

BRILL HANDBOOKS ON CONTEMPORARY RELIGION

Handbook of Spiritualism and Channeling

EDITED BY

Cathy Gutierrez

BRILL

Handbook of Spiritualism and Channeling

Brill Handbooks on Contemporary Religion

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Introduction

Cathy Gutierrez

Spirit possession ranks, along with myth-making and mysticism, as one of the truly global religious phenomena. Through time and across space, all cultures have manifested some form of spirit possession, whether ritualised and central to religious authority, like indigenous shamans or the Pythia of Greece, or understood as an intrusion of chaos into religious order, like the travails of Salem or even the current outbreak of interest in zombies. An external, supernatural force occupying a living, material body can be an omen or a curse, a prophecy or a sign of end times. The fate of the possessed—and the role of possession—is always in the hands of its interpreters, who bring culturally-crafted conditions and conceptions to the moment and determine whether the event is demonic, divine, or somewhere in between.

The contributors to this volume have come together to examine two related models of interaction with spirits in the modern world. Spiritualism, the movement that is generally dated to 1848 with the Fox sisters, inaugurated widespread attempts to contact the dead through the use of mediums. Modeled on the new technology of telegraphy, mediums served as conduits between this world and the next, where trance lecturers expounded on politics and philosophy while home séances contacted the dead for the bereaved. In the course of these communications, the living learned the landscape of heaven and that it was the destination for all of humankind. Indebted to the Neo-Platonic ladder of progress and predicated on Emanuel Swedenborg's visions of a lively and active heaven, Spiritualists understood death to be the next step on a journey of never-ending progress.

Born in California in the 1970s, channeling relied on new technologies of television and talk shows to become an international New Age phenomenon. Much as with Spiritualist mediums, channelers initially came from the ranks of middle-class white women who would enter some alternative state and let spirits speak through them. Unlike those in Spiritualism, these spirits were not familiar ones, famous dead people or lost loved ones, but rather ancient wise men from mythical places like Atlantis or Lemuria. Speaking with the authority of tens of thousands of years of knowledge, these channeled spirits held forth on all matters of theology and history. As time went on, the beings channeled by the living expanded to include aliens, elemental spirits, and even nature itself.

While the basic structures of Spiritualism and channeling share remarkable family resemblances with religious communication transhistorically and

cross-culturally, they also bear the markers of their specific cultural circumstances: both relied on and embraced technology, both existed in a new world of international communication, and both shaped and reacted to the new discourses of psychology. They also share an ethos that is extra-denominational, a multicultural and progressive spirit that is inclusive of all humanity but still not entirely exempt from the pitfalls of stereotyping, racism, and colonialism. But as Spiritualism and channeling do not deal with the deity *per se* but rather with wise intermediaries, they also deny that spiritual knowledge or salvation is reserved for the few.

Many scholars have noted that spirit possession allows the marginalised of a society a voice in important religious and political matters that would otherwise be denied. Bypassing the need for education or credentials and often in direct contradiction to priestly authority, women and children are often the vessels for spirit contact and the recipients of cultural currency for it. This observation holds true for Spiritualism, where the majority of mediums were women, many of them quite young. In addition to discoursing publicly on such serious matters as Abolition and women's rights, mediums also had a higher degree of autonomy than many women in the nineteenth century. They usually made a generally poor but at least independent living, travelled, and interacted with social classes that would often have been out of their normal reach. Channeling began among housewives. There were far fewer restrictions on women in the 1970s and 1980s than there had been on their Spiritualist sisters, and the possibilities for fame and fortune were also much higher: these women wrote bestsellers and appeared on television with some regularity.

Those claiming direct contact with some sort of spiritual authority that bypasses the establishment are always in danger of censure. The nineteenth century saw a new form of condemnation, often with the power of the state behind it—nascent psychology and the medicalisation of consciousness. The infrastructure of Spiritualism was predicated on the work of Franz Anton Mesmer, a medical doctor who was seeking a single-cause cure for illness. In the course of conducting treatments with what Mesmer called 'animal magnetism', a student of his discovered that his patients would often fall into alternate states of consciousness. Erroneously and eponymously called 'Mesmerism', the ability to induce a trance state in another was the necessary backdrop to early Spiritualism, where the trance state was understood as the condition for allowing spirits to use the medium as a portal to this world.

Ghosts are also good to think with, and the appearance of the dead speaks volumes about a culture's fears, boundaries, and bigotries. Mediums, particularly those who produced material goods or people from heaven, were often tested, prodded, and bound to protect against trickery, with effects that

frequently fell outside of the established bounds of Victorian ladyhood. The presence of spirits from other cultures and races both inscribes their presence in heaven and reinscribes painful stereotypes. Simultaneously within and ahead of its time, Spiritualism proposed an equality of souls but demonstrated an inequality of their knowledge and refinement: the many tiers of heaven routinely placed many Others in such lowly spots that even the living—generally the least knowledgeable beings in this schema—could teach those in heaven from earth. Contemporary channeling similarly often distorts and disguises racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, and more into a discourse that is a thin patina over its true objects of fear and condemnation.

Spiritualism has received renewed interest of late in both scholarship and in popular culture. In the academic literature, commentators on both sides of the secularism debate have turned to Spiritualism and other non-institutional religious movements to explore the claim that Western society is becoming increasingly irreligious. Responding to Max Weber's famous description of secular and scientific worldviews as the "disenchantment" of the West, scholars have looked to less authoritarian and less doctrinally motivated forms of expressing the sacred to question whether religious pursuit is actually in decline or merely shifting forms. Since Spiritualism was historically at the vanguard for progressive reforms in gender and race that are now accepted standards of ethics, it remains of particular interest to those concerned with the intersection of politics and religion. Moreover, and less overtly, Spiritualism was among the first widespread articulations of complete metaphysical multiculturalism.

The lack of a centralised authority coupled with the wholesale denial of damnation makes Spiritualism and its related currents attractive to contemporary thinkers who find exclusive truth claims and excessive priestcraft to be outdated or distasteful. Spiritualism provides a powerful and moving sense of enchantment without the hegemonic discourse of institutionalised religions. Popular culture, too, quietly endorses this system of salvation: contemporary depictions of mediumship imply that all of the dead are destined for the same eternity and that reconciliation with one's loved ones is posthumously guaranteed. In keeping the appealing aspects of spirituality and disregarding restrictive categories of the saved, Spiritualism provides a template for an enchanted cosmos that is neither distant nor judgmental.

This handbook seeks to set Spiritualism in context alongside its influences, its affinities, and its effects. While none of these topics can be exhaustively covered, the reader should find the historical and social location of Spiritualism in its beginnings as well as an explanation of many of the ideologies that were necessary to its birth. Ranging from the theoretical underpinnings of

Swedenborg's theology to the ritual ability to induce trance states to the changes in the economies of death, the background of Spiritualism emerges. How the movement articulated, subverted, and created ideas of gender, race, and sexuality is explored in both Spiritualism as well as channeling. Spiritualism's interactions with other religions of the period—and specifically how competitor movements differentiated themselves from Spiritualism while feasting on some of its features—are examined in detail. The spread of Spiritualism and the attendant changes to its tenets is of course fruitfully the topic of many existent and future books in itself: here the primary initial moves to France and Afro-Caribbean religions are explored.

Channeling is here situated as the heir apparent to Spiritualism, sharing many of its primary claims and social priorities. However, while Spiritualism thrived in relation to current technologies such as the telegraph, channeling was born into the world of television, where fame and the possibility of fortune met with a completely new scale. In addition to changes in media, channeling responded not to a cultural moment in which the majority of Western seekers were encountering science and evaluating its theories but rather to one in which scientific theories were generally accepted as a given. Wisdom in channeling is sometimes found in the long dead, those who have had millennia to watch the course of the world, and it is also found in outer space. Aliens, superior in knowledge and frequently (but not always) beneficent, function in many new religions as the prophets of old—capable of such technology that their works seem like miracles, aliens provide enchantment that remains strictly nondivine. The beginnings of channeling are covered here for the classical examples and then the horizon of discourse is expanded both geographically and thematically. Finally, the legacy of Spiritualism is explored in its interrelations with millennialism, psychical research, and popular culture. The last chapter serves as both a conclusion and a coda—the tangled skein of relations between people and ideas, the dead and the extraterrestrial, are brought together in a discussion of a new metaphysics and a changed sense of the sacred.

This volume is arranged in five sections, beginning with *Locating Spiritualism*, which details categorical speculation that should be useful to students and historians of Spiritualism and channeling. Adam Crabtree begins with an examination of Mesmerism and psychoanalysis, highlighting the changing values assigned to the trance state and the battle for a theological or material definition of consciousness. While Mesmerism is not the sole influence on Spiritualism, it is vital for understanding the trance state that the majority of Spiritualist ritual required. Equally important was Emanuel Swedenborg's theology, discussed by Arthur Versluis in its American context. Versluis encounters the Swedenborgian Church in America and its interpenetrations with

Spiritualism, particularly in the lives of Andrew Jackson Davis, Laurence Oliphant, and Thomas Lake Harris. At the intersection of social history and economic flux, changes in funerary practices in America are discussed. I argue that the monetizing of the dead had an impact on the rise of Spiritualism and that the shifting valence of the body and soul were responsible for changing attitudes towards death and the dead. Mary Keller recounts spirit possession in a global context, using what she terms the 'scene of possession' as the focal lens for understanding how possession mediates history. While much excellent work has been done on the gendered effects of Spiritualist mediumship, less scholarship has focused on sex itself. Here Marlene Tromp proposes the queering of the séance and how its non-normative space could foster homoerotic overtones.

The section *In Conversation* is designed to bring Spiritualism into dialogue with various other religious and cultural movements. John Patrick Deveney traces the intellectual influences on Spiritualism and the resultant bifurcation of Spiritualist trends in the New Thought movement. Elizabeth Lowry links women's autobiography with race and power relations in an exploration of a medium's Native American spirit control. Simultaneously overtly political and largely unconscious, the troubled relations between white women and their desire for endless interactions with a fantasy of Native Americans has only begun to get the scholarly attention it deserves and Lowry contributes to that growing area of literature. Christa Shusko recounts the surprising and almost entirely overlooked relationship between Spiritualism and the members of the Oneida Community. The founder John Humphrey Noyes originally considered Spiritualism to be a religious competitor but later experimented with séances as a method to rejuvenate a feeling of religiosity among skeptical members. Jeremy Rapport outlines the beginnings of Christian Science and Mary Baker Eddy's efforts to differentiate her religion from Spiritualism. The similarities in some aspects of medical discourse and also in the strong leadership role of women required a direct accounting of their differences by Eddy to distinguish their many shared values.

In *New Directions* authors explore the exporting of Spiritism from Europe to Latin America. In these chapters the influence of Asian thought, particularly reincarnation, transforms Spiritualism in ways that make it attractive to new populations across continents and up through time. Lynn Sharp takes us through the history of widespread belief in reincarnation and the thinkers who combined Asian ideals with Platonic legend to create one of the most robust branches of Spiritualist belief. John Warne Monroe discusses the transnational growth of Spiritualism and the centrality of the work of Allan Kardec, primary architect of the marriage of reincarnation to the afterlife. Bringing the

conversation into the contemporary world, Waleska de Araújo Aureliano and Vânia Zikán Cardoso examine Spiritism in Brazil and its trajectory through the French Spiritualist Allen Kardec whose work was detailed in the previous chapter. Lastly, Darryl Catherine observes the transformations in Spiritualism in its most famous community, Lily Dale, as the spirits reflect Asian and New Age influence and focus on individual improvement.

The second half of the book remains in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries and reflects on Spiritualism's legacy to new religious movements. The section on Channeling begins with Hugh Urban's analysis of the birth of channeling among Californian housewives and the impact of television and gender on its success. Ruth Bradby examines the growth and democratisation of channeling and its impact as a New Age theology. Adam Klin-Oron looks at channeling in a new context—that of Israel, amidst entrenched monotheism and shifting political landscapes. Christopher Partridge examines the practice of channeling aliens and its roots in Theosophy. These chapters are brought to the Next Move with Jeffrey Kripal's tracking of the history of parapsychology through remote viewing in the Cold War. Douglas Cowan looks at the inundation of portrayals of psychics on television and in movies, arguing that the entertainment industry blurs the lines between fact and fiction. Michael Barkun follows the career of Dorothy Martin after her starring role in the classic, *When Prophecy Fails*, to discover that she flourished after her famously failed prediction by channeling spacemen. Finally, Catherine Albanese uses channeled wisdom according to the Teachings of Abraham as a focal point for reflecting more broadly on the uses of the imagination in both trance theologies and scholarship about them.

This handbook brings together work by many of the best established scholars in this field as well as voices from new perspectives. The result, I hope, is that the reader will find scholarship that is both comprehensive and surprising, that covers what the beginning student needs to know about the state of modern spirit possession and that brings the reader to new locations, both historical and spatial, to see the effects of past religious movements as they continue to spread and change in the contemporary world.

PART 1

Locating Spiritualism



Mesmerism and the Psychological Dimension of Mediumship

Adam Crabtree

Mesmerism has a twofold relationship with Spiritualism and spiritualistic mediumship: 1) as the healing tradition of animal magnetism founded by Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815), it spawned many forms of Spiritistic mediumship and eventually contributed centrally to the rise of Spiritualism in the United States; and 2) as a psychological approach to human life based on the ideas of Mesmer's pupil the Marquis de Puységur, it made possible a psychodynamic view of the human psyche and the development of psychodynamic psychotherapies in the latter half of the nineteenth century. These two streams of influence travelled side by side for over one hundred fifty years, periodically overflowing their banks and intermingling, so that eventually the second stream became the source of a new way of looking at mediumship and gave rise to several theories of explanation for mediumistic phenomena.

Animal Magnetism

Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815) was born in the region of Germany called Swabia. His parents hoped he would become a priest (Pattie 1994: 5–7), but he chose the field of medicine instead and received his medical degree from the University of Vienna Medical School in 1766, upon completion of a dissertation called *Dissertatio physico-medica de Planetarum Influxu* (Bloch 1980). Mesmer's thesis was that just as there are tides in the ocean, so must there also be tides in the atmosphere and even in the human body. This tidal influence of celestial bodies on the human body he called 'animal gravity'. He developed this idea over time and came to connect this force with the action of mineral magnets; nine years later he called it 'magnetic fluid'. He eventually separated this organic magnetism from the action of mineral magnets and asserted that the most powerful healing magnet was the organism of the physician, which he could use to affect the flow of magnetic fluid in the patient's body, freeing it from disease-created blocks. In this way he came to call his system 'animal magnetism', the word 'animal' referring to the fact that the flow of magnetic fluid occurred in the bodies of all animate beings.

In 1778, Mesmer moved to Paris, where he hoped to find acceptance for his ideas and the practice of magnetic healing. There he published his manifesto on animal magnetism, *Mémoire sur la découverte du magnétisme animal* (1779). His pleas for the acceptance of animal magnetism by the medical establishment met with mixed results, generating a great deal of controversy. In 1784, the French king appointed two commissions to investigate the claims of practitioners of animal magnetism. The first was established to determine the scientific status of animal magnetism; it was comprised of five members from the Academy of Sciences and four from the Faculty of Medicine and was chaired by Benjamin Franklin. The second, made up of members of the Royal Society of Medicine, was supposed to determine the usefulness of animal magnetism in the treatment of illness. The first concluded that the true causes of the effects attributed to animal magnetism were touching, imagination, and imitation, and the effects were not due to the action of magnetic fluid (Bailly 1784). The second arrived at similar conclusions (Poissonnier et al. 1784), although there was a dissenting report submitted by one of the commissioners, Antoine Laurent de Jussieu, who wrote that there may be some true magnetic effects and that further investigation was warranted (Jussieu 1784).

While Mesmer was promoting his ideas to medical men, he was also earning a living by teaching, to anyone who was willing to pay the fee, the 'secret' of animal magnetism and the proper techniques for its application (see Vinchon 1936). These teachings were delivered in the form of a lecture series delivered in Paris. Among those who took the course in 1784 was Armand Marie Jacques de Chastenet, Marquis de Puységur (1751–1825). When he returned to his estate near Soissons, Puységur immediately began practicing his new techniques and soon noticed that something odd seemed to happen to those he magnetised. Many entered into a state characterised by: 1) a sleep-waking kind of consciousness; 2) a 'rapport' or special connection with the magnetiser; 3) suggestibility with heightened imagination; 4) amnesia in the waking state for events in the magnetised state; 5) the ability to read the thoughts of the magnetiser; and 6) a striking change in the personality of the magnetic subject (Crabtree 1993: 38–45). The magnetised person seemed to be asleep but was awake enough to communicate with the magnetiser. Rapport meant that the subject was connected both mentally and, it seemed, physically with the magnetiser. The magnetic subject was ready to follow the suggestions of the magnetiser and experienced a heightened ability to imagine things vividly. The observation that there was amnesia for events that had occurred during magnetic somnambulism upon returning to the normal state, led to the notion that everyone possesses a *divided consciousness*, and Puységur (1784: 90) regarded the waking and magnetised states as "two different existences." Ability to read

the magnetiser's thoughts was thereafter augmented by other ostensibly paranormal capacities, such as being able to perceive objects and situations not available to the senses and the ability to exercise a 'sixth sense' by which magnetic somnambulists could diagnose their own illnesses or those of others and prescribe effective remedies.

Unlike Mesmer, who paid little attention to the fact that some patients went into a swoon while being treated, Puységur immediately saw the importance of this special state, which he called 'magnetic sleep' or 'magnetic somnambulism'. As it turned out, Puységur's discovery was to have momentous consequences for the subsequent history of psychology and psychological healing (Crabtree 1993; Crabtree 2003; Ellenberger 1970). Puységur believed that magnetic somnambulism was the same thing as natural somnambulism or sleepwalking, with the important difference that the magnetic subject was in a state of rapport with the magnetiser, whereas the sleepwalker was in rapport with no one (Puységur 1811).

The discovery of magnetic sleep by Puységur would have momentous implications for understanding the nature of the psyche, introducing a new paradigm for understanding human psychological life (Crabtree 1993: 86–88). Before then, when a person was subject to unaccountable thoughts, feelings, or impulses, the source was thought to be some outside entity—the devil or an evil spirit or witch—intruding itself into the consciousness of the afflicted person and causing him or her to think strange things and have weird visions. This paradigm for disturbed mental functioning was employed to account for everything from "evil thoughts" to madness, and it was considered an adequate and complete explanation. For our purposes, we can call this paradigm the 'intrusion paradigm'. The intrusion paradigm holds that all mental aberrations are of supernatural origin and require as their remedy an intervention by some person skilled in spiritual lore. Later, a second paradigm arose that asserted that disturbances of consciousness could be understood in terms of natural causes rooted in imbalances of the physical organism, so that mental dysfunction was not considered a spiritual or moral problem, but a physical one. In this schema, the condition could be cured through the application of medical remedies. Since this explanatory framework holds that mental aberrations are the result of a malfunctioning organism, it can fittingly be called the 'organic paradigm'.

The discovery of magnetic sleep by Puységur introduced a radically new view of the human psyche and opened up a fresh vista of psychological inquiry. Magnetic sleep revealed that consciousness is divided and that there exists in human beings a second consciousness quite distinct from normal everyday consciousness. This second consciousness in some cases displays personality

characteristics unlike those of the waking self in taste, value judgments, and mental acuity. It has its own memory chain, with continuity of memory and identity from one episode of magnetic sleep to the next. However, it is separated from the person's ordinary consciousness by a memory barrier, and the two consciousnesses are often sharply distinct—Puysegur's "two different existences." This newfound second consciousness became the ground for a third paradigm for explaining mental disorders: the 'alternate consciousness paradigm'. This new paradigm established a revolutionary view of the human mind. Although the full implications of this discovery would not be developed until the latter part of the nineteenth century, the basic elements were there from the time of Puysegur.

Spiritism

While Mesmer and Puysegur saw the phenomena of animal magnetism as the action of nature, there were practitioners of animal magnetism who, from very early on, ascribed to a version of the intrusion paradigm, believing that these phenomena were due to the influence of spirit entities. The Swedenborgian society of Stockholm, Sweden, called the Exegetic and Philanthropic Society, became heavily involved with magnetic somnambulism and set out to become an associate of the Strasbourg Society of Harmony (organised by Puysegur in 1785 with the mission to train magnetisers, treat patients, and report the results of their work). Founded in 1786, the Stockholm society had as its purpose the promotion of the teachings of Swedenborg, whose visions revealed a world of spirits, good and bad, who secretly influence the conduct of ordinary human life. In 1789, the Stockholm Society wrote a letter to the Strasbourg Harmonic Society, in which the society stated its dissenting views:

We believe that those systems which have their foundation in mere physical causes, as "*la Psychologie [sic] Sacrée de Lyon*," are quite inadequate to explain how those singular effects take place and are produced, with magnetism and Somnambulism present. It seems to be impossible fully and rationally to explain them unless we once and for all, and without shrinking from the shafts of ridicule, take it for granted that spiritual beings exert an influence upon the organs of the invalid during the time that the power of magnetism has produced a partial cessation of the functions of the soul, and that these spiritual agents, in virtue of the higher degrees of knowledge which they possess, originate these wonderful and otherwise inexplicable phenomena.

Spiritism is a broad term denoting the belief that spiritual entities exist in the world and that it is possible to communicate with them in some fashion or other. In their brief position paper, the Stockholm Swedenborgians laid out the classical Spiritistic point of view in regard to the phenomena of magnetic somnambulism. They held that the wisdom involved in diagnosis and healing requires an intellectual, spiritual agency beyond the somnambulist himself. Since somnambulists are not aware of acquiring this wisdom through any identifiable mental process—through learning, reasoning, or experience—the processing must take place in another intelligent agent: a beneficent spirit.

In the early years of magnetic practice, there had been sporadic accounts of communication with the dead by somnambulistic mediums (Darnton 1968: 37–38). Later, more systematic forms of magnetic Spiritism developed, examples of which can be found particularly in the writings of Johann Jung-Stilling, Justinus Kerner, Guillaume Billot, and Louis Cahagnet.

Johann Jung-Stilling (1740–1817) believed that it could be shown through empirical evidence that human beings live in two worlds, the material world and the world of spirits (Jung-Stilling 1808). He claimed that somnambulists, in ecstatic vision, have direct access to the spiritual world and can bring forward verifiable information not available through ordinary means. Through magnetisation, the soul becomes free from its usual adherence to the brain and nervous system. In that state it may perceive the world without the aid of the bodily senses, communicate directly with other souls in this world, or communicate with spirits not of this world.

Justinus Kerner (1786–1862) also formulated a theory of magnetic somnambulism that involved communication with the spirit world (Kerner 1824). He came to believe that spontaneous magnetic states (arising without magnetisation) were not as uncommon as had been thought and that sometimes souls enter into a state of magnetic somnambulism in which they communicate with departed loved ones. Some, however, experience this magnetic communication with spirits in their everyday lives, aided by spiritual guides who lead them through higher realms and teach them about spiritual matters.

Guillaume Billot (1768–1841?), a devout Catholic, was influenced by the writings of Swedenborg. He claimed that magnetising merely disposes the subject to the influence of spirits (Billot 1838). All healing action and all ability to see at a distance or peer into the future are produced by the good guardian spirits or guides that are assigned to every human being. All inhibition of healing, all distortion of thinking, all mistaken impressions come from evil spirits.

Louis Cahagnet (1809–1885) had a lifelong interest in exploring the connections he believed existed between this world and the world of spirits. As a young man, he had encountered magnetic somnambulists whose ecstatic experiences enthralled him. Spurred on by his own hashish-evoked periods of

expanded consciousness, he began to investigate the powers of a number of magnetic somnambulists, whose experiences he described in his writings (Cahagnet 1848–1854). He found that some believed that, when somnambulist, they were regularly in touch with angelic spirits and spirits of deceased human beings, who, among other things, gave them instructions in regard to healing. Spirits of the deceased often turned out to be friends or family of the magnetised somnambulist.

Animal magnetism was, in its origins, a *healing* system, but as time went on, auxiliary phenomena, such as spirit communication, became more prominent. In the United States in the 1830s and 1840s, healing and spirit phenomena overlapped in a flurry of public demonstrations of Mesmerism (see for example Poyen 1837), which employed those who easily became somnambulist to diagnose illnesses and prescribe curative procedures. In some cases, teams of Mesmerist and somnambulist were formed that roamed the eastern seaboard staging healing demonstrations. One such somnambulist was Andrew Jackson Davis (1826–1910), an apprentice cobbler from Poughkeepsie, New York, who was first exposed to Mesmerism by J. Stanley Grimes. Davis was a talented somnambulist and offered his hired services to Mesmerists to take part in demonstrations of the wonders of magnetic clairvoyance and healing. Eventually, he was able to enter somnambulist states without the benefit of a mesmeriser (Fuller 1982: 97–99). Davis took mesmeric trance one step further by using self-induced somnambulist states as the means of verbally channeling cosmic wisdom. According to Fuller (1982: 98), with this step “mesmerism had unwittingly played midwife to trance mediumship.” Davis claimed that these messages, with their moral sermons, were coming from discarnate human spirits. He dictated his spirit messages and exhortations to William Fishbough in the late 1840s. They were published in several volumes, and as a result Davis became a significant figure in the popular culture of the time and came to be thought of as the precursor of American Spiritualism.

Spiritualism

Spiritualism is distinguished from Spiritism by the fact that it denotes a specific cultural movement that arose in the United States in the middle of the nineteenth century, involving the belief that human beings survive death and that the living can communicate with those who have passed on. Spiritualism had its start in 1848 in the tiny home of John Fox located in Hydesville, New York, near Rochester. In March of that year, noises began to be heard in the house as if the furniture was being moved, and pounding sounds seemed

to come from the walls. A search by the Fox family, parents and two daughters, revealed no discernible source for these disturbances, and for mutual security on March thirty-first they all slept in the same room. The noises recurred as soon as all had retired. This time, however, the two young daughters, Maggie and Kate, responded playfully to the sounds, snapping their fingers and clapping their hands and asking that the sounds imitate them. Then the mother got involved, asking that the ages of the two girls, fifteen and twelve, be rapped out. When this happened the family invited neighbors to come and witness what was going on. A yes-no code was worked out and questions were asked of the mysterious sounds. The answers claimed that the noises were being produced by the spirit of a deceased person who had been buried in the basement. Soon the house was overrun with neighbors, looking in every corner for the source of the sounds, even tearing up the floorboards in the basement to find the supposed dead body—to no avail. The knocks occurred only in the presence of the daughters, and they continued to follow the girls when they were separated and sent to the homes of their older brother, Richard, and older sister, Leah.

At this point, the types of phenomena taking place around Kate began to multiply. Objects were seen flying through the air and beds shook at night. Books and other articles were shifted from one place to another, the combs of several ladies were drawn from their hair and placed in the hair of others, musical instruments played as they floated through the air above the onlookers, and chairs and tables were tipped, turned over, or moved about.

Isaac and Amy Post, friends of the Fox family who lived in Rochester, investigated the phenomena happening about the sisters and were convinced that they were being produced by spirits. Isaac Post suggested a method of communicating with the spirits, spelling out messages by reciting the alphabet out loud and recording when a knock would occur at a particular letter, a practice that came to be called 'spiritual telegraphy' (Capron 1855: 52–53, 63–65). At the Post house, a new step was taken in the development of the phenomena, with communications no longer coming only from the spirit of the Hydesville farmhouse: the first telegraphed message was, "We are all your dear friends and relatives." From that moment the possibility of communicating with deceased loved ones inflamed the imagination and piqued the curiosity of the public (Crabtree 1993: 232–235).

In the context of this burgeoning movement, many remarkable phenomena were reported. Besides communication with departed spirits occurring through various means (including knocks in walls and furniture) there were materialisations, possessions, direct writing, automatic writing, planchette, Chevrue pendulum phenomena, and visionary and hallucinatory experiences of various kinds, all relating to the manifestation of the dead to the living.

The history of Spiritualism, including its spread, the evolution of its phenomena, the controversy over their genuineness, the variety of explanatory theories, its importance in the evolution of popular culture, goes far beyond the scope of this chapter. For a broader discussion, the reader can consult the multitude of historical works on the subject, of which I will mention only two as starting points for exploration: Janet Oppenheim's *The Other World* (1985) and Ruth Brandon's *The Spiritualists* (1983). For present purposes, I will concentrate on issues relating to mediumship and its psychological aspects as they relate to the history of Mesmerism and its offshoots. Among the most important of such manifestations was 'table turning'.

Communicating Tables

In 1853, a New York man sent instructions to his brother in Bremen, Germany, about how to replicate in Germany the physical manifestations of Spiritualism that were becoming commonplace in America. The Bremen man set up the suggested experiment. He gathered eight people around a table in the center of a room, instructing them to touch neither each other nor the legs of the table except in the prescribed way. They formed a chain by resting their hands lightly on the surface of the table, palms down and fingers spread. Each placed his or her right little finger over the left little finger of the person adjacent, in this way forming a continuous chain around the surface of the table. After about thirty minutes, the table began to rotate. It then began to move and change position, and the chairs of the participants were taken away so they could stay with the table. The experiment was repeated later that evening, with the same results. An account of this event was published in the *Gazette d'Augsbourg* and then reprinted in other newspapers in Germany and France, and from there the news spread to England and back to America. This was the beginning of the table-moving fad that spread through much of the civilised world. It was variously called 'table moving', 'table turning', 'table rapping', 'table tipping', and 'talking tables' (Crabtree 1993: 236–265).

'Talking tables' were so named because they produced sounds that could be alphabetically parsed into messages. Within five years, hundreds of books, pamphlets, and articles had been written describing experiences of talking tables and attempting to explain how such things could happen. Explanations included speculations that the phenomena were produced by spirits, by the devil, by fraud, by self-delusion, by unconsciously applied physical force, by 'electrical fluid', by 'magnetic fluid', or by the 'odic fluid' of Baron von Reichenbach.

One of the things that explanations needed to account for was the *intelligent nature* of the messages produced. The movements typically gave rise to messages with coherent content in the form of words, phrases, or sentences. These messages were given through discrete sounds that spelled out the words in simple alphabetic code. These sounds were sometimes produced by the tapping of a table leg on the floor and sometimes by tapping sounds that ostensibly came directly from the wood of the surface of the table. One explanation was simply that spirits produced all this directly through some kind of physical force unknown to science. Other explanations were that the 'fluid' that caused the movements and sounds was produced from the vital force of the individuals around the table.

Whether one attempted to explain the messages as the productions of unconsciously applied force from the hands of the sitters or unconsciously induced actions of one of the various fluids, one still had to explain the intelligent nature of many of the messages. In these cases the participants must have produced the messages as a group with no awareness that they were doing so. The content of the messages could include events or information unknown to any of the participants; encouragement or advice for some particular person present; affirmations of the continuing existence of relatives or friends; or imaginative stories. At times the messages seemed to involve original and creative thought; at other times they were banal.

Some of the proffered speculations posited concurrent unconscious mental activity. This was a novel thought. Previously, descriptions of a second consciousness that revealed itself in magnetic somnambulism contained little that would indicate that the second consciousness was active during normal waking states. Attempts to explain the intelligent messages produced by the talking tables introduced the notion that the consciousness of magnetic somnambulism actually might continue to be active when the person had returned to normal awareness. The notion that unconscious mental activity was *always going on* and *always able to affect the thoughts and actions of a person* opened the door to a way of exploring the human mind and behavior beyond anything hitherto achieved.

The final touch on this new understanding was applied by a small pamphlet published in 1855, entitled *Second lettre de gros Jean à son évêque au sujet des tables parlantes, des possessions et autres diableries*. According to the anonymous author (probably Paul Tascher), in human beings ideas and knowledge are given unity by personality. There is an 'I' that thinks and knows, and from this 'I' the individual makes judgments and takes action. As people think new thoughts, the thoughts are attached to the personality and said to belong to the 'I'. Thoughts, however, can separate into two distinct streams, each with a

life of its own. In certain conditions—when the will is weakened—a person can find herself separated into distinct parts, each with its independent stream of thought and its separate identity. This weakening of the will makes it possible for mediums, who regularly experience it, to have more than one personality. That, said the author, is precisely what happens when the table-moving medium is not conscious of the response produced through her: “She only knows the response through the movement of the table. Intellectual division is complete. At the same time the dissident thought expands its domain. It no longer simply deals with questions addressed to the table; on the contrary it now asks questions of the persons present” ([Tascher] 1855: 11).

According to this author, the second personality, separated from the normal personality, forms romantic fabrications, fantasies, and digressions that exhibit both intelligence and imagination. When the normal personality is put aside through somnambulism, the second personality comes forward. The concurrent nature of the activity of the second self, with its peculiar interests and creative movements, shows that human beings can carry on complex mental activity outside the awareness of their normal selves. This formulation of a theory of unconscious mental activity was far ahead of its time, and is not seen again until the work of Frederic Myers and Pierre Janet in the 1880s and 1890s.

Society for Psychical Research

The British Society for Psychical Research was founded with its purposes set out clearly:

1. An examination of the nature and extent of any influence which may be exerted by one mind upon another, apart from any generally recognized mode of perception.
2. The study of hypnotism, and the forms of so-called mesmeric trance, with its alleged insensibility to pain; clairvoyance and other allied phenomena.
3. A critical revision of Reichenbach's researches with certain organizations called “sensitive,” and an inquiry whether such organizations possess any power of perception beyond a highly exalted sensibility of the recognized sensory organs.
4. A careful investigation of any reports, resting on strong testimony, regarding apparitions—at the moment of death, or otherwise, or regarding disturbances in houses reputed to be haunted.

5. An inquiry into the various physical phenomena commonly called Spiritualistic with an attempt to discover their causes and general laws.
6. The collection and collation of existing materials bearing on the history of these subjects ([Mission Statement], *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 1: 3–4).

The mandate was broad, but for our purposes, I am simply going to touch briefly on those researches and theories that relate to Mesmerism, mediumship, and psychology.

The society was founded after a fair amount of investigatory work had already been going on. Frederic Myers, Edmund Gurney, and the Sidgwicks, Henry and Eleanor, a group associated in various ways with Cambridge University, had already spent a great deal of time witnessing and interviewing mediums all over Britain. Eventually they joined forces with William Barrett and some of the leading British Spiritualists of the time to establish an organisation to carry on the work and publish its findings. One of their main concerns was to look into the validity of the claims of Spiritualists in regard to mediumship, physical and mental. Their findings were mixed, and within a short time, tension arose between the Cambridge group and the Spiritualists of the society, resulting in the resignation of some of the most prominent Spiritualists in protest that the criteria being applied for determining what was believable were too stringent (Hamilton 2009: 111–164).

Within the Cambridge group itself, there were differences of opinion about these matters, especially over whether the phenomena being investigated were explainable purely in terms of telepathy (a term coined by Myers) with no need to bring in the notion of spirit action. This issue was never fully resolved, and the society as such did not take any official position on the matter (Hamilton 2009: 170–177).

They did generally agree about the inadequacy of mechanistic explanations for the phenomena, such as that of William Carpenter, who called upon ‘unconscious cerebration’ and reflex action of the brain to account for the phenomena. It was in the process of investigating automatic writing in particular that Myers developed the notion of psychological ‘automatism’, which posited multiple submerged centers of intelligent activity, concurrent with normal consciousness, that could manifest in conscious life and affect a person’s thought, feeling, and activity in important ways. This led Myers to develop a new framework, based on the notion of the ‘subliminal self’ (Hamilton 2009: 155, 193–195).

Mediumship and the Subliminal Consciousness

In what follows I will be saying quite a bit about the work of Frederic Myers. The reason is that more than any other researcher, Myers contributed an understanding of both streams emanating from Mesmerism—mediumship and psychodynamic psychology.

Myers thought of the subliminal self as that aspect of the psyche that resides *below the threshold* of awareness (*sub + limen*). What is above that threshold is our ordinary everyday consciousness, the supraliminal (*supra + limen*), whose activities make up our daily life. Aspects of the supraliminal self are generally accessible at will. What is below the threshold can only be accessed in special situations: in dreams, during hypnosis, in flashes of genius, in the experience of paranormal phenomena, and when experiencing a psychotic or dissociative episode.

Myers described automatisms as messages from the subliminal to the supraliminal self. Every time individuals produce intelligible messages that do not originate in their ordinary consciousness, automatisms are at work. Sometimes the subliminal source would identify itself and convey a sense of personality with specific characteristics. On occasion, the subliminal personality would claim to be a spirit of some kind, perhaps belonging to a deceased individual. In this way, Myers came to classify the phenomena of mediumship among these psychological automatisms.

With the rise of American Spiritualism, a mass of mediumistic phenomena began to accumulate (Brandon 1983; A. Braude 1989; Moore 1977; Oppenheim 1985). Some of the communications came by way of motor automatisms such as 'talking tables'. Putting aside for the moment such motor phenomena, let us briefly consider what were called the 'mental' phenomena of mediumship, in which the medium used writing or speaking to convey information that ostensibly did not originate from normal sources, that is, from ordinary sense experience.

It might be fair to say that automatic writing itself was first developed by Spiritistic mediums. Shamdasani notes that it was first called 'spirit writing' in the mid-1800s, and then 'involuntary', 'mechanical', 'somnambulist', 'subconscious', 'subliminal', and 'unconscious' writing (Chevrue 1854; Shamdasani 1993: 102). However, the term 'automatic writing' was used quite early, and it is the one that stuck.

With regard to 'automatic speaking', the term could fairly be applied to trance speaking of antiquity, while its modern manifestation is best exemplified in speaking sessions carried out in the state of magnetic sleep or trance. Usually subjects returning to their normal state of consciousness remembered nothing of what they had said in a trance state, and they did not experience themselves as authors of what had been spoken. In respect to its modern Spiritistic manifestation, automatic speaking typically occurred when a person

was either placed in a hypnotic trance or used some self-trance method to attain the desired altered state, and then dialogued with spirits, communicated messages from spirits, or spoke from what appeared to be clairvoyant knowledge that was in some way or other provided by spirits. A somewhat modified modern version of this kind of mediumship is 'channeling'.

Myers considered all productions of automatic writing or speaking to be psychological automatisms, whether they purported to come from spirits or were thought of as the product of some hidden part of the writer or speaker. He insisted that even if there were cases of actual communication with spirits through these automatic means, they must be investigated as psychological phenomena since they used the same mechanisms for emergence from the subliminal into the supraliminal that all other automatisms use. If we receive messages from spirits, he insisted, they are communicated first to the subliminal self, and only then do they rise to the supraliminal. He also believed that the phenomena that he called 'supernormal' (today called 'paranormal'), such as telepathy and clairvoyance, resulted from impressions that affected the subliminal first.

Myers posited a 'mythopoeic' faculty, in the subliminal consciousness of everyone, that constantly produces fantasies, stories, poetic images, and other spontaneous creations which might on occasion pass through the threshold of consciousness into supraliminal awareness (Myers 1903: II, 5). If spirits communicated, they would do so by means of this faculty. But the same would be true of manifestations of mental disorders, such as the fantasies of 'hysterics'. Because of this, the genuineness of mediumistic communications could only be determined by objective evidence deriving from the *contents* of the messages. As to content, communications could be an odd mixture of the fantastic and the telepathic, as shown, for example, in Myers's 1884 exposition of the 'Clelia' case of automatic writing. He saw this case as evidence for the existence of telepathy. It also provided Myers with the opportunity to express his view, for the first time, that there exist in the subliminal self secondary centers of intelligent activity, and that the productions of these centers can emerge into consciousness in certain special circumstances.

Mediumship and Survival

Discussing the evidence for human survival of death, Myers (1890: 37–38) wrote that

those who wish to prove continued personal identity must keep two needs in view;—first the need of definite facts, given in messages, which were known to the departed and are not known to the automatist

[medium]; and secondly, the need of detailed and characteristic utterances; a moral means of identification corresponding, say, not to the meagre *signalement* by which a man is described on his passport, but to the individual complex of minute markings left by the impression of a prisoner's thumb.

During the time of Myers and after his death, many cases of mediumship involving extensive supernormal functioning were described and discussed in the literature. When examining the accounts of mediumistic phenomena, a few mediums stand out as providing unusually powerful evidence for the presence of paranormal capacities and even for the continued existence of the departed. Foremost among them were Leonora Piper and Gladys Osborne Leonard.

Leonora Piper used both trance speaking and automatic writing in her sittings. She began her mediumship in the 1880s, and for fifteen years she was studied, scrutinised, monitored, and even followed by a detective to see if there was any way that she could be obtaining information through normal means. She was never discovered in deception or fraud in the course of the many sittings she conducted. Details of sittings, with the precautions used and information produced, were reported in various articles, many of them in the *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*.

Gladys Osborne Leonard's mediumistic automatism was trance speaking. She began functioning as a medium in 1914 and soon came to the notice of some of the more prominent members of the Society for Psychical Research. For a period of time she had sittings exclusively for that society, and the report that resulted was that she gave good evidence of communicating with discarnate spirits. Over a period of years, Charles Drayton Thomas carried out experiments testing her clairvoyant abilities and wrote of his findings in two books (Thomas 1922; Thomas 1928). Thomas's experiments with Mrs. Leonard were so successful that there were those who speculated that perhaps some specially gifted mediums could exercise almost unlimited powers of extrasensory perception (Stevenson, 1977: 157).

These two mediums routinely produced automatisms that contained information about deceased individuals for which no ordinary explanation seemed adequate. The information they produced and the circumstances around its production was so thoroughly examined over many years that it seemed to many that the only possible explanation was that indeed the dead were communicating through them. For if they knew what they seemed to know, and if their presentation of the purported communicating spirit was as impressive as it was, and if, through the best of the abilities of the investigators, fraud,

conscious and unconscious, was ruled out, what alternative explanation could be offered?

Spirits vs. Superpsi

When writing about the medium 'Hélène Smith', Theodore Flournoy had invoked Myers's notion of the 'mythopoeic' to express the tendency that people have to construct characters, stories, and 'romances' in their subliminal minds, and, on occasion, to dramatise these romances in the form of automatisms, such as automatic writing. Flournoy believed that mediums demonstrated this tendency to an extraordinary degree, and that the 'spirits' that they claimed to be in touch with were the products of this faculty. His observations of 'Hélène Smith' led him to believe that everything that she produced could be explained in terms of the creative play of her subconscious mind, supplemented by 'cryptomnesia' (unconscious recall of forgotten events) and spurred on by the need to resolve certain personal psychological problems. Although in his analysis of 'Hélène Smith's' communications, Flournoy allowed for the possibility that telepathy played a role, he tended to play down that element.

Flournoy's estimation of the role of paranormal knowledge in mediumistic communications evolved, and his final position on the matter can be found in *Esprits et médiums. Mélanges de métapsychique et de psychologie*, which was condensed and translated into English (Flournoy 1911a; Flournoy 1911b). Here he stated that he now believed that the information presented by certain mediums was so impressive that telepathy must be involved.

Flournoy's final position became the seed for a conception of mediumistic psychology that slowly evolved over the twentieth century and eventually came to be called the 'superpsi' theory of mediumship. This theory of mediumistic communication has two components:

- 1) Superpsi Component. The medium was believed to have the ability to exercise telepathy, clairvoyance, retrocognition, precognition, and psychokinesis to such an extent as to obtain any information that is needed to produce an impersonation of a deceased individual that is indistinguishable from the deceased person him or herself. Belief in their ability to exercise these powers was gradually ceded to mediums over time, as experimental and anecdotal confirmation of these faculties grew, and the extension of these powers beyond anything that had been proven provided a non-spirit hypothesis as an alternative explanation for the impressive veridical information produced by some mediums.

- 2) Superplasticity Component. In cases of trance mediumship or mediumship involving some kind of ostensible possession, the medium was believed to be capable of unconsciously integrating paranormally acquired information about an individual in such a way as to convincingly impersonate that individual. This component was based on the belief that human beings have an unconscious tendency to create stories, fables, characterisations, and even well-rounded personalities and dramatise those creative fabrications to others. This ability is characterised by playfulness, inventiveness, and an urge to dramatise that remains wholly unconscious to the medium.

Ironically, the superpsi component, which contributed to doubts that mediumistic communications constituted proof of survival, was the result of the extraordinary success of some mediums in demonstrating telepathy and clairvoyance (Stevenson 1977: 157–158). In any event, this approach provided an explanation of mediumistic messages that involved neither fraud nor spirit intervention.

Myers (1890: 337) had already written in 1890:

We must remember that there is a possible way of explaining almost any message without postulating the continuance of personal life after bodily death. It is *conceivable* that thought-transference and clairvoyance may be pushed to the point of a sort of terrene omniscience; so that to a man's unconscious self some phantasmal picture should be open of all that men are doing or have done,—things good and evil photographed imperishably in some inexorable imprint of the past. In such a case the apparent personality of one departed might be only some kind of persisting synthesis of the psychical impressions which his transitory existence had left upon the sum of things.

Myers did not claim he had empirical evidence of such “omniscience,” only that the evidence gathered up to that moment pointed in the direction of this possibility.

Flournoy's 1911 book was the first clear statement of what would become the superpsi theory, and the introduction to the English version of the book, written by the American psychical researcher Hereward Carrington, became the first counterargument. Carrington took the position that some mediums were able, in fact, to communicate with the departed and that, in the face of the evidence, no other explanation was credible. He noted that if one were to accept Flournoy's position (explaining all mediumistic phenomena in terms of

subconscious psychological needs which made use of such natural factors as cryptomnesia, working in combination with extensive paranormal powers to dramatise fictive 'spirits'), then communication with the dead would become virtually impossible to prove. Carrington expressed his disagreement with Flournoy in this way:

Professor Flournoy evidently finds great difficulty in accepting the doctrine of spiritism, and for several reasons. In the first place, he contends that it has not as yet been adequately proved; that most of its phenomena can be explained by latent subconscious incubation, cryptomnesia, and the added supernormal powers of telepathy, clairvoyance, etc. Certainly his analysis of many of the cases seems to bear this out in a very striking manner. This is, perhaps, the most valuable portion of the book, and the one which will be most acceptable to the average scientific man. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that there are many facts which remain unexplained. Premonitions and independent clairvoyance are hardly touched upon by the author, while many of the phenomena witnessed in the case of Mrs. Piper certainly cannot be explained by the hypotheses advocated unless these be so stretched and extended as to make them (as Professor Flournoy himself admits) as remarkable and inconceivable as spiritism itself. Certainly a fact cannot be explained by any process of "latent incubation" in the medium when it can be shown that it was never known to her; nor can telepathy be invariably used as an explanation, for many of the facts were unknown to the sitter himself, and were only ascertained after constant inquiry and much letter-writing. And, if we stretch telepathy to embrace and include all human living consciousness, we have here a theory which is as staggering as it is unconvincing, and one which, in spite of its hypothetical powers, fails to explain many of the facts, all of which are perfectly intelligible and natural on the spiritistic theory.

FLOURNOY 1911B: 6-7

In the following decades, the proto-superpsi theory formulated by Flournoy continued to influence discussions of the source of mediumistic communications. E.R. Dodds, in his sceptically oriented article on survival, urged a "telepathic" explanation of the phenomena and noted the objection that it involves an "unexampled selective action of the medium's mind, in supernormally deriving from other human minds precisely those remembered facts which are required for building up of a particular trance personality" (Dodds 1934: 163).

Hornell Hart, in his 1959 book *The Enigma of Survival: The Case For and Against an Afterlife* (139–140), summed up the main issues and gave a name to the theory:

Professor Dodds, Gardner Murphy, and other scientifically minded doubters of survival, have developed the theory that the dramatizing power of the unconscious, making use of a comprehensive form of telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition and retrocognition (which I shall call *super-esp*), may create pseudo spirit personalities, which convince wishful believers, but which give no genuine evidence of survival beyond bodily death. Dr. Murphy, Dr. Louisa Rhine, and others have argued that a similar process creates (or might create) apparitions of the dead, which (if this theory were pushed to its limit) would provide no evidence for survival. In recent decades they have come to believe that telepathy, clairvoyance, retrocognition and even precognition operate in ways which can gather pertinent information from anywhere in the world. And they have come to believe that the information thus comprehensively gathered is organized into plausible pseudo communicator form by the dramatizing capacity of the medium's (and perhaps the sitter's) unconscious mind.

A more recent superpsi position on mediumistic communications has been formulated by Stephen Braude (S. Braude 1989; Braude 1992a; Braude 1992b; Braude 1995; Braude 2003). Braude is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Maryland, Baltimore, and former president of the Parapsychological Association. He has written about a great variety of parapsychological issues as well as matters relating to the philosophical implications of dissociation and multiple personality. In his initial articulation of his position, Braude (1989: 25) wrote that “both abstract and empirical considerations suggest that psi-functioning in human beings may be considerably more extensive and controllable than its laboratory manifestations make it appear to be.”

This formulation was meant to include both ‘super-PK’ (a greatly extended ability to affect physical events at a distance) and ‘super-ESP’ (a greatly extended ability to perceive things not available to sense experience). Braude (1992a: 128) insists that “the most serious obstacle to taking even the best evidence for survival at face value is the possibility that the data can be examined in terms of highly-refined psi among the living.... No case so far investigated resists explanation along these lines.”

Braude contends that the discussion of the superpsi hypothesis had been impeded by the scant knowledge of possible unconscious factors often shown by investigators of mediumship. In particular, he argues that knowledge of

dissociation in general and of multiple personality in particular is crucial to any analysis of the psychological dimensions of mediumship. Braude (1995: 210) suggests that a more accurate description of his position would be to call it the 'dissociation + psi' hypothesis, emphasising the fact that an understanding of dissociation is intrinsically involved in its application. Also, Braude uses his approach to analyze not just mediumistic productions, but also accounts of ostensible memories of reincarnation.

The super-psi explanation has been disputed by a number of authors (for example, Gauld 1982; Stevenson 1977; Stevenson 1992; Almeder 1992; Griffin 1997). Several types of criticisms have been voiced. One involves the assertion that there is little empirical support for the superpsi position, and that even the most dazzling of psychic virtuosos have not shown paranormal capacities anywhere near those assumed to be at work. Coming at it from a slightly different angle, it is suggested that if superpsi capacities existed, then things would be very different in the world, because that capacity would be used to do dramatic things, such as gathering information to save people's lives, which would be perceived by all of us and could not be ignored. Another objection is that the theory seems to be unfalsifiable, that is, that there are no empirical means to show that the theory is not true, or, as Gauld (1982: 15) writes, it cannot "be tested against the facts." Gauld (1982: 15ff) also points out that in the case of "drop-in communicators," there are great difficulties in explaining how the medium could select the communicator about whom to gather the information and how the medium could locate the appropriate materials to present in the communication. Stevenson (1977) suggests that the same difficulty arises from evidence of survival obtained in cases of the reincarnation type, and that there is a further problem deriving from the fact that, whereas mediums have exhibited paranormal powers on various occasions, those who recall past life experiences have not (Gauld 1982: 165). Stevenson (1977) calls attention to an additional difficulty with the theory. He points out that while it is one thing to access paranormal sources of information to be used in personating a departed spirit, it is quite another to acquire a skill that belonged to that spirit. He cites evidence that skills can only be acquired by practice, and that this type of learning would not be available to the medium. Again referring to cases of the reincarnation type, he points out that a child, for instance, may manifest not only unexplainable knowledge of a previous existence, but also behavior of a type characteristic of the person thought to be reincarnated. This characteristic behavior, "for example of special interests in food, clothing, and activities, can be so unusual—if not unique—that it may constitute collectively a skill of the sort Ducasse considered to provide evidence for the survival of a personality after death," and poses serious difficulties in explaining the transfer of this

behavioral sense of the deceased person in terms of super-psi (Gauld 1982: 165–166).

Braude's later position involves a subtle shift in emphasis. In *Immortal Remains* (2003) he examines not only the issue of spirits vs. superpsi, he also deftly discusses most of the major issues of mediumship in terms of psychological considerations. As he puts it, the question is "Whether evidence suggesting post-mortem survival is actually disguised psychic functioning among the living" (Braude 2003: 2). Braude attempts to answer the critics of the superpsi theory who say that it posits a higher level of psychic functioning than has been documented in the living, outside the laboratory, by arguing that there is evidence of very impressive psychic function in some spontaneous cases. Further, he points out that, when it comes right down to it, the Spiritist position requires a similarly high degree of psychic function. He also rejects the notion that the superpsi theory is 'unfalsifiable', saying that while it may not be falsifiable in the strong sense that nothing can count against it, it is nevertheless falsifiable in the weak sense in that there is evidence that can render the theory less plausible than the countertheory (Braude 2003: 17, 20).

Braude's (2003: 303) final position is that it is just not possible to decide for or against survival with a high degree of confidence and that "when we consider the antecedent probability of the superpsi and survival hypotheses relative to the total background of relevant evidence, it begins to look very much like a draw." Nevertheless, Braude (2003: 303, 305) does say that "the various lines of survival evidence...taken together...point more strongly toward that conclusion [survival] than they do separately," and that perhaps "the scales are tilting slightly toward the survivalist and away from the superpsi hypothesis." He ventures the opinion that "the issue of crippling complexity...tips the balance even more convincingly in that direction" and concludes that "the evidence provides a reasonable basis for believing in a personal post-mortem survival" (Braude 2003: 303–305).

However one views the situation, provided one does not simply consider all mediumistic communication to be fraudulent, the phenomena of mediumship are indicative of the action of a sustained automatism. Whether the medium simply produces the dramatisation from his or her unconscious materials, or whether paranormally gathered information is added to that mix, or whether spirits are indeed somehow at work, the automatism involved is dramatic and impressive.

With this confrontation between spiritual and psychodynamic views, the two streams of Mesmerism, which had run separate but parallel and sometimes intersecting courses through the history of developments since Puységur,

have come together in fateful and fruitful ways. However, the outcome of this new confluence is, it seems, yet to be determined.

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Spiritualism and the American Swedenborgian Current

Arthur Versluis

Certainly one of the most important traditions for understanding the history of Spiritualism and channeling, particularly in North America, is that inaugurated by Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), whose voluminous works provided the most influential cosmological framework for subsequent forms of Spiritualism. In the wake of Swedenborg's many volumes devoted to chronicling his visionary experiences came others, particularly in Britain and North America, but also in Europe. While it is by no means the case that all of Spiritualism derived from Swedenborg, nonetheless many figures, among them Andrew Jackson Davis (1826–1910), Thomas Lake Harris (1823–1906), and Laurence Oliphant (1829–1888), took on prophetic roles of their own to varying degrees, and are important figures, for different reasons, within the larger history of Spiritualism and channeling.

These three figures were prolific authors and perhaps the most well-known of American visionaries who drew from the Swedenborgian current, but there were many others. To give only one example, in 1849, a Rev. Henry Weller, pastor of the Grand Rapids Society [of Swedenborgians] in Michigan, “claimed to be in personal communication with Swedenborg, and began to call himself the Lord's High Priest.” After he drew together a small band of followers and introduced a “spiritual wife system” among them, he was repudiated by the Michigan Association, whereupon he moved to La Porte, Indiana, and set up shop there for a time (Block 1968: 127). This pattern of Swedenborgianism generating new prophetic claims and systems is exemplified not only by better-known and more-documented examples, but also by many lesser-known ones, which each demonstrate what Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur observed (tongue-in-cheek) in *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) of American religiosity: that sects perpetually divide, and that the logical outcome would be countless sects of one. To put it succinctly, Swedenborgian claims of direct spiritual vision often generate new claims of supersession by others. And this is precisely what we see in the histories of Andrew Jackson Davis, Thomas Lake Harris, and Laurence Oliphant.

We begin with a brief overview of Swedenborgianism.

Emanuel Swedenborg and New Dispensations

Emanuel Swedenborg's biography and works are widely available, and they need be only briefly recounted here with an eye to their significances for the history of Spiritualism and channeling. Without doubt, Swedenborg's works and ideas influenced many subsequent movements, groups, and individuals in Europe, England, and the Anglo-European diaspora. Swedenborg's appeal derives not only from his assertions of direct visionary revelation and his scientific background and approach, but also from the complex cosmological schema that his work provides and within which much in the subsequent phenomena of Spiritualism can be situated.

Swedenborg was born in Stockholm and raised in Uppsala, Sweden, where his father was a theologian. He had an affinity for mathematics and natural science, and after graduating from the university in 1709, he travelled to London, Oxford, the Netherlands, and France. He published on technical subjects at first, but then moved on to publish in more than twenty theological works, outlining in a scientific way the cosmology of the 'heavenly doctrine' he believed had been vouchsafed to him in vision. For him, vision and ratiocination could be simultaneous, or nearly so, and they were not in opposition to one another. In Swedenborg's works, we see the inauguration of the claim that Spiritualist phenomena could be understood as complementary to and extensions of modern science. Swedenborgianism is not Spiritualism proper, since that movement emerged in the nineteenth century, but certainly many Spiritualist beliefs have their origin in Swedenborgian thought or revelations.

The following are some characteristics of Swedenborg's views that influenced subsequent Spiritualist and channeling phenomena not only in the nineteenth, but also in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries:

1. Rejection of some foundational tenets of confessional forms of Christianity, including doctrines like vicarious atonement and Trinitarianism.
2. Assertion of the existence of spiritual realms in which angels and spirits reside, and of his own ability to see and converse with them.
3. A complex cosmological/psychological depiction of posthumous states of existence, and the possibility of seeing/communicating with beings in those states.
4. A theory of male–female spiritual relationships, and of posthumous “conjugal” love and marriage between spirits.
5. Chiliasm—that is, the belief that the apocalypse had already happened (in 1757) and that the Swedenborgian New Church represented a new spiritual era, a Second Advent or Pentecost.

These particular aspects of Swedenborg's doctrines (later often unacknowledged as to their origin) became articles of faith for numerous subsequent religious movements, groups, and individual charismatic and prophetic figures in the next several centuries. One could well argue, and indeed Wouter Hanegraaff (1998) has pointed out, that much in late twentieth-century New Age thought can be traced back to Swedenborgianism, at the very least, as a harbinger. Swedenborgianism proper, with its complex cosmology and doctrines, typically appeals to a social-intellectual elite, as for instance demonstrated by Mary Ann Meyers (1983: 6, *passim*) in her study of the social history of North American Swedenborgianism. But through movements like Spiritualism, ideas along these lines were conveyed to a wider public as well. Given the syncretic and dynamic nature of new religions, and because of the ways ideas travel, many subsequent figures might well not be aware of how or in what ways their movements or ideas are indebted to Swedenborgianism. And indeed, charismatic or prophetic figures frequently either elide the origins of their thought or present themselves as the supersession of their predecessor(s), as is the case with more than one prophetic figure in the broader American Swedenborgian current.

Perhaps the most important and widely influential Swedenborgianesque concept, which of course does not originate with Swedenborg, is that of a new dispensation or a new era. Variations on this idea become central to many forms of Spiritualism and channeling, under the more general notion that in one form or another, a new era is being inaugurated, characterised variously by communication with spirits or angels; by some envisioned change in the heavens, understood literally or figuratively; or by some being or beings from other galaxies, dimensions, or times, marked in most cases by communication with discarnate beings ordinarily or hitherto invisible. Underlying all of these is the notion of supersession, a belief that our era is inaugurating a new and auspicious age for humanity. This concept of a new era or dispensation is visible in much of the subsequent Swedenborgian current, as in, more broadly speaking of course, the later New Age movement.

The high point for Swedenborgian influence in the United States was the mid- to late-nineteenth century, to which all of our emblematic figures belong. Among these, arguably the most influential, and certainly one of the most interesting, was Andrew Jackson Davis.

Andrew Jackson Davis

Andrew Jackson Davis was born in Blooming Grove, New York, in 1826, and he later claimed that he was clairvoyant from an early age. Indeed, he said that

he persuaded his father to move the family to Poughkeepsie, New York, on advice from inner voices. He had no formal education, but he did undertake an apprenticeship in shoemaking at sixteen. In 1843, he attended a lecture and demonstration on Mesmerism, and later was himself put into a 'mesmeric sleep' by a local tailor, in which state he said he was able to diagnose diseases, a series of events strikingly similar to the later clairvoyant awakening of Edgar Cayce (1877–1945). Perhaps most relevant to his later work, though: in 1844, he said that he travelled forty miles one night in a trancelike state, where in the mountains he claimed to have met two spiritual guides, Emanuel Swedenborg and Galen. Swedenborg's shadow in fact is cast over all of Davis's subsequent work.

The extent of Davis's indebtedness to Swedenborg was documented in 1847 by George Bush, a professor of Hebrew at New York University. In his book *Mesmer and Swedenborg*, Bush included an appendix on Davis, who was then twenty-one. In his appendix, Bush documents at length the parallels between Davis's lectures and various texts of Swedenborg. Bush gives the text of a letter from Davis in which he details a trance experience and includes a text that Davis wrote during the trance, which is addressed to the spirit of Swedenborg. In it, Davis writes that he has been granted the opportunity to "discourse" with Swedenborg when he is "near our earth," on topics that Swedenborg discussed in "A.C. [*Arcana Celestia*] 322, 1880, 1881, 3633, 4622, 4735, 6054," and so forth. In his letter to Bush, Davis wrote that "I do not understand the meaning, nor the letters A.C., and the figures. It appears now I knew it then, but can't recollect what it was. As I felt impressed so strongly to send it to you, I do so, for it must be right" (Bush 1847: 175–179).

Not surprisingly, Bush was puzzled by this communication, and even more baffled when he found that Davis's writing was derived from Swedenborg's *The Earths in the Universe*, yet was not "so perfect, as might be expected in an intended copy. There was a singular air pervading it. Portions of it were obscure and mystical, and it was still a problem, why it should not have been marked with a greater or less conformity to the original" (Bush 1847: 178). One could explain this by Davis having read Swedenborg and by his possession of an exceptional memory—but Bush goes on to observe that Davis swore an oath that he had never read the works of Swedenborg. What's more, Bush said, Davis was able in trance to give the details word for word of Bush's own work in progress, without having seen a word of the manuscript. Bush writes about this, "This will appear incredible, *but it is strictly true*" (Bush 1847: 180). Needless to say, Bush's exchanges with Davis only served to complicate matters.

Still, Bush's assessment of Davis was more or less empirical. Bush made inquiries into Davis's childhood and reading habits, seeking to verify whether

he might have actually been reading Swedenborg, but he found no evidence that he had. As a young man, Davis's reading habits were evidently juvenile and minimal. Nonetheless, writes Bush, "that Mr. D. has in some way come, in his disclosures, into a singular relation to the philosophy and psychology of Swedenborg is, I think, beyond a question. Equally clear do I consider it that this is not the result of design on his part, nor could he have designed it when he had previously not the slightest knowledge of his system" (Bush 1847: 183). Bush did not endorse the veracity of Davis's revelations—indeed, he suggests that they probably represented an admixture of truth and falsehoods—but he was convinced of one thing for certain: that Davis was profoundly linked to Swedenborg.

When we consider the characteristics of Swedenborg's work mentioned above, we find that every one is visible in Davis's writings. Davis did not espouse the specific chiliasm of Swedenborg and the notion of a new age beginning in 1757, but rather transposed the new era to his own present, and to the advent of Mesmerism and Spiritualism. Nonetheless, in Davis's work, we do in fact see the rejection of some foundational tenets of confessional forms of Christianity, the assertion of the existence of spiritual realms in which angels and spirits reside, the assertion of his own ability to see and converse with them, the elaboration of a complex cosmological/psychological depiction of posthumous states of existence, and the possibility of seeing/communicating with beings in those states, as well as a theory of male–female spiritual relationships, and a variant form of chiliasm. In Davis's writings we also see the assertion that beings live on/in the various planetary spheres, a view we see repeated in later authors of this school.

Davis subsequently became one of the more prolific and widely read American authors in this genre of the nineteenth century. His books include *The Principles of Nature* (1847), *The Great Harmonia* (1850–1855), *Philosophy of Spiritual Intercourse*, (1851), *Penetralia* (1856), *The Magic Staff: An Autobiography* (1857), *A Stellar Key to the Summer Land* (1867), *Events in the Life of a Seer* (1868), *The Harmonial Man* (1872), and *The Diakka and Their Earthly Victims* (1873), as well as the autobiographical sequel *Beyond the Valley* (1885). Davis's voluminous writings include a broad range of subjects, including health, disease, posthumous existence, criminality, spiritual beings, marriage to one's 'counterpart', and much else. An edited compilation from his works is available as *The Harmonial Philosophy* (1922). In brief, he represented himself as a seer into other worlds, as an authentic visionary very much in the Swedenborgian current.

Davis emphasised the importance of conjugal love, marriage, and spiritual companionship. In *The Great Harmonia* (1850–1855), he asserts that "every

individual is born married; every male and female has a true and eternal companion, depending on the spontaneous conjunction of affinities, of principle with principle and spirit with spirit" (Davis 1850–1861: II, 201–210). Davis uses the term 'counterpart', writing that "To every individual, its counterpart—or the most loved—is purest, greatest, most beautiful of all beings... This philosophy of marriage is that which angels know." And he uses Swedenborgian terminology to make clear that there are three kinds of marriage: natural, spiritual, and celestial. He is writing in the broad Swedenborgian current, but there is no mention here of Swedenborg.

In her landmark survey of Spiritualism, *Modern American Spiritualism*, Emma Hardinge Britten gave pride of place to Davis, placing a photograph of Andrew Jackson Davis as the frontispiece and asserting that Davis stands "alone and unrivalled in the marvellous character of his occult endowments and the irresistible nature of the influence he has exercised upon humanity" (Britten 1970: 23). Without doubt, Davis was widely influential, and the advent of Spiritualism might indeed better be linked to him than to the Fox sisters. But the first chapter of Hardinge's survey also begins with a quotation from another major figure whose work was indebted to that of Swedenborg and, after him, to Davis. The quotation is from a poem by Thomas Lake Harris, the next major visionary figure in the American Swedenborgian current.

Thomas Lake Harris

Thomas Lake Harris was born in 1923 in Fenny Stratford, England, and he emigrated as a child with his family to Utica, New York, in 1828. Although as a young man he became a Universalist minister, in 1847 he joined the group of Andrew Jackson Davis, which he shortly thereafter left in order to enter the Swedenborgian 'Church of the New Jerusalem'. It is here that Harris's thought, like Davis's, has its origins. Harris subsequently travelled to England on behalf of Swedenborgianism, but there he announced his own chiliaric group, called the 'Brotherhood of the New Life'. Harris established his community at Brocton, Salem-on-Erie, New York, and finally in Santa Rosa, California.

Harris's early writings belong to the New England Swedenborgian ambience of the 1850s. He appealed to a Swedenborgian audience and drew very much on the characteristic vocabulary and worldview, but offered himself as the successor to Swedenborg. In *The Arcana of Christianity* (1858), and in its sequel, *The Song of Satan* (1860), Harris said he had the direct visionary blessing of Swedenborg himself, just as Davis did, but he went Davis one better by claiming he had achieved a revelatory level higher than that of Swedenborg. Harris

had a messianic self-view, and he believed that in addition to his visionary experiences, he had to fight spiritual battles and that he was the ‘pivotal’ one in the world. Already in the 1850s, we find Harris writing about “internal respiration,” about the existence of “fays” or faeries, and about the spiritual importance of male–female “counterparts.” Davis also wrote about “counterparts,” but Harris developed it into a primary aspect of his communal life and teachings.

Harris was a prolific author, and he also wrote and published a number of hymns and songs. In addition to *Arcana of Christianity: An Unfolding of the Celestial Sense of the Divine Word* (1858–1867), Harris published a collection of extemporaneous lectures entitled *The Millennial Age: Twelve Discourses on the Spiritual and Social Aspects of the Times* (1860), a monograph on “universal religion” entitled *The Breath of God with Man* (1867), and, in the book *The Golden Child* (1878), a daily chronicle of life in the California community Harris founded. From early on, Harris distinguished between institutional Swedenborgianism, which he did not care for, and “direct influx from the Lord,” which he espoused and claimed for himself as for the New Church (Harris 1859b: II, 437).

Harris’s doctrines—including a male–female divinity, and a belief in an enduring transcendent male–female spiritual body—have their origins in Swedenborgianism. Harris’s doctrine of counterparts is this: that each individual, male or female, has a counterpart of the other gender. According to Harris, it is rare for both counterparts to be incarnated and married; in general, one’s counterpart is a spiritual being (Harris 1859a: II, 307). A practitioner of Harris’s group came to know his or her counterpart through an inner revelatory process; contrary to various lurid accusations, his was a quasi-ascetic community. In the personal accounts of some members, there were sexual dimensions to the counterpart experiences, but those experiences were of union with non-physical beings. But it is also evident that Harris’s teachings included a joint male–female transformative process.¹ In his *Arcana of Christianity* (1867), Harris writes that the woman needs the man, who serves as “the hierophant, who becomes masculine-feminine, supplying from his masculine mind the bodies for the spirits of the ideas disrobed of their ultimate appearance, and left as feminine bodies for the woman’s eyes” (Harris 1858–1867: I, 250).

1 That there was a sexual dimension to these practices was, of course, the accusation by a Miss Chevallier early in the twentieth century, which raised such a stir that eventually Harris felt compelled to leave the estate near Santa Rosa and travel East. This was also the accusation against Laurence Oliphant, Harris’s most famous and remarkable erstwhile follower (Smith 1928: 219–228; see also Schneider and Lawton 1942: 534–560).

This discipline, which can condense ten years of inner work into one, can lead the husband and wife into a “crowning with the crown of life” (Harris 1858–1867: I, 349).

Although in some respects Harris belonged to the broad Swedenborgian current, by the 1850s he had begun to criticise Swedenborgianism as “sectarian” and insufficiently practical. In Harris’s view, the “sect of Swedenborgians is built around a nucleus of written memorials. It is purely historical; necessary perhaps to make up the complement of the sects, but valueless in the sense of a Divine Institution” (Harris 1859b: II, 437). Harris was impatient with those who adhered to sectarian doctrines but were unwilling to enter into a transformative process themselves. By contrast, Harris emphasised a male–female transformative process that was based in particular practices that included ‘internal respiration’ as well as visionary travels and battles. ‘Internal respiration’, a term derived from Swedenborg, for Harris involved the whole body from the soles of the feet to the crown of the head, an inner process on which his visions were based.

The visionary dimensions of Harris’s teachings have their clearest predecessors in Andrew Jackson Davis and, before that, in the work of Swedenborg. Harris writes of visiting the spiritual inhabitants of planets like Saturn or Venus, as well as of the Sun, and this is an established current that we also see later in the *Sympneumata* of Laurence Oliphant, Harris’s erstwhile student. Harris’s English follower W.P. Swainson’s 1922 *Thomas Lake Harris and His Occult Teachings* begins with Harris’s fantastic visionary voyages to various planets and discusses “the conditions of life on the sinless or unfallen worlds” (Swainson 1922: 18). Harris, Swainson (65) observes, “makes such stupendous claims that, on first acquaintance, one naturally feels skeptical as to the truth of much that he asserts. Even after a more or less comprehensive study of his writings it is difficult to bring oneself to accept many of his statements.” One can understand those statements better, however, by recognising their Swedenborgian origins and context.

One of the things that most distinguishes Harris, especially for this period, is the central, one could say cosmic, role that he assigns himself. Harris saw himself as the ‘pivot’, as someone who intervenes in invisible dimensions on behalf of others, suffers, prevents conflicts on earth, and so forth. In this role, he could be likened in some respects a *shaykh* figure in Sufism, or to a kind of guru or messianic figure. Numerous accounts depict him struggling with demons, exorcising them, and curing the possessed or afflicted, to such an extent that some of his biographers are unable to resist poking fun at him—as when, late in his life, Harris’s wife makes a skin rash into an outbreak of the hells on earth as he battles with ‘inversive’ forces.

Harris's relationship to Swedenborgianism was complicated because he both belonged to it and rejected it. In a narrative called "A Sister in the New Life," written by an anonymous young woman who came to the Harris community in 1881, for instance, we find that Harris was highly critical of Swedenborgians, as in the following: "I was told one thing by him [Harris], that Swedenborgianism, more than any other -ism, destroyed truth and goodness. All the greatest troubles and worst lies that have been sent by the evil powers against him, have come through that sect" (Schneider and Lawton 1942: 518, 527). In addition to this admission about Harris's rejection of institutional Swedenborgianism, this text also explains what it was like to enter into the Harris circle. The narrative is replete with descriptions of the author's inner states in relation to Harris.

The narrative "From a Lady in San Francisco to a Friend in England" begins with accounts of unusual physical or psycho-physical phenomena, like a peculiar vibrating sensation in her arms, which gradually extended throughout her body. Provocatively, she writes that "The first time that it came into my body, that is the trunk, it seemed to enter through the generative organs, and with it came the thought, this is like sexual intercourse, only infinitely more so, in that every atom of your frame enters into union with another atom to the furthest extremity of your body" (Schneider and Lawton 1942: 511). But the experience left her "infinitely calm and peaceful, nothing turbulent and passionate about it, and my only desire was to constantly pray in thankfulness." The next day (17 May 1881), she felt "little wings" moving in her breast, along with great exhaustion and a sense of joy.

Within a few days, the author began to experience or recognise her inner husband or angel, and she realised with "reverence" that "the womb and life-giving organs must be very holy" (Schneider and Lawton 1942: 514). Her breathing changed, and sometimes when the vibrations began, they gripped one another in order to feel what was going on, "and she can feel something like electricity almost" (Schneider and Lawton 1942: 515). She remarked (5 June 1881) on how "very strange" was the feeling of her counterpart, which began with "a strange sensation in my arms," "gradually extending all over" ((Schneider and Lawton 1942: 523). It was a "delightful" sensation, but she became "so utterly exhausted and worn out that I feel at times as if I could not endure it. I never used to have a conscious sensation about my body, and now it is all changed" (Schneider and Lawton 1942: 524). She became very self-conscious about her body because she constantly felt inner "flutterings," "circulation," and "I scarce know what," all of which left her exhausted and insomniac. But in a few months, she also felt "currents of life flowing into me continually, and Father [Harris] says they are from him."

Harris also acted as a medium for “fairies,” on one occasion “talk[ing] for over an hour,” and “answer[ing] all sorts of questions in the loveliest soft lisping notes, they are mostly vowel sounds” (Schneider and Lawton 1942: 531). She writes that the fay began to set up house inside her, making her body a kind of miniature version of a kingdom, with little dwellings scattered throughout it (Schneider and Lawton 1942: 525). Such personal narratives help demonstrate how Harris’s abstract concepts in *Arcana of Christianity* and elsewhere were realised in individual experience within his esoteric community.

In 1909, *The Brotherhood of the New Life* was published under the pseudonym ‘Respiro’, and in this work a follower of Harris’s analyzes not only Harris’s teachings, but also those of Laurence Oliphant, Anna Kingsford, and a number of other contemporary authors, with a particular eye towards their teachings regarding male–female spiritual union and the central role that this has played historically (Respiro 1909). He cites a wide range of ancient and more recent authors, but gives pride of place to Harris, whose teachings he regards as most complete as regards the true nature of God’s unity in duality. For ‘Respiro’, Harris’s theory of counterparts points towards a future ideal divine-human state of being—of which Harris was harbinger, himself being ‘two-in-one’ because he was united with the divine Lily, his own counterpart (Respiro 1909: 31, 103–105). What Respiro’s work makes abundantly clear—if it was not already so from Harris’s own works and from contemporary accounts of and accusations regarding his communities—is that Harris took the Swedenborgian role of visionary further than anyone else.

Harris was not claiming for himself only visions of beings in other realms or spheres, but rather his own centrality in a cosmic drama. Harris took the Swedenborgian teachings in new directions, effectively offering himself as the revealer of a new religious revelation with esoteric sexual dimensions. He became in many respects a prophetic figure, but more than that, in his own perspective and that of others around him, a Christ-like figure, as well as an exemplar of spiritual awakening through the esoteric practices of internal respiration, visions, and union with one’s inner counterpart. Without doubt, Harris took the Swedenborgian current represented by Davis to an entirely new level, presenting himself, at least to those privy to his inner teachings, as not only Swedenborg’s successor, but as a cosmic figure in his own right. In this regard, Harris represents a precursor to the many guru-figures who appeared in the West in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Rawlinson 1998). And like many of them, his sect was to suffer a major schism, in this case with his erstwhile student, Laurence Oliphant.

Laurence Oliphant

Laurence Oliphant (1829–1888) was born to Anthony and Mary Oliphant, and by the time he was ten, his father had been knighted. Sir Anthony and Lady Oliphant were members of the Calvinist Protestant Reformed Church, and the young Laurence grew up in Ceylon, where his father was Chief Justice, and in England. Even as a young man, Laurence Oliphant was well-travelled. In his early adulthood, he travelled through India and Nepal, returned to England and passed the bar exam, travelled to Russia, observed the Crimean war first-hand, became Lord Elgin's private secretary on the mission that negotiated a primary treaty between Canada and the United States, and as Herbert Schneider (80) puts it, “embarked on one expedition after another with reckless abandon and almost incredible energy.” He had served on diplomatic missions to China and Japan, and later became a well-known war correspondent for the *Times* of London.

Oliphant met Thomas Lake Harris in England during Harris's visit there. To the disbelief of his English peers, upon his election to Parliament, instead of attending to his position, Oliphant applied for membership in Harris's esoteric community in New York, and he became known as the silent member of Parliament for his refusal to speak there. Instead, he went to America, and with his mother, Lady Oliphant, joined Harris's community, called ‘the Use’. Oliphant, like his mother, subordinated himself to the charismatic Harris as his ‘Father’. Harris hoed in the fields and did other manual labor in the vineyards and on the farm for ten or more hours a day. Oliphant lived in a shed, during the day sometimes cleaning out stables and hauling rubbish.

Oliphant and his mother lived for years in Harris's Brocton community, which grew to around a hundred members, and to significant size and relative wealth. The communal wealth was to a significant extent provided by the Oliphants. Later, Harris and some select members of the community moved to a huge estate near Santa Rosa, California, where again they developed surrounding vineyards and built a mansion on a high hill. Oliphant returned to England, rejoined high society, married the striking Alice le Strange Oliphant, and returned with her to New York. She travelled to California to visit Harris there, but Harris sent her away. Oliphant and his wife subsequently broke from Harris's community, seeing Harris himself as having fallen prey to ambition and ego. They regained some of Oliphant's wealth through threatened legal action and made preparations to move to Palestine.

Oliphant later published two works that detailed his own esoteric teachings, which turned on the esoteric relationships possible between men and women. These works bore the significant influence of his wife Alice, particularly the

first of them, *Sympneumata; or Evolutionary Forces Now Active in Man* (1885b) and *Scientific Religion; or, Higher Possibilities of Life and Practice through the Operation of Natural Forces* (1888), published in the year of Oliphant's death. In these books, we see Oliphant's esoteric sexual teachings outlined in considerable detail. We see his visionary accounts of the beings said to exist on/in the planetary spheres of Mars, Venus, and so forth, and his cosmological teachings elaborated as extensions or developments of Swedenborgian thought in new directions.

Sympneumata, which he wrote with his wife Alice le Strange Oliphant, was a work very much in the Swedenborgian current, whereas *Scientific Religion* is perhaps somewhat closer to conventional scholarship of the time, at least in references to contemporary scientists and religious scholarship and texts. Yet at the same time, its rationalist tone accompanies some surprising assertions about how both it and *Sympneumata* were written. Oliphant writes that in the summer of 1882, he was beginning to write a book, but found that he could only do so by way of a clairvoyant communication with his wife, Alice. This clairvoyant communication produced the Swedenborgesque work *Sympneumata*, and after his wife's death, Oliphant went on to write *Scientific Religion*, also in clairvoyant communication with her. He explains that her death briefly interrupted the "atomic combination" he had formed with her, but subsequently the link was reestablished via the same "duplex cerebral action" of their joined "finer particles" (Oliphant 1885a: 55). What Oliphant is describing here in quasi-scientific terms is an application of the Swedenborgian-Harrisian line of 'counterpartal' philosophy wherein the united counterparts, destined to be together, are seen as greater than the two separate individuals.

The same counterpartal philosophy is illustrated in Oliphant's subsequent two-volume novel *Masollam* (1886). In *Masollam*, Harris's erstwhile disciple depicts himself as the hero with the transparently obvious name of 'Santalba' (implying 'holy' and 'white'), whereas Masollam (Harris) is depicted as originally having real spiritual experience and insights, but as having spiritually deteriorated. Given Oliphant's and Harris's nasty split, it is not surprising that in the novel, Santalba and Masollam also undergo a bitter division. In the middle of the second volume, Santalba tells a Druse shaikh:

the world's deliverance has come, and it has come in the form of a woman. It could not be delivered hitherto, because the sexes were divided; but in union is strength. It is only when the sexes are united according to the divine intention that the redemptive forces for the world's deliverance can play through them; and it is through the operation of the divine

feminine that this union must be achieved. This is the interpretation of your vision of the twofold Word.

OLIPHANT 1886: II, 123

Santalba (Oliphant) also writes that “She who was my associate on earth, and who has passed into higher conditions, is not prevented thereby from co-operating with me...due to the fact that during our external union we had, by long and arduous effort and ordeal, arrived at a consummation, whereby an internal and imperishable tie had been created, the mystery of which I dare not enter upon now” (Oliphant 1886: II, 130). In ordinary Spiritualism, “the bodily health is injured, the intellectual faculties are enfeebled,” but in this higher union, one experiences “increased mental vigour and bodily strength, a consciousness of moral and intellectual freedom and spontaneity” (Oliphant 1886: II, 130–131).

Unfortunately, Oliphant died in 1888 prior to returning to Palestine, yet he left behind not only a remarkably varied body of literature, including novels, travel memoirs, and philosophico-religious discourses, but also an extraordinary example of a colorful life. War correspondent, member of Parliament, menial laborer in Harris’s esoteric community, world traveller, funder of various charities, Oliphant was a remarkably creative and adventurous figure. Although Swedenborg plays only a background role in Oliphant’s unusual works and life—because, like Harris and Davis, Oliphant insisted on his own visionary and spiritual authority—he, again like Harris and Davis, nonetheless belongs to the broader currents of American Swedenborgianism, Spiritualism, and channeling.

Conclusion

In the history of American Spiritualism, the role of male/female relationships as an offshoot of Swedenborgianism has not yet been fully explored, but this is an important aspect of all three authors’ works and lives. It becomes obvious, from the works and lives of Davis, Harris, and Oliphant, that they represented a particular line of American religious philosophy and practice which, although it derived initially from Swedenborg’s writings, soon took on original aspects that simply are not traceable back to Swedenborg. Harris’s teachings about fairies, Oliphant’s writings about the ‘atomic combination’ of a husband and wife—these sorts of teachings are unique to these particular individuals. Nonetheless, Swedenborg’s works were the launching point from which these different authors, from strikingly different backgrounds and perspectives,

developed their own visionary and spiritual teachings. Central to these teachings was the idea, developed differently in each case, that spiritual marriage was vital for one's spiritual progress.

There are other reasons that Swedenborg played a continuing, sometimes hidden, role in American religious history during the nineteenth century, his influence visible not only through the line of Davis, Harris, and Oliphant, but also in the writing of Ralph Waldo Emerson and William James. Swedenborg is an appealing figure for Americans because he represents two recurrent themes that continued to resonate: (1) the merger, or attempted union, of science and religion; and (2) the assertion of direct, individual spiritual visionary experience. In effect, Swedenborg provides a model for the prophet who comes with a new religious dispensation, one that seeks to place itself not in conflict, but in harmony with science, scientific method, and scientific discovery. Out of this model came Davis, Harris, and Oliphant, Emerson and James, but out of it also came much of the rest of Spiritualism and channeling, too.

In other words, Swedenborg's role went well beyond these three authors, and not only because through their works, similar ideas were dispersed very widely in the United States and England. As is well known, William James's father was a Swedenborgian, and there is at least some evidence that Swedenborg was on James's mind as he wrote *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Ann Taves (1999: 283–284) supports this line of thinking in *Fits, Trances, and Visions* (1999), suggesting that Swedenborgianism provided at least an influence in the development of William James's mature thinking on matters of religion and religious experience, and indeed it makes sense that it did, not only because James's father was a Swedenborgian, but also because Swedenborg himself represents a classic example of the attempted merging of his earlier scientific methodology with his later religious visionary experience.

One question raised in the works of Swedenborg, Davis, Harris, and Oliphant is also raised by William James, and it still is not entirely answered by contemporary scholarship on religion: how are we to respond to these authors' assertions of direct religious inspiration and experience? Their works, after all, make rather strong claims about the origin and nature of knowledge obtained by non-ordinary means. There are a number of possible approaches to such claims. Among these are: (1) derision; (2) regarding their work as a species of fiction or fantasy; (3) analysis that focuses on behaviors or physiology; (4) discourse analysis; (5) empiricism. Of such approaches, empiricism is arguably the most expansive, if the empiricist remains firmly agnostic about the authors' claims of knowledge gained by non-ordinary means. After all, it is possible to take seriously their claims, yet not thereby either endorse or attack them.

However, the magnitude of these authors' claims might help explain why there has not been a plethora of scholarly works on such flamboyant and fascinating figures as Davis, Harris, and Oliphant, despite the fact that they left such a large trail of published work. Their individualism and the fact that none of them founded enduring institutions to guard their legacies go a long way towards explaining their relative scholarly neglect. So too does the prolixity of their style. Nonetheless, they represent important examples of American prophetic figures, influential in the history of Spiritualism, but indicative also of a recurrent tendency in American religious history to produce prophets with new revelations of new dispensations.

After all, it is not that large a step from reading Swedenborg's writings asserting the primacy of direct individual spiritual vision to taking up the mantle of prophethood for oneself, and here too Swedenborg represented an important predecessor for American prophets. But to become an authority for oneself, one has to leave one's origins to some extent behind, and present one's own original contributions. This is what Davis, Harris, and Oliphant were more or less successful, each in his own way, at doing. One cannot call any of them strictly speaking Swedenborgians—any more than one might term Emerson or James a Swedenborgian—and yet can one really imagine their works without the prior example of Swedenborg's? All the same, Davis, Harris, and Oliphant were originals, and one has to recognise that they belong, too, to the constellation of American prophets not only of the nineteenth, but also of subsequent centuries, each to a greater or lesser extent predecessors of later healers, channelers, and guru-figures who also claimed cosmic knowledge and roles, and who flourished in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

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Dead Reckonings

Spirits and Corpses at the Crossroads

Cathy Gutierrez

Salvation

Perhaps the most famous sermon in American history remains “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Written in 1741, the classic fire-and-brimstone jeremiad by Jonathan Edwards warns the unrepentant that sin weighs so heavily on each soul that it is unforgivable by God, and that one’s plans and deeds have no more power to save than “a spider’s web would have to stop a falling rock.” Grace alone accounts for the few who are saved, and even the most deserving Christian is repugnant in the eyes of the Lord. Edwards, generally less dramatic in tone and more pedantic in content, informed his congregation that this gruesome misadventure was directed at those who had not yet experienced conversion. While not a guarantor of salvation, conversion was nevertheless a prerequisite for its possibility.

The ensuing century would see a reversal of the doctrine held most dear by Calvinist theology. The predetermined and very small group of elect who were saved without reference to good deeds would be almost entirely forgotten, opening a vista for Christian universalism, dual covenant theologies (where God would fulfil his specific promises to the Jews and those to the Christians separately), and nascent multiculturalism. Several sociological factors converged to effect this change, but foremost among them was increased individualism brought about by the political ambience and an economic shift that radically changed women’s roles.

Between the American Revolution and the mid-nineteenth century, the population exploded more than eight-fold and the popularity of religion kept apace with the ethos of expansion in peoples and land. Nathan O. Hatch (1989) has documented the rise of religious populism in tandem with the embrace of political democracy: traditional doctrine was questioned, the privileged classes too closely resembled the landed aristocracy, and credentialed authorities suddenly came under suspicion. He writes,

American Protestantism has been skewed away from essential ecclesiastical institutions and high culture; it has been pushed and pulled into its present shape by a democratic or populist orientation.... America exalted

religious leaders [who were] short on social graces, family connections, and literary education. These religious activists pitched their messages to the unschooled and unsophisticated. Their movements offered the humble a marvelous sense of individual potential and of collective aspiration.

HATCH 1989: 5

The post-Revolutionary thrall of democratising society on earth would eventually be felt in heaven.

Clergy in the south, particularly among the Baptists and Methodists, began implementing more emotional styles of preaching that encouraged individual conversion experiences. A camp meeting would attract thousands and, in the sparsely populated and rural areas, could constitute the primary social encounter with one's neighbors. While the change in tenor implicated a believer's participation in her own salvation, there were limits to the democratising impulse, foremost race. Despite some of the preachers' personal reservations about slavery, southern Protestantism tended to uphold the institution as God-sanctioned. Notable exceptions were the Quakers, whose anti-slavery stance predated the Revolutionary War, and the Presbyterians, who denounced slavery in 1818 but saw no practical way to end it without God's intervention (for revivalism in the South, see Abzug 1994).

Preachers in the north soon took note of the successful revivals and borrowed many of the methods of their predecessors. Culminating in Charles Grandison Finney's "New Measures for New Men," revival preaching became increasingly emotional and individual. Interdenominational tent revivals swept the area of upstate New York following along the bend of the Erie Canal, resulting in what Whitney Cross (2006) has termed "the burned-over district" because of the intense religious fervor there. Populated by young, mobile, and largely literate Yankees, the area was ripe for religious reform and populist impulses. While the more staid New Englanders worried that revival-style preaching was too histrionic and altogether too informal about God, the uprooted generation along the canal wholeheartedly embraced the reforms of the day.

Finney, who could make women swoon at the sound of his voice, galvanised the fairer sex into mobile units who would chastise the unconverted in public. 'Anxiety benches' were placed in the first row in front of the preacher so the as-yet unconverted could, after a long walk to the front of the tent, benefit from the direct ministrations of the preacher. In sum, social and psychological pressure was applied to induce an individual's conversion, an experience so powerful that it would become addicting for some, who sought it over and over.

The collective religious enthusiasm of the period came to be known as the Second Great Awakening, the high-water mark of which is generally dated at the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825 (Cross 2006; see also Barkun 1986; O'Leary 1998).

Women were instrumental in the spread of religious fever. Economic changes following the Revolution led to the creation of an American middle class, a development that had a profound impact on gender roles and women's use of time. In agricultural and artisan economies, all members of a household are involved in the manufacture of the goods produced. While labor roles are most often gendered, both genders are required for the smooth running of a farm or family business. The creation of a white-collar class, however, moved the site of production to outside of the household, where men would work in mills or publishing or other burgeoning industrialised economies, effectively recasting the domestic sphere as the structural opposite to and refuge from the work environment. The ability to support a wife and family became the hallmark of the new class, leaving women with a circumscribed sphere of influence and a new quantity of time to fill (see Ryan 1981; Johnson 1978).

Religion, and ancillary volunteer societies, would come to fill that void. While women's participation in most forms of public discourse was still largely taboo, the new separation of home and work created a patina of tranquillity and spiritual superiority for women. Religion and various causes, from Temperance to Abolition, became legitimate platforms for women to occupy and often run. Women were at the forefront of volunteer movements that frequently began as crusades for social or spiritual reform and transformed by mid-century into overtly political organisations. Women exhorted their children, their spouses, the local drunkard, and total strangers to experience Christianity personally, in what many have called the feminisation of American religion.

In one hundred short years, salvation shifted from being entirely in the hands of God and the result of grace alone to being universally possible and individually catalyzed. Spiritualism, and ideologically allied movements like Universalism, would inaugurate the next theological step—salvation would become not only universally possible, but universally necessary.

Commemoration

As the prospects for heaven changed, so too did the tenor of the living's relationship to the dead. The possibility of universal salvation ineluctably altered how people thought about death, now potentially a happy conclusion, and the

dead, who were now presumably enjoying eternity in heaven surrounded by family and kind angels. The living's relationship to the dead reflected this shift, with commemoration of the dead and the constant production of memory becoming special requirements for grieving.

Victorian sentimentality is an apt indicator for the new valence given to death and grieving. Etiquette manuals prescribed the length of visible grieving, with widows having the longest requirement of two years and those who had lost a parent or a child one year. The first year would constitute deep mourning, where the widow would wear only unadorned black and be exempt—and excluded—from any public occasion. As time went on, restrictions lightened, and one could add black lace and eventually wear gray or lavender. Both men and women wore mourning jewellery, and the deceased's hair was often turned into lace and kept in a shadow box. Children had to participate in the visual culture of mourning as well and wore white in the summers and gray in the winters. The constant display of memory and loss became institutionalised and elaborate only in the nineteenth century as the result of a concatenation of religious change, increased leisure and wealth for the middle and upper classes, and women's new place as the beacons of morality.

In tandem with the domestic imperatives for the grieving, the location of death was undergoing considerable change. As a mobile workforce increasingly made the tradition of a family burial site improbable, community cemeteries came into prominence. Located in rural and tranquil settings, the new cemeteries reinforced the continued relation between the living and the dead and the familial ties that existed beyond the grave. Monuments grew both in size and in the sentiments expressed, which often introduced the novel idea that the dead would be reunited with their loved ones in heaven. Ann Douglas (1975: 60) comments, "It was absolutely essential to this process that the deceased do not truly die. The planned and picturesque new 'rural cemeteries'...were dedicated to the idea that the living, and the dead, still 'cared'. Paths with pastoral names, gentle rills, green slopes and newly popular graveside flowers were all meant to flatter the guaranteed but enduring docility of the deceased." The reciprocity between the living and the dead in rites of commemoration set the stage for the same reciprocity in communication.

By mid-nineteenth century a new form of memorialising captivated the country with its power—the camera. The machine that could seemingly objectively capture a moment forever was quickly conscripted for commemoration of the dead, and photographers were called upon to enshrine the memory of the living by using the bodies of the dead. Corpse photography was common, and the goal was to make the subject as life-like as possible; oftentimes the mother would even pose holding a dead baby, creating a scene that erased

the boundary between life and death. As Nancy West has pointed out in "Camera Fiends" (1996: 172), post-mortem photography came into full bloom at the precise historical moment of Gothic novels and the profession of undertaking, creating Dr. Frankenstein figures specifically hired to "bring the dead back to life." Nineteenth-century descriptions often called photographs "mirrors with a memory," and these mirrors reflected undisturbed comfort and rest, presumably creating a memory of a contented passage into permanent sleep.

If for the standard run of American Protestants death became, if not a celebration at least a permeable threshold that reinforced the bonds of kinship and promised reuniting in the end, for Spiritualists it was a portal to a superior culture. And for Spiritualist theology, the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg take pride of place in terms of describing the social and physical terrain of heaven and the place of memory in it. An eighteenth-century mystic who took repeated journeys to the afterlife with angelic guides, Swedenborg described a three-tiered heaven absolutely teeming with motion that would become the basis for Spiritualists' later conception of the afterlife. The dead formed societies, learned together, had marital sex, and essentially lived a human life except without the knowledge of craven or sinful thoughts. As John Casey argues in *After Lives* (2009: 355), Swedenborg crafted a vision of heaven with a distinctly Protestant character: "Swedenborg brings out implications of the Renaissance and Protestant conviction that a life of activity is superior to one of contemplation. Perhaps this is the sort of heaven that a Protestant ought logically to countenance—one in which the active virtues are paramount and which represents a purified version of a cheerful active society as it ought ideally to be in this life."

Unlike the majority of Spiritualists, Swedenborg retained a Christian bifurcation of heaven and hell, but the individual, rather than a judging God, decided where her soul was destined to go after death. The instrument of metaphysical ethics for Swedenborg was memory—at death, one discovers that one has two memories, the earthly one given to gaps and errors and a perfect one that has been stored all along in the soul. Upon ascension to heaven, one's memory of earth is literally peeled off, and the soul and angels watch one's entire life much like a movie. The sum total of a life's good or evil then becomes apparent to the spirit of the recently deceased, and he or she rises to the proper level of heaven or plunges of his or her own volition into the depths of hell. Since Spiritualism retained many of Swedenborg's notions, memory would be the arm of punishment in its heaven, too, but the evildoer would be forced to dwell with his memories on a low rung of heaven rather than be cast into hell. Memory, then, retained its individual character and haunted the dead in the afterlife until they could right their wrongs and move up the ladder of heaven.

In addition to the theological underpinnings of Swedenborg's discourses on the nature of heaven, Spiritualists in particular believed that they had concrete and empirical proof of their relatives thriving in the afterlife. In Ann Braude's seminal work, *Radical Spirits*, she argues that Spiritualism delivered a final blow to Calvinism particularly in the arena of infant damnation; in addition to the tiny fraction of the world's population that would be saved, Calvinism posited that a baptism at the age of consent was also a prerequisite, thus condemning children who died too young to hell. The séance allowed mothers in particular nearly constant contact with their deceased children, who not only assured them of their happiness in the afterlife but also completed the lifecycles that had been denied to them on earth. Children posthumously grew up, went to school, found true love, and sometimes even got married and had spirit children, although the latter was hotly contested among adherents.

Memory was thus fluid and ongoing for the living and the dead in Spiritualism. As society encouraged and coached and insisted on the production of memory in the course of grieving, Spiritualists went a step further and created new memories of friends and family as they traversed the afterlife. The dead not only offered solace for the living, but also continued to grow, spiritually, intellectually, and even physically, in heaven. The accounts of those events reinforced ongoing relations with those left on earth and promised an actual reunion of loved ones beyond the threshold of death.

Corpses and Commodification

No American prior to the Civil War was unscathed by death: while mortality rates in the 1700s and 1800s are difficult to calculate, scholars have estimated that ten or more percent of all children died before reaching adulthood. Some of these estimates run closer to thirty percent during epidemics of cholera, tuberculosis, diphtheria, and smallpox. Death during childbirth for mothers makes it difficult to calculate what an 'average' life expectancy would have been. According to Gary Laderman (1996: 24–25), for example, life expectancy for women at birth in 1849 in Massachusetts was a mere thirty-seven years, with men's expectancy lagging even a bit lower. However, if one lived past the age of forty, one would have a nearly sixty-five percent chance of living to see age sixty. Increased urbanisation and mobility decreased longevity, and the quality of medicine, sanitation, and diet appear to be fairly uniform in the decades preceding the Civil War.

In short, the experience of the death of someone close was ubiquitous, and the question of what value to assign to a corpse was one that every community

confronted. While traditional Christian preference dictated that the corpse be buried in preparation for rising at Judgment Day, the nineteenth century ushered in two new concerns that would erode that custom. The scientific impulse welling up during the Enlightenment posited not only that inanimate bodies were mere objects but also that science could be furthered through their study. The centuries-long taboo against dissection weakened as criminals and suicides were quietly whisked away to anatomy labs. By mid-century, roving bands of medical students dubbed 'Resurrectionists' would disinter corpses from sacred ground, indicating what a radical shift had taken place for a small section of society.

Concomitantly, the theology of death was undergoing changes to its foundation, and the possibility of universal salvation made bodily resurrection and hellfire more remote. As Stephen Prothero (2001: 12) has argued, the desecration of the Christian corpse resulted not from rising secularism but rather from intra-Christian conversations about the true nature of personhood as constituted by the soul only. By the time of the Spiritualists, who believed that all were destined for heaven regardless of color or creed, the idea of a final judgment was null. Spirits were invested with spirit bodies that could undergo all of the positive aspects of embodiment while avoiding the negative ones. Many séance sitters were informed by the dead that their bodies became more ethereal as they progressed in knowledge, leading eventually to spirits who were clothed in air or who ingested fragrances. The high percentage of séance goers who inquired whether the dead have sex or wear shoes suggests a lively curiosity about the body in heaven but not the body in the ground.

Death was preeminently in the women's sphere before the birth of the funeral industry in the 1830s. Women would wash and clothe the body, then put it out for display for friends and family (which is the reason homes have bay windows, so the air could circulate), then the body would be carried by kin and buried by all. The creation of an industry that handles bodies for profit was a confluence of increasing consumer culture, the professionalisation and masculinisation of medicine and death, and the estrangement of death from the domestic sphere. Laderman (1996: 47) writes:

The services of the undertaker and the attendant emerging funeral industries located the corpse in a network of commercial activity that was just beginning to operate in a heretofore untapped market. In the urban centers of the North, the dead were no longer simply prepared, transported, and buried by an intimate group of relations. Rather, they were becoming the focus of a developing economic regime that was determined by consumerism, class differentiation, and mass produced goods.

The professional—and costly—services of casket makers, hearse drivers, cemetery laborers, grave and monument carvers, and so on firmly moved death out of the home and into the marketplace. Lawmakers passed legislation determining when funerals could be held and who could be buried next to whom. The corpse came to signify society's concerns about sanitation, race relations, and evidence of wealth and consumption.

The Civil War ineluctably altered many people's relationship to death, as the sheer preponderance of dead bodies made death so immediate that social and symbolic associations with it had to change. In addition to those felled by the war, disease ravaged the encampments, where hunger and horrendous sanitary conditions contributed to the contagion of death. Soldiers were denied the time to bury in the customary way and the leisure to grieve; through psychological necessity, many hardened to the idea of death. Corpses were handled with as much individual care as time and contingency could afford, with some receiving private graves and others summarily buried in group trenches. Men on the battlefield in both the North and the South worried about the treatment of their bodies at the hands of the other, and rumours of desecration of bodies flew through the battlefields (Laderman 1996, particularly Chapter 11).

The reinterment of fallen soldiers was also the occasion for the rediscovery of embalming in America. While many ancient societies, most notably Egypt, had preserved corpses with clinical skill and artistry, the practice had fallen into disuse in most monotheistic regions. 'From dust to dust' is generally taken quite literally in Jewish and Muslim communities, where a dead body is buried swiftly and without many material trappings. The desire to bring bodies home for burial required ingenuity borrowed from the maligned medical students who preserved corpses for dissection. The profession of embalming came into its own during the war and would become a staple of the funeral industry through the present day. Bodies could be packed in salt, placed in a barrel of whisky, or injected with chemicals, as remains common today. Culture followed necessity, and the alleged merits of embalming and the retardation of decomposition became a standard in the American way of death.¹

1 The classic criticism of the funeral industry in this regard is how it portrays embalming as sanitary and traditional, when in fact corpses pose almost no threat to the living, and embalming itself is very modern. For the landmark work on the topic, see Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death Revisited* (2000). For an updating of her work, including a state-by-state guide to what is legal in the United States regarding death and dead bodies, see Joshua Slocum and Lisa Carlson, *Final Rights: Reclaiming the American Way of Death* (2011).

At the other end of the spectrum of cultural values, by the last decades of the nineteenth century cremation became an option for the disposal of corpses. The first 'modern' cremation, that is, in a crematory designed for that purpose, was of Baron De Palm in 1876. This highly publicised—and public—event was preceded by a eulogy delivered by Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, president of the Theosophical Society. The society had roots in Spiritualism, and many of its best-known members began their careers as mediums. Under the direction of Olcott and the colorful Russian immigrant Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, Theosophy moved away from talking to the dead and turned towards a more secretive, even conspiratorial, view of hidden ancient wisdom and initiatory rituals required to become adepts. Olcott and Blavatsky would embrace many Hindu and Buddhist beliefs and eventually move to India.

It was this concatenation of the dawning influence of the Far East with contemporaneous science that brought Baron De Palm to what turned out to be a singularly undignified cremation. Olcott used this opportunity to publicise the Theosophists' theology to a packed audience in New York. Stephen Prothero (2001: 26) elaborates:

In keeping with the Theosophists' interests in merging East and West, religion and science, and ancient and modern, the liturgy included references to fire worship, Darwin's evolutionary theory, Egyptian mystery cults, Spiritualism, the Nile goddess Isis, the Hindu scriptures, and American Transcendentalism. It also incorporated a credo affirming, among other things, that the body is nothing more than a "temporary envelope of the soul" and that "there is no death" because "the soul of man is immortal."

The actual cremation required an additional six months to find a suitable place to carry it out, during which time De Palm's body was embalmed, lost or stolen on a train, waked for five minutes until it was discovered that the embalming had not gone that well, and finally cremated in the presence of loved ones, angry locals who objected to the unchristian tenor of cremation, and journalists from places as far flung as France and Germany.

Despite this very unpromising beginning, cremation eventually gained a foothold with sanitation reform. Disturbed by the recent discovery of germ plasma, some intellectuals and medical reformers began worrying about the possible effects of burying corpses in the ground. Pitted against both those who associated burial with true Christianity and those who had begun to make a profit from cemeteries and undertaking, sanitary reformers argued for cremation not only as a barrier against disease but also as a newly cast

sentimental issue. Putrefaction was too intolerable a process to subject one's loved ones to, advocates argued, as they slung dreary prose filled with images of worms and effluvia into the discourse of cleanliness (see Prothero 2001: Chapter 2).

In the 1920s, one percent of American dead were cremated; today that number is nearing thirty-seven percent. Spiritualists were among the early adopters of the new burial technology, since most did not expect a Christian resurrection and many were at the vanguard of scientific progressivism. The nineteenth century witnessed more than one dramatic change in the symbolic and even economic value of a corpse: the dead were moved outside of a feminine and domestic sphere, into a professional trade, only to be hastily disposed of during war, then embalmed and brought home, and finally cremated, for those who believed that the soul had no need for a body after death.

Communication

When Samuel Morse strung a telegraph line from Washington to Baltimore in 1844, the very idea of communication was irrevocably changed. Although not chosen by Morse, the impressively prescient first message, "What hath God wrought," would result in telegraph offices spanning the eastern seaboard in less than a decade. The first practical application of electricity, the telegraph revolutionised the speed of information and commerce: when the transatlantic telegraph was completed in 1866, instantaneous international news became possible for the first time. David Freeman Hawke (1988: 193) writes, "The telegraph annihilated distance. Space, once measured in miles, was now measured in the moments between the time a man in New York pressed a key and another in New Orleans replied."

For a population that was already accustomed to the idea that all beings, as well as planets, tides, and so forth, were connected by invisible ties such as Mesmer proposed, the precise constitution of those bonds could shift from magnetism to electricity and back quite easily.² The ability to instantly, and invisibly, communicate with someone several states away led many to

² See Adam Crabtree's contribution to this volume for a history of Mesmer's theories. The foundational work on invisible bonds and Spiritualism is Robert Cox, *Body and Soul: A Sympathetic History of American Spiritualism* (2003). A new, excellent monograph examines changes in the women's labor market and ideas of sympathy. See Jill Galvan, *The Sympathetic Medium: Feminine Channeling, the Occult, and Communication Technologies, 1859–1919* (2010).

conclude that the ability to communicate instantly with those in heaven was merely a logical next step. Early Spiritualism proposed precisely a telegraph to the dead, with a female medium acting as the passive conductor of information. The Fox sisters' 'alphabet raps' were a laborious version of Morse code that would quickly be replaced by faster—and more entertaining—methods of communicating with the dead, but the metaphor of the medium as performing telegraphy had made its mark.

Then, as today, technology was more easily used than understood, and Spiritualists proposed various theories about electricity, foremost that by their 'naturally' more nervous mental states, women were negatively charged electrically. For this reason, the positively charged spirits of the afterlife would be more attracted to them as mediums. While there were some male mediums, women dominated in the ranks of communicating with the dead, enacting a paradox of passivity where women could expound on politics and philosophy with the caveat that their 'real' selves were understood to be completely absent. In her recent work, *The Sympathetic Medium* (2010), Jill Galvan advances this observation through the first decades of the twentieth century, arguing that Spiritualism paved the way for women to populate most communication technologies, ranging from telephone operation to court room stenography. Women could conduct sensitive information in a semi-automatic state without interfering with the message.

Spiritualist communication took place in two varieties of venues: the public trance lecture and the private, domestic séance. As Ann Braude argued over twenty years ago, Spiritualist mediums provided an intermediary state for society accepting women's public speaking. Some Spiritualist meetings were held camp-style, following the interdenominational and theatrical style of the revival movement. In these settings, women would enter a trance state and deliver lectures—usually from a famous dead soul like Swedenborg or Benjamin Franklin—on the state of politics in America or discuss moral lessons learned while in heaven. Emma Hardinge Britten and Cora Hatch were among those women who took aim at every hot subject from slavery to marriage reform to decrying Christianity for making people afraid of God. Later even more radical voices like Victoria Woodhull's would declare that the spirit world denounced marriage and advocated free love.

The spirits themselves were subject to constant improvement in heaven and would change their minds posthumously. Swedenborg came to deny the existence of hell, Michael Faraday (who had heatedly contested Spiritualism while alive) became a believer, and Shakespeare rewrote soliloquies to reflect his changed views on the question of death. Certain mediums specialised in communicating with the famous dead. Miss Lizzie Doten of Boston continued the

literary careers of many authors posthumously, and Mrs. S.G. Horn published a collection of philosophy and statesmanship from a roster that includes De Quincy, Fenimore Cooper, and Herodotus. The authority that women, the occasional African American, and lower-class men could lay claim to was staggering, and while many people thought these claims were humbug, others saw an authentication in these reversals of power—surely no young lady could be making this up.

Heaven itself was dotted with different ethnic and religious neighborhoods, and while there is no consistency on this point, the ladder of ascent through the seven heavens was frequently unrepentant evildoers on the lowest rung, 'heathens' and small children (who attended school) on the second, the vaunted dead like Swedenborg, Bacon, and Plato around the fifth, with communication waning for those on higher tiers, who presumably had too much heavenly wisdom to translate well to the living. Since the soul is not instantly perfected upon death, one continues with the same character traits and identity politics in the afterlife, but this is a mere step on the ladder of progress. Andrew Jackson Davis encapsulates the progressive politics of Spiritualism when he writes that loving one's neighbor is the true universal condition: "I do not mean that you would ever exist without the feeling of inclination or disinclination. That would be impossible. But you need not be so warped and swayed by them as to be *poisoned* in your thoughts and affections towards those of a different nation and temperament. The true and noble in the Summer Land [heaven] work diligently among the members of its inferior societies to bring about that state of heavenly peace and concord" (Davis 1910: 135). Distinguishing national and religious characteristics drop away as one proceeds through the ranks of heaven.

On a more personal level, domestic séances were usually conducted in homes and involved contacting familiar dead. The dynamics of these were more complicated and often required an evenly gendered audience around a table in a darkened room. The sitters held hands so that the magnetic or electrical fluid would move among them and also, from time to time, as an attempt to prevent any trickery on the medium's part. Lost loved ones usually reported happiness in the spirit realm, where they were surrounded by loving relatives and wise angels. Almost always spirits indicated that the bonds of affection between them and the sitters continued past death and that a reunion would be awaiting the living when their own time came.

Spiritualism provided a highly effective form of grief counselling and could fill the loss of death in more immediate and concrete ways than other religious comforts. The circumstances, however, were unpredictable. The British novelist and Spiritualist author Florence Marryat (1894: 235) provides a moving example:

My heart literally stood still. This was the name of my beloved eldest daughter, whom I had the misfortune to lose in childbirth, nearly seven years ago, and whom I have been longing and praying to see ever since, but without effect. I began to tremble so violently I could hardly keep still on my seat, and I felt as if I would suffocate. Here was I, who had been entreating the Almighty for the last seven years to afford me a little glimpse of this most cherished possession of my life, doomed to meet her for the first time since she had been torn from my arms, in company with strangers who knew nothing of my loss, nor could sympathize with it. I thought I must run out of the room.

Mrs. Marryat's daughter becomes such a frequent visitor and close friend that the two joke with each other about their foibles. Her daughter Eva is posthumously recuperated and completely reincorporated into her mother's life via a medium.

Given the percentage of mediums who were female and the percentage of believers and sponsors who were female, Spiritualism provided a way for women to reclaim the space of death after it had been summarily taken away from them. As the importance of bodies decreased, the importance of souls rose, so women became in a sense the caretakers, tenders, and audience of what truly mattered at death. In many regards the Civil War was the defining moment for American Spiritualism, driving widows and mothers to spirit sittings to communicate with the dead. European and Canadian Spiritualism would not peak until the First World War and the Spanish influenza created similar barren landscapes of death, and, concomitantly, swelled the ranks of those who wanted to speak to lost loved ones.

Reckoning with Death

Since death does not perfect one, spirits often told tales of how they had overcome some character defect—pride was a common stumbling block—and had shed some of their human traits. The lower rungs of the seven-tiered heaven were often described as a sort of holding pen for those who needed to improve themselves. In 1908, the Chicago-based medium Mary T. Longley (1908: 30–31) tells a typical story of a spirit who is being taught a lesson by his placement in heaven:

His life was given up to grasping greed, and therefore he only generated a magnetic aura of selfishness; and it is not spirituelle [sic].... It is good for

him to get only a worm-eaten, mouldy structure, and to hear the winds coming through its cracks and holes; good for him to wear threadbare clothing for a while, and to learn what poor mortals suffered through his greed and selfishness. When he becomes fully conscious why he is in this deplorable condition, and sorry for the wrong done, he will wish to undo it as far as in his power [sic], and then he can be helped, and not till then.

Spirits continued to evolve in the afterlife, and their free will governed the pace at which they improved. The living, however, could help the dead, either by telling them how to navigate heaven or else just by imparting positive magnetism to those who appeared in their spirit circles.

With the spirits of debauchers, criminals, and drunkards now in heaven, Spiritualism had to answer the conundrum that its own progressive politics had created: what to do with evil dead people. Throwing the doors of heaven open to all cultures and races also fostered intellectual colonialism and, on occasion, outright racism. All souls were headed for the same afterlife, but they were not created equally. In *Spiritualism and Women's Writing* (2009), Tatiana Kontou has made an excellent case for the projecting of evolution into the realm of the dead. More precisely, she examines how the popular (but incorrect) understanding of Darwin's theory as eliding evolution with progress was taken up by Spiritualists. She cites Alfred Russel Wallace, convert to Spiritualism and Darwin's competitor in theorising natural selection, as providing a scientific imprimatur to this extension of evolution. Kontou (2009: 125) writes, "Wallace turned to an alternative belief system, a system that had no conception of reward or punishment in the afterlife but saw the transition between life and death in terms of a 'continuous' evolution."

Spiritualists added a heavy dose of free will to the idea of evolution, giving bad people and 'unprogressed' peoples and races a chance to strive to advance through the spheres of heaven by their own determination. To some extent, recalcitrant spirits can be aided by the living, generous other spirits of the dead, or angels, but for the most part the individual has to recognise her own flaws and wish to improve. I have written extensively elsewhere on how memory serves as the form of judgment in Spiritualist heavens and the evil dead are haunted by the recollections of their own deeds.

By banishing hell, Spiritualists reconciled their own inclusive politics with the unfortunate fact that malice and crime still existed on earth; this same gateway allowed them to vent racism and a sense of superiority while still including the other in the afterlife. With the prospect of hell gone and the cultural superiority of heaven clearly asserted, the prospect of being dead was clearly a more welcoming one than it had been in the fire and brimstone past

of Puritan America. However, the idea of dying still stung, and Spiritualists used the dead to describe the one thing that the living can never truly know—what it is like to die.

Florence Marryat (1894) discusses several such cases in her accounts of séances. In 1894, a brewer was killed in an accident that was so swift his spirit did not recall dying. He hung around the park gawking at the overturned carriage with the rest of the concerned citizens while someone sent for a doctor. Much to the brewer's surprise, "The doctor turned the body over and the spirit *saw his own face*." This moment, so Gothic and yet so modern in popular culture, is one of many where the living learn about dying from the dead. While she herself seems oblivious to the connection, nearly all of the stories Marryat relates involve a transitional period between dying and being dead. This period is marked by danger: the soul may reenter the body, making a miraculous recovery, or it may miss the window of opportunity to revivify the corpse and end up trapped, Hades-like, between worlds.

She continues regarding the brewer who told her this story posthumously,

Even then he could not believe that it could be himself. He felt so much like he had always done, and remembered nothing of passing out of the body; but when he was convinced of the truth he said he became violently agitated and wanted to come back to this world again. He followed the person who carried the body, into the hospital ward...he told me he made the most tremendous efforts to get into it again, but it was so maimed and broken it was impossible.... He said he remained by his body as long as it was in the hospital, and for some time, by the grave—where it was buried, he found it so hard to sever the links that bound him to it.

MARRYAT 1894: 112

The earth-bound spirits, as she calls them, are so attached to their material existence and the mortal coil that they literally cannot rise to heaven because they are as yet incapable of breathing air more refined than common air on earth. Heaven was the eventual destiny for all, but when a soul could detach sufficiently from the world to move up was an entirely individual matter.

Robert Cox argues in *Body and Soul* (2003) that Spiritualism capitalised on a long and venerable theory of sympathies existing between people or objects. He writes, "Like the divine spirit, occult sympathies permeated the universe, revealing the cause of astrological relations between planetary and human bodies, elucidating the alchemical transformation of elements, and the mystic relations of bodies and souls" (Cox 2003: 26). Mediums required a bond of sympathy with the dead, and heaven knew instantly where to place a soul on the

seven tiers by the connection that existed between like souls. The tethering of the soul to the body, however, posed potential difficulty.

Florence Marryat continues with another case of sudden death, this time of a young girl, Amy, who appears to her affianced and asks not to be buried because she was “not dead yet, i.e., not properly separated from her body.” The fiancé imposes upon the father, who is ready to have a proper funeral, to not bury the girl until a sign of decomposition had set in:

The body lay in its coffin, in the father's house, *for three weeks*, without experiencing the least change. At the end of that time, however, Amy appeared to her lover, and told him, joyfully, that at last she was quite freed from her body and that they might bury her as soon as they chose. He went to the family with this news and found that the body, which had retained its freshness for so long, had literally fallen to pieces that very morning, and the coffin had been obliged to be closed.

MARRYAT 1894: 111

It takes Amy's soul three weeks to sever from her body, and her concern about being buried is presumably fear—she does not see herself as dead yet, and when her spirit fully makes the transition to death, her body follows suit.

With Spiritualism, a watershed moment had transpired: progressive Americans could no longer accept that anyone was due to be damned. If Africans, Hindus, and American Indians, as well as lechers and murders, were all heading for heaven, then sin became a meaningless category and evil an old superstition that had been outgrown. However, the existence of suffering, physical debilitation, or sinister suspicions had to be accounted for. Dying remained a rare moment of uncertainty for Spiritualists, where fear and the lack of meaning were displaced from a classical hell onto dying itself, keeping Spiritualism's progressive cosmology intact while recognising, however briefly, that death still holds mortals in its thrall.

The transitional space between life and death had become a changing *topos* by the end of the nineteenth century. The destiny of the soul in a standard Christian dualism had come under assault by the dismantling of a traditional hell by Deists, Universalists, and Theosophists, as well as by the Spiritualists. The idea of reincarnation, popularised by Allen Kardec and furthered by contemporary readings of Plato and Asian religious texts, begged the question of what happened to the soul between bodies. And bodies themselves were under new scrutiny, as debates about autopsies, the newly embalmed corpse, and the questionable desirability of cremation all destabilised what could or should be done with a dead body. Spiritualism both responded to and shaped Americans'

relationship to death and the dead. While the fear of dying was never fully eradicated, the fear of damnation was soundly ended. At the moment when the corpse was taken out of women's care, women flocked to mediums and became stewards of the soul rather than the body. Tempering grief and continuing relationships across the threshold of heaven, Spiritualism offered a radically re-envisioned relationship to death.

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Spirit Possession

Mary Keller

The study of spirit possession brings academic scholarship face to face with spirits, be they spirits found in words carved on stone tablets, spirits depicted on rock art from prehistoric communities, or spirits encountered by contemporary anthropologists in fieldwork in every continent. For this reason, the study of spirit possession creates what I will refer to as ‘the scene of possession’, by which I mean that the accounts are charged with dramatic and ethical force: encountering spirits makes for a very good story. In this article I will lay out the uniquely complex elements of the scene of possession and provide an overview of the geographical and historical breadth of spirit possession accounts. The aim of this article is to take what might at first seem anachronistic and exotic, the possessing of a human body by spirits, and reorient this perception. Spirit possession takes its rightful place as a central human experience when the reader is provided sufficient information and analysis about the scene of possession. Once seen in this light, the scene of possession provides critical insight into contemporary issues of globalised and mediated identities in which haunted pasts continue to speak through our everyday lives.

We begin with a case study to illustrate the dramatic power of the scene of possession. In this case study, a contemporary woman recalls her experiences as a seven-year-old in England, when she was possessed by the spirit of a young boy who had been repeatedly appearing to her from a tree in her garden (Ryan 1998). The boy told her that in order to come into her house to play with her, he would have to come into her body. When she finally agreed to let the boy do so,

He came out of the tree, raised up. Like a light moving up, quite bright. His energy changed, he took dense in one form...“He’s changing. Why is he changing?”...His clothes are all merged in with him...Half way up the garden I felt boxed in mid way. I felt a narrowing, a closing down, and a boxing in. I felt an energetical change, that’s what it was. And he changed, and it went from white to blue, to a darker blue, it started to brown then it started to go black and the blackness started expanding. I felt like it was gonna hit me, cos something he enclosed around me. I was feeling connected...I don’t quite understand...It felt like I was swallowed from the head downwards, and it felt like I was eaten, and then I heard the voice, and it was him, and he was laughing.

RYAN 1998: 8

After the boy took over her body, Holly's life careened into a surreal existence. The boy caused her to foam at the mouth, prevented her from building relationships, and created anguish and distress for the next fifteen years. She felt at times that this was a game for the boy inside her, and that she was like a puppet. She moved through traditional medical care, mental health counselling, and alternative health disciplines such as yoga. Doctors from Western psychological backgrounds understood her to be dealing with dissociation and encouraged therapies that would incorporate the boy into her psyche.

At the age of twenty-two, she was finally aided by an acupuncturist who used the philosophy of Chinese medicine and performed a dragon treatment that ridded her of the boy's presence. Of that experience, Holly stated:

The pins started going in—how he got them in with me clinging to him like a limpet I don't know, cos I was so scared. There was a shuddering from my base, my whole body twisted up—it felt like something was coming out. It came all up my spine and out of the top of my head. And I saw it—a silvery black mass, and as it went out the window I started laughing. I laughed so much I nearly fell off the table. I felt awful, laughing my head off, but I couldn't stop.

RYAN 1998: 10

What are we to do with a spirit boy who lived in a tree and transformed into colored energy that entered a human body and inhabited it until he was dispelled out a window in England by the needles of a Chinese acupuncture dragon treatment? What of the boy's laughter upon entering Holly's body, and Holly's raucous laughter upon his departure fifteen years later? This is the scene of possession, excessive in its pathos, replete with tragedy, comedy, and the unbelievable, befitting popular culture more comfortably than scholarly study. What is Holly's story doing in an academic dissertation? What is it doing here? Many ethnographic studies of spirit possession begin with the disclaimer that the scholars never intended to focus on spirit possession, but the scene was so powerful they could not avoid it (Wolf 1992; Rosenthal 1998). The encounter with spirits that overcome human bodies is a compelling hook.

What can an academic claim to know about the scene of possession? To explore that question I will move in three parts. After defining spirit possession for the purposes of this chapter, I will describe three problems in the study of spirit possession: subjectivity, community, and representation. Addressing these problems establishes a theoretical framework for a critical, comparative study of the scene of spirit possession. With that framework in place, I will outline the geographical and historical spread of spirit possession traditions in terms of the space and time of spirit possession. Because the scene of

possession invokes an otherness of time and space, we can better understand the critical perspective it brings if we elucidate the premodern and exotic dimensions of the scene.

The progression of the article establishes the scene of possession as a global scene and the event of spirit possession as a fundamental human activity, rather than an anachronistic novelty. This approach produces a locative (that is, spatially centered) theory of spirit possession that speaks directly to life in our globalised, mediated cultures. If we can frame the issues involved in the study of spirit possession well, we can engage with central issues that impact theorisations of human subjectivity in the twenty-first century. All people are dealing with the effects of forces, like global climate change and the international economic crisis, that speak through their communities beyond the will and the intellectual capacity of an individual. When the scene of spirit possession is viewed as a human capability rather than as an anachronistic novelty of others (primitives, women, the mentally ill), then we have a clearer picture of the human condition that speaks significantly to the challenges of our times.

Defining Spirit Possession

For the purposes of this discussion, spirit possession is defined as “any complete but temporary domination of a person’s body, and the blurring of that person’s consciousness, by a distinct alien power of known or unknown origin” (Gold 1988: 35, n.1). While the term ‘spirit possession’ is rarely used outside of the Western European tradition, Gold (1988: 39) argues that the term does not “radically violate indigenous categories and does facilitate controlled comparisons with similar phenomena in other linguistic regions” if, she emphasises, regional nominations and the subtleties of cultural interpretation are brought to bear. This is a very important issue. Is it an imposition of English and Western categories to use the phrase spirit possession? Or is spirit possession a pragmatic term that allows us to compare and contrast, across time and cultures, phenomena in which a person’s body is described as being overcome by distinct alien powers of known or unknown origins?

For example, among the Shona of Zimbabwe, the term spirit possession is not used, and yet Lan’s (1985) ethnography of spirit mediums in the fight for independence from colonial government describes spirit possession. Lan pays close attention to the indigenous metaphors used by the Shona:

When an ancestor feels the need to communicate directly with its descendants it chooses a woman or a man and uses her or his mouth to speak.

It is said *svikiro inobatwa nemedzimu*; the medium is grabbed by the ancestor. The medium does not wish to be possessed. Indeed possession is a hardship and a trial. It is the all-powerful ancestors who make their choice, “grab” their mediums and take control of their lives. When possessed, the medium is thought to lose all control of body and mind. He may be referred to as *homwe* which means pocket or little bag.

LAN 1985: 49

In contrast to the pocket or bag that is grabbed by an ancestor in the Shona tradition, spirit possession in a village in northern India was found by Wadley (1976: 233–252) to follow “two broad patterns of possession which are defined by the nature of the spiritual beings causing possession.” Malevolent beings “ride” their hosts, and benevolent beings “come” to their hosts. Being ridden is a hostile takeover, while the benevolent spirit is understood more as an arrival to the scene of possession. We see that even within a tradition there are categorical differences in types of possession. The differences that exist between cultures, like those between the Shona and the village in northern India, include linguistic constructions of personhood and agency. Nevertheless, the scene of possession exists in both contexts.

In his study of spirit possession in Early Modern Catholicism, Moshe Sluhovsky (2007) argues against a comparative method because such a method implies that there is a singular or stable configuration called spirit possession that can be found across time or cultures. He writes:

Functionalist and comparativist approaches do not do justice to the immense wealth of metaphors, images, and symbols that characterized European cases of possession and that distinguished them from all other modes of action that Europeans utilized. Finally, such approaches assume a stable definition and configuration of possession and do not take into account the transformations of the European meanings and practices of possessions, changes that are at the very center of this book.

SLUHOVSKY 2007: 6

I agree fully with Sluhovsky that once one seriously understands the meaning of the Shona “pocket” that is grabbed by the ancestor, or the northern Indian case in which a woman is played by a benevolent spirit, then the value of studying either scene comes from the subtlety and depth with which one understands the unique configuration of the scene. However, there is still hope that the comparative study of spirit possession open horizons of difference from which we can learn about different models of subjectivity, different linguistic

constructions of agency, and different ways in which matter itself, including the matter of human bodies, is conceptualised. I do not think Sluhovsky would agree with Gold or me, but I choose Gold's stance on the issue and place the differences between accounts of spirit possession on a playing field with the cross-cultural and transhistorical appearance of related phenomena. Applying Gold's logic, I will use the term 'spirit possession' to compare and contrast the scenes of possession. It would be a shortcoming *not* to consider what is going on from a comparative frame, though in the spirit of Sluhovsky's argument it is the locative dimension of each event—its place, time, and context, as adjudicated by each community—that matters.

Power and Spirit Possession

With this definition in place, I want to focus on the very complex methodological issues of analyzing power in the study of spirit possession. As Michel de Certeau notes (1988: 252), the possessed person is, by nature of her experience, doubly removed from her speech: she is not where she is speaking, and we learn about what she says through the voice of her other, be that the spirit or the witness to the event.

De Certeau (1988: 252) describes this quandary in respect to the Nuns of Loudun in seventeenth-century France:

Quite often the available sources (archives, manuscripts, etc.) offer, as the possessed woman's "discourse," what is always spoken by someone other than the possessed. In most cases these documents are notaries' minutes, medical reports, theologians' opinions or consultations, witnesses' depositions, or judges' verdicts. From the demoniac woman there only appears the image that the author of such texts has of her, in the mirror where he repeats his knowledge and where he takes her own position through inverting and contradicting it. That the possessed woman's speech is nothing more than the words of her "other," or that she can only have the discourse of her judge, her doctor, the exorcist, or witnesses is hardly by chance.... But from the outset this situation excludes the possibility of tearing the possessed woman's true voice away from its alteration. On the surface of these texts her speech is doubly lost.

Accounts of spirit possession, then, require an analysis of speech that has been doubly lost. Hence we face three very interesting problems in the study of spirit possession: (1) subjectivity—a person who is spoken-through rather than

speaking; (2) community—the ethical demand that the possessed body makes of his community to witness to and provide a response for the possessing force; and (3) representation—how, in scholarly discourse, does one represent what is happening during a possession, particularly in terms of claiming knowledge of what is happening and analyzing the power that possesses the body?

From the earliest recorded accounts of spirit possession, we know that the first people to analyze the power that wields a possessed person's body were the local cultural specialists, such as healers, who devised tests for and responses to events of spirit possession. Their work was focused on healing the obvious imbalance that gave rise to the arrival of a possessing spirit in order to restore integrity and balance to the possessed person, so that she could be reintegrated as a functioning member of the community. With the growth of urban centers came the development of doctrinal institutions, with their clerical authorities. Because possessing spirits disrupt everyday life by inserting supernatural agencies into human bodies, liturgical responses, such as exorcisms, were developed that would attend to the possessing spirit while preserving the authority of the religious institutions. With the development of the human and social sciences, spirit possession has been studied by a growing field of specialists, including theologians, anthropologists, ethnographers, sociologists, psychologists, doctors, and psychiatrists. In the past ten years, a growing number of research articles from the fields of neural and cognitive sciences have taken the study of spirit possession into the physiology of cognitive function. This spectrum of experts, from local village specialists to priests and cognitive scientists, creates very different foci on the cause of spirit possession. The resultant analyses of the power that causes the spirit possession, from ancestors to neural firing, mark very different scenes of possession.

The phenomenon of spirit possession is deeply embedded in fields of power that parallel the three problems identified above. In the case of subjectivity, power of known or unknown origin overcomes the human body, as evidenced by remarkable physical transformations, often grotesque and uncanny, and sometimes ribald or erotic. In his accounts of contemporary spirit possession among the Songhay in Niger, Paul Stoller describes the full body swan dives in the air and down to the hard ground that announce the arrival of spirits into human bodies, and he concentrates on the embodiment of spirits. Of the scene of possession in which he received an invitation to record the words of Hauka spirits, spirits that mimic European figures from the era of Niger's colonisation (such as the General or the surveyor) Stoller (1995: 2–3) writes:

They groan, bellow and thump their chests with clenched fists as they stamp across the sand. Saliva bubbles from their mouths. They babble.

Their eyes blaze.... Suddenly Istambula breaks through the circle of mediums and runs stiff-legged [mimicking European marching style] in their [Stoller's] direction. He leaves his feet like a swan diver and belly flops just in front of [me].... Istambula's inert body, stinking of sweat and dirt, is jolted with what seem to be electroshocks. His face crinkles like burning paper as he pushes himself up on one knee and lifts his right hand toward [us].

Such physical overcoming of the subject is indeed remarkable. The message that the spirit delivered to Stoller was equally remarkable. The Hauka spirits requested that Stoller write their story, and they expressed their demand through Istambula's body. Who is speaking, and about whom will Stoller be writing? This is the field of power that surrounds the problem of subjectivity in the study of spirit possession.

The field of power that accompanies the second problem, the problem of the community that is witness to the possession and therefore implicated in the need to respond in order to reintegrate the possessed person, is marked by all of the central axes of social power in which our lives are lived. If the community marks out social power in terms of lineage, age groups, gender, wealth, rhetorical skill, or sexual orientation, then the possessed body will be responded to by the community in light of all of these axes of social power (McIntosh 2004). For this reason, vulnerable members of the community are greatly at risk if they are possessed, because the dominant members of the community have the power to interpret the possession in ways that may require, for instance, the removal or death of the possessed person, rather than his or her reintegration.

On the other hand, there is an opportunity for a person of low status to hold higher status, at least temporarily, if the community identifies the possessed person to be housing an authentic spirit. In European history, the rise and death of Joan of Arc demonstrates the vulnerability of a woman to charges that she is possessed by a demonic force. Joan of Arc enjoyed greater social power as a warrior when she could claim that God was directing her to battle successfully, but she was killed when church officials ruled subsequently that she was possessed by diabolical spirits. Women's vulnerability is also seen in an interesting twentieth-century case in Taiwan described by Wolf (1992). A Taiwanese woman had moved into a rural community with her husband, who had a job in a village where they had no lineage ties. The woman was discovered thrashing and shrieking in the mud. Wolf describes the community process of adjudicating whether the woman was authentically possessed or mentally ill. In the former case, the woman might gain an occupation and status in the community

as a healer with insight from the realm of spirits. In the latter case, she would fall further in her status and be outcast, which in fact was the outcome. From Joan of Arc to a disenfranchised woman in a contemporary Taiwanese village, the possessed body floats on the ocean currents of social power as the community tests and evaluates the possessed person's status. Because the possessed person's consciousness is overcome, she relies on the community to witness and respond to her condition, but for this same reason the possessed person is at the mercy of the community response.

As both of these examples illustrate, women's standing in social fields of power is especially significant. Women predominate in accounts of spirit possession. Boddy (1989) and Sered (1994) broke analytical ground by arguing that academics were repeatedly evaluating the predominance of women in accounts of spirit possession in negative terms, pathologising the accounts as evidence of women's weaker psychological integrity. They argue instead for a revaluation of the predominance of women in accounts of spirit possession, taking it as evidence of women's particular ability to experience the power of spirit possession for which their empathetic and receptive physical and social boundaries were particularly inclined. That is, when Boddy and Sered examine the asymmetry of women's social power, their feminist concerns lead them to see women's preponderance not as a symptom of the abnormality of spirit possession and women's pathological vulnerability to hysteria due to their powerlessness in communities, but rather as part of women's particular propensity to receive and embody this ambivalent power.

The third arena of power is the issue of representation—because the possessed person does not speak 'for herself', community and/or academic witnesses always wield power in their descriptions of and proscriptions regarding spirit possession. In response to the representational fields of power in which accounts of spirit possession reside, freighted as they have been with Eurocentric and androcentric evaluations of possessed bodies as psychologically weak, primitive, and abnormal, we can instead flip the tables of evaluation by approaching accounts of spirit possession as "other languages of power."

If we draw a parallel from the world of history, Cameroonian historian Achille Mbembe argues that we are no longer in a time of bringing Africans to the governing philosophy of Western democracies but rather that emerging within Africa are "other languages of power." Mbembe argues that in order for a successful African narrative on political power to develop, these languages "must emerge from the daily life of the people, [and] address everyday fears and nightmares, and the images with which people express or dream them" (West 2005: 2, quoted in Geschiere 1997: 7).

Mbembe's insight serves as the guiding argument for West in his study of contemporary sorcery in Mozambique. A significant concern for sorcerers is healing people from possessing spirits, which are part of everyday life. West (2005: 2–3) writes that he seeks “to contribute to a fuller appreciation among policymakers, analysts, scholarly commentators, and students of African affairs more generally of the importance of *uwavi* (sorcery) to the conception and operation of power on the Mueda plateau and, by extension, of the political salience of such languages of power elsewhere in contemporary Africa and beyond.” Following Mbembe's lead, spirit possession is presented here not as an anachronistic problem that the scholar brings to the rational frames of modernity. Rather, when witnesses speak for and adjudicate the authenticity of a possessed person, we can approach their account as a discursive opportunity to hear other languages of power that speak to experiences that “emerge from daily lives, [and] address everyday fears and nightmares, and the images with which people express or dream them.”

Having defined spirit possession and laid out the three problems of subjectivity, community, and representation, we now turn to look at the space and time of possession studies.

The Time and Space of Spirit Possession Studies

We have a vast historical record that establishes transhistorical and cross-cultural occurrences of spirit possession on every continent (see Bourguignon 1968). More recent reviews of contemporary scholarship (Mayaram 2001; Smith 2001) describe the global range of contemporary spirit possession studies. Instead of simply presenting a chronology of spirit possession studies, I want to address a more theoretical discussion of the decidedly premodern scene of possession and argue that the study of spirit possession provides a critical distance from which we can understand the human condition in its contemporary situation.

The scene of possession is a complex temporal/spatial nexus that implicates the past and displaces the present, creating a haunting scene that can imply an anachronistic past and an exotic present tense (see Fabian's [1983, 2002] discussion of how anthropology makes its objects, producing an ‘us’ in the now and a ‘them’ in ‘other’ time). The insertion of the past and the overcoming of the present has much in common with the scene of haunting that is described by Gordon in his important work *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (1997). I want to suggest that this temporal/spatial complex evokes a sense of spirit possessions not only as a haunted scene, but

also as 'the indigenous'—a chthonic sense of humans deeply rooted to spirits who come from the past and enter human bodies in the present because those spirits cohabit the present. Possessing spirits are residual spirits on the landscape who are not subject to laws of property in the way that humans are; they can transgress property lines and displace the sovereignty of individual subjectivity if they can 'take place' in a human host. Whether it was the boy child described first in a tree, then in Holly's body, and finally floating out of a window as a colored cloud or the Hauka spirits from the colonial past possessing the bodies of the Songhay, these spirits are from the past but linger in the landscape and implicate themselves in the present by displacing the consciousness of their human hosts. Because the spirits lived and died on the land, they have enduring power. In this manner, they are indigenous.

I began the chapter purposefully with a discussion of a contemporary spirit possession in Britain in order to reduce the space between my presumed readers and the spirits, as part of a conscious effort to describe spirit possession as part of the modern, Western world. I did not begin with Stoller's Nigerian context, for example, because that might have supported the assumption that spirit possession is a scene of an anachronistic, exotic, *other*. Nevertheless, from England to Nigeria, when spirits possess a human, they integrate the human into a complex temporal/spatial nexus that brings the past into a haunting relationship with the present. The possession displaces the temporal and spatial presence of the individual, who instead is transformed into an instrumental agency for the spirit. Implicating both the dynamics of haunting and the presence of the indigenous, the scene of possession is remarkably complex. With this in mind, the following genealogy of spirit possession studies provides a critical insight into the positions that scholars have taken vis-à-vis that nexus, positions which I describe metaphorically as the 'scientist', the 'tourist', and the 'Gnostic diplomat'.

Chronological Survey of Comparative Studies

The classic surveys of spirit possession began with T.K. Oesterreich's *Possession: Demoniacal and Other among Primitive Races, in Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and Modern Time*, published in 1930. He delivered an overarching diagnosis that spirit possession is an effect of psychological projection. We might say that Oesterreich built a museum in which primitive races and people from Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and far-away places were housed with psychologically weak women for study by an objective, modern, scientist. Oesterreich's analyses are marked by their significant racism, sexism, and Eurocentrism. He speaks from

a rational center, and places those he studies in a psychological ether. Oesterreich epitomises the 'scientist' approach to spirit possession studies.

In the 1970s, Bourguignon compiled the majority of twentieth-century studies and concluded that of 488 societies studied, seventy-four percent of them believed in spirit possession. She noted differences between trance and possession states, which she considered to be distinct types of dissociative states, and suggested that it was good for the scholar to "maintain an attitude of healthy skepticism" with regard to the existence of spirits (Bourguignon 1976: 14). We might call hers the tourist approach. Clearly she covered the ground attentive to the power of spirit possessions for the cultures that she studied. As clearly, she stood her ground in terms of healthy scepticism.

Following Bourguignon came theoretical efforts in anthropology and sociology that were influenced by the race, gender, and identity theories developing in the seventies; these might be thought of as 'Gnostic diplomat' studies. Goodman (1972), a student of Bourguignon's, combined comparative linguistic analysis of the speech of possessed persons with social theory developed by physical anthropologists, producing a complex schema for analyzing what kind of anxieties were likely to affect hunter-gatherers, horticulturalists, agriculturalists, nomadic pastoralists, and city dwellers. She also pursued the biomedical analysis of brain waves in volunteers, for whom she had developed a method for achieving a state of trance (Goodman 1988a, 1988b). In his 1989 sociology of spirit possession, *Ecstatic Religion*, I.M. Lewis divided spirit possession into center and periphery traditions, highlighting the social standing of those involved in the traditions. In traditions where spirit possession is central, the people who establish their status as technicians of spirit possession enjoy high levels of institutional authority. In contrast, in periphery spirit possession traditions, minorities, the poor, and women with no institutional frameworks nevertheless establish a narrative role in their communities, which allows them not to hold central power but to play a significant role when people in the community seek the help or healing of spirits.

Because of the problem of subjectivity described above, the study of spirit possession takes a decided turn after the critique of the sovereign subject. As Long (1999: 76) notes, the Enlightenment sciences "remained wedded to the notion of a centered consciousness as the locus of inquiry." The possessed person's consciousness is overcome, so he or she doesn't belong to the center from an Enlightenment sciences perspective. As Bourguignon's 'healthy skepticism' suggests, the possessed person is put in their marginal time and place. In *The Hammer and the Flute* (2002), I propose an alternative strategy based on post-colonial insights on decentered subjectivity. Drawing from theorisations of women's agency such as Nair's "On the Question of Agency in Indian Feminist Historiography" (1994), I argue for a revaluation of agency in which the

possessed woman's agency is always evaluated in terms of relational networks (in contrast to modern notions of an individual agent). By revaluing receptivity (as an ability) and agency, I argue for a methodological discursive space in which 'we' become subjected to the meanings and agencies of the spirits as they are understood within their communities. Building on the multiple meanings of the terms 'instrumental' and 'agency', I argue that the common dynamic of spirit possession is that the possessed body becomes a place of exchange where work, war, and play are accomplished, integrating past and present in a complex and powerful, though vulnerable, nexus: the body possessed by a spirit (see Johnson and Keller 2006 on "The work of Possession(s)").

In terms of fieldwork in the past twenty years, the developments have been dramatic. As Frederick Smith (2001: 203) notes in his survey of cross-disciplinary work, "Study of spirit or deity possession has historically stood at the chaotic intersection of anthropology, psychology, religions, sociology, history, medicine and performance theory," and we can add cognitive science and evolutionary biology to the intersection. Mayaram's (2001) excellent analysis of recent work in anthropological theory identifies the move from evolutionary theory, developments in performance theory, and engagements with theories of knowledge and power. She also covers phenomenology and exploratory anthropology, including issues raised by participant observer strategies in the study of spirit possession. She notes the interface between studies of healing and medicine, citing Arthur Kleinman's important role in developing "Concepts and a Model for the Comparison of Medical Systems as Cultural System" (1978). Mayaram writes of this model, "Medical pluralism does not mean that choices [between traditional healers and Western medical treatments] are infinitely or equally available to all but that there are different resolutions for a range of problems. It suggests the availability of simultaneous and hierarchical patterns of resort so that traditional and folk therapies are in use simultaneously with modern systems" (2001: 216). At the time of her writing she noted that the response of the dominant (Western) system of medical care to alternatives found in traditions such as spirit possession had been hostile. It is fair to say that hostility has given way to pragmatic integrations of traditional and modern protocols. Sudir Kakar (2009) in India draws from Hinduism's ancient engagement with spirits and compares these to the modern world of psychoanalytic theory. Luh Ketut Suryani began with the study of spirit possession in Bali, from which she developed the Suryani Institute for Mental Health, where spirit possession is treated regularly (Suryani and Jensen 1996). These interdisciplinary engagements represent the discursive trend for twenty-first-century spirit possession studies.

There are still studies that represent a purely reductive approach to spirit possession, in which the Western focus on individual pathology continues to

frame the work, as with the “Investigation of the cerebral blood flow of an Omani man with supposed ‘spirit possession’ associated with an altered mental state: A case report” (Amr et al. 2009). We can, however, say that much of the pragmatic and clinical work being done with patients who are presented as being possessed by spirits is being conducted in line with Mbembe’s political philosophy. Medically trained researchers are seeking to understand spirit possession as another language of diagnosis and treatment. To the extent that contemporary research doctors understand the power of the social context in the production of healing, they understand that the social context of spirit possession traditions exerts significant power in the lives of their patients (Schoenbrun 2006). Whereas the evolutionary and imperial theories of Osterreich’s world once relegated spirit possession to an anachronistic space, there is now a consensus that spirit possession offers horizons of meaning and efficacious practices that can promote healing and the reintegration of people into their communities (Cohen 2007, 2008). The common goal to be found among those working in the fields of medicine, ethnopsychiatry, and medical anthropology is to promote healing, and practitioners draw from the diagnostic and cultural contexts that will facilitate engaged care.

Recent interdisciplinary methodological work is found in the collection *Spirit Possession and Trance: New Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, edited by Bettina Schmidt and Lucy Huskinson (2010). There are also many helpful regional studies of spirit possession traditions in India, the Pacific Basin, Afro-Caribbean Islands, African, and Central and South America. Frederick M. Smith’s *The Self Possessed: Deity and Spirit Possession in South Asian Literature and Civilization* (2006) is recognised as a landmark study. He argues for an entire revaluation of the understanding of self and notions of personhood in classical India. His rich and exhaustive study makes a case in the Indian context that gives cultural specificity to the larger claim of this argument: with careful study it becomes clear that the possessed person is a foundational model of personhood, not a marginalised extreme. For the Pacific Basin, see Mageo and Howard, *Spirits in Culture, History and Mind* (1996). Michael Lambeck’s *Knowledge and Practice in Mayotte* (1993) provides a foundation for study of the *jinn* or *djinn* found in Muslim traditions in the Indian Ocean. For the Afro-Caribbean context, see the edited, interdisciplinary collection *Sacred Possession: Vodou, Santería, Obeah, and the Caribbean* (Olmos and Paravisini 1997). George Brandon’s *Santería from Africa to the New World* (1993) and Paul Johnson’s more recent *Secrets, Gossip, and Gods: The Transformation of Brazilian Candomblé* (2005), are both distinguished for their theoretical complexity and historical precision.

For Chinese religions, see Paper’s *The Spirits are Drunk* (1995). For African traditions and methodological context see Behrend and Luig, *Spirit Possession:*

Modernity and Power in Africa (1999), which introduces recent German and French scholarship, but also needs to be supplemented by emergent methods from within African studies, such as West's *Kupilikula: Governance and the Invisible Realm in Mozambique* (2005). There are regional and ethnographic studies of spirit possession in Africa for every country. For a larger context of spirits in the cultural landscapes in Central and South America from which to proceed to regionally-specific studies, see Lawrence Sullivan's *Icanchu's Drum* (2003) and David Carrasco's *Religions of Mesoamerica* (1990). For recent work in European history, see Buell's work about early Christianity, "Imagining Human Transformation" (2009), and Sluhovsky's study of early modern Catholicism, *Believe Not Every Spirit* (2007). Chajes has produced a definitive study of spirit possession in early modern Judaism: *Between Worlds: Dybbuks, Exorcists, and Early Modern Judaism* (2003).

Spirit possessions in documentary films began with Jean Rouch's 1955 film *Les Maîtres Fous*. Henley's "Spirit Possession, Power, and the Absent of Islam: Re-Viewing *Les Maîtres Fous*" (2006) is a helpful entry to that film, because he clearly identifies the critique of colonialism that is delivered by the spirits. Contemporary work such as *Taki Kudo, shamanic medium of Tsugaru*, filmed from 1991 to 1997, documents the work of Ms. Taki Kudo, medium, healer, and fortune teller. Ms. Kudo talks to the ethnographer about her relationship with the gods and the process of spirit possession. *Songs for the Spirit: Music and Mediums in Modern Vietnam* is a text that includes a DVD with video that includes "folklorized performances of spirit possession" (Norton 2009). Spirit possession will thrive in the mediated, virtual culture of our times.

The folklorised performance of spirit possession represented in *Songs for the Spirit* raises an issue that has been elucidated beautifully by Beatrix Hauser (2008) and that demonstrates the importance of cultural and linguistic specificity with regard to evaluating performers of divine embodiment. Hauser argues for a "taxonomy of mimesis" in order to differentiate accurately the variety of relationships found in ritualised performances of spirit possession. She contrasts the formal, unemotional stasis of actors embodying the divine in Ramlila performances with the highly emotional performance of procession members in a community pageant. By comparing the significant differences between the somatic states of the respective actors, Hauser elucidates a complex and subtle spectrum of performances in which audiences nevertheless understand themselves to have *darsan*—an encounter with the divine embodied in human form.

An interesting contribution to this field comes from Vincent Crapanzano, whose early work in ethnopsychiatry and spirit possession included field work in Morocco, and who is the author of the Spirit Possession entry in the

Encyclopedia of Religion. He is currently a distinguished professor of comparative literature and anthropology and in his *Imaginative Horizons: An Essay in Literary-Philosophical Anthropology* (2003), he writes about frontiers, such as spirit possession, that “mark a change in ontological register” (Crapanzano 2003: 14). See also the Special Issue of the *University of Toronto Quarterly* (2010) that collects papers from three symposia held at the University of Toronto to explore the role of humanities scholars in “helping to construct and disseminate models of consciousness—and especially extraordinary states associated with overwhelming emotions, trauma, and trance.”

Spirit possession also figures in literature, theater, film, and popular culture, so while modernity might have pushed spirit possession into an anachronistic space, spirit possession has nevertheless continued to be a powerful, if untheorised, player on the field of the social symbolic. In literary studies and comparative literature, significant theorisations of polyvocality, heteroglossia, and creolisation probe the depths of subjectivity found in the literature of diasporan communities. Literature of the diaspora examines the complex relationship between subjects and the language systems of colonial governments into which they are born and with which they must speak. Where Michel de Certeau revalued the significance of the narrational relationships in the discourses of the Nuns of Loudun, Mae Gwendolyn Henderson’s landmark article for literary theory “Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer’s Literary Tradition” (1989) brought to the fore the depth and power of characters that are spoken through in literature written by black women writers.

Concluding Thoughts on the Scene of Possession

The study of people whose conscious processes are overcome, and who are ‘spoken through’ rather than speaking, is finally at home in an academic world that includes concepts such as hybridity and liminality, both of which imply a subject that negotiates with multiple identities in transformative processes that transport the human through different states of consciousness (Mayaram 1999a, 1999b). So also, the person whose voice is taken over by the agencies who possess her is now seated at the table of postcolonial literature studies concerned with polyvocality and heteroglossia (Henderson 1989). Anthropologists have shifted into experimental methodologies in order to study spirit possession from a broad range of perspectives, including critical, materialist analysis of gender hierarchies and global economic forces. For example, Tsing (1993) and Mayaram (2001: 219) both discuss issues of gender and perform economic

analyses of their impact on the shamanic traditions of the Meratus who inhabit the South Kalimantan mountainous rainforests of Indonesia. From a recent epidemiological study of harmful spirit possessions found in post-civil war Mozambique (Igreja et al. 2010) to a theoretical revaluation of the role of music for a theory of the body and healing in Friedson's study of Tumbuka-speaking people in northern Malawi (1996), entire webs of interrelated knowledge are being built around the scene of people possessed by spirits.

The three particular problems of subjectivity, community, and representation with regard to the study of speech that is 'doubly lost' are specific to the time and place of each account—the Nuns of Loudun are not 'the same' as the Hauka spirits of the Songhay, but the formal problem of describing subjectivity, evaluating the community's response, and clarifying who is speaking for whom point to a common, formal issue. The scene of possession creates a complex nexus of time and space that is particular to each event in which a person is receptive, through accident or purposeful ritual practice, to the will of the spirits that are demanding use of a human body. The past inhabits the present, and the spirit displaces the sovereignty of the self. To compare these events is not to blur them, but it does require what Kripal (2004: 491) calls a structural mysticism that appeals to a common human condition: "Indeed, it is this comparative project across time and clime that is structurally 'mystical' in the sense that it recognizes the importance of cultural particularity but denies the ontological ultimacy of difference itself. To compare, after all, is to refuse *both* the fetishisation of difference *and* the dangerous hegemonies of identification and conflation." (See also West 2007). Applying Kripal's argument to the study of spirit possession, the comparativist stands upon a claim of a common, human ability that is seen across "time and clime" in which supernatural agencies possess human bodies. The risk, as Sluhovsky and Oyěwùmí have argued, is that we invent that common humanity in our own image, rather than being subjected to the meanings and agencies of ontological registers of difference (Oyěwùmí 1997).

And finally—what does spirit possession have to say to twenty-first-century life? As Cheah (1996) has illustrated, it is non-voluntaristic accounts of agency that are necessary in these times when global capital inscribes its meanings on the very intestines of the human community. Spirit possession offers a non-voluntaristic account of human agency that ties humans to their heritage in place and time. Where the modern commodifications of time and space keep driving us towards the future, the return of religion in the twenty-first century tells us that we are still haunted by the past and must reckon with its demands. The international rise of indigenous people's movements is similar to the demands of spirits: both request the opportunity to take their rightful place in the present and both provide a critical perspective informed by premodern

meanings of the value of human relationships to the land and to each other based on the gifts offered by the land (Denzin et al 2008, Long 2003). Even writers in *The Economist* (1999) are rethinking the model of the economic human, decentring their once sovereign rational economic agent and examining instead the ways that humans are spoken-through by desires and wills of which they are neither conscious nor in control. By reorienting the scene of possession, taking it out of the anachronistic and exotic time and space and viewing the possessed body as representative of the human condition, one can begin to imagine and address the central issues of subjectivity, community, and representation in the twenty-first century, where humans are still not where they are speaking.

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Queering the Séance

Bodies, Bondage, and Touching in Victorian Spiritualism

Marlene Tromp

What is a Queer Séance?

The séance could be an awfully queer place. Female mediums might be bound together on a mattress in a darkened room, or a female medium and spirit might invite a third woman into their private space, disrobe, and invite that guest to touch their bodies. The Victorians understood ‘queer’, in its broadest sense, to mean non-normative, but also, by the end of the century, to define sexual relations between men. I would argue not only that the profoundly homoerotic acts between women often queered the séance in the former sense, but also that they began increasingly to suggest women’s homoeroticism, and, in this way, shifted the ground of the séance with particular effects. The goal of the séance—to uncover relations that had not been previously possible—authorised female mediums’ socially and spiritually ‘queer’ acts. This, too, was the means by which they authorised their own disruptive mediumship, non-normative gender relations, and social authority. In this essay, I focus on four famous female mediums’ production of flesh and blood spirits or ‘full-form materialisation’ and records of séances during the 1870s through 1890s, engaging both the practical strategies of mediums themselves and the experiences of the séance attenders or ‘sitters’. In that context I explore how the queer moments in relationships among women were far more fundamental to Spiritualism as a movement than we have previously supposed. I further argue that those moments were appreciated and valued by the community and that such practices applied pressure to the limits of ‘respectable’ womanhood. While several critics have pointed to the ways in which the erotic played an important role in Spiritualism (see particularly Owen 1989; Tromp 2006; Willburn 2006), no one has, as yet, explored the erotic relations between women in any depth or asked what those relations might have meant. Women’s homoeroticism helped shape the séance, and plumbing homoerotic moments can illuminate the potential for social transformation embedded in Spiritualism’s sometimes deeply conservative practices.

Let me begin by defining my terms. In this essay, I will address the homosocial, the homoerotic, and, more obliquely, the potential for the homosexual, as well as their impact on gender and power. For decades, critics have argued that the line between the terms in the binary homosexual/heterosexual is tenuous and

permeable: that, in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's words (1990: 10), "the ontologically valorized term ['heterosexuality'] actually depends for its meaning on the simultaneous subsumption and exclusion of ['homosexuality']," and that slippage characterises the relations between these ideas. Even in our own cultural moment, the boundary between these concepts is often blurrier than we have acknowledged. In the period I discuss here, these concepts were emergent. Perceiving sexuality as identity-shaping, knowable, and stable are twentieth century sensibilities, as are 'homosexuality' and 'heterosexuality'. Sharon Marcus (2007: 19) has shown that in nineteenth-century Britain, the homoerotic and homosexuality not only lived alongside heterosexuality, but that "our contemporary opposition between hetero- and homosexuality did not exist for Victorians, and that Victorians were thus able to see relationships between women as central to lives also organized around men." While I am sensitive to Marcus's caution to avoid treating all homosexuality or homoeroticism in Victorian women's relationships as transgressive, I will explore potentially disruptive uses of the queer in the already vexing space of the materialisation séance. Here, I follow Ellen Bayuk Rosenman (2003: 5) in her argument that "because the consolidation of sexual categories has had serious political repercussions, it is instructive to see how they were evaded, even if only partially and on a local level."

My argument is situated, therefore, against two significant backdrops. First, the séances to which I refer took place prior to sexologists' articulation of the gender 'invert', an often internally contradictory conception of a mannish woman who desired women and one that was later often deployed to pathologise women's relationships. This does not mean, however, that prior to this time, women were assumed not to be sexually intimate with one another or that all of what we would now call lesbian relationships were closeted or shaped wholly by a rhetoric of shame and secrecy. Indeed, as Martha Vicinus (2004) and Sharon Marcus have shown, the Victorians understood sexual relations between women as real and possible. Second, the events about which I am writing were marked by a specifically Spiritualist sense of religion, Godhead, spiritual-material relations, and gender, a sense that grew out of a craving for physical contact with the spiritual and that neither Vicinus nor Marcus considers in her argument. While both authors engage sexuality and religion, Spiritualism likely did not emerge in their studies because it has typically been figured as marginal in studies of Victorian religion. Indeed, it has even been ignored, left out of surveys of faith in the period, because it stands at odds with some scholarly notions of Victorian religion.

The historical disregard for Spiritualism, which is at last being corrected, occurred in spite of the large numbers of people who described themselves as Spiritualists and the incredible reach of the movement into respectable

middle-class homes, a phenomenon that has led us not only to underestimate the significance of Spiritualism, but also to miss the ways in which it participated in conversations throughout the culture. For example, Richard Noakes (2004: 23–44) has shown that scientific efforts to define the boundaries of science and the ‘supernatural’ were often played out on the landscape of Spiritualism, and Pamela Thurschwell (2001) has argued that many new technologies in the nineteenth century were understood, in part, in relation to the contentions of Spiritualism. For Thurschwell, the articulations of these technologies emerged alongside narratives of the spirit world. In other words, whether we regard it as fraud or fact, Spiritualism was far more central to Victorian sensibilities and debates—often serving to generate the very boundaries that ultimately emerged—than we have often considered. Turning our gaze to this largely neglected space to examine sexuality, then, can be particularly productive because it offers us insights into an emerging sense of sexuality in a liminal faith at a moment before the boundaries framing both began to harden into the binaries (heterosexual/homosexual and supernatural/natural) that we understand today.

Séance Hetero-Erotics

Full-form materialisation was sought-after evidence of the spirit realm beginning in the 1870s. While both men and women performed this feat (and made their reputations and fortunes from it), women were conceived of as the ‘stars’ of full-form materialisation, in part because they were believed to be more naturally passive and, thus, available to spirits’ use. In this practice, a medium entered a materialisation cabinet (sometimes a curtained recess in a room, sometimes a specially-built structure, complete with locks, chains, or ropes) and a flesh-and-blood spirit emerged, utilising the ‘ectoplasm’ of the medium to create a body. Medium in; flesh and blood ghost out. The catch was that the medium, like the photographic plate, could not be exposed to light during this delicate process or—the spirits warned—the medium might be harmed and the spirit might refuse to return. These conditions made less credulous/more sceptical folks suspicious that the spirit was simply the medium tossing off her ordinary dress in the cabinet and robing herself in spirit draperies (typically, white muslin or linen) and performing the role of the spirit. To ensure the medium’s honesty without violating the spirits’ parameters for a good séance, ‘test conditions’ were often employed. Essentially, this meant securing the medium in the cabinet, by any means necessary, to verify that she would be physically unable, even in a trance state, to leave the

cabinet and personate the spirit. Spiritualists and non-Spiritualists alike devised tests that included tying, chaining, or strapping the medium inside the cabinet and sealing the bonds with wax impressed by signet rings; inking the medium's body and then investigating the spirit's body for ink; or locking the medium in a cage.

These practices, as I have argued in *Altered States* (2006), were often profoundly eroticised, and they depended upon the uneasy relationship between the respectability of religious inquiry and the nontraditional landscape of the séance. To fully appreciate the significance of the séance, it is important to recall that the Victorian séance was not a parlor game to Spiritualists. It emerged from efforts both to contact the spirits and to legitimise the faith. Séances were a deadly serious matter. Earnest inquiry, heartfelt commitment to spiritual growth, devout faith, *and* deep scepticism drove the séance as a form of test, a proof of Spiritualism and the afterlife. In the darkened room, however, the séance also provided opportunities for practices that were not explicitly on most Spiritualists' agendas, including illicit sexual behavior and duplicity. Authorised by its relation to spiritual seeking, to God, and to the afterlife, the embodied spirit, fresh from the materialisation cabinet, might dispense spiritual advice, walk about the room, make life recommendations, or prove its materiality by eating, writing, touching, or being touched. Some highly regarded spirits flirted with the sitters—kissed, fondled, or toyed with people in the séance circle.

Take, for example, the interaction between Catherine Wood's materialised spirit, Pocka, and T.P. Barkas, a séance attendee. In the dark séance, the spirit began to touch his knee, but, in hopes of producing greater intimacy and contact, he remained, "quite reticent, and did not audibly acknowledge the favour"—"favour" being a highly charged term. When the spirit remarked, "Yes, I touched you, Mr. Barkas, but you did not speak," [he] said, in an almost inaudible whisper, 'Will you kiss me, 'Pocka'?' Remarkably, Barkas described how, in this darkened Victorian drawing room, "hands took hold of the front collar of my coat, one on each side, and I was drawn forward, and gently and softly [kissed]" (Barkas 1874: 496). Striking here is the eroticised gesture of pulling him forward by his clothing secretly to kiss him. Another recipient of Pocka's kisses was Mr. R. Wolstenholme, who watched the spirit eat an apple (none too subtle a metaphor, even for the Victorians), then "she pulled me down to let her kiss me, after kissing me she said 'Ta, ta', and retired into the cabinet" (Wolstenholme 1877: 246). In my previous work (2006: 46), I pointed out the ways that even anti-Spiritualists got in on the action of physical contact with spirits during attempted 'exposures' at full-form materialisation séances. Exposures were most often executed by men physically grabbing the materialised spirit, while someone

else pulled open the drapery or door on the materialisation cabinet with the intention of revealing that the medium herself had disrobed, emerged from the cabinet in disguise, and left her clothing behind her in the cabinet: a deeply suggestive kind of manhandling and disclosure.

Most of the touching, grabbing, and kissing, however, was experienced by the faithful, and it did not go unremarked. While the sitters often record their emotional and physical responses to such spirit/sitter interaction, the most dramatic may be an example provided in a séance that I have previously discussed and that Alex Owen has described in *The Darkened Room*. In it, Spiritualist heavyweight and editor of *The Medium and Daybreak*, James Burns, explains that another spirit of Woods's, called 'Minnie', "stooped down slightly, our lips met firmly [and] a fervent kiss was recorded on the surrounding atmosphere. I was distinctly conscious of two impressions: the peculiar thrill of affection which passed through me, and the physical conformation of 'Minnie's' lips" (Burns 1878a : 362). To give some sense of the pervasiveness of such practices with young women mediums, we might consider the fact that Burns refers to this as the spirit's "duties." Owen (1989: 221) argues that this scene reveals "the incidence of beautiful spirits who took pleasure in bestowing caresses and kisses on their gentleman admirers was high, and in this sense a spirit representation of femininity ran counter to prevailing ideas of moral acceptability. Even those spiritualists who denounced any hint of debasement in mediums could accept a pronounced degree of eroticism in visitors from the other world."

I argue in *Altered States* that this form of eroticism was not perceived as contrary to the female morality in the séance, precisely because it was fundamental to the dissolution of boundaries between flesh and spirit and between self and other, and, in consequence, to the disruption of rigid moralities in the murky space of the séance—elements that made the séance an attractive space for women practitioners of Spiritualism. Sarah Willburn, in *Possessed Victorians* (2006: 84), agrees and suggests that through highly sexualised "membership in a radically mystical, mythical, mostly female community," women were granted new freedoms. She argues that these freedoms challenge "worldly authority," and served as a form of political modelling (Willburn 2006: 86). I concur and have argued (2008: 192) that Spiritualists often actively sought social reform and that those mediums who were successful did their work in a 'community' that worked to create social change. In this essay, I hope to explore more deeply of what that community was constituted for many women. Further I will investigate why what Willburn (2006: 87) calls in one instance "same-sex erotic act[s and] an (auto-) erotic mystical community" was so fundamental to Spiritualism for many women adherents and it sold so well in

print to a great body of readers. In this way, I will attend to what has, until now, remained almost entirely untouched in studies of the séance: the operations of intimate relations between women in this landscape of sexual play.

Homosociality: Partners in “Crime”

For some mediums, full-form materialisation was a call to partnership. Critics thought of this as a form of ‘confederacy’ between shysters: a magician and a magician’s assistant. Devout Spiritualists, on the other hand, argued that women created a kind of spiritual synergy for one another. Whatever the case, many mediums travelled in pairs or worked with select sitters in their mediumship. I will pay particular attention to two sets of pairings in this essay: mediums Annie Fairlamb (later Annie Mellon) and Catherine Wood; and author and Spiritualist devotee Florence Marryat and the mediums Mary Rosina Showers and Florence Cook.¹ The materialisation séance became a staple of the mediumship of all four mediums in the 1870s and spread their fame from the United Kingdom to British outposts around the globe. To this day, practicing Spiritualists regard Florence Cook as legitimate and her mediumship as incontrovertible proof of the reality of full-form materialisation. As I will explain, full-form materialisation often relied upon relationships between women, though it is largely the relations between men and women that have been the primary focus of scholarly study.

Bound Together: Wood and Fairlamb

In many séances, two women materialisation mediums would literally be bound together or would be placed in the same materialisation cabinet during a séance, and this was perceived as increasing the likelihood of producing ‘phenomenon’ (or material evidence of the spirit world) in the séance. Wood and Fairlamb were frequently tied together during their joint séances. As

1 Though most mediums, like most young women, eventually wed, in the majority of the séances here, they operated under maiden names; I will signal the shift (in Annie Fairlamb Mellon’s name, for example) after a woman’s marriage. Florence Marryat was Florence Ross-Church’s maiden and pen name (her father was military officer and novelist Captain Marryat, and she traded in part on the currency of the already famous name), and she was always interviewed and published as ‘Marryat’ though she refers to herself as ‘Mrs. Ross-Church’ in both of the books I quote here.

Barkas (1874: 496) described it, “the young-lady mediums were strapped . . . securely to the chairs, but in order to make ‘assurance doubly sure’ [for a test séance,] one of my friends asked and obtained permission to tie the mediums to the chairs and to each other by fine threads. The arms and hands of the mediums were then tied together by two single threads.” This was a common practice that only increased when a medium’s honesty was called into question. Not long after a devastating exposure, when Fairlamb and Wood began performing materialisations again, Thomas Hinde brought the mediums thirty-one miles south to the Darlington Spiritualist Society for what we might call ‘come-back’ séances. The conditions, of course, at these séances were particularly stringent in the hopes that they would restore confidence in those whose legitimacy had been undermined. Hinde (1874: 566) explained that everyone at the séance was “struck with the quiet simplicity and ingenuousness of the two young ladies, Miss W. and Miss F . . . ; and still more were all satisfied by the unreserved way in which *both submitted to be secured* during the dark séance, so that there could be no possibility of doubt as to their taking any share in the manifestations.”

Their submissiveness to test conditions and passivity in the hands of the sitters was a marker of their femininity, something perceived as wholly contrary to the possibility of fraud. It seemed to signal their adherence to normative social codes, in spite of the other practices in which they engaged. Perhaps that was what made binding the women together seem so ‘natural’. Such bondage, however, resists a flat narrative of individual female passivity. Hinde (1874: 566) continued, “The mediums were strapped to their chairs under the direction generally of the non-Spiritualists [and, thus, more sceptical] of the company. The buckles of the straps were tied through with thread or tape, so that they could not be loosed without the fastening being ruptured. Except on one evening there were, in addition to the strapping, fastening of thread or tape passing from the mediums’ wrists to the back of the chairs.” These, surely, were intimate quarters for these young women. In the darkened room, behind the velvet curtain of the materialisation cabinet, Wood and Fairlamb were bound together physically—as they already had been socially in so many people’s minds. In fact, some people spoke of them almost as if they, together, were an entity—and, as a bound unit, they were a force with which to be reckoned.

J. Morse, a regular visitor to Newcastle to assess the ‘progress’ at their séances, reported, “So far as Newcastle is concerned, I am proud to have the honour of chronicling the fact that our cause is spreading with marvellous rapidity. The progress I observed since my first visit five months since struck me with amazement. The society possesses two very good mediums—Miss Wood and Miss Fairlamb—through whom very satisfactory phenomena are obtained.” Hinde

went further, noting, with language that offers a telling metaphor, “Even supposing [Wood and Fairlamb] could get free from the straps [with which they were bound]—an impossibility—they could not possibly free themselves from the other ligatures” (Morse 1874: 21). While Hinde, of course, sought clear-cut evidence of the afterlife in this bondage, I see in this passage something more: evidence of women’s relation to other women as something foundational to the perceived value of their mediumship and to the success of the séance. For Fairlamb and Wood, as for many other women mediums, less visible ‘ligatures’ kept them consistently bound together. While the landscape of Spiritualism was not exclusively homosocial—in fact, there was a great deal of mingling of the sexes—joining women to other women was often seen as key to achieving the best results.

Female Burlesque

When they were partnered, Wood and Fairlamb were successful, in spite of the exposures they suffered. Their séances, read to an eye with the homoerotic, often seem like performances designed for the benefit of the mediums themselves, rather than for the almost exclusively male circles that surrounded them. At several séances, for example, when either Wood or Fairlamb would enter the materialisation cabinet alone, the other would remain positioned outside—the only woman in the circle of men. In these cases, the spirits that appeared seemed to be performing for the other medium, much more even than the sitters. At one séance, instruments and chairs were pitched back and forth between the cabinet (where Wood was stationed) and the circle (where Fairlamb sat) until “Miss Fairlamb [got] a slight bruise from one of them on the temple. The curtains were also flung wide open. Miss Wood was entranced, and carried on a conversation with the company; Miss Fairlamb was conscious all the time” (“Discouragement of Dark Séances” 1875: 264). Joined across space, the curtain between them withdrawn, Wood and Fairlamb seem in intimate communication, like two stations in a wireless telegraph relay. Thurschwell has explained, using precisely these new scientific technologies as a figuring metaphor, that this form of contact was conceived of as highly erotic, a landscape of desire.² So profound were the energies volleying back and forth between the two women during the séance—along with the physical objects that were

² Thurschwell (2001) discusses the relationship between technologies like the wireless devices of the nineteenth century and the Spiritualistic séance and interpersonal erotics (see especially 23–35).

being chucked from place to place—that the boundary between the women blurred, the spiritual and material slipped, and Fairlamb's body was marked as the spiritually significant site.

Significantly, the séance often seemed almost to become a burlesque. In one case, the “crowning point of the evening's séance was the throwing open of the curtains, showing [a spirit] standing about a yard away from the medium, who also was seen fully, and was talking; at the same time the dulcimer was being vigorously fingered in the opposite corner of the cabinet A spirit showed his face through the division of the curtains, but on this occasion, at the same time, a leg, bare from the foot above the knee, protruded through the lower portion of the curtain, and, with the toes, played upon the dulcimer outside” (Rhodes 1876: 137). The “vigorously fingered” dulcimer and the bare legs cancaning through the boundary between the circle and the materialisation cabinet, seem to suggest that the women/spirits were playing with notions of gender—men were being materialised by (or impersonated by?) women—and the erotic in the same way that many scholars have described both actors and audience as doing in burlesque performances and in the theater. Martha Vicinius and J.S. Bratton, for example, “have found encoded in male impersonations in music hall performances at the end of the nineteenth century a strongly lesbian subtext” (quoted in Davis 1998: 55). Jim Davis (1998: 63) goes farther, arguing that theaters served as “sites for public display of gender transgression as a signifier of sexual orientation and consequently for the clandestine establishment of homo-erotic relationships,” and he suggests that spectators, too, participated in disruptive practices and that these practices often moved *outside* of the theaters. Indeed, read in these terms, the “vigorously fingered” dulcimer evokes sexual contact between women as much as it does disruptive gender performance. Paula Gillett (2000: 84) has explained that to play on stringed instruments was likened to play on/with a woman's body—it was part of the reason the violin was considered an inappropriate instrument for women. “The instrument/body analogy had taken on erotic overtones, and like exquisitely sensitive strings, the nerves spoken of were most often those of women [when it was men, it often figured them as feminine] The comparison was well known to Victorians.”

In another séance, a spirit (whom a sceptic, of course, would read as either Fairlamb or Wood in disguise) appeared with a beard surrounding his face. A sitter was invited into the medium's cabinet, and discovered that this “figure which led him was bending over her and looking at her [the medium]. The masculine figure again came from behind the screen, showed its hand and beard, played upon a small mouth organ, and retired”; the screen was removed and “Miss W was found in a deep trance” (Barkas 1874: 497). The intimacy between the ‘male’ figure (which, even if a spirit, was produced from the body

of the female medium) and the medium here is striking. Moreover, the curious disruption of gender (was it Fairlamb in the beard?) and slippage of identity in the substitution of pronouns for more particular identification of figures suggests a murky framing of gender identity. The unstable gender of the 'bearded lady', which I have compared elsewhere to the threatening *vagina dentata*, had the power to castrate male sexuality. This figure not only "underscored the radical instability of" gender codes, but also provided a female-focused erotic (Tromp 2008: 11).

In this instance, the bearded figure also "play[s] upon a small mouth organ," language Victorians would have understood as suggestive of cunnilingus and language that often emerged in sexual narratives and widely-circulated pornography.³ Pornography, as Marcus (2007: 114) has demonstrated, "is not the sexual underbelly of culture; rather, pornography and mainstream culture share an erotic repertoire." Similar patterns emerged, too, when Fairlamb held séances, and the bearded lady made an appearance. In one séance, a spirit figure called 'Minnie' emerged from the cabinet, and a reporter on the séance remarked, "As she passed Mr. Rhodes she also gave him her hand, but he not having seen Minnie before, was not certain whether the dark hair falling below the drapery of the head and face was a beard or otherwise, by the insufficient light" ("Miss Fairlamb's Mediumship" 1875: 221). As I note in *Altered States* (2006: 117), the author's rationale for being unable to determine the woman's gender—that Rhodes had not seen Minnie before—hardly seems a good reason to find even a spirit woman's gender indeterminate, or to imagine that this woman has a *beard*. This bearded lady, however, was not shy, and she stifled Rhodes's critiques (and apparently his spiritual doubt) by placing his hands directly in the hair itself—an erotic gesture that clearly places the bearded lady in control. "[S]he bent forward and took his hand, allowing him to feel that it was hair extending up the side of the head and hanging down loosely. On Mr. Rhodes expressing himself satisfied, and thanking her, she took his hand, and kissing it, passed on to one or two others" "Miss Fairlamb's Mediumship" 1875: 221). Once thus managed, Mr. Rhodes made no further complaint.

Clearly, Wood and Fairlamb were very effective when they worked together, and—whether one sees this as evidence of confederacy and chicanery or deep bonding—the connection between these women was both spiritually and materially significant. When Wood was in the cabinet, the 'power' was inevitably increased by the entrance of Fairlamb into the same cabinet. Together, as

3 See Sharon Marcus's insightful work on this theme in Chapter 3 of *Between Women* (2007). See also works like *The New Ladies' Tickler* (1866) and Edward Sellon's *The New Epicurean* (1875), which use the language of the 'organ' and 'mouth' and the woman's 'beard'.

James Burns (1878b: 345) described it, they could produce better results. “Miss Fairlamb sat close to the cabinet outside, so that the mediumship of Miss Wood and her friend was combined in producing the results.” At another séance in Newcastle, one sitter reported that after Wood became “entranced and talk[ed] a little while with the company, Miss Fairlamb entered the cabinet to add to the power.” In fact, as time went on, the women who entered the cabinet with Wood varied, but the results were always the same. In this case, when Fairlamb exited, Mrs. Petty was invited inside, and the spirits who emerged “took hold of Miss Fairlamb” immediately upon exiting the cabinet (“Newcastle-on-Tyne: The Chief Newcastle Mediums at One Seance” 1875: 216). Clearly, the intimate cycle of exchange between women increased the effectiveness of the phenomenon.

Even when Wood and Fairlamb parted ways—they quarrelled and then Fairlamb married James Mellon—Wood maintained the attendance of a close lady companion. W.P. Adshead (1877: 154) noted that Wood arrived for test séances “accompanied by Miss Coltman, a young lady whose presence we were told would be an advantage.” Adshead initially complained that, “Under the circumstances, we would rather Miss Wood had come alone, but we did not object to the presence of her companion, feeling quite confident that, in conducting the experiments on which we were about to enter, we could hold our own.” His remarks seem to suggest, in fact, that the two women were something to contend with as a unit. Later, however, he softened, indicating that “after the first night it was discovered that Miss Coltman was not in any sense a factor in the problems awaiting solution.” Coltman, instead, facilitated the séance. How she did so seemed to revolve around the unstable social codes, as I will explain.

Several critics have suggested that women found significant murkiness in gender codes during the séance; there was slippage in sexual codes as well. This slippage may have made Spiritualists more comfortable with the sorts of relationships and behaviors that often characterised these séances. During one séance, for example, a spirit emerged for whom “the face, notably the dark beard and whiskers, were distinctly seen.” Like previous séances in which the bearded man/woman approached a female, this spirit, too, focused “his” amorous attentions on a lady and moved across the floor “[w]ith a firmer step and swifter motion than we had yet seen manifested . . . toward the chair on which [a] young lady . . . sat, and gave her [a] promised kiss” (Adshead 1877: 155). Adshead (1877: 185) concludes by noting, immediately after this remark, that, “In this connection, I think it is only justice to Miss Coltman to say that her presence on the scene had reference exclusively to Miss Wood’s comfort when absent from home and amongst strangers. The medium having with her, *both day and night*, a loved and pleasant companion, is, as all Spiritualists know, if

not an absolute necessity, an excellent preparation for a successful séance” (emphasis added).

Indeed, when Wood ran into problems during these séances—she was unable to produce a materialised spirit while locked in a cage and chained to a chair with a velvet collar—Miss Coltman came to her rescue, explaining that Wood had been jostled by some men in the streets before their arrival and that it was *this* contact that had disrupted the séance. These events seem to suggest that men, in general, disrupted the harmony of the séance (rather than the challenge of the locked cage, for example). The solution? The spirits commanded that the “cage must be opened, and the medium released at once, taken home under control, and put to bed,” presumably accompanied by her companion. “This was done, and she remained under control until a late hour” (Adshead 1877: 187). The notion that eliminating male contact and remaining intimately connected with women would provide a sure means of ‘curing’ the ills the medium faced seemed to pervade attitudes around women’s full-form materialisation. Indeed, I would take Willburn’s argument about the possession of bodies by more than one person in Spiritualism a step further. Not only was more than one woman occupying one body—the mediums as well as her spirits—but women were spiritually and physically connected across bodies in increasingly intimate and eroticised ways. This was perceived to be a means of ensuring the best possible affective and material state for the séance. The best practice was to surround a medium with women and actively to involve women in preparation and management of the séance.

Testing the Boundaries

One way that women became increasingly visible in relation to the medium was during séance preparation. As full-form materialisations became increasingly common, tests were designed to investigate mediums rigorously to prevent fraud. What seems most significant about these tests to me is that they were so heavily sexualised that men were often prohibited from performing them in order to honor codes of propriety. In spite of their eroticisation, however, women were permitted to engage in them and, indeed, to elevate the eroticism of the acts. For example, women mediums were examined for secreted material that might be used to create spirit draperies or objects that could tamper with ties, ropes, cords, or chains that held the medium in the materialisation cabinet. Clearly, there was potential for violation of social codes regarding men’s access to women’s bodies, and men often balked at providing such tests. Women, however, showed no hesitation. Indeed, they proposed new tests, like the following which amounted to a strip search: “Mrs. Ford . . . a severely critical investigator,”

suggested a special test condition that created a highly homoerotic environment: “that Miss Wood go up stairs with me, and allow me to undress and redress her, so that in the event of a form or forms walking out of the cabinet robed in white, we may feel quite assured that the medium took nothing [white] into the cabinet with her.” Wood, we are told, was “quite willing to do so.” Because mediums often refused tests, Wood’s ready accession indicates her comfort with the practice. On the next night, these rigors were increased, when she was “asked if she would again submit to the special test. Without a moment’s hesitation she acceded to the request. The change of dress was even more thorough than before, her stocking and boots having been taken off and examined.” Once she was returned to the largely male circle and the materialisation cabinet, however, the séance was broken up over “inharmony” (Adshead 1877: 186).

Not only did Wood seem comfortable primarily in the company of Mrs. Ford, the “severe investigator,” who figured like the strict governess or school marm birching the naughty teenage girl—a classic figure from Victorian erotic literature—but it was only in the company of women, like Ford and her female companions, that Wood became a successful medium. Compare, for example, this description of a girls’ school teacher from the eighteen-issue run of *The Pearl*, a magazine of erotica published between 1879 and 1880, in which the school teacher ordered of a young woman, “Now strip [her], and examine every article of clothing as it is taken off Notwithstanding [the girl’s] confusion, I noticed a slight gleam of satisfaction pass across her countenance They proceeded with the undressing, and I could not help noticing her continued satisfaction as each garment was overhauled” (“Miss Coote’s Confession: Letter 7” 1880: 21). The erotic enjoyment of the stern older woman and the young pupil seems translated into these séance scenes. Fairlamb, too, submitted to the practice, which had been in use at least since 1874. In Fairlamb’s case, the medium was required to lie on a bed in the cabinet and an “Investigator” called upon “the lady of the house to remain with Miss F. until she recovered from the trance, to take her directly into an adjoining bed-room to undress her, and to see if she had any white garments of any kind upon her person or in her possession” (Investigator 1874: 468). Being compelled into bed by the circle and then submitting to investigation of her body by other women became a frequent and deeply homoerotic practice and one that was perceived to be fundamental to a good materialisation séance.

Clad in ‘Other Clothes’: Cook and Showers

Wood and Fairlamb were not the only ones who submitted to such tests. Other materialisation mediums, including the second pair mentioned above, Mary

Rosina Showers (Rosie) and Florence Cook (Florrie), gave women access to their bodies and submitted to undressing as well. R.G. Medhurst and K.M. Goldney, investigators for the Society of Psychical Research, described this practice with Florence Cook (later Corner), with the additional requirement that the medium dress in other women's clothes. "Mrs. Corner had, before [the séance] commenced, stripped to her last garment in the presence of some of the lady sitters and then had re-clad herself in garments provided by Miss Mack Wall, after which she was not left a moment alone." Not only do women continue to remain by her side, but during the séance, the medium is bound to an "iron ring" in the materialisation cabinet, a highly eroticised metaphor for female sexuality.⁴ As the séance record describes it, "She was most securely bound to her chair, which was fastened to an iron ring in the floor and each hand was tied to an arm of the chair, with only two inches play allowed. All the knots were stitched over with coloured thread and everything was found intact afterwards" (Mary Mack Wall, quoted in Medhurst and Goldney 1964: 85). Given the expectation for 'virginal' purity among these young women mediums, this report is striking for its assurance that "everything was found intact afterwards," language highly suggestive of a reference to the undamaged hymen (which, of course, Victorians understood could remain undisturbed by sexual engagement between women).

At another séance, a sitter reported that, here as well, the medium was subject to "stringent test conditions." In this case, two women—Mrs. and Miss Corner—"took the medium to her bedroom, and having taken off her clothes, and thoroughly searched them, dressed her without a gown." Again, prohibited from wearing her own clothes, Cook was stripped, examined, and robed only in a cloak, and "led . . . to the séance room, where her wrists were tied tightly together with tape." She was bound to a chair, and the knot in the rope was "sealed with a signet ring. She was then seated in the cabinet, which had been previously examined. The tape was passed through a brass bracket in the floor, brought under the shawl." Cook was constantly under the surveillance of the investigators: "Mrs. Corner took charge of the medium whilst she was out of the cabinet, and did not lose sight of her for one minute" ("Photographing a Spirit by the Magnesium Light" 1873: 200). Interestingly, like Cook, Mrs. Corner was no passive creature. She served as the president of the Dalston Association Of Inquirers Into Spiritualism and directed a good many tests with mediums. Perhaps one of the most significant aspects of these séances is that these

4 Gilbert (1980: 414) has written about H.D.'s use of this metaphor in *Helen in Egypt*, in which the "archetypal seductive female" will be linked to a new Achilles, who will be a transvestite or third sex figure.

women were clearly engaging in a process in which they were not simply pawns for men, but active agents. Like Mrs. Ford, Mrs. Corner felt free to “propose tests.” Indeed, the women themselves often directed tests with other women or willingly submitted to such tests. They were choosing to engage in these practices.

Feminine dress plays a suggestive role in these choices. Wearing another woman’s clothes or wearing clothes that fail to signal womanhood (like the shapeless gray cloak) not only grates against the codes for femininity, it again evokes Victorian burlesque performance and, as such, all the tensions around gender and sexuality that it carries. In this way, the mediums’ unconventional clothing applied pressure to the kinds of women’s relations that were compatible with normative heterosexuality. In being called upon to step outside of their normal ‘clothes’, these mediums were, in effect, being invited to change out of their former habitude, to inhabit a different kind of women’s realm. Here, the relations between women were not only intensely eroticised but were also amped up by their enactment in profoundly public as well as private settings. In other words, these women participated in what were acknowledged to be erotically charged—not simply friendly or sisterly—acts in both the bedroom and the public séance room. Pornography was rife with female characters who exploited the plasticity of social codes surrounding women (women’s intimacy with women was socially normative and generally perceived as nonsexual), so that they might strip other young women and make them sexually available for their pleasure. It is not surprising, then, that when Cook’s spirit ‘Katie’ emerged from the cabinet at this séance, she invited Mrs. Corner to examine her body and clothing—a moment that echoed what had already occurred between Corner and the medium in the privacy of the bedroom. As the recorder of the event described it, Katie “allowed [another séance sitter] and Mrs. Corner to pass their hands over her dress, in order that they might satisfy themselves that she wore only one robe” (“Photographing a Spirit” 1873: 200).

Women penetrating into another woman’s secret places (in this case, her dress, her body, and, as I will show below, the materialisation cabinet), as the Corner women do with both Cook and ‘Katie’, became an increasingly common practice between female sitters and young women materialisation mediums in the séance. Women were often granted access to other women in a way that exceeded polite limits. Again, in another séance where Miss Corner was present, she situated herself outside the cabinet with an uninterrupted view of Cook. As a letter to the Editor of the *Spiritualist* explains it, “Miss Corner (who was at the left of the cabinet, and at a *favourable angle for seeing anything within*) declared she saw Miss Cook and Katie at the same time; the position in which the remainder of the circle sat *would not admit of their distinguishing*

anything inside. It would probably—except for the fact of Miss Cook and Katie having been seen at the same moment—have been unnecessary to publish what may, perhaps, be termed another certificate relating to our photographic proceedings under test conditions” (“Letter to the Editor” 1873: 217; emphasis added). Since materialisation cabinets typically did not admit a viewer’s gaze, Miss Corner’s “favourable angle” is unique and noteworthy and, like Mrs. Corner’s, sustained the erotic engagement with the medium beyond the strip search and into the séance room. Moreover, what makes the séance worthy of report is seeing the two women (spirit and medium) together.

Significantly, penetration into another woman’s “secrets” was a typical metaphor in erotic literature for sexual acts between women. While I’m not suggesting that the Corner women had clandestine sexual relations with Cook (indeed, everything I have quoted here was intended for public consumption), I want to point up the way that, just as erotic tensions between men had played a role in Cook’s mediumship,⁵ so did erotic tensions with women. Moreover, because, as Marcus (2007) notes, there were fewer explicit limitations on relations between women in the nineteenth century, and because the lines became even murkier in the Spiritualist séance, women may have achieved even greater freedom to experience, elevate, and utilise erotic energies between women. I would pair this with Lillian Faderman’s (2001: 251) caution that the Victorians did not share our contemporary focus on genital sex as the defining moment in a sexual encounter. Whereas Marcus (2007: 113–115) makes a clear distinction between romantic friendship and homosexuality by highlighting the role of “genital arousal” in the latter, she explains that she does so to alleviate the restriction of looking for “evidence of sex” when it was typically not mentioned even in relations that were explicitly sexual (such as marriage), as well as to develop the discussion of desire, particularly women’s sexual desire for women. I would like to be attentive, here, to the ways such erotic acts in the publicly reported séance could be part of an *acting out* or performance of the sexual desire that Marcus so carefully documents. I am particularly interested in the ways that the context of the séance provided a space for the enactment of such desire and, because it was a landscape in which respectable people met and interacted, applied pressure to the normative limits the performance of such desire.⁶ I find it compelling, too, that Cook married Edward Elgie Corner, ‘Ted’, the son and brother of the Mrs. and Miss Corner, and often

5 Virtually every academic writing on Florence Cook has made this argument.

6 Marcus also notes, for example, that in the most committed, marital relationships, performance of erotic desire was often limited in public settings. I would argue that the séance, in its liminal space of the culturally normative and the culturally experimental, pressed those limits.

had the Corner women with her in séances throughout life. There might be something telling, too, in what may have been a reproductive “failure” in Ted and Florrie’s relationship and in what Owen has called the “breakdown of their marriage” (Owen 1989: 73) I can find no evidence of Florrie and Ted having children; their letters are preserved at the Emma Hardinge Britten Library in Stansted as the gift of their niece, L. Dixon, into whose possession they had passed, rather than the expected son or daughter.

Of course, there were many who believed that the women surrounding Cook were simply “confederates” who either aided her in fraudulence or testified to her efficacy, but it is significant that her perceived accomplices were so often women. While men investigated her (like famed scientist Sir William Crookes—who by no means came away from his investigations with a clean reputation), women often bore witness to Cook’s veracity. The Corner women seemed to support her mediumship, while her niece, L. Dixon (n.d.), reported that “Uncle Ted was most antagonistic to Spiritualism always despite all he saw & heard & experienced.” Nor were her in-laws the only women in Florrie’s corner. In another case, for example, the medium “Mrs. Basset told the company that Miss Cook had been entranced all the time, with her head lying on her (Mrs. Bassett’s)⁷ lap; that Katie appeared suddenly, and frequently, entered and left the cabinet; finally, she came in again, stood by Miss Cook, and slowly faded away” (“Letter to the Editor” 1873a : 152). All of the language here—complete with the lap as the seat of erotic engagement and the movement in and out of the ‘cabinet’—are suggestive of emotional and physical intimacy between women in the séance. Indeed, such intimacy between mediums was central to Cook’s séances, as it had been to Wood’s and Fairlamb’s, and it is this pattern that I explore in the following section.

Flesh of Her Flesh: Cook and Showers

Cook was not only intimate with women who sat in the séance circle. She was also deeply connected with other women mediums. As Owen (1989: 51) describes it, when Showers came on the scene, Cook was already a well-established medium, materialising Victorian spirit favorite ‘Katie King’, and “far from shunning the new rival, she and Mary Rosina became close friends.” What characterised their close friendship is an intriguing question. Some people believed they were confederates. Trevor Hall (1962) has suggested that Cook wrote Showers and shared with her the ‘tricks’ of the trade, teaching Showers

7 Mrs. Bassett was herself a medium, who also suffered an “exposure” during her career.

the legerdemain that would produce 'Florence', 'Lenore', and 'Peter'. Medhurst and Goldney (1964) deny this, pointing out that Showers was already performing materialisations before she and Cook met. Their relationship, then, was based on something other than just swindler's schooling. They were seen by many of the faithful as intimately bonded, just as the spirits they materialised were bonded to them.

In describing the theoretical principles behind materialisation, F. Clavaïroz (1874: 769), for example, used compelling language to report that "the fluidic interior body is the purified copy of the exterior envelope, which serves as a mould. This interior body is nothing more than an instrument in the hands of the spirit, but it is still the medium's body and this is why . . . 'Katie' [resembles] Miss Cook, and 'Florence' Miss Showers . . . What remains to be studied is, then, the law of the double, which is the key to the phenomenon." As Katie and Cook were paralleled and Florence and Showers were copies, so, in many ways, were Cook and Showers ultimately joined in narratives about them, so like the language of 'joining' used to describe marriage. Even during her test séances with famous scientist Sir William Crookes, for example, Showers played a key role.⁸ Some critics have argued that Cook and Crookes simply had a sexual relationship, carried on under the guise of scientific inquiry so that it could also be carried on under the nose of his wife. Their relationship, as I have argued elsewhere however (Tromp 2006: 37–46), was more complex than that. Crookes engaged in extensive testing with Cook, developing new scientific techniques and devices to plumb the depths of Cook's mediumship. Another aspect of this complexity was the fact that Showers was present at many of the test séances, and, in one of the most famous, Cook and Showers entered the materialisation cabinet together, and their spirits, Katie and Florence, appeared outside the cabinet together. Crookes (1874a: 176) reported that "Miss Cook's 'Katie' has been walking about in my laboratory along with Miss Showers's 'Florence' with their arms entwined schoolgirl fashion, and in a strong light. 'Katie' has also materialized and spoken when I have been in the cabinet with Miss Cook, holding her hand."

A spiritualist debunker, Edward Cox, rendered this moment and Cook and Shower's relationship as wholly physical, removing it from the realm of the spiritual and making it available to social critique. I quote him at length:

8 Cook suffered an 'exposure' and turned herself over to Sir William Crookes, a respect Fellow of the Royal Society and a founder of the Quarterly Journal of Science, for experiments designed to prove her authenticity and restore her good name.

I have seen the forms of 'Katie' and 'Florence' together in the full light, coming out from the room in which Miss Cook and Miss Showers were placed, walking about, talking, playing girlish tricks, patting us and pushing us. They were solid flesh and blood and bone. They breathed, and perspired, and ate, and wore a white head-dress and a white robe from neck to foot, made of cotton and woven by a loom. Not merely did they resemble their respective mediums, they were facsimiles of them—alike in face, hair, complexion, teeth, eyes, hands, and movements of the body. Unless he had been otherwise so informed, no person would have doubted for a moment that the two girls who had been placed behind the curtain were now standing *in propria persona* before the curtain playing very prettily the character of ghosts.

COX 1874A: 294

The suggestion here, of course, is that the mediums were frauds and were engaged in chicanery for some kind of benefit, whether financial or social. Cox also suggested, however, that they were in on it together and he rendered this collaboration in wholly physical terms: patting, pushing women of "solid flesh and bone" who breathed, perspired, and ate with the bodies of the mediums. These, in other words, were young women, in Cox's estimation, who were entering a small, darkened room, escaping from bondage, stripping off their clothes together, redressing, and then theatrically performing for the room. These, surely, were not appropriate behaviors for even the "fastest" young women. Moreover, Cox complained that since the two spirits and mediums were together, "Miss Cook and 'Katie' must therefore well know if 'Florence' was genuine or not. But both refuse to answer inquiries as to this, although told it was to save the credit of their associate" (Cox 1874b: 435). Their refusal echoes spousal immunity or 'marital confidence privilege', which prohibits investigators and courts from compelling one spouse to share incriminating evidence against his or her partner.

Cox argued that Showers had definitively proven herself a fraud through these experiments, and, thus, that Cook's/Katie's unwillingness to speak was a sign of their illicit cooperation. Moreover, it had been he who had hosted Mrs. and Miss Showers in his home, where an exposure had taken place. "At a sitting with Miss Showers, a few days ago, the curtain, behind which the form of 'Florence' was exhibiting her face, was opened by a spectator ignorant of the conditions, and a peep behind the scenes was afforded to all those present." In this case, the spectator who drew back the curtain was a woman, evidently intent upon exposing Showers's secrets to the world. This suggestive "peep behind the scenes" was, for Cox, proof of her illegitimacy as a medium: "I am

bound, in the interests of truth and science, to say, that I, as well as the others, beheld revealed to us, not a form in front and a lady in the chair, but the chair empty, and the lady herself at the curtain wearing the ghost head-dress, and dressed in her own black gown! Nor was she lying on the floor as some have surmised." He also detailed how her body was not the 'entranced' body that some had thought: unconscious puppetry, strings pulled by the spirits. "When the head was thrust out between the curtain the eyes were turned up with the fixed stare which has been observed in the supposed 'Florence', but the eyes rapidly assumed their natural position when the exposure was made, and the hands were forthwith actively employed in trying to close the curtain, and in the struggle with the inspecting lady, the spirit-headress fell off. I was witness to it all She said in excuse that she was unconscious of what she had done, being in a state of trance. Doubtless it was so, and I impute no blame or deliberate trick to her. But the fact was completely established, on this occasion at least 'Florence' was Miss Showers herself" (Cox 1874a: 294).

While he publicly said he thought the illicit behavior was unconscious, Cox privately voiced his views that Showers and others were engaging in deliberate fraud. Indeed, he claimed later that he saw a letter from one female medium to another that indicated that muslin was "carried in her [the medium's] drawers" and that these young women mediums always had a confederate (Medhurst and Goldney 1964: 117). What he was ultimately suggesting—and choosing not to suggest publicly—was that these young women were fooling around with their underwear.

His public silence on this matter, especially given the fact that it could have proven his assertion of their fraudulence, is striking. We must wonder who or what he was protecting by keeping his silence. Certainly, it was not the mediums themselves, since he had actively sought to discredit them and full-form materialisation. I would suggest that there were more disturbing tensions beneath the surface—tensions about what their relationship might imply about gender (could women engage in such duplicity?) or sexuality (could women be so intimate that they would essentially evoke spousal immunity?)—that were much more difficult for Cox to voice. Indeed, this may be why Cox (surprisingly) indicated that he did not believe that the medium was guilty of "deliberate imposture" and he suggested that the mediums were "obeying merely the strong desire of those about them."

Moreover, those specific "strong desires" were quite significant and permeated the movement. Perhaps this was why Charles Blackburn (Cook's patron) angrily wrote to the Spiritualist press, "I now leave the public to judge whether it is fair to slander such an excellent truthful, and honourable medium. In fact, a debt of gratitude is due to both Miss Cook (that was) and Miss Showers; indeed, any gentleman who has a *proper mind* would apologise to both families

for recent language used against these two respectable young ladies, only eighteen years of age" (quoted in Medhurst and Goldney 1964: 112). The defence certainly suggests that their perceived "crimes" were disreputable impropriety, just as Cox's silence did—but that whatever they were, they could not be compelled to stop. Crookes even tried to persuade Rosie to cease her séances, but failed, even though he seemed to have strong evidence against her imposture. Whatever the case, Crookes himself said that Cook had refused to say anything negative about Showers, and even when Crookes asked 'Katie' directly about Showers and 'Florence', she "refuse[d] to say anything about [them]" (quoted in Medhurst and Goldney 1964: 106). (Another investigator, Lord Rayleigh, reported in 1874 that Crookes's tests—such as dipping the medium's hands in dye—failed with Showers, but not with Cook. [Medhurst and Goldney 1964: 107].) In spite of the fact that Crookes admitted in his private letters that Showers had "accomplices" (Crookes 1874b, quoted in Medhurst and Goldney 1964: 113), he never blamed Cook directly or by implication.

Touching Support: Florence Marryat

In one erotic Victorian text, a female character remarks that "a club of ladies could enjoy every sensual pleasure without the society of men" ("Miss Coote's Confession: Letter 7" 1880: 18). The stories of Florence Marryat, a woman who played a significant role in the mediumship of many young women, might have provided illustrative matter for erotic tales like this one, given the striking access she had to other women's bodies. Both Cook and Showers had compelling relationships with this novelist and devout Spiritualist. At Marryat's house, the spirit 'Katie King' was so comfortable and had "become so much one of the family" that she could get into bed with others and not alarm them. Indeed, as Marryat reports, Cook's husband, Ted Corner, had "told [her] himself that he used to feel at first as if he had married two women, and was not quite sure which was his wife of the two" (Marryat 1917: 140). This example of co-sleeping with spirits, however, was perhaps the least dramatic of their interactions. Marryat proudly indicated, for example that Cook consistently wanted her to remain by her side. After her exposure, "Florrie refused" to sit for a séance "unless someone remained in the cabinet with her, and she chose me for the purpose. I was therefore tied to her securely with a stout rope, and we remained thus fastened together for the whole of the evening" (Marryat 1917: 145). Tied together like two mediums might be, Cook (via her spirit Katie King) and Marryat had remarkably intimate access to one another's physical bodies. As Marryat told it, "she [the spirit] seated herself on my knee . . . and asked me to

feel her body, and tell the others how differently she was made from the medium.... I then passed my hand up and down her figure. She had full breasts and plump arms and legs, and could not have been mistaken by the most casual observers for Miss Cook" (Marryat 1917: 147–148).

This scene in which Marryat touched 'Katie's' breasts and determined their weight to be different than Cook's simply cannot be described as a form of casual homosociality—there was clearly a heavily erotic charge in these moments—nor was this an isolated instance. At other séances, Marryat described the flesh of Cook's spirits as "quite firm and warm." Moreover, it was not just the spirit who came in for such handling (if we grant that Cook *was* manifesting a spirit and not impersonating one). Cook herself was touched by Marryat in a similar fashion. As she materialised spirits, Marryat would place her "hand upon Miss Cook's figure... I kept passing my hand up and down from her face to her knees, to make sure it was not only a hand I held" (Marryat 1917: 149). One striking scene merits quoting at length. In it, Katie remarked, "I want Mrs. Ross-Church'. I rose and went to her... [She] pulled my dress impatiently and said, 'Sit down on the ground', which I did. She then seated herself in my lap, saying, 'And now, dear, we'll have a good 'confab', like women do on earth.'" Desiring a woman whose clothes she pulls and in whose lap she sits (as though she was an adult woman), Katie wants to engage physically and mentally "like women do on earth"—evidently with the material touch that earth women have. However, the scene continues: "Florence Cook, meanwhile, was lying on a mattress on the ground close to us, wrapped in a deep trance. 'Katie' seemed very anxious I should ascertain beyond doubt that it was Florrie. 'Touch her', she said, 'take her hand, pull her curls. Do you see that it is Florrie lying there?' When I assured her I was quite satisfied there was no doubt of it, the spirit said, 'Then look round this way, and see what I was like in earth life'. I turned to the form in my arms, and what was my amazement to see a woman fair as the day, with large grey or blue eyes, a white skin, and a profusion of golden red hair'. 'Katie' enjoyed my surprise, and asked me, 'Ain't I prettier than Florrie now?'" (Marryat 1917: 141–142). Katie's pleasure in Marryat's evident desire, her comments on her beauty while resting in Marryat's arms and her encouragement that Marryat touch the medium, are precisely the kind of desire that Bayuk Rosenman (2003: 113) argues can be read as 'women's erotica' or even 'lesbian erotica' for the text's readers (and certainly, in this case, given that it is a record of events, for the actors themselves).

Immediately following this scene, Katie cut a lock of her hair and of Cook's for Marryat, a traditional token of romantic intimacy. Soon after on a "very warm evening," Katie "sat on my lap amongst the audience, and I felt perspiration on her arm. This surprised me; and I asked her if, for the time being, she had the veins, nerves, and secretions of a human being." Katie's suggestive

answer was “I have everything that Florrie has.” On this evening, Cook and King favored her with an even more dramatic gesture of intimacy. “She called me after her into the back room, and, dropping her white garment, stood perfectly naked before me. ‘Now,’ she said ‘you can see that I am a woman’. Which indeed she was, and a most beautifully-made woman too; and *I examined her well*, whilst Miss Cook lay beside us on the floor. Instead of dismissing me this time, ‘Katie’ told me to sit down by the medium *She then knelt down and kissed me, and I saw she was still naked*. ‘Where is your dress, Katie?’ I asked. ‘Oh, that’s gone’, she said” (Marryat 1917 : 142, emphasis added). The disrobing of Katie and Marryat’s evident pleasure at touching the medium and spirit and of gazing at the “beautifully-made woman” and kissing her while she was naked presses the boundaries of Sharon Marcus’s (2007: 113) notions of the “erotic appetite for femininity in women” and “female homoeroticism” that were accepted parts of Victorian society.

Marryat had a similar relationship with Showers and the spirits she manifested. As with Cook, she often had very intimate physical contact with the medium and the spirit. This began when Marryat met Showers and learned that the medium’s “mother had gone to Norwood to spend the night, and that she (Rosie) was afraid of sleeping alone, as the spirits worried her so. In a moment, it flashed across me to ask her to Bayswater to sleep with me, for I was most desirous of testing her powers when we were alone together” (Marryat 1917: 67). Not only does this echo the *Risky Business*-style liberties of a teen set free by a parent’s absence, but Marryat explicitly described her wishes as a “desire” to bring the young woman home to her bed and to test her alone. When they arrived, Marryat locked both her door and the door to the adjoining room, placed the keys under her pillow, and she and Rosie “undressed and got into bed.” Here, the spirit ‘Peter’ proceeded to strip them of the bed clothes over and over. “At last, the manifestations became so rapid, as many as eight to ten hands touching us at once, that I asked Miss Showers if she would mind my tying hers together. She was very amiable and consented willingly” (Marryat 1917: 69). Remarkably, at the late hour, Marryat went so far as to sew Showers’s hands into the sleeves of her nightgown and then to sew the sleeves to the mattress. The trope of hand binding, so common in Victorian erotica (see for example “My Grandmother’s Tale” 1880), particularly between an older and younger woman, marks this entire narrative.

If Showers were a fraud who required a confederate, as Sir William Crookes and Cox had suggested, then Marryat herself had to be the willing partner in pulling off the bed clothes and in the many hands touching. Certainly, Marryat was not trying to make a record of fraud for a cause to which she was deeply committed. Nor, however, would it be accurate to say that she was resisting

such manifestations. In fact, she invited them and was a willing and active participant. Marryat, herself, described their relationship as particularly special. “Miss Showers and I were so *en rapport* that her manifestations were always much stronger in my presence It was generally known that *our powers were sympathetic*, and at last ‘Peter’ gave me leave or, rather, *ordered me to sit with ‘Rosie’* while the manifestations went on outside” (Marryat 1917: 109). Entering into her secret spaces, as she had with Florrie, Marryat remained during the séances with her “arms rest[ing] on Miss Showers’ lap” or freely touching the medium or spirit all over her body and head (Marryat 1917: 110–111). Moreover, together, they were a powerful force. On one particular occasion, the two women locked themselves alone in a room together, “extinguished the lights, and sat down on a sofa side by side.” There, they were plagued by a “power, which having once called into action, we had no means of repressing” and, as a result, “our clothes were nearly torn off our backs” (Marryat 1917: 113–114).

This power beyond their control, this special sympathy, goes beyond what Marcus (2007: 170) describes as the “passionate devotion between women essential to the formation of ideal womanhood.” Indeed, at a séance in Marryat’s home, a spirit emerged and asked Mrs. Showers to confirm that “she had *not* got on Rosie’s petticoat body.” At a previous séance, the spirit had been discovered wearing it (evidently it somehow came into view during the séance), and “Mrs. Showers had recognized it and slipped upstairs during the séance and found it missing in her daughter’s chest of drawers and had been angry in consequence.” What made Mrs. Showers angry on her daughter’s behalf was not the “theft” of the petticoat, but the “[fear] that Rosie’s honor might be impeached” (Marryat 1917: 116).

The concerns about her daughter’s honour suggest that, however blurry the boundaries were, crossing lines in a séance made the acts legible as potentially *both* honourable and dishonourable. Indeed, this play existed at the very boundary, in the liminal space between the respectable and the shocking that these young women mediums and their women companions and cohorts danced. As Marryat (1917: 151) herself noted, being a medium was considered the “greatest misfortune that [had] ever happen[ed] to them” because of the “influences [that] take possession of them, unfitting them” for other work. This was indeed a complicated line to walk: not all intimacy between women was tolerated. As Vicinus (2004: 61) has aptly noted, “Women together, especially in bed together . . . were not above suspicion,” and some of the events described in *There is No Death* seem to transgress those boundaries. In a later work, *The Spirit World* (1894), Marryat lamented a type of purgatory one of the spirits had described to her in which the consequence for “men and women who forgot their sex”—a telling moral crime on which for her to focus. Strikingly, their

penalty was to be “submerged in a sea of slime, too horrible for words to describe, which gets into their mouths and nostrils, and clings to their garments, and besmirches every part of them with its foul stench and feeling” (Marryat 1894: 149). Perhaps as Marryat more aggressively crossed lines and reviewers complained that spirits in her book were “creatures . . . of objectionable propensities” (Review of *There is No Death* 1892: 50), the costs of that liminal space became too great, too overwhelming, to pass without comment. This did not, however, undo the power of such queered writing in her most famous nonfiction work, a power I discuss in the next section.

Coming Out of the Cabinet: Queer Séances and Social Change

Florence Marryat described her work as being “inspired by a desire to serve some cause of social reform” (“A Book of the Hour” 1898: 258). Her most popular lecture (and one she was asked to give over and over again) was “Women of the Future, or What Shall we Do with our Men?,” a comic meditation on modern womanhood. *There Is No Death*, the book in which she detailed the séances I have described above, “created . . . a sensation” (“Searches after Fate” 1892: 824), and at her death in 1899, it was singled out as one of her most significant and best-selling works (“Amongst the Mummies” 1899: 7). She clearly had an enthusiastic readership for such narratives. Marryat did worry about presenting herself as “moral” and sometimes discussed it in interviews, particularly after she added acting to her bill of feats (“Miss Florence Marryat on Her Travels” 1886: 5). Still, she published the book and took the risks that it entailed, remarking in one interview that she had chosen to be explicit and to “name names” because “It was always my resolve . . . if I ever wrote such a book to give names, addresses, & c.; from the want of such facts, all former books have been as worthless as the advertised testimonials of most quack medicines” (Dolman 1891: 2).

Her explicit discussion of people and places leaves little to the imagination, and those stories, so widely circulated, along with the narratives in the Spiritualist press, may have helped to frame the new sense of desire that was being articulated. Reviewers noted that “The book is interesting all through—on that point there will probably be no difference of opinion—but many of the stories it contains are very tough [to believe] indeed: as tough as any we have come across” (“Glimpses of the Spirit World” 1892: 4). Perhaps part of what made them “tough” was not just the introduction of spirits, but also the ways in which they dared to cross lines of sexuality as well. Even representing those narratives, however, as so many other Spiritualists before and after her did, was to push the boundaries of the cultural narrative.

Alex Owen (1989: 218) has said that “The spiritualist séance struck at the very heart of this normative definition [of womanhood], exposing the conditional nature of femininity and redefining acceptable limits to intimacy and pleasure.” I support this contention in *Altered States* and hold that the transgressive space of the séance—always disrupting the boundary between respectability and scandal—helped to make that process effective and possible. I would argue, however, that Victorians were not nearly so naïve as Owen (who was writing, at that time, without the benefit of the research that has now been conducted on the homoerotic and homosexual in the nineteenth century) seems to suggest when she remarks that “Although illicit sexual activity undoubtedly existed in the spiritualist world, the subterranean theme of sexuality which ran through much of spiritualist practice went largely unrecognized and unexamined by the majority of the faithful” (Owen 1989: 220). To suggest that they were unaware of the sexual aspect of the practices in which they were engaging is to suggest that these women were, indeed, in a trance—one from which they never awoke. Owen goes even further, acknowledging these striking erotics, but then simply suggesting that they had been purified by the faith. “Even those spiritualists who denounced any hint of debasement in mediums could accept a pronounced degree of eroticism in visitors from the other world However beautiful or alluring the entity, she was still considered to be ‘of psychic force.’ This put the spirit, and all spirit-sitter interaction, safely beyond the realm of flesh-and-blood sexuality without prohibiting intimacy or diminishing the pleasure of the exchange” (Owen 1989: 221).

The performed erotics between spirit and sitter would still have made their mark and, as we have seen, they were not simply confined to the spirits, but touched the mediums as well. I would suggest, instead, that the parallels to pornography and erotic literature were not inaccessible to the women and men in the séance, but instead that they were tolerable, and for some even agreeable, because of the ways in which the séance invited transgression of boundaries: between the spiritual and material, between the respectable and the erotic, between women. Indeed, while many critics who have discussed Spiritualism have essentially created a binary between the spiritual and sexual, suggesting that one does not occur within the landscape of the other, those studying homoerotic and homosexual relations between women in the nineteenth century (such as Vicinus and Marcus) have deconstructed that barrier as one erected in the twentieth century, along with the binary between heterosexual and homoerotic practices that does not apply to nineteenth-century thought. Understanding this provocative context is particularly important, as it makes Spiritualism a space in which those violations and the play surrounding notions of sex and sexuality might be immanent. Just as other boundaries

were actively tested and even collapsed in the séance, one could test the evolving understanding of sexuality, whether boldly, tentatively, experimentally, or otherwise. I would supplement Marcus's (2007: 202) notion that "networks" created "an aura of propriety and respectability" for women and suggest that there were entire *subcultures* too—not just individual people or couples who could supply safe space. Hundreds and hundreds of women and men in the world of Spiritualism saw fit to sanction significant reconfiguration of social codes, reconfigurations that not only made it possible for women to engage intimately with one another, but also brought that intimacy to the center of religious faith, reconfiguring both the faith and the notions of womanhood and sexuality imaginable there. We might call Spiritualism Victorian Britain's 'San Francisco'—a landscape in which people were not necessarily queer, but in which very 'queer' identities and relationships were tolerated and in which the honouring of queer relationships was written into the very sensibilities with which the community operated. There is no question that while San Francisco is a unique space, its 'transgressions' impact the mainstream with their presence, just as Spiritualism did for mainstream Victorian religion and sensibilities.

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PART 2

In Conversation



Man is a Spirit Here and Now

The Two Faces of Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism and the Creation of the Magical Occult Theosophical Spiritualist New Thought Amalgam

John Patrick Deveney

Introduction

By the mid-1890s, an amalgam of Spiritualism, occultism, Mesmerism, alchemy, magic, astrology, Theosophy, mind cure, and Eastern religions had arisen in the United States. This new *koiné* spread under the catch-all name of ‘New Thought’, but it was a form of New Thought that was practical and magical and far removed from the simple process of healing through quiet mental effort that most associate with the term.

This magical New Thought was the natural development of the fundamental proposition of Spiritualism and later Mesmerism that “Man is a spirit here and now as much as he will ever be after death.”

All adherents of the various elements which fed into the amalgam paid lip service to the idea, but many, especially early Spiritualists, restricted its application to man’s state *after death* when, freed of the trammels of the body, he would have all the powers displayed by the spirits of the séance room. Others were more perceptive and realised that, if man is a spirit *now*, there was no reason why he should await death to exercise his innate spiritual powers. Man, in other words, here and now should be capable of developing what was inherently his and of functioning during this life as the godling he was by nature. Still others took the idea to a more fundamental level, with even more profound magical consequences: not only is man a spirit, but he is Spirit itself—God—and, properly instructed and with suitable practices, he can manipulate and even create his environment at will—“Thoughts are things!” as Prentice Mulford proclaimed.

Man is a Spirit Here and Now

The literature of Spiritualism is replete with variations on the idea that “[m]an is a spirit while he is in the body, as truly as when he is out of it...” (“A Few Words” 1859; see also: Hopps 1874: 13; “Man is a Spirit” 1893: 568; Brown 1899: 12; Sargent 1869: 300; Clark 1863: 94; Hill 1919). Many, like Samuel Watson, the

editor of *The American Spiritual Magazine*, and the shady Henry T. Child, listed the proposition “That man is a spirit now and here” as the most fundamental tenet of Spiritualism (“The Spiritual Body” 1876: 360; Child 1871: 128; Child 1875: 254–255; “Eleventh Annual Meeting” 1877: 177). Others expressed the same idea by emphasising that man was by nature a spirit and did not *become* one only after death (Denton 1872: 131; see also: Waisbrooker 1869: 251–252; Murray 1899: 198) and that he was even now in some vague sense already in the spirit world (Peebles 1907: 213–214).

Some readily moved their focus from the spirits of the dead *out there* to the spirit *within* and concluded that there was no reason whatever, given the premises, why man had to pass through death to exercise his full spiritual powers. Captain Henry Harrison Brown (1840–1918), who was one of the most flamboyant of the New Thought hucksters—he was the author of *Dollars Want Me, the New Road to Opulence* (1903b),—appended “Man is a Spirit Now” as subtitle of his journal *Now* (1900–1928) and focused his message on its implications: “Man is spirit here and now, with all the possibilities of Divinity within him and he can consciously manifest these possibilities here and now” (Dresser 1919: 239). While Brown was a New Thought mage, however, he was also an old Spiritualist and Spiritualist lecturer and sought to place the sentiment in its correct context within Spiritualism:

All New Thought ideas, save those [practical techniques] that make man conscious that he IS spirit here and NOW, were born before the Hydeville raps.... They have been repeated by Spiritualists during all the years of its existence. In 1845, three years before the Hydeville raps, in the person and Revelations of Andrew Jackson Davis, was Modern Spiritualism really born. And to him we may honestly date New Thought's birth, though present ‘founders’ of systems of ‘Healing’ and teaching, and many teachers of various phases of New Thought, are not aware of the source from whence, by evolution, their ideas sprang....

Davis called his system ‘The Harmonial Philosophy’. The difference between this and New-Thought lies principally in the emphasis which is now placed upon the individual soul in its independence from all external control, its unity with the One, and its power to build its body into health and keep its environments to its desire through right thinking. But Davis, in teaching the Divinity of Man and Nature, virtually taught all this.... Davis started Philosophical Spiritualism and this is so near New Thought that I am not able to ‘Draw a line between the two where God has not’. The Affirmation of Phenomenal Spiritualism is: *I live as Spirit after the death of my body*. The Affirmation of New Thought is: *Man is*

Spirit, here and now. The Affirmation of Soul Culture [Brown's name for his own version of New Thought] is: *I live the Spiritual life, here and now.*¹

BROWN 1903A: 36–37

Andrew Jackson Davis

No history of Spiritualism has been written without a discussion of Andrew Jackson Davis's role in the movement, but he is a particularly unlikely figure to choose as the father of what most people thought of as Spiritualism. He came to accept the reality of the rappings only late, in 1850 (Davis 1867: 436),² only reluctantly made room for them in his philosophy, never accorded spirit communications much importance, carefully emphasised the superiority of his own clairvoyance in the 'Superior Condition' over mere mediumship, and abandoned organised Spiritualism altogether after the 1870s, more than thirty years before his death. For Davis, the appearance of departed souls marked a phase of progress for humanity (and for the spirits on the other side of the barrier of death) and served to help others see the continuity of the immortal spirit, but little more. He was a square peg in a round hole, and many of the more perspicacious Spiritualists, like Emma Hardinge Britten, questioned, with some justification, whether he was a Spiritualist at all (Davis 1885: 133–134; Peebles 1902; Cole 1903: 4; "Andrew Jackson Davis's Recantation" 1871: 3; "Recantation" 1871: 3; Dowd 1871: 2; Boyd 1871: 3).

Despite his failings as the progenitor of phenomenal Spiritualism, however, Davis was the proximate source for most English-speaking Spiritualists of the congeries of elements encompassed by the statement that man is a spirit here and now. In *The Principles of Nature, Her Divine Revelations, and A Voice to Mankind*, which appeared in the spring of 1847, he set out his description of the universe, God, man, life, and death, as witnessed by him in the Superior State: There is only one substance, the Univercoelum, a "boundless, undefinable, and unimaginable ocean of LIQUID FIRE!," the "LIVING SPIRIT." Both

1 The idea of Davis as the fountainhead was common at the time. "Every idea jostling about amongst the Theosophists, Christian Scientists, Mental Curists, New Thoughtists, and Spiritualists, he foreshadowed or settled long ago." *Banner of Light*, 23 March 1901, quoted in Delp 1965: 206.

2 Davis's journal, *The Univercoelum and Spiritual Philosopher*, only twice mentioned the spirits of the dead: once to opine that communication with "those who have entered upon the spiritual life" appeared possible, and once to query whether the Fox Sisters' rappings were caused by spirits or were a "magnetic epidemic" (Peabody 1848a: 177–178; Peabody 1848b: 155).

the “spiritual” and the “material” worlds are simply aspects of this “GREAT POSITIVE MIND,” the “Great Central Sun” of being. The Univercoelum functioned as a sort of self-actuated perpetual-motion machine in which both the cosmos and man’s spirit were spun off automatically in widening gyres. The spirit, which was a spark of the primordial Central Sun and “a part of this great body of the Divine Mind,” progressed both during its life on earth and then after death, through the circling celestial spheres of the afterlife until it reached the “sixth sphere,” which was “as near the great Positive Mind as spirits can ever locally or physically approach (“Esteemed Inquirer” 1849: 281–283). When all spirits reach the sixth sphere, the process begins again, on a higher key as it were, and spirits are once more spun off only to rise again through a still more exalted series of spheres in a perpetual series of expansions and contractions (Davis 1847: 463–464; Davis 1880: I, 121–122; Davis 1880: II, 253–254).

Everything, including man, in other words, was spirit (Davis 1868a: 153–154), and the science of man the spirit, in turn, was ‘Spiritualism’:

Spiritualism

This theory teaches that there is a natural supply for spiritual as well as for corporeal wants; that there is a connection between God and the soul, as between light and the eye, sound and the ear, beauty and the imagination It teaches that the World is not nearer to our bodies than God to the soul; ‘for in him we live and move, and have our being’.³

DAVIS 1848: 154

For Davis all this was a corollary of the fundamental proposition that man is a spirit imprisoned in the body and a particle or spark of the one Infinite Spirit (Davis 1885: 56–57, 134, 314; Davis 1872: 328; Davis 1869: 278).

The one thing lacking in Davis’s view of man as a spirit is any notion that man could unfold or develop his spiritual nature during life. The Superior State was, for Davis, the key to everything. It was far more exalted than mere physical clairvoyance or the magnetic trance, in which the entranced subject could see far off events or the interior of solid objects; it was vastly superior to mere mediumship, in which the medium acted as the mechanical link between the

3 The passage is quoted without acknowledgement from Unitarian Transcendentalist Theodore Parker’s *A Discourse of Matters Pertaining to Religion*, 1847: 202–203. See Davis 1868b: 308–310.

living and the spirits of the dead, a mere passive conductor, like an electrical wire, irrespective of intelligence, vision or morality; and it was even superior to the state of most disembodied spirits before they progressed through the spheres and approached nearer the Positive Mind (Davis 1885: 325). The Superior Condition was the realm of “true prophets and seers”—like Jackson himself—and required the full development of love, intelligence, moral sense, and interior understanding for its attainment, making it as rare in this life as the blossoming of the century plant (Davis 1910: III, 283, 289–293). While clairvoyance might be developed by fasting, magnetism, and the like, the Superior Condition required “constitutional harmony, combined with fine moral and intellectual sensibilities and tendencies” (Davis 1890: 42).

This harmony either existed from birth, as in Davis’s own case, or was developed only after the spirit left the body (Davis 1880: II, 272). The practical consequence of this was that it was only *after death* that ordinary man could enter the Superior Condition and exercise the full powers of his nature as a spirit (Davis 1865: 244; Davis 1871: 461–464; Davis 1880: II, 272). Davis’s disciple, R.P. Ambler, put his finger on the central tenet—and the great failing—of the Harmonial doctrine: “[T]he spirit [is] rendered fully clairvoyant by the process of death” (Ambler 1850: 84–85; R.H. Brown 1855). All that man the spirit could aspire to here and now was moral advancement (“Spiritual Materialism” 1854), social reform, and the lower forms of somnambulism available through the magnetic trance (Davis 1880: III, 231–250)—all mere preparatory steps in the purifying ascent back to the divine source.

Davis’s works abound in themes that later emerge in occultism and New Thought—the illusion of matter (Davis 1885: 42) and the spirit as the “creator of all external forms” (Davis 1847: 608), “self-healing energies” (Davis 1879: 40–44; see also Wallis and Wallis 1903: 245), and the idea of the “natural supply” provided men by the all-encompassing benevolent nature of which they form a part (Davis 1848: 154)—but without the possibility of personal spiritual development during life, Davis remained only a visionary and a reformer. He was in no sense a guru; he sold no lessons of secrets and had no disciples whom he initiated into the deeper mysteries of the universe. It was he who, with his then-wife Mary Fenn, led the fight against the dangers of the new “Magical Spiritualism” in the mid-1870s (A. Davis 1885: 134; M. Davis 1875)⁴—a movement that arose directly from the practical implications of his own ideas.

4 In *Beyond the Valley* (1885): 134, Davis wrote, “I do not believe in the identity of modern Spiritualism and ancient magic.”

Proto-Spiritualists

In later years, when Davis had carved out a niche for himself as the visionary of the innate, self-induced trance of the unique Superior Condition, he carefully avoided all mention of his earliest work, *Lectures on Clairmativeness: Or, Human Magnetism* (1845). The reason, undoubtedly, was that the book not only showed him to be fairly Christian in his outlook at the time but also revealed his familiarity with something suspiciously like the Superior Condition, induced, not by himself, as he always claimed, but by mere 'Animal Magnetism' (Smith 1845: 33–36).⁵ In this context, Davis was simply the emergence in the English-speaking world of a long line of continental Spiritualists, transcendent magnetists, pneumatologists, romantic Mesmerists, and the like, who were preoccupied with the 'night-side' of nature, the shadowy residue of reality that escaped the sharp spotlights of focused consciousness and the Enlightenment. Central to these concerns was the unexplored *something* within man which existed independently of the material body, possessed certain marvellous powers, especially clairvoyance, could act at a distance without a material intermediary, and could survive death. These romantic Mesmerists included Justinus Kerner, Johann Heinrich Jung-Stilling, Christian Gottfried Nees von Esenbeck, Alphonse Cahagnet, Jules Dupotet, Catherine Crowe, and many others, whose works run like an undercurrent through the early years of Spiritualism (on the German "pneumatologists," see Kiesewetter 1895, I: 326–414).

Like Davis—whose work was translated into German through the influence of von Esenbeck, mostly in the *Bibliothek des Spiritualismus für Deutschland* (see Davis 1868b: 465–466, 482; Kiesewetter 1895, I: 631–632)—most of these made room in their ruminations for the possibility of communication with the dead, but the possibility of that communication was of decidedly secondary importance, a subset, rather than the focus, of what man the spirit was capable of. By the time the Fox Sisters first communicated with the spirits of the dead, it was a commonplace among these romantic Mesmerists that man was a spirit now and that man's spirit could function independently of his body, in trance and in clairvoyance.

The eponymous father of this, of course, was Franz Anton Mesmer, though not the Mesmer of the physical magnetic fluid, who, as one of his disciples noted, had no need for "Spiritualism to explain the phenomena of somnambulism" (Deleuze 1813: 239). It was the flamboyant later Mesmerists who

5 Davis (1867: 306) always stressed that he first permanently reached the Superior State on November 28, 1845, after the publication of *Clairmativeness*, but the explanation is too contrived to be convincing.

transformed his ideas into magic by sublimating the all-pervasive physical fluid into a 'spiritual', 'psycho-fluidist', 'mental' or psychological substance controllable by the will, prayer, and imagination, and who focused their study on the marvellous powers and abilities displayed by the liberated spirits of entranced subjects. Many of these were not 'Spiritualists' at all in the sense of believing in the reality of some transcendently spiritual realm distinct from the material world, but they all held that there was something unexamined within man that animated his body and that, once freed from the body's prison, was capable of independent existence and possessed of wondrous latent powers. For most this entity was the spirit (see for example: Méheust 1999: I; Podmore 1909: 63–86, 192–204).

The French Mesmerists enriched this mixture by incorporating whole all the techniques of the Western magical tradition (drugs, magic mirrors, ritual chants, etc.) to enable their entranced *lucides* to enter the 'ecstatic' state and to direct and explain their visions of the world the freed spirit entered (Dupotet 1977; Cahagnet 1858a). Alphonse Cahagnet's subject Bruno, for example, rapturously proclaimed while entranced that: "A spirit is air...but it can assume the form it desires, [carry] heavy burdens. In the state I am in now, I am a spirit like them; I am out of my body, I perceive it seated on the chair; I walk about in my room without being seen or felt by you whom I touch" (Cahagnet 1855: 19).⁶

The proximate source for the influence of these Mesmerists on English-speaking audiences was Catherine Crowe (1800–1876). In 1845, she published her translation of Justinus Kerner's *The Seeress of Prevorst* (Kerner 1845) and followed this up in 1848 with her own *The Night-Side of Nature, Or, Ghosts and Ghost Seers*, which appeared before the Fox Sisters had heard their first rap. The book gave space to ghosts but was far more fundamentally concerned with dreams, trance, wraiths, doubles, apparitions, astral projections, and the will, and above all with 'the Dweller in the Temple', the spirit within man and its inherent powers and capabilities. "Once admitted that the body is but the temporary dwelling of an immaterial spirit, the machine through which, and by which, in its normal states, the spirit alone can manifest itself, I can not see any great difficulty in conceiving that, in certain conditions of that body, their relations may be modified, and that the spirit may perceive, by its own inherent quality, without the aid of its material vehicle..." (Crowe 1850: 19–29).

The surest sign of the reality of this spirit's independence from the body for these romantic Mesmerists was astral travel, which became one of the hallmarks of occultism, Theosophy, and magical New Thought as the century

6 See also Cahagnet 1855: 204 ("man is a spirit as to his interior," a phrase borrowed from Swedenborg).

progressed, though none of the Mesmerists managed personally to accomplish the feat or any of the other wonders achieved by their magnetised subjects. Cahagnet was typical: "Cahagnet confesses that he sees nothing by himself and receives no direct revelations from the spirits. He is neither a seer, a prophet, a somnambule or an illuminé. He sees only by the eyes of the *lucides*...." (Figuier 1861: IV, 347; see also Sandby 1850: 415). This would change as the century progressed.

The Two Spiritualisms

By 1850, three years after Davis's *The Principles of Nature: Her Divine Revelations* and two years after the first communication of the spirits of the dead with the Fox Sisters, the stage was set for a controversy, which lasted until the end of the century, over the relative roles and powers of the spirits of the dead and the spirits of still-embodied men. Everyone interested in the matter admitted that after death the spirits, or at least the more progressed among them, had marvellous powers. They could clairvoyantly see the insides of bodies and other solid objects, invisibly move tambourines and speaking trumpets in the air, find treasure, predict the future, travel at will about the earth and the spirit world, and so on. Most of those interested in such things also agreed that the spirits of still-embodied men, in magnetic trance or sleep or dreams or in their fully developed state, could do the same things, most notably seeing clairvoyantly and travelling outside the body. Emma Hardinge Britten expressed this latter position succinctly: "There are no phenomena produced by disembodied spirits, which may not be effected by the still embodied human spirit, provided a correct knowledge of these powers is directed by a strong and powerful will" (Britten 1876: 137; see also Peebles 1878: 1–2; Hardinge 1860: 2). The idea became a commonplace in later Spiritualism and occultism and was a foundation stone of the more magical forms of New Thought (Blavatsky 1877: II, 593–594; Blavatsky 1878: 4).⁷

The question posed was, how to relate the powers of the two sorts of spirits, and, especially for normative Spiritualism, how to relate the two in such a way as to preserve the importance of the visits of the spirits of the dead lest, as

7 In H.P. Blavatsky's letter to W.H. Burr, November 19, 1877, she writes, "But I believe that the astral souls (erroneously called spirits) within a living body have the same powers or faculties as those who have forced themselves from their earthly presence" (Gomes 1990: 77–82).

many Spiritualists feared, “modern Spiritualism...dribble away into mere psychology” (Scrutator, quoted in George Wyld 1880: 72). The principal stumbling blocks for normative Spiritualists were the astral appearances of the spirits of living persons and the gradual realisation that the innate powers of the embodied spirit could be consciously developed and exercised before death.

The 1850s saw the emergence of a variety of what were called ‘no-spirit’ theories of the phenomena of Spiritualism, theories that argued that there really was no justification for positing the presence of the spirits of the dead at séances since everything that occurred was easily explainable by the innate powers of still-embodied spirits. In America, John Bovee Dods (Dods 1854: 100–101; see also Dods 1850; Courtney 1854) and in Britain, John William Jackson, the author of *Ecstasies of Genius* (1859) led the way by arguing that “in virtue of our being spirits, we possess the powers manifested by spirits” at séances, and there is no reason whatever to posit the action of the spirits of the dead to explain the phenomena of Spiritualism (Jackson, quoted in Sargent 1869: 220–238; see also “The Philosophical Difficulty” 1868: 225–231). Convinced Spiritualists, like Epes Sargent and Allen Putnam, tried to turn the argument on its head to make it an argument for the role of the spirits of the dead: why shouldn’t they have these wonderful powers, since we have them during life? (Sargent 1869: 220–238; Putnam 1853: 39–40; Putnam 1858: 1).

The conflict over the powers of the spirits of the living and the spirits of the dead raged throughout the 1850s, with both sides fully conscious of the stakes and serious consequences of the debate. Baron Dupotet’s *Journal du Magnétisme*, for example, warned in 1856: “If magnetism does not make of Spiritualism a weapon which will assure its victory, Spiritualism might well become a weapon which will kill it” (D’Ormoy 1856: 88). The intuition was prescient.

Most Spiritualists grudgingly came to admit that at least *some* of the phenomena attributed to the spirits of dead were in fact caused by living men, or their ‘doubles’ (see for example: Harrison 1879: I, 144–180, 201–220; Coleman 1893a: 772–773; Coleman 1893b: 804–805; Tuttle 1864: II, 61–62). This frank admission, however, soon came to be overlaid with cautions in an effort to preserve a role for the dead. It became the acceptable Spiritualist doctrine that “outside spirits aid in the manifestation of the medium’s ‘double’, assisting it in the production of the phenomena” (Coleman 1881: 2).⁸ Many Spiritualists who had decided proclivities for magic and occultism continued to insist on the necessity of the presence of spirits of the dead for the production of occult

8 See also Brown 1897: 14–15: “The point of special interest to the Spiritualist in these [out of the body] experiences is, that they were all managed by a spirit.”

phenomena. Cahagnet (1858b: III, 198–202), for example, criticised the temerity of Eliphas Lévi in dispensing with the spirits of the dead in his magical operations and H.P. Blavatsky (1881: 194–195) laughed at William Stainton Moses's timorousness (M.A. [Oxon] 1881) in failing to dispense with them altogether.

In accepting a role for the spirits and powers of embodied men, however, Spiritualism had swallowed the camel only to strain at the gnat. The nose of the camel under the tent was the activity of man's spirit while he was still alive—especially astral travel—and that in turn became the entry wedge for the introduction of occultism and magical New Thought into Spiritualism. The solution for many Spiritualists lay in what came to be called the 'Higher Spiritualism' (see for example Peebles 1903: 97; M.A. [Oxon] 1881: 19)⁹ or simply 'spiritualism'—the cultivation of the innate powers of man's spirit—in contradistinction to mere 'Spiritism'¹⁰—the phenomena and messages produced by the spirits of the dead in séances. Once they admitted the premise of the 'Higher Spiritualism' that man's spirit here and now in some way possessed all of the powers that disembodied spirits enjoyed, Spiritualists had no sound theoretical basis for distinguishing the two or giving precedence to the spirits of the dead. It was a slippery slope, down which Spiritualism proceeded to slide, starting in the 1870s and ending in the late 1890s when the terms Higher Spiritualism (and Spiritualism as distinguished from Spiritism) became simply other names for occultism or the metaphysical or New Thought movement (see for example Kenilworth 1910: 300; Bjerregaard 1892: 317–319; Peebles 1901a: 386–397).

Moses Hull, for example, an old Spiritualist lecturer and radical who turned to occultism and New Thought in his later years, emphasised the intimate connection between Spiritualism and the conscious, active development of man's spiritual (and divine) nature:

The word Spiritualist I think is wrongly applied to a set of phenomenalists whose knowledge of Spiritual things is limited to what they have

9 As M.A. (Oxon.) [William Stainton Moses] described it: "When I speak of Spiritualism I have in my mind that higher development of it which is concerned with the training of the soul. ...It is of this Higher Spiritualism that I venture to come forward as a very humble exponent." (19).

10 In the American sense of believers in the spirits' phenomena as contrasted with advocates that man himself was a spirit here and now. The term should not be confused with the Allan Kardec's 'Spiritisme', which never found any great acceptance in England or the United States.

gained by witnessing certain physical phenomena; and who seem to have no desire for any other kind of spiritual culture than what they imagine they obtain in a table-tipping or materializing séance. Such, in my estimation, are no Spiritualists at all; at best they are only *Spiritists*. That is, they believe in spirits—that they exist and that under proper circumstances they can give sensuous evidence of their existence.

On the other hand, a *Spiritualist* does not reject external or objective evidence of spirit existence, but believes himself to be a spirit here and now and...puts in his time in an effort to grow a spirituality which even here brings him *in rapport* with the world of spirit, the world of thought, the world of Wisdom.

* * *

[T]he phenomena are not Spiritualism or any part of Spiritualism; they are only the steps leading to Spiritualism.

* * *

That what we need to learn, above all things, in Spiritualism is that we are here and now spirits.

HULL 1890: 35

By the end of the century, the distinction between Spiritism and Spiritualism, with the latter a synonym for the development during life of the man's innate powers as a spirit, had become accepted by all except the most doctrinaire phenomenal Spiritualists, and the activities of the séance room had come to be seen as 'a millstone' retarding the progress of man's development (see for example Wright 1903: 284–285; Spence 1898).

Occultism

A major change was necessary to transform the sterile and secondhand revelations of the Mesmerists into the practical pursuit here and now of the development of the innate powers of man's spirit, and that transformation came in the guise of occultism. An interest in the occult sciences had existed throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, but it was without exception bookish and antiquarian, a pursuit of the leisured, classically educated classes curious about the theoretical possibilities of ritual magic, astrology, and the like.

Practically no one held out the possibility of actually *doing* anything with the secret knowledge purveyed or offered instructions in putting the lessons into practice (Deveney 2008). All of this changed in the mid-1870s with the emergence of 'occultism'—the study of man's nature as a spirit and of the practical means to develop his innate powers. The term 'occultism' itself was a neologism of the 1840s that was popularised by Eliphas Levi (de Radonvilliers 1845: 441; Ragon 1853: 488; the German cognate appeared at about the same time), but unlike its immediate antiquarian predecessors, it was primarily practical, designed to convince man of the possibility of personally achieving the goals it described.

This form of occultism, or 'Magical Spiritualism', as it was called by its enemies, was the product of three people: Paschal Beverly Randolph (1825–1875), Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), and Emma Hardinge Britten (1823–1899). All three started out in the bosom of Spiritualism and all taught a philosophy whose roots went back to Andrew Jackson Davis's vision of the all-pervading "astral ocean of invisible fire" of which man's spirit is a spark. Unlike Davis, however, all three supplemented the theory with occult practice devoted to joining, during this life, man's immortal spirit with his mortal, individualised soul to form "a perfected, self-conscious, individualized entity,...a bright, luminous emanation of the divine mind" (Britten 1876: 22) that was capable in this life of exercising the full powers of the spirit and after death of voyaging as a god or godling on its way back to the Central Sun of being. As Blavatsky said in 1875, "Occultism without practice will ever be like the statue of Pygmalion, and no one can animate it without infusing into it a spark of the Sacred Divine Fire" (Blavatsky 1875; for the reliance of all three on A.J. Davis, see Deveney 1995).

Randolph, the most openly practical of the mages, advocated the use of drugs, magic mirrors, and, above all, sexual magic as the techniques to the unfolding of man's innate powers (Deveney 1995; Deveney 2005), and both Blavatsky in *Isis Unveiled* (Deveney 1997; Deveney 2003) and Britten in *Art Magic* (Britten 1877) expatiated more generally on practical societies used techniques and their results. Even Emma Hardinge Britten, as Marc Demarest has discovered, organized practical occult groups in Australia in 1878 and in San Francisco in 1880 "for the study of Spiritual Science and the unfoldment of Medium Power and Spiritual Gifts" (Britten 1891; Demarest 2010). The work of all three paved the way for the magical New Thought amalgam (Godwin et al. 1995). All of them, even Blavatsky in her early days before she rejected the possibility of practical individual advancement in this life, organised groups in which they inculcated their ideas and practiced their techniques.¹¹

11 Randolph's practice was taken up by the H.B. of L. (Godwin et al. 1995). The H.B. of L. had a wide influence on the New Thought amalgam, both through its membership and by its ideas.

This practical occultism emerged from Spiritualism and completely transformed it by shifting the focus from the spirits out there to the spirit within and to the practical means of realising here and now the innate powers of that spirit. It vastly enriched the personae of the spiritual universe to include elementaries, elementals, kobolds, "Mundane, Submundane and Super Mundane" spirits (Britten 1876), and others, in addition to the spirits of dead humans, and it enlarged spiritual geography far beyond the old concentric spheres of post-mortem development. It rejected the radically democratic and egalitarian underpinnings of early Spiritualism, for which mediums were in no sense special or more holy or more developed (see for example, Clark 1863: 213; Morse 1888: 82–84), by allowing for the possibility of spiritual professionals (gurus, adepts, mahatmas, etc.) with special, reserved, secret knowledge and powers. And it also rejected the fundamental Spiritualist notion of progress, which assumed that the present, exemplified by modern American Spiritualism and the industrialised West, was by definition more advanced than the 'benighted' past, exemplified by the gibberish of the ancient wisdom preserved by 'rat-eating Chinamen' and 'dirty' 'polygamous, polyandria-indulging, child marrying Indians' in the undeveloped East (Peebles 1899: 1).

After the occult revolution, Spiritualism began slowly to accept the existence of elites who possessed secret knowledge (always ancient and often from the Mystic East) by which men could develop their innate psychic and spiritual powers here and now. The way lay open to the peddling of secrets as Spiritualists began to realise that their real products were not repetitious messages of comfort but secret wisdom and practical development. 'Unfoldment' of man's innate powers became the hallmark of the new amalgam,¹² and every New Thought, occult, and Spiritualist journal carried advertisements by swamis (bogus and authentic), masters, secret societies, academies, schools, and teachers for the mail-order 'lessons' offered for a fee by those favored ones with a connection to some source of secret wisdom in the East or among secret ancient brotherhoods on both sides of the grave.

The impact of occultism on Spiritualism (and later, New Thought) was immediate and powerful. Nearly every New Thought leader in the United States before World War I had been a member of the Theosophical Society. Randolph's influence spread into the new movement through the Hermetic

12 See for example the subtitles of *The Temple*, "Devoted to the Fuller Unfoldment of the Divinity of Humanity," of *New Thought* (Pittsburgh), "Devoted to the Science of Natural Healing and Higher Mental Unfoldment," of *The New Way* (Washington, D.C.), "Devoted to the Unfoldment of the Higher Life," and of *Growth* (Pasadena), "An Exponent of the Higher Principles of Physical, Mental and Spiritual Unfoldment."

Brotherhood of Luxor and especially through his most prominent disciple, Freeman Benjamin Dowd, who deliberately softened and Christianised Randolph's sexual magic and became in the process the unheralded father of much of New Thought. It was Dowd who provided Charles Fillmore, the founder with his wife of the Unity School of Christianity, with Randolph's image of the 'winged globe'—the emblem of the conscious, individualised union of soul and spirit—with which Fillmore graced the covers of *Unity* and others of his magazines (Fillmore 1936: 66; Teener 1939: 43). Dowd also wrote for Anna Kimball's and George Chainey's *The Gnostic* (where his co-workers were Malinda E. Cramer, W.J. Colville and, probably, Ida C. Craddock), Andrew Swarts' *Mind Cure and Science of Life*, Paul Tyner's *The Temple*, and Malinda Cramer's *Harmony*.

Another of the influential transitional mages was George Wyld (1821–1906), who was the first to attempt to lay out the full consequences of the man-is-a-spirit-now side of Spiritualism and Mesmerism. Wyld was an English homeopathic physician who had become an ardent Mesmerist while still in his teens, fascinated with the stories of projection of the double and clairvoyance, and then took up Spiritualism in the mid-1850s. In the late 1870s he became one of the first British Theosophists (Gomes 2000) and then president of the British Theosophical Society, attracted by the fact that H.P. Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled* (1878) was "an almost inexhaustible mine of facts and thoughts illustrating the statement that man is a spirit, and as such has, if worthy, dominion over matter" (Wyld 1877).¹³ He resigned from the Theosophical Society in 1882 over Blavatsky's blatant opposition to Christianity (Price 1987; Wyld 1903: 71–74) but continued until the end of his life to expound on the possibilities of man the spirit.

In Wyld's view, the spirits of the dead were distinctly marginal in importance, since there was nothing they could do that embodied men were not capable of:

Briefly stated my theory is this. Man is a spirit; therefore, if the phenomena we call Spiritual are produced by spirits, there is no reason why the operating spirits should not be those of the living beings present.

* * *

13 On Wyld's notion of "theosophy" as the concentrated wisdom of the ages concerning man's reality as a "spark of the Spirit of God," see "La Clef de la théosophie selon le docteur G. Wyld," which ran in *Revue Spirite* from August to December 1880.

The essence of true Spiritualism is to me the conviction that *I am a spirit*, a part of the Great Central Spirit, and, as such, possess the possibility of spiritual powers here, and the inheritance of a spiritual life hereafter.... [B]ut I maintain that the spirits of the living also appear and disappear as doubles, and that other spiritual phenomena can also be produced by our own spirits.

I repeat—Man is a Spirit, and as such possesses the same powers as the spirits of the departed. Farther, I maintain that when he is entranced, he is, in proportion to the depth of his entrancement, more or less a *departed spirit*.

When a clairvoyante travels, say five thousand miles in a few minutes, and reveals to us the secrets of those at that distance, that clairvoyante is a departed spirit.

Again, if chairs and tables are moved by departed spirits, so also can chairs and tables be moved by the spirit-force of the adept. If a foreign spirit can materialise itself, so also can the adept bring before us animal and human forms; and if the ghost of the departed now and again reappear, so also does the double of the living.

WYLD 1894: 43, 65; SEE ALSO WYLD 1877: 283–286

The urgency of Wyld's message about the inherent possibilities of man the spirit even during life came from his early experimentation with drugs like chloroform and nitrous oxide, which allowed him to experience himself separated from his body (Wyld 1880: 118–124, 120; see also Wyld 1886: 6). This experience, and others of a similar purport, Wyld easily equated with the induced ecstasy and trance produced by the Mesmerists the projection of the soul achieved by "Hindu Ascetics" through years of asceticism and contemplation, and the miracles of the Christian saints. In each case, the various techniques used all produced "the temporary death of the body, and thus the temporary freeing of the soul" (Wyld 1880: 122).¹⁴

One of the relevant powers of the embodied spirit for Wyld (1880: 12, 27, 30, 53) was healing,¹⁵ but it was his assertion that man was a spirit now, "an atom or spark of the spirit of God" that could act by intention directly on the mind

¹⁴ Wyld's ideas on the importance of drugs in man's development found favor with at least some Theosophists of the time. C. C. Massey (1881) in reviewing Wyld's *Theosophy* concluded that they coincided with the ideas of the "brightest and noblest of Aryan psychologists."

¹⁵ After the emergence of Mind Cure and New Thought, Wyld was very aware of the inherent connection between his own ideas and those of the new movements (see Wyld 1899;

of another, that made Wyld's work attractive to Warren Felt Evans, the first systematic organiser of Mind Cure and New Thought in the United States (Evans 1885: 26, 77, 84).

More important for later developments of New Thought was Wyld's insistence on the still more mysterious power of man the spirit to *create* the world outside itself—"Thus in the Spirit world is Berkeley true." "The mind of man being made in the image of God can likewise create by the exercise of thought, will, and imagination, or imagination" (Wyld 1881b: 277). This astonishing statement is indistinguishable from hundreds of similar claims that formed the staples of the later New Thought theory: thoughts are things, and the body and the material world are projections of the embodied spirit. "The spiritual man can create or materialize those forms by the mere force of his spiritual nature. The whole universe is only the materialized thoughts of the Divine Mind" (Wyld 1880: 54).

New Thought

New Thought is usually described as the wave of idealistic 'positive thinking', comfort, uplift, and mental healing that swept the United States and, to a lesser extent, England, Germany, and France, from the 1880s on. It was the product of the elaboration by Phineas Parkhurst Quimby, Warren Felt Evans, Mary Baker Eddy, and their students, especially Malinda E. Cramer, Nona Brookes, Emma Curtis Hopkins, and Charles and Myrtle Fillmore, of the basic intuition that mind can affect the body and the exterior world. All that is true in a sense, but New Thought was much more. It has been a victim of its historians and organisations who have chosen to omit from their accounts, or to sanitise and minimise, the more interesting (though seamier) underside of the movement. But it was this underside, a world of magic and occultism, of con men, crooks, cranks, and sexual mages, of obscure journals and popular magazines with vast circulations, of bogus swamis, secret societies, hypnotism, talismans, distant healing, magic, alchemy, and rituals, that was predominant (at least in the popular mind) and was generally identified as New Thought before the Second World War. It was a vast popular movement, the product of the transition of New Thought away from the intellectual constraints of the American northeast and the control of a Brahmin class of leaders intent on downplaying

Wyld 1880). He went on in his old age to become one of the founders of the Psycho-Therapeutic Society of London, which focused on the practical healing aspects of magnetism, spiritualism, Christian Science, and Mind Cure (Thomson 2006: 26–31).

the natural conclusions of their own creation, to the West, the natural home of this amalgam of New Thought, Spiritualism, magic, occultism, Theosophy, palmistry, astrology, and creative sexual practice.

The 'East Coast' variety of New Thought, originally known as 'Boston Metaphysics' (see for example Mulford 1886: 242), was earnest, "affective" (Albanese 2007: 358), filled with moral uplift and social concern, sincere, and mild, and peopled by men who disproportionately prefixed "Dr." or "Prof." to their names on the articles they wrote for magazines like *The Arena*, *The New Thought* (Melrose, Massachusetts), *The Metaphysical Magazine*, and *Mind*, and by college-educated women who came from 'good families' of the northeast. This sort of New Thought traced its roots to New England Transcendentalism, presented itself as Christian, focused on the discovery that the mind could heal, both mentally and physically, and rode on the wave of social concern and universal reform that been almost synonymous with Spiritualism until the late 1870s.

These were the New Thought proponents who wrote the histories. This conservative approach was led by Horatio Willis Dresser, whose father, Julius, had been healed by Quimby in 1860. He was a graduate of Harvard College, where he had studied with William James, and he wrote more than a dozen books railing against the dangers of subjective idealism, questioning belief in the "hidden wisdom" of the Orient (Dresser 1905: 113), and warning of the pitfalls of "deviations into occultism" (Dresser 1900: 126) and of confusing man's spirit with the intractable world of reality: "To allege that 'thoughts are forces', or 'vibrations', or to say, with Prentice Mulford, that 'thoughts are things', is to confuse the inner life with the natural world" (Dresser 1906: 168). Despite the efforts of Dresser and others (Wood 1904b: 94–95; Dresser 1917: 199, 251) to set limits to the powers of man the spirit now "in which the realities of finite life" were acknowledged (Dresser 1910: 122), and to preserve some sort of transcendence for God (Dresser 1903: 162, 408–411, 434; see also Dresser 1908; Dresser 1921: 338), the cautions were ignored. The elites were reduced to sniffing that the unlimited affirmation of man the spirit was commercial, vulgar, and popular ("Fakes" 1907: 140–141; Hall 1901)—as indeed it was.

In a strictly historical sense these purists were simply wrong in trying to limit New Thought to mind cure and the transcendent Christian God. There never was a 'pure' mental healing movement in the United States. From its inception, New Thought already contained at its core many of the traditional panoply of elements that made up Mesmerism, Spiritualism, and occultism. Warren Felt Evans, for example, the first man to attempt to impose some order on New Thought, in his influential *The Primitive Mind-Cure* (1885), made the expected references to Bishop Berkeley, Emerson, Schelling, Fichte,

et al.—the traditional forerunners favored by the east coast elites—but then proceeded to buttress his argument with the Kabala, Swedenborg, the Hermetics and the Pimander, Pythagoras, Eliphas Lévi, George Wyld, S.B. Brittan,¹⁶ Bulwer Lytton, and indeed the entire spiritual and occult tradition of East and West. The ultimate goal of the realisation of the mind and its powers, Evans concluded, was the liberation of mind from the ‘prison of the senses’—a sentiment that would have been congenial to Catherine Crowe and the romantic Mesmerists of an earlier era, and to the proponents of the Higher Spiritualism of every age.

New Thought did not slide unconsciously into a morass of occultism and magic, driven by vulgar desires and misunderstanding; it had the seeds of its occult transformation from the very beginning.

While the mental-healing and socially conscious advocates of New Thought focused on demonstrating their connection with Emerson and German Idealism, proponents of the second sort of New Thought, the ‘West Coast’ variety, turned its attention to the practical effects and permutations of the discovery that man is a spirit here and now and that mind affected and controlled—and indeed created—reality; from here they moved naturally and flamboyantly to magic, occultism, secret societies, and commercialism, incorporating in the process whatever might be grist for their mills. Though there were women like Grace M. Brown, Helen Van-Anderson, Helen Wilmans, Sarah Stanley Grimké, Nancy McKay Gordon, and Eleanor Kirk who were active in this side of the movement, it was primarily the work of men who sought power rather than comfort, unfoldment of inner forces rather than healing, mystery rather than rational calm, and above all money. These New Thought mages included men like William Walker Atkinson, Sydney B. Flower, Sidney A. Weltmer, J.C.F. Grumbine, Ernest Loomis, News E. Wood, Thomas Jasper Betiero, Hiram E. Butler, W.J. Colville, F.B. Dowd, Otto Hanish, A.J. McIvor-Tyndall, Paul Tyner, Reuben Swinburne Clymer, Parzival Braun, and J.C. Street, men who, if they knew of the disapproval of their betters, were unmoved by the criticism and spread *their* magical version of New Thought through a bewildering variety of institutes and secret societies, and through thousands of ‘lessons’ and hundreds of magazines that far outstripped their more restrained and intellectual competitors.

16 Brittan was one of A.J. Davis's original disciples, and at one point used “A Dweller in the Temple” (Catherine Crowe's phrase for man the spirit) as his pseudonym in publishing *The Philosophy of Modern Miracles, or the Relations of Spiritual Causes and Physical Effects* (1850).

This sort of New Thought is best understood by looking at the ubiquitous phrase ‘thoughts are things’. For some who employed this phrase, the words were merely a motto, or a hopeful affirmation, amounting to no more than a recognition that focused attention produced results, or that a person’s mental state called forth corresponding responses from others and the world around (Del Mar 1918). For the most radical among New Thought advocates, there was only one divine Spirit, and when the New Thought practitioner realised the truth of that simple fact, thoughts were in actuality things and the outside world was simply the projection of the individual’s thoughts. The sentiment that ‘thoughts are things’ is ubiquitous in New Thought and its magical outgrowths, expatiated upon by everyone from Ella Wheeler Wilcox to William Walker Atkinson (1902: 16; 1909), Florian Husband (1901), E.D. Babbitt (1900), Franz Hartmann (1890: 191), Eliza Barton Lyman (1900: 27), and many, many others (for example, “Your Thoughts Are Things” 1941), including even the Theosophist Annie Besant (1964). The concept was first brought to prominence by Prentice Mulford who, while he stands outside the received genealogy of New Thought, was instrumental in turning the movement from simple mental healing to magic.

Prentice Mulford (1834–1891) was an old Spiritualist who, after an unhappy love affair and an extended period of seclusion as a hermit in a New Jersey swamp, emerged in 1886 to publish *The White Cross Library*, later published in bound volumes as *Your Forces and How to Use Them* from 1888 to 1892 (Mulford 1888a). His first essay, “You Travel When You Sleep” (1888b), puts Mulford squarely in the man-is-a-spirit line of thinkers: “You travel when your body is in the state called sleep. The real ‘you’ is not your body; it is an unseen organization, your spirit. ...Your spirit (your real self) uses your body as the carpenter does his hammer or any tool to work with.” Sleep, like the Mesmeric trance, allowed a person to realise his spirit separate from his body, and the same experience could be consciously achieved and controlled by techniques, like concentration and ‘drawing into one’s self’, and by certain drugs, like opium and hashish. With practice and continued aspiration, a person can become “an inhabitant of the two worlds, the physical one about [him], and that grade or stratum of the spiritual where [he] naturally belonged” (Mulford 1888b: 12–13; Mulford 1888e 1–16). Man’s spirit, in other words, is part of the Infinite Spirit, with all of the powers, at least potentially, of God (Mulford 1888c: 1, 8).

The spirit, in turn, is accessible through thoughts (Mulford 1888b: 5). When the mind is distracted during the day, it exhausts itself following after each passing distraction, but when it “sits for power,” quietly collecting its scattered forces, there is an “in-drawing” or “drawing into self” as the spirit returns to its divine center. There, the united spirit gains “force” (Mulford 1888d),

and, when it focuses that force on any clearly visualised idea or desire, it creates the result. “[W]hatso you imagine in your mind is a spiritual reality. That is, what you imagine, you are actually in spirit and by spirit doing. Every plan or invention clearly seen in thought is of thought-substance, as real a thing as the wood, stone, iron, or other substance in which afterward it may be embodied and made visible to the body’s eye, and made to work results on the physical stratum of life” (Mulford 1888b: 4–5, 10).

The thoughts of the spirit, in other words, really are things, and the result is indistinguishable from magic:

There is no limit to the power of the thought current you can attract to you nor limit to the things that can be done through the individual by it. In the future some people will draw so much of the higher quality of thought to them, that by it they will accomplish what some would call miracles. In this capacity of the human mind for drawing a thought current ever increasing in fineness of quality and power lies the secret of what has been called ‘magic’.

MULFORD 1888F; MULFORD 1888G

Evelyn Underhill, later well known for her studies of mysticism and her membership in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, correctly connected all of this with its magical underpinnings: the proponents of New Thought “have some of the pure gold of the Magi concealed amongst the strange trappings of their faith” (Underhill 1907: 180; see also Underhill 1930: 312–313).

Magical New Thought was simply the re-emergence of the notion that man is a spirit now, with the added recognition that his spirit was, as it was for A.J. Davis, identical with the one universal Spirit of the universe. “There is no separation between your soul and the soul of the universe. You are one with that soul, all you have is from that soul. In that soul you live and move and have your being. You are one with the great Universal Soul. ...In the deepest sense you are the great universal soul” (Patterson 1904: 7; see also Sheldon 1916: 153–159). “The entire object of metaphysical study, may be summed up in the REALIZATION of yourself as the Omnipotent creator of the Universe, or, in other words, God” (“Personal Problem Department” 1907: 36–37).

Conclusion

By the late 1880s, all of the individual spiritual movements of the second half of the nineteenth century were beginning to merge into an amalgam of the

constituent elements, whose adherents, with varying emphases, increasingly were coming to share a belief in the practical ‘unfoldment’ of man’s innate powers as a spirit, the underlying unity of mind with Mind/Spirit, and the existence of a past age of high wisdom whose remnants were preserved by adepts in the mysterious East. The professionals of the amalgam also shared a business model based on the sale of lessons that guided the aspirant to the full exercise of their spiritual powers through the stages of the societies and academies run by New Thought mages. In the intermingling, it was becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish among the elements. The Reverend Solon Lauer, for example, at the first (1899) convention of the International Metaphysical League, the predecessor of the International New Thought Alliance, proclaimed that there were “no very distinct lines of demarcation” among Spiritualism, Theosophy, and Christian Science, and advised “a broad and generous interpretation” to remove most of the “points of seeming antagonism” (International Metaphysical League 1899: 55; see also Dresser 1919: 302–303). While many advocates of the individual ‘isms’ rejected the advice and fought a rearguard action to preserve the priority and superiority of *their* element over the others’ (for the mentalist perspective, see Segno 1902: 20 on mentalism; for the Spiritualist view, see Kates 1903: 4; Tuttle 1904a: 4; Severance 1900: 5; Richmond 1900: 5; Tuttle 1904b: 21, among others), it was a *tertium quid*, the amalgam of them all, which thrived and spread under the catchall name of New Thought.

Phenomenal Spiritualism was in precipitous decline by the end of the nineteenth century and was acutely aware that “New Thought Movements... Are Rapidly Gaining Recruits While Orthodoxy Is Continually Losing” (“New Thought Movements” 1906; see also “Has Spiritualism” 1901; Barrett 1906). The problem for normative Spiritualism was not that adherents of the new movement did not believe in the spirits of the dead, but that they found little need for them in the unfoldment of man’s powers. The ‘Spiritualism without spirits’ debate of the 1850s had been largely resolved forty years later in favor of the man-is-a-spirit-now side of Spiritualism. Mesmerism, similarly, which had played an important part in the original mind-cure movement,¹⁷ had fallen on hard times by the late 1880s, transformed in ‘scientific’ circles into ‘hypnotism’, only to re-emerge in the bosom of the amalgam in the form of ‘suggestion’ and ‘auto-suggestion’ (see for example: Atkinson 1902; Wood 1904a). Sydney B. Flower of Chicago, for example, in 1901 changed the name of his magazine from *The Hypnotic Magazine* to *The New Thought*, hired William Walker

17 P. P. Quimby, for example, had been a disciple of the French magnetist Charles Poyen (Dresser 1919: 29–30).

Atkinson as editor, and proceeded to expound the full scope of the magical amalgam to a new audience on both sides of the Atlantic.¹⁸

Theosophy, especially in the United States, was similarly transformed. After the death of H.P. Blavatsky in 1891, the 'Neo-Theosophy' of her successors, Annie Besant, a *clairvoyante manquée*, and her seer Charles W. Leadbeater, was far closer to the New Thought amalgam than to Blavatsky (on the 'psychism' of Neo-Theosophy see Rogers 1916; Van Hook 1910; Besant 1916), and it managed to reconcile itself even with Spiritualism. As the debunking magician J.N. Maskelyne noted in 1912, "There is no talk now about [Theosophy's] putting down Spiritualism; in fact, the two cults are at present coquetting affectionately" (Maskelyne 1912: 39, qtd in Sheldon 1916: 27). Jesse Shepard, the 'Singing Medium', who had been an early member of the society, summed up the prevailing perception of the movement: as an element of the new amalgam: "Theosophy, pure and simple, means the development in each soul of the 'superior condition' so much spoken of by Andrew Jackson Davis" (Shepard 1887: 2; see also W. Brown 1887: 6).¹⁹

The simplest indication of the gradual transformation that occurred over the course of the century is provided by the Spiritualist journals. At the end of the century, the venerable *Banner of Light* of Boston (started in 1857) mourned the demise of the old guard Spiritualist journals ("The Passing" 1897: 4)²⁰ and divided all the then-current journals devoted to 'spiritual' topics into three categories: purely spiritualist, mixed, and 'New Thought', bemoaning the fact that very few of the first group survived (Bach 1900: 4). The *Banner* itself soon fell a victim to the transformation. In its last years (it ceased in January 1907), Spiritualism was still predominant in its message, but it was no longer the urgent proclamation of the news of communication with the beloved dead. Instead, it focused on rather tired accounts of the foibles of mediums, organisational notes on faltering organisations, and repetitive pious claims of consolation. The change was most evident in the advertisements, almost all of which increasingly came to be for products of the more vibrant

18 Articles from *New Thought* were republished as *Neue Gedanken* (1904–1907) by Psychologischer Verlag in Berlin which also published the Flowers Kollektion of the writings of Flower, Atkinson, and other New Thought mages.

19 "The philosophy of self-unfoldment has come to be known now as theosophy—a beautiful name. ...The tendency of advanced Spiritualists would seem to be to become theosophical, and to get into a frame of mind well balanced on the question of individual unfoldment and responsibility...." (Phelon 1888: 7).

20 By this count in *Banner of Light*, only eight "spiritualist" journals survived—an extraordinarily optimistic estimate.

New Thought amalgam (books on New Thought, occultism, astrology, palmistry, telepathy, auto-suggestion, etc.), but even the articles now tended towards 'auras', astrology, occultism, mind cure, and the like. In its last years, the *Banner* even regularly carried the poems of Ella Wheeler Wilcox, 'the Poetess of New Thought', in an effort to stave off the inevitable.

Other purely Spiritualist journals followed the same path. In 1898, the illustrious *Religio-Philosophical Journal* of Chicago briefly changed its title to *The Religio-Philosophical Journal and Weekly Occult News* in a vain attempt to revive its flagging fortunes ("Important Notice" 1898). The attempt aroused such animosity among die-hard Spiritualists that the original title was resumed four months later—although the contents of the journal increasingly turned to New Thought and occult topics. *The Light of Truth* of Columbus, Ohio (1885–1907), changed its subtitle to read "A Weekly Exponent of the Philosophy of Life, Embracing Spiritualism, Hypnotism, Theosophy, Palmistry, Astrology, and Kindred Sciences." *Facts* of Boston (1882–1887), in an effort to include all and offend none, adopted the ungainly subtitle: "A Magazine Devoted to Mental and Spiritual Phenomena, Including Psychometry, Clairvoyance, Clairaudience, Mesmerism, Trance, Inspiration, and Physical Mediumship; Prayer, Mind, and Magnetic Healing; and all Classes of Psychical Effect."

The most willing proponent of the view that Spiritualism must adapt or die was John R. Francis, the editor and proprietor of *The Progressive Thinker*, the most successful of the 'spiritualist' journals from the mid-1890s on—and by 1908 "practically the only weekly Spiritualist paper left in the ranks of Spiritualism in the country" ("Do It Now" 1908). In 1895, Francis noted the handwriting on the wall and proclaimed that the purely Spiritualist journals would soon be "evolved out of existence": "They have done their work, are now living, as it were, in the past, and vainly striving to get their former foot hold" ("Spiritualists' Papers" 1895; see also Jensen 1908: 1). As an indication of the evolution of the new realms of spiritual truth, the *Progressive Thinker* was at different times the (unofficial) organ of the National Spiritualists' Association and of Olney Richmond's Order of the Magi, ran a regular column called "The Occult Corner," and opened its pages to gurus, swamis, secret societies, psychedelic drugs to free man's spirit, Odic Forces, mystic brotherhoods on both sides of the grave, Himalayan Adepts, Brothers of the Cosmic Temple, the Brotherhood of Light, Henry S. Olcott, Charles W. Leadbeater, W.P. Phelon, Baba Bharati, and many others.

What prospered above all were the new journals that specifically addressed themselves to the amalgam and the promise of personal unfoldment. Of all the hundreds of Spiritualist journals begun in the first forty years of the movement, only two, *The Banner of Light* and *The Religio-Philosophical Journal*, had

occasionally achieved circulations of fifteen thousand, while most were fortunate if they reached one thousand. None (except *The Progressive Thinker*) operated at a profit or without the benefit of patronage. By the turn of the century, with technological improvements, mass advertising, cheap second-class bulk postage, and the expansion of the target audience to include anyone interested in popularised and 'down-market' versions of magic, mystery, occultism, mental healing, New Thought, and self-development, new journals (like *The Magazine of Mysteries*, *The Swastika*, *Eternal Progress*, Helen Wilmans' *Freedom*, *Unity*, *The Nautilus*, *Success*, and William Walker Atkinson's *New Thought*) emerged to meet the need. These new journals regularly achieved circulations in excess of one hundred thousand and occasionally five hundred thousand. All ran at a profit and most were published outside of the Northeast.

A person familiar with what had existed at the beginning of the period that extended from 1850 to the First World War would have been astonished if transported somehow to its end, when the spirits were relegated to the sidelines and unfoldment had become the watchword of an exuberant, flamboyant, creative, popular, and, to the dismay of the intellectual elites, commercial movement (J.E.M. 1901: 146–148; "Fakes" 1907: 140–141; Hall 1901). James Martin Peebles witnessed the whole process. He had become a Spiritualist in the mid-1850s (Tuttle 1878: 1) and, after leading a long rearguard action against the intrusions of Theosophy, magic, and the Orient into Spiritualism ("Dr. Peebles" 1903: 5, 7; "The Hindoo Monk" 1900: 7), found himself in the 1890s, as the market for Spiritualist lecturers declined, transformed willy nilly into a practitioner of 'psychic diagnosis' and 'psychic treatment' of patients who were not physically present (Peebles 1904; "Old Man" 1902)—'absent treatment', in the parlance of the New Thought movement—and an advocate of physical immortality (Peebles 1900: 3) and magic ("Curious Hindu Magic" 1891: 2).

Despite this, even he was so shocked by the change in Spiritualism that he was moved to ask in horror "What next?" when he encountered the new Order of the Mystic Seven in Baltimore in 1901. It was a textbook example of the vagaries and extravagances of the New Thought amalgam. The Order was built on the ruins of earlier Spiritualist circles and each branch consisted of seven persons, four women and three men, who had developed a rudimentary ritual. At meetings, they sat in scarlet robes (three members forming a triangle and the other four forming a square around them) "to develop clairvoyance, healing, concentration, illumination and adeptship as steps to Nirvanic absorption into the One, A.U.M." As might have been expected, they believed in reincarnation and practiced healing—though the members disagreed about whether the patient had to be naked for the magnetic force to take effect (Peebles 1901b: 7).

Peebles was similarly astounded at the extravagances of J.C.F. Grumbine's Order of the White Rose which, though nominally 'spiritualist' in its beliefs—Elizabeth Barrett Browning was Grumbine's controlling spirit—sought through its College of Psychic Sciences and Unfoldment to develop man's "innate, divine powers" on the path to nirvana through a series of mail-order lessons, initiations, and 'aspirations' ("I aspire to conscious Oneness with the eternal Principle, the everlasting and unchanging 'I Am That I Am'..."). All this was all done under the guise of Spiritualism, though, as Peebles (1901b: 7) noted, it was Spiritualism without spirits, like "Hamlet" without Hamlet.²¹

Perhaps more perceptively he might have described it as Spiritualism in which the only operative spirit was that of man himself, man the spirit here and now.

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²¹ With tongue in cheek, Peebles proposed his own "Order of the Holy Wiggle-Waggle," with breathing and concentration techniques to develop illumination and annual fees to go into his own pocket.

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Pinkie at Play

Postcolonialism, Politics, and Performance in Nettie Colburn Maynard's Was Abraham Lincoln a Spiritualist?

Elizabeth Lowry

Although there is substantial biographical information on nineteenth-century female mediums, historiography indicates that not much was written by the mediums themselves. Scholars of Spiritualism such as Alex Owen have noted that in the nineteenth century, female mediums outnumbered men, but male mediums are more visible on the historical record because (unlike women) they were apt to self-promote by publishing their memoirs (Owen 2004: xii). For this reason, female mediums' autobiographical writing is less readily available than that of men and consequently understudied. Further, since women's presence and self-definition in the public eye was not accepted without dispute, it is worth analyzing female mediums' autobiographical writing with a view towards understanding how they constructed themselves within Victorian public spheres. Specifically, this article examines Nettie Colburn Maynard's 1891 autobiography, *Was Abraham Lincoln a Spiritualist? Or, Curious Revelations from the Life of a Trance Medium*, in order to discuss Maynard's rhetorical strategy as well as elements of her social performance, both as a medium and as an autobiographer.

Social performance is central to Spiritualist rhetoric because demonstrations of spiritual phenomena link performers and audience symbolically through speech and action, while the autobiography forms similar affective links by means of the written word. In Maynard's case, performance links Spiritualism to postcolonialism in that she slips into a trance to 'perform' a colonial subject. The apparent disconnect between Maynard herself and her control—a Native American spirit—effectively highlights racial difference via a process of mimicry to distinguish the performer from the performance. The more aptly the (entranced) speaking subject reconstructs the speech patterns of the 'other' the more convincing she is. The act of mimicry can be distinguished from other forms of imitation (such as parody) in that it operates as a self-protective device; rather than simply replicating or mocking an 'original', it offers the mimic a form of social (and possibly subversive) camouflage. According to Homi Bhabha, mimicry can become a means of reinscribing the boundary between the oppressor and the oppressed by emphasising that the 'other' can only ever be a poor imitation of the 'original'. Thus, Bhabha's concept of mimicry not only

lends itself to considering Spiritualism in terms of postcolonial theory, but also helps to situate the construction of both female and postcolonial subjects within the context of nineteenth-century women's autobiography.

Two features of Maynard's mediumship distinguished her from other established mediums of her time. First, she went into a trance whenever she was controlled by a spirit;¹ and second, of the spirits she believed were controlling her, one of the most consistent—and popular, particularly when Maynard was in the company of ladies—was 'Pinkie', a Native American child-spirit. The phenomenon of white mediums being controlled by Native American spirits became common following the Civil War and continued well into the 1870s (Cox 2003: 233). As Pinkie, Maynard, an "unlettered girl," is able to negotiate entry into high society by opening up a space in which women of differing backgrounds could engage with one another socially and express political opinions. Significantly, the fact that Maynard goes into a trance and is not aware of what her controlling spirit says means that her clients' confidentiality can be maintained. From a narrative perspective, Maynard avoids accusations of social transgression by stressing that she has no agency whatsoever while being controlled by a spirit and by appearing to erase herself from the scene she presents. In short, by adopting the stance of the child Pinkie, Maynard is able to discuss personal issues with society ladies while appearing to remain a disinterested party.

It was through these society connections that Maynard met the Cranston-Lauries, who were friends with the Lincolns. The Cranston-Lauries introduced Maynard to Mary Lincoln, who was deeply depressed after losing a son. Apparently, after a single meeting, Mrs. Lincoln was so impressed by Maynard's powers that she introduced the medium to her husband, who was in the throes of planning military strategy. According to Maynard, that meeting was such a success that the president repeatedly requested her services. It is these meetings with Lincoln that Maynard highlights in her memoir, in an attempt to debunk the belief that only Mrs. Lincoln was interested in Spiritualism. By placing Lincoln at the center of her 1891 autobiography *Was Abraham Lincoln a Spiritualist? Or, Curious Revelations from the Life of a Trance Medium*, Maynard asserts that the book is about his spiritualist experiences, not Mary's. This move allows her to develop an ethos: by constructing Lincoln as a stable 'truth' at the center of the book, Maynard creates an increased sense of stability and credibility at its margins—where she places herself. In this manner, Maynard

1 My research on the practices of other nineteenth-century mediums (Jones 1980; Underhill 1885) indicates that not all mediums fell unconscious during trances, and many conducted séances without ever going into a trance at all.

claims historical space and authority for herself and for Pinkie. Further, as rhetorical constructs within the autobiography, both Pinkie and Maynard perform subjectivity by enhancing one another's potential as citizens and empowering one another to act in a dominant public sphere.

Ultimately, Maynard's memoir suggests not only that she was Lincoln's primary Spiritualist advisor, but that advice from spirit guides played an integral part in winning the Civil War (Maynard 1891: 92).² Despite these claims, Maynard's name is conspicuously absent from historical sources documenting the Lincoln administration. For this reason, the fact that Maynard's autobiography was published decades after the Civil War operates in her favor, since narratives of Lincoln had already been firmly established in the American cultural consciousness. Overall, Maynard's descriptions of Lincoln are very much in keeping with the mythos created in the years following his assassination. Maynard tells a familiar story of Lincoln, delicately overlaying it with the rather less palatable narrative of Spiritualist practice. However, towards the end of the nineteenth century, it would not have been difficult to persuade sympathetic readers that the Civil War had been won by virtue of a higher agency and that Lincoln himself had been spiritually inspired.

As mentioned earlier, there is no corroborating evidence in the historical record to confirm that Lincoln knew Maynard—nor is there much background on Maynard herself. Although Maynard does not give her birthdate—modestly claiming that such personal information would not be of interest to readers—details in her autobiography suggest that she was born in 1841, raised in Connecticut, began practicing Spiritualism in the mid 1850s, and came to be introduced to the Lincolns in the 1860s by mutual Spiritualist friends. Apparently, prior to the death of their son Willie, the Lincolns had never demonstrated much interest in Spiritualism, although they were friendly with some of its practitioners. However, when Willie died in 1862, first Mary Lincoln and then the President began consulting spirit mediums. By that time, because of the Fox Sisters, Spiritualism had come to be quite well known, although as a medium, Maynard (then Nettie Colburn) kept a much lower profile than the Fox sisters, engaging mostly in private consultations—rather than large public demonstrations—and trance speaking³ before select Spiritualist audiences.

2 According to Maynard's autobiography, Lincoln also consulted other psychics on matters pertaining to the Civil War; these included Charles Colchester, Charles Foster, Mrs. Lucy A. Hamilton, and Charles Redmond.

3 Not all trance speakers were considered mediums. While mediums held séances and passed messages to individuals, trance speakers could not necessarily do this—and simply lectured on esoteric subjects.

Although very little information is available on Maynard outside of this autobiography, her book receives recognition from Hudson Tuttle, a well-known Spiritualist whose letter of commendation was published in the March 7, 1891, edition of the Spiritualist newspaper *Banner of Light* (and reprinted in the introduction to Maynard's autobiography). Tuttle describes Maynard as being "not as well known to Spiritualists as she was years ago under the name of Nettie Colburn. She set out as a trance speaker...and was...continually engaged by societies. She was eloquent, and had that sterling integrity of character which endeared her to all." Notably, Maynard practiced trance speaking in public, but she rarely practiced mediumship in public. The fact that Tuttle describes her as a trance speaker rather than as a medium signals that she might have been viewed with respect by old guard intellectual Spiritualists who disliked and mistrusted the sensationalist turn that mediumship had taken in the 1870s (Lehman 2009; Owen 2004). Trance speaking was held in higher regard than mediumship since the (usually female) speaker delivered educational lectures under the control of an erudite (usually male) spirit. Since the speakers were understood to be literally absorbed by the persona of their controls, they could not be accused of impropriety. It was also assumed that since the female speaker lacked a formal education, she was incapable of the kind of fraud that apparently prevailed at séances. Since trance speaking was held in higher esteem than mediumship in general, it is possible that Maynard refers to herself as a 'trance medium' to convey that although she relays messages from the dead, she wishes to maintain the social cachet of a trance speaker.

In addition to empowering herself by identifying with trance, Maynard emphasises her access to Lincoln and creates a rhetorical space in which to align herself with him. Maynard builds an ethos by inserting references to politically high profile sitters at her séances and by providing anecdotes about President Lincoln, including details so specific and personal that it seems she could not have invented them. Here, Maynard describes her first meeting with him:

...I was led forward and presented. He stood before me, tall and kindly, with a smile on his face. Dropping his hand upon my head, he said, in a humorous tone, "So this is our 'little Nettie' is it, that we have heard so much about?" I could only smile and say, "Yes, sir," like any school-girl; when he kindly led me to an ottoman. Sitting down in a chair, the ottoman at his feet, he began asking me questions in a kindly way about my mediumship.

When describing her introduction to the President, Maynard speaks, as usual, in a passive voice. After she is “led forward and presented” she finds in Lincoln a paternal figure who puts his hand on her head—or more specifically, “drops” it because he is so tall and formidable a presence. Although Lincoln’s gesture may seem unduly patronising to contemporary readers, the President was far older than Maynard—she was the same age as his eldest son Robert—and the autobiography asks us to read the gesture as one that Lincoln intended to put her at ease. Maynard is clearly intimidated by Lincoln, and she mentions being embarrassed by her monosyllabic answers to his questions, but she finds his manner almost overwhelmingly “genial and kind.”

As Maynard’s autobiography progresses, her growing familiarity with Lincoln becomes evident, and in later passages she no longer appears to be so intimidated by him. By repeatedly mentioning Lincoln’s kindness and lack of pretension, Maynard supports the cultural mythos surrounding Lincoln and his reputation as an exceptionally humble and tolerant man. Notably, Lincoln is lauded for having the patience to cope with his much maligned wife, Mary Todd Lincoln (Baker 1987: 194–201), a point to which I shall return.

The Autobiography

In her autobiography, Maynard puts special emphasis on her lack of education—a common rhetorical trope for female mediums and trance speakers of that era. As an “unlettered girl,” she was considered to be at her most convincing when she offered details on subjects she could not possibly know anything about. For instance, Maynard often reminds readers of her humble origins, claiming that mediumship had taken her “an untaught child, from my humble home in the ranks of the labouring people and led me forth, a teacher of the sublime truth of immortality...” (Maynard 1891: 22). Further, by framing evidence of Lincoln’s involvement with Spiritualism as a question (“Was Abraham Lincoln a Spiritualist?”) rather than as a statement, Maynard attempts to give the impression that she could not presume to tell a reader what to think and that she has no choice but to breach gender and class boundaries in service of the broader discourses of Spiritualist historiography.

Maynard’s self-deprecating comments at the beginning of the autobiography give the reader the impression that she is modest and has a strong sense of propriety and social boundaries—a common trope in nineteenth-century works. Maynard’s original text, published by Rufus Hartranft of Philadelphia, is a red volume with a gold engraving of Lincoln on the cover and a portrait of Lincoln on the frontispiece. The engraving, by a “Mr. Halpin,” is endorsed by

both Mary and Robert Lincoln, serving to advertise Halpin's skills. The 264-page book bears an epigraph: "After all, it is the old old story, Truth is stranger than Fiction," and it is dedicated to Maynard's husband, William Porter Maynard. The publisher's preface takes up eighteen pages, attesting to Maynard's integrity and appealing to sympathy by letting the reader know that at the time of publication Maynard had been declared a "hopeless invalid" unable to leave her bed. This is followed by a foreword in which Maynard assures readers that her book is not intended to "proselyte in the cause of Spiritualism" and goes on to apologise for her writing style: "School privileges were denied me through protracted illness in childhood, and home training did not prepare for authorship; therefore, I beg the indulgence of my readers" (Maynard 1891: 1). Again, Maynard speaks in the passive voice, conveying a certain degree of fatalism. Furthermore, Maynard emphasises her femininity by declaring her unworthiness, and then, in mentioning "home training," she reminds her readers of her tendency towards domesticity and perhaps a reluctance to be out in public.

The first four chapters are a history of how Maynard came to Spiritualism and discovered her abilities. The next two chapters describe the difficulties her brother faced as a Union soldier on the front and her efforts to procure a furlough for him. Chapters 7 through nineteen are dedicated to describing her meetings with the President. Upon her arrival at the White House, Maynard was officially employed by the Agricultural Department in the seed room,⁴ which served as a cover for the unofficial work she did for Lincoln. Although Maynard is careful not to discuss money, it can be inferred that she was paid for working part-time in the seed room rather than for her services as a medium. The final two chapters and conclusion of the autobiography discuss Spiritualism in more general historical terms. The body of the work is interspersed with portraits of various society ladies as well as members of Lincoln's cabinet, such as Daniel Somes, an inventor and statesman from Maine. The remaining fifty pages of the book are made up of "Spirit Poems" penned by Maynard herself while in a trance state and an Appendix containing correspondence between Maynard and various society figures in Washington D.C. at the time of the Civil War. However, the Appendix contains no correspondence from either the President or his wife. Either the Lincolns sent no letters at all (preferring to arrange Spiritualist liaisons by word of mouth) or the letters have been lost.

As mentioned, Maynard attempts to provide a social history of Spiritualism so as to contextualise her own experience within it. Although Maynard does not specifically acknowledge the Fox sisters, she seems to accept the widespread

4 Workers in the seed room bagged seeds to send to citizens growing food for the war effort.

theory among Spiritualists that the movement began in 1848 with the Hydesville rappings.⁵ It is possible that Maynard did not wish to mention the Fox sisters by name, because by the time her autobiography was published, the sisters had already become embroiled in a series of scandals. As if anticipating a reader's prejudice, Maynard states that the first twenty-five years of Spiritualism, that is, Spiritualist practices between the late 1840s and the beginning of the reconstruction, were aimed at levelling "a stern and unyielding warfare against the world without, yet withal to rather bear with its oppressors than to attempt their overpowering; to uproot old and stereotyped errors, change ancient ideas and do battle with school-craft ignorance and bigotry" (Maynard 1891: 126). By impressing this upon her audience, Maynard clarifies that she identifies with Spiritualism only in its purest form. Here, her language is particularly interesting as she describes Spiritualism itself as being part of a larger struggle for the souls of the American people. When she mentions "warfare...against the world without" and "battle with school-craft ignorance" she speaks of taking aggressive action, but she also suggests a passive resistance by using the word "unyielding" and by speaking of Spiritualism bearing "with its oppressors...[rather]...than to attempt their overpowering." In pitting Spiritualism against "the world without," Maynard creates a binary that suggests the insularity of Spiritualism and a certain privileged knowledge. Further, by speaking of the need to "uproot...stereotyped errors," Maynard evokes gardening and typographical machinery—in Maynard's day a 'stereotype' was a printing plate used to duplicate typed material. Once submitted to a stereotype, the original typography would be set and replicated multiple times at which point it was often too late to correct errors. Here, the idea of error is key: "errors" of bigotry are not natural, they are man-made—but can be "uprooted" as if they were plants. Given her typically apologetic nineteenth-century writing style, rhetoric of reticence, and veneer of feminine passivity, it is surprising to see Maynard use such strong language and to speak in what could be conceived as extremes: for example, the "ignorance" of the world without is characterised not simply by outmoded ideas, but by "ancient" ones. As such, Maynard demonstrates an identification with the more intellectual and sophisticated members of the Spiritualist movement rather than with those embroiled in spectacle and showmanship. To emphasise this differentiation, she writes of "...many changes of a discouraging character which overshadowed believers" (Maynard 1891: 126). She does not go into detail on this but alludes to unscrupulous activity operating under the guise of Spiritualism.

5 The birth of American Spiritualism is widely attributed to the Fox Sisters and the mysterious rappings at their house in Hydesville, which were believed to be messages from the Spirits.

Trance

In terms of credibility, the success of Maynard's performance as a medium seems contingent upon her ability to be as unobtrusive as possible—that is, to enter the public sphere metaphorically but not literally. She achieves this by slipping into unconsciousness—or a period of deep trance—while under the control of a spirit. In her memoir, she describes a particularly significant occasion upon which she provided information on military strategy via a spirit named Dr. Bamford. Significantly, when she was controlled by spirits at Lincoln's behest, they were almost always the spirits of elderly white men. Here, she describes emerging from a trance state:

In my hand was a lead pencil, and the tall man, with Mr. Lincoln was standing beside me, bending over the map, while the younger man was standing on the other side of the table, looking curiously and intently at me...The only remarks I heard were these: "It is astonishing," said Mr. Lincoln, "how every line she has drawn conforms to the plan agreed upon." "Yes," answered the other soldier, "it is very astonishing." Looking up they both saw that I was awake, and they instantly stepped back, while Mr. Lincoln took the pencil from my hand and placed a chair for me.

MAYNARD 1891: 165

Maynard brings attention to her own lack of agency by noting that upon awakening, she finds a pencil in her hand. Both Lincoln and his "tall" companion are standing nearby, and Maynard is acutely aware of their physical presence, appearing always to notice men's bodies—and their imposing size—more readily than she notices women's. The fact that all of them, (including Maynard) are standing up, suggests an exigence and formality that does not seem to exist when Maynard is consorting with women. For instance, Maynard seems usually to meet with women in intimate domestic spaces such as bedrooms and parlors, but she meets with men in larger, less intimate spaces: in this case, what appears to be a conference room. When the men notice that Maynard is conscious, they "instantly stepped back." Not only do they seem startled by her, but when she awakens, they appear to remember social codes. They should not be standing too close to her, which is why they immediately move away. This suggests that the appropriate degree of space between the bodies of men and women is measured differently during Spiritualist activity than it is in everyday life. Interestingly, in this passage, Maynard seems to share in her observers' astonishment. She has no recollection of having been in a trance state and no free will after she loses consciousness. In this regard, Maynard's experiences of

being controlled by spirits are markedly different from those of many other mediums.

Maynard's entry into trance is quiet and peaceful rather than dramatic. There is no quivering or gasping, no production of ectoplasm, and no use of a spirit cabinet. Maynard emphasises that for her, entering a trance state is a dignified affair, one that is relatively undisturbing despite the fact that her consciousness is effectively "stolen." Maynard describes her first trance experience in the company of a Connecticut politician:

Governor Seymour, who was standing behind me, laid his hand upon my head and in a moment a quiet and dreamy feeling stole over me, and a prickly sensation passed through my fingers and along my arms. This is the last I remember until an hour later when I awoke in a different part of the room, finding myself seated on the sofa with the company gathered about me. It appeared that I had been completely entranced, had personated different individuals who were known to be in the spirit world, and had spoken to a number present.

MAYNARD 1891: 22

This is the first time that Maynard describes being touched on the head. Later in the autobiography, Lincoln touches Maynard's head, apparently in a gesture of fatherly goodwill, and still later, he does so again—ostensibly to instigate Maynard's trance state (Maynard 1891: 22). To Maynard, being touched on the head by these formidable men seems to carry with it a sense of patriarchal blessing—it connotes a conferring of power. That is, Maynard constructs this physical contact as a means by which she is granted the authority to connect with the spirits. Lincoln confers his masculine power upon her so that she is able to serve him. This sense of hierarchy is not enacted physically when Maynard is with other women—nor does she seem to be as aware of her physicality. Maynard experiences brief discomfort when "a prickly sensation" travels through her arms and hands, which is noteworthy because it is one of the few times that we see Maynard acknowledge her own body. It is as if she can only recognise her own embodiment on the threshold between consciousness and unconsciousness—although she seems to embrace passivity in both states. In fact, Maynard's clients apparently have more agency over her spirit controls than she does herself: for instance, clients will usually receive the spirit control they request—which again absolves Maynard of responsibility for transgressive behavior. Maynard describes the spirit of one Dr. Bamford as "quite a favorite with Mr. Lincoln. His quaint dialect, old-fashioned methods of expression, straightforwardness in arriving at his subject, together with a fearlessness of utterance, recommended him as no finished style could have done" (Maynard 1891: 85).

Enter Pinkie: Native American Child Spirit

Only on one memorable occasion does “Pinkie,” whom Maynard describes as “the little Indian maiden,” appear to Lincoln and his guest, a distinguished general in the Union army. Pinkie “turned at once to the stranger, addressing him as ‘Crooked Knife’ her Indian name for him” (Maynard 1891: 131). This name however, appears to be strangely appropriate as, after Pinkie vanishes, the General “laid aside his cloak, revealing his whole uniform and a crutch” (Maynard 1891: 132). Pinkie’s knowledge is astounding to these men, perhaps because it is delivered by a racial ‘other’—and a female child at that.

By adopting the stance of a Native American, Maynard is able to associate herself with nineteenth-century beliefs about Indian mysticism and power. However, further research into postbellum Spiritualism reveals that the Native American control was not quite as unusual as it might initially have seemed: “As white Americans rued (or celebrated) the vanishing Indian in novels, plays, poetry and song, as they swilled ‘Indian’ tonic and drank their patent medicines, Indians became ever more visible as spirits” (Cox 2003: 190). White Americans turned towards Native Americans, whom they believed to be more attuned to the natural world and uncorrupted by commerce and industrialisation. They were also considered to be superior healers with an intimate knowledge of medicinal plants. It is possible that American Spiritualists believed that in turning towards native or indigenous populations, they were returning to an originary power—accessing an untainted essential self that was to be found through appropriating the power of a more natural ‘other’.

Scholars of American Spiritualism have noted that “the most significant group of non-Christian spirits to appear in the 1850s and 1860s were those of Native Americans” (Taves 1999: 196). According to the British-born Spiritualist Emma Hardinge, “the Indian Spirits were the most esteemed.” (Taves 1999: 196). In her book *Modern American Spiritualism*, Hardinge describes how the larger Spiritualist community assumed that Native American spirits freely forgave white settlers for the violence they had inflicted upon indigenous populations (Britten 1870). According to white constructions of Native American lore, Native American spirits wanted to cure whites of their social ills, which was the primary reason that they became ‘controls’ for white mediums (Cox 2003: 189). Specifically, in Maynard’s case, Pinkie’s presence points towards healing a country torn apart by war and ‘curing’ the sickening fact of slavery while returning to a more innocent and spiritually pure lifestyle. That Pinkie is a mere child could be interpreted in a number of ways: it could signal either innocence and purity or indeed a stunted growth, an arrested Spiritual development. Notably, Pinkie appears to women far more often than she does to men and serves to offer amusement and comfort as well as to negotiate the

terms of Maynard's relationships with high society women. The child-spirit emerges to help Maynard bridge a social gap and to find common ground with influential women such as Daniel Somes's wife "Mrs. Somes" and Anna Mills Cosby, "the wife of the recent consul to Geneva" (Maynard 1891: 160).

Maynard refers to her social life in Washington as being among the "most pleasant memories of my Washington experiences. Tuesday afternoons we usually attended Mrs. Lincoln's receptions, often meeting there the ladies and gentlemen who graced our own" (Maynard 1891: 178). Beyond this, Mrs. Lincoln is mentioned surprisingly little for a book purporting to be about President Lincoln's Spiritualist activity. It is possible that this rather conspicuous lack of reference to Mrs. Lincoln plays into Maynard's rhetorical strategy. Historians assert that Lincoln's wife had a significant influence on him, but that it was this very influence that gave rise to unflattering, and often misogynistic, judgments of her as domineering, mentally unstable, fretful, and shrewish (Baker 1987: 211–218).

At the time that Maynard's book was published, Mary Lincoln had been dead for nearly ten years, but she was still a controversial public figure. The First Lady had gone down in the annals of history as the difficult wife whose idiosyncrasies the saintly Lincoln had endured without complaint. Maynard offers some corroboration of this view, claiming that the First Lady "would while under excitement or adverse circumstances, completely give way to her feelings...She was ever kind and gracious to me; yet I could never feel for her that perfect respect and reverence that I desired to entertain regarding the chief lady of the land" (Maynard 1891: 65). Maynard's references to the First Lady quickly give way to other society ladies introduced to her by the Cranston-Lauries. Maynard infers that these women quickly grew fond of 'Miss Pinkie' and so included Maynard in their gatherings (Maynard 1891: 129). It is evident also that although Maynard did not receive money for the sittings she conducted with the society women, she was given room and board for periods of time, given gifts for Pinkie, or offered a 'souvenir' of the psychic encounter. Maynard recounts requesting portraits as souvenirs for occasions on which she is "kept busy reading the characters of the different persons present, and relating incidents in their lives of which they knew I could have no knowledge whatever" (Maynard 1891: 153). Requesting a client's portrait is apparently deemed both flattering and appropriate. Further, Maynard's subsequent ownership of client portraits suggests both a sense of propriety over these women as well as a form of intimacy—portraits are usually given to family members. In this manner, Maynard is able to insert herself into high society circles, often striking what must have been a delicate balance between remembering her place and cultivating a sense of familiarity with her clients.

Maynard's autobiography suggests the extent to which Pinkie provided Maynard access to this intimacy and propriety. As a child, Pinkie could assume a level of familiarity from which Maynard herself might have balked for fear of being considered inappropriate. Through Pinkie, Maynard is able to find clients in intimate settings: when Mary Lincoln is panicking about her husband's military strategy and the welfare of the troops during the Civil War, it is Pinkie who enters Mrs. Lincoln's bedchamber to comfort her. Maynard writes:

No hint of the battle had as yet reached the public. I was surprised. I threw my things aside and we at once sat down. "Pinkie" controlled me instantly, and, in her own original way, assured Mrs. Lincoln that her alarm was groundless; that while a great battle had been found and was still in progress, our forces were fully holding their own; and that none of the generals, as she had been informed were slain or injured. She bade her have no fear whatever; that they would get better news by nightfall, and the next day would bring still more cheering results.

MAYNARD 1891: 100

This passage is significant both because it describes a sitting with women only, and with a very high profile woman at that, and because it constitutes a rare occasion on which Maynard speaks in the active voice—the moment at which she “threw her things aside.” Notably, both the women are sitting down—which evokes a stronger sense of social equality than the image of the tall men standing with the much shorter Maynard around a table in a study. Pinkie both “assures” and attempts to “cheer” Mary Lincoln, which appears to be one of her primary functions as spirit guide. Interestingly, this portion of the autobiography suggests that Mary Lincoln doesn't know whether or not she can trust Pinkie—possibly because Pinkie is a child or because she is a Native American—but is somehow certain that she can trust Maynard. The fact that Maynard can go into a trance at will suggests agency, but her apparent inability to decide upon her control indicates passivity. The effect of this contrast is to heighten a visible difference between Maynard and her controlling spirit—thereby compelling the First Lady to conceive of Maynard and Pinkie as two separate entities. When Maynard assures Mary Lincoln that Pinkie is worth listening to, “This calmed her somewhat, and after I awoke she talked very earnestly with me to know if I fully trusted and believed in what was said through me. I assured her of my confidence in whatever was communicated, and it seemed to give her courage” (Maynard 1891: 100). What remains unclear is how Maynard—if she is in a trance state—is aware of what Pinkie is saying to Mrs. Lincoln. Presumably Maynard knows only because of what Mrs. Lincoln tells

her. However, although Mrs. Lincoln is a little wary of Pinkie, other society women seem to adore her.

Anna Mills Cosby's letters provide a testament to the co-construction of Maynard and Pinkie's subjectivities. Pinkie or "Pinkey" seems to be a special favorite of Cosby, who mentions the child multiple times in correspondence with Maynard, inviting Pinkey to visit and suggesting that Pinkey come to interpret her dreams (Maynard 1891: 250, 252). Cosby often inquires after Pinkie's wellbeing and offers messages for Maynard to pass along. "Tell Pinkey she must go with me to the Capitol... Tell her, also, I heard a driver to-day caressing his horse and by the most endearing terms call it his dear Pinkey" (Maynard 1891: 253). Cosby's anecdote draws attention to the fact that Pinkie's name is one that might be given to a pet. Further, while not white, Pinkie is not entirely 'red'. Her nativeness or 'redness' has been diluted and diminished in order to render her a less threatening 'other'.

The ritual of Maynard's trance and her acknowledgment of Pinkie as her controlling spirit becomes an intricate performance involving mimicry, displacement, and fetishism. In the *Location of Culture*, Bhabha discusses the notion of skin color as a fetish object: "Skin, as the key signifier of cultural and racial difference in the stereotype, is the most visible of fetishes, recognised as 'common knowledge' in a range of cultural, political and historical discourses, and plays a public part in the racial drama that is enacted every day in colonial societies" (Bhabha 1994: 112). By lightening Pinkie's 'redness' the child's racial difference is maintained, but "cultural, political, and historical discourses" are tempered. Pinkie is expected to operate not as an advocate for her own people, but for the Union and on a more individual basis, to assuage the fears of Mary Lincoln and interpret the dreams of ladies such as Anna Mills Cosby.

Although the Native American subaltern would not have been acknowledged as an American citizen, that subaltern still had to be considered in a material or corporeal sense, especially in terms of how her body was to be used and how it would occupy physical spaces. Paradoxically then, when the Native American spirit becomes an individual capable of disseminating wisdom and political authority, the subaltern gains a subjectivity in death that she certainly did not enjoy in life. As such, Pinkie is rhetorically empowered by death when she assumes a recognisable subjectivity by virtue of her public communications. If Pinkie ever existed, we do not know how she died. In fact, Pinkie was likely only recognised in terms of what Russ Castronovo (2001: 5) refers to as "necro-citizenship," a means by which an emphasis on "disembodiment empties political identity of specificity even as it hints at the indisputable materiality of bodies that refuse abstraction." In other words, although the living subaltern is not acknowledged to be an actual American subject, she must still

be considered in terms of how her material presence will be handled. Only in death, when the subaltern's material body no longer needs to be considered, is the spirit rhetorically empowered. Pinkie's empowerment, however, is never used in the service of living Native Americans. Pinkie does not demand that whites recognise her as having been an earthbound subject. She shows no resentment towards the white people who must have threatened her homeland and may even have killed her. Because of this, the white recipients of Pinkie's wisdom are not required to take a reflexive stance on how she came to the spirit world.

Native Americans in the Postbellum Public Sphere

Constructing Native American spirituality as being emblematic of a mythic return to nature made Native American spirit controls especially desirable and central to the American Spiritualist experience. Robert Cox (2003: 191) claims that the proliferation of Native American imagery in post-Civil War Spiritualism was due to a belief that Native Americans "performed a vital function for the living within a racial system that facilitated an adjustment to a universe of constrained sympathetic reach...as much healers of sympathy as they were sympathetic healers." In other words, Native American spirits made white people feel as if they were reaching out to the 'other' and emulating a quasi-egalitarian society that they did not need to act upon literally. The "constraints" of sympathy meant being sympathetic, but not sympathetic enough to identify too closely with subalterns. When Cox suggests that Native American spirits become "healers of sympathy," he intimates that the ostensive presence of Native American spirits helped whites to define clearly where the boundaries of their sympathy lay and to keep social prohibitions intact.

Cox (2003: 203) goes on to claim that the possession of the white medium by the Native American spirit was as close as Victorian cultures ever came to "true interracial fusion." The white medium allowing a 'red other' to take control denoted "a miscegenation nearly unthinkable between white and black but one that became the rule between white and Indian" (2003: 203). By adopting Native American 'control' spirits, the white hegemony constructed Native American experiences as available to be "acquired, possessed, and co-opted... negotiated through the sympathetic bonds that united Indian and white. The absence of family connection, of racial or intellectual affinity precluded the ordinary channels of sympathetic congress, for Spiritualists were repeatedly assured of Indian otherness in each of these regards" (Cox 2003: 205). Since whites had managed to commune with Native American spirits while keeping

social boundaries in place, they had to find a way to sympathise with Native Americans that did not elide perceived ethnic differences. This was done through a connection to the American landscape—a landscape that, to some degree, liberal whites imagined that they had in common with Native Americans (Cox 2003: 233–234). An American citizen's social power depended on what—and how much—land he owned. Colonialists constructed the Native American as transcending the notion of ownership altogether by cultivating a belief that Native Americans were too much part of the landscape itself to lay claim to it. Constructing Native Americans in this manner helped white settlers to absolve themselves of guilt, as did lauding the nobility of Native American suffering.

In a similar vein, Castronovo claims that white writers, poets, and politicians of the nineteenth century tended to romanticise what they believed was a Native American drive towards death over slavery; that is, if he cannot be 'free', the Native American chooses the noble act of suicide—an act over which he has sole agency. Freedom is to be found in death, and perhaps only in death: "Native Americans had been processed by an iron rhetoric that made the choice between two absolutes, freedom and death, the same option" (Castronovo 2001: 34). Castronovo explains that constructing Native Americans in this manner exempts white oppressors from having to recognise their participation in a Native American genocide. Freedom is construed as a "non-cultural, eternal value...making the fate of Native Americans a matter of individual proclivity, ahistorical, and natural" (2001: 34). As Castronovo points out, any ethnic group can appropriate the idea of choosing death over any perceived enslavement—but the point is that "the officially recognized citizen is not sentenced to a political fate as drastic or final as suicide. Such a citizen can still choose liberty *or* death, whereas nonwhites and women suffer the conjunction of liberty *and* death" (2001: 36). Since death is romanticised in such a manner and the nobility of the transcendent spirit is emphasised, colonists mythologise their subalterns while simultaneously condemning them to death.

Mimicry

As rhetorical constructs, Maynard and Pinkie both rely on and subvert a key concept in both postcolonial and performance theory: mimicry. Bhabha (2008: 38) speaks of the postcolonial subject as the "subject of a difference that is almost the same but not quite." Again, it is unclear as to whether or not Pinkie actually existed, when she died, and how anglicised she had been before her death—but it is important to note that she is "almost the same" as

her addressees in that she speaks their language, understands their frames of reference, and behaves in a manner consistent with their expectations. Colonisers attempt to fashion indigenous communities in their own image, yet feel threatened by the colonised being in whom they see themselves reflected.

Jacques Derrida (1991: 176) posits “the relation of the mime to the mimed... is always a relation to a *past present*. The imitated comes before the imitator. Whence the problem of time, which indeed does not fail to come up.” Here, Derrida refers to the typical relationship between the coloniser and the colonised—the coloniser convinces indigenous communities that he, the coloniser, is the originary model—the one who must be mimicked. However, this idea becomes more complex when applied to Maynard’s situation because, when considering an afterworld and its inhabitants, there is inevitably a confusion of “past present.” Ostensibly, Maynard “mimics” the deceased Pinkie, but, even while she is in a trance state, she cannot escape her coloniser persona. This act of mimicry is further complicated by the fact that Pinkie in turn mimics the white coloniser. Such a paradox of mimicry challenges the coloniser’s construction of an “originary” model. If Maynard herself imitates the imitator, the boundary separating the imitator from the imitated is blurred and the notion of both a temporal and physical originary model is destabilised. Further, in temporal terms, Derrida asserts, “the difficulty lies in conceiving that what is imitated could be still to come with respect to what imitates, that the image can precede the model, that the double can come before the simple” (1991: 176).

In my view, this linear notion of time provides a useful lens through which to consider Maynard-as-Pinkie, in that her practices of mimicry may be interpreted as an example of a “double that can come before the simple.” Pinkie—as a white woman’s mimic or “double”—has preceded Maynard, the white woman who by default mimics both Pinkie and her originary white subject. I am drawing here on Derrida’s point that being able to tell the difference between the imitator and the imitated in terms of a “past present” relationship “is what constitutes order” (Derrida 1991: 177). He continues: “And obviously, according to logic itself...what is imitated is more real, more essential, more true, etc., than what it imitates. It is anterior and superior to it” (1991: 177). But rather than simply constituting order as Derrida would suggest, my point is that if Maynard imitates the imitator herself, she displaces an already displaced imitator.

The idea of colonisers mimicking their subalterns is not a new one—nor was it uncommon. As many scholars have already discussed, during the mid-nineteenth century and beyond, white actors frequently put on black-face shows in which they would mimic African-Americans (Sayre 2009: 125). Less frequently discussed is the proliferation of ‘red-face’ performances that arose

around the same time. When the oppressor mimics the oppressed, he subjects his own body to a form of mock colonisation as the subaltern now appears to take over. Mimicry of the subaltern carries a theme of ridicule, one that highlights his 'otherness' and the futility of his efforts to perform whiteness. Even as colonial powers attempted to reform their subalterns, they became threatened by a subject who appeared to perform whiteness too effectively. In other words, red-face and black-face performances could be interpreted as being a defensive move on the part of a white hegemony—a protection against the uncanny power of the subaltern who began to seem overly familiar with the social mores of an elite white discourse community. Thus, the oppressor appropriates the act of mimicry itself, reclaiming it from the oppressed. In this manner, channeling 'native' spirit controls means reclaiming the disturbing act of mimicry, a mimicry of the mimicry itself, or a perceived need to reabsorb whatever power the mimic has supposedly assumed.

Conclusion

In life, Pinkie would have been considered to be what Castronovo describes as a "social corpse," that is, a person who cannot be ignored as a material body, but who does not count as a citizen. In a sense then, Pinkie passes directly from one construction of death to another. Just as Pinkie can only exist partially, Maynard can only recognise Pinkie partially, leaving her image open to the interpretation of sitters who see the 'Indian' child as external to Maynard and external to themselves—an entity that attends to their needs. As Castronovo (2001: 171) says of Spiritualism, "This otherworldly politics that ignores difference...seemingly induces egalitarian race relations in this world. But the emancipatory policy culled from clairvoyants was dedicated to remembering the dead and the patriarchal order in which they once lived." This "remembering" is frequently expressed in the act of mimicry—the clairvoyant controlled by the subaltern spirit becomes a mimic of the act of mimicry itself; the white subject mimics the colonised subject mimicking the coloniser.

According to Bhabha (2008: 338), mimicry denotes a degree of ambivalence with respect to constructing a social identity: "in order to be effective, mimicry must constantly produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. The authority of that mode of colonial discourse that I have called mimicry is therefore stricken by an indeterminacy..." This ambivalence—a willingness and also an unwillingness to perform colonial discourse—turns the postcolonial subject into a "partial presence" (Bhabha 2008: 338). Maynard's experience under Pinkie's

control emphasises the slippage in meaning that Bhabha describes; a mimicry of mimicry itself produces an excess of difference—and twice as much indeterminacy as the single slippage evinced by a unidirectional mimicry. Evidently, for some Spiritualists, this indeterminacy was troubling; having not sufficiently colonised the Native American in life, they sought to do so in death. The “difference” or “slippage” evident in Pinkie’s “control” of Maynard thus bears a contradictory double function; integration, along with a reinscription of racially marked social boundaries.

Finally, the idea of mimicry ties into Maynard’s work both as an autobiographer and as a medium, insofar as she is able to blend into her environment in two significant ways: by framing her own memoir as a biographical portrait of Lincoln and by effectively “absenting” herself from the company of her superiors during the process of trance. Significantly, Maynard’s gendered relationship with Lincoln further relates to the concept of mimicry in the sense that Maynard can effectively perform the spirits that she channels. Highly aware of her audience, Maynard delivers the spirits they most desire. For women, there is Pinkie, the little Native American girl. The president, however, seems to elicit a broader range of spirits, all of whom are male—and more specifically, spirits experienced in military strategy. Maynard tempers the social impact of presenting a male spirit by being excessively passive—that is, her trance-like state seems to deepen when she is in the company of Lincoln and she uses her autobiography to cast herself as an apologetic subaltern. Maynard’s memoir relates to the broader concept of mimicry, in terms of self-protection and camouflage, in that she uses tropes typical of the nineteenth-century female writer, assuring readers that she knows her place. Therefore, an analysis of Maynard’s autobiography must extend beyond the concept of the racial double-bind of mimicry evident in her channeling of Pinkie, to also evince a highly gendered double-bind of mimicry—one in which Maynard must compensate for the time she spends hosting male spirits by demonstrating an acute awareness of her femininity.

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Criticising the Dead

Spiritualism and the Oneida Community

Christa Shusko

An article published in 1866 in the Oneida Community's *Circular* offered a concise summary of that Community's long-standing, and largely negative, views of the Spiritualist movement. Many of the 'frequently asked questions' addressed in the article focused on the Community's seemingly strange reticence to accept Spiritualism or to even demonstrate healthy curiosity about Spiritualist phenomena. A 'questioner', presented clearly as an outsider to the Community, stated, "Roaming spiritualists are in the way of calling on you; I should suppose your people might have had opportunities to see and hear the 'manifestations' through the mediumship of your visitors, at least." The Community respondent replied, "No. There is evidently something in the very atmosphere of our communes, that quenches had aean inspirations. We have never been bored by messages, any more than by ghostly raps or table antics. The most transcendent mediums become perfectly vapid in the nimbus of our society" (H. 1866).¹ Thus not only did the Community not investigate the mysteries of Spiritualism, it actually silenced those mysteries entirely.

As late as 1871, the Oneida Community continued to maintain that it was "clear from the taint of modern spiritualism." In an article in the *Oneida Circular*, one Community member challenged readers to find any support for Spiritualism in the Community's writings:

Search our publications from the date of the "Rochester knockings," and you will not find a single article expressing appreciation of the developments of modern spiritualism, except in regard to the single point that they have served a useful purpose in cracking the thick crust of unbelief that is over the world respecting even the existence of invisible beings. Any test to which the Community may be subjected will prove it is clear

1 Within Oneida Community publications, the author of an article was not always identified; many articles appear without an author, and most others provide only the initials of the authors. When it is possible to identify an author not specifically identified within the publication itself, I will do so in the citation.

from the taint of modern spiritualism, Andrew Jackson Davis-ism, and Swedenborgianism. *It would be as futile to attempt to prove a close connection between these isms and the Community as to prove that General Grant surrendered Ticonderoga.*

THE O. C. RECORD 1871

This present article is, then, an example of just such a futility. I will here argue that a close, if complicated, connection *did* exist between the Oneida Community and Spiritualism. The overwhelming popularity of the Spiritualist movement demanded a response, and while the Community's first response was one of outright hostility, this response would not be its last. Though the Community managed to repel the 'sorceries' of Spiritualism for twenty years, in 1873 (less than two years after the above statement), the Community began its own participatory investigations into the 'rapping mysteries', conducting séances within the Community, and going even so far as to include the spirits of the dead in the important Community ritual of Mutual Criticism, the practice of publicly examining members' faults and virtues as determined by the Community.² John Humphrey Noyes himself, founder of the Oneida Community and a long and outspoken critic of Spiritualism, would later encourage and take part in many of these Community séances. Thus the Community shifted from critiquing or negatively criticising Spiritualism to formally Criticising the spirits and Spiritualism, making Spiritualism an important component in later Community endeavors. Rather than simply viewing the Community's experiments in Spiritualism as an aberration in Community belief and behavior, I argue that recognising the significant impact of Spiritualism on the Oneida Community allows for a fuller comprehension of the Community's beliefs and practices. Further, because the Community record is vast (though sadly more attenuated than it could have been), the Community's documentation of the ever-shifting Spiritualist movement alongside its own ambivalent attitudes towards that movement may aid in a better understanding of the enormous impact of Spiritualism on Americans in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

While the primary purpose of this article is to present the Oneida Community's views of Spiritualism, whether historically justified or entirely idiosyncratic, it will also seek to offer some general insights into American

² In order to distinguish the general word "criticism" from the Community's particular use of the term "criticism" to refer to Mutual Criticism, when using the term in the Community sense, I will capitalise the word.

Spiritualism at large. Since Spiritualism itself was never singular, but developed into many dramatically diverse discourses over time, the Community's presentation and adoption of Spiritualism can contribute to a more general knowledge of the variegated forms of nineteenth-century Spiritualism itself. Before turning to the Oneida Community's responses to the Spiritualist movement, it is necessary first to provide a context in which those responses may be more readily understood. The Community's intense ambivalence towards Spiritualism was the result of its adherence to the complex theology of John Humphrey Noyes. This theology emphasised human perfection, and Noyes understood perfection as both spiritual and material. Noyes thought that sickness and even death were the results of sinfulness; sinfulness was caused by the wrongful separation of spirit and matter. Since Noyes thought that death was ultimately the result of sinfulness, communicating with dead spirits would prove tricky and, possibly, even dangerous.

The Oneida Community: Overcoming Death

John Humphrey Noyes first began to form a religious community in his home of Putney, Vermont in the early 1840s. At that time, the Community was small, limited primarily to members of Noyes's own family with a few select outsiders joining as a result of their support of Noyes's early publications and sermons. It was in the Putney Community that the earliest forms of later Oneida Community practices would be established. Most important (and seemingly most fascinating to outside contemporaries of the Oneida Community) were the system of governance known as Mutual Criticism and the religio-social experiment that Noyes would call Complex Marriage. The former was a practice in which members of the Community were apprised of their faults publicly in an attempt to instigate personal and communal improvement and redemption from sin. This practice would later be used, not only for spiritual, intellectual, or character improvement, but even for physical healing. Without the control offered by Mutual Criticism, it is unlikely that the other Community reforms would have been successful, as it served as the primary system of governance within the complex Community. The most notorious of these other reforms, Complex Marriage was a system of communal marital relations in which all adult members of the Community were considered bound to each other by ties of marriage in an attempt to increase and equalise the unselfish love among human beings in the world. When this practice was discovered by conventional Putney society, the outrage was so great and the threat of legal prosecution so immanent that Noyes and members of his Community hastily

moved to the more liberal region of upstate New York near Oneida, where a proponent of Noyes's theology offered up land for the purpose of housing the growing Community. It was from this location, where the religious Community would reside for over 30 years, that the Community would take its more lasting name.³

Complex Marriage was based on Noyes's broader principle of Bible Communism in which all was shared in common, including sexual partners, material property, labor, and childcare. The reforms of Noyes and his followers abolished the 'ownership' of property and persons, supplanting the conventional structures of marriage, family, and labor with 'communist' or communitarian systems. The development of Complex Marriage was contingent on another important and controversial Noyesian 'discovery', that of Male Continence, a form of birth control which prohibited men from ejaculating save in those rare instances when procreation was communally approved. While these Community reforms are sometimes read as largely social or secular in nature, they were in fact grounded in Noyes's unique material theology. What linked all Community reforms was the underlying desire to perfect humanity in preparation for the coming Kingdom of Heaven. Perfection was only possible through sinlessness, and this state would require overcoming humanity's central sin, which Noyes identified as selfishness. Selfishness, in his view, resulted in conflicts between human beings and God, between human beings and each other, and even caused discord within individual human beings themselves. This discord was caused by separations—at root, selfishness was grounded in separation. Rather than separating human beings from God, each other, or their own selves, the theology and reforms of the Oneida Community sought to eradicate selfishness in order to unify human beings. Ultimately, however, the Community was striving not only for improved relations among human beings, or even between human beings and God, but also for the complete and perfect unification of spirit and matter within their own bodies.

The possibility and actuality of human perfection required a rather distinctive understanding of time. In his early days as a seminary student first at Andover and later at Yale, Noyes undertook a close study of the Bible. Eventually, he became convinced that human perfection was possible, if difficult. Famously, Noyes professed in a sermon that he was perfect, resulting in

3 The general history of the Oneida Community, sometimes called the Oneida Perfectionists, has been fairly well documented. Those looking for a historical overview of the Oneida Community would do well to consult Klaw 1994. Much of the history and analysis of Community theology in this section has been summarised from my dissertation on the Oneida Community (Shusko 2010).

his expulsion from Yale (Noyes 1849: 18–19). While Noyes's profession of perfection shocked his more conventional professors and peers, Noyes understood his own perfection as both rational and faithful; this view was based on a radical re-vision of history and of time itself. As an important step in recognising the real possibility of human perfectibility, Noyes came to believe that Christ's Second Coming was not forthcoming but was, in fact, long past. Lawrence Foster (1984: 76–77) writes:

[Moses] Stuart [one of Noyes's teachers at Andover] argued that Christ had predicted that his Second Coming would occur within the lifetime of his then-living followers. Noyes was convinced that Stuart's reading of the Bible account was correct; yet he was equally certain that Jesus could not have been wrong in predicting his imminent return. Noyes thus concluded that the Second Coming must have taken place in A.D. 70 when the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed and the great Diaspora began.

The belief that the Second Coming had occurred in 70 C.E. would create an even more complex set of problems for Noyes. Simply making a claim that the Second Coming had resulted in human perfection and sinlessness was impossible since Noyes himself recognised the continued existence of sin and human imperfection in the world. Noyes therefore developed the belief that the Second Coming was not the Final Coming; instead, the Second Coming marked a partial judgment, a judgment in the spiritual or invisible world. Importantly, the judgment that would occur during the Final Coming of Christ would be comprehensive or holistic; both the spiritual/invisible and the material/visible realms would be judged and redeemed at that time.

In redeeming the spiritual realm, Christ had opened up the door to perfection; yet because of a misunderstanding of the true nature of reality, most humans had not yet stepped through this door. Noyes thought that most people failed to realise perfection because they failed to realise and enact the truth of their own nature. Valorising matter as God's creation, Noyes believed that human beings were importantly composed of both spirits and bodies (see for example Noyes 1851). And it was by understanding and actualising the unification of body and spirit, by overcoming sin and the temptations and illusions caused by evil, that perfection occurred. Ultimately, overcoming sin would result in the ability to overcome that greatest of evils, death itself.

The central imperfection of the material realm was, therefore, death. Noyes, like many Christians, thought that the sacrifice of Christ on the cross

had saved humanity from death itself. However, he understood this salvation in somewhat different terms than did his Christian peers; salvation from death was not posited in the distant future of an afterlife, but was nearer than most recognised. For Noyes and his Community, death was “the result of sin” because “sin [was] a disease . . . the great disease” that led to death (D. 1853). Death, caused by sin, demonstrated the core of sin, that is, selfishness or separation: “the essence of death [was] separation from each other, from God and Christ” (“Second Coming” 1852). This wrongful separation was social, causing rifts and disagreements among human beings, but it was also theological, separating humans from God. Even further, separation was also *physical* or *material*; death separated the body from the spirit. This separation of the material and the spiritual was, at base, the cause of these other separations; in wrongfully dividing matter and spirit, by valuing spirit and denigrating matter, humans perpetuated their separation from each other and from God. As death separated spirit and matter, the desire to overcome death was at the foundation of all reforms the Community would institute. Quoting Paul’s letter to the Romans, a Community member wrote, “Death is the last enemy that shall be destroyed”; through the ultimate destruction of sin, death would also be destroyed. The Community saw itself as “engaged in . . . a revolt against the principality of death” (Seymour 1852) as it revolted against the symptom of sin.

From the Community’s perspective, death was not *essential* in the world, that is, death was *not* part of the natural order of things. Instead, death had come into the world secondarily. It had infiltrated or infected matter, which essentially had a good nature. Community member Theodore L. Pitt wrote that “[The Bible] never represents death as part of the enduring order of God’s creation, but as the result of evil, proceeding from the Devil, destined to be overcome and pass away” (Pitt 1860). Death intruded upon life, but it need not be a permanent trespasser. By knowing Christ and “being conformed unto Christ’s death” one could “be clothed upon with a heavenly body” by clearing away all those parts of matter and spirit that left humans susceptible to death. Community member Henry J. Seymour argued that death was commonly and wrongly viewed as a positive separation of the (imperfect) body from the (perfect) soul. He wrote, “[In these conventional views, death] is an act in which the soul and body, the component parts of man, assert their independence of each other, and go their different ways” (Seymour 1852). Rather than viewing the act of overcoming death as an event that would perpetuate such a separation, the Community instead understood that overcoming death would do precisely the opposite; overcoming death meant that body and soul would be finally, permanently, and perfectly joined.

Mutual Criticism: Controlling Desire, Disease, and the Dead in the Oneida Community

The Community's social reforms, especially the socio-sexual reform known as Complex Marriage, were, to say the least, challenging for Community members. In working towards perfection, a way to aid individuals in the difficult work of achieving perfection was needed for both individual and communal improvement. The Community's social reforms themselves were ideal structures, yet because of continued human sinfulness, the reforms were not simply miraculous solutions to sin. While the structures of Bible Communism certainly helped to limit Community sin, human beings could still fail to fully engage in these reforms. For example, even with the structure of Complex Marriage, which sought to equally disseminate love among all Community members, 'Special love'—the Community's common term for wrongful monogamous or romantic love—was a common problem (see Fogarty 1994, 2000). In order to regulate the complex social relations of the Community and to aid individual members in their attempts towards improvement, the Community from its earliest days made use of the system of governance it called 'Mutual Criticism'. While the uses of Criticism would be somewhat broadened over the forty-year history of the Community, when it would later be more explicitly used for physical healing as well as for spiritual and social improvement, the form of Criticism would remain fairly constant. In essence, it consisted of both the public (and occasionally private) criticism of Community members by other members on a regular basis. All members, save Noyes (who sometimes Criticised himself), were subject to Criticism and were encouraged to seek it out for their betterment. While outsiders were very occasionally Criticised (when brave enough to request it and sincere enough to be granted it), the practice was primarily reserved for Community members. By marking a person's strengths and weaknesses, Criticism motivated that person to make changes in his or her behavior, leading him or her towards the goal of perfection (Oneida Community, 1853: 9–11). Behaviors, attitudes, Community labor, and even sexual talents (or the lack thereof) were regularly Criticised. Many early Criticisms focused on a person's attitude or character as the seat of other practical, social, behavioral, or even physical problems.

While Criticisms were thought to be most effective when they consisted not only of 'fault-finding' but also more positive affirmations, it was certainly the case that Criticisms could be quite severe. As the Community began to face epidemics of diphtheria and malaria, Criticism, along with other material means of healing (ice, the Turkish bath, and quinine), was applied to the sick. Since physical sickness was caused by sin or evil, the Criticisms of the sick were thought to be effective in addressing the true roots of disease. At least once

during this period, a Community member was even Criticised after death for the benefit of the living. As we will see, Criticisms of the dead would later be instituted more formally within the structure of Community séances, seeking to benefit not only the living members of the Community, but, occasionally, those dead members as well.

Critiquing Spiritualism's Predecessors: Noyes on Animal Magnetism and Swedenborg

Even before the advent of Spiritualism in the late 1840s, Noyes was critical of those he (and many contemporary scholars) would identify as Spiritualism's two primary progenitors: Franz Anton Mesmer and Emmanuel Swedenborg (for a contemporary perspective, see Gutierrez 2009: 7 Albanese 2008: 208-209, Cox 2003: 12-16). The critiques that Noyes levied upon Animal Magnetism and Swedenborgianism would, in many ways, prefigure the critiques of Spiritualism that Noyes and the Community would later make. In seeking a more complete understanding of those critiques of Spiritualism, I will briefly describe Noyes's critiques of Animal Magnetism and Swedenborg.

Noyes's primary critique of Animal Magnetism was that it was too concerned with the material and not enough with the spiritual. Noyes wrote, "In the present state of the Magnetic philosophy, (i.e. while the brain is the grand centre of investigation and experiment,) its professors can do but little directly for the benefit of the souls of men; and even their operations on men's bodies can rise no higher than that of auxiliaries to the art of ordinary physicians" (Noyes 1847: 71). In Noyes's view, though Magnetism focused upon a 'subtle fluid' that moved throughout the body, Magnetists like Charles Poyen who carried the theory from France to America in the 1830s were mistaken in their identification of the origin of that fluid. Rather than proceeding originally from the head or brain, 'spirit', according to Noyes, emanated most vitally from the heart, before spreading to the head and the other parts of the body. Noyes wrote, "It is hardly necessary to say that we dissent from Mr. Poyen in regard to the seat of spiritual life. We believe as he teaches that a spirit emanates from the brain; but we hold that the ultimate center of vital emanation is the heart: by which we mean, as we have before explained, not the fleshly organ on the left side of the thorax, but a spiritual organ, not discoverable by dissection, situated in the middle of the breast" (Noyes 1847: 71). Noyes concluded his critique of Magnetism with a positive suggestion: "When their philosophy and experiments shall be transferred from the brain to the heart, and their science shall enlarge itself until it becomes Spiritual Magnetism, they will penetrate beyond

the body and the senses, to the affections, and find out the old Bible secret of combining lives; of joining God to man; of producing righteousness, unity, and health" (Noyes 1847: 71). As I will show, Noyes would later critique Spiritualism for precisely the opposite reasons; he would find it obsessed with the spiritual and not concerned enough with the material. Ultimately, Noyes thought that the unification of spirit and matter was the only true perfection; any philosophies that posited a separation of spirit and matter or a valuation of one over the other were essentially flawed.

The other major progenitor of Spiritualism was, in Noyes's view, the problematic theology of Emmanuel Swedenborg, which became increasingly popularised in America in the 1830s and 1840s. Noyes's clearest criticisms of Swedenborg appeared in a 15-part series he penned for the *Circular* in 1867–1868 entitled "Swedenborgiana." As a starting point, Noyes used the 'controversy' that occurred in 1845–1846 between himself and a Professor Bush, a proponent of Swedenborg. Thus, many of Noyes's negative perspectives on Swedenborg were long-standing; much of the Swedenborgiana published in the series was taken from writings from the 1840s, or consisted of Noyes's reflections upon it at this later date, after the virus of Swedenborg had spread to the enormously popular movement of Spiritualism.

Noyes harshly criticised Swedenborg in these articles; his primary critiques focused on the ways that Swedenborg dispensed with the Bible, on the one hand, denoting some books (including Paul) as uninspired works, and, on the other hand, how he stressed the internal meaning of the books that remained after his culling. In an article entitled "Swedenborg's Bible," which was originally published and circulated in a rather sneaky manner "to all the religious papers in the country," Noyes took aim at the growing and, in his mind, dangerous interest in Swedenborg: "This mutilation of the Bible, is a feature of Swedenborg's system which seems not to be generally known, or at least not to have attracted the attention which it deserves."⁴ Noyes found much to criticise

4 The article was originally circulated in October 1845. Because Noyes was convinced that the current interest in Swedenborg was a significant problem, one that needed to reach more than the *Perfectionist's* circulation of 500–600, he devised a 'strategem' by which to circulate his concerns more broadly. Since Noyes had a rather volatile relationship with more conventional religious organisations, he wrote, "I knew that the religious papers would not quote from the *Perfectionist*; nor would they print anything written by me, if aware of the authorship. So we betook ourselves to strategem. We printed the articles on slips as newspaper proofs, without date, place, or signature, and sent them to all the religious papers in the country. The experiment succeeded. The article was wanted, and was printed, to our certain knowledge, in a multitude of papers—probably in nearly all to which it was sent." The article was reprinted in the first of Noyes's Swedenborgiana series (Noyes 1867).

in Swedenborg in addition to his “mutilation of the Bible”; since Noyes himself was not by any means a Biblical literalist, he admitted that he had

no quarrel with the idea that spiritual teaching takes precedence over the letter of the Bible. But this idea is to be applied only in private experience. A man who knows that he is in communication with God may set the inward above the outward word for himself, but not for another; because the *communication* of the teachings of the inward word by another, by *speech* or *writing*, is nothing but an outward word.

NOYES 1867A

Comparing Swedenborg's revelations to the revelations of “Mahomet in the Koran,” Noyes states that both Mahomet and Swedenborg made the Bible secondary to their own revelations, instead of viewing their revelations as secondary to that primary tome of inspiration, and he goes on to state, “Neither have I any quarrel with the idea that God may give new revelations in these times. But I assume that the Spirit will never contradict itself, and that its former revelations, recorded in the Bible and especially in the writings of Paul, are the nucleus of all its disclosures to come” (Noyes 1867a).⁵ Noyes saw his own, sometimes radical, Biblical interpretations as ultimately consistent with a reading of the Bible; they did not supersede that earlier inspiration, but instead demonstrated a correct, if new, way of reading the scriptures. Noyesian inspiration—as opposed to Swedenborgian revelation—was supported by the scriptures, though to those who did not accept the validity of Noyes's inspiration, his scriptural interpretation would certainly be questionable.

Noyes's developing critique of Swedenborg would eventually address the Swede's visions as the basis of his revelations. Noyes, interestingly, did not deny the factuality of Swedenborg's visionary experiences. Instead, Noyes thought that, though Swedenborg's visions may have had ‘objective reality’, Swedenborg's perception of them was faulty. Noyes explained his complex position as follows:

The hypothesis which I am most inclined at present to regard as the true one, is, that Swedenborg actually was introduced into the spiritual world, and that many of the things which he reports were objective realities; but that he was only introduced into that apartment which in the Bible is called *hades* [*sic*], which is below the resurrection state; and that his

⁵ Noyes would also note the similarity between Mahomet's and Swedenborg's revelations in their insistence on ‘Unitarianism’, emphasising the Unity of God, instead of Duality or Trinity.

theology is the orthodoxy of hades. Many circumstances indicate to my mind that this was the fact. I am sure he never saw the resurrection mansion; for he believes in no resurrection distinct from continued existence in human form after death. He knows nothing of the Second Coming and the judgment at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem, and of course nothing of those who entered the resurrection . . . Those whom he calls angels are only the ghosts of men; and men without names.

NOYES 1867B

This would form the basis of Noyes's later critiques of Spiritualism. Rather than questioning the veracity of claims to communicate with a spiritual realm, Noyes and his followers would believe the basic content of these claims. What they would question, however, were the ways in which these experiences were understood by both Swedenborg and Spiritualists. Rather than seeing heaven, Noyes feared that Swedenborg and the Spiritualists who followed after him only saw Hades, the realm where the unsaved dead resided. Rather than questioning the reality of spirit communications, Noyes instead questioned their character.⁶

Critiquing Spiritualism: Oneida Community Opposition to Spiritualism

In many cases throughout the nearly 30-year publication of the Community's weekly paper,⁷ the attention to Spiritualism can be seen in the repeated reprinting

6 While I will expand upon this more fully in the next section, it might be useful to note here one Community member's perspective on why Spiritualists' communications from the dead were sure to be faulty: "The truth is, the whole premises upon which [Spiritualism's] claims are founded, are false. These premises are, substantially, that the world of the dead, from the days of Adam down, is a heterogeneous compound of good and evil existences, separated more or less by filmy partitions into different 'spheres', but still in one general enclosure. Whereas we know that Christ and the innumerable company of his redeemed church have been separated not only from this world but from Hades, by a bona fide judgment and resurrection, and have ascended 'far above' all the principalities and powers, and thrones and dominations of those lower heavens with which pseudo-spiritualism deals." Thus all those dead with whom it would be beneficial to communicate, in the Community's view, were in fact, impossible to reach through Spiritualist means, as they were separated from the realm of the unsaved dead. Any communications received from the dead were guaranteed to be faulty, as they must descend from "those lower heavens" ("A Word" 1855).

7 The Community changed the name of its weekly publication from the *Circular* to the *Oneida Circular* in 1871 and changed it to the *American Socialist* in 1876.

of articles published in Spiritualist papers or newspaper articles discussing the Spiritualist craze, sometimes with commentary. In addition to this more passive approach, however, members of the Community wrote numerous articles on Spiritualism and the Community's view of the movement—and these articles would appear throughout the Community's history, which, interestingly, coincided with the most intense years of Spiritualist fascination in America, from the 1850s to the late 1870s.⁸ In 1852, the Oneida Community's *Circular* published an article entitled "Preaching to the Spirits" which critiqued the majority of those participating in the then burgeoning Spiritualism movement. It stated:

Some of those who are deep in the business of consulting the oracles of Hades, are evidently apostate spiritualists, who 'seek unto familiar spirits', as Saul did, because the Lord has ceased to communicate with them. Others are speculating on the matter *scientifically*, as they did on Mesmerism. Others, and probably the majority, are drawn to the sittings as to a 'show', by curiosity, which afterwards ripens to something like reverence. We are satisfied that disappointment and mischief are in store for all such customers. Gormandizers of witchcraft and delusion will have trouble in their bowels.

"PREACHING" 1852

In this early critique of Spiritualism, Noyes's emphasis on the 'Hadean' element of Spiritualism is clear. 'Hades' was long Noyes's and the Community's term for the place where the unsaved dead resided before the final judgment. While not being 'Hell' exactly, it was certainly not a realm to be admired or desired due to its obviously intimate relationship with death—and therefore with evil. Communication with those populating this realm was, at best, useless, and, at worst, dangerous. Some of the Community's early critiques of Spiritualism focused on the fact that participation in séances could lead to insanity, and it attributed two cases of Community insanity to those members' dabblings in Spiritualism ("Rapping Epidemic" 1852).⁹ Interestingly, like Noyes's view of Swedenborg's mystical experiences, Noyes and the Community did not doubt the actuality or factuality of the spirit manifestations. The

8 See Cross 1950 and Barkun 1986 for considerations of the historical contexts that might contribute to such religious fervor in this period.

9 "It was found that in both cases there had been more or less private dallying with the witchcraft; and in fact, that Mr. Joslen [more commonly spelled Joslyn within other Community records], one of the deranged persons, had held a formal consultation with the spirits, a short time before his disorder appeared."

Community thought that these manifestations could happen and were really happening in the world. Instead, it would question the nature of spirit manifestations; the Community's investigations of Spiritualism would primarily address the meaning and significance of those manifestations.

The language of the Community's earliest critiques of Spiritualism was quite harsh; Spiritualism was variously and repeatedly called witchcraft, sorcery, delusion, and (equally damning from a Community perspective) Universalism. The Community's earliest responses to Spiritualism demonstrated that communication with the spirit realm needed to be undertaken with caution, like any sensible interaction with living human beings. In a Home-talk published in 1853, Noyes said, "We have watched [the rappings] in all candor, and shall continue to do so. But before taking their communications as gospel, we must ask for their credentials. We wish to know from what standpoint they look. And thus far we have found them like Swedenborg—not in the bosom of the Father—not even professing to be there, or in communication with those who we know are in the central place" (Noyes 1853). Those who resided in Hades were clearly not superior to living human beings because they existed in a state of separation, not of unity; by their nature, spirits of the dead had been separated from the body. Mocking Andrew Jackson Davis's term 'the superior condition', a Community member wrote that "The fact that [Davis] can see clearly in his trances, when he is withdrawn from the body, proves no victory at all . . . Christ could act clearly and well *in combination with the body*" ("Superior Condition" 1854). The article concluded that "We are certain that Christ and the Primitive Church, and all the spirits that are in communication with their sphere, have conquered in this very struggle of the spirit with the flesh, and fulfilled their obedience, not by going out of the body, but here in combination with it." The spirits populating the spirit-realms of the Spiritualists were thus not in a position to instruct the living.

Noyes and Community were not convinced that death would grant any special knowledge or wisdom to the dead beyond that which they would have had during their lifetime. Again asking for the check of the spirits' 'credentials', a Community member wrote:

That the dead are not fitted to be our teachers and leaders, would plainly appear from modern Hadean Spiritualism itself, granting it is what it purports to be—communication with departed spirits. Among the vast multitude of communications that have been published, as having been received from that world, how much is there that this world is the better or wiser for having read or heard? Who can put his finger on an original sentence which has been "rapped" out from that world, by any living

medium, that has made a human soul better or brought it nearer to Christ; that has revealed a truth in regard to man's salvation, that was not known before? We have never seen one. We doubt if one has been written.

"HADEAN" JUNE 1863

Suspicious of the unalloyed belief in the superiority of the spirits, the Oneida Community would, even in its later active investigations and experimentations with Spiritualism, maintain that the spirit realm was not necessarily any better than the realm of the living; and it was the case that it certainly could even be worse. To put it even more simply, "The simple fact that a communication comes from the spiritual world does not invest that communication with sacredness or truth" ("Hadean . . . No. 3" July 1863). The emphasis on the disembodied state of death might further lead to problems for this world, as it could lead to a "detract[ion] from . . . practical interest in the concerns of life." Another Community member wondered "Of what use are toilsome and ill-paid attempts to improve this world in the face of such immensely superior conditions as are gained by getting out of it?" Instead, people should recognise that "The earthly is the bride of the heavenly" ("Better Mediumship" 1855). Only by so doing could perfection be achieved.

Hadean or 'false' Spiritualism was commonly contrasted with the Community's own Bible or true Spiritualism in Community writings.¹⁰ According to the Community, the popular Spiritualism of the day suffered because of its lack of 'true' Christianity. Many of the Community's critiques of Spiritualism emphasised the lack of clear 'Bible' Christianity in the movement: "It cannot be denied, we think, that, however it may be in a few individual

10 It should be noted that, like the term 'free love', 'spiritualism' was a term Noyes claimed to have coined well before its recent popularity. While his claims to the term 'spiritualism' might be debated, it certainly is the case that Noyes used the word in essays in the early 1840s. And Noyes and other Community members repeatedly lamented the fact that the term 'spiritualism' (as well as 'free love') had been hijacked by those who did not understand the true meaning of the term. "The modern system of rappings and Hadean revelations has no special right to the words *Spiritualism* and *Spiritualist*. Those are generic terms, and belong to all who believe in the sensible operations of spirit, and the possibility of intercourse with the spiritual world . . . We receive letters occasionally urging us to confess ourselves Spiritualists. We do confess it, and did long ago . . . As we started the term *free love*, which was afterwards appropriated by persons with whom we have had no fellowship, so we have reason to believe that we commenced the modern use of the term *Spiritualist*, and that the rappers caught it from us" ("Who are Spiritualists?" 1868).

cases, the general tendency of Hadean Spiritualism is, towards rejection of the Bible as the authoritative word of God, disrespect to Christ, and denial of his Divinity" (A. W. C. 1858). Most often, it seemed, the non-Christian tenor of many Spiritualists was grounded in a general Universalism: "There is another phase of Spiritualism which may be noticed; and that is, its tendency towards *Universalism*. This is one of the most disastrous effects of the teachings of the spirits. If there is any one thing that we consider as preeminently 'the doctrine of demons', it is Universalism. There is nothing better calculated to dull the mental vision and moral sensibilities, or stupefy the conscience, than this delusive doctrine" (A. W. C. 1858).¹¹ A *Circular* article entitled "Preaching to the Spirits" (1852), included a long excerpt from a Spiritualist publication detailing the communication between a mother and her dead daughter. In it, the mother (a woman of admirable Christian faith, from the Community's perspective) exhorted her daughter to believe in more orthodox Christian principles even after death. While the daughter eventually stopped communicating with her mother, the Community commentary on this exchange is illustrative of their concern with the unbelief or wrongful belief of many of the spirits then communicating with the earthly realm. The commentary stated that this exchange showed that "the tables may be turned" when communicating with spirits. "If Hades will allow of free discussion, and let us take our turn in teaching as well as being taught, we have no objection to civil intercourse with the invisibles. The gospel is for the dead as well as for the living; and it is evident enough that the dead who are rapping at the doors of this world, need the gospel of salvation from sin" ("Preaching" 1852). The spirit's lack of true Christianity further underscored the fact that though these spirits were real, they were certainly not to be trusted as true guides towards salvation. Another member of the Community commented quite harshly on an 1867 article in the Spiritualist publication *The Banner of Light*. After giving an excerpt from this article, which provided a response to a question about why Jesus never seemed to communicate to the living through mediums, the following Community response appeared:

This answer reminds us of the lawyer's plea about the cracked kettle:
 "May it please the court, we shall show you in behalf of our client, 1, that

11 Interestingly, Noyes and the Community may have been more observant (if less sympathetic) of the Spiritualist trend towards Universalism than many scholars of Spiritualism have been until quite recently. The Community's fears that Universalism would create a less overtly Christian Spiritualism proved correct. For recent attention to the influence of Universalism on Spiritualism, see Buescher 2004.

the kettle was cracked when we borrowed it; 2, that it was whole when we returned it; 3, that we never had it." "Perhaps Christ does come through the mediums," says the spirit, "and you do not know it; and then, again, there's no knowing that such a person as Christ ever existed." It is difficult to reply to such logic.

Stripped of its circumlocution, this answer is an admission that Jesus Christ has nothing to do with Spiritualism, though it omits to give the reason why, which was the point of inquiry. Since the spirits will not answer the question we must seek an answer elsewhere. And the most obvious reason that occurs why "Christ never comes through" the so-called mediums is, that he and they are operating in a widely different manner and place. To put the reason in another way, they are wildly astray in their Geography. They think they are scaling heaven, when in fact they are only looking through the key-hole into Hades and reporting what is seen and heard there.

G. 1867

The fact that "Christ never comes through" mediums was seen as further support for the Community's view that popular Spiritualism was false or Hadean in its nature. Christ's absence in these spirit communications meant that the mediums were communicating with a very different realm than Heaven.

Not only were many spirits not properly Christian, some spirits and their mediumistic agents were unquestionably allied with the evil agents of the questionable realm of Hades and had entered communication with the world in order to persecute good Christians like the Oneida Community. In a reflection on the Community's difficult past, Theodore Pitt argued that the genesis of a number of tribulations in 1851 could be directly traced back to a Spiritualist's visit to the Community in that same year. Pitt writes "We treated him [the Spiritualist] courteously and kept him over night, but ventured some criticism upon his spirit and conversation. This irritated him, and the next morning he left, denouncing in a prophetic strain all manner of woes and judgments on the Community." Pitt then listed "a series of calamities" that soon troubled the Community, including a fire at the Community that destroyed the printing-office, the sinking of the Community boat on the Hudson River which resulted in the death of two Community members (the influential and much-loved Mary Cragin was one of these victims), the death of another member from undisclosed causes, several cases of insanity, verbal and legal attacks on the Community, and finally "several cases of consumption and death." Pitt noted that "All this dark catalogue was filled up within a year." While ultimately Pitt thought that these trials made the community "stronger and more thoroughly

organized than ever," their causes were clearly attributed to the nefarious medium who had visited the Community at the start of that year. Indeed, Pitt wrote that "Afterward we learned that the loud-mouthed prophet who denounced his woes upon us for not receiving him, claimed the credit of foretelling our disasters. We never disputed his claim, for we have good reasons for believing that he was in rapport with, and an active medium of, the principality that was seeking our destruction." Pitt's reflections on this series of calamities twenty years later—at which time Spiritualism had become enormously popular—served as a warning since the evil deeds of spirits and the mediums those spirits controlled could have material consequences. Pitt concluded

The spiritual agents who communicate and carry on the procedure, confessedly deal with material things. They rap on material surfaces; they lift tables; they play on musical instruments; they tie and untie ropes, and perform many other similar operations. These may be harmless performances; but the agents who can use material instrumentalities in these ways, can use them in other ways. A spirit that can tip a table or lift a chair, can throw a stone or pull a trigger. It can steal money or commit murder, as may suit its purposes. It can sprain an ankle or pitch a man off a precipice, poison his coffee, or choke him while asleep, just as easily as it can untie a rope in the dark. The only other condition needed to make such things possible, nay probable, is spiritual mediums who are wicked enough to perform them. The fact that Spiritualism has not yet played its card of crime, does not insure us against its doing so, whenever the interests of the principality demand it.

PITT 1870

As Spiritualism increasingly emphasised materialisations, it became even more dangerous as it became more potentially able to unleash deadly forces in the world through the materialisation of evil spirits.

The Benefits of "False" Spiritualism

Despite all of these warnings concerning Spiritualism, the Oneida Community began to temper some of its language and positions on Spiritualism, as it started to recognise that even 'false' Spiritualism could result in people turning or returning to religion in what was an era of increasing religious doubt brought on by, among other things, the theories of Positivism. While definitions of nineteenth-century Positivism vary, the Community identified Positivism as a

particular type of scientific inquiry that sought to explain the nature of the universe and humanity through entirely rational means. While Noyes and the Community respected both science and reason, they thought that Positivism, like Animal Magnetism, overemphasised the material realm at the expense of the spiritual realm, ultimately causing many to doubt the very existence of God.¹² In seeking a cure for this excessive sort of Positivism, it was, strangely, to Spiritualism that Noyes and the Community would turn.

As early as 1858, the Community began distancing itself from at least some of its earlier hostile language while clarifying its still largely negative opinion of the Spiritualist movement in general: "The phenomena and influence of Spiritualism present a very important question for the consideration of earnest and progressive minds. It is simply absurd to attempt to ignore Spiritualism by calling it a humbug, a delusion, &c. The facts in the case are too well authenticated for any reflecting mind to doubt their reality" (A. W. C. 1858). Going further even than this softening of language and attitude, however, the Community began to recognise Spiritualism's potential in shaking up conventional churches and society, thus preparing the world for the coming kingdom of heaven. On this potential good of Spiritualism, one Community member wrote,

Spiritualism has come in as a disorganizing element in the churches, and has already upset the religious beliefs of many. Indeed, it bids fair to break in largely upon adhesion to old forms, and set things afloat in the religious world... [W]e cannot but regard them as auguries of good instead of evil. Christ must 'break in pieces and bruise the nations of the earth', and 'put down all authority and rule', before he can reign without a rival; and we regard the process of disorganization that is going on, as very satisfactory evidence that Christ *is* putting down all rule and authority, and paving the way for the establishment of his kingdom in this world.

A. W. C. 1857

In this view, the world needed to be broken down, destroyed, disorganised, and this was precisely one of the effects of Spiritualism. While to the uninformed observer, this effect might be seen as purely damaging and detrimental, to those 'in the know', the need for a radical shifting of societal norms and values was well understood.

¹² In a Home-talk (Noyes 1869), Noyes stated that "The [Positivist] scientists of Europe have followed their senses and their rationalisms till they have eliminated spirits from the universe, abolishing God and immortality."

Even more positively than this idea of Spiritualism destructively preparing the world for the final coming of Christ, however, was the idea that Spiritualist practices and beliefs could serve as an entry to belief for nonbelievers or atheists. Since most members of the Oneida Community thought that the spirit manifestations of the Spiritualists were real, they thought that the phenomena of Spiritualism could lead atheists to some degree of belief. These atheists could first begin to recognise the activities of the unsaved spirit realm. After this initial recognition of the reality of the spirit realm, the Oneida Community hoped that belief in the spirit realm could become more discerning; previous nonbelievers could learn to distinguish the activities of the 'Hadean' spirits from those of the true spirits of Christ and the saved. In 1857, Community member Henry Seymour wrote

For another thing, Spiritualism affords a most admirable illustration by which the gospel of Christ can be made clear to the understanding of men. *When persons come to us with wonderful accounts of the doings of spirits, demonstrating their identity and reality, and the manner of their communication, it is comparatively easy to present to them the idea of a higher sphere, in the resurrection world where Christ dwells; and also the idea of receiving a more interior and continuous communication with him, whereby we come more and more under his magnetism, in which manner we are cleansed from sin and prepared for communism and a more glorious state of existence, not only in the world to come, but here on this earth.*

Emphasis mine; SEYMOUR 1857

While Spiritualism was not seen as the ideal end of a person's religious life, it did open people up to the existence of a spirit realm. And while Spiritualists were in communication with the wrong realm, even that communication could ready them for eventual communication with the higher realm and with Christ.

It was precisely this last idea—that belief in the spirit realm (imperfect though it might be) could serve as a starting point for 'true Spiritualism' and belief in Christ—that was the more explicit reason for the Community's experiments in Spiritualism. Theodore Noyes, son of John Humphrey Noyes, was a self-professed atheist in his college days. By encouraging Theodore to scientifically examine Spiritualism, the elder Noyes hoped that Theodore, by investigating the real activity of the spirit realm, could be brought back into faith in Christ. According to Spencer Klaw (1994: 216), "[Noyes's] hope was that regular attendance at séances might wean the doubting Theodore away

from scientific materialism by convincing him of the existence of a spirit world—and that this conviction would in time lead him to a renewed belief in the divinity of Christ.” Though the Community’s experiments in Spiritualism thus began with Theodore, they quickly gained popularity with other members of the Community. Klaw (1994: 216) writes that “[Theodore] developed half a dozen home-grown mediums at Oneida, and every day, an Oneidan remembered years later, the voices of the dead were heard at séances ‘in the ‘dark room’ in the north garret where we sat around a table and people *shook*.’” Spiritualism would, in a short time, become integrated into the heart of the Oneida Community, with Noyes himself participating in séances, and spirits of dead Community members even being Criticised. In Criticising spirits, the Oneida Community was able to continue the struggle for perfection even after death, even into the realm of Hades, something previously unimaginable.

Criticising Spirits: Spiritualism in the Heart of the Oneida Community

While Noyes and the Community were long critical of Spiritualists and the spirits with which those Spiritualists communicated, it was not until Spiritualism was practiced within the Community that Noyes and other members began to recognise the need to not only informally criticise but also to formally *Criticise* Spiritualists and spirits. By bringing the spirits into the practice of Mutual Criticism, the Community integrated spirits into an important Community practice, and thus began to consider the dead in a radically new way. In submitting to Criticism, the spirits could, like the living, continue to work towards their own improvement. While the dead had occasionally been Criticised within the Community prior to its investigations into Spiritualism, in those cases, the Criticism was undertaken primarily for the benefit of the living Community members. The family journal entry from December 3, 1863 stated that

In the meeting there was a rousing criticism of Arthur Clark lately deceased, occasioned by the circulation, among the younger portion of the family particularly, of his private notebook and love letters. Mr. N. in introducing the subject, said he had been desirous of sparing the feelings of Mrs. Clark particularly, but now he felt it under such developments to be his duty to criticise Arthur, notwithstanding he was dead. He saw no reason why we should [not] criticise the dead as well as the living.

The death of Arthur Clarke occurred during an outbreak of diphtheria in the Community, and the outbreak of the disease in the Community was attributed to the infiltration of unbelief in the Community. Therefore, the sick, as well as the dead, were in this case Criticised in order to rout the 'spirit of unbelief' that had come into the Community and caused the outbreak of dis-ease. While the dead were thought to be too distanced from the Community to benefit from the exercise, Criticising them could benefit those living in the Community. By understanding the mistakes that led ultimately to Community members' deaths, the living ones could better continue their work towards perfection.

Prior to the Community experiments into Spiritualism in the 1870s, however, no attempt had been made to actually contact and communicate with dead members. The dead were considered to be unable to struggle towards perfection, since they were separated from the material realm, and thus radically imperfect. Further, the Community had previously taken its members' silence after death as some proof of the partial perfection of its members. In choosing not to communicate from the imperfect realm of Hades, dead Community members demonstrated their wisdom. Though they themselves were in an imperfect Hadean realm, they did not need to confuse the living with communications from that realm (H. 1866).¹³ Yet the Community's perspective on death seems to have shifted rather dramatically as a result of its investigations into Spiritualism. In at least one case, a dead Community member was Criticised, and this Criticism was explicitly meant to benefit *both*

13 The hypothetical question (likely based on common questions asked by outsiders of the community) was posed: "But some of your own members have died—some even that were first among you. Do you not want to hear from them?"

"We think of them as prisoners carried off by an enemy. We do not expect to do them any good by following them with longings of affection. We should only expose ourselves sympathetically to the snares of the same power that has captured them. We mean to keep clear of the hadean influence by all means possible, and bend all our energies towards communication with the resurrection church, that we may be helpers with them, in making an end of the reign of death, and delivering his captives. The fact that our absent friends have never made any attempt to communicate with us, gives us to understand that they do not want to draw us under, but are striving themselves toward the resurrection."

This last sentence seems to indicate that dead Community members could continue to progress towards perfection after death, which sounds quite Spiritualist. This idea does not appear in earlier Community theology, as it largely held that the final judgment of the dead would be based upon their *living* thoughts and deeds. This text seems to indicate a significant Spiritualist influence; though whether this was a Community member's attempt to make Community theology intelligible to Spiritualists or whether this was, in fact, a belief that was widely held by the Community is difficult to say.

the living and the dead. Two Community members were particularly involved in this Criticism, a living male member given the pseudonym of 'Dante' in the published account of the case, and a recently dead female Community member called 'Beatrice'. The Community saw fit to publish the details of this case in its weekly circular. While there are other records of Community séances, both published and in private Community documents, this case is a significant one, as it clearly brings Spiritualism into the heart of the Oneida Community by combining the Community practice of Mutual Criticism with Spiritualist practices. By attending to this case of Criticism of the dead, Spiritualist concerns were unexpectedly integrated into the Community's own perspectives.

The account of Beatrice and Dante appeared in the *Oneida Circular* in June 1874. Prior to turning to the case itself, the author of the account first gave readers a bit of information about the Community's surprising investigations into Spiritualism:

It is, or may be, known to our readers that the Community has been taking liberties with the Other World in the fashion of the Spiritualists, and has had plenty of the usual phenomena, especially communications through writing-mediums, purporting to come from departed associates and others. We do not propose at present to say how much or how little we believe in the authenticity and value of these communications, for we have not made up our minds on these or any other points in the matter, except that we are sure invisible personalities have manifested themselves to us in various ways. We have no objection, however, to reporting facts.

"CRITICISM" 1874

The "facts" of the case were as follows. Beatrice, a dead Community member, was contacted during a Community séance. In this séance, the 'special love' or 'false love' Beatrice and Dante had shared was identified as the cause of Dante's 'present trouble', which was a physical affliction, possibly gout. Special love was the Community term for romantic, monogamous love, and was often the subject of Criticisms, as it was thought to lead dangerously to selfishness, the greatest evil identified by the Community. When the spirit of Beatrice communicated with the Community, it was discovered that she too suffered from the improper selfish love she had felt for Dante in life. She stated that R. R., another dead Community member, was helping her towards improvement in the spirit realm by advising her to turn away from her special love for Dante and instead towards 'Community love'. Beatrice thought that a Criticism would

further help her and Dante overcome the lingering effects of their special love. According to the account, "These communications were reported from time to time to Mr. Herrick, the foreman of the Criticism Club, and he finally reported them to Mr. Noyes, asking what he should do. Mr. N. said, 'Put Beatrice on your list of applicants for criticism, and when her turn comes give it to her'. Her turn came on Sunday, the 14th of the present month and the Club did its duty as follows" ("Criticism" 1874). During the lengthy Criticism, one member of the Criticism Club stated that "It seems that she has now asked for help and wants deliverance. I think this exposition of her character and spirit will help her. I hope she will feel the pressure of the Community spirit against the power that is oppressing her; that she has a friend and deliverer still in the Community; and that she is not beyond the reach of Community criticism. Christ can save to the utmost all that come to him. I confess Christ in her." Following the Criticism, the spirit of Beatrice was contacted, and she expressed her gratitude for the Criticism. She stated "It will do me good. It will make me earnest to get out of my bondage into the liberty of Community love. Christ is my only hope, and I will trust him. Will not the committee criticise Dante? It will deliver us both." Even before a Criticism of Dante was performed, however, he had a remarkable recovery. The account states that Beatrice's Criticism took place on a Sunday. The very next day, without having witnessed the Criticism or its report at the evening meeting, Dante was seen fully recovered from his physical ailments.

On being questioned he wrote the following account of himself:

Yesterday forenoon I had a chill. In the night I was in terrible conflict. Toward morning I felt a new liberty of faith and prayer, and seemed to draw near to a mighty spirit that offered protection and strength. Still I was under heavy depression when I got up. The chill had aggravated all the old symptoms. I found it difficult to bear the least weight on my foot. After hobbling about some time, I laid down on the bench on the children's portico. Some of the small children asked me to help them find their toys. I took my crutches and started out, bearing some weight on my foot, and soon found, with joyful surprise, that it gave me no pain to do so. My foot had undergone some great and sudden change, and was apparently well. I laid down my crutches and have not used them since.

"CRITICISM" 1874

Criticising the dead in this case had a positive effect on both the living *and* the dead. Allowing Criticisms of the dead, the Community demonstrated the ways that its practices could be integrated into Spiritualism while at the same time

acknowledging the ways that the Community dead could affect (both negatively and positively) the Community living.

Rather than a disinterested adoption of Spiritualist perspectives or a casual appropriation of Spiritualist language, the Community's investigations into Spiritualism actually shifted Community beliefs and practices. While not altering Community perspectives in a radical way, the Community did begin to interpret their own perspectives differently, integrating Spiritualist language in significant ways. Noyes, Paul, and even Christ were characterised in later Community writings as powerful 'mediums' (see for example: J. B. H. 1874; G. A. C. 1879). Further, in achieving a better understanding of Spiritualism through firsthand experience, the Community found that it could better understand its own practices. By understanding the similar actions of the control of mediums by spirits of the dead and the control of people's actions by 'spirits' understood in a broader sense, the Community could learn how to control bad spirits and so better achieve perfection. Community member Frank Wayland-Smith thought that Criticism could rout the bad spirits controlling a person, allowing the good spirits to reign over a person's actions and thoughts; while referring to spirits in a broader way, however, he illustrated the point with reference to the control of mediums by the spirits of the dead (Wayland-Smith 1874). The language of Spiritualism allowed for a clarification and rearticulation of many Community ideas. By the mid-1870s, Spiritualism had been integrated surprisingly well into the Oneida Community.

Conclusions: Selective Spiritualism

The story of Spiritualism in the Oneida Community is a vital one, for it not only allows a fuller understanding of the Community, but it also exposes the enormous influence of Spiritualism in nineteenth-century America. For Spiritualism to permeate a group so long opposed to it demonstrates the pervasiveness of Spiritualist ideas and practices. While the popularity of Spiritualism in America in the nineteenth century is well documented, the case of Spiritualism in the Oneida Community further complicates attempts to document the actual numbers of Spiritualist participants, long a difficult task for historians of the movement.¹⁴ In the case of Spiritualism in the Oneida Community, members would likely not have called themselves 'Spiritualists' in the popular sense;

¹⁴ While Ann Braude (2001: 25–31) correctly states that “any attempt to estimate the numerical scope of the movement is rendered questionable at best by Spiritualists’ aversion to organization,” she still makes an excellent case for the popularity and importance of the movement, when the numbers of proponents are impossible to verify.

instead, they saw themselves as investigating scientific phenomena, or simply broadening an understanding of cosmology, rather than fully participating in a distinctly new religious tradition. The Community's own vociferous objections to Spiritualism throughout many of its publications made any self-identification as Spiritualists even more problematic and unlikely.

While in the early 1850s the Oneida Community's response to Spiritualism was to simply identify it as a false belief and thus one not worthy of much consideration, Noyes and other Community members soon realised that this response was not sufficient. With the overwhelming popularity of Spiritualism, a more thoughtful response was needed. The Community's comprehensive investigations of Spiritualist writings and, eventually, of their practices, led to an Oneidan Spiritualism, one that integrated Spiritualism into Community concerns. The Community's adoption of Spiritualism was cautious and selective; Community publications demonstrate well the Community's intense ambivalence towards Spiritualism. In my readings of the *Circular*, the *Oneida Circular*, and the *American Socialist*, the selection of outside articles on Spiritualism for inclusion in these Community publications tells an important story about what kind of Spiritualism was valued by the Oneida Community (when, at last, it *was* valued). Spiritualism that was un-Christian, that did not support the centrality of Christ, and that clearly was performed for selfish reasons would *never* be commended in Community publications. If such accounts of Spiritualism were included, those accounts were severely criticised. When Spiritualism was presented more positively in Community publications, it was typically because the varieties of Spiritualism at hand supported Community beliefs and social reforms. Those Spiritualists who supported 'orthodox' Christian views—which might have been considered 'unorthodox' by many non-Community Christians—were clearly valued (for example, see "Preaching" 1852). Theodore L. Pitt, a Community member at the forefront of the Spiritualist investigations, for example, seemed quite taken with the Spiritualist and radical social reformer (and one-time Presidential candidate) Victoria Woodhull, once she had "confessed Christ," largely because of her support for marriage reforms and stirpiculture—the Community's name for their experiment in scientific human propagation (Pitt 1875; Pitt 1878).

In addition to valuing varieties of Spiritualism that supported the theological perspectives and social reforms upheld by the Community, the Community also appreciated accounts of Spiritualism that provided what it saw as clear scientific evidence for the phenomena. While this attempt to 'scientifically' prove the veracity of Spiritualist claims might seem strange, in fact, Noyes and the Community had long seen science and faith as ideally compatible. The Community's 'scientific' investigations of Spiritualism, and the inclusion of

scientific 'proofs' of Spiritualist phenomena in Community publications demonstrate the Community's interest in scientifically grounded religion. Like the stirpiculture experiment, the goal of which was to scientifically propagate human beings who were both more physically and spiritually perfect, the Community thought that the perfect unification of the material and the spiritual necessitated a marriage of science and religion. Since, from the Community's perspective, science was based on the real principles that were observable in God's creation, science could aid in understanding the truths of the Bible. Spiritualist materialisations were of particular interest for the Community (for example, see J. B. H. 1874). While the Community's initial impressions of Spiritualism were largely negative, based on what it saw as Spiritualism's disregard for the material realm, the Community came to recognise Spiritualist concerns for both social reforms and material manifestations. This in turn necessitated a more nuanced understanding of Spiritualism.

The Oneida Community's selective Spiritualism shows that as a movement, Spiritualism was far from singular. And at least one reason for Spiritualism's widespread popularity in nineteenth-century America was precisely because of its variety and thus, its malleability. While its predominant concern was communicating with the dead, the form and meaning of this communication varied widely. For Community members, their own interests in the material realm, social reforms, and Christian 'orthodoxy' grounded all of their communications with the spirit realm. As was the case for many Spiritualists, the living found precisely the dead they desired.

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The Nature of Reality

Christian Science and Spiritualism

Jeremy Rapport

Mary Baker Eddy (1821–1910), the founder of Christian Science, suffered from ill health and what was likely depression throughout much of her young adult life. After two failed marriages and a transient existence characterised by a constant search for relief from her suffering, she eventually found the services of the healer Phineas Parkurst Quimby (1802–1866). Quimby helped Eddy regain her health in 1862, and Eddy subsequently sought his treatment and counsel on numerous other occasions. She greatly admired him, and after he died Eddy wrote an ode lamenting his demise. When Eddy suffered a serious injury caused by falling on ice, she used both Quimby's methods and her own Bible study to heal herself of injuries that her doctor had thought were fatal. Eddy went on to write *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* (1875) (Satter 1999: 62). In that book, Eddy argued that God is all and God is good; therefore evil cannot be real. Evil, sin, and disease are the result of the lesser human mind creating an illusory world. Humanity is not made up of matter, but of spirit. Matter is an illusion of the lesser human mind. The only true reality is the spiritual reality of God. The problem, therefore, is that the human mind is separated from the divine mind. Healing in Christian Science involves stopping the force of the mortal mind with the divine mind. Eddy's technique for accomplishing this was remarkably similar to Quimby's healing method. The patient had to be convinced that the disease was a result of a false belief and so it had no reality.

Eddy worked diligently for many years spreading her Christian Science. She gave public presentations on her developing theology and healing method. She demonstrated her healing method to both friends and skeptics. The work progressed slowly at first, but in 1879 Eddy and a small group of followers founded the Church of Christ, Scientist in Boston. Over the last couple of decades of the nineteenth century, Christian Science became a widespread movement that included an educational institution, the Massachusetts Metaphysical College, and a magazine, the *Christian Science Journal*.

Eddy was a complex person well aware of her environment and the threats it might pose to her religious claims. As a result, her religious message focused on more than just the beliefs and practices of Christian Science. Chapter 4 of *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* is entitled "Christian Science

Versus Spiritualism.” This curious chapter lays out in twenty-nine detailed pages the differences between Eddy’s theological vision and the tenets of Spiritualism. At first glance it might seem a strange inclusion for Eddy, who insisted that her Christian Science was a return to the original system demonstrated by Jesus. Yet the two systems shared many basic claims, including the premise that a non-material reality ultimately shaped the human experience of the mundane world and could be used to facilitate healing in that world. Both systems also taught that anyone could learn and use those ideas, thus rejecting important parts of the hierarchy of knowledge and healing in America. Furthermore, Eddy knew Spiritualists, and some evidence indicates she was involved with Spiritualist groups during the period in which she wrote *Science and Health*.

Eddy’s concerns with Spiritualism arose from a need to establish boundaries for her emerging movement, which she knew shared basic elements with Spiritualism, and which appealed to people who were often sympathetic to Spiritualist practices. Spiritualist practitioners saw Christian Science as an effective healing system, and Eddy placed advertisements for students in *Banner of Light*. For many Spiritualists, Christian Science was one more part of an emerging worldview premised on the aid and comfort available to those who could communicate and interact with the world beyond this one. This uneasy relationship reveals not only some of the ways that the two religious systems used discussions of each other to define themselves, but also how people, especially women, used the emerging religions to redefine and reshape their place in the rapidly changing, late nineteenth-century America.

In this chapter, I first examine the environment that produced Christian Science and Spiritualism, focusing especially on the ways that each religion used and rejected various central parts of the late nineteenth-century American religious world. In particular Eddy’s Christian Science must be understood in the context of religious competition and in light of Eddy’s efforts to differentiate her teachings from those of the many other groups that espoused similar ideas and practices. Next, I take a more detailed look at how the two movements understood the nature of the world around them and what that knowledge taught them about how to act in the world. Christian Science must be read as a specific type of theology with a specific claim about the nature of God, while Spiritualism is better understood as a worldview that promoted its practices both as a way of authorising new behaviors and as a new way of thinking about the social contract. Finally, I conduct a close reading and analysis of Chapter 4 of *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, demonstrating how Eddy used her ‘gentle polemic’ about Spiritualism to both draw the boundaries of Christian Science and to show potential adherents the superiority of

her theologically-based system of healing and relating to the ultimate force in the world.

The Late Nineteenth-Century American Religious World

The religious world inhabited by the late nineteenth-century practitioners of both Christian Science and Spiritualism was one in which the notions of the controlling forces of the universe were up for grabs. By the second half of the nineteenth century in America, traditional religious authority competed with a developing scientific worldview promising that through systematic investigation of the natural world, one could both understand that world and discover the forces that had created it. Moreover, modes of popular expression made a scientific viewpoint appealing to many people who were not formally trained scientists. Called by many historians the 'Village Enlightenment', this way of approaching the natural world had become the dominant system of knowledge for the religiously creative people behind both Christian Science and Spiritualism. For many Americans at that time, religion and science were not mutually exclusive categories, and many religiously creative people, in addition to many more mainstream religious thinkers and writers, attempted to harmonise the worldviews of science and religion.¹

The Village Enlightenment idea is critical for understanding how Spiritualist practitioners and Mary Baker Eddy approached the justifications for their ideas and practices. As this approach to acquiring and interpreting knowledge developed in the American setting, it came to emphasise a particularly American form of 'Baconianism' mediated through the Scottish Common Sense Realism philosophy that dominated academic and theological institutions in nineteenth-century America. Theodore Dwight Bozeman (1977: 21) describes Baconianism's components this way:

1. A spirited enthusiasm for natural science. 2. A scrupulous empiricism, grounded upon the confident 'trust in the senses' and in the reality of the outer world.... 3. A sharp accent upon the limits of scientific method and knowledge, directed to the inductive control of generalizations by continuous reference to 'facts'. Abstract concepts not immediately forged from observed data have no place in scientific explanation. 4. A celebratory

¹ On the relationship between science and religion in nineteenth-century America, see Bozeman 1977, Hovenkamp 1978, and Hazen 2000. For a case study that examines, in part, the use of science in the Christian Science movement, see Rapport 2011.

focus upon 'Lord Bacon' as the progenitor of inductive science; a flat identification of Newtonian methods with Bacon's 'induction'.

Baconianism was not only an interpretative tool, but also a celebratory discourse, one that allowed its proponents to expand the notion of science beyond the realm of investigation of the natural world and into almost any part of the human enterprise.

Popularised in academic circles, the print press, and in the emerging Chataqua circuits, Baconianism in the form of the Village Enlightenment extended the ideas and philosophy of a particular approach to science into new realms, including religion. The Village Enlightenment authorised anyone capable of observing facts in the world around them and thinking through what those facts indicated to make a claim of scientific authority for their observations and interpretations. In that way, a particular approach to science became the *lingua franca* of nineteenth-century popular American discourse about science. The effect was that anyone who wanted to make authoritative claims about the natural world, or the supernatural world, adopted the language and the methods of Village Enlightenment science. In particular, the religiously creative people of the second half of the nineteenth century emphasised the idea that trusting in one's senses could reveal God's designs and actions in the universe. Village Enlightenment popular science became a way to authorise religious beliefs as well as a method for investigating the natural world.

Religious people across the American spectrum adopted this form of discourse, including innovators who wanted to change basic religious beliefs and practices. Key figures in both Spiritualism and the emerging New Thought and Christian Science worlds used Village Enlightenment ideas and claims in their works. The Spiritualist Robert Hare (1781–1858) used Village Enlightenment science to justify new religious claims, as did New Thought pioneer Phineas Parkhurst Quimby. Eddy understood her whole project as scientific in ways that clearly reflected the influence of the Village Enlightenment, although she also made anti-materialist claims that she justified using popular scientific ideas (Hazen 2000: 1–14; Rapport 2011). In effect, Village Enlightenment science facilitated the explanation of religious claims in a mode of discourse that the American culture was coming to understand as the authoritative way of justifying claims.

Spiritualism adopted the language and methods of science from its earliest nineteenth-century American manifestations. The explicit 'see it for yourself' nature of the séance easily aligned with the Village Enlightenment style of science, and many Spiritualists concluded that their investigations and public demonstrations were as 'scientific' as any work being done in a university lab.

As Craig James Hazen (2000: 69) argues, Robert Hare, a chemistry professor at the University of Pennsylvania who came to Spiritualism late in his life and who for a time became its most prominent 'scientific' defender, adopted the 'frame of mind' of the Village Enlightenment in his journey to Spiritualism. Hare "dispassionately followed through to what he believed was the only logical conclusion that could be derived from the raw data and brute facts concerning spirit communication" (Hazen 2000: 83). Hazen argues that a key part of Hare's conversion process was that dispassionate approach of Baconianism that helped Hare keep his emotions in check as he examined Spiritualists' claims (Hazen 2000: 83). For Hare, and for many other men who became interested in it, Spiritualism became more credible by investigating it using modes of inquiry that took it out of its emotion-laden links to grief and loss. Thus, the Village Enlightenment was not just a way for amateur scientists to adopt the language of science, but also an important approach to scientific investigations that helped trained scientists overcome the sentimental, and therefore problematic, aspects of their subject matter.

At the same time, new modes of life were emerging throughout the post-Civil War American landscape, guided by large-scale economic forces such as urbanisation and industrialisation that changed everyday life for many Americans. Both men and women experienced shifts in their roles as people moved from rural areas to the emerging urban areas to work in factories that demanded a type of structure and specialisation in work that was basically new for most Americans. The emerging capitalist, market-driven American economic world made demands of its participants that were radically different from those of an agrarian and rural culture. Women, whose household roles were thrown into disarray and who generally were not afforded the same economic opportunities as men working in factories, were especially affected by these changes, and so it should not be surprising that women in particular were attracted to both Christian Science and Spiritualism. Both religious movements offered women ways to empower themselves in a world that generally disempowered them, by presenting new ways of seeking and authorising religious experiences structured by the prevailing Village Enlightenment worldview.

This type of scientific worldview, combined with the changing social forces of nineteenth-century America, helped to create the conditions under which Christian Science and Spiritualism were born and became key parts of the American religious world. Both of those religions, at least in part, reacted to the new, industrialised, urbanised world and, in turn, provided their adherents with religious strategies for operating in that world. Informed by the notions of the common sense realism that advocated the idea that the world could be explained using rational strategies to explain plainly observable facts, Christian

Science and Spiritualism both adopted practices that depended upon the 'see for yourself' approach to espousing their religious claims. It was this overlapping epistemology that contributed to the interest that early adherents of each system espoused for the other system. Eddy's reactions to the Spiritualist bent that shared part of her world must be understood in the context of her attempts to protect and to rationalise her own teachings.

In addition to these social and philosophical changes, America of the early nineteenth century was a vastly different place than America of the late nineteenth century. In 1801, America was confined to east of the Mississippi River, was still in the process of a series of deadly confrontations over control of land with various Native American tribes, and was mostly a Protestant country. By 1899, the country had spread to the west coast, most of the Native Americans had been defeated and moved to reservations, and the country was home to populations of every major world religion. The nineteenth century was the primary transformative era of American history, and the primary way of being religious to emerge from this transformational period was 'metaphysical religion'.²

Although traces of metaphysical religion may be found in America at least since the time of the English colonists, it was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that full-fledged religious movements premised on metaphysical ideas really began to emerge. Metaphysical religion is a term used to describe a way of being religious that focused on four basic themes. First, metaphysical religion is premised on the mind and its powers. The key force for American metaphysicians is inside the individual, not outside in some realm beyond the everyday experience of the adherent. Second, metaphysical religion employs the theory of correspondence, the idea that this 'microcosmic' world reflects and is tied to a larger, more perfect 'macrocosmic' world where the various problems and shortcomings of this world do not exist. Third, metaphysical religion posits a universe of movement and energy in which changes and transfers between the macrocosm and the microcosm are always happening. By discovering and practicing methods to connect the microcosm with the macrocosm, metaphysical practitioners discover ways to remedy the ills that plagued the individuals in the microcosm. Finally, metaphysical religion seeks for and understands salvation in terms of solace, comfort, therapy, and healing (Albanese 2007: 13–14). Salvation comes through a relationship that brings tangible benefits in this world and also indicates a proper understanding of and relationship with the macrocosm. In particular, this means

2 On the concept of metaphysical religion and its role in American religious history, see Judah 1968 and Albanese 2007. See also Albanese's contribution to this volume.

that salvation is not something beyond the grasp of the individual. Indeed, because it is the individual's responsibility to learn the ideas and the practices that will bring the healing and comfort that indicate a state of grace, salvation is really only available to those who actively work towards it in this world.

The metaphysical religion born of the American nineteenth century was also "a profusely rich and hybrid series of contacts among religious peoples, ideas, and practices" (Albanese 2007: 18). Because they focus on the individual's relationship with the divine, metaphysical religions tend to authorise their practitioners to combine the tenets and practices from any system that the practitioners understood as helpful or appropriate to their cause. For example, Spiritualists could emphasise the authority of communications from the dead and therefore cite new authorities from the macrocosm for new claims about the world. Because an authentic religious life required active participation and investigation from the practitioner, new claims were not only acceptable, they were expected. Metaphysicians regularly reinterpreted religious claims based on their own investigations into scriptures and the natural world. Thus for Spiritualists, and for Christian Scientists and many other metaphysical practitioners, it is not all problematic or inconsistent to claim to be Christian and to at the same time deny the divinity of Jesus. For many adherents of metaphysical religions, Jesus was an example of a human who was capable of overcoming the chasm between the microcosm and the macrocosm. As we will see, this approach to religious practice is one of the primary sources of tension for Mary Baker Eddy in her understanding of Spiritualism.

So, in order to understand Christian Science and Mary Baker Eddy's approach to it, it is critical to understand that Eddy did not agree with the 'combinativeness' of many of the emerging religious groups of nineteenth-century America. In particular, Eddy wanted to assure that her Christian Science did not become just another of the religiously based healing enterprises that were forming under the banner of New Thought. Both Eddy's background and her vision of the nature of Christian Science precluded the possibility of an easy open-ended welcome to all practices and ideas that might come her way. The claims of Christian Science depend on absolute adherence to the idea that God is the only reality. Because there was only this one truth, according to Eddy, the texts, tenets, and practices of Christian Science needed to reinforce the idea of the entirety of God as the basis for all that existed.

Spiritualism, on the other hand, took the ideas of correspondence and combinativeness quite seriously. The methods of Spiritualism—séances, automatic writing, and other forms of mediumship—functioned in complex ways to authorise claims that might or might not align with the claims of established religions and other social systems. The authority of those who dwelled beyond

this world and their communications with the living meant that a wide variety of claims, causes, and practices might be taken up by Spiritualists. Thus Christian Science, and in particular the healing methods of the Christian Science, could be just as easily adopted as the messages from the spirit world about the well-being of its inhabitants. Not only were the lines dividing groups less important for Spiritualists, but in many ways the premises of Spiritualism assumed that crossing those lines was vital to successfully understanding and using the claims of the spirit world and to progressing in the material world (Gutierrez 2009). Spiritualism worked towards a truth that was beyond the limits of the material world, so its practices and tenets reinforced the notion that boundaries and lines were meant to be crossed and overcome.

These ideas played out in the myriad Spiritualist groups that formed throughout the nineteenth century and in the multitude of issues the Spiritualists addressed. In addition to the various groups that formed, Spiritualists adopted several different methods of contacting and communicating with the dead. Spirits might communicate with mediums via raps, furniture tipping, speaking, or through materialisations. The spirit could directly dictate writing, or the spirit could guide the medium's hand in automatic writing, as Dr. John B. Newbrough was guided in writing the alternative Bible OAHSPÉ.³ Newbrough's work reflected Spiritualism's multiplicity in the different groups and practices it embraced, and it demonstrated the ways that Spiritualism easily coexisted with other forms of religious practice.

Christian Science Theology Versus Spiritualism's Worldview

Although Christian Science and Spiritualism shared assumptions about the nature of science and its role in organising and justifying belief and practice, as well as a common cultural milieu that facilitated some of the overlap between the two movements among interested people, the movements also had some fundamental differences. Perhaps the most important difference was the basic fact that Christian Science was a more unified movement with a leader who was clearly trying to make it into one coherent group, while Spiritualism was a diverse and diffuse movement with several different institutional manifestations. In part, these institutional differences reflected different perspectives on the forces that organised and operated the world. Eddy's vision of God as the one and only force in the universe meant that multiple sources of institutional

3 For a useful overview of the variety of groups and practices that came under the Spiritualist banner, see Judah 1968: 50–91.

and textual authority were incompatible with the nature and order of the universe. Most Spiritualists, on the other hand, were interested in investigating and communicating with a universe that they understood to be inhabited by multiple forces, any one of which might have significant information for those still inhabiting the mundane world. Thus Eddy's movement instantiated one leader and one text, and at least attempted to maintain one institution. Spiritualists manifested multiple organisations, leaders, and texts that each reflected the visions, knowledge, and practices of the individuals involved in that particular movement. A useful way to think of these critical differences is to distinguish between a Christian Science theology and a Spiritualist worldview. Eddy had a faith that must be understood through a specific view of God. Spiritualists had a series of assumptions about the world beyond this one that they consistently put to various mediumistic tests.

For Mary Baker Eddy, the source of power behind Christian Science could not be up for any debate. Eddy proclaimed only one truth underlying all existence, God. Her book outlining this proposition and its use in everyday life is titled *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*. In this eighteen-chapter volume, first copyrighted in 1875 and subsequently revised numerous times before a final edition, Eddy engaged topics as diverse as "Prayer" (Chapter 1), "Physiology" (Chapter 7), and "Creation" (Chapter 9). Eddy also spent three chapters describing the various evils and misunderstandings of the mainstream and non-Christian Science world. Thus Chapter 11 presents "Some Objections Answered," Chapter 5 reveals "Animal Magnetism Unmasked," and Chapter 4 examines "Christian Science versus Spiritualism."

Eddy wrote *Science and Health* both to document her vision and to describe its uses in everyday human life. At the same time, Eddy's intentions for *Science and Health* were much more than religious revelations. Eddy used the book to mark out her theology in opposition to several similar worldviews circulating at that time, including that of the various Spiritualist groups. Eddy may have had connections with Spiritualists, and she was certainly familiar with Spiritualism (Braude 2001: 182–189). Christian Science and Spiritualism, as we have already seen, shared several assumptions about the nature of the world, the goals of human life, and the ways to investigate the world to understand it better. But the similarities end there. Eddy espoused a specific type of Christian theology that she supported with the Village Enlightenment and metaphysical assumptions of the nineteenth century, while Spiritualists used the Village Enlightenment and metaphysical assumptions to authorise their spiritual investigations and claims. Christian Science is an institution that dictates certain religious beliefs and practices, while Spiritualism is a set of practices and philosophies about how to relate to a world beyond the visible, material one. In

essence, Christian Science is *a* religion while Spiritualism is a *way* of being religious.

Eddy's claims about the nature of the universe and the force that controlled it were influenced by her strict Calvinist upbringing in early nineteenth-century New Hampshire. She was the product of an environment that taught her that legitimate religion was textual and taught, rational and revealed.⁴ Like most American Protestants, Eddy clearly also believed that legitimate religion was monotheistic, biblical, and dependent on the individual's ability to relate to a transcendent God with a specific plan for salvation. Whatever the spiritual explorer part of Mary Baker Eddy may have done for the construction of Christian Science, whenever it came time to declare what Christian Science really was, Eddy consistently chose the path of organisation and control, the forms of denominationalism and Protestant theology, over the path of pure exploration and philosophy that better characterised the development of Spiritualism. Eddy's tendencies towards organisation, control, and theology can be seen in the development of several key ideas in Christian Science.

Mary Baker Eddy employed traditional theological categories in her expositions of Christian Science. Many of Eddy's concerns were shaped by her views about God, the nature of humanity, death and the afterlife, and ethics and morality (Bednarowski 1989; see also Judah 1968: 256–289). Eddy may have had different views about the true nature of God and humanity, but she still framed her claims in those traditional Protestant terms. Eddy was remorselessly logical in her use of her basic assumptions to inform subsequent claims and practices; indeed, her religious project can be fruitfully understood as an elaboration of her understanding of the nature of God. "God is incorporeal, divine, supreme, infinite Mind, Spirit, Soul, Principle, Life, Truth, Love" (Eddy 1977: 465). This observation about the nature of God led to Eddy's conclusions about human nature, death, ethics and morality, and healing.

This theological tenet is clearest in the chapter "Recapitulation" in *Science and Health*. Here Eddy answers a number of theological and philosophical inquiries by explaining the subjects under inquiry with the qualities of God's nature. These claims are intended to demonstrate how most theological inquiries can be answered by systematically returning to the core principle of God as "omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent Being" (Eddy 1977: 465–466). For example, in response to the question, "What is Mind?" Eddy writes, "Mind is God. The exterminator of error is the great truth that God, good, is the *only* Mind.... There can be but one mind, because there is but one God"

4 On Eddy's life from the perspective of Christian Science, see Peel 1977; for biography that focuses more on Eddy's early life, see Gill 1998; on Eddy's later years, see Gottschalk 2006.

(Eddy 1977: 469). Eddy uses the same idea to explain why evil is not real: “We lose the high signification of omnipotence, when after admitting that God, or good, is omnipresent and has all-power, we still believe there is another power, named *evil*” (Eddy 1977: 469). Similarly, Eddy defines life as “divine Principle, Mind, Soul, Spirit...neither in nor of matter” (Eddy 1977: 468–469). What humans experience as reality is actually a manifestation of God. All of the synonymous characteristics of God reinforce the idea that all the tenets and characteristics of the material world can be explained by returning to the oneness and absoluteness of God. Because God is the only reality, perfect and good, the fallen material world must be illusory and therefore incapable of affecting our true nature, which is spiritual and one with God. Shaped by the common sense, Village Enlightenment science that informed American culture, it is not so much a circular argument as it is a remorseless return to the one observation that Eddy insisted must be true, God is the only reality.

As an older and more diverse movement, Spiritualism, on the other hand, had myriad tenets among its diverse group of practitioners. Most Spiritualists shared two basic ideas: that the spirit continued to exist after the transition of death and that it was possible for humans still living in this mundane world to communicate with those who had left this world. Beyond those assertions, however, Spiritualism was a divided movement, with most organisations, to the extent that they existed at all, being confined to state or local levels. Spiritualism never had one charismatic person driving a specific theological agenda as Christian Science did. Indeed, starting in 1864 with the push to form the national Association of American Spiritualists, major splits emerged between factions interested in more formal organisation and mediums who advocated a more individual approach to the practice (Braude 2001: 162–182).

From early on in the development of Spiritualism, divisions existed among its practitioners about its basic religious identity. Spiritualists incorporated many of the religious trends of the nineteenth century in their emerging practices and philosophies, including elements of liberal Christian theology, transcendentalism, and Universalism, but no clear consensus ever emerged about doctrines. Spiritualists even disagreed about the whether the movement was Christian. Many Spiritualists cited biblical passages to support mediumship, but some prominent Spiritualists, including Andrew Jackson Davis, hoped the movement’s new revelations would replace Christian teachings, while others wanted to supplement Christian teachings and practices with Spiritualism (“Spiritualism” 2010). Divisions between Christian Spiritualists and those who use mediumship to authorise alternative spirituality persist today. That lack of institutional control was part of the appeal for many Spiritualists, and some scholars argue that it was the attempt to formalise the structures of the

movement that led to the decline of its role in empowering women (Braude 2001: 165–182).

The controversies of the 1860s and 1870s that accompanied the attempt to form the American Association of Spiritualists illustrate some of the tensions that arose as debates over organisation, female leadership, mediumship, and other issues came to the fore in the second half of the nineteenth century. During the national convention in Chicago in 1864, a concerted effort, led primarily by male practitioners and non-mediums, began to form a national organisation to formalise Spiritualism. Culminating in the formation of the American Association of Spiritualism at the 1865 convention in Philadelphia, that move opened a rift between the predominantly male organisational proponents and the predominantly female mediumship proponents in the movement. At approximately the same time, Spiritualist camp meetings that converted the practice into a form of summer entertainment for the masses emerged. The ‘materialisation’ issue, a controversy over mediums who claimed to be able to make spirits appear to witnesses, also flared up at the same time, leading to several other controversies over the legitimacy of mediumship. Despite the ultimate failure of the American Association of Spiritualism, these developments transformed Spiritualism away from an antinomian movement that helped to authorise many types of countercultural claims and to empower women to a practice that could be linked to any one of several modes of social experience. As Ann Braude (2001: 190) has argued, “Without the ideological backing that tied Spiritualism to radical reform in the earlier period, mediumship ceased to empower women as individuals or to be a model of women’s power and independence to those who witnessed it.”

More than simply a disagreement over the institutionalisation of a movement, however, those organisational battles also reflected the multifaceted nature of the Spiritualist worldview. The basic idea of Spiritualism that mediums could communicate with the dead and thus gain knowledge to authorise action in this world meant that the early movement was highly individualistic. Early Spiritualists authorised all sorts of subversive behaviors and countercultural actions, including women leading séances, abolitionism, and controversial positions regarding marriage and the relationships between the men and women (Braude 2001: 162–191). Spiritualism also subverted the dominant paradigm in less obvious ways. By giving women a public voice and role, and one that frequently was in conflict with the male clergy and political world, Spiritualism implicitly, and often explicitly, critiqued cultural norms. The fact that the medium’s work usually took place in a private home, instead of a public place, also meant that subversive claims could be made in front of a self-selected audience and outside the purview of a watchful male authority structure.

To be sure, Christian Science attracted more than its fair share of criticism (Ward 1990). Not only was Mary Baker Eddy a widowed and divorced single mother who gave up her son early in his life, she had the temerity to claim that her ‘great discovery’ should rework people’s understanding of the nature of God and Jesus. She also couched her claims in the Village Enlightenment scientific language of the late nineteenth century, thus using the language and ideas of science to refute the claims of mainstream science and religion (Rapport 2011). But Eddy adopted the forms of the religious culture around her. She used Protestant ideas and organisational methods in her foundation of Christian Science. Christian Science also did not subvert cultural norms in the same way that Spiritualism did. As Paul Eli Ivey (2010: 442) argues, “Christian Science has always attracted a large female following—more than 75 percent of the overall membership. Founded by a woman, it offered women relief from suffering and a public profession as healers, readers, and teachers that reinforced the traditional role of women as caregivers, often with significant remuneration.” Women had power in the Christian Science system, but it was the private power of the caregiver working one on one with a client, not the public and political power seeking to change an unjust social system that Spiritualism often claimed.

Christian Science Versus Spiritualism

The historical context, relationships between Christian Science and Spiritualism, and their similarities and differences in form and philosophy help to explain the most overt expression of Mary Baker Eddy’s thoughts on Spiritualism. Eddy expressed the heart of the issue in Chapter 4 of *Science and Health*, “Christian Science Versus Spiritualism.” Although the title might suggest a point-by-point comparison of the two religious systems showing how Christian Science is the superior of the two, the chapter is far from an anti-Spiritualist screed. Eddy actually wrote more of a philosophical analysis of several key points of contention between the two movements. A close analysis of the Chapter 4 of *Science and Health* reveals not only how Eddy was attempting to draw boundaries between the two movements, but also how Eddy went about the task of correcting those whom she understood as sympathetic to many of her general ideas while at the same time wrong about many of the specifics. Moreover, by the end of the chapter, Eddy has seemingly wandered off topic, focusing more on how the Christian Scientist should understand and interpret various central ideas than on a comparison with Spiritualism. “Christian Science Versus Spiritualism” is a polemic, one that ranges in tone

from gentle counterargument to rhetorical harangue, but it is a polemic with other goals in mind, namely to reinforce the boundaries and principles of Christian Science teachings and practices by comparing them with a system that shared many potential adherents.

Eddy understood the shared territory and clientele of the two movements, and she understood the need to define her movement clearly. From the earliest drafts of *Science and Health*, Eddy included versions of the chapter that would come to be titled “Christian Science Versus Spiritualism.” Ann Braude (2001: 183) outlines the development of the basic claims of the chapter originally called “Imposition and Demonstration,” arguing, “Eddy took the claims of mediumship seriously and showed extensive familiarity with Spiritualism.... She tried to provide a comprehensive meaning system that would address those same concerns without recourse to spirit communication.” Eddy’s language, modes of argument, and the content of the chapter demonstrate how she differentiates Christian Science and Spiritualism.

Eddy considers the true nature of reality in the opening verses of “Christian Science Versus Spiritualism.” She writes, “Every day is a mystery. The testimony of the corporeal senses cannot inform us what is real and what is delusive, but the revelations of Christian Science unlock the treasures of Truth” (Eddy 1977: 70). Eddy makes a complex rhetorical claim here that both questions the ontological claims that Spiritualists depended upon and invokes the traditional Christian language of revelation to stake her own truth claim. When she avers, “corporeal senses cannot inform us what is real,” she is denying one of the central claims of Spiritualism, that one could test the ideas oneself through séance practice. At the same time, her use of the phrase “the revelations of Christian Science” not only asserts the truth of her system, but also uses language that has clear religious implications—Christian Science beliefs come not only out of human observations about reality, but are also given by a higher power. Thus Eddy reinforces her own assertions by using familiar, religious language to make them. In effect, Eddy is claiming that Spiritualism depends on the forces of the illusory, material world while Christian Science is part of the spiritual and religious world, a claim she will reiterate in several different ways throughout the chapter.

Eddy’s own claims about the true nature of God and spirit emerge next, “Nothing is real and eternal,—nothing is Spirit,—but God and His idea” (Eddy 1977: 71–72). Because that sentence indicates that the only spiritual reality is God, a devoted Spiritualist would immediately recognise this as a refutation of the claim the individual spirits exist in a realm beyond the material world, a primary tenet of the movement. But Eddy’s argument is more than a refutation. Her rhetoric shows that she is well aware of the links between the movements, and so her emphasis in these opening verses is on the core tenets of Christian

Science that relate to the claims of Spiritualism. Eddy invokes the overlapping terms of the two movements to define how Christian Science focuses on the entirely spiritual nature of ultimate reality and identity, but Spiritualism is caught in the illusions of the material world. For example, Eddy wants to make clear that the forms of the material world only *reflect* true Spirit and that the material world is a creation of the mind. She illustrates this point by describing how in dreams one may touch and smell a flower, see a landscape, or see a person. According to Eddy, this does not indicate the reality of an unseen world, but the fact that the mind creates the material world. Properly understood, this shows the illusory nature of the material world, “From dreams also you learn that neither mortal mind nor matter is the image or likeness of God, and that immortal Mind is not in matter” (Eddy 1977: 71). Spiritualism is thus primarily a confusion or misunderstanding about reality. Spiritualists have mistaken the form for something of real substance. This is a grave mistake with dire consequences that leads to confusion about basics like the nature of God and the nature of evil. The problem for Eddy, and for most Spiritualists, is not the reality of evil but ignorance of the true nature of reality. Eddy argues, “Evil has no reality...[it is] an illusion of material sense” (Eddy 1977: 71). True identity, Eddy claims, resides in God, not in the formations identity takes in the material world. The material forms are only reflections of spiritual realities.⁵ For Eddy, confusions such as these lead to human suffering such as illness and unhappiness.

Eddy reinforced these basic doctrines of Christian Science in order to set up her coming refutation of the tenets of Spiritualism. The first direct mention of Spiritualism is in verses twenty-one through twenty-four, “When the Science of Mind is understood, spiritualism will be found mainly erroneous, having no scientific basis nor origin, no proof nor power outside of human testimony. It is the offspring of the physical senses. There is no sensuality in Spirit. I never could believe in spiritualism” (Eddy 1977: 71). Eddy proceeds to explain in great detail her specific objections to Spiritualism, as well as how Spiritualism is erroneous when compared to the principles of Christian Science. She writes, “Not personal intercommunion but divine law is the communicator of truth, health, and harmony to earth and humanity” (Eddy 1977: 72). Eddy thus refutes a basic tenet of Spiritualism, namely that knowledge and truth can come from mediumistic practices. More than that, she asserts a key philosophy of Christian Science, that it is simply a revelation of the workings and order of the universe and the God who is its one true reality.

5 Many Spiritualists also held that the body reflected a spiritual reality and made use of that premise in the various forms of healing they practiced. For an account of the cosmologies that informed Spiritualist healing practices, see Gutierrez 2009: 111–142.

Eddy also denies this basic tenet of Spiritualism: “Spiritualism calls one person, living in this world, *material*, but another, who has died to-day a sinner and supposedly will return to earth to-morrow, it terms a *spirit*” (Eddy 1977: 73). Again, we see here how Eddy both rejects a basic claim of Spiritualism and uses familiar religious language to describe the position of Christian Science. Spiritualists are incorrect to assert a difference between living humans and dead humans. The Christian Science practitioner, on the other hand, understands that the material body is an expression of sin. By using familiar religious language, Eddy rhetorically links her claims to familiar religious ideas while also critiquing the ideas of those she opposes.

Eddy’s critique of matter is central to her critique of Spiritualism, and she spends the next several paragraphs expanding on why belief in the reality of matter is incorrect. She critiques the idea of mediumship as merely a “mortal belief,” one that would destroy “the divine order and the Science of omnipotent, omnipresent Spirit” if it were true. She calls the idea that the spirit is confined in a material body and released after death incorrect, and then restates this basic Christian Science tenet: “It is a grave mistake to suppose that matter is any part of the reality of intelligent existence, or that Spirit and matter, intelligence and non-intelligence, can commune together.... There is no communication between so-called material existence and spiritual life which is not subject to death” (Eddy 1977: 73–74). Eddy is doing at least three things here: she is restating Christian Science beliefs; she is making an argument about the false premise of Spiritualism; and she is writing about how she understands law and science. She proceeds this way because she is well aware of the territory, context, and potential adherents that the two movements share. Eddy’s process of defining Christian Science, in other words, includes defining what is not Christian Science. She does this in part by trying to discredit Spiritualism on the grounds of Village Enlightenment science. Such a rhetorical strategy not only reveals Eddy’s own claims, but also reveals the way that a movement with a clearly defined theology attempts to differentiate itself from a more diffuse movement that has authorised many different views of the spiritual realm. Such differentiation is most important, argues Jonathan Z. Smith (2004: 251–302), when the groups doing the defining are closest. These types of territorial battles reveal how critical it is for religious groups with similar assumptions and potential adherents to mark off their territory.

Eddy’s deconstruction of Spiritualism continues for the next several pages. She reiterates and repeats previous points when she implies that Spiritualists are ignorant of the true nature of life, “When being is understood, Life will be recognized as neither material nor finite, but as infinite” (Eddy 1977: 76). She even offers a critique based on granting the premises of Spiritualism: “Even

if communications from spirits to mortal consciousness were possible, such communications would grow beautifully less with every advanced stage of existence. The departed would gradually rise above ignorance and materiality, and Spiritualists would outgrow their beliefs in material spiritualism" (Eddy 1977: 77). Her deconstruction culminates with this: "If the departed are in rapport with mortality, or matter, they are not spiritual, but must still be mortal, sinning, suffering, and dying. Then why look to them—even were communication possible—for proofs of immortality, and accept them as oracles? Communications gathered from ignorance are pernicious in tendency" (Eddy 1977: 78). Spiritualism is not just wrong, but dangerous because it makes the spread of false assumptions about the nature and order of the world more likely.

Eddy then turns to criticism based on what she takes to be the problematic science of Spiritualism. This is a particularly important point in Eddy's larger argument since the two movements otherwise share several assumptions and goals. Eddy tries to argue for the epistemological errors of Spiritualism by using her own interpretation of science to discredit Spiritualism. In a lengthy passage in which she invokes healing as her central example, Eddy claims disease and death are mental errors and argues against Spiritualist techniques by linking them to the material science that she considers faulty: "A scientific mental method is more sanitary than the use of drugs, and such a mental method produces permanent health. Science must go over the whole ground, and dig up every seed of error's sowing. Spiritualism relies upon human beliefs and hypotheses. Christian Science removes these beliefs and hypotheses through higher understanding of God" (Eddy 1977: 79). The hypothesis of Spiritualism will fail because experiment will prove it incorrect.

Ultimately for Eddy, Spiritualism is nothing more than a form of mysticism, and as such she intends to contrast it with a rational system of belief based upon verifiable experiences. She writes, "It is mysticism which gives spiritualism its force. Science dispels mystery and explains extraordinary phenomena; but Science never removes phenomena from the domain of reason into the realm of mysticism" (Eddy 1977: 80). In other words, Spiritualism may seem to be based on science, but it is only a faulty human science, one that misunderstands the central operating fact of the world, that the only reality is God. Spiritualism depends on various types of ritual mysticism that further cloud true understanding rather than revealing spiritual truth. Eddy continues with similar examples over the next several pages. She references Spiritualist ideas both to debunk them and to reinforce Christian Science tenets. Her critique has shifted to the problem of materialism in general, of which she considers Spiritualism to be a particularly relevant example. Here Eddy's aims become

clear. She understands the appeal of Spiritualism, but she strives to convince her audience of its incorrect epistemology by juxtaposing the beliefs and practices of the two movements.

By the last few pages of the chapter, Eddy's focus has become the Christian Science eschatology. She describes the Earth becoming "dreary and desolate" and the conflicting forces of the material world that will precede the ultimate destruction of error. Matter will become more and more destructive, which will reveal its true nothingness (Eddy 1977: 96–97). Eddy ends the chapter with a statement of the final truth of Christian Science, linking it with God's eternal truths, restating that other systems, including Spiritualism, are false beliefs, and predicting the ultimate victory of Christian Science (Eddy 1977: 99).

Conclusion

On the surface of it, Eddy's forceful condemnation of Spiritualism makes little sense. In some very important ways, Christian Science and Spiritualism are not at all related. Yet this close examination of the relationship between these two vital religious movements born in the nineteenth century has revealed some basic reasons both for the interest that some Spiritualists had in Eddy's work and for Eddy's grave concern and vehement denial of the relationship between the two movements. In particular, Eddy's traditionalist urges in regard to her vision of Christian Science and her strict theology help to explain why Eddy had to make clear the differences between the two movements.

Investigating Christian Science side by side with Spiritualism also helps us to better understand the complexity and diversity of the late nineteenth-century American religious world. In many ways, Mary Baker Eddy was trying to construct a religious movement that would resist the cultural and religious changes that were sweeping over America at that time. Odd though it may sound, then, to describe an alternative form of Christianity this way, comparing Christian Science with Spiritualism reveals the conservative nature of Christian Science, a religion founded on one principal claim about the nature of God and that insisted that most theological inquiries could be explained by recourse to the true nature of God as one Spirit, one Love, one divine principle. Eddy saw that the world she inhabited was changing rapidly and she discovered and described a method for holding on to a core Christian theological claim to anchor herself in that new world.

On the other hand, Spiritualism revealed methods to legitimise a variety of truth claims. In many ways, Spiritualism was more theologically daring and practically experimental than Christian Science. It could take claims first

asserted in the private realm of the séance and make them into prescriptions to solve social injustice. Its premises allowed Spiritualist practitioners to embrace the messiness and diversity of nineteenth-century American religious life because they allowed Spiritualists to authorise a variety of stances and practices. If it is correct that metaphysical religions are those that posit a worldview that encourages combining disparate beliefs based on the authority of the individual, then Spiritualism is a metaphysical religion par excellence.

Conversely, Christian Science appears much less metaphysical in the light of this comparison. Certainly Christian Scientists privilege the mind and its powers, and they seek salvation in part by seeking healing and solace in this world. But both of those notions come with caveats for Christian Scientists. They are symptoms of the one God that is the only ultimate reality. The idea of correspondence is highly problematic in Christian Science, since the basic assertion of the religion is that there is only one reality. If there is only one reality then movement and exchange between realities are also impossible.

Finally, comparing Christian Science and Spiritualism also reveals the diversity of strategies that can develop in similar environments and similar premises. Mary Baker Eddy's experiences in the nineteenth-century American religious world prompted her to develop a method of retaining a core Christian belief, the reality of one God. Spiritualists experienced the nineteenth-century American religious world as a place to explore alternate realities that might also facilitate social change and bring comfort to the suffering. In order to grasp how these two movements came to their respective stances, then, it is vital to grasp that at the heart of the issue was a disagreement over the nature of ultimate reality.

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PART 3

New Directions



Reincarnation

The Path to Progress

Lynn L. Sharp

Spiritualists throughout Europe and the Americas share a set of principles and beliefs, most importantly the survival of the soul and the ability of the living to contact those who have died. Early on, French Spiritists distinguished themselves from Spiritualists in general by adding a particular twist to this: reincarnation of that soul through a progressive set of existences that led to increasing perfection of the soul. Belief in reincarnation preceded the rise of Spiritualism in France and became a central tenet of what has come to be called Kardecist Spiritism from its inception in the 1850s. It was transported to Brazil and Puerto Rico at the very beginnings of the Spiritualist movements in those countries and spread rapidly to other Latin American countries. Given the numerical superiority of Latin American Spiritualists and their migration throughout the globe, reincarnation as a part of Spiritualism has spread back to Europe and the United States and is accepted by the majority of contemporary Spiritualists.

Nineteenth-century French theories on reincarnation surfaced as part of a general cultural conversation on society, humanity, and progress, prompted most strongly by the dual push of Enlightenment thought and the traumatic experience of the French Revolutionary years. These theories met the question of human suffering head on. In a modern Enlightened society, how could one understand the continued existence of suffering and the relationships among humanity, God, and suffering? Does human hardship have a religious purpose? Or is it evidence of an ill-conceived society in need of change? Can people do away with misery by bettering society, or is it a thing to be alleviated by charity among humans as part of perfecting the individual soul? Would a perfect society, full of advanced people, be free from injustice, poverty, and individual misery?

Theories of reincarnation were widely popular among French writers and intellectuals in the 1830s and 1840s, especially romantic socialists. Socialist visions of a perfect world blended easily with a reincarnationary vision of a perfect soul. Reincarnation survived the silencing of romantic socialism during the 1848–1850 revolutionary period because Spiritists adopted it as their own and continued to support it from the 1850s on. Allan Kardec, the founder of organised French Spiritism, propagated the belief in reincarnation, and

French followers carried it with them across time and space, establishing it as central to major strands of Spiritism. Its popularity can be explained by looking closely at the answers it posed to the burning questions of the nineteenth century, as well as at the ways it integrated morality and action in Spiritist thought. First romantic socialists and then Spiritists argued that reincarnation offered a moral compass for how to create a more just and equal world. Reincarnation functioned to allow a new hope for progress both for the individual and for society. It was the individual's progress that was most highly promoted by Spiritists, however, and that colored nineteenth-century French (and later Latin American) Spiritism's focus on solidarity, charity, and fraternity.

Romantic Reincarnation

The 1830s and 1840s offered a perfect combination of factors that helped popularise reincarnation. The hope for social reform that arose in the aftermath of the French Revolution, the flowering of romanticism, and the 'discovery of the Orient' all overlapped to create a hope in progressive lives as the motor for progress of society.

The French in the 1830s and 1840s recognised that humans could have a direct say in forming the society they lived in. The Revolution of 1789 destroyed the monarchy and instituted a short-lived Republic built on Enlightenment ideals of democracy. This was replaced by the Napoleonic empire, which was in turn replaced by a new version of the old Bourbon monarchy. The right of the nobility to rule had been rejected, but an elite based on wealth continued in practical power, highlighting the failure to achieve longed-for social equality. In the July Revolution of 1830, calls for more democratic representation were heard again, but the workers at the barricades who made the revolution ended up disappointed by a new constitutional monarchy and a suffrage only slightly broader than it had been under Louis XVIII and Charles X. Given the extremity and rapidity of these changes, French politicians, writers, and thinkers focused closely on how to rebuild society, argued over the best political and social organisation, and avidly sought new ideas on these issues.

The tenor of these ideas was profoundly affected by the romantic movement. Romanticism, which had flowered in Germany and England from the 1780s on, came late to France. Its lateness, and the political upheaval that had partially caused that delay, meant that romanticism had a more directly political flavour in France. French romantics, especially following the 1829 debut of Victor Hugo's play *Hernani*, which pitted liberals against conservatives, engaged

directly with questions of society and politics. Yet like all romantics, French romantics searched for the emotional, sensual side of humanity. Reflections on mortality, religious questioning, and intrigue with newly discovered Eastern religious thought, especially Hinduism, all made romantics receptive to the idea of metempsychosis.¹ Death fascinated the romantics and was a frequent topic in their works, offering a mysterious and unfathomable realm that suited their taste for the mystical. Death was both attractive and frightening. Reincarnation offered a consoling addendum to death and a mystical *frisson* of excitement at the myriad possibilities of new lives.

Like politics, religion had been remade during the Revolution. Catholic churches had been dismantled, the clergy forced to sign an oath of allegiance to the Revolution and convents and monasteries closed. On the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy, the Catholic church became a staunch supporter of conservative thought and hierarchical control of society. Missions went through the French countryside in the 1820s in an attempt to rechristianise society. Most non-conservative French intellectuals saw the church as bankrupt, or at least highly questionable. The challenges to Catholicism resulted in a spate of spiritual inventions that included a rejection of Catholic judgments of heaven and hell and a hope for a new future that embraced the innate morality of humanity (Bénichou 1977; Charlton 1963). These new religious beliefs provided an alternate path through a changing world. As historian D.G. Charlton (1984: 34) argues, “to restore the old society one must restore the old religious truths; to create a new order in a new society requires as foundation a new intellectual synthesis.” The participants in these debates, he continues, were “convinced that it is ideas above all which govern history.” Religious questions were thus crucial to the active rethinking of French society.

The last and probably most important source for a turn towards reincarnation was what has been called an ‘Oriental Renaissance’ during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. A vogue for Eastern ideas followed the translation and publication of texts such as the *Bhagavad Gita* (1787, 1832), which

1 The terms metempsychosis and palingenesis were the common terms used before Spiritism. Palingenesis referred at the time to the (re)generation of an animal; a different animal emerged, but one that existed already in genesis in the germ cells of its predecessor. In palingenesis, evolution occurred, but it was not random or left to nature; instead all stages of existence were preordained. Metempsychosis generally refers to the theory of the transmigration of souls and includes in most definitions the progress from animal (or ‘lower’ forms) into human (presumed a ‘higher’ form). Authors at the time used metempsychosis for what in today’s usage would be called reincarnation. As generally accepted, this refers only to a series of rebirths in human form.

fascinated Europeans with its glorious poetry and its discussion of reincarnation. Despite the fact that British thinkers held pride of place in the Orientalist movement, the influence of Orientalism in France was great, due to its coincidence with romanticism and an openness to new religious ideas. “[T]he French Soul of 1820–40 became Romantic and that opened it to everything that Indianism meant and conveyed” (Schwab 1984: 226). Historians Jules Michelet and Edgar Quinet, the great novelist Honoré de Balzac, and Catholic thinker François de Lamennais all saw oriental ideas as new air to freshen the stultifying ideas of their own culture (Schwab 1984: 364). Romantics combined these into ideas of “a continual progression that advances the vital principle degree by degree until the fullest perfection is achieved.”² (Germaine de Staël, cited in Schwab 1984: 230). Michelet (Mitzman 1990: 45), Lamennais (Schwab 1984: 356–360), and even Victor Hugo (Roos 1958) would ultimately come to believe that a series of reincarnations offered consolation and solace for the pains of this world.

Although many romantics read Eastern texts and incorporated ideas of the progressive soul into their writing, most drew their ideas from three contemporary thinkers: Pierre-Simon Ballanche (1776–1847); Pierre Leroux (1797–1871); and Jean Reynaud (1806–1863). These thinkers integrated Eastern and Western ideas and domesticated metempsychosis for the masses. The Englishman Sir William Jones had linked Indic metempsychosis, Pythagorean metempsychosis, and Platonic myth in his 1792 translation of the *Gita Govinda* (Schwab 1984: 205). Ballanche and others looked back to Plato and Pythagoras as responsible for “initiating” the West into the knowledge of Eastern thought. Together, these writers popularised a philosophy of progress through multiple incarnations, either of the individual or of society. They built on Charles Bonnet’s eighteenth-century scientific writings, in which Bonnet argued that progress towards God happened in a series of catastrophic changes, that affected the entirety of nature, a process he dubbed palingenesis. (Bonnet 1769; Sharp 2004). Prior to his, the idea of metempsychosis had been popular among occultists but not widely discussed in literature or philosophy.³ Balanche,

2 The depth of popular understanding of complex Eastern texts is difficult to ascertain, but clearly many thinkers read Eastern texts with their own Western preconceptions well intact.

3 French scholars of literature Paul Bénichou and August Viatte have identified metempsychosis as a major factor in romanticism, springing from the Theosophists of the eighteenth century. See Bénichou, *Le temps des prophètes* (1977) and *Les Mages Romantiques* (1988) and August Viatte, *Les sources occultes du romantisme*, 2 vols. (1965 [1928]). This means that the embrace of reincarnation at the end of the nineteenth century by many modern occultists brought the belief full circle.

Leroux, and Reynaud all posited a version of palingenesis, or reincarnation, as key to the progress of humanity, but they differed in their views of how that progress occurred.

Pierre-Simon Ballanche, a deeply Catholic thinker, believed that social change was necessary to reach a more moral, more equal world. Ballanche never fully completed his theory of social progress towards the divine, although he published several pieces of his work, including a preliminary version of the whole, his *Palingénésie sociale*, in 1827. In his theory of 'Social palingenesis' or 'social rebirth', he argued that society underwent catastrophic change (such as the French Revolution) in order to evolve. Borrowing from Jacob Böhme and other illuminists (McCalla 1998: 206–250; Bowman 1984: 85–86, 98–99), Ballanche held that this evolution took a distinctly religious path, a movement towards God via religious initiation into higher truths. The Fall had occurred because humanity, in the person of Adam, had asserted its will against God's will. To recreate a just and equal society, humanity had to reconcile its will with God's; the method was initiation into Christ's knowledge. Ballanche (1827: 9–10) imagined this process not as an individual but as a social one: the individual could progress and reach perfection "only within and by society." Christianity already recognised all humans as equal before God; Ballanche called this state 'solidarity' and saw it as the endpoint of social evolution; society would eventually reach a state of equality among humans to equal the Christian vision of equality before God. The doctrine of a 'test' (*épreuve*) lay at the center of Ballanche's vision. This suffering, analogous to Christ's suffering on the cross, ensured the "progressive redemption of humanity by its own sorrows" (Bénichou 1977: 87).⁴ This earth had to be a place of suffering since suffering offered the means to achieve a society closer to God's will. "Humanity cannot accuse God of permitting needless suffering because humanity brought suffering on itself [through the Fall] and because it is by means of the expiatory value of suffering that humanity is rehabilitated" (McCalla 1998: 170). For Ballanche, humans suffered not as individuals, in recompense for their actions, but as members of a society progressing towards God.

Ballanche's ideas retained a tension between the individual and society. God had ordained a series of "mysterious and difficult initiations" so that humans would merit, through faith and labor, their reunion with God. Yet Ballanche (1827: 10) also insisted that "man makes himself in his social activity and in his individual activity." The individual can respond to the tests she is

4 Bénichou attributes the importance of giving value to suffering to Ballanche's own suffering; Ballanche grew up in Revolutionary Lyon during the time of its great destruction. For details on Ballanche's suffering and his life during the Terror, see McCalla 1998: 9–22.

given but cannot make progress on her own, outside society. Ballanche also posited that some individuals were more “advanced” than others; these could moralise society in hopes of helping it, but they, too, must await the great metaphysical transformation of the collectivity, because “the Creator willed that man be a social being, in other words, defined by the whole and condemned to learn all as a member of this whole” (Valette 1981: 25). Not completely unlike Karl Marx’s later ideas, Ballanche’s vision was of a series of societies that evolved towards a better world, the germ of each contained within and freed by the downfall of the previous. He even argued that class conflict was one of two means of initiation into the religious truths that brought change; the other was cooperation (Busst 1987: 23). For Ballanche, the motor was not economic change, but the will of God. That it was society, not individuals, who made progress towards God sets off Ballanche’s philosophy from actual theories of reincarnation. He did intimate that some form of future life awaits the individual: “We dream for an instant on the Earth; our dream is sometimes peaceful, but most often worried and troubled; a beneficial crisis called death comes and causes our awakening” (cited in Roos 1958: 95).⁵ Ballanche hesitated to elaborate on what this awakening meant. For him, it was societies or nations that experienced rebirth; the process took too long to occur within the scope of individual existence. This long view left the individual in a pessimistic place: he could not expect to personally experience perfection, and since it was God who directed the process, nothing he could do would change it.

Despite their seemingly conservative tenor, Ballanche’s ideas were widely read, discussed, and accepted by a variety of liberal reformers who embraced his hope for a reformed and equal society. His writings became popular immediately following the Revolution of 1830, a revolution that had replaced a monarch but failed to create greater social equality, as many of its participants had hoped. For our purposes, the two most important ‘students’ of Ballanche were Leroux and Reynaud, two young idealists who hoped that the moment had come to create a better world.

Pierre Leroux and Jean Reynaud met in the milieu of the Saint-Simonians, followers of Claude Henri de Rouvroy, comte de Saint-Simon (1760–1825), who promoted a vision of an increasingly industrialised and egalitarian society. By historians, they are known as romantic socialists, but at the time they considered themselves republicans. They hoped to ameliorate the condition of the

5 According to Roos, Victor Hugo takes from this the idea of metempsychosis, describing all our earthly lives as but sleeps from which we awake to find our true selves.

working class through representation and economic change, but they sought *social* change for the good of all, in order to regenerate society and move it towards perfection (Beecher 2001: 1–8). Leroux (1978: 376) characterised his doctrine as one that “sacrifices none of the terms of the formula: Liberty, Fraternity, Equality, Unity, but reconciles them all.”⁶ Reynaud was in complete agreement with Leroux, and the two worked together on a series of projects to promote social change. Together they popularised a theory of change that combined spirituality, progress, and humanism. Leroux and Reynaud hoped to change society and politics by formulating a new religious outlook that privileged justice, cooperation, and the promise of reincarnation. They rejected Ballanche’s acceptance of original sin and any need to expiate that sin. Instead they employed their version of reincarnation—which they called metempsychosis—to formulate a relationship with God based on justice. Like Ballanche, Reynaud and Leroux rejected eternal punishment, arguing that no just God would punish people forever, with no hope of improvement. But while Ballanche attempted to reinvigorate the Church, Reynaud and Leroux rejected it. The teachings of the Church could not be reconciled with ideas of equality and solidarity.

For nearly all of the 1830s, Reynaud and Leroux worked together to develop ideas on social reform based on metempsychosis. The most important vehicle for these ideas was their *Encyclopédie nouvelle* (New Encyclopedia). The *Encyclopédie* focused on religious, philosophical, and social issues, and its stable of writers included luminaries of romantic and romantic socialist circles.⁷ By the end of the decade, Leroux’s and Reynaud’s ideas had begun to diverge and their egos to clash, so that ultimately they split up to work on separate projects. They continued to respect each other and each other’s ideas, even when they didn’t agree. Two main factors separated Leroux’s and Reynaud’s visions of reincarnation: the place of the individual vs. collective humanity and the place of suffering in the world. Both took themes already broached in Ballanche and continued the discussion around how to perfect society and the individual.

6 Leroux is actually credited with coining the term “socialism,” but later insisted that the term did not apply to his ideas. Notes added in 1847 and 1850 comment on the term socialism.

7 The *Encyclopédie nouvelle* published articles by (and helped support) many ardent social reformers. Contributors included Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, Edgar Quinet, Pauline Roland, and Charles-Augustin de Sainte-Beuve, among others. It was published in a sporadic series of volumes from 1834 to 1845. After 1840 Reynaud edited it alone, and the project was never fully finished. For details on this and on Reynaud’s life, see Griffith 1965.

Leroux expounded his ideas in a doctrine (and a book) called *Humanity* (1985 [1840]). He believed that his new religion of 'humanity' answered the ills, political and social, of the time. Leroux built on Ballanche's emphasis on solidarity and on a collective version of change but rejected his Christianity. True solidarity sprang from human nature, not Christianity. Christian ideas of charity, according to Leroux, turned people away from each other and towards God. Leroux rejected the idea of 'love your neighbor' as impossible and argued that individuals acted out of self-love, and that this was good. For Leroux, self-love or 'egoism' combined with communion with humanity (solidarity) led to both charity and liberty. Humans needed to recognise their own needs as intimately entwined with those of others; solidarity towards others (charity) would be the result. Solidarity was (and was the result of) the true union of the self and the other (the *moi* and the *non-moi*). Here Leroux argued that only through recognising collective humanity could liberty be reached.

Leroux shifted the emphasis from the future and God to the present and humanity. He argued that the way to achieve a perfect society was through solidarity and charity towards others. Ballanche saw suffering as expiation; Leroux completely disagreed and saw charity and solidarity as ways to eliminate and avoid suffering. Suffering seemed to be evidence of the injustice of society, although Leroux never put it that specifically. Humanity was infinite, and thus would continue to progress towards perfection. "To be, is to be infinite; either in an absolute way, like God, or in a purely virtual way, like all creatures made by God" (Leroux 1985 [1840]). Although the mortal part of a person might die, the immortal essence, one's humanity, never did. Leroux's emphasis on humanity led him to posit a metempsychosis that rejected the continuation of the individual soul. For Leroux, death meant a rebirth into humanity, but not ongoing existences of the same soul. Reincarnation guaranteed that each person, as a part of collective humanity, would know true equality and justice once the perfect society was achieved. Like Ballanche, Leroux argued for metempsychosis as progress for the whole; unlike Ballanche, he believed that it was humanity, and not God, that would effect the change towards perfection.

Jean Reynaud shifted the focus of metempsychosis away from the collective and to the individual and thus formulated the version of reincarnation that would be adapted by Spiritists and would carry on into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Reynaud agreed with Leroux that Christian theology, with its original sin and eternal punishment, was anathema to any true justice. Original sin punished the innocent; hell punished without any chance for progress or improvement and despite earthly circumstances. Although Reynaud shared Leroux's insistence on humanity helping itself, he nonetheless

put the onus on the individual to make progress for him- or herself. Reynaud posited "an infinity of corporeal existences . . . in the infinite diversity of habitats [the planets] that God has disseminated throughout space" (Reynaud 1840: 611). Reynaud's innovation was to imagine a body that went beyond human limits. Like the caterpillar becoming a butterfly, the soul would take new forms as it evolved. "Thus the soul which passes from one journey to another, leaving its first body for a new body, constantly changing its residence and its exterior, pursues under the rays of the Creator, from transmigration to transmigration and metamorphosis to metamorphosis, the palingenetic course of its eternal destiny. . . . Birth is not a beginning, it is merely a change of body" (Reynaud 1840: 613). The body, increasingly immaterial across existences, would come closer and closer to perfection as the soul progressed.

Unlike Leroux or Ballanche, Reynaud allowed each individual to make progress for him- or herself. He also made individuals responsible for their own lives. In this, he came much closer to Christian ideas of compensation and punishment, but he also borrowed from Hindu ideas of karma. Suffering, in Reynaud's philosophy, was caused by actions in previous lives. For Reynaud, although he did not stress this aspect, suffering in this life resulted from actions in past lives. These results were expressed most clearly in class and social status. According to Reynaud, children and parents had an affinity before birth (he claimed that causes for this affinity vary and cannot be known). Each person chose his or her life, based on what he or she did in a previous life. "We are thus not passive in this capital fact of birth, which represents in some sort all there is in our life of the fatal or the preordained [including] . . . the essential qualities of our bodies and our minds, of our education, of our status, of our country and our most common relations in society; which includes . . . all the elements of our earthly existence" (Reynaud 1840: 614). Individuals not only chose their situation (and class), but they earned that situation in former lives: their birth and their characters represented "precisely those circumstances that constitute the particular positions that, by [their] preceding efforts, [they] merited from heaven" (Reynaud 1840: 614). Thus Reynaud argued that present life resulted from past life, and he implied that one was what and where one deserved to be.

The individual's progress, however, could only be forwarded by his or her actions within the collective. "Man works for himself when he works for others and there is no other way to work for himself than to work for others" (Reynaud 1840: 618). Solidarity and progress were founded on humanity working together to make a better world. Reynaud wanted "to convert this terrestrial residence, where so many creatures still suffer, into a residence peopled exclusively by happy creatures" (Reynaud 1840: 618). Although material improvements would

move society closer to perfection, Reynaud moved away from his Saint-Simonian roots in that his theory of reincarnation left no real room for a perfect society to be established on earth. Human will alone could not create perfection; perfection would come only as individual humans progressed, through a series of lives, to become something more perfect than human, something supra-human.

Ballanche's, Leroux's, and Reynaud's visions of progress and perfection spread through intellectual circles in Paris and throughout France but also to less educated classes, through teachings by Saint-Simonians to workers and through popular magazines. Of the three, Reynaud's work became the most popular. Reynaud's reincarnation was the most imaginative of the three, allowing flights of fancy about future worlds and future bodies and the abilities or mysteries they might hold. The popular playwright Victorien Sardou read Reynaud, later became a Spiritist (probably in the late 1850s), and published a vision of what life on the world of Jupiter entailed (Commetant 1863: 259ff). The piece was mocked by the popular presses, but it was also widely read, showing the attraction of an open future.

More importantly, Reynaud's version gained influence for two main reasons: individualism and nationalism. As liberalism rose among the middle classes, so too did a vision of the individual as responsible for him- or herself. Although Reynaud insisted that individual progress happened *by working for* society, his arguments still allotted progress to individuals: they did not have to wait for society or humanity as a whole to progress. After the failure of socialist hopes in the 1848 Revolution and with the arrest or exile of many socialists, including Pierre Leroux, Reynaud remained in France and concentrated on publishing his ideas on reincarnation. Many liberal political thinkers who had been sympathetic to socialist ideas prior to the 1848 revolution lost that sympathy in the face of what they saw as unreasonable worker riots. Reynaud's *Terre et Ciel* (Earth and Heaven), which combined the two major articles from the *Encyclopédie Nouvelle* that dealt with reincarnation, was published in 1854. It was condemned by the Catholic church, making it popular among anticlericals and liberal reformers who opposed the rise of the conservative regime of Louis Napoleon after 1850.

From the late 1830s on, Reynaud justified his ideas on reincarnation by connecting them with the mythical French past. In his 1838 article on "Druidisme" for the *Encyclopédie nouvelle* (t. 4; later printed separately as a book under the title *Considérations sur l'esprit de la Gaule*, 1847), he claimed that reincarnation was distinctly French because the Gauls, the first French, had based their philosophy on belief in metempsychosis. This created a clear nationalist link to reincarnation. Reformers who argued for a more democratic France could

point to the Gauls as already practicing participatory democracy. Reynaud did just that, asserting that the Celts had maintained a more egalitarian society, included women in their decision-making processes, and offered a just political and social model to look back to. The idea of the Gauls as the bearers of 'true' French culture enjoyed a vogue throughout the nineteenth century; Reynaud participated in and furthered this trend.⁸ His writings strongly influenced Henri Martin, the most important popular historian of France at the time. Martin incorporated teachings on Celts, druids, and reincarnation into his vision of France as a nation and popularised that vision widely (Rearick 1972: 60–61). Reincarnation thus fully entered the lexicon not only of readers of the romantics but also of the majority of bourgeois and working class French through Martin's popular histories. Despite this spread of the idea, only the birth of Spiritism gave reincarnation a permanent doctrinal home.

Spiritist Reincarnation

Reincarnation as popularised by French Spiritists rested on ideas of free will, equality, merit, progress, and justice from a just God. It offered a secular and 'scientific' version of spiritual truths, and it appealed to people across faiths, classes, and genders. Intellectually defensible, Spiritist reincarnation also touched the emotions, assuring families that they would be reunited and those seeking justice that they would find it. Spiritist reincarnation's greatest strength was that it incorporated a strong spiritual element in the relationship between the individual and society, offering followers clear guidance on how to live yet not sanctioning the interference of the church in individual lives.

Allan Kardec, born Hippolyte-Léon-Denizard Rivail (1804–1869), founded the French Spiritist movement in the late 1850s. He led that movement until his death, and his ideas and writings permanently shaped the form of Spiritism.⁹ Born in 1804, Rivail's life paralleled the rise of the reform movements that had already occasioned the rise of theories of metempsychosis. Lyon, his birthplace, suffered more severely than any other under the Revolution; it was also known for its freethinking tendencies. He studied in

8 For more on the importance of the Gauls and the revival of interest in the druids, see Stuart Piggott 1968. For Reynaud, druids, and reincarnation, see Sharp 2006: 26–28. On the importance of Celts for nineteenth-century patriots, see Pomian 1996: 29–76. Pomian's article discusses the early Gauls in general; no reference is made to druids in particular.

9 See John Monroe's contribution to this volume for an in-depth discussion of Kardec and Spiritism.

Switzerland under the education reformer Jean-Henri Pestalozzi, who invented a new form of pedagogy directly based on Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emile*. In Paris, Rivail made his living as a teacher, promoting the new method; in his private life he explored phrenology and Mesmerism. He published works on mathematics and pedagogical methods, and argued for free and universal education.

When the new vogue of table turning arrived in Paris in 1853, Rivail was fascinated by it but thought it had little utility. After his discovery of writing mediums, with their ability to channel spirits' answers to questions about life and the afterlife, he became fully convinced of the value of talking to spirits. In 1855, Rivail questioned the spirits in weekly conversations held by the Baudin family, whose two daughters acted as mediums. It was here that the spirits reportedly gave him his 'druidic' pseudonym and, more importantly, a corpus of knowledge that Kardec codified into possibly the most important publication in all Spiritualism, *Le livre des esprits* or *The Spirits' Book*, published in 1857 and revised into its lasting form in a second edition in 1860.¹⁰ The term 'codified' is that used by Kardec, who claimed that he did no more than organise the spirits' answers to his questions. The book consists of questions and responses arranged in categories. The categories and questions were shaped by Kardec's concerns and contemporary ideas; they addressed the nature of God and the spirit world as well as a search for moral law. Kardec also commented, offering his interpretations of the spirits' responses in clearly demarcated sections. Kardec's book took what had been a light-hearted parlor game and turned it into a search for scientific and religious truths about the relationship between this world and the next. The crux of that relationship, for Kardec and his followers, lay in the continuous progress made by the soul through a series of lives.

"What is the aim of the incarnation of spirits?" Kardec asked the spirits. Their answer: "It is a necessity imposed on them by God, as the means of attaining perfection. For some it is an expiation, for others, a mission. In order

10 Allan Kardec. 1989 [1875]. *The Spirits' Book*. trans. Anna Blackwell. Blackwell's was the first, and until recently only, English translation. It is based on the revised 1860 edition. Blackwell knew Allan Kardec and his wife Amélie Boudet, and she was a practicing Spiritualist in England. At least two more recent English translations now exist, one (1996) translated by John Zerio and published by the Allan Kardec Educational Society in Philadelphia, and another (2005; 3rd ed. 2010) translated by Darrell W. Kimball and Marcia M. Saiz and published by the International Spiritist Council in Brasilia. Both use more contemporary language yet faithfully produce the meaning of the original; I prefer Blackwell's because it retains a certain nineteenth-century formality. Kardec's works, as well as those of many other key French Spiritists, can be downloaded in the original French for free from the Centre Spiritiste Lyonnaise Allan Kardec <http://www.cslak.fr/>.

to attain perfection, *it is necessary for them to undergo all the vicissitudes of corporeal existence*. It is the experience acquired by expiation that constitutes its usefulness" (Kardec 1989: 107). This question and answer from *The Spirits' Book* illustrates the straightforward nature of the presentation of this doctrine and its simple, accessible form. The quote goes on to tell readers that each spirit has a mission to accomplish in life; the spirit is "thus made to contribute his quota towards the general weal, while achieving his own advancement" (Kardec 1989: 107). In this quote we see the legacy of Ballanche, Leroux, and Reynaud very clearly. Reincarnation is the path to progress for society as well as individuals. Ballanche's term 'expiation' is present and necessary.¹¹ Whether Kardec had read Ballanche, Leroux, or Reynaud is uncertain, although likely. He never offered modern sources for reincarnation but instead pointed back to Pythagoras and Hinduism (Kardec 1989: 183). Yet he certainly belonged to the types of groups whose members were involved in contemporary discussions of reincarnation. In addition, he was introduced to table turning by the dramatist Victorien Sardou, among others, and Sardou had long been a proponent of Reynaud's ideas (Boudou 1921: 170–171). Reynaud's work on reincarnation had also just been published in its collected form, *Terre et ciel* (1854), and was being widely read and reviewed. Certainly whether Kardec acknowledged the influence or not, his codification clarified the relationship between individual advancement and society in ways very similar to that of Reynaud: increasingly advanced individuals make a better world for all.

According to Spiritist doctrine, spirits evolve from one existence to the next, developing from fairly base, sensually oriented creatures to increasingly moral, intelligent, and selfless beings that inhabit the same sphere as God. A spirit who has acted poorly, failing to progress, may need to stay at the same level in life, in order to make up for its sins and learn its lessons. A spirit who has acted wisely and charitably in life can move forward. The more perfect spirit is morally upright, in solidarity with humanity by aiding others, and becomes less and less material, both in terms of its desires and in bodily terms. Truly advanced spirits often choose to be incarnated into a lesser world simply to aid those behind them in their development. Jesus exemplified the advanced spirit returning to help others less advanced to recognise the way forward. His critique of materialism illustrates his advanced nature. The concept of advanced

11 Note that the modern American edition of the text translates the French *expiation* as 'purification' rather than expiation. This softens the meaning and moves it away from a punishment for the Fall and towards individualised progress. The term 'expiation' still implies that some of the blame for the human condition rests on original sin or, at least, on the faults of humanity as a whole.

spirits aiding those less so echoes that of bodhisattvas and shows the unacknowledged, probably unconscious, blending of Eastern ideas into Spiritist thought.

Most nineteenth-century Spiritists believed that these incarnations took place not simply on earth but on numerous planets (Guthke 1990: 3). The idea of a plurality of worlds that could support life circulated so widely in the nineteenth century that one historian has called it an “*idée reçue*” under the Second Empire (Nathan 1981: 17). In the Spiritist version of plural worlds, these planets differed greatly from earth; earth was imagined to be a fairly low or non-advanced world. The level of advancement of the spirit determines the world into which it is incarnated, and the purer the spirit, the less material the physical envelope: the body becomes “less dense,” its needs “less gross.” Purification means not only bodily lightness but also the loss of material desires: “The purification of spirits determines the moral excellence of the corporeal beings in whom they are incarnated. The animal passions become weaker, and selfishness gives place to the sentiment of fraternity” (Kardec 1989: 124).¹² Progress is the path away from materialism. As humans progress, so too will earth: “It will become a terrestrial paradise, when the men by whom it is inhabited have become good” (Kardec 1989: 125). This last vision echoed that of Leroux, who dreamt of the day that true fraternity and justice would reign on earth.

The importance of justice in the theory of reincarnation cannot be exaggerated. Spiritists (or the spirits) argued for God as just, and just on terms that humans could understand and accept. Like romantic socialism, Kardecist Spiritism insisted that a just God would not punish without reason or chastise His people without giving them a chance to learn and improve. He most certainly would not condemn them to eternal suffering. Multiple lives gave humans a chance to correct and improve, fulfilling the nineteenth-century value of progress. Multiple lives also explained this life’s many seeming injustices: inequalities of wealth, aptitude, and intelligence, among others. If these differences were explained simply by “the corporeal organisation of each child” then humans would be mere machines, determined by their own bodies

¹² The quote comes from Kardec’s commentary on a spirit communication. The botanist and zoologist Charles Bonnet, in his *Palingénésie philosophique* (1769), argued that the future body of the soul will be ether, light, or some analogous substance; it will retain memory and will have more refined senses and organs capable of new perceptions and feelings different from humans (Guthke 1990: 268).

(Kardec 1989: 143).¹³ This would be unjust, negating morality, as a person would not be to blame for his or her actions. Spiritists acted as vocal defenders of individual moral responsibility in the face of increasingly materialist explanations of society and the mind, promoted by thinkers such as Auguste Comte and the material psychology beginning to be introduced from Germany.¹⁴ Spiritists also challenged the Catholic acceptance of inequality as God's will. If God created souls unequal, He could not be just. A God that favored some over others would be a capricious God, more fitting for ancient Greeks than nineteenth-century Europeans.

God and reincarnation were eminently *rational*. Kardec and his followers repeatedly insisted on the rational nature of this belief. Kardec even argued that logic alone would lead one to recognise the truth of reincarnation; the actual teachings of the spirits on reincarnation added weight, but were not crucial to accepting the idea. Reason above all led one there: "The doctrine of reincarnation...is the only one which answers to the idea we form to ourselves of the justice of God in regard to those who are placed, by circumstances over which they have no control, in conditions unfavourable to their moral advancement.... This doctrine is indicated by the teachings of reason, as well as by those of our spirit-instructors" (Kardec 1989: 121).¹⁵ The emphasis on reason was Kardec's position. Reason and the empirical gathering of facts from experiment with mediums made Spiritism 'scientific' as well. This allowed the educated anticlerical elite to accept its teachings in ways that calling it a religion would not have. For many, probably most, Spiritists, it was less reason as such and more the rejection of the limits of Catholicism and the promises of progress that convinced them of the rightness of Spiritism, along with, of course, a true acceptance of the spirits and their messages.

13 The context of this quote is a chapter-long comment by Kardec (1875: 138–148) explaining how reincarnation is rational: it explains earthly inequality and thus proves God's justice. Reflecting nineteenth-century prejudices, Kardec also argues that reincarnation helps explain the "inequality" between the races, some of which are savage and others civilised. A contemporary translation (transl. J. Zerio; Kardec 1996: 89) replaces "race" with "groups of people" and "savage or civilised" with "more progressive in their attitudes."

14 On the relationship between psychology and Spiritism, see Brower 2010; for the rise of experimental psychology, see Chapter 2.

15 See also 138–147, where Kardec reiterates his rational argument for reincarnation and claims that reason should lead even those who do not accept spirit teachings as valid to believe.

The central values of equality, justice, and progress rested on a system of merit and free will. Born of the Enlightenment, the nineteenth-century faith in merit insisted that people should be able to rise to positions in society merited by their abilities and efforts. This critique of traditional aristocratic hierarchies had been cemented by the French Revolution. The hope for family or individual improvement through social mobility buoyed the rising middle class, many of whom turned most of their collective efforts towards improving their status and wealth, often through education (on the goals of the middle classes, see Davidoff and Hall 1987; Harrison 1999; Daumard 1970). In a clear echo of these hopes, the version of reincarnation promoted by Kardec and French Spiritists entwined merit with the principle of equality, tempering the negative side of karma by arguing that all souls merited the experiences of each life, but that they would ultimately surpass their contemporary limits and merit better lives, either on this world or another.

Free, individual will governed the relationship between merit and equality. Equality dictated incarnation for all spirits, even those who never deviated from the good path. "All are created simple and ignorant; they gain in instruction in the struggles and tribulations of corporeal life. God, being just, could not make some of them happy, without trouble and without exertion, and consequently without merit" (Kardec 1989: 107). But how quickly one advanced to perfection was strictly a matter of individual choice: "It depends upon each spirit to hasten his own advancement or to retard it indefinitely" (Kardec 1989: 129). Progress could be made both by right actions in earthly life: charity and fraternity; and by right choices in disincarnate life: choosing tests that helped one learn the unimportance of material gain and the importance of devotion to others. Thus some spirits take longer to reach perfection, but it is their own choice to do so. The differences in experiences in our lives are explained by our positions along that path to perfection and the choices we have made for this life. "The wisdom of God is shown in the freedom of choice which He leaves to every spirit, for each has thus the merit of his deeds" (Kardec 1989: 103).¹⁶ The very nineteenth-century European twist to this version of reincarnation comes in its one-way nature. Spirits can *only* progress (or remain stranded); they cannot regress. "Spirits may remain stationary, but they never retrograde; those who are rebellious are punished by not advancing, and by having to recommence their misused existences under the conditions suited to their nature" (Kardec 1989: 123; see also 102). This punishment is self-inflicted within the

16 A section on "Choice of Trials" explains that God rarely imposes trials of life as chastisement, for He does not need to hurry the spirit along but lets it find the right road on its own (163–170).

norms of the system, rather than the wrath of God. It is also distinctly temporary. This vision of the human spirit is doubly optimistic. Not only does the spirit always eventually reach perfection, but lessons learned are never forgotten and lead directly to positive results in terms of progress.

Theologically and emotionally, reincarnation offered a direct challenge to Catholicism. Most importantly, Spiritists denied both hell and purgatory. Spiritism replaced hell (and heaven) with salvation for all and the expiatory suffering of purgatory with the expiatory learning progress of successive existences. Purgatory enjoyed great popularity among Catholics in the late nineteenth century (Cuchet 1999: 333–353; Vovelle 1996; LeGoff 1984). Like Spiritism, purgatory allowed continued connection with the dead, as well as hope of being ‘saved’; unlike spirits according to Spiritism, souls in purgatory had no control over their progress and could only hope for God’s mercy. Spiritists rejected mercy for action; they imagined souls making choices and taking control of their progress and their advancement (see Sharp 2006: 146–155). This consolatory and proactive, rather than judgmental, emphasis attracted many to the movement.

What would seem to be one of the thorniest theological, and practical, problems of belief in reincarnation is that of karma, or just desserts. The term karma was almost never used by nineteenth-century French Spiritists, and it is used only rarely today. But the gist of the idea, that this life is determined by what you deserve given your actions in the last one, surfaced again and again in Spiritist teachings. However, the concept of karma seems almost never to have led to blaming the victim of hardship. Followers sometimes pointed to it as excuse or mitigating factor, in fact: we all experience poverty in one life or another; this is just your life to do it. The lack of blame was perhaps because of the element of choice. ‘Tests’, such as poverty, hardship, or painful experiences, could be *chosen* by spirits as a way to better advance in moral and spiritual development. They might not result from bad actions in a previous life. Nor were seemingly good things in life necessarily rewards for good actions. In one example, a spirit had chosen for her next life “a new test, the riskiest of all, that of fortune. Thus Jacqueline will reincarnate in a rich family, and will be beautiful” (*Révélations d’outre tombe* 1864: 32).¹⁷ Although Spiritists did not say this in

17 The spirit promised to study and to fortify itself by acts of charity in order to avoid the temptations of wealth and beauty. Clearly, this spirit communication could be read to justify middle class wealth (and inequality) as long as mitigated by charity. That the spirit was being born as a woman was fitting, given women’s key role in bourgeois charity.

so many words, spirit communications such as this one revealed there was no clear way to know whether earthly situations were thus a result of poor action in a previous life (evidence of a lack of progress) or of a tough but wise choice made as a non-incarnate spirit (evidence of growth).

Kardec has been called 'popelike' and credited with strict control of Spiritism (Monroe 2007: 112–118), but the structure of Spiritism meant that theories could be applied and interpreted in many ways (Hess 1991: 60). Certainly Kardec during his lifetime, and others after that, challenged Spiritists who tried to reject the Kardecist version of Spiritism in France, largely successfully. Certainly Spiritism relied on published works like the *Revue spirite* and the *Spirits' Book*, which maintained a relatively consistent message. But in reality, the strength of Spiritism always came from its participatory nature. Anyone might be a medium; even those who did not develop that talent could experience the thrill of the spirits' visits in individual group meetings. Spiritism in France and elsewhere spread through small groups, often situated in private homes or meeting privately in rented rooms. Each of these groups could and did forge its own relationship to the spirits with whom it spoke. Most also developed particular interpretations of Spiritist doctrine. Some emphasised the importance of reason and intellectual development through writing mediums; these were closest to Kardec's vision of Spiritism. Bourgeois Spiritists often took this path. Others revelled in the appearance of 'apports'—roses or other objects materialised from the beyond by physical mediums—or in the ability of spirits to play musical instruments and make sounds. These groups often emphasised what might be called the 'entertainment' value of Spiritism, the wonder at the ability of spirits to affect this world. Still others, probably a majority, used séances to contact their loved ones and gain reassurance that their family and friends continued to exist, although taken from them for the moment. The doctrine of reincarnation consoled those who had lost loved ones by signaling that they would be reunited again in some future earthly existence and would all be reunited ultimately in the perfection of humanity. All groups, though, had to consider the issue of how the doctrine of reincarnation translated into action.

Three main responses arose in the struggle to reconcile merit and social progress with reincarnation. The first encouraged quietism and acceptance of one's place in life and the social hierarchy. This came closest to blaming the individual, pointing out that people occupy the place they deserve or have earned. Or, more positively, that since all experience hardship, hardship should be accepted rather than mitigated. The second and much more widespread response insisted that social hierarchy did not matter, given that all

people would experience a variety of levels. However, the inequalities of social standing should be ameliorated by charity and fraternity. The third and most radical approach insisted that fraternity should lead to solidarity, which meant striving to create a more equal society on earth, usually through supporting socialist ideas. This view had significant and vocal support from a number of Spiritist leaders and writers in the second half of the nineteenth century, although often leaders also supported the more moderate version of equality through charity, even while calling for some political change. The most popular response has always been the call for charity and fraternity; in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it almost completely superseded the more radical vision.

The interpretation of class privilege as related to merit came out most strongly in the ideas of a Lyon lawyer, André Pezzani, who wrote frequently in Spiritist journals from 1863 through at least the 1880s. He was rather an outlier of the movement, however, who first celebrated and then rejected Kardec's teachings. In his writing, Pezzani promoted reincarnation extensively, as he had since the early 1840s. He had participated in the Revolution of 1848, but his political commitment did not last long, and he returned to his writing career. Writing in the 1860s, he saw reincarnation as explaining the hardships of the poor and the workers, rather than as a means to change their position. He wrote that the majority of men are disinherited of property, obliged to suffer through rude labor. So they raise their voices against such an order, demanding sharing of the wealth. "Spiritism...gives the solution to the problem, it assigns, for the origin of property, a providential law. We are all in the position that we have merited..." He goes on to tell the workers: "Do not grumble about your fate; do not call violence to the aid of imaginary rights; there are no other rights here below than the will of God"¹⁸ (Pezzani 1863: n.p.). Pezzani expressed what was a common bourgeois fear after the 1848 Revolution: that the working classes would attempt to violently reorganise the social order to better their lot. Unlike most Spiritists, Pezzani spent his energy studying the philosophy of reincarnation and constantly trying to justify it. His interest in the spirits themselves remained minimal. This may explain the rarity of his viewpoint. Spirit messages consistently called for action, not quiescence. Very few existing groups seem to have accepted Pezzani's version, although its publication in Spiritist periodicals shows it was not anathema.

18 "Ne murmurez pas de votre sort, n'appellez pas la force au secours de droits imaginaires; il n'y a d'autres droits ici-bas que la volonté de Dieu..."

A much softer version of this idea was offered by Gabriel Delanne, leader of the scientific study of mediums in Paris from the 1880s to the 1920s. In his *Evolution animique* (Animistic Evolution, 1897), he reminded readers that class conflict might be avoided if people truly recognised that “existence is only a transitory moment in the eternal evolution.” If there were only “less arrogance above and less envy below,” Delanne insisted that “an effective solidarity” would spring from the “consoling doctrine” of Spiritism. “We would soon see the disappearance of these fratricidal struggles, foolish products of ignorance, dissipating before the teachings of love and fraternity that are the crowning rays of spiritism” (Lantier 1971: 121–122). Delanne’s vision was hopeful that divisions would easily be overcome, but it was vague enough to also ignore any need for social change.

The opposing viewpoint insisted that the revelations of Spiritism only further supported a call for radical social change. Prior to 1878 and the full establishment of a Republic in France, many Spiritists participated in the republican opposition to Napoleon III’s Second Empire and, after 1870, the conservative early Third Republic. During this period, both socialists and republicans called for legal equality and democratic voting. The political differences amongst these groups could be ignored when out of power. What they shared most strongly was an anti-clerical bent, part of France’s republican tradition since 1792, as the Catholic church was seen as upholding the most traditional and conservative values, and as promoting the status quo rather than the progress of the people.

Republican ideas flourished in Paris, but they were hardly limited to the vibrant capital. The best example of radicalism in the countryside was in the small medieval city of Carcassonne, in the south of France. Carcassonne hosted a Spiritist circle of leftist thinkers that supported and popularised the socialist teachings of Charles Fourier and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, both of whom offered radical critiques of capitalism and property. Fourier also theorised multiple lives on multiple planets (Nelli 1978: 185; Nathan 1981). Two important figures, Timoleon Jaubert and Valentin Tournier, spread Spiritism and with it a call for socialist equality. Jaubert was most known for his Spiritist poetry, printed in both Spiritist and non-Spiritist journals from 1854 up to 1892. Tournier was more fiery, offering strong critiques of the clergy and the establishment. His vehement “Refutation” (1875) of a critique of Spiritism written by Archbishop Desprès of Toulouse was read throughout France and helped equate Spiritism and anticlericalism. Tournier’s emphasis lay less on reincarnation per se and more on conversations with spirits as a way to revitalise morality, something the Church had failed to do.

The teachings of the spirits held plenty of room for calls for social change to create a more egalitarian world. The *Spirits' Book* on 'the law of labor' holds, for example, that labor is necessary for all. It is expiation, but it also develops intelligence. Everyone must work. Even those wealthy enough to avoid material labor aren't exempt from "rendering [themselves] useful" (Kardec 1989: 290, 291). Most interesting, employers misusing authority and imposing too much labor on employees "commit one of the worst of crimes" and "transgress the law of God." Those whose family cannot support them in old age without working should be provided for by society (Kardec 1989: 292). Elsewhere, this same crime is pointed to in one of the few examples where the *Spirits' Book* claims that people will suffer for their actions. Those who "abuse the superiority of their social position by oppressing the weak to their own profit...will be re-born into an existence in which they will endure all that they have caused to be endured" (Kardec 1989: 328). The influence of romantic socialists is clearly seen in this section. First, Kardec's questions directly investigate the notion of absolute equality of riches. The spirits answer that those who believe this is possible "are framers of systems" and caution their listeners not to "run after chimeras" (Kardec 1989: 329). "Equality of well-being" however, is possible, if humanity could only come to a good understanding of itself. Those who "fall into destitution and misery through their own fault" should nonetheless be aided by society, which is "often the primary cause of such failures" (Kardec 1989: 330). What the spirits did not do, at any point, was to discuss the *politics* of how "society" should aid those in need.

In 1889, at the first and most important international Spiritist conference, many raised their voices to argue that Spiritists were not doing enough to fight for social change and equality. The Groupe Bisontin, from Besançon, insisted that the word 'fraternity' appeared too rarely in calls for social change. It was the role of Spiritism, they wrote, to unveil the reality of socialism as the next stage of human evolution and thus open the way to the only true path of progress (*Compte rendu du Congrès spirite et spiritualiste internationale de 1889* 1889: 217–218). The Italian law professor Jean Hoffman also called for socialism: "association," he claimed, was the only means to heal the ills of individualism and egoism (*Compte rendu* 1889: 197). Most Spiritists were less overtly political. The 'law of justice' should be followed, as should the 'law of charity' and of fraternity. Kardec's *Spirits' Book* (1989: 350–351) defined the law of justice as truly following the golden rule; it also insisted that it was unjust to "accumulate [property] without benefit to any one, merely to satisfy...passions." This meant not a socialist politics but an active engagement in charitable giving of one form or another.

For the vast majority of Spiritists, the practical outcome of a belief in reincarnation thus lay in the need to help fellow souls progress along the path to perfection. Spiritist groups sponsored project after project, usually befitting their class standing. Bourgeois Spiritists sponsored works to help women newly freed from prison, programs for girls' education, and programs to distribute bread to the poor. They contributed very strongly in the 1870s to the push for free, universal, and secular education embodied in the left-leaning *Ligue de l'enseignement* (League for Education) that culminated in the passage of the Ferry Laws on education from 1880 to 1883. Working-class Spiritists created self-help groups that mirrored those in earlier craft associations. These mutual-aid societies supported their fellow Spiritists in times of illness or job loss and by doing things like paying for a funeral. Many working-class Spiritists also participated in more traditional charity, such as providing bread to the poor on All Souls' Day. In some cases, Spiritists helped souls directly, rather than as reincarnated on earth. In these instances, Spiritists at meetings helped newly disincarnated spirits to recognise that they were dead, and taught them about Spiritism and reincarnation as a way to help them understand their situation and to progress towards their next reincarnation.

Given the importance of equality and the important roles women played in the movement, Spiritists often worked for equality in matters of gender. What sex a body was came not from the soul but from circumstance. "The same spirits animate men and women," and the choice of sex "is always decided in view of the trials which [the spirit] has to undergo" in a particular corporeal incarnation (Kardec 1989: 131; see also 331 for a discussion of equal but separate roles for women and men). Nineteenth-century French Spiritists were relatively pro-women's equality, while still accepting separate roles for men and women. Female Spiritists, many of them claiming the authority that mediumship gave them, argued for women's right to act in the public sphere. Their lives as mediums and often as writers reinforced that claim. Olympe Audouard, an important member of feminist circles in the 1860s to 1880s and a prominent feminist lecturer, publicly announced her conversion to Spiritism in her journal *Le Papillon* in 1861 and frequently promoted Spiritist ideas (Audouard 1861: 27, 231–239). Emilie Collignon, a Bordeaux medium during the 1870s, used her Spiritist connections to help her set up a school for working-class girls.¹⁹

19 Collignon 1870 and 1873. For more on Collignon, see Sharp 2006: 112–114; for an in-depth study of mediums, gender, and women's rights, see Edelman 1995. See also Owen 1990 and Tromp 2003.

All of these practices could be, and were, seen by practitioners as changing the world and improving it. For some this improvement needed to be much more politically radical than for others. Spiritism could integrate all levels of political and social commitment in its theory of reincarnation. This was and is, in fact, one of the main strengths of the philosophy. The 'law of progress', that all will constantly improve and that all should aid others in improving, creates, in the main, a very optimistic outlook on life and one that promotes fraternal charity. Meetings and mediums' services were and are (almost) always free. Every Spiritist I have 'met', past or present, draws from a deep respect for humanity. Despite the possibility of interpreting reincarnation in terms of karmic retribution, the main thrust of the concept is one of increasing intellectual and moral development. Each life is lived better; each person in each life should strive to improve. Blame or condemnation rarely appears as part of this process. Despite the theological emphasis on the importance of individual action and free will, the practical outcome of the Spiritist doctrine of reincarnation is to encourage extensive aid to others.

Kardecist Spiritists were not alone in their progressive politics. Even while rejecting ideas of reincarnation, nineteenth-century Spiritualists in Britain and perhaps especially in the United States embraced progressive causes, from women's rights to the abolition of slavery to worker education (Braude 1989; Barrow 1986). Women and the working classes in these countries used Spiritualism as a motor for social change, a means to argue for their own rights. The crucial element that Kardecist Spiritism adds to the mix is the insistence on fraternity and that one's own individual progress is directly linked to one's behavior towards society as a whole. One of the most repeated elements of Spiritist teaching is the maxim *Hors la charité, point de salut* (without charity, there is no salvation). This reworking of the Catholic church's insistent and exclusive *hors de l'église, point de salut* (outside of the church, there is no salvation) made an active concern for others central to Kardecism (Kardec 1876: 222–229). It also took the teachings of Jesus and Paul away from the church and reworked them in a way that was clearly moral and spiritual but did not require Christianity. This social element, springing originally from the romantic socialists in their critique of Catholicism, nonetheless appeals directly to the general Christian morality of the Catholic countries where Kardecist Spiritism has flourished. From France to Puerto Rico (Rodriguez Escudero 1991; Romberg 2003a; Romberg 2003b) to Brazil (Aubrée and Laplantine 1990; Hess 1991; Hess 1994), Spiritists have been extremely active in promoting social improvement. Brazil especially is well known for its Spiritist healing centers, which offer charitable aid from soup kitchens to spirit-directed healing (Moreira-Almeida and Koss-Chioino 2009; Moreira-Almeida and Neto 2005;

Bragdon 2004).²⁰ As Kardecist Spiritism spread through Latin America, the dedication to fraternity increased through the decades of the twentieth century and won these previously marginal groups partial recognition from mainstream institutions. Contemporary Spiritists continue to cite reincarnation as a primary factor in their worldview and in motivating their social actions. As it did in the nineteenth century, the Spiritist theory of reincarnation attracts followers through its versatility and ability to integrate with a number of outlooks, both Christian and scientific. In Spiritism, reincarnation provides a clear path to progress for both the individual and society.

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20 For more on Spiritist therapy in Brazil, see Aureliano and Cardoso's contribution to this volume.

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Crossing Over

Allan Kardec and the Transnationalisation of Modern Spiritualism

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Within five years of its emergence in upstate New York, Modern Spiritualism had become transnational. It spread to Great Britain in late 1852, after the arrival of the American medium Mrs. W.R. Hayden (Goldfarb and Goldfarb 1978: 68–87). At about the same time, séance phenomena elicited growing interest on the Continent. As early as 1851, practitioners of Mesmerism in France took note of the “mysterious raps from America” (Cahagnet 1851a); by spring 1853, news from the United States had ignited a widespread fascination with table-moving in Germany, France, Italy, and Russia, among other places (Biondi 1988; Cuchet 2012; Monroe 2008; Treitel 2004; Vinitsky 2009). Sitting around a table with friends, laying hands on its top, and feeling it rotate, creak, or tap, apparently without any direct physical impulsion, became a common party game from Brussels to Moscow. While broad popular interest diminished rapidly, small groups across Europe embraced the American notion that these phenomena and others of similar kind could serve as a means of conversing with the spirits of the dead, and these groups began to speculate about the metaphysical significance of this dialogue. Over the next decade and a half, these isolated groups grew and coalesced. First in France, then in Italy, Spain, and Russia, it became common to distinguish Spiritualism from ‘Spiritism’, a religious system that shared fundamental elements with its American progenitor but differed on key points that seem to have made it more attractive to believers whose expectations were shaped by Catholicism and, to a lesser extent, Eastern Orthodoxy (Monroe 2008; Biondi 1988; Vinitsky 2009; Abend 2004; Cuchet 2012). In the 1870s and 1880s, Spiritism made its own way west, to Latin America and the Caribbean, where it subsequently became part of a syncretic mixture typical of what Paul Gilroy (1993) has called the “black Atlantic.”¹ This essay seeks to shed some new light on a crucial turning point in this process of global transmission: the initial codification of the philosophy and practice of Spiritism by the French writer and editor Hippolyte Léon Denizard

1 See Moreira-Almeida et al. 2005, and Rivera 2005. For syncretism and the complex social meanings Kardec’s ‘doctrine’ has acquired in Latin America and the Caribbean, see Aubrée and Laplantine 1990; Brown 1986; Hess 1991; and Santo 2010.

Rivail, who published his most important works under the pseudonym Allan Kardec. In addition to considering how Kardec's ideas emerged from the French encounter with American Spiritualism in the late 1850s and early 1860s, I will use a case study—that of the ill-starred Bordeaux lawyer Jean-Baptiste Roustaing—to analyze the distinctive dynamic of authority that characterised Kardecist Spiritism and marked one of its most salient differences from its American counterpart.

It has become increasingly common for historians—especially in the United States—to say that their field has undergone a ‘transnational turn’ (see for example Bayly et al. 2006; Roberts 2005; Seigel 2005). Scholars are coming to see the concern with individual nation-states that has typically structured historical inquiry as potentially arbitrary and restrictive, and they are seeking other ways to frame their subjects. Epoch-making social, economic, intellectual, and religious developments, after all, have often been notable for the ease with which they cross political borders. A transnational approach privileges such instances of crossing, by foregrounding migrations, diasporas, and movements of ideas among nations and across cultural and linguistic boundaries. Historians who adopt a self-consciously transnational approach are primarily concerned with the study of exchanges—relations of contact in which each party takes something from the other while simultaneously distinguishing itself by marking out its own differences. Analyzing the process by which individuals and groups discover, invent, and define their similarities and differences, in turn becomes the primary subject of scholarly inquiry. This approach has the salutary purpose of revealing the constructedness of national and cultural identities, which emerge not as reified sets of defining characteristics, but as unstable terms subject to ongoing renegotiation, constantly permeated by influences from elsewhere.

Despite Modern Spiritualism's global reach, and its consequent implication in numerous and complex relations of exchange, scholars have been remarkably slow to consider it as a transnational phenomenon. Historians of the United States, who have produced perhaps the largest, most highly developed body of literature on the subject, tend to present Spiritualism as a distinctively American religious movement. Their efforts to do so have taken an array of forms. To varying degrees, many (Braude 1989; Moore 1977) have emphasised Spiritualism's connection with the groundswell of interest in radical reform, ranging from women's rights to abolitionism, that historians in the United States have long considered a defining aspect of “the American 1848.”² Many

2 “The American 1848,” a widely-used term of art among American historians, was coined by Michael Paul Rogin (1983).

have also placed Spiritualism in the landscape of the broadly Protestant, though sometimes more dramatically heterodox, sectarian diversity that characterised the United States before the Civil War, alongside Swedenborgianism, Universalism, Quakerism, Unitarianism, Mormonism, and so on (Carroll 1997; Albanese 2007; Braude 1989; Moore 1977). A third group has taken an approach grounded in cultural history, emphasising the way Spiritualism reveals specifically American changes in practices of mourning, ambivalence about race, and broader efforts at national-cultural self-definition (see Cox 2003; McGarry 2008; Gutierrez 2009). The literature on Spiritualism in Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and Russia has tended to pass relatively quickly over the question of American origins, in order to chart the specific unfolding of these ideas in whichever national context is the primary focus.³ Bridget Bennett (2007) has called attention to this myopia, and has made an attempt to correct it by emphasising the ‘transatlantic’ character of Spiritualism—both in terms of the preexisting ideas and practices it drew upon and in terms of its diffusion—but her project remains artificially limited by its exclusive focus on the English-speaking world. Similarly, Guillaume Cuchet, though he notes Spiritism’s status as “one of the very first Americanisms in European culture,” leaves the specific networks of intellectual exchange that brought it to the Continent unexamined (Cuchet 2012: 22).

Clearly, a careful, wide-ranging consideration of Spiritualism as a transnational phenomenon is, to use a metaphor familiar to any scholar of the topic, a new frontier ripe for exploration by scholars in the field. Thus far, as Bennett and Cuchet’s otherwise useful studies reveal, the language barrier has been a primary obstacle to this endeavor. Bodies of literature on Spiritualism and other forms of heterodoxy in nineteenth-century Europe have emerged in French, German, and other languages, but each of these has tended to remain

3 In addition to texts already cited, see Oppenheim 1988; Owen 1989; and the German-language scholarship cited in Wolfram 2009. The French-language scholarly literature on currents deriving from American Modern Spiritualism is sparse. The key historical monograph is Edelman 1995. Edelman treats the topic as a problem in social history, while Cuchet adopts a broader, cultural-historical perspective. Other French scholars of what writers in the field call *ésotérisme* have tended to approach the subject from the point of view of intellectual history. Seen from this angle, nineteenth-century Spiritism’s preoccupation with simplicity and sentiment can become something of a handicap. French scholars of *ésotérisme*, in any case, have tended to pass over Spiritism quickly and to devote the bulk of their attention to more philosophically recondite forms of nineteenth-century religious innovation—particularly those that draw on the Hermetic tradition of the Renaissance. See, for example, Faivre 1996 and Laurant 1992.

cordoned off from the others. English-speaking historians of Continental Europe, for their part, only began to turn their attention to this subject in the mid-1990s. The initial monographs they have published—and here I include my own work—while informed to some degree by the rich literature on Anglo-American Spiritualism, remain more concerned with laying basic empirical groundwork than with subtler questions of transnational exchange (Abend 2004; Monroe 2008; Treitel 2004; Vinitzky 2009; Kselman 1993: 125–162; Sharp 2006). As this fundamental material falls into place, however, it will be possible for scholars to begin using the existing literature to construct a more nuanced picture of Spiritualism's spread over the last five decades of the nineteenth century, first across the Atlantic from the United States to Europe, then east across the continent, then back across the Atlantic to the Caribbean and Latin America. Instead of simply assuming that 'Spiritualism' was always everywhere the same, or limiting our focus to a single nation-state, we can begin moving towards a more nuanced sense of the ways ideas and practices invented in the United States were sometimes gradually, sometimes dramatically reshaped at each waystation on their global journey, and what that reshaping might tell us about broader similarities and differences in nineteenth-century religious life across the Atlantic world.

The career of Allan Kardec illustrates the interpretive potential of a transnational approach with particular immediacy. *Spiritisme*, the term he coined in 1857 to replace the American-derived *spiritualisme*, has become the standard word in French and other Romance languages for the belief that the living can enter into direct contact with the dead. While most English-speaking scholars treat Spiritism and Spiritualism as synonyms, in Romance languages each term in fact has a distinct meaning rooted in its historical development. The emergence and continuing existence of these distinctions, in turn, tells us much about how American Spiritualism changed as it moved from the Anglophone world to Southern Europe and beyond. Kardec's Spiritism was based on an adaptation and alteration of American ideas distinctively suited to the requirements of the context in which he found himself in the late 1850s and early 1860s, one defined by four elements very different from those present in the United States or Great Britain: a legacy of visionary cosmological and moral thought derived from the writings of French romantic socialists such as Charles Fourier, Pierre Leroux, and Henri Reynaud; a conception of teleological historical development and the value of empiricism rooted in the positivism of Auguste Comte; an orthodox religious landscape dominated by the Catholic Church, which retained close ties to the state; and an authoritarian government that imposed strict legal controls on public speech, especially

concerning matters of politics, economics, and religion.⁴ Though the key theological principles of American Spiritualism were known and discussed in French Mesmerist and romantic socialist circles from the early 1850s, the practice of holding séances as a religious activity only came into its own in France with the spread of Kardec's ideas in the 1860s. By the early 1890s, Kardec's Spiritism had become the dominant model underpinning the philosophy and practice of urban spirit communication across southern Europe and Latin America.

To investigate the French origins of Spiritism, therefore, is to place oneself at a fulcrum point in the transnationalisation of Modern Spiritualism as a whole: a moment when a broadly Protestant, highly individualistic, and often radically reformist religious ideology assumed a form more congenial to audiences who shared the American craving for a spiritual practice that seemed to reconcile faith and science, but whose religious assumptions, social visions, and political situations looked very different. This essay's analysis will be in three parts. The first two will place the philosophical aspect of Spiritism in a context of transnational exchange by examining how Kardec's ideas emerged from the intellectual ferment caused by the arrival of American Spiritualist ideas in France. The third will use a case study from the early 1860s, first to gain a clearer understanding of the importance of doctrinal consistency in Kardecist Spiritism, and then to derive some broader conclusions that might help account for the ascendancy of Kardec's altered version of American Spiritualism in the Catholic world of the late nineteenth century.

American Spiritualism in France, 1848–1855

When H.L.D. Rivail attended his first séance, in May 1855, the philosophical principles of American Spiritualism had been circulating in France for a little more than five years. Even after the *tables tournantes* vogue of mid-1853, however, knowledge of these ideas was primarily confined to an urban bohemianism of Mesmerists and supporters of the political left. Many of these early French votaries adopted the loosely Swedenborgian conception of the spirit world that Bret E. Carroll (1997: 16–34) has identified as typical of pre-Civil War American Spiritualism. Though Paris had a small, formally organised

4 Throughout this essay, I follow Jonathan Beecher's example, using the term 'romantic', rather than 'utopian', as a characterisation of pre-Marxist socialist thought. The word 'utopian', while still commonly used, reflects Marx's own polemical stance on the question, rather than an effort to approach these ideas on their own terms (Beecher 2001: 1–8).

congregation that venerated the Swedish visionary's texts in a manner patterned after the American New Church, French *spiritualistes*, as they often called themselves, took a different approach.⁵ Their Swedenborg, like the Swedenborg of the American seer Andrew Jackson Davis, was less doctrinal authority than presiding spirit, a source of ongoing revelation and inspiration for a world-picture that emphasised the connections between the terrestrial and the beyond. Louis-Alphonse Cahagnet, an idiosyncratic Mesmerist practitioner (or *magnétiseur*) was the first French thinker to elaborate a cosmology in this vein. In early 1848, he published the initial volume of *Arcanes de la Vie Future Devoilés*, a vast compilation of transcribed conversations between spirits and somnambulists. At the end of the third volume, which appeared in 1854, Cahagnet presented a list of five general philosophical principles that could be derived from the hundreds of pages of material he had presented:

1. Spiritual existence is a continuation of terrestrial existence;
2. There exist as many groups of spirits as of varieties of spiritual affection concerning practices, studies, philosophical and religious beliefs;
3. There is a superior heaven, or state, toward which all aspire, regardless of their circumstances, as here below we aspire to a better state;
4. Heaven is the divine sphere in which each person feels and understands God, without seeing him in any other form than that of a radiant sun;
5. In opposition to this heaven, a place or places, a shadowy state or states, are called places of purification, in which the soul suffers only the burning aspiration freely to enjoy the sweet beatitude of the chosen, and to erase from its thoughts even the smallest memory of its past errors.

CAHAGNET 1854: III, 380

Cahagnet's spirit interviews, in other words, outlined a moral and cosmological vision quite similar to the one Carroll (1997: 60–84) associates with Davis and other American Spiritualist thinkers who drew inspiration from his writings. The spirit world and the material one were not radically separate, but instead points on a continuum, bound by threads of 'affection'. Heaven appeared as a

5 This tiny Parisian congregation called itself *La Nouvelle Jérusalem* and dated to the late 1820s. Several other Swedenborgian congregations existed elsewhere in France, the most important in the central French town of Saint-Amand (Cher). For further information, see Jacob 1855: 15–20; the various brief entries for "France" in Odhner 1898; and Sjöden 1963. The journalist Jules Bois (1894: 23–25) provides a description of the *Nouvelle Jérusalem* as it existed at the end of the nineteenth century.

set of spheres at varying levels of distance from a central, impersonal divinity. After death, individual souls were engaged in a dynamic process of improvement, first ‘purifying’ themselves of the residual evils of material existence, then progressing—albeit at varying rates—towards an ultimate state of communion with the divine. Cahagnet’s ideas and those of American Spiritualists shared such a strong affinity that, as early as 1851, translations of the first two volumes of the *Arcanes* were published in both New York and Rochester under the title *The Celestial Telegraph, or Secrets of the Life to Come* (Cahagnet 1851b). Cahagnet eagerly took credit for Spiritualism’s growing popularity in the United States, asserting in 1856 that the English translation of his book had “given birth to Davis,” and hence to the “spiritual manifestations of all kinds that cover the earth today.” Despite the remarkable influence he believed his works had exerted on its shores, however, Cahagnet sarcastically berated “powerful America” for its lack of gratitude, which in his view made it a “savage” nation: “do you remember the promoter of these studies? Have you ever sent him a single one of your numerous publications? Have you subscribed to a single one of his? Have you said anything about him in your metaphysical speculations? No, you have only thought of him to steal the priority of his work. Thank you, thank you a thousand times, benevolent land of liberty” (Cahagnet 1856: 9–10).⁶

As Cahagnet’s anti-American invective indicates, he was a pugnacious and eccentric figure. In late 1847, he emerged as a leading exponent of what the French already termed *le magnétisme spiritualiste*, joining an ongoing polemic between those who viewed Mesmerism as a tool for exploring the spirit world and those who preferred to think of it as a therapeutic technique better understood in medical than in metaphysical terms.⁷ A working-class autodidact, Cahagnet funded his Mesmeric experiments and numerous publications with piecework, turning chair parts on a lathe and making shirt collars. Unlike

6 Note that the chronology of Davis’s writings as presented by Carroll and others makes it unlikely that the American plagiarised Cahagnet. Instead, the two men probably developed their philosophical systems concurrently. For a statement of the case in favor of this view, see *L’Union magnétique* 1857b.

7 For a useful overview of the development of French Mesmerism in the first half of the nineteenth century and other matters germane to this essay, see Viatte 1935: 35–58. Viatte notes that the practitioner J.P.F. Deleuze used the term *magnétisme spiritualiste* as early as 1818 to refer to an already-established strain of French Mesmerism concerned with “communication with spiritual beings” (Viatte 1935: 37). The origins of this strain go back to such late eighteenth-century figures as Louis-Claude de Saint Martin, Jean-Baptiste Willermoz, and Martinès de Pasqually. See Bergé 1995; Faivre 1993: 71–81; Harvey 2005; Le Forestier 1987. On polemics between ‘spiritualist’ and ‘materialist’ Mesmerists in the 1840s and 1850s, see Monroe 2008: 64–94.

Davis, he did not enter a trance state himself. Instead, in a manner typical of French Mesmerist practice in this period, he used “the simple imposition of hands on the forehead” to entrance a variety of somnambulists (Cahagnet 1854: III, 372), all of whom were drawn from what one observer called “the illiterate class” (Jacob 1855: 37). Once a somnambulist had attained the level of lucidity required to see and converse with spirits, Cahagnet would begin posing questions, first about the appearance of the spirit, then about other matters. A small circle of followers attended these sessions, each of which began with a communion ceremony featuring bread and wine magnetically influenced by the spirit of Swedenborg, followed by an invocatory prayer. Cahagnet always presided, but each member of the circle—in 1848 there were nine, and followers continued to meet after Cahagnet’s death in 1885 (Bois 1894: 36–37)—had the opportunity to pose his or her own questions to the entranced subject (*L’Union* 1857a: 1–2; *L’Union* 1857b: 1–2).

Cahagnet’s circle was small, and his status marginal even among practicing Mesmerists, but he nevertheless played an important role in introducing France to the vision of the beyond that underpinned American Modern Spiritualism. In the mid-1850s, other French writers began to produce their own loosely Swedenborgian discussions of the metaphysical implications of séance phenomena.⁸ The most accessible of these texts was the 1854 *Lumière, esprits et tables tournantes*, a small book by Paul Louisy, based on paraphrases of communications received through an unnamed French medium. A Parisian *homme de lettres* best known today for his translations of Walter Scott and James Fenimore Cooper, Louisy showed a considerable familiarity with the discourse of American Spiritualism, but inflected his presentation of the new religion in ways that claimed it for the French political left.⁹ Unlike Cahagnet—who otherwise shared many of his left-leaning convictions—Louisy emphasised the American origin of Spiritualism, which he presented as a divine endorsement of democratic government. It was fitting, Louisy wrote, that “the same cradle in which true liberty was born” should also “witness the growth of a true

8 In addition to the text by Louisy discussed here, see D. Buret 1856, which does not cite, but nevertheless closely echoes the ‘harmonial philosophy’ of A.J. Davis; and Goupy 1854, a baggy, idiosyncratic work that falls midway between Cahagnet and Louisy in its political approach.

9 The catalogue of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France lists the author of *Lumière* separately from two other Paul Louisys, one the translator of Scott and Cooper, the other the translator of several additional English-language texts, but Louisy’s service as a translator of articles from the American Spiritualist press in the late 1850s and a brief mention of his position on the writing staff of *La Biographie contemporaine*, a kind of nineteenth-century *Who’s Who*, lead me to suspect that all three entries refer to the same person. See *Encyclopédie magnétique spiritualiste* (1859) 4: 116–117.

faith destined to regenerate the world" (Louisy 1854: 6). In the France of 1854, gripped by the authoritarian retrenchment that followed the brief democratic flowering of the February 1848 revolution, statements of this kind were inflammatory. In the minds of many in France in this period, particularly those who supported the dictatorship of Napoleon III, advocating democracy was a marker less of liberal moderation than of support for redistributive socialism.

Louisy's text tightened the connection between Spiritualism and French socialist thought by introducing a striking deviation from American precedent. Instead of conceiving the soul's journey after death as a progressive movement through ethereal heavenly spheres, as Davis did, Louisy asserted that this progress took the form of a "human metempsychosis," in which individual souls were physically reincarnated on Earth and on other planets. These worlds were "arranged along an immense scale of perfectibility," some very comfortable and others less so (Louisy 1854: 9). Good behavior in one physical existence would be rewarded by incarnation on a better planet; bad behavior would be punished by incarnation on a worse one. Mid-nineteenth-century French readers would have easily recognised this cosmology's roots in the various strains of romantic socialist thought that reached their peak of influence during the first phase of the 1848 Revolution (Laurant 2006; Sharp 2006: 1–47). By emphasising Spiritualism's connection to democracy and transforming the Swedenborgian idea of progress through ethereal spheres into progress by means of reincarnation, therefore, Louisy gave the new religion a clear place in its French context: it was essentially progressive in the political sense, the spiritual counterpart of what leftists in the period called *la sociale*—the social and democratic republic that the most ardent revolutionaries in 1848 had hoped to establish. Louisy was by no means the only figure to draw connections of this kind. A group of followers of Charles Fourier, the most influential of the French socialist theorists of reincarnation, held regular séances in 1853, becoming minor celebrities in the Parisian literary world.¹⁰ Several somnambulists in this period also seem to have based their accounts of the structure of the spirit world on ideas derived from this romantic socialist tradition.¹¹

10 The core of this group was made up of writers for *La Démocratie pacifique*, a newspaper established by the Fourierist leader Victor Considerant and banned after Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte's 1851 coup brought an end to the Second Republic. The explanations this group developed for séance phenomena and their metaphysical implications owed very little to American precedent, and instead drew almost exclusively on the thought of Fourier (Monroe 2008: 53–56).

11 Probably the most influential example of this tendency is the somnambulist Céline Japhet. See also the medium J. Roze, who published his own three-volume compilation of

Alongside this leftist current, a group of French writers sought to redefine trance-based spirit communication in ways that would allow it to function as a form of explicitly Catholic religious practice. This approach also had roots in Spiritualist Mesmerism, and its most prolific exponent was Henri Delaage, a *magnétiseur* who wrote numerous books emphasising the connections between the visions of entranced somnambulists and those of Catholic ecstasies. For Delaage, conversing with somnambulists was a means of “walking, with firm steps, in the path of unity of faith that count Joseph de Maistre glimpsed, when his thought took flight over the mountains like an eagle, vigorous, sovereign and profound, to swoop down and prostrate itself, humble and submissive, before the august decisions of the old man in the Vatican” (Delaage 1854: 242). In the late 1840s, a few liberally inclined members of the clergy evinced sympathy for Mesmerism as well. On December 6, 1846, from the pulpit of Notre Dame, the eminent cleric Henri Lacordaire professed his belief in “magnetic phenomena,” and speculated that they might be a “divine protestation against science,” offering tangible proof “that there is something beyond death” (qtd in Viatte 1935: 43). A parish priest in the Parisian neighborhood of Batignolles, the Abbé Almignana, thought along similar lines. With authorisation from the Archbishop of Paris (Almignana 1852), he pursued his interest in the subject both by conducting his own Mesmeric experiments and by attending meetings of Cahagnet’s circle (Almignana 1854: 28–36; Jacob 1855: I, 62–63; Cahagnet 1850: 152–158).¹² Henri Carion and Girard de Caudemberg, two Catholic writers whose interest in the subject began with the table-turning vogue of 1853, followed the example of American Spiritualism by emphasising the importance of personal communication with the spirits of the dead, rather than dialogue mediated by a *magnétiseur* and *somnambule* (Carion 1853; Caudemberg 1857). Both presented mediumship as an essentially Catholic spiritual practice with the potential not only to assuage doubt and console

cosmological spirit communications, Roze 1862. Roze, a printer by trade, was active as a somnambulist at least from the mid-1850s (at which point he was in his seventies), and he worked with Kardec when the manuscript that would become the *Livre des Esprits* was in its early stages. The two men later had a falling out. See the letter from Camille Flammarion to “M. Rose” dated December 9, 1861, in the manuscript copybook *Miscellanées* 1861, and the letter from Flammarion to Sabô, president of the Société Spirite de Bordeaux (n.d.) at the beginning of the copybook *Miscellanées* 1863, both in the *Fonds Camille Flammarion de l’Observatoire de Juvisy-sur-Orge*.

- 12 Cahagnet (1850: 152–158) describes visions the Abbé Almignana, having taken “three grams of hashish,” experienced in the course of a “metaphysical discussion” with the book’s author in 1848.

grief, but also to provide a new channel for souls in purgatory to make direct appeals for prayers from the living. Though the hierarchy emphatically rejected them in the mid-1850s, these efforts to transform Spiritualism into something Catholic resonated strongly with the new emphasis on tangible religious experience that characterised the Church in this period—as, for instance, in the case of the apparitions at Lourdes.¹³

From Spiritualism to Spiritism

This, then, was the unsettled intellectual climate in which H.L.D. Rivail began his own studies of *séance* phenomena: small groups of writers were adapting American Spiritualist ideas to the French context by subjecting them to a variety of strategic modifications, often seeking either to associate them with the most radical currents of 1848 or to assimilate them into a Catholic framework. Rivail was not exclusively drawn to either of these points of view. Instead, his temperament and background seem to have disposed him to search for a new synthesis. Born in Lyon to a family of lawyers, raised Catholic but educated at Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi's famous progressive school in Yverdon, Switzerland, Rivail joined a respect for professional dignity and a taste for moderation with a lingering attraction to the visionary ethos of romantic socialism. After completing his studies and military service in 1832, he and his wife founded a private technical school in Paris, which failed after a few years. He went on to become a freelance bookkeeper, and by the early 1850s he was earning enough money to live the life of a comfortable *bourgeois*. At the same time, he retained his interest in education, publishing an array of pedagogical texts and teaching physics, physiology, and astronomy for a brief stint in 1849. Like many other progressively inclined French men in this period, Rivail was also a casual student of Mesmerism, which he had begun to explore in the 1820s (Sausse 1927: 18–27). While he had been aware of the 1853 vogue for table turning and had friends who told him about the uncanny phenomena they had witnessed in *séances*, he remained skeptical. His opinion only changed in 1855, after a conversation with a M. Pâtier, “a public official, of a certain age, a very

13 For reprints of many of the official condemnations of table-moving, which began to appear in 1854, see the appendices in Ambroise Matignon 1862: 106–139. In July 1856, Pope Pius IX issued the encyclical *Adversus magnetismi abusum*, which officially prohibited Catholics from attending *séances* or conducting Mesmeric experiments that involved conversations with the spirit world.

well-educated man, with a cool, grave character,” whose level-headed eyewitness accounts of séance phenomena persuaded Rivail that such things might indeed be worth serious investigation (Kardec 1978: 241).

By the end of 1855, Rivail had found a place in the small world of Parisian Spiritualists and started on the path that would lead him to prominence. He was a regular guest at the Baudin family’s weekly séances, where Mme Baudin and her two teenage daughters served as mediums. In the Baudin household, spirits communicated via automatic writing, initially produced either by a basket with a pencil attached, or by a *planchette*. These gatherings were light-hearted affairs when Rivail began attending them. A spirit named Zéphyr responded to questions with a mixture of sage advice and “humorous quips” — a situation Rivail, an intensely serious man, found disconcerting and unproductive. Gradually, he worked to push the séances in a more rigorous direction. Drawing on his Pestalozzian training in the ‘experimental method’, he devised a series of linked queries in advance of each meeting, and posed them in a sober, methodical way, “not accepting an explanation as valid until it resolved all the difficulties of the question.” The other attendees at the séances began to support Rivail’s project, abandoning their previous interest in “trivial questions.” Zéphyr and his fellow spirits bore up well under this scrutiny, elaborating a body of material that, in Rivail’s words, “formed a whole and took on the proportions of a doctrine” (Kardec 1978: 242–244). He began to collate the circle’s communications and edit them for publication. As he did so, other members of the group, including the playwright Victorien Sardou, the writer René Taillandier, and the publisher Alfred Didier, contributed to Rivail’s research by giving him additional notebooks of automatic writings from other mediums (Sausse 1927: 30). For further assistance in his project, Rivail began consulting a professional *magnétiseur*, Roustan, and his somnambulist, Céline Japhet. Japhet’s spirits shared Rivail’s penchant for philosophical coherence, helping clarify ambiguities and reconcile inconsistencies among various communications (Kardec 1978: 245). Sometime in 1856, as this process was well underway, Rivail received a communication, either from the Baudin circle or from Japhet and a medium named J. Roze, suggesting that he publish his book under the pseudonym Allan Kardec.¹⁴ In spring 1857, his first compilation of communications, the *Livre des Esprits*, appeared in print.

14 Rivail’s pseudonym has two competing origin stories. See *Le Spiritisme* (1888) 5: 233, for an account that ascribes it to a medium in the Baudin circle; and *La Lumière* (January 1899–December 1900) 10: 38–40, for an account that ascribes it to Japhet and Roze.

Kardec's book was one of a burst of French-language texts on Spiritualism published at more or less the same time, a sign of the enthusiasm the Anglo-American medium D.D. Home's European tour generated among French readers (Monroe 2008: 83–90, 102–104). Nevertheless, the *Livre des Esprits* quickly distinguished itself from its competition. Where earlier Spiritualist books in French had tended to be digressive, loosely organised compilations of anecdotes and speculations, Kardec's spirits conveyed their ideas in simple terms, responding directly, catechism-fashion, to clearly stated questions. Perhaps even more important, the responses the spirits provided were notable for their lack of originality. Instead of exploring uncharted, fanciful-seeming intellectual territory, the communications in the *Livre des Esprits* synthesised select elements from the diverse systems that had emerged in earlier French Spiritualist texts. Like Cahagnet, Kardec stressed the continuity of material and spirit worlds; he also shared the Spiritualist Mesmerist notion of a pervasive universal 'fluid' that bridged the two. Kardec similarly retained the conception of the soul's journey as one of continuing progress present in Cahagnet and much American Spiritualist thought. Instead of envisioning the afterlife as a series of immaterial spheres, however, he took Louisy's approach, describing a cosmos in which individual souls expiated sins and reaped rewards for good behavior through physical reincarnation on a series of progressively more comfortable planets. Between incarnations, souls existed for varying lengths of time as wandering spirits; the entities who visited séances either were of this type or were souls who had reached the ethereal state that marked the highest levels of spiritual evolution. At the same time, Kardec's spirits, while by no means orthodox in their reasoning, were often at least nominally Catholic, and emphatically Christian in their moral sensibility: the book included communications signed by Saint Augustine, Saint Vincent de Paul, Saint Louis, and Félicité de Lammenais, among others.

The other Spiritualist books of 1857 were quickly forgotten, but the *Livre des Esprits* became a bestseller. Its success stemmed not only from its unusual logical coherence and accessibility, but also from a more fundamental characteristic: the ideas it presented were remarkably well-suited to its intended audience. Much of the material in the *Livre des Esprits*, as already mentioned, had antecedents in the work of earlier French Spiritualist writers, but the specific elements of Kardec's synthesis meshed in a unique way with the broader intellectual sensibility and political situation of left-leaning, progressive French men and women, especially in the urban middle class. The moral vision and eschatology Kardec's spirits outlined, with the emphasis on charity as the primary expression of moral conduct and the conception of interplanetary reincarnation, strongly echoed the romantic socialist thought of Fourier, Henri

de Saint Simon, Etienne Cabet, Jean Reynaud, and Pierre Leroux. Kardec's sense of the value of spirit communications as a way of giving an empirical basis to faith, and the teleological vision of historical progress he espoused—with its assumption that mankind was moving towards an age in which triumphant science would resolve an ever-growing number of fundamental questions—owed clear debts to the positivism of Auguste Comte. Indeed, this fusion of romantic socialist metaphysics and positivist epistemology was perhaps Kardec's most original intellectual move. Politically, the *Livre des Esprits* retained the visionary élan of romantic socialism, but jettisoned its explicitly revolutionary message. Kardec's spirits, for example, made it clear that reincarnation was not an incentive to create paradise on earth through radical social reorganisation, as many romantic socialists had seen it, but instead justified resignation to present injustice with the promise of future reward on a more socially enlightened planet. This served the double purpose of distancing Kardec's ideas from the violence and upheaval of 1848 and of accommodating the repressive realities of Napoleon III's authoritarian state, under which advocates of the political left were subject to censorship at best, arrest and exile at worst. As a result of this careful balancing act, Kardec's philosophy struck those who embraced it as both familiar and reassuring: it took exactly the form a mid-nineteenth-century reader with progressive inclinations would expect an alternative religious system to take, but it did so in a way that dissipated the intense socio-political passions that had caused so much turmoil during the Second Republic.

Kardec intended the *Livre des Esprits* to be the foundational text of an organised movement. His first step in this direction was terminological: to replace the previously common *spiritualisme*, he coined a new term, *spiritisme*. As he put it in the introduction to the *Livre des Esprits*, in French the word *spiritualisme* already referred to a broad, long-established philosophical tradition, making it applicable to anyone “who believes he has something in himself other than matter,” from Descartes and Victor Cousin to Cahagnet and Delaage. *Spiritisme*, in contrast, was more precise: it referred to a “doctrine” founded on “relations between the material world and spirits, or beings from the invisible world” (Kardec 1996: I). Believers in this doctrine were *spirites*; the cosmological, eschatological, and moral principles on which it was based were those outlined in the *Livre des Esprits*. In 1858, Kardec founded a journal, the *Revue spirite*, to lend further support to his ideas, and shortly thereafter he established a society for the study of spirit manifestations, the *Société parisienne des études spirites*. This group, composed, as the *Revue* put it, “exclusively of serious people,” including several “men made eminent by their knowledge and social position,” held its first meetings in the spring of 1858 (*Revue spirite* 1858: 1, 148).

The Triumph of Codification

Kardec did not use the term ‘doctrine’ lightly. For him, as for many of the believers who adopted his ideas in the latter half of the nineteenth century, Spiritism derived considerable power from its consistency and logical coherence. The pages of the *Revue spirite* and of his compilations of spirit communications were polyphonic, bringing together automatic writings from a wide variety of different groups and mediums. Though there was always editorial commentary to weave the various pieces together, he often emphasised this diversity by using different type sizes and—especially in the *Revue*—including the signatures of spirits at the end of their communications. This impression of multiplicity, in turn, caused the underlying philosophical unity to emerge that much more clearly. As Kardec put it in his second book, a detailed manual on the conduct of séances and the interpretation of spirit messages, “the language of the spirits is always identical, if not in form, at least in substance. The thoughts are the same, whatever the time and place; they can be more or less developed, according to circumstances, needs and the capacity to communicate, but they will not be contradictory” (Kardec 1986: 337). Coherence of this kind, for Kardec, was a crucial element of Spiritism’s value. Where a more conventional speculative philosophy was merely “a theory, a system invented to provide a first cause,” Spiritism had “its source in the facts of nature itself, in positive facts that frequently appear before our eyes” (*Revue spirite* 1864: 325). It was not simply one possible vision of the universe, it was the single true vision, constructed on a foundation of empirical evidence—spirit communications—that thorough rational scrutiny had rendered unshakable.

This emphasis on doctrinal coherence placed Kardec at odds with the individualistic ethos many historians consider to have been a defining aspect of American Spiritualism. Carroll notes that in the United States, Spiritualists in the 1850s and 1860s tended to view contradictions and inconsistencies among communications as a consequence of the novelty of their enterprise. Competing theories, according to this view, were simply recent entrants into a free marketplace of ideas, from which the truth would emerge with the same inevitability Adam Smith claimed for fair prices (Carroll 1997: 45). In the late 1850s, many French *spiritualistes*—as they still called themselves—shared this view, railing against Kardec’s push to codify. The most vocal of these opponents was Zéphyre-Joseph Piérart, former editor-in-chief of the *Journal du magnétisme*, France’s leading Mesmerist periodical (Court et al. 1998–1999: 71–72; 3–69). Shortly after the *Revue spirite* made its debut, Piérart founded a competing journal, pointedly named the *Revue spiritualiste*. Its first issue began with a manifesto criticising “some isolated spiritualists” for their

presumptuous effort to “write the code of the spirits.” This group, Piérart wrote, “will doubtless soon think of forming an orthodoxy, which all signs indicate they will have the pretention to use in order to explain these phenomena, and beyond which, according to them, there will be only error, heresy.” Such a move, in Piérart’s view, was gravely mistaken. The proper approach was to avoid premature conclusions, instead seeking “to establish relations with all convinced spiritualists, in order to gather all opinions, weigh them, and judge them.” What Spiritualism needed, in short, was an “academy,” an impartial body that would assess all claims equally. This process of consideration, Piérart argued, should also have a democratic dimension: the “academy,” he suggested, could solicit communications from a wide array of Spiritualist circles on “God, Providence, cosmogonies, worlds, eternity, souls, humanity, the future life, great truths religious, moral, philosophical, psychological, historical, scientific, etc., etc.” Then, it could subject these documents both to rational scrutiny and to quantitative analysis, giving precedence to ideas shared by the largest number of groups (*Revue spiritualiste* 1858: 1–11). This appeal to democracy, in turn, was a veiled jab at Kardec’s advocacy of reincarnation, a principle overwhelmingly rejected by spirits in the Anglo-American world. While Piérart never succeeded in establishing his *Académie spiritualiste*, his journal—at least in its first few years—attempted to accomplish a similar goal, soliciting information from the United States, arguing against reincarnation, and welcoming submissions from the principal French Spiritualist authors of the early 1850s.

Kardec paid little heed to Piérart’s critiques, and he treated American objections to reincarnation dismissively. In his view, the fact that most American spirits did not mention reincarnation was simply an otherworldly concession to racism. The spirits, he wrote, wanted belief in the possibility of dialogue with them to “emerge in a country with absolute freedom regarding the expression of opinions,” and therefore said nothing about reincarnation, which they knew “would have run up against the prejudices of slavery and color. The idea that a black could become a white; that a white could have been black; that a master could have been a slave, would have seemed so monstrous that it would have led to the rejection of the whole idea” of spirit communication. In France, where such prejudice did not exist, according to Kardec, the spirits could freely reveal the truth. Eventually, he argued, “unity will emerge on this point as on all the others” (*Revue spirite* 1862: 50).

Certainly, the decisive success of Kardec’s approach in France bolstered his confidence: by 1866, the *Revue spirite* boasted 1800 subscribers to the *Revue spiritualiste*’s 500 (*Archives nationales*). In practice, however, this success only increased the challenge of maintaining philosophical coherence of the kind Kardec sought. As Spiritist societies formed across France, a growing number

of mediums produced revelations that varied considerably from group to group. Kardec explained this situation by emphasising the diversity of the spirit world. Holding a séance, particularly if one did not explicitly invoke a particular spirit, was much like holding a public meeting open to all comers. Elevated spirits might visit, but so might the less evolved (Kardec 1986: 352–353). Most inferior spirits, he contended, were clearly identifiable: they spoke in a less intelligent manner, could be rude or mischievous, and often exhibited a fondness for spectacular but crude physical phenomena. Elevated spirits, in contrast, communicated about important matters in calm, serious, measured tones (Kardec 1986: 326–351, 407–419; Kardec 1996: 43–61). Given this situation, the most vexing spirits were those whose communications bore all the stylistic marks of elevation, but nevertheless contradicted aspects of Spiritist doctrine already accepted as true. These deceptive heterodox communications, Kardec argued, were the work of an insidious class of inferior disembodied soul: the *esprit faux savant*, or poseur spirit (Kardec 1996: 48–49). These beings were not malicious; they simply had not yet succeeded in overcoming the preconceived notions that had limited their thinking while alive. The concept of the *esprit faux savant*, in other words, provided Kardec with a safety valve—a way to delegitimise the compelling and logical but awkwardly divergent communications some mediums produced.

Though it was essential for the maintenance of Spiritism's doctrinal coherence, the actual identification and denunciation of communications of this kind could generate considerable conflict. Indeed, the problem of keeping mediums in their places appears to have been among the greatest difficulties Kardec faced once Spiritism became a fully established movement in the early 1860s. His personal authority as an insightful judge of truth, and the dominance his books, organisation, and journal enjoyed in the world of French heterodoxy, made many mediums eager to see their communications published with his imprimatur. Even as automatic writings poured into the offices of the *Société parisienne* by the thousands, however, Kardec found that mediums could be quite reluctant to have their communications criticised.¹⁵ Despite Kardec's repeated warnings, all too many mediums and believers, when presenting communications to him for evaluation, appear to have done so already convinced that they had received wisdom from superior beings. These seekers were generally displeased to hear the *maître* proclaim that deviations from already established points of doctrine called the origin of their revelations into

15 In 1863, Kardec claimed to be working through a backlog of 3600 written spirit communications. In addition, there were "a certain number of more or less voluminous manuscripts" (*Revue spirite* 1863: 156).

question. From the perspective of both the medium and the séance participant, after all, a spirit communication was the physical trace of a powerful, deeply personal experience of inspiration and transcendence. By approving a communication, Kardec verified the authenticity of that moment of inspiration; a rejection, in contrast, indicated that the petitioner had mistaken an inferior spirit's fantasies for enlightenment. Kardec's further implication that such inferior communications were the consequences of the medium's own "weakness and credulity" would have made this refusal doubly painful (*Revue spirite* 1859: 33).

For the most part, these recalcitrant mediums only exist in the historical record as depersonalised targets of Kardec's admonitions.¹⁶ The case of the Bordeaux lawyer Jean-Baptiste Roustaing and his medium, Mme Emilie Collignon, however, is a well-documented exception to this rule. Roustaing's story provides a revealing illustration of the way authority functioned in French Spiritism, and hence, of its striking divergence from its Anglo-American counterpart. Born into a lower middle-class family, Roustaing began his professional life as a public school teacher in Toulouse, where he served from 1823 to 1826. During this period, he studied law in his spare time. In 1826, he moved to Paris, where he did his legal apprenticeship (Roustaing 1866: I, iii–iv). After finishing his training in 1829, he returned to his native city of Bordeaux and began to work as a lawyer. He built a successful career as an *avocat*, serving for thirty years "in the office and at trial" (Roustaing 1866: I, iv). In 1858, Roustaing contracted a serious illness, which obliged him to stop work; even after his recovery in 1861, he did not have the strength to resume his "beloved profession" (Roustaing 1866: I, iv).

Fortunately, just as Roustaing recovered, he found a new vocation: the study of Spiritism. He first heard about the new doctrine from a local doctor and from a fellow lawyer named André Pezzani (Roustaing 1866: I, iv).¹⁷ Initially, Roustaing was skeptical, but after reading the *Livre des Esprits*, his opinion changed, for reasons that seem to have been typical among French converts—especially educated men—in this period (Roustaing 1866: I, iv, vi; see also Monroe 2008: 123–127). Kardec's doctrine offered Roustaing a powerful solution to the metaphysical doubts that had plagued him during his illness. Before encountering the *Livre des Esprits*, Roustaing could not bring himself to accept

16 For discussions of a few other well-documented cases where it is possible to identify specific mediums, the most notable of whom was Honorine Huet, see (Monroe 2008: 90–94, 133–139).

17 Pezzani was an enthusiastic defender of the idea of reincarnation. See his defense of Kardecist cosmology against the objections of Piérart in Pezzani 1872: 93–96.

the teachings of the Catholic Church. The Gospels seemed “obscure and incomprehensible” to him, and the interpretations the Church offered were too patently irrational to satisfy the requirements of his well-honed mind (Roustaing 1866: I, vi). At the same time, however, the Bordeaux lawyer felt a powerful desire to believe. He admired Christian morality, even as he refused to accept the reality of the spectacular “transgression of natural laws” that appeared to occur so frequently in the Gospels (Roustaing 1866: I, vi). Spiritism, with its emphasis on fact and its claim to provide an explanation for miracles consonant with the demands of modern science, finally allowed Roustaing to exchange his doubt for a definitive certainty. His enthusiasm for the new doctrine inspired him to send a declaration of faith to Kardec, which was published in the *Revue spirite* in 1861 (169).

After his conversion, Roustaing approached his study of the beyond with a steadily escalating intensity. He began by attending a variety of Spiritist meetings, never serving as a medium himself, but instead following both Mesmerist precedent and Kardec’s usual practice, observing and posing questions to the spirits that appeared.¹⁸ In December 1861, he met the medium Emilie Collignon. Unlike the mediums Roustaing had consulted previously, Collignon had not only the will, but also the ability and patience to produce voluminous automatic writings ambitious enough to satisfy the exigent former lawyer. At the end of her second meeting with Roustaing, Collignon received a long, spontaneous communication written collaboratively by the spirits of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, “assisted by the apostles” (Roustaing 1866: I, xxiii). In this missive, the spirits announced their intention to use Collignon as the vehicle for a dramatic series of new communications: “To this end, dear friends, we will undertake to explain the gospels *in spirit and truth*, and thus set the stage for the unity of beliefs among men; you may call this “*the revelation of the revelation*” (Roustaing 1866: I, xxii; emphasis original). Roustaing’s task, as Collignon’s questioner, would be to collate these revelations and prepare them for publication. Meeting regularly for the next five years, Collignon and Roustaing produced an enormous compendium of commentaries on the Gospels, followed by a similarly detailed explication of the Ten Commandments furnished by the spirit of Moses. Roustaing published this text in 1866—probably at his own expense—as three thick volumes bearing the cumbersome title, *Spiritisme*

18 By the early 1860s, this model had become typical in French Spiritist circles. According to Carroll (1997: 120–151), mediums tended to dominate American Spiritualist circles, but in France, especially from the 1850s through the 1870s, the dominant figure was the male society president, who led meetings and asked questions of spirits, but never entered a trance himself (Monroe 2008: 132–133).

chrétien ou révélation de la révélation, les quatre Evangiles suivis des commandements, expliqués en esprit et en vérité.

The ideas Roustaing's and Collignon's Evangelists espoused were both idiosyncratic and potentially inflammatory. Most strikingly, they offered a novel explanation of Christ's divinity and the virgin birth. The new "revelation of the revelation," Roustaing (1866: I, 48) explained with a typical combination of legalistic circuitousness and visionary typographical exuberance,

shows that this virgin conception and gestation, and thereby, this virgin pregnancy and parturition—which could not have been real, because they would have contradicted the laws of nature, immutable as the will of God, from which they emanate—*on our Earth*, require the congress of the two sexes for female conception (and in consequence, gestation, pregnancy, and parturition), and cannot, *therefore and necessarily* be anything BUT simply apparent—were, in fact, *simply apparent* as works entirely foreign to all human action—as works of the *Holy Spirit*, which is to say, of *spirits of the Savior* and *THUS purely Spiritist*.

Emphasis Original

Christ, in other words, did not have a body in the human sense, according to Collignon's and Roustaing's Evangelists. Instead, he had a "fluidic body, of périspritic nature, visible and tangible as a human bodily appearance" (Roustaing 1866: III, 131).¹⁹ Christ's apparently physical body was in fact an unusually powerful and long-lasting 'full-form' spirit materialisation. His birth and Mary's pregnancy, therefore, did not actually occur, but were instead simulations, so real they convinced Mary herself.

This notion of Christ's body and birth as "purely [...] Spiritist works," Roustaing maintained, was the only rational way to account for the Messiah's status as a divine being. The old story of the virgin birth contradicted the 'laws of nature', which every modern, scientifically trained person knew to be immutable. For the idea of a divine Christ to be rationally defensible, therefore, it needed to be explained in terms of these laws. Spiritism and Mesmerism, by introducing the idea that the soul could use the 'universal fluid' to make its presence felt in the material world, provided this explanation. Christ, as Roustaing and Collignon portrayed him, was a spiritual entity with a tangible but not fleshly body. He was not an ordinary human being, therefore, but a

19 The word *périsprit*, coined by Kardec in the *Livre des esprits*, refers to the ethereal 'fluidic envelope' that surrounds a spirit when it is in the disincarnated state, and serves as its means of influencing the material world.

direct physical manifestation of God's will; his apparent humanity was only an illusion intended to make him more appealing to the less-evolved intellects of Biblical times (Roustaing 1866: III, 578).

Kardec did not receive Roustaing's *magnum opus* with the same enthusiasm he had accorded the letter of 1861. A brief review of the *Quatre Evangiles* appeared in the *Revue spirite* in mid-1866. "For Spiritists," Kardec noted, this new collection of spirit communications "has the merit of in no way contradicting the doctrine taught in the *Livre des Esprits*" (*Revue spirite* 1866: 190; italics mine). This doctrinal orthodoxy, however, was accidental: it stemmed from the willingness of Roustaing's spirits to address questions more elevated entities had decided to leave untouched, in the interest of perpetuating some measure of harmony between Spiritism and Catholicism—if not in the eyes of the clergy, who categorically rejected Kardec's ideas, at least in the eyes of open-minded laypeople. In Kardec's view, then, the work's flaws did not stem from its contradiction of already-published Spiritist texts, but rather from the awkwardness of the ideas it advanced. Most important, the book's description of Christ's spiritual nature disturbingly contradicted a key point of Catholic dogma, and worse, echoed the ancient heresy of Docetism. Instead of wholeheartedly embracing Roustaing's work, Kardec emphasised his reluctance to endorse its most dramatic conclusions. "Until we receive further information," he wrote, "we will neither approve nor disapprove of [Roustaing's] theories." Instead, believers would do well to consider these volumes as "the personal opinions of the Spirits who formulated them," not as "integral parts of the Spiritist doctrine" (*Revue spirite* 1866: 191). With this statement, Kardec implied that Roustaing's Moses, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John might in fact have been *Esprits faux savants* who had led the eminent lawyer astray. Lest any readers view this cautious assessment as too affirmative, Kardec went on to imply that several spirits contacted for corroboration had already voiced "serious objections to this theory" (*Revue spirite* 1866: 191). Roustaing's book, according to Kardec, was merely a curious and hypothetical document.

Kardec's refusal to accept the *Quatre Evangiles* as a canonical Spiritist text left Roustaing bitterly disappointed. The Bordeaux lawyer responded to Kardec's rejection with a long letter, which was eventually published as a pamphlet in the early 1880s (Roustaing 1882).²⁰ In this text, Roustaing denounced Kardec for his authoritarianism. Kardec, he wrote, surrendering to a base thirst for power, had transformed the doctrine the spirits had revealed to him from a simple hypothesis into an inflexible "preconceived system" (Roustaing

20 Roustaing (1882) wrote this brochure in 1866 and revised it before his death in 1879. The core of the document is the letter Roustaing wrote to *La Revue Spirite*.

1882: 18). This rigidity, Roustaing wrote, did grave harm to the Spiritualist cause in France. By presenting himself as an “infallible judge,” Kardec had “repelled [...] all men of scientific and literary standing who did not want to be his henchmen, who wished to retain their independence and the criterion of their reason” (Roustaing 1882: 29). In America, where Spiritualism remained free of dogma and decentralised, it had succeeded in making converts “by the millions” (Roustaing 1882: 29). In France, on the contrary, the movement appeared to interest only a shrinking minority. Distinguished, educated, and intelligent people, Roustaing asserted, rejected French Spiritism because they quickly perceived its contradictions. In theory, Spiritism was a doctrine that promised freedom, social reform, and the transformation of human relations with the beyond. In practice, it was an authoritarian sect that “exhausted and imprisoned” the minds of its adherents by forcing them to bend to Kardec’s implacable will. French Spiritism, Roustaing concluded, would only begin to gain influence if it succeeded in liberating itself from the constraints of Kardec’s oppressive “system.”

In the end, however, the authoritarianism against which Roustaing fulminated served Kardec well. By the time the Bordeaux lawyer’s volumes had appeared, the overwhelming majority of French groups devoted to spirit contacts accorded a central role to Kardec’s texts and acknowledged the preeminence of his journal and the Parisian society he led. Spiritist groups had also begun to appear in Catalonia and Italy. This position of eminence gave Kardec a considerable amount of power in determining which ideas were and were not acceptable for admission to the Spiritist canon—and created the general perception that such a ‘canon’ existed in the first place. The popularity of Kardec’s books, the simplicity of the ideas they contained, and their accessible style made the Spiritist ‘doctrine’ the philosophical lens through which the French, believers and skeptics alike, understood séances and the otherworldly contacts that occurred in them. A steadily growing number of Spirit societies across France organised themselves according to the Kardecist model; the communications mediums received reflected this growing consensus by increasingly taking the doctrine and terminology of the *Livre des Esprits* as their point of departure (Monroe 2008: 112–118). Among spirits who spoke through French mediums, for instance, the idea of progressive reincarnation had become ‘common sense’ by the early 1870s. At the time of his death, in 1869, Kardecist Spiritism had come to assume an important place in the French visionary imagination, which it would continue to occupy well into the twentieth century.

Though Roustaing would have disagreed, the triumph of Spiritism in France, and subsequently elsewhere in the Catholic world, was probably not the simple

consequence of one man's ruthless pursuit of power. Instead, Kardec's distinctive version of Modern Spiritualism succeeded in large part because it resonated so strongly with its intended audience. This resonance, in turn, leads us back to the broader question of Modern Spiritualism as a transnational development. In France, as we have seen, this strain of heterodoxy placed a much greater emphasis on centralised organisational structure and doctrinal coherence than did its Anglo-American counterparts. British and American Spiritualists, as the rich literature on the subject has shown, organised themselves into a decentralised collection of 'circles' and were considerably more tolerant of philosophical differences among mediums and groups. In large part, as Kardec's ambivalent response to Roustaing implies, the French preference for authority and codification was a product of the religious context in which Spiritism took shape. The majority of Spiritists, even if they had abandoned Catholicism, had been raised in the Church and continued to conceive of religious legitimacy in Catholic terms. Kardec himself took pains to present Spiritism as closely connected to Catholicism. Spiritism, he wrote,

appears yet more—and with more authority—in the Catholic religion than in all the others. In [Catholicism] we find all the important principles: Spirits of every rank, their occult and visible relations with men, guardian angels, reincarnation, disengagement of the soul from a living body, second sight, visions, manifestations of all kinds, and even tangible apparitions.

KARDEC 1996: 486

While Spiritism's numerous, often vituperative, clerical critics disagreed emphatically with this statement, particularly when it came to the question of reincarnation, it nevertheless seems to have struck a certain number of lay-people as credible. According to Kardec's own assessment, based on ten years of journal and spirit society correspondence, some seventy percent of French Spiritists were "Catholics not attached to dogma"; "Catholics attached to dogma" accounted for ten percent more (*Revue spirite* 1869: 5).

French Spiritism's relative centralisation and reliance on codified doctrine, therefore, could perhaps be considered a collaborative creation, the product of an interaction between Kardec's ideas and his audience's expectations. While the role of Catholicism is important to the story, it was not the only element at play in this collaboration, however. As we have seen, many of Spiritism's distinctive 'non-Catholic' elements, including the concept of expiatory interplanetary reincarnation and the tendency to give authority in meetings to a non-entranced male 'president', also emerged from this interplay between

ideas and expectations. Developing a clearer understanding of this type of differentiation as it played out not only in France, but elsewhere as Spiritism began its own transnational journey, will do much to sharpen our sense of the significance of the process of religious innovation the Fox sisters began in their small farmhouse in 1848.

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Spiritism in Brazil

From Religious to Therapeutic Practice

Waleska de Araújo Aureliano and Vânia Zikán Cardoso

Introduction

Despite the centrality of rationalist thought in shaping modernity in the so-called Western cultures, it is in their midst that a movement known as Modern Spiritualism took form. A movement at once religious and secular, Modern Spiritualism proposed the recognition and systematisation of the relations between humans and spirits. Since its inception, such systematisation has been marked by complex political, historical, and social dispositions that not only engendered distinct religious fields, but also inscribed the very social and cultural dynamics of particular groups.

The origin of this movement is attributed to the communication between the twelve- and fifteen-year-old sisters Katie and Margaret Fox and spirits in Hydesville, New York. The Fox sisters, born to a Presbyterian family, devised a code of raps on doors and tables to communicate with spirits that haunted their home. They quickly became well-known in the United States, travelling through the country to demonstrate their extraordinary powers of communication. As early as 1854, an estimated three million people had become adepts of Modern Spiritualism. In 1842, a mission spread the news to the Old Continent as Modern Spiritualists travelled to Scotland and England (Aubrée and Laplantine 2009).

The European salons were thus introduced to the phenomenon of levitating tables, which for a while was the object of curiosity and entertainment of the elite. In France, such a phenomenon drew the attention of Hippolyte Léon Denizard Rivail, a pedagogue who would come to be known as Allan Kardec, the ‘codifier’ of Spiritism. Spiritism was developed as a scientific-philosophic-religious system in which the relations between the visible world of humans and the invisible world of spirits could finally be systematised following the rationalist and scientific conceptions that ruled nineteenth-century Europe. Kardec coined the term Spiritism in order to differentiate his new doctrine from the wider Spiritualist movement then under development in the United States and Europe. He defined it as “a science dealing with the nature, origin and destiny of the Spirits, and with their relation with the corporeal world”

(Kardec 2009: 10). The books written by Kardec, based upon his communication with the spirits, quickly reached other European countries. Later, they crossed the Atlantic to the European colonies, where they achieved great popularity with some members of the local elites, among whom were many Europeans, as was the case in Brazil.

Spiritism is anchored on a few central religious and philosophical postulates. The belief in immortality and in the evolution of the spirit is a basic premise of the doctrine. According to Kardec, God created all spirits, imperfect and alike, and all were granted the freedom of will to make the necessary choices for their spiritual evolution towards moral perfection. Reincarnation is understood to be the natural path towards such a goal. The actions taken and choices made during the (incarnate) life of a spirit not only contribute to moral growth and, consequently, evolution, but also determine the probations and expiations the spirit has to undergo in each reincarnation. Kardec thus named this universal system of ethical retribution a “law of cause and effect.” According to this law, the condition of our current life is the outcome of our acts in previous lives. Nonetheless, the notion of free will resurfaces in the idea that a spirit can also choose the conditions of life during a particular incarnation in order to more rapidly achieve perfection or the expiation of errors and mistakes committed during past lives.

In addition to reincarnation and karma, mediumship is a central element of Spiritism. Mediumship is the means of communication between incarnated and disincarnated spirits, and those who are able to develop this ability to its full potential are called ‘mediums’. Another basic principle of Spiritism is the practice of charity, which constitutes the fundamental means of spiritual evolution. Incarnate and disincarnate spirits can improve themselves through charitable acts and brotherly love, principles closely linked to Christian moral values. These principles are clearly expressed in Kardec’s well-known saying that “there shall be no salvation without charity.”

We do not seek here to offer a historical account of French Spiritism (for that, see Aubrée and Laplantine 2009; and Monroe’s chapter in this volume), but rather to focus on the expansion of this doctrine in Brazil, attending to the particularities of its development there, where it is marked by a strong emphasis on its therapeutic applications. We thus hope to introduce the therapeutic dimension of Spiritism that, while only slightly developed under Allan Kardec’s and French codification, gained strength in Brazil and distinctively marked Brazilian Spiritist practice, at the same time engendering a field of disputes involving the State, the medical establishment, and various religious groups.

Spiritism(s) in Brazil: Singular or Plural?

Modern Spiritualism's theories, as well as those of what can be called French Spiritism, were fast to arrive in Brazil. The first book on Spiritism to be published in the country, *Les temps sont arrivés* by Casimir Lieutaud, dates as far back as 1860, only three years after the publication of Kardec's *The Spirits' Book* in France. In Rio de Janeiro, in the second half of the nineteenth century, an elite made up of French and Brazilians well-versed in French was the first group to become acquainted with the novelty arriving from Europe. Despite its early beginnings in Rio, it was in the northeast of the country, in the state of Bahia, that, in 1865, the foundation of the first Spiritist congregation took place, the Family Group of Spiritism. It was only in 1873 that a second group was founded in Rio de Janeiro, the Society for Spiritist Studies—Confucius Group.¹ A translation of Kardec's work was first published in Brazil in 1875.

There was no unity in the growing Brazilian Spiritist movement, as many different groups existed at the time. Far from promoting a synthesis of the disparate strands, Kardec's teachings on Spiritism, which conceived of it as a triad of science-philosophy-religion, worked as a means through which his followers were able to create not one but several Spiritisms, riddled by disputes both internal and external to those groups. According to historian Sylvia Damazio (1994: 105), it was within the Confucius Group that various currents within the Brazilian Spiritist movement first gained form. Those currents reflected the diverse interpretations of the Spiritist doctrine as well as the distinctive dimensions of that doctrine that each group sought to emphasise in its teachings in Brazil.

One of the currents was thus called 'scientific' and was composed of those who privileged the experimental dimension of the doctrine that focused on physical phenomena, such as materialisations; another one was named 'Pure Spiritism' and was composed of those who accepted the scientific and philosophic teachings revealed by the doctrine, but rejected its religious development based upon the Spiritist readings of the Bible; and a third one was called 'religious' or 'mystic' and was composed of those who had a proselytising orientation and thus accepted the whole of Kardec's work, but focused on the religious and moral dimensions of the doctrine that were based on Christianity (Arribás 2008).

1 Despite its name, there are no references in the literature to the actual incorporation of elements of Confucianism by this group. In fact, it is said that Confúcio is the name of a spirit who claimed to have been sent by the angel Ismael, whom Brazilian Spiritists consider the patron guide of Brazil (Arribás 2008).

In 1881, during the first Brazilian Spiritist Congress, in Rio de Janeiro, a first attempt at unification of the Brazilian Spiritist movement gave rise to the Center of the Spiritist Union of Brazil. The project was short-lived due to disagreements between the 'mystic' or 'religious' and the 'scientific' supporters within the group. On January 1, 1884, another attempt was undertaken in the hopes of creating an institution neither 'scientific' nor 'mystic', but 'neutral' (Damazio 1994; Arribas 2008), which would bring together Brazilian Spiritists: the Brazilian Spiritist Federation (FEB). The new organisation managed to gather the diverse currents in its early years, but as time went by the disputes amongst 'religious' supporters, the majority group within FEB, and the ones with 'scientific' orientation once again lead to ruptures. The institution, nonetheless, did not fall apart as had its predecessor and manages to continue operating today. That does not mean, however, that it was successful in unifying Brazilian Spiritists, but that it remains a representative body for Spiritism as a religion officially recognised by the State. Even so, not all those who identify themselves as Spiritists in Brazil recognise its authority.²

Alongside the internal disputes, movements of approximation to and distancing from other religions—such as Catholicism and Afro-Brazilian religions, particularly Umbanda—also marked the shaping of Spiritism in Brazil. Despite historical conflicts with the Catholic Church, Brazilian Spiritists drew closer to Christianity as they adopted some of its symbols, such as the cult of the Virgin Mary. The 'mystic' currents were the ones taken to be responsible for this approximation with Catholic symbols and values as they turned their focus to the religious and proselytising messages of the doctrine. Chico Xavier, a medium who became known in Brazilian society well beyond Spiritist circles, was emblematic of the approximation between Spiritism and Catholicism in Brazil. This movement had started much earlier with one of the founders of the Brazilian Spiritist Federation, Adolfo Bezerra de Menezes, a devout of the Virgin Mary (Arribas 2008). It is, however, Chico Xavier's own trajectory as a model of renunciation, obedience, and sacrifice that personifies the centrality of Catholicism's values within Spiritism.³

2 Those centers that do not wish to follow FEB's guidelines tend to join other federations, even though they tend to not enjoy the same social and political prestige as FEB.

3 The son of a travelling salesman, Chico Xavier lost his mother and was raised by a godmother who punished him severely. He started to work at an early age and, even without a good formal education, was able to become a civil servant. When he encountered Spiritism, he was able to find an explanation for the voices and apparitions that had surrounded him since his childhood. As a medium he developed the skill of 'psychographism', or channeling the words of spirits, and he wrote more than 400 books with the aid of spirits. He died in 2002 without

According to Stoll (2003), it is precisely because there was no attempt to construct a spirituality radically different from the one predominant in contemporary Brazilian society that, in contrast to what happened in France, its country of origin, Spiritism was able to take root in Brazil. The 'Brazilian style' of Spiritism was centered on the Catholic notion of saintliness, one of the founding values of a "national religious culture" (Stoll 2003: 196). Stoll further argues that the hegemonic model of Brazilian Spiritism is predicated upon its relation to Catholicism.

This purported hegemony of a 'Catholic model', however, collides with the correlations that have been continuously made between Spiritism and Afro-Brazilian religions. The movements of approximation and distancing between Umbanda⁴ and Spiritism, for instance, have been at the heart of the historical formation and consolidation of both religious practices in Brazil (see Camargo 1961; Bastide 1967; Bastide 1985; Giumbelli 1997; Ortiz 2005). Like Spiritism, Umbanda is a mediumistic religion in which the recognition of a relation between the world of spirits and the human world is marked by the practice of incorporation, even if it takes place in very different manners in each religion.⁵

Camargo (1961), for instance, proposes the notion of a 'mediumistic continuum' to speak of the relation of continuity between the various mediumistic religions, particularly Umbanda and Kardecism.⁶ Even though he considers

ever marrying. He never charged for his services, and the revenue from his book sales were donated to charitable organisations. In 2010, a full-length film about Chico Xavier's life was released in Brazil, and it drew 600,000 spectators to the movie theaters in its first week showing. It was the largest blockbuster in Brazilian cinema since 1995.

- 4 Umbanda is a religious practice that emerged in Brazilian urban centers in the early twentieth century and is often described as the 'true national religion' (Ortiz 2005). Its cosmology congregates African deities and Amerindian and Brazilian spirits, and its practice incorporates Christian and Spiritist values, among others. It is a highly complex religion, and its practices, just as in the case of Spiritism, are diverse and marked by regional, political, and ritual differences.
- 5 We have chosen to follow a growing trend in the anthropological literature on Afro-Brazilian religions and opted to use the word 'incorporation' instead of 'possession'. Not only does 'incorporation' reflect the words the practitioners themselves use to refer to their practices, while 'possession' carries with it a long history of medicalisation of such practices, but 'incorporation' also points to potentially enlightening dialogues with current theories on the body, embodiment, subjectivity, agency, and so on.
- 6 In Brazil, to call oneself a 'Spiritist' is often a socially accepted way of making reference to one's membership in one of the many religious denominations that involve mediumistic practices, that is, the incorporation of spirits. Such ascription does not imply any necessary relation to Spiritism as a formal religion. To label oneself Kardecist, on the other hand, is to mark a radical difference between those who truly follow Kardec's codification of the doctrine and the adepts of other mediumistic practices.

them to be distinct religions, Camargo goes on to argue that, in terms of their doctrines and their followers' practice, they combine "in innumerable ways the ritual and doctrinaire solutions of each extreme" (1961: xii). In other words, on one end of such a continuum one would find Kardecism, on the other Umbanda, and in between a series of combinations that give rise to a range of Spiritist practices. One common point along this continuum, besides that of mediumship itself, is the therapeutic aspects of the religions; another is their role as a means for social adjustment in the context of rapid urbanisation in the country during the first half of the twentieth century. Such transformations led to dramatic changes in Brazilian social relations, which shifted from a rural structure based largely on patronage to an urban context of fragmented and impersonal sets of relations.

In his seminal work on Afro-Brazilian religions, Roger Bastide argues, however, that the notion of a continuum between these two religions based on their points of contact cannot be sustained when we consider their ritual and cosmological differences. He highlights the fact that the mediumistic trance is itself manifested in very different manners across the two religions. The Kardecist trance is centered on speech, on preaching, and on the analysis of family relations, which would bring this version of Spiritism closer to Freudian psychoanalysis. On the other hand, trance in Umbanda is centered on gestural expression, more like a theatrical enactment of a "popular mythology" (Bastide 1967: 15). Bastide regards the existence of multiple Spiritisms as a consequence of class struggle in Brazilian society, and he distinguishes three types that are not necessarily in a continuum: a) an 'initial Spiritism' that regards itself as scientific and is practiced by intellectuals, doctors, engineers, and academics; b) a Spiritism more focused on the religious aspects of the doctrine and centered on the preaching of the gospel, which, despite being open to all, is mostly practiced by the white middle class and has a heightened therapeutic function; and c) Umbanda Spiritism, which is mostly practiced by blacks and has the sociological function of "reassuring the black man of his own value, showing that he is not beneath western culture, that he is not 'primitive' or 'semi-civilized', but rather thinks and feels exactly as other members of Brazilian society" (Bastide 1985: 435). Bastide goes on to say that whites are, nonetheless, not fooled by this third and last realm of Spiritism, therefore labelling it pejoratively as 'low Spiritism'.

Spiritism's Therapeutic Trajectory in Brazil

According to Aubrée and Laplantine (2009), the therapeutic aspect of Spiritism evolved only in Brazil. This is not surprising, given that, as they point out, Allan

Kardec's code contained only a very generalising and brief explanation of illness and offered few resources for the mediums to develop actual therapeutic practices. According to the code, illnesses, especially chronic and degenerative ones, could also be seen as part of an individual's karma and were therefore considered incurable. Such a conception of illness might be the reason why Spiritist therapy hardly developed at all in France. In Brazil, on the other hand, such a therapeutic dimension emerges in the early stages of its development in the country and is in part related to the notion of mercy and forgiveness inherited from Catholicism.

However, we have to recognise that this therapeutic dimension is not exclusive to Brazilian Spiritism. In Puerto Rico, this manifestation of Spiritism is widespread, as pointed out in the research carried out by Koss-Chioino (2005), Rivera (2005), and Schmidt (2009).⁷ In Buenos Aires, Argentina, Algranti (2007) points to the etiological theories and therapeutic practices developed in the *Escuela Científico Basilio*, a Spiritist institution founded by a French couple who migrated to Argentina at the end of the nineteenth century. What might distinguish the Spiritist therapeutic practice in Brazil is its considerable public, social, and political recognition, as pointed out by Giumbelli (1997) and Aubrée and Laplantine (2009). Nonetheless, a long process of condemnation and eventual legitimisation of therapeutic practices, which is still underway nowadays, marks this contemporary recognition.

Spiritism, as formulated by Kardec, teaches that human beings are formed by a triple dimension: the physical body (material and transitory), the spirit (fluid and immortal) and the 'perispirit', the energetic body situated halfway between the material and the spiritual bodies, responsible for the union and equilibrium of both. The 'perispirit' is considered the mediator through which the "spirit conveys its will to the exterior and acts on the body organs" (Kardec 1994: 63). In the absence of a perfect equilibrium among these three dimensions of being, a space is open for illness, which can be: a) the consequence of a person's action in this life, which compromised the equilibrium between body, mind, and spirit; b) disturbances caused by disincarnate spirits who,

7 Similarly to Brazil, in Puerto Rico Spiritism takes on many faces or variations, as suggested by Schmidt, who refuses the label 'syncretism', arguing, as did Evans-Pritchard a long time ago, that religion is what people do. In that sense, Spiritism in Puerto Rico is not a "secondary system formed by elements of different origins that are mixed up, but a system of belief practiced by millions of people everyday" (Schmidt 2009: 182). Puerto Rican Spiritism brings together Catholic saints, African deities, and Kardec's teachings in its practice, and it also plays a role in discourses on national identity and exerts aesthetic influences on the work of several artists who find inspiration in Spiritist imagery.

moved by karmic debts, act upon the incarnate, bringing spiritual and material imbalance that can lead to physical illness, given that in the Spiritualist conception of the human being such dimensions are interconnected; and c) karmic illness derived from the choices made by the spirit itself in its earlier incarnations and that serve as a means to achieve redemption from grave errors committed in those earlier lives.

As far as the forms of healing are concerned, Kardec's work mentions praying as well as the laying-on of hands. The therapeutic properties of such practices are partially derived from the notion of animal magnetism developed in the eighteenth century by Mesmer.⁸ In Brazil, Spiritists extended the therapeutic scope of the doctrine towards the healing of multiple infirmities. The main therapeutic technique developed by the first Brazilian Spiritists was the laying-on of hands as well as 'disobsession', a technique in which one medium incorporates the spirit who is exerting 'obsession' over a person—that is, exerting his will over a person in a harmful manner—and another medium takes on the duty of indoctrinating that spirit by means of lecturing him on Christian values, such as forgiveness and love for thy brother. Such preaching seeks to convince the 'obsessing' spirit to forego his desire for vengeance. Spiritists also made use of mediumistic prescriptions, which were dispensed by mediums that incorporated medical doctors or were guided by intuitions afforded by such spirits, who mostly advised on the use of homeopathic medications, but also prescribed allopathic ones.

Such practices, developed in the early years of the spread of Spiritism in Brazil, were not seen favorably by the medical community, which, in cohort with jurists, preachers, journalists, and the police, promoted the persecution of Spiritists under the charge of charlatanism and illegal practice of medicine. As late as 1942, the Brazilian Penal Code still ruled that Spiritism's healing practices were akin to illegal medical practice when they were used to "promote the cure of curable or incurable illness" or to "apply or prescribe substances for therapeutic ends."

Sanctions determined by the legal code were selectively applied in the first decades of the twentieth century as 'true Spiritism' began to be differentiated

8 Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815), an Austrian doctor, formulated the theory of 'animal magnetism', also known as Mesmerism. In 1775, after many experiments, Mesmer came to the conclusion that he could cure by the laying of hands. He argued that a fluid emanated from his hands, reaching the patients, and he deployed this method of cure for many years in Vienna and Paris. Kardec makes several allusions to magnetism and magnetic fluids throughout his work, particularly in *The Book of Mediums*, but he did not see the spirits' manifestations as mere physical effects of animal magnetism. For Kardec, such phenomena resulted both from human magnetic properties and the interference of spirits.

from a 'low' or 'false Spiritism'. The first mode, linked to the educated middle class, distanced itself gradually from the prescribing practices that so bothered the medical doctors and developed a strong philanthropic apparatus through which it carried out 'practices of charity' that ranged from medical and dental assistance to donations of medicine and food. It progressively increased the presence of medical doctors, who then provided legitimacy to the Spiritist therapeutic practices. Gradually, groups who claimed to represent 'true Spiritism' concentrated their efforts on the cure of 'illnesses of the soul' (especially obsession), no longer competing with the medical establishment for the cure of 'bodily illness'.

Meanwhile, the designation 'low Spiritism' was no longer restricted to the discourse of jurists, medical doctors, journalists, and social scientists, having been adopted by the Spiritist groups themselves. It was then deployed as a means of self-differentiation from the religious-therapeutic practices marked by the influence of Afro-Brazilian religions, called variously 'macumba', 'black magic', or 'witchcraft', that are all charged with the intent to cause harm or deception (Cardoso 2004). The term 'Low Spiritism' was thus used by the State's police apparatus as well as by the religious practitioners themselves, particularly through FEB, to produce distinctions between a 'true' and a 'false' Spiritism, at once legitimising certain groups and practices while denying such legitimacy to others.

In the course of its history, FEB has endeavoured to develop and implement a series of prescriptions regarding the interpretation of the religious doctrine among its affiliate religious centers, providing guidelines for the carrying out of the practice of spiritual therapy. If in the first half of the twentieth century that meant a progressive distancing from mediumistic prescription and the exclusion and rejection of mediumistic incorporation of spirits linked to Umbanda, which was at the time included among the forms of 'low Spiritism', nowadays the therapeutic restrictions imposed upon its affiliates are more applicable to what is broadly called the 'New Age', a religious-spiritual field currently in rapid expansion (Maluf 2005; D'Andrea 2000).

The influence of New Age practices, adopted by an urban middle class with close ties to post-psychoanalysis and post-Spiritualist movements that question all religious dogmatism and traditionalism, has once again reconfigured Brazilian Spiritism. Individuals who identify themselves with the Spiritist doctrine but resist the religious dogmatism that has given shape to Brazilian Spiritism have gradually incorporated the reflexive and psychological elements emanating from such New Age practices. The orthodox posture of institutions such as FEB has led many adepts to break away from institutionalised Spiritism, or has, at least, fomented their multiple memberships in other contemporary

religious-spiritual systems that offer a wide range of spiritual-therapeutic practices.

Recently, Spiritist centers in Brazil have adopted practices such as chromo-therapy, Bach Flower Remedies,⁹ Reiki therapy, and the use of crystals. Such centers cannot be affiliated to FEB, as the Federation does not recognise such practices as appropriate to the Spiritist doctrine, classifying them as 'esoteric'. Nonetheless, many adepts who make use of these alternative and complementary therapies in the Spiritist practice have turned to theories of bioenergy, quantum physics, and even documents issued by the World Health Organisation to sustain the 'scientific' nature of their efficacy.

These last changes reaffirm the persistence of a therapeutic orientation in the historical development of Brazilian Spiritism, which has been fundamental not only to demarcating its frontiers, but also to broadening its boundaries. All along this process, medical doctors have played an important part, sometimes in the role of prosecutors of Spiritism, at other times as its allies in the defense of a 'holistic' approach to medicine that considers body, mind, and spirit as an integrated whole.

Doctors and Mediums: From Conflict to Alliance

The therapeutic dimension of Brazilian Spiritism that we have been describing thus far forced practitioners to establish relations with the official representatives of the medical field: medical doctors. It is important to note that the first years of the development of this religious practice in the country coincided with the demarcation and strengthening of the medical field as well¹⁰ and that the persecution of Spiritists by medical doctors stimulated the production of knowledge in both fields. In order to discredit Spiritist therapy, doctors had to

9 Developed by Edward Bach, an English doctor, in the 1930s, the remedies make use of flower essences that are supposed to therapeutically affect the emotional state of the patients. According to Bach, health ailments have their origin in the mind and in repressed feelings that emerge as mind conflicts and eventually lead to physical illness. Bach Flower Remedies arrived in Brazil in the early 1990s, and nowadays other types of essences exist alongside the ones originally created by Bach himself (Flower Remedies of Saint German, Flower Remedies of the Goddess, Flower Remedies of California, and so on).

10 Medical education in Brazil started in 1808, when the Portuguese royal family set up court in the colony after fleeing Napoleonic wars. Before that, the few doctors in the colony were schooled in Europe and had to compete with a whole slew of healers, herbalists, and other popular figures who tended to the health needs of the local population (Montero 1985).

construct a plethora of pathological classifications for the practitioners of Spiritism, which fomented diverse medical theories, the majority of them delving into the psychic nature of pathology, and placed Spiritism, alcoholism, and syphilis as the main causes of mental alienation. At the same time, in order to defend themselves from the accusation of charlatanism and illegal medical practice, Spiritists implemented a series of rules and procedures intended to distance their practices from those accusations.

As Gama (1992: 259) puts it, “medical knowledge is built from the study, observation and debate about Spiritism, [which] also rebuilds itself from the debate with medicine.” For historian Artur Isaia (2008: 20), in the early years of the twentieth century, psychiatry and Spiritism occupied similar places, as “both sought social acceptance, guided by the same modern ideal—the praise of rationality.” Relations between doctors and Spiritists thus developed basically from the conflicts and disputes for the control over health care, but such relations also included places of alliance, as some doctors found in the doctrine of Spiritism the possibility of reconciliation between science and religion.

A physician, Joaquim Carlos Travassos, undertook the first translation of Kardec’s oeuvre. Even more significantly, Adolfo Bezerra de Menezes, one of the main spokespersons for Spiritism in Brazil, was also a doctor. Born into a Catholic family, Bezerra had a successful public life by the time he formally joined Spiritism, having already been elected to public office more than once. After a Spiritist homeopathic treatment cured him of severe stomach pains, Bezerra studied the doctrine and later helped create FEB, becoming one of its most influential presidents until his death in 1900. In 1897 he published *A loucura sob novo prisma* [*Mental Illness Through a New Prism*], a book in which he presented case studies in which mental disturbances had been cured by Spiritist treatment, particularly disobsession. He is considered the patron of Brazilian Spiritist doctors and, according to practitioners, as a spirit he continues to aid contemporary doctors in their cure.

Spiritist doctors have always sought to develop more formal ties between their professional practice and their religious confession, based upon a ‘scientific’ argument regarding the doctrine. It is in this pursuit that the first Spiritist Medical Association (AME) was founded in São Paulo in 1968. In 1991, AME organised the first Spiritist Medical Congress, which has continued to take place biannually since then. By 1995 there were nine AMEs in Brazil, and during that year’s Congress a national organisation was founded (AME-Brazil), with the mission of “promoting the study of the Spiritist doctrine and its phenomenology, considering its relation to and its integration and application in philosophy, religion and Science, in particular in Medicine, seeking to sustain

it through the creation and undertaking of studies and experiments.”¹¹ Research posted on the association’s website and growing interest in the theme within medical schools continuously highlight Spiritism as scientific health treatment.¹² Spiritist doctors claim a place within official medical science particularly through academic research and seek in other sciences, such as quantum physics, arguments to validate their views on health and spirituality.¹³

Brazilian Spiritist medical doctors seek the consolidation of Spiritist therapeutic practices within the recognised realms of knowledge regarding health and illness. They also extend their influence to other countries, promoting the trans-nationalisation of Brazilian Spiritism through the field of health (Lewgoy 2008). Such goals led to the convening of the First International Meeting of Spiritist Doctors in 1999; on this occasion doctors from Argentina, Colombia, Guatemala, Panama, Portugal, and Brazil founded the International Spiritist-Doctor Association (AME-I). Since then, AMEs have spread through other countries in Latin America and Europe, as well as the United States. Such associations are commonly founded or coordinated by immigrant Brazilian Spiritist doctors.

Considering this history, the large number of Spiritist hospitals that presently can be found in Brazil comes as no surprise. According to Almeida and Neto (2003), in the state of São Paulo alone there are twenty-six such institutions¹⁴ where conventional medical and psychological resources are deployed alongside Spiritist therapy procedures. The latter consists mainly of the laying-on of hands, praying, and preaching, but it may include in certain cases sessions of disobsession and complementary procedures such as chromotherapy. The majority of these institutions treat patients with psychiatric and/or

11 Excerpt from the website www.amebrasil.org.br. On February 2011, the association’s site reported forty-four AMEs throughout the country and six new ones being formed. Spiritist psychologists have also founded a national organisation, the Brazilian Association of Spiritist Psychologists (see <http://www.abrape.org.br/index.php>. Accessed 02/2011).

12 In the United States and Europe, medical schools’ curricula have, for quite some time, included classes focused on the study of the relation between health and spirituality. Starting in 2005, some schools in Brazil have included in their curricula the course ‘Health and Spirituality’, with the support of AME.

13 The Spiritist medical congresses have been attended by physicists such as Amit Goswami and Alan Wallace, well-known for their attempts to explore the relations between physics and spirituality, and in 2009 the event convened about 1,300 people in a university in southern Brazil.

14 In an Internet search on February 2011, we were able to locate twenty-nine medical-Spiritist institutions in various Brazilian states. On the AME-Brazil webpage, however, only fourteen Spiritist hospitals are listed.

chemical dependency problems, providing medical treatment that may at times be offered free of charge as part of the public health system.

The relation between the medical field and Spiritism in Brazil is not, however, restricted to incarnate doctors. As we described above, in the practice of mediumistic prescription, for instance, the medication was prescribed by the spirits of doctors, through their incorporation in mediums. The actions of disincarnate doctors are, however, mainly represented in the practice of spiritual surgeries. Starting as early as the 1950s, several Spiritist mediums argued for the healing properties of surgeries performed through the incorporation of spirits of doctors. The most well-known spirit to perform such surgeries in Brazil is Dr. Adolph Fritz, a German doctor who allegedly died during the First World War and who is claimed to have performed, during the last sixty years, thousands of surgeries through incorporation in different mediums. He used scissors, kitchen knives, and even an electric chainsaw for such purposes, without the need for any anaesthetic or asepsis. Despite those conditions, his 'patients' claim to have felt little or no pain and report that post-surgery infections are rare.

Dr. Fritz's surgeries generally occur in large warehouses where, through a medium, he performs surgery on hundreds, sometimes thousands of people per day. José Pedro de Freitas, who became known internationally as Zé Arigó, was the first medium to incorporate Dr. Fritz. After his death, other mediums continued this partnership with Dr. Fritz, one of them being Edson de Queiroz, a gynecologist who had his medical license revoked by the National Medical Council for breach of the code of ethical professional conduct. The justice system eventually reinstated his titles. Nowadays two mediums allegedly incorporate the spirit of the German doctor. One of them performs surgery in the southeastern part of the country, without the use of any incisions or other types of bodily perforations on his clients. The other, who deployed the same 'traditional' manners as Dr. Fritz, making use of surgical blades, needles, and scissors, operated in the northeast but was denounced by local medical agencies, charged with illegal practice of medicine, and went into hiding to evade prison. Another famous medium is João de Deus, a farmer who lives in the midwest and weekly tends to hundreds of people from all parts of the world attracted by the promise of cure by spiritual surgery, which he performs with or without the need of surgical incisions, depending on the choice made by the patients as to the 'surgical procedure' (Almeida et al. 2000).

Dr. Fritz's surgeries have a very performative character and are generally undertaken with all the props present in a biomedical surgery room, minus the asepsis procedures. The white jackets are a common attire, sometimes marked with the name of the spirit of the doctor, not that of the medium. It should be

pointed out that a large part of the symbolic value of Dr. Fritz's actions derives from the fact that he not only had been an actual doctor while incarnate but, most importantly, was German; his education and nationality thus grant him high status amongst the population that seeks his care (Lynch 2005).

In most cases, spiritual surgeries and other therapies offered by Spiritist centers are conducted free of charge. Charity is the principle that guides such practices, and charging for them would definitely characterise the mediumistic practice of spiritual surgery as illegal medical practice. Donations are nonetheless welcome, and many surgeries are accompanied by the recommendation of the use of 'natural' medicines, typically teas, which are sold by the surgeon-mediums themselves. A large part of those practitioners are accused of illegal medical practice by the local Medical Councils, but the charges are generally dropped for the lack of proof of any harm perpetrated on patients.

Dr. Fritz's surgeries are the object of criticism not only on the part of doctors, but of many adepts of Spiritism as well. Greenfield (1992; 1999) observed that in addition to the charges brought against the mediums by the Medical Councils, the Spiritist Doctors Association of São Paulo also condemned the actions of Edson de Queiroz. The more orthodox Spiritists, with close ties to FEB, deem incisions and perforations unnecessary, arguing that curative fluids¹⁵ do not need such intervention in order to act upon the physical body. Some adepts, however, consider the spiritual surgeries with incisions an irrefutable proof of the power of the spirits and a means to challenge people's lack of faith.

There are many other modes of spiritual surgeries besides those mediums perform with the aid of Dr. Fritz. Many Spiritist centers, even some affiliated to FEB, practice what is called 'remote fluidic surgeries'. A person can request a spiritual surgery, which is then undertaken directly by the spirit wherever the patient might be, without the presence or mediation of a medium. The procedure generally requires that the patient recite a prayer and lie down at a previously arranged time in order for the spirit to perform the fluidic surgery. In this case the spirits themselves perform the surgery by the action of 'spiritual

15 Generally speaking, fluids are defined by Spiritism as extremely rarefied matter, being often compared to sounds, which are invisible and transmitted as waves. In the Spiritist literature, the description of fluids is closely related to theories of animal magnetism. However, there are many different types of fluids acting between the visible (material/human) and the invisible (immaterial/spiritual) worlds that can be emitted by humans, spirits, and nature alike. Such fluids have the capacity to interfere in dense matter, being therefore deployed for spiritual cures, particularly through the laying of hands—the means of transmission of human and/or spiritual fluids.

fluids' that emanate straight from them to the body of the patient. Other surgical procedures can also be performed with the use of a finger or a dull surgical blade that is pressed upon the place of surgical intervention. In most of those practices, a clear biomedical aesthetic guides the procedures, as the clothing, bodily gestures, environment, and speech compose the setting of a surgical event in which the spiritual entities, not the mediums, are deemed to be the actual surgeons.

Why is Spiritist Therapy So Appreciated in Brazil?

Spiritist therapy enjoys a degree of social recognition and a level of institutionalisation in Brazil that is absent from any other country where Spiritism has flourished. It is not uncommon to see references in the media to public figures, such as famous athletes or TV actors, who disclose that they too have undergone spiritual surgeries—preferably without incisions. Some Brazilian Spiritist centers are deemed of 'public interest' under Brazilian laws because of the services of social assistance and therapy they provide to the public, being therefore eligible for government subsidies, which confer on them political legitimacy. Despite legal prosecution of the mediums who operate with the aid of Dr. Fritz's spirit, wherever they offer their services long queues attest to their continued popularity, while in Brazilian universities there is a growing debate regarding alternative healing practices. It is within this latter realm that Spiritist practices are currently being discussed, with the support of Spiritist doctor associations, which find in the growing international mobilisation around traditional and alternative medical practices a means to gain legitimacy for their own therapeutic practices.

The widespread use of Spiritist therapeutic practices in a country with such continental dimensions led many Brazilian and foreign researchers to formulate socio-anthropological interpretations to explain the success and expansion of Spiritism in Brazil. The main argument of those researchers can be summarised by two points: 1) the lack of conventional social and medical assistance; and/or, 2) the lack of available therapy for incurable diseases, whether these are terminal, or their origin cannot be explained by allopathic medicine, or their symptoms cannot be mitigated by physicians' prescribed medication. In such cases, the illness is deemed to have a 'spiritual' origin, not being subject to cure or diagnosis by 'Earth medicine', but only by 'Astral medicine'. Spiritists thus divide the therapeutic field into two realms.

In addition to the two factors above, researchers generally add a third one, which links the widespread belief in spirits to a national ethos. Such belief in

spirits would have been responsible for the creation of a religious culture within which elements of a Brazilian tradition of curative arts—present among its rural population and predicated upon the power of saints, spirits, ghosts, and other entities to affect the world of the living—would have migrated to the modern urban centers, especially during the early years of development of the great metropolitan centers. In its socio-genesis, Brazilian society would then have inherited the Euro-Catholic, African, and Indigenous therapeutic practices, all of them imprinted by the mystic-religious dimension of their respective cultures and markedly present in the urban spaces of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

If such sociological and culturalist arguments were able to offer reasonable explanations for the process of expansion and development of Spiritism in the early decades of the twentieth century, they can no longer sustain an analysis of the persistence of Spiritist healing practices in contemporary Brazil. It is certainly true that Brazil still lacks a public health system that can provide biomedical assistance to all of its population, and the lack of remedies for the afflictions of the chronically ill still persists. Nonetheless, it is quite clear that Spiritist therapies do not represent merely a means of diminishing the lack or deficiency of medical attention. In fact, in the last decades, they have been incorporated into the health system as treatment alternatives available to people of any socio-economic status, people who do not necessarily share the moral and religious values of Spiritism. Just as many who seek allopathic medical treatments are suspicious of or do not fully 'believe' in their healers—medical doctors—the notion of 'belief' is not sufficient in itself to explain the use of Spiritist therapies either. It is not some internalised predisposition, but the very therapeutic process itself, in which the relation of the patient to the techniques and agents of therapy is constructed, that accounts for the 'belief' of those seeking such alternative healing practices.

More recent research on Spiritist therapy in Brazil has shown that there is a vast and heterogeneous network of healers and users of these techniques (Aureliano 2010). As those people come from all social classes, the economic factor cannot be used to explain the search for spiritual treatments in Brazil. It is also important to point out that the majority of Spiritist centers are located in the urban centers of the south and southeast, regions displaying the best economic indices in the country and where the majority of public and private health services are concentrated. Furthermore, it is not only the incurably sick who crowd the warehouses where mediums operate under the incorporation of Dr. Fritz. The afflicted range from cancer patients to people with a simple sinus infection or cataracts, problems that could have been solved with fast and inexpensive allopathic treatments. Finally, we cannot say that the people

seeking spiritual cures share the religious values of Spiritism, or that they have been converted by any 'miraculous cure', as we encounter among the clients of Spiritist centers people of Catholic and evangelical faiths, and even agnostics and people who do not profess a religion. How, then, can we explain the continuity and currency of Spiritist therapeutic practices in twenty-first-century Brazil?

The relations that sometimes drew together and at other times distanced Brazilian Spiritism from other religions such as Catholicism and Umbanda, as well as the clashes and alliances with medical and other therapeutic systems, pushed Spiritism through different social, political, and cultural realms, where its religious, spiritual, and therapeutic practices were gradually reconfigured and diversified. Consequently, Spiritism in Brazil has to be considered beyond its religious dimension, and it should be taken as a religious-therapeutic field of permeable frontiers. Historically, Spiritism's permeable frontiers have facilitated the movement of categories and practices from within its various groups to the sphere of action of other social agents and, conversely, made it possible for its own groups to absorb and place in contention external elements that played a role in the construction of its own practices. Even then, such movement should not be thought of as a well-defined and consensual syncretism of religious and/or therapeutic forms, but as an unfinished and dynamic process where partial connections (Strathern 2004) are continuously produced, allowing the dislocation of spiritual therapies from Spiritist centers to hospitals, from universities to the offices of new age therapists, from the influence of Jesus Christ to that of quantum physics. In this process, cuts, fissures, and cleavages become spaces of tension, involving political disputes and disputes over the production of meaning, where social actors, be they patients, spirits, lay or religious persons, medical doctors, the state, associations, or institutions, can continuously make and unmake such connections. In this process, Spiritist therapeutic practices can be granted legitimacy in one moment or place and be criminalised elsewhere or in other times, just as they can be given legitimacy through the lenses of scientific discourse and at other times be recognised precisely as part of Christian faith. The production of such connections draws on both the historical-political dimensions that mark any religious field and the subjective dispositions of the patients themselves, as they live through the experience of illnesses.

Focusing attention on the processual dynamics of these partial connections, rather than relying on the notion of syncretism, allows us to avoid generalising explanations that cannot account for the heterogeneity that clearly marks Spiritist practices in Brazil. Furthermore, this conception of 'partial connections' allows us to suggest that the success of Spiritist therapeutics in

Brazil is part of a wider, trans-national socio-cultural process wherein the place of religion and the place of medicine are continuously questioned and resituated by those undergoing the experience of illness. People do not commonly act according to distinctions imposed by a rationalist model centered exclusively on a biological frame, nor do they give up claims to health care as a social right. What they do seek are modes of understanding and modes of action that allow for their active engagement with processes of healing. In this respect, Spiritism in Brazil has offered a possibility for therapy that escapes the dichotomies constructed by both religion and science, even while denying neither faith nor reason.

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Between Two Worlds

*Transformations of Spiritualism in Contemporary Lily Dale*¹

Darryl V. Catherine

Introduction

At first glance, it seems that little has changed at Lily Dale. Founded in 1879 as one of hundreds of Spiritualist camps started during the postbellum era, Lily Dale has survived as one of the last, and perhaps the most vibrant, establishments of its kind. Today an estimated twenty-five thousand guests visit the 167-acre camp, located on the shores of Cassadaga Lake in upstate New York, each year. They no longer ride the New York Central Railroad to ‘the Dale’s’ front gates, but they do step into the same Victorian-era settlement of hotels, houses, and manicured parks that welcomed travellers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Lily Dale’s abundant hardwoods and evergreens are now fully grown, towering over the gridded streets in old-growth groves and promenades, but the central activities of the camp remain largely unchanged. The physical spectacles of spirit communication—including self-manifesting paintings, tipping tables and levitating trumpets—disappeared from the camp in the 1940s, but messages from the deceased continue to pour in, through the professionally trained mediums who live and work at the camp.

Part of Lily Dale’s enchantment is indeed its ability to conjure up memories of an America-gone-by. Visitors revel in the faded wallpaper and creaking beds of its hotel rooms, or the noticeable lack of television sets and computer terminals on the campgrounds. But just beneath the old-time-religion patina, the Dale teems with the energy of fresh innovation. Since the 1980s, a new baby boomer generation of mediums has been blending elements of traditional Spiritualism with various aspects of so-called New Age spirituality. In 1988, this updated version of Spiritualism became institutionalised in a new church, Fellowships of the Spirit, located just a quarter of a mile from the main entrance to Lily Dale. Meanwhile, the marks of new religious experimentations accent the ground of the camp itself: a ‘fairy trail’ decorated with miniature shelters for land spirits runs through the woods, an evergreen bush labyrinth grows atop one of the parks, and a medicine wheel fashioned from stumps sits on a

1 The author wishes to thank Martie Hughes, registered Lily Dale medium, for her assistance in researching and proofreading this essay.

beach alongside Lake Cassadaga. Over the last decade, itinerant Buddhist monks have inaugurated the annual season with the construction of a sand mandala, regularly disposed in the lake's waters as an offering to human and other-than-human spirits alike.

The meaning of 'Spiritualism' at modern-day Lily Dale is taking shape somewhere in between these poles of tradition and innovation. On the one hand there is the conservative notion of Spiritualism as adherence to a well-defined set of metaphysical doctrines. At the Dale, this refers specifically to the guiding principles of the National Spiritualist Association of Churches (NSAC), an organisation founded in 1893 to perpetuate Spiritualism as a distinctive American denomination and to safeguard the religious freedom of mediums. Lily Dale medium Harrison D. Barrett served as the first president of the organisation, with Dale residents constituting nearly half of the New York delegates represented at the inaugural meeting in Chicago.² Today the NSAC's institutional headquarters are housed on the campgrounds, and many of the Dale's mediums articulate their Spiritualism in accordance with its metaphysical teachings. On the other hand, there is a more fluid notion of Spiritualism dating back to the Dale's earliest years, when a local assembly of Free Thinkers—the Cassadaga Free Lake Association—owned and orchestrated the camp. In the days before the spirits had revealed any clear set of philosophical principles to humankind, Spiritualism connoted something rather ambiguous. It was mediumship rather than metaphysics that distinguished the movement, and doctrines were in flux. Today many of the baby boomer mediums at Lily Dale identify themselves as inheritors of this lineage, taking liberties in elaborating their own understandings of Spiritualism. They stress that at Lily Dale, this kind of improvisation represents the older and therefore more 'traditional' expression of the religion.

In truth, the robust culture of Lily Dale depends upon a creative tension between both kinds of Spiritualism. While NSAC affiliates work to safeguard Spiritualism as a one-of-a-kind religion, the newer generation of mediums staves off the Dale's demise into cultural obsolescence. Unfortunately, modern Spiritualism as a whole seems to be following this latter trajectory. By the turn of the twenty-first century, the number of self-identified Spiritualists in America had shrunk to a meagre 116,000, with the average age of mediums

² A total of two hundred delegates from twenty-three US states, the District of Columbia, and Germany attended the first convention of the National Association of Spiritualists, forerunner of the National Spiritualist Association of Churches. The state of New York sent fourteen delegates to Chicago. Of these, six were listed as Lily Dale residents (*Proceedings of the National Delegate Convention of Spiritualists* 1893: 199–203).

in the early sixties.³ Alarmed by the graying of their tradition, some Spiritualists have begun to chart a new course for their churches—recommending the same kind of transformations that Lily Dale underwent decades ago. Their vision would reaffirm the communal nature of Spiritualism, which rejects the ethos of radical individualism typically embedded in New Age spiritualities. But it would also dress Spiritualist metaphysics in new clothes, drawing from New Age-inspired concepts. Whether or not the churches can or will reinvent themselves in time to avert extinction remains to be seen. In the meantime, however, Lily Dale seems destined to thrive.

The following overview of contemporary Spiritualism is written strictly from the perspective of Lily Dale. While no single site can capture the full range of religious belief of an entire denomination, an exploration of the Spiritualist culture at the Dale can nevertheless clarify a number of important issues affecting the tradition as a whole. Before turning to the discussion of why and how Lily Dale has been transforming the meaning of Spiritualism for the twenty-first century, it is helpful to consider what, exactly, Spiritualism meant at the camp before the transformation began in the 1980s.

The Meanings of Spiritualism at Lily Dale: Practice and Belief

Driving through the main gates of Lily Dale, the contemporary traveller will pass underneath a large wooden sign, painted a rich blue and decorated with a light pink lily pad. “Lily Dale Assembly,” it reads, “[the] world’s largest center for the religion of Spiritualism.” The proclamation seems rather straightforward—until one tries to pin it down. What, exactly, is the “religion of Spiritualism” that Lily Dale celebrates? Journalists and scholars have offered a dizzying variety of answers to this question over the years. Spiritualism has been described as a new religious movement, a variant of liberal Protestantism, a pseudoscience, and a species of metaphysical-occult religion—to name just a few of the important, and conflicting, categories that observers and practitioners have invoked to settle the issue.⁴ The problem is compounded even further by the introduction of the notoriously vague concept of ‘religion’—ambiguously

3 For the total number of self-identified Spiritualists in the United States over the age of eighteen, see Kosmin and Mayer 2001: 13. Based on survey data collected from the Spiritualist camps of Lily Dale, Cassadaga (Florida), and Chesterfield (Indiana), Todd Jay Leonard (2005: 164) calculates the mean age of female mediums as 65, and that of male mediums as 59.

4 Scholars of religion have employed a variety of historiographical approaches to the study of American Spiritualism, rendering accounts of its origins that are at turns both

signifying an orientation either to supernatural realities or to cultural notions of ultimacy.

Before narrowing in on the meaning of Spiritualism at Lily Dale in particular, it is helpful to recall a few basic facts about the origins of what quickly came to be referred to as 'Spiritualism' by the public at large. If by Spiritualism we mean a two-way conversation with the spirits of the departed, practiced by middle-class, Anglo-Protestant Americans, then Spiritualism began in 1848. It was in that year that two young girls, Kate and Margaret Fox, of Hydesville, New York, astonished their friends and family by entering into an intelligent rapport with the spirit of murder victim. According to eyewitnesses, it was Kate who first discovered that she could elicit responses—communicated through a series of rapping noises—from the angry poltergeist whose body was allegedly buried in the cellar of the Fox cottage. She had merely to ask it questions, and the disincarnate intelligence answered her obediently. News of this uncanny interaction was quickly picked up by the local and national press, and soon communication with the dead—through private séances and public mediums—became something of a national pastime.

If, however, by Spiritualism we mean a distinctive cosmology that explains how, and why, such interactions should occur in the first place, then the dating of Spiritualism gets pushed back by at least one year. In 1847, another upstate New Yorker named Andrew Jackson Davis published a three-volume tome entitled *The Principles of Nature, Her Divine Revelations, and a Voice to Mankind*. Davis had dictated the contents of the work—which covered everything from the origins of Creation, the history of humankind, and the mysteries of the afterlife—over a two-year period while in trance. It was Mesmerism that had first unlocked the young man's visionary powers in the year 1843, when an

complementary and contradictory. Authoritative studies exemplifying this methodological diversity might include Peter Clarke's discussion of Spiritualism as a new religious movement in *New Religious Movement in Global Perspective; a Study of Religious Change in the Modern World* (2005); Ann Braude's emphasis on its Unitarian, Universalist, and Quaker theology in *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (1989); and Catherine L. Albanese's reconstruction of Spiritualism as an extension of Western metaphysical religion in *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (2007). Generations of skeptics and debunkers have also published monographs on mediumship as self-consciously fraudulent performances preying on the emotional vulnerability or intellectual weaknesses of audience members, as in James Randi's *Flim-Flam! Psychics, ESP, Unicorns, and Other Delusions* (1982). Related to this last genre are scholarly works evaluating Spiritualism as deriving primarily from a popular cultural interest in science. See Fred Nadis, *Wonder Shows: Performing Science, Magic, and Religion in America* (2005).

itinerant practitioner passed through his hometown of Poughkeepsie. In an altered state of consciousness he referred to as the 'superior condition', Davis experienced an exalted ability to gain knowledge about virtually any topic. One of the subjects covered in *The Principles of Nature* was, in fact, the fate of the human spirit in the afterlife. According to the 'Poughkeepsie Seer', spirits made their way after death back towards the Source of all Being, an Infinite Intelligence, through progressive stages of spiritual and material refinement. Along the way, they could and did communicate to certain sensitive individuals among the living, back here on earth, by means of telepathy.

Lettered residents of Hydesville who watched the Fox Sisters' initial rapport with the poltergeist were quick to make connections between Davis's cosmology and the girls' activities as fledgling mediums. From those earliest days until today, writers attempting to define the contours of Spiritualism have tended to focus on either its ritual or its doctrinal dimensions—Spiritualism-as-the-practice-of-communing-with-the-dead, or Spiritualism-as-a-belief-system-elaborating-on-the-meaning-of-spirits—and in the process have given two very different impressions of the subject. Once again, if by Spiritualism we mean primarily a formalised interaction with disincarnate spirits—'mediumship' for short—then there is nothing particularly new, in the history of religions, about the phenomenon of the Fox Sisters. Following exactly such an argument, Spiritualists themselves frequently distinguish between their own tradition, as *modern* Spiritualism, and *ancient* Spiritualism, the other modes of mediumship found across times and cultures. But if the doctrinal dimension of American Spiritualism is emphasised, then the lineage is usually traced back through Davis to the Swedish visionary Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772). Swedenborg also received visions of the afterlife and its inhabitants. Davis claimed both to have communed with him and to have corrected some of the errors in his cosmology—most significantly, by doing away with the concept of hell that figured importantly in Swedenborg's descriptions of the afterlife.

By the time Lily Dale was founded in 1879, Spiritualism—as both a practice and a belief system—had lost much of the cultural cachet it once wielded among America's social elites. Mediumship had become a profession rife with con artists and frauds, and new cosmologists were channeling their own revelations about the cosmos, afterlife, and other-than-human beings that were more up-to-date and cosmopolitan than Davis's. Davis, once a self-proclaimed Spiritualist, in fact broke with the movement in 1878, disheartened by the carnivalesque turn that spirit communication had taken since the inception of the movement (Braude 1989: 181–182). In the meantime, after the Civil War, the institutional locus of Spiritualism shifted away from the public lyceum circuit,

signalling an end to its political phase when trance speakers, oftentimes women, had spoken out on a variety of social issues in the name of famous national ancestors. Postbellum Spiritualism saw the rise of the Spiritualist camps. These were, like Lily Dale, typically located in rural settings and under the administrative control of mediums, who were disproportionately women.

Over the decades, Lily Dale has featured as the subject of several journalistic articles and academic studies. In attempting to characterise the camp's version of the Spiritualist religion, these studies have followed the trend in Spiritualist literature more generally to focus on either ritual or doctrine, but rarely to synthesise the two. A few examples will suffice to illustrate. In 1899 journalist E. Lyell Earle paid a visit to the camp to write an "expose of some so-called spirit phenomena" for *The Catholic World*—concluding that there was "no fundamental doctrine in Spiritualism." For Earle, the only point mediums agreed upon was that "all around us are spirit forms with whom we may hold immediate converse, solace ourselves with their company, find guidance in their counsels, and courage in the thought of their victory. In everything else concerning the nature of these spirits, their origin, their destiny, their manner of manifesting themselves, all is chaos" (Earle 1899: 506–507).

While it might be tempting to dismiss Earle's generalisations as so many distortions of Catholic bias, a similar observation was raised again in 1930 by academic sociologist George Lawton. Lawton struggled to reconcile the phenomena of mediumship with the official doctrines of Spiritualism. He concluded that mediumship is underdetermined by its official religious explanations—that it could and had been analyzed within other explanatory paradigms. "The occurrence of messages, rappings, movements of objects at a distance, materializations, [and] photographs of 'spirits' does not prove the Spiritualist hypothesis of disincarnate spirits enjoying an eternal life in a spirit world which is a perfected reproduction of this one," he summarised. Unlike Earle, Lawton did not seek to reduce all mediumistic phenomena to trickery. Rather, he abandoned the attempt to link mediumship to Spiritualist doctrine altogether, proceeding to limit his study of Lily Dale to a discussion of Spiritualist cosmology and the sociological profiles of its practitioners. He argued that it was Spiritualism's explicit claim to resolve the problem of meaning posed by death that lent its appeal to modern people alienated from their own religious traditions. The phenomena of mediumship attracted some, but not all, people to Spiritualism, and the contours of the religion could ultimately be understood without it (Lawton 1932: 37–54).

In 1980, Michel P. Richard and Albert Adato published a second sociological study of Lily Dale that sidestepped a discussion of mediumship. The authors were interested primarily in resolving the sociological debate over how to

classify Spiritualism: as a denomination, a sect, or a cult. They took interest in mediumship only to discount Bryan Wilson's former characterisation of Spiritualism as a 'thaumaturgical' sect. Invoking the Spiritualist belief that spirit communion is an accepted extension of the Laws of Nature, rather than a miraculous or supernatural event, Richard and Adato (1980: 186–196) discounted Wilson's argument and presented their own case for defining Spiritualism as a religious sect with historical, though not ideological, ties to liberal Protestantism.

Finally, one might consider the most recent study of Lily Dale: journalist Christine Wicker's 2003 bestseller, *Lily Dale: The True Story of the Town that Talks to the Dead*. Like Earle's earlier study, Wicker's depiction of the Dale leaves the impression that formal doctrine is not a particularly important aspect of the camp's culture. Instead, Wicker reconstructs dozens of interviews with people whose lives have been changed through their encounters with mediumship. She finds that personal transformation, rather than assent to creed, is the most remarkable feature of Spiritualism at Lily Dale.

As these divergent interpretations suggest, Spiritualist ritual, its performances of mediumship, and doctrine, a well-defined set of principles, each has a life of its own at Lily Dale. Often they intersect, but often they do not. In order to understand why this is so, it is necessary to know something about the history of Lily Dale. The camp was *not* founded as a Spiritualist church camp, but rather as the brainchild of a local organisation in the nearby town of Laona that called itself the 'Religious Society of Freethinkers'. The roots of this organisation date back to before either Andrew Jackson Davis or the Fox Sisters had appeared on the American scene. The year was 1844, and the occasion was, once again, the visit of an itinerant Mesmerist to a small upstate New York town. Laona resident Jeremiah Carter was moved by the lectures and performances of Dr. Moran from Vermont, but by the time he was ready to be mesmerised, Moran had already left town. So Carter stepped forward at the local general store to participate in an impromptu experiment with Mesmerism by his fellow townsfolk. As the storekeeper made the requisite passes over his body, Carter quickly fell into a trance and metamorphosed into an alter ego who could speak learnedly on medical and other topics. His neighbors referred to him as 'Dr. Hedges'.

It was Carter and a number of his friends who eventually founded The Religious Society of Free Thinkers, in 1855. The group was initially committed to fostering open inquiry into a number of issues, including Mesmerism and political reform, but after the Civil War, they turned increasingly to matters of Spiritualism. In 1870, they purchased a Universalist Church building in Laona and converted it into a Spiritualist meeting house. In 1873, member Willard

Alden moved that a tract of land on his property—a favorite summertime picnic spot among the Free Thinkers—be set aside exclusively for the practice and discussion of mediumship. In 1877, Carter had yet another visionary experience, this time receiving a directive from the spirits that his group was to “prepare a camp meeting” on Alden’s land (LaJudice and Vogt 1984: 2). The owner was happy to oblige. But Alden died the following year, and his son demanded a large percentage of the admission fees, so the Free Thinkers formed their own corporation, the Cassadaga Free Lake Association, to procure just shy of nineteen acres of lakefront property adjacent to the Alden farm.

In 1879, they began clearing this land for the camp that has since come to be known as Lily Dale, and in 1881, they opened the grounds to the public for a ‘People’s Camp Meeting’. During its first few years, the camp retained a decidedly woodsy ambiance: speakers lectured from the ‘Bough House’, which was thatched with tree branches, and guests stayed at a hotel fashioned from a former horse barn. But despite these rustic beginnings, the Cassadaga meeting soon secured the patronage of wealthy donors, and the camp began quickly to grow. By the turn of the century it had swelled into a small settlement of 37 acres—including 198 Victorian-style houses, two grocery stores and bakeries, a meat market, a hardware store, a post office, a bowling alley and billiards hall, a library, and a printing press. The horse-barn hotel had been expanded into a four-storey, eighty-room lodge, and the Bough House was replaced by an auditorium seating up to 1500 guests. Two water towers, a sewage system, and an electrical works completed the infrastructure. In 1903, the camp changed its name to the City of Light—an allusion to its newly installed, state-of-the-art electric lighting—and again in 1906 to the Lily Dale Assembly. By this time there were hundreds of Spiritualist camps throughout the nation, but Lily Dale had gained a reputation as the most luxurious of them all.⁵

Throughout all of these changes, it was mediumship that drew the crowds to Lake Cassadaga. And despite the presence of the Lily Dale residents who were—beginning in the 1890s—also members of the National Association of Spiritualists, it was the theatrical (and, by most accounts, fraudulent) displays

5 Although they are anecdotal, designations of Lily Dale as America’s most prominent Spiritualist camp recur in a number of independent sources. Examples include the description of the Dale as “the most famous and aristocratic spiritualistic camp in America” in “Ingenious Frauds” 1908; or its status as “the most famous of Spiritualist camps and a Mecca for Spiritualists from over all the country” in Lawton 1932: 294. In a later work, J. Stillson Judah (1967: 81) includes Lily Dale alongside Camps Chesterfield (Indiana) and Ephrata (Pennsylvania) as “by far the most popular.”

of physical mediumship that made the camp famous. In addition to the more common spectacles of spirits materialising in darkened rooms or levitating trumpets announcing messages from midair, the camp was renowned for its “precipitated spirit paintings”—artful portraits of deceased loved ones that slowly manifested on blank canvasses under the ‘control’ of the adept medium duos, the Bangs Sisters and the Campbell Brothers.

There is no doubt that the founders of Lily Dale did their part to steer the camp in the direction of middle-class propriety. The Cassadaga Free Association prohibited the sale of alcohol on the campgrounds, and it conceded to the selling of cigars in the 1890s only after a long and heated debate. Furthermore, it regularly invited well-established mediums and advocates of Spiritualism from the movement’s earlier and more political era. One of these was Cora Richmond, born Cora Scott, who as a teenage trance medium had enthralled public audiences throughout the 1850s by waxing eloquently on the cosmological fine points of Andrew Jackson Davis. Between 1887 and 1898, she made four appearances at the Cassadaga camp, advocating the kind of principled Spiritualism endorsed by the national association. Susan B. Anthony also made back-to-back appearances in 1891 and 1892, with a third and final visit in 1905. Welcomed together with Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Anthony in her 1891 visit packed the auditorium and for a moment returned Spiritualism to its earlier status as a leading supporter of and inspiration for the Women’s Movement.

The bourgeois sensibilities of Lily Dale’s founders went a long way in securing the financial backing of upper-class donors, but by no means did the founders speak for the entire camp. As its fame spread, Lily Dale came to attract Spiritualists of all stripes. These included former members of John Murray Spear’s Harmonia community in Kiantone, New York, where members had heeded spirits to dig for remains of an ancient civilisation of Celtic, web-footed Indians (Buescher 2006: Chapter 24). They also included a Spiritualist from Chicago named C.A. Burgess, who appeared at the camp in 1912 to teach healing classes allegedly based on techniques he had learned from Pawnee elders in the Great Plains. Shortly after Burgess’s arrival, a Mohawk man from Kahnawake, Quebec, named Oskenton joined the Lily Dale staff. Together with Burgess and, later, medium Jack Kelly, Oskenton taught healing classes in a lecture hall and in a wigwam erected on the eastern edge of the camp. He also toured the United States and Europe as an opera singer, regularly billed as an ‘Indian version’ of the Italian tenor Enrico Caruso.

Against this decidedly eclectic background, it is not surprising that the *Catholic World* reporter E. Lyell Earle, visiting the Dale in 1899, would choose the word ‘chaos’ to describe its religious culture, although the term is misleading. There is a coherence to the unbounded performance of mediumship at

Lily Dale—even if, true to Earle's observation, one must sometimes pass through chaos to get there. What, exactly, is the 'religion of Spiritualism' shorn of well-defined principles? The simple answer is: a sustained, open-ended, and public reflection on the performance of mediumship.

From the earliest decades of Lily Dale's history until today, the central attraction of the camp has been its so-called 'platform readings'. These are held twice a day at 'Inspiration Stump' in the midst of an old-growth forest grove, where the Religious Society of Free Thinkers once picnicked, and once a day in front of the 'Forest Temple', a simple veranda built by the edge of the camp's western woods. These ceremonies are almost entirely devoid of theological or philosophical 'explanations' that would fix the meaning of mediumship.

Platform readings are performances of the spoken word, lasting for an hour, that combine improvisational theater and extemporaneous speaking. A chairperson, who opens and closes with an improvisational prayer—usually addressed to 'Mother-Father God' or 'Spirit'—calls forward three student or veteran mediums, who are almost always women. They take turns delivering spontaneous messages from the spirits to members of the crowd—"May I come to you?" they ask for permission, and then begin: "As I step into your vibration..." Onlookers are entirely at liberty to draw their own conclusions about what they have just beheld. In fact, chairpersons periodically remind their audiences that they are part of a religious service, instructing them to hold back applause.

These rituals of mediumship do not end once the platform readings are over. Continuous public readings—three times a day, seven days a week—fan the flames of endless conversation at the camp. The Dale has been built as a kind of echo chamber, designed for talking. There are seven parks, two restaurants, and a coffee shop. Televisions and radios have yet to be installed inside the Maplewood Hotel and the camp's sundry bed-and-breakfasts. Instead there are porches and parlors with chairs. In these nooks and crannies of the camp, first-time visitors share their experiences and perceptions of mediumship with more seasoned guests, members of Spiritualist churches, and self-taught metaphysicians. Encounters with the inexplicable—or at best partially explained—performances of mediumship awaken what sociologists call 'memorates'—personal tales of paranormal events. In the sequestered environment of the campground, these memorates are shared, compared, and elaborated. Even sceptical visitors begin to wonder out loud if chance coincidences, dreams, pictures found aslant, coins discovered on sidewalks, or books fallen off of shelves, have not all along been signs of an extraordinary world nudging up against the contours of everyday life.

In the process of trying to figure out what, exactly, mediumship is about, strangers open up to each other. They give voice to their religious questions as

well as their doubts. It hardly matters which they are. Relationships are forged. Contact information is exchanged. Networks begin to form. As scholar Robert Cox (2003) has discussed in his study of nineteenth-century Spiritualism, mediumship is a ritual par excellence for evoking and modelling an affective, visceral experience of *communitas*—known in the 1800s as ‘sympathy’. First, mediumship is interactive, requiring at least two people. Much of the confusion surrounding the ‘truth’ of Spiritualism might be avoided by emphasising its status as a *unique kind of conversation*, rather than as a proclamation of static truths. Second, mediumship is revealing. The messages brought through by mediums seek not only to describe the physical appearance of deceased loved ones, but also to clarify some intimate aspect of the relationship the sitter once had with them. In platform readings, participants implicitly give their consent to being unmasked, allowing others to listen in on the personal details of their lives as narrated by the medium. And third, mediumship is contagious. Mediums do more than engage in intimate conversation; they model it. The public platform readings showcase and legitimise heart-to-heart rapport with the total stranger. In the echo chamber of the camp, it is precisely this kind of conversation that reverberates and intensifies.

At Lily Dale, then, the ‘religion of Spiritualism’ is ultimately a celebration of American society itself, reflected back to its visitors as if in a mirror. Michel P. Richard and Albert Adato, the sociologists who visited the Dale in 1980, are correct in de-emphasising the miraculous or supernatural associations that mediumship often evokes. But there is something sublime at Lily Dale—and that turns out to be the plain human nature of those who have wandered through its gates. In case the ongoing performances of mediumship do not drive this point home, manifold totems of the modern nation, laced throughout the camp, will also remind visitors of the wondrous dimension of everyday life in America. A memorial to fallen troops stands just outside the Healing Temple. A precipitated spirit painting of Abraham Lincoln hangs proudly in the lobby of the Maplewood Hotel. A portrait of Thomas Paine joins daguerreotypes of famous Lily Dale mediums in Assembly Hall. And a spirit slate in the Lily Dale Museum records one of the most famous messages to come through to the camp: “We come to you Sir because we see you are spreading the truth in the right way. I understood the phenomenon while in earth life, and had I lived, should of [sic] proclaimed it to the world. Press forward my brother, never let thy step stray from the path of progress and truth. Your friend, Abraham Lincoln.”

But there is another meaning of the ‘religion of Spiritualism’ at Lily Dale as well. This is its doctrinal, denominational, and institutionalised guise that has attracted the attention of other researchers. While it was not *founded* as a Spiritualist church camp, Lily Dale has *functioned* as one for several decades, and

today it is the central headquarters for the NSAC. Founded in 1893 as the National Association of Spiritualists, the NSAC is the largest, oldest, and most historically influential of the umbrella organisations coordinating networks of Spiritualist churches throughout the United States. The Association was first organised to restore credibility to Spiritualism in the wake of widespread fraud, and to protect the religious freedom of its practitioners.⁶ Their strategy was to codify Spiritualism into a nine-point Declaration of Principles, which reads as follows: (Approved by the National Association of Spiritualists in 1893:)

1. We believe in Infinite Intelligence.
2. We believe that the phenomena of Nature, both physical and spiritual, are the expression of Infinite Intelligence.
3. We affirm that a correct understanding of such expression and living in accordance therewith, constitute true religion.
4. We affirm that the existence and personal identity of the individual continue after the change called death.
5. We affirm that communication with the so-called dead is a fact, scientifically proven by the phenomena of Spiritualism.
6. We believe that the highest morality is contained in the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

(Added in 1909:)

7. We affirm the moral responsibility of individuals, and that we make our own happiness or unhappiness as we obey or disobey Nature's physical and spiritual laws.
8. We affirm that the doorway to reformation is never closed against any soul here or hereafter.

(And in 1944:)

9. We affirm that the precepts of Prophecy and Healing are Divine attributes proven through Mediumship. (Awtry 1983: 9–20)

It should be pointed out that these nine points are not, historically, the first summation of Spiritualist metaphysics. In 1871, the British-born medium

6 The first national organisation of Spiritualists in the United States was the National Convention of Spiritualists, which first convened in Chicago in 1864. It was dissolved in 1873. During its existence the Convention encompassed eighty auxiliary groups (Awtry 1983: 1).

Emma Hardinge Britten first channeled a core set of principles, which later became the central creed for the Spiritualists' National Union—one of England's main Spiritualist organisations, founded in 1901.⁷ But in the United States context, the NSAC paved the way not only for fixing the definition of Spiritualism, but for identifying its 'religious' dimensions with a system of *belief*.⁸ This can be seen, in part, as a nod to the dominant Protestant culture of the time, which assumed the same equation. And relative to the Association's own goals, the strategy was partly effective. In the many exposés of fraudulent mediums during the interwar years, popularised by the theatrical investigations of Harry Houdini, researchers and the press took pains to distinguish the 'real' Spiritualists—those who lived by a coherent creed—from the subjects of their mudraking.

The linkage between Lily Dale and the NSAC dates all the way back to the birth of the national association. The first president of the NSAC, Harrison D. Barrett, was a Lily Dale resident, as was one of its five trustees, Marion Skidmore. And of the fourteen New York delegates sent to Chicago, six were from the Dale. Today the most visible sign of an NSAC presence at the camp for casual visitors is its daily church service—reminiscent of a simple, Unitarian-Universalist gathering except for a medium's readings at the end—offered every afternoon in the Dale's spacious auditorium. But in terms of exercising an influence on Lily Dale's culture, the impact of the NSAC has been limited. It would not be felt until the middle of the twentieth century, and then only for about three decades.

During a period from around 1940 to the early 1980s, the playful beginnings of the camp began to fade away. The camp's culture during this time was shaped by an increasing emphasis on Spiritualist creeds. The NSAC Declaration of Principles appeared in the annual brochure for the first time in 1940, and

7 Britten's seven principles are as follows:

1. The Fatherhood of God.
 2. The Brotherhood of Man.
 3. The Communion of Spirits and the Ministry of Angels.
 4. The Continuous Existence of the Human Soul.
 5. Personal Responsibility.
 6. Compensation and Retribution Hereafter for All the Good and Evil Deeds Done on Earth.
 7. Eternal Progress Open to Every Human Soul.
- 8 Over the decades since the NSAC has been in existence, theological debates over its principles have given rise to a number of competing national organisations. The most heated controversies have focused on the subjects of reincarnation and the Christian underpinnings of modern Spiritualism, both of which the NSAC formally rejects. For a detailed discussion of these non-NSAC national Spiritualist groups, see Judah 1967: 72–80.

stayed there for the next thirty years. Over the next decade, physical mediumship was phased out of camp life altogether, and it has never returned. By 1943, at the height of World War II, the Dale was promoting Spiritualism as “an all American religion...ideally fitted to be the vehicle for the New Age universal religion of tomorrow.” Lily Dale began to market itself as a kind of religious retreat center. In the words of its 1945 program, it cast itself as the “Shrine and World Center of the Universal New Age Religion of Modern Spiritualism, where the bereaved heart will find solace and the soul will grow spiritually through the teachings of truth.” In 1955, it unveiled its new Healing Temple, a sanctuary for energetic healing, the Spiritualist version of the laying on of hands. Built on the site where Oskentonton had once set up his tipi, its plain and white steepled exterior resembled a Congregationalist meeting house.

In retrospect, the mid-twentieth-century transformation of Lily Dale away from its improvisational, almost-anything-goes beginnings signalled a crisis for Spiritualism. Beyond the gates of Lily Dale, public interest in mediumship had begun to wane, with UFOs replacing spirits as the most publicised wonder of the era. By the 1960s, the camp was experiencing financial difficulties, and nationally renowned Dale medium Billy Turner was predicting the extinction of the movement. “Organized Spiritualism is on its way out,” he was quoted as saying in a 1967 overview of the movement, “[But] because Spiritualism is true, its truths will gradually be taken up by the organized churches...” (Judah 1967: 84).

By the 1970s, many of the Dale’s houses had been abandoned and boarded up. At the time, it looked like Turner had been right, but fortunately for Lily Dale, his was not the last word. In the settlement founded by the Religious Society of Free Thinkers, NSAC Spiritualists contributed significantly to the discourse about mediumship, but they were never able to close the conversation completely.

Enter the New Age

It is difficult to date with precision exactly when Lily Dale made its turn-around to become a vibrant center of twenty-first-century Spiritualism. Perhaps it was in 1983, the year that a number of new classes with titles like “An Aesthetic Experience in Environmental Awareness,” “Discerning the Aura,” and “The Rainbow Revelation” appeared alongside NSAC-sponsored courses in mediumistic development. Perhaps it was in 1987, the first year the camp marketed itself as “established in 1879 by Free-Thinkers...dedicated to metaphysical education”—rather than as a center for the study of Spiritualism per se. Or

perhaps it was in 1990, the year that Deepak Chopra, M.D.—bestselling author on mind-body healing, Ayurvedic medicine, and perennial spirituality—came to lecture at Lily Dale, packing the auditorium. Whatever date is chosen, it is safe to say that by the end of the 1980s, Lily Dale had reinvented itself by skillfully aligning Spiritualism with what was then popularly known as the New Age movement.

Defining the ‘New Age’ is no less complex an affair than pinpointing the meaning of Spiritualism, although for different reasons. The expression first surfaced in the mass media during the middle years of 1980s, even though the social trend it was meant to describe had been brewing since the previous decade (Albanese 2007: 496). From the start, ‘New Age’ was an umbrella term. It referred to a burgeoning interest in a number of religious, psychological, and alternative healing teachings and practices that had previously been marginalised, or simply ignored, by modern institutions of power. Rather than compiling lists of *what* these subjects were, many scholars have found it more helpful to begin by describing the New Age in terms of *who* its constituents were and *why* they sought out knowledge that had been stigmatised by their culture. In answer to the first, demographic question: New Agers were mostly white, college-educated members of the post-World-War II baby boomer generation. At an earlier stage in their lives, they had been affected in some way by countercultural movements of the 1960s, particularly the antiwar, civil rights, and hippie movements. By the end of that decade, it was clear that these political and social experiments had failed to effect the thoroughgoing revolution in American culture that they had envisioned. But by the end of the 1970s, an older if not more jaded generation had taken up a new strategy for change (Lewis and Melton 1992: xi).

Self-transformation has often been cited as a defining ethos of the New Age. Boomers turned to a wide spectrum of teachings culled from non-Western cultures or subaltern traditions within the West to deepen self-awareness and to heal the body and mind. The New Age was born as a kind of “seeking spirituality” documented by sociologist Wade Clark Roof (1994: 9). This was a personal quest for wholeness intended to redress the perceived crisis of meaning in modern Western culture, which the political protests of the 1960s had failed to overcome. While focused on the self, the New Age looked forward to broader changes in national and indeed planetary consciousness. But it resisted institutionalisation. The movement took shape largely through the publication of books and participation in workshops and lectures organised by their authors. One landmark text helping to define the genre was Marilyn Ferguson’s 1980 *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, whose title alluded to the dawning of a new astrological epoch marked by a ‘higher’ planetary consciousness. Another was Shirley

MacLaine's 1983 autobiography, *Out on a Limb*, which narrated her own personal journey through world religions and Western metaphysics in a search for self-renewal (Albanese 2008: 247–248). By the end of the decade, a small deluge of thematically similar works had appeared, and with them a cast of highly sought-after authors and teachers. Deepak Chopra, the Ayurvedic doctor who spoke at the Lily Dale auditorium, was one such New Age guide.

Ever since the 1980s, Lily Dale has indeed stayed the course of aligning Spiritualism with philosophies and practices geared towards self-transformation—a concept now signified by the term 'spirituality'. The New-Age-inspired workshops offered during its 2010 season included classes on Buddhist mindfulness meditation; spiritual dowsing/divining; power animals, journeying, and shamanic healing; the spirituality of money; astrology and real estate; chakra and crystal healing; hand reflexology; and lucid and spiritual dreaming.

In the meantime, one Lily Dale medium has institutionalised the marriage between Spiritualism and the New Age in a new Spiritualist church. Elaine Thomas, a native of Brooklyn, New York, founded Fellowships of the Spirit in 1988. She had discovered Spiritualism many years before after relocating as a young adult to Buffalo. Her teacher was the British-born Edith Sandy Wendling, a once-popular Lily Dale medium and former minister of a Spiritualist church in Buffalo. Wendling taught Thomas the practice of mediumship the way she had learned it—meditating on Spiritualist authors, stilling the mind, and essentially waiting for insight and inspiration to come. The process took years to master. While Thomas never wavered as a self-identified Spiritualist, she also began to wonder if teachings and techniques from other religious and psychological systems might not expedite the art of becoming a medium and breathe new life into Spiritualism's nineteenth-century-derived philosophy.

Like many of her baby boomer peers, Thomas searched across denominational boundaries for answers. She learned Transcendental Meditation, explored hypnotherapy, travelled to India, and even experimented with fire walking. After years of such study, she finally came to a new synthesis, and she began teaching Spiritualism from her own perspective—first as a travelling lecturer, and then out of Lily Dale's volunteer fire house. In 1988, Thomas founded her own, independent Spiritualist church—the Fellowships of the Spirit—and in 2005 procured a building just a few hundred yards outside of Lily Dale's main entrance.

Today, Fellowships of the Spirit offers classes on mediumship as the development of 'spiritual insight'. Thomas's classes seek to develop and attune a student's mindfulness, concentration, active imagination, and listening skills through a variety of methods. These include neurolinguistic programming, guided visualisation exercises, and Hindu meditation practices. Thomas has

found that by combining these approaches with the experience she gained from Wendling, students gain acuity as mediums in a much shorter time than it took her. In addition to spiritual insight training, Thomas also offers a far more extensive program that prepares students for the Spiritualist ministry. The two-year seminary curriculum is taught by a joint staff consisting of Spiritualist mediums alongside a Qigong Master, an Oglala Sioux author, and an Aramaic scholar also ordained as a Unity minister, to name just a few.

Having already graduated hundreds of ministers and metaphysical teachers, Fellowships of the Spirit is paving the way for a new, twenty-first-century variant of Spiritualism. Elaine Thomas is a living embodiment of the transformation that Lily Dale has recently undergone as a whole. As a former student of Edith Sandy Wendling, she is grounded in a specific lineage, and she passes on the accumulated wisdom of mediumistic forebears to her students. But as a woman whose worldview was deeply shaped by the tenets of the New Age, she has also brought Spiritualism outside of its churches and into the orbit of a wider religious and cultural world. Hers is a 'seeking Spiritualism'. Rather than simply initiating students into an extant tradition, Thomas encourages them to explore the truth of Spiritualist principles for themselves, in as many venues as they can find.

From the hindsight of the twenty-first century, it might be tempting to conclude that the coming of the New Age to Lily Dale was inevitable. It is clear today that many (though certainly not all) of the subjects on the long list of New Age interests are legacies of a long-standing metaphysical tradition in America. These traditions—inaugurated in America by nineteenth-century Spiritualism—share a common emphasis on personal spiritual illumination as the doorway to all wisdom. Further, they espouse various visions of an interconnected or whole universe, the antithesis of the fragmented and alienating worldview of modernity. And finally, they too are the products of spiritual seekers from other eras—men and women disaffected from their own traditions who drew freely from a range of world religions and cultures to formulate new visions of cosmic coherence. Were not Spiritualist churches, and camps like Lily Dale, just waiting to be discovered by the New Age?

In fact, they were not. As James R. Lewis has carefully written, the New Age "emerged out of a pre-existing occult-metaphysical subculture that—especially in such institutional embodiments as the Theosophical Society, New Thought churches, traditional Spiritualist denominations, and so forth—was affected by, but was never completely absorbed into [it]" (Lewis and Melton 1992: 3). The key words here are "institutional embodiments." While the New Age drew from the ideas and practices of the metaphysical tradition, its radically individualistic ethos resisted identification or affiliation with any single

institution or community. The successful integration of the New Age at Lily Dale is the exception, rather than the rule, in American Spiritualism.

How did the camp manage to overcome the institutional barriers to attract members of the wider New Age culture? The answer is given in the wording of its 1987 brochure, which describes the camp as “established...by *Free-Thinkers*... [and] dedicated to *metaphysical* education.” In short, Lily Dale ‘un-invented’ itself as a satellite of the NSAC, by writing anew its own history—or at least its history as it was being written in the mid-twentieth century. As I have already discussed, this development was by no means a misrepresentation of the past. Jeremiah Carter and his heirs were hardly concerned with any ‘pure’ version of Spiritualism. They were interested only in fostering an open-ended discussion, born of wonder, centered on the regular performance of mediumship.

A cursory review of the literature both read and written at Lily Dale suggests that such eclecticism has long been a part of Lily Dale culture. A short sampling of titles donated to the its Marion Skidmore Library reveals as wide a range of interests as those included in the New Age itself. They include: collected 1870–1873 issues of the *Phrenological Journal*, studying head formations to ascertain personality types; the 1914 edition of Dr. L.W. de Laurence’s *Book of Magical Art, Hindoo Magic, and Indian Occultism*; a copy of Allen Putnam’s *Witchcraft of New England Explained by Modern Spiritualism* bequeathed in 1893; a translation of the Upanishads, donated in 1931; and James Churchward’s *The Lost Continent of Mu*, bequeathed in 1953, on antediluvian history.

At least during the early decades of the camp, annual programs also reflected the wide range of these religious interests. In 1894, Lily Dale inaugurated a tradition of featuring regular speakers on Asian religions, with the invitation of Virchard R. Gandhi, a Jain teacher from India. In 1897, a British leader of the Theosophical Society, Annie Besant, spoke during the summer season. In the meantime, the camp’s newspaper *The Sunflower*, published weekly from 1898 to 1911, featured regular articles on psychic science, palmistry, astrology, hypnotism, and Asian religious thought. Articles on “America’s Small Debt to India” (January 23, 1904); “The Universe a Living Magnet” (June 10, 1905); and reports on astral travel to other planets—“Has Visited Planet Mars” (February 6, 1904) and “A Journey Through Space” (in four parts, May 14–June 5, 1906)—complemented the paper’s main offerings on spirits and mediumship.

None of this is to suggest that the NSAC, which continues to uphold its Declaration of Principles, has no important role to play in the camp today. In fact, the first two of its principles—proclaiming a belief in Infinite Intelligence and Nature as Its expression—further the metaphysical linkages between Spiritualism and the New Age. Since the 1980s, however, these central Spiritualist doctrines have taken on new dimensions of meaning. The same New Agers who

embraced Lily Dale's ethos of self-discovery and religious tolerance have drawn liberally from the insights of theoretical and applied sciences in articulating new visions of cosmic wholeness. Concepts borrowed from quantum physics, for example—such as the interdependent relationship between the observer and the observed, or the unmediated interaction across time and space between subatomic particles—have frequently featured in New Age cosmologies as descriptions of interconnectedness on a more human scale. In the same way, 'energy' has become an ontological metaphor, transposed from the study of generators and circuit boards onto the poetics of religion.

But for Spiritualists at Lily Dale and elsewhere, these elisions between the scientific and religious worlds are nothing new. As the paradigmatic made-in-America metaphysical cosmology, Andrew Jackson Davis's 1847 opus, *The Principles of Nature*, collapsed the boundaries that were thought to separate God, Nature, and humanity in the normative Protestant theology of the day. In Davis's visionary flight through the cosmos, Nature is revealed as the emanation of a timeless and infinite Source of intelligence and power. Conversely, this Source is indistinguishable in its essence from Nature, although it exists in an infinitely more refined state. So too, every particularity in the cosmos—including and especially human beings—are emanations of the same primordial, spiritual-material Source in different stages of refinement. As a corollary, all the particular parts of the cosmos are interconnected. That disincarnate spirits could communicate with embodied human beings is simply one—but certainly not the only—implication of this unified and interconnected whole.

The Poughkeepsie seer was by no means the first thinker to articulate these ideas. In Western intellectual history, their roots can ultimately be traced back through the hermetic renaissance of the sixteenth century to Greco-Roman civilisation. But Davis, together with Ralph Waldo Emerson, was one of the first Americans to argue eloquently that the time had come for them to supersede the Christian worldview as a description of the way things 'really are'. And when the baby boomer generation searched beyond their own inherited religious and cultural worldviews for alternative explanations of reality, they oftentimes found themselves rediscovering the same fusion of religion, science, and human nature that the NSAC has been proclaiming all along—with 'quantum reality' standing in for 'Laws of Nature' and 'energy' for 'Infinite Intelligence'. During the 1980s, then, as New Agers and Spiritualists met each other at Lily Dale, they found their own beliefs reflected in the other: twentieth- and nineteenth-century variants, respectively, of what historian of religion Wouter J. Hanegraaff (1998) has termed 'secularised western esotericism'.

Conclusion

Whether American Spiritualism as a whole can make the turn-around that Lily Dale has accomplished remains to be seen. Billy Turner's prediction that organised Spiritualism is on its way out still seems a very real possibility for the nation's churches. The 2001 American Religious Identification Survey, conducted by the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, estimated the total number of self-identified Spiritualists in the United States at around 116,000 members. This number represents a miniscule fraction—less than one percent—of the total population.

In 2005, a California Spiritualist named Carter McNamara prepared a report for the NSAC entitled "A Response to the President of the NSAC's Call for Feedback on: 'Why Is Our Attendance on the Decline in Our Spiritualist Churches?'" While highlighting the cultural appeal of Spiritualist practices and its "philosophical emphasis on natural law and personal responsibility," the report did not mince words in characterising the NSAC as "administratively and scholastically out of date, and socially out of touch...[with] no apparent plans to substantially evolve" (McNamara [2005]: 3). Spiritualist churches administered by the NSAC were, in McNamara's analysis, suffering from "founder's syndrome," entrusting too much responsibility to a single individual—in this case, their ministers. Socially, the structure of NSAC churches had not changed to accommodate the needs and lifestyles of their twenty-first century congregants, and scholastically their literature had not evolved past early-twentieth century concepts and language. Overall, the report was dire: if Spiritualism did not reinvent itself, it was sure to die away.

McNamara's report also included pages of suggestions for possible solutions in each of the three problem areas. In its final recommendation for updating the mission of the NSAC, it had this to say:

The NSAC must define a mission in order to pursue it effectively. The ability to communicate with spirit guides is one area of natural law. A consideration of how much to emphasize the relationship with spirit guides, and how much to emphasize other areas of natural law to support congregant relationships with Infinite Intelligence is needed....

New attendees to Spiritualist Churches are always more interested in the relationship to spirit guides because they have had opportunities to study spiritual laws/Creation at other institutions. Congregants that have developed a relationship to spirit guides over a long period of time often express a desire to see program materials that emphasize a relationship to Infinite Intelligence/Creation through study materials focused on

natural laws other than mediumship: particularly natural laws such as creating forgiveness, spiritual relationships, intentionality, energy laws and work, the science of spirituality, etc.

emphases in original, MCNAMARA [2005]: 46

In essence, the most urgent recommendation of McNamara's study had already been incorporated at Lily Dale in the 1980s. By broadening its scope beyond the denominational to include the metaphysical, Spiritualism at the Dale has entered into a dialogue with a wider range of religious, psychological, and alternative healing discourses. This transformation represents something more substantive than a savvy marketing decision. It reflects a return of Spiritualism to its historical and philosophical roots, before it was institutionalised as a church.

There remains, however, a very real limit to how far Spiritualism can refashion itself for a new era. This limit returns to the implicitly communal dimension of Spiritualism, and its intimate relationship with evoking and modelling *communitas*. Despite their other differences, NSAC and non-NSAC Spiritualists have come together in rejecting the radically individualistic ethos of the New Age. At the Fellowships of the Spirit, Elaine Thomas makes as much of a concession to this individualism as her tradition can allow. Readings, she advises, should no longer merely focus on proving the survival of the deceased—as was the custom throughout the earlier chapters in Spiritualist history. Rather, a medium today should spend most of her time elaborating on whatever guidance a spirit might be bringing for the living—insights that could help further the all-important goal of self-transformation.

On the one hand, this reworking of mediumship might seem to be a complete co-option of Spiritualism to the dictates of the New Age: the spirits now exist primarily to increase the wisdom and well-being of the self. Perhaps there is no other way to be a medium in the twenty-first century. In Christine Wicker's journalistic account of Lily Dale, she reports the striking observation by one medium that descriptions of the deceased are lost on postmodern people, because they no longer remember their own ancestors.⁹ On the other hand, even this most personalised expression of mediumship still depends on the participation of more than one person. At the very least, there is a medium and a sitter, and the presence of a third: the spirit conjured up between them,

9 Wicker (2003:178) records medium Lauren Thibodeau as suggesting: "People don't remember anybody from past generations.... When you add the number of adoptions and divorces that split families apart, you've got a real problem. I might very well be bringing in Grandpa, and no one knows enough about him to believe that he's really there."

whether by a pooled effort of their imaginations or by an Infinite Intelligence acting through Nature. At Lily Dale and possibly beyond, the continuation of Spiritualism into the twenty-first century preserves a way of life rooted in face-to-face community, a way of life that is rapidly receding. It cannot help but feel a little nostalgic.

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PART 4

Channeling



“The Medium is the Message in the Spacious Present”

Channeling, Television, and the New Age

Hugh Urban

So now see Rubert [Jane Roberts] as my television screen.... It makes no difference whether or not I am myself speaking within Rubert now... or whether I did this last night in his sleep and tonight is a film or playback.

Again: the medium is the message in the Spacious Present,” Seth said smiling, “and whenever the time for the program arrives, I am here in your present...I may prepare my film in advance.

JANE ROBERTS, *The Seth Material*

“The medium is the message” means, in terms of the electronic age, that a totally new environment has been created. The “content” of this environment is the old mechanized environment of the industrial age. The new environment reprocesses the old one as radically as TV is reprocessing the film.

MARSHALL MCLUHAN, *Understanding Media*

In August 1985, talk-show host Merv Griffin introduced two special guests to his live TV audience.¹ The first was JZ Knight, a very pretty blonde suburban housewife, who also spoke broadly on spiritual and metaphysical topics. The second was Ramtha, a 35,000-year-old being from Lemuria who had once fought as a warrior at Atlantis and had now chosen Knight as his human ‘channel’ through whom he would transmit his ancient message to the modern world. Ray Richmond, the talent coordinator and segment producer for *The Merv Griffin Show*, had preinterviewed Knight before the appearance. As Richmond later recalled, he tried to warn Griffin that this so-called channel was either completely delusional or a crude charlatan. “Oh that’s perfect!” Merv exclaimed, “Delusion makes wonderful tv” (Richmond 2007). After a ten-minute interview with Knight and a commercial break, Merv asked Ramtha

¹ This episode can still be viewed on various websites, including: Youtube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-HR2L5hVpo>.

to make an appearance. Now dressed in a long beige jacket and her hair pulled back into a ponytail, Knight went into a silent trance that lasted a full three and a half minutes. As the host looked increasingly uncomfortable, she finally stretched, yawned, opened her eyes, and then exclaimed: "Indeed!" Immediately, the audience (comprised mostly of Ramtha enthusiasts) rose to their feet, thrust their fists in the air, and echoed back, "Indeed!" Merv and Ramtha then spent the rest of the segment in a lengthy discussion that covered the nature of God, the soul, reincarnation, and various other matters, before Ramtha finally left the stage to a cheering audience. After the show, Richmond recalls, Merv was positively giddy: "Wow, I thought she was going to weave back and forth like that for an hour. I didn't know what to do. But damn, it was great television. Great television!" (Richmond 2007).

While this anecdote of a 35,000 year old Lemurian appearing on *The Merv Griffin Show* is entertaining, it is also in many ways iconic of the broader New Age phenomenon known as channeling. In many ways, channeling is rooted in the much older American tradition of Spiritualism (Riordan 1992: 111; Brown 1999), which began in the mid-nineteenth century and rapidly became a broad popular movement, filling ordinary homes with rapping ghosts, mediums, séances, and Ouija boards (see Braude 1989; Owen 1990). Yet as it emerged and flourished in the 1970s and 1980s, channeling was also clearly attuned to the unique sensibilities and spiritual concerns of the television era. Although it shared with Spiritualism a re-enchantment of the domestic sphere, a more democratic form of spirituality, and an empowerment of women as conduits of transcendent wisdom, channeling was also very much part of a 1970s era of postmodern media spectacle and consumer culture.

This chapter will examine three of the most important figures in the New Age movement who contributed to the popularity of channeling as it emerged in the 1970s and 1980s: Jane Roberts, the channel for an entity named Seth, JZ Knight, the telegenic spokesperson for Ramtha, and Shirley MacLaine, who, though not a channel herself, helped popularise the idea of channeling through her books and above all through her TV mini-series, *Out on a Limb* (1986).

Channeling, I will argue, at once confirms and challenges Marshall McLuhan's famous observation that "medium is the message." Although McLuhan's work has often been dismissed as superficial, undeveloped, illogical, and obscure,² there has been something of a McLuhan renaissance in the last decade. Named

2 See for example: "McLuhan's sin was to have speculated recklessly and to have been wrong about a lot of things...McLuhan became a highly produced symptom or cliché of the world he was describing" (Marchessault 2005: 199).

the patron saint of *Wired* magazine, McLuhan has had a significant impact on our understanding of media technologies since the 1960s and has witnessed something of a renaissance since the 1990s (Wolf 1996; Bendetti and DeHart 1997). As McLuhan suggested in 1964, new media technologies such as television are not mere passive wrappings that dress up the same old content in new garb; rather, they are active processes that in turn create new human environments. The medium, in short, affects society not simply by its content but also by its characteristics (M. McLuhan 1964: vi).

New Age channeling, I will suggest, was uniquely adapted to the new environment of television, where the medium really was the message—though in an ironic double entendre that McLuhan himself probably never imagined. Although there is now a good deal of literature on the subject of religion and television (Ferré 1990; Winston 2009),³ channeling represents perhaps the most explicit but ironically unexplored example of this spiritual-technological interface. As early as 1970, as we see in the epigraph to this chapter, Jane Roberts and her channeled entity Seth made much the same observation that “the medium is the message.” Throughout the Seth materials, the language of channeling draws heavily from the terminology of television, with mediums serving as the instruments that receive and transmit messages from the spiritual realm. Just as nineteenth-century Spiritualists used the metaphors of electricity and the telegraph to describe their messages from the unseen world (Braude 1998: 24–25), so too channels of the TV age employed the metaphors of television stations, pre-recordings, and video screens. By the 1980s, channeling was also increasingly *on* TV channels, through Ramtha’s appearance on Merv Griffin and Shirley MacLaine’s hugely successful TV miniseries. Perhaps most importantly, however, the spiritual message of these New Age channels was also uniquely attuned to an era of mass media. Among the most common themes throughout channeling literature is the idea that we create our own reality (Hanegraaff 1996: 207), that we ourselves project the world that we see, and that we have the power to ‘change the channel’, as it were, creating our own new reality just as actors and directors create new realities through cameras and screenplays. Although the idea that the mind creates its own reality can be traced back to at least the nineteenth century in movements such as New Thought and Christian Science, it was rearticulated for a mass audience through these New Age channels and through new media such as daytime talk shows and primetime miniseries.

3 “Television now plays an equal and indeed even greater role than traditional churches in providing meaningful narratives that join thousands and millions of people” (Winston 2009: 2).

To conclude, I will suggest this discussion of channeling and television also has some important implications for our own twenty-first century era of new spiritualities and the Internet. If channeling was uniquely suited to the era of TV talk shows and miniseries, we might well ask what new forms of spirituality are emerging and adapting to the new medium of cyberspace?

“My Television Screen”: From 19th Century Spiritualism to Jane Roberts’s Seth Material

We want you to change the channels of your awareness...You have other consciousness selves.

Seth, in JANE ROBERTS, *The Seth Material*

One of the first and most important figures in the development of New Age channeling was Jane Roberts. Born in Saratoga Springs, NY in 1929 and spending her early years as a housewife and author of poetry and children’s stories, Roberts emerged as perhaps the most influential channel of the 1970s. As Catherine Albanese notes (2007: 501), Roberts’s writings and filmed speeches “launched an era of nationwide awareness” of channeling and helped to form the “self-identity of an emergent New Age movement” (see also Melton 1998: 55). Indeed, Roberts helped create the vocabulary of modern channeling, in which the ‘medium is the message’ in a very literal sense.

Roberts claimed to have first come into contact with a supernatural entity in December 1963, while she and her husband were experimenting with a Ouija board. The being they contacted later identified himself as ‘Seth’ and soon began dictating messages directly through Roberts without the aid of the Ouija board. Although Roberts also claimed to have channeled several other beings, including psychologist William James and painter Paul Cézanne, Seth was the being she channeled consistently until her death in 1984.

Among her other contributions to New Age spirituality, Roberts is an especially clear example of both the continuities and the discontinuities between nineteenth-century Spiritualism and late twentieth-century channeling. In many ways, Roberts shares much in common with nineteenth-century mediums and their Spiritualist message. As Anne Braude has shown in her influential work, *Radical Spirits*, nineteenth-century Spiritualism was closely identified with both women and the domestic sphere. Because women were imagined in nineteenth-century discourse to be inherently passive, humble, receptive, and open to the spiritual realm, they made natural mediums for otherworldly influences. In turn, the feminine sphere of the home became the preeminent locus of mediumship, séances, or Ouija board sessions:

Spiritualism also reflected the Victorian view that the home was the true locus of religiosity...Spiritualists secured the place of religion well within women's sphere by relocating religious practice from the church to the home. Spiritual circles gathered around parlor tables, a most appropriate place for women to preside.

BRAUDE 1989: 25; see also CLARK 1863: 182

Ironically, Braude suggests, the very qualities that were believed to make women inferior to men—their alleged passivity and meekness—also made them natural mediums. Through their very 'weakness', they were able to gain a surprising new kind of voice, legitimacy, and authority to speak in public spaces that was otherwise unavailable to most women in mid nineteenth-century America: "Mediumship," in short, "allowed women to discard limitations on women's roles without questioning accepted ideas about woman's nature" (Braude 1989: 83; see also Kucich 2005: 43–44).

In addition to their transformation of women's roles and the domestic sphere, nineteenth-century Spiritualists also tended to use the new language of science and technology to describe communications with the unseen world. Above all, the phenomenon of electricity and the newly invented technology of the telegraph provided ideal metaphors for the instantaneous communications with spirits in distant worlds beyond the five senses. Indeed, many Spiritualists noted the "parallels between the instantaneous communication of messages over long distances by wires and what came to be called the 'spiritual telegraph', the communication of messages between this world and the next through human mediums...One Spiritualist called electricity 'God's principle at work'" (Braude 1989: 5).

Finally, particularly through the new popular technologies of planchettes and later Ouija boards, Spiritualism also opened the door for a new mass audience to begin experimenting with mediumship. First introduced in the 1890s and still mass produced by Parker Brothers to this day, the Ouija board in particular helped introduce spirit communication to a much broader audience of ordinary consumers, muddying the boundary between spiritual phenomena and popular commodities to be enjoyed in middle-class living rooms. "The introduction of the planchette facilitated the mediumship of untrained family members within the home.... The line between parlor game and religious inquiry blurred when families who tried the spirits in fun discovered mediums in their midst" (Braude 1989: 24–25).

Almost 100 years later, Jane Roberts and her channeled entity Seth continued many of these Spiritualist themes, but with some important transformations for a late twentieth-century audience. Like her nineteenth-century

predecessors, Roberts played the role of a largely passive female receptacle for a higher masculine spiritual entity; and like nineteenth-century female mediums, she found in that role a powerful new voice and authority that she had not otherwise found through her poetry or short stories. She also found in the domestic sphere a new space to receive a spiritual message that would eventually reach a massive popular audience through her numerous books and recorded speeches.

But perhaps most important for this essay, much as nineteenth-century Spiritualists had drawn on the imagery of the telegraph, Roberts made explicit use of language drawn from the new medium of television. As one of the very first modern mediums to use the term 'channeling', Roberts made extensive use of the metaphor of TV channels to describe her contact with Seth's unseen realm. Indeed, as Roberts described her first encounter with Seth's spiritual world, it was as though her brain was a "receiving station" now being bombarded with transmissions from a wholly new source of broadcast information:

Between one normal minute and the next, a fantastic avalanche of radical, new ideas burst into my head with such tremendous force as if my skull were some sort of receiving station, turned up to unbearable volume. Not only ideas came through this channel, but sensations, intensified and pulsating. I was tuned in, turned on...*connected* to some incredible source of energy...It was as if the physical world were really tissue-paper thin, hiding infinite dimensions of reality.

ROBERTS 1970: 10

Throughout the early Seth materials, Roberts elaborates on the metaphor of TV transmissions, describing human consciousness as a kind of receiver that can tune in to one or more channels of information. As Seth explains, most of us in the ordinary world are like TV sets without all the channels working properly: "There are aspects of my identity with which you are not acquainted.... though at a later time you may be. All the channels are not yet working on this set, you see" (Roberts 1970: 271). Hence, becoming aware of higher dimensions of reality requires that we open our minds to other channels of information, changing from the waking channel to a trance channel where we receive knowledge from transcendent beings: "The waking state...is as much a trance state as any other. Here we merely switch the focus of attention to other channels" (Roberts 1970: 66). Listening to the messages from a supernatural being is thus a matter of switching stations, turning from the ordinary frequency of the mind to a new one. We can, in short, "change the channels" of our awareness, thereby accessing "other consciousness selves" (Roberts 1970: 252).

On some occasions, Seth used the metaphor of a tape recorder to describe the nature of consciousness. The self is like an audio recording device with multiple channels, which, through contact with supernatural dimensions, can be opened to new and potentially infinite channels of information: "Imagine your whole self as composed of some master tape. Your recorder has four channels. We will give our recorder numberless channels. Each one represents a portion of the whole self, each existing in a different dimension" (Roberts 1970: 200). On other occasions, however, Seth made explicit use of the language of television and the channels of the TV screen. As we saw in the epigraph to this chapter, Seth even compared his human channel to a kind of 'television screen', which could broadcast either a live performance or a prerecorded performance of his message. As such, his channel was at once the receptacle of a divine being and the divine message itself: in short, 'the medium is the message in the Spacious Present'.

But perhaps most important, Roberts also repeatedly emphasised the idea that we have the power not simply to tune in to different channels of awareness, but actually to *change* reality itself. For Roberts as for virtually all later New Age channels, reality as we perceive it is largely a projection of our own minds—for good or for ill. Therefore, by changing our consciousness, we can actively change our perceptions and ultimately change our reality, ideally for the better. As Seth explains, using the metaphor of a motion-picture film projector,

The eye projects and focuses the inner image (idea) onto the physical world in the same manner that a motion-picture camera transfers an image onto a screen...Actually the senses are the channels of creation by which idea is projected into material expression.

ROBERTS 1970: 12

In reality you project your own energy out to form the physical world. Therefore, to change your world, it is yourself you must change. You must change what you project.

ROBERTS 1970: 3

This notion that we project and therefore can change our own reality is one of the most important themes throughout virtually all of the channeling literature and the New Age movement as a whole. As J. Gordon Melton notes, "No single idea so permeated the New Age movement as the notion that we create our own reality" (Melton 1998: 64; see also Hanegraaff 1996: 207). In its most ambitious forms, this idea is tied to the belief that the human self is in

fact divine, godlike, or even non-different from God. Just as God creates, maintains, and transforms this world through divine creative power, so too, we each have that same creative potential within ourselves, because we each are ultimately one with God: "You are always and you always will be," Seth asserts, "...The God that is, is within you, for you are a part of all that is" (Roberts 1970: 3).⁴ In sum, it is not simply the *medium* who is the message – that is, both the spokesperson for the divine and herself divine; rather, *we are all the message* insofar as we are each potential channels for the divine transmission of our own inherent godliness. As Seth declared in a videotaped session in June 1974 (now available on Youtube): "You give the message to your self, for you are the message...If only we can show yourselves, then you will trust yourselves to explore those dimensions of your own greater reality" (Roberts 1974). Not just medium and message, but medium, message, and audience are ultimately one.

Here, Seth's central teaching that 'we are the message' closely parallels several of McLuhan's insights into the nature of media in an electronic age. If nineteenth-century Spiritualists reflected the influence of new technologies such as the telegraph, then Seth clearly reflects the new transformations brought about by television and other new media. Not only does Seth use the metaphors of channels, screens, broadcasts, and pre-recordings, but he also articulates McLuhan's key insight that not only is the medium the message, but the viewer him- or herself is also an active part of the message in the television age: "The TV user is the content of TV.... It is man who is the content of the message of the media, which are extensions of himself" (Bendetti and DeHart 1997: 155). In contrast to earlier media such as newspapers and magazines, television is a medium in which, in a sense, "*you are the screen*. The clash of views in printed journalism...gives way to a new participation in the TV exposé" (Marchessault 2005: 196). The key difference, of course, is that Seth's message is not simply that we are the screen for participation in a TV exposé, but that we are the screen for the realisation of the ultimate message: the truth of our own divinity.

"This day I've always been fabulously wealthy": JZ Knight and Ramtha

"This day I've always been fabulously wealthy," "this day I am 30 years younger".... You are affirming a new reality.

JZ KNIGHT on CNN's *Larry King Live*

4 As Seth proclaimed in a videotaped session on June 4, 1974: "what you want is within you now and within your glowing creaturehood...You are indeed given the gift of the gods" (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AMRYkgBjCoA>).

If Jane Roberts helped develop the theology of channeling as a new spiritual medium, then JZ Knight helped bring it to a mass public audience, not simply through the *metaphor* but through the *actual medium* of live TV. Far more so than Roberts, Knight emerged as a channel who appealed directly to ordinary Americans, presenting herself as just another suburban housewife who had spontaneously come into contact with an exotic warrior from an ancient civilisation. It was also Knight's commercial success, however, that contributed to the skeptical image of New Age channels as mere charlatans out to dupe a gullible public with pseudo-metaphysical blather. As Wouter Hanegraaff notes, "Her appearances on television talk-shows and in Shirley MacLaine's books have made her one of the best-known channels.... Knight has strongly contributed to the popular image of channeling criticized...as New Age glamour. Channeling has made her a star and brought in millions of dollars" (Hanegraaff 1996: 40; also see Brown 1999: 1–3).

As she recounted in her best-selling book, *A State of Mind* (1987), JZ Knight first came into contact with Ramtha at her home in Tacoma in 1977. Before meeting Ramtha, she was simply "a happy housewife and mother" whose husband delighted in her "good cooking and homemaking" (Knight 1987: 287). The circumstances of her first encounter are indeed striking and worth retelling here. During these years, the loose blend of alternative spiritualities known as the 'New Age movement' was just beginning to seep into American popular consciousness, and one of the most pervasive New Age trends was the idea of 'pyramid power'. Thanks to the best-selling book by Max Toth and Greg Nielson (1976), pyramids were believed to have the power to do everything from preserve foods to sharpen razor blades, and Knight and her husband began, half-jokingly, to build and play around with a wide array of pyramids in their home. In a fit of silliness in the middle of her kitchen floor, Knight placed one of the pyramids on her head and was immediately stunned by the dramatic appearance of Ramtha:

In jest, I grabbed one of the rejects off the floor, held it over my head and proclaimed, "Attention, attention please, you are now about to witness a miracle..."

I placed it on my head, and through peals of laughter...mumbled 'I sure hope it works'...Laughing so hard that tears were streaming from my eyes, I caught the glimmer of a bright light at the other end of my kitchen.... I blinked, and to my utter shock and amazement, there stood a giant man at the other end of my kitchen...

This...thing...was made all of light, like golden glitter dropped through a ray of sunlight. His shoulders came to the top of the door, and it was as

if the ceiling had disappeared to make room for his head. It was beautiful. His robe seemed to be of purple light. A dazzling display of color and crystal against the strangeness of immense human form...His face...it was the most beautiful face I had ever seen...eyes that shone like ebony stones with copper flashes...skin, if that is what it was, the coloring of olive, bronze, illuminated and a fine chiseled nose and a broad jaw line and smile that would rival any Hollywood star's. My eyes went glassy, like those of a sleepwalker.

KNIGHT 1987: 10–11

Several aspects of Knight's first encounter with Ramtha are worth noting here. First, like her nineteenth-century Spiritualist predecessors, Knight's encounter was very much a *domestic* one, taking place in the kitchen (the 'woman's domain'), and it was also clearly *gendered*: the blonde, petite housewife meets a giant, handsome warrior with chiseled nose and jaw (see Melton 1998: 57; MacLaine 1986).⁵ Second, Knight also likened her handsome Lemurian warrior immediately to a Hollywood star, suggesting that he was not simply gorgeous but movie star gorgeous.

Initially, Knight had no clear understanding of her relationship with this handsome being from ancient Lemuria. However, after visiting a Spiritualist named Lorraine and reading various books about Hindu avatars, Madame Blavatsky, and Edgar Cayce, Knight came to realise that she was a channel for Ramtha. As Lorraine explained, there is a fundamental difference between a medium in the nineteenth-century Spiritualist sense and a channel such as Knight. For a channel is one who allows herself to 'die' temporarily, to become wholly taken over and *used* by the channeled entity: "a channel leaves her body, as in death, and allows the entity to express his own personality. A medium only serves as a bridge between dimensions but does not entirely leave her body. It is a rare phenomenon for one to allow herself to be used like that" (Knight 1987: 324).⁶

Knight's domestic encounters with Ramtha continued throughout her narrative in *A State of Mind*. Thus he appeared in her living room, filling the space with his "utterly beautiful" radiance: "He looked like some fabulous king on a

5 As MacLaine (1986: 125) described Knight and Ramtha, "JZ was a beautiful blonde with a delicate friendliness. Ramtha was a definitive masculine energy...When she went into a trance and Ramtha came through, everything about JZ changed."

6 As Knight explained on *The Merv Griffin Show*, "I'm what's called a pure channel, because the whole of my essence goes to another time flow.... I go through the emotion of actually dying, I've died a thousand deaths."

throne...in *my* living room. I was so dazzled by him that I wanted to touch that magical robe of his" (Knight 1987: 288–289). In many cases, these encounters combined the sublime with the ridiculous—intentionally, it would seem—as Ramtha repeatedly appeared to Knight while she toiled through her housewife's chores. Indeed, Ramtha was even willing to materialise spontaneously to help clean up after her kids' sloppy breakfast, when their spilled Cheerios had become stuck to her kitchen floor. Knight's dialogue with Ramtha in these cases often resembled a housewife on a daytime TV commercial interacting with the Maytag repairman or Mr. Clean:

The following Monday morning I got the good doctor off to work, my two ideal children off to school, and after my cup of tea, I started in on the housework...I did the dishes and then started to mop the kitchen floor. I was in a hurry, so when three Cheerios that had become glued to the floor wouldn't come up with the mop I threw the mop to the side and tried to pry them loose with the toe of my shoe. They refused to budge, so I... dropped to my knees and began to chisel the little suckers off with a butter knife. At that moment the Ram appeared in front of me by the sink, but I was too engrossed in my war with the Cheerios. He stooped down, put his hands on the floor, and came eye level with me and the O's. ...He didn't say a word, just put one of those long cinnamon fingers on one stubborn O and it lifted off with the greatest of ease. ...I dropped my head in my hands and muttered, "Thanks, the next time I need a helping—glowing—hand, I'll call ya."

KNIGHT 1987: 343

Having won the war with the stubborn Cheerios, Knight then went on to make the beds, while she and Ramtha engaged in a lengthy discussion of religion, God, and inter-religious conflict (Knight 1987: 348–349).

Ramtha, moreover, was not above giving Knight advice on her most mundane housewife's concerns, such as how to deal with her messy children or how to manage her grocery shopping. "My kids are slob," lamented Knight, "Just look at this room" (Knight 1987: 345). In response, Ramtha went on to expound his central philosophy that we are all, in fact, divine beings, suburban children as much as ancient warriors like himself: "Indeed, I am continually learning that I am God." JZ, however, merely returned to her housework and reminded him of her daily errands: "Cut it out, I have to go to Safeway" (Knight 1987: 347).

Despite the seemingly mundane domestic venues in which Ramtha chose to appear to Knight, his message was ultimately one of profound metaphysical

significance. Echoing Seth's words that "the medium is the message" and that the individual self is divine, Ramtha repeatedly proclaimed the central channeling belief that each one of us is a god, if we would simply recognise our own true nature. Thus when Knight asked Ramtha, "You are a god?" he promptly replied, "Indeed! Beloved entity, so be you God also. The only difference between that which be you and that which be I, is that I know that I am and you, beloved woman, do not" (Knight 1987: 290).⁷

The message that we are all "sleeping gods" was also the central theme of Ramtha's first television appearance on *The Merv Griffin Show* in August 1985. It is surely no accident that the housewife-turned-channel made her debut on Griffin's daytime TV program, which occupied the same time slot as the many soap operas, game shows, and sitcom reruns that other suburban housewives would also likely be viewing. Already well-known with a large following, Knight had filled the studio audience with Ramtha enthusiasts, who reportedly lined the sidewalk for blocks outside waiting to get in (Richmond). Here on daytime TV, the viewer could clearly see the striking juxtaposition between Knight, the self-described housewife and suburban mom, and Ramtha, the 35,000-year-old divine being proclaiming the godhood of each individual. Knight's self-presentation was mild, self-effacing, and extremely 'feminine'; Ramtha's, in contrast, was loud, assertive, and exaggeratedly 'masculine'. Yet once again, the medium was the message. As a vehicle for the divine entity, Ramtha, Knight was herself both a vessel for God and the bearer of the great message that we are all in fact gods. Even before Knight had a chance to speak, in fact, Merv replayed an earlier videotape of Ramtha, in which he proclaimed the godhood of every human being:

My advent on this plane...is to bring to you an understanding of you. The great teaching is to behold God, but no one will ever understand the mystery of that teaching until they know who they are...What I teach and manifest is the personal self. Because only when you go inward are you going to understand 'behold God'. And that I do very well.

KNIGHT 1985

Ramtha, in his rematerialisation on Merv's live stage, then reiterated this central message. God is not without but within, he repeated again and again. Ramtha is a God; JZ is God; Merv Griffin is God; the viewers are God. Medium, message, and audience are one:

⁷ See Weinberg 1986: 101: "Who are *you*? You are the 'identifiable God'."

That which is termed...God, which has been misunderstood, which has been taught to live outside of your being, is within your being. And that that which is called Christ is within your being, and that which is called life is the grand experience, that it is where the kingdom of heaven is located, entity. When know you that that which is termed you are god, that that which emanates within you is divine, you will find joy.

KNIGHT 1985

Ramtha's television presence was by no means limited to *The Merv Griffin Show*. Indeed, the ancient Lemurian has a vast televised history, both positive and negative, ranging from network exposés to numerous talk show appearances to thousands of hours of video now accessible online. Not long after her Merv Griffin appearance, Knight was made the subject of a major *ABC 20/20* exposé, which aired January 22, 1987. Among the many charges levelled against her, *20/20* claimed that JZ was essentially a fraud; that she had duped her followers financially; that she had falsified the details of her autobiography; that she was getting rich from a vast confidence scheme; and that she was ultimately a greed- and power-driven cult leader who taught dangerously immoral ideas (Melton 1998: 139–141). Ironically, the *20/20* exposé probably did as much good as harm to JZ's channeling career, generating so much media attention that she became the object of countless other television shows, newspaper reports, and magazine articles.

Knight's television presence has continued well into the twenty-first century, as she has appeared on major programs such as *CNN's Larry King Live*. As she reiterated the central message on King's show in 2008, we are all divine, creative beings who have not just the possibility but the obligation to take charge of our lives and create our own new realities: "Instead of being a reactive person, to be a master of the reality, even our house, even our family, our workplace, our greater place of enjoyment. That instead of reacting in the old ways, that we absolutely cultivate the ability to create new realities" (Knight 2008). Thought, she explained to King, has the power to create any reality we choose, from greater happiness to more wealth to youthful health:

Thought is there in your brain to construct reality. It is important what we think. ...We learn to make a small list. It's important. And the small list says, "This day, I'm going to create my day. This day I have always been filled with joy." Not that I will be—but that I've always been filled with joy.... Your body hears every thought in your brain. You begin to heal yourself—"This day I've always been fabulously wealthy," "this day I am 30 years younger".... You are affirming a new reality.

KNIGHT 2008

Although Ramtha is most famous for his appearances on television, he also made a film debut in the 2004 movie, “What the Bleep Do We Know?” Conceived and directed by three Ramtha students, William Arntz, Betsy Chasse, and Mark Vicente, the film attempts to connect aspects of quantum physics with New Age spirituality. A relatively low-budget independent production, the film spread widely to theaters across the US before being picked up by a major distributor and eventually grossing over \$10 million (Hogan 2005). Centered on the fairly minimal plot of a deaf photographer on a journey of self-discovery, the film weaves interviews with physicists, philosophers, and New Age enthusiasts with footage of Ramtha himself, all to reassert the basic message that mind creates reality. Now projected on a movie screen rather than a TV screen, Ramtha repeats the same basic theme he had on Griffin’s show twenty years earlier: it is the divine power of the mind that creates the reality we experience. This power of mind over matter can be observed everywhere, from the quantum realm to the most mundane phenomenon of a man’s overly active imagination giving him an erection:

A feeling that some would call a sexual fantasy? It only takes one sexual fantasy for a man to have a hard-on. In other words it only takes one thought here for a man to have an erection in his member. And yet, there was nothing outside of him that gave him that. It was within him that gave him that.

What the Bleep 2005

This same power of thought that can give a man an erection is also the power that creates and transforms our reality. In short, even when presented in the medium of film rather than TV, Ramtha’s message repeats the central channeling theme that we ourselves are both medium and message. We are both the source of our own reality and the truth of our own creative godhood.

“Just like the movies”: Shirley MacLaine and Channeling for Prime Time

Life was an illusion—just like the movies.

MACLAINE, *Out on a Limb*

If JZ Knight helped bring channeling and New Age ideas to a daytime TV audience, it was really Shirley MacLaine who helped bring them to the American public on a mass scale through her best-selling books and her hugely successful TV miniseries. While not a channel herself, MacLaine helped transmit, communicate, and translate—in short, in her own way, ‘channel’—the ideas of Ramtha and others to a much broader general audience that might never

otherwise have heard of reincarnation, UFOs, lost worlds, or the divinity of the individual self (Hanegraaff 1996: 41).

By the early 1980s, MacLaine was already a hugely successful actress. Her role in the 1983 film, *Terms of Endearment*, had just won an Academy Award and a Golden Globe Award for best actress, and she was preparing for a one-woman Broadway show. That same year, she also published *Out on a Limb*, her autobiographical narrative of self-discovery, which became an instant bestseller. Described by critics as “a stunningly honest, engrossing account of an intimate journey inward,” the book recounted MacLaine’s story of personal growth through her acting career, passionate love affairs on several continents, and exploration of New Age philosophy. Both *Out on a Limb* and the follow-up book, *Dancing in the Light* (1985), contain numerous accounts of channeling through MacLaine’s encounters with a variety of channels, including JZ Knight. Indeed, MacLaine describes Knight’s channeled entity Ramtha as the most remarkable and powerful being she ever encountered (Melton 1998: 51). Much like Jane Roberts, JZ also made explicit use of the language of TV and ‘tuning in’ to explain the phenomenon of channeling to MacLaine. We all have the potential to tune in to the spiritual realm, she explained, but the channel has a unique ability to get the signal, as it were: “When you’re tuned in, you’re tuned in...A psychic is just a little more tuned in to the knowingness of his or her higher self” (MacLaine 1986: 123). Ramtha’s advice to MacLaine ranged from the metaphysical to the mundane, covering everything from her own divine nature to the details of her diet, exercise, and acting career: “He spoke of the vitamins I needed, the kind of exercise I should have...and even gave me an evaluation of the scripts I was reading. I asked questions relating to everything from the personal life of Jesus Christ to whether I would ever meet my soul mate in this incarnation” (MacLaine 1986: 127).

While her paperbacks sold several million copies, it was her prime time TV miniseries that reached a truly mass American audience. MacLaine was the first to really bring the phenomenon of channeling—along with astral projection, UFOs, and other New Age ideas—to a major primetime channel and so to millions of ordinary viewers. One of the most striking scenes in the miniseries was the appearance of the real-life channel Kevin Ryerson. Ryerson’s gift of channeling had already been described in the book version of *Out on a Limb*, which recounted his arrival at the actress’s home in Malibu. As MacLaine (1983: 178) described him, Ryerson seemed like a strange combination of a medieval anachronism and a 1980s pop-star: “He seemed to swing back and forth between the Knights of the Round Table and the rock generation.” Unlike most channels, Ryerson had the unique ability to channel not just one but multiple supernatural entities. To use Jane Roberts’s metaphor, he could change multiple channels on the receiving set of consciousness. As Ryerson

explained, these entities ranged from the profound to the ridiculous, from an otherworldly metaphysician to a petty Irish thief:

Two, three or maybe four spiritual entities use me to channel information. The first who usually comes through to greet people calls himself John...He speaks in a biblical lingo that is sometimes hard to follow.... If you prefer...another entity comes through. He calls himself Tom McPherson because his favorite incarnation was that of an Irish pickpocket a few hundred years ago. He can be very amusing...Then there's Dr. Shangru, a Pakistani of a few hundred years ago, well versed in medical matters, and Obidaya, whose favorite incarnation was that of a Jamaican who understands modern-day racial problems.

MACLAINE 1983: 182

While Ryerson's appearance in MacLaine's book is fascinating, his appearance on her TV miniseries borders on the surreal. Playing himself in the series and reenacting the same scene described in the book, Ryerson actually went into a trance and channeled John and the pickpocket live before the camera. In other words, he *re-channeled* or rather *replayed his original channeling* episode for the TV camera, in order to be re-broadcast for a massive viewing audience on MacLaine's miniseries. As Hanegraaff notes, "Millions of people in the U.S.A. and abroad were thus first introduced to the channeling phenomenon by Ryerson's example" (Hanegraaff 1996: 41).

The central message of MacLaine's various channels throughout her journey, however, remained essentially the same as the one articulated by Seth and Ramtha: God is within, we are all divine, and we create our own reality. In Ryerson's words: "Within the inner heart one finds God...The *self...knows the Divine truth because the self is itself Divine*" (MacLaine 1983: 208). Interestingly, enough, however, MacLaine also described the ways in which she worked this basic philosophy of self-deification into her acting profession. While preparing for her one-woman Broadway show, she began to use a series of affirmations that reminded her of her own divinity as she rehearsed her dancing, singing, and stage moves: "To work at one's profession and apply spiritual techniques was an adventure I longed to experience...I began to work with what is known as 'affirmations' a few days into the rehearsal period" (MacLaine 1986: 118). Thus she repeated a series of affirmations such as: "I am God," "I am God in action," "I am God in health," "I am God in happiness," and so on:

It worked in a remarkably simple manner. I trusted what I can only describe as my higher unlimited self...The higher unlimited superconsciousness

can best be defined as one's eternal unlimited soul...It knows and resonates to God because it is a part of God.

MACLAINE 1986: 111

If Jane Roberts made explicit use of the metaphor of the TV screen to explain the phenomenon of channeling, MacLaine made perhaps the most explicit use of the metaphors of acting, film, and performance to explain her spiritual quest and personal philosophy. "I had begun my search for the recognition of higher consciousness," as she described her inner journey, "Life and acting, then, came together for me" (MacLaine 1986: 109). Following the New Age dictum that mind creates reality, MacLaine concluded that life itself is "an illusion—just like the movies;" but this insight also meant that we have the divine power to transform the illusion of our lives, to enact our lives in new ways, to create new realities. We are not bound to the single script of a movie but rather have infinite possibilities to rewrite the scripts of our lives—a potential more akin to the global reach and myriad channels of television itself. This central message of channeling was perhaps mostly famously enacted in the key scene of *Out on a Limb*, as MacLaine and her New Age guru David were discussing deep metaphysical questions on the Malibu beach. David offered to teach her "a good exercise that helps us get in touch with the realization that we have God inside of us," which culminated in the two of them leaping up and down joyously before the glimmering ocean shouting: "I am God! I am God! I am God!" While by this time a fairly standard trope in most New Age literature, this message of self-divinisation was probably a fairly radical one for most American viewers of prime television in 1986.

In this sense, MacLaine might best be understood as a kind of second-order medium for the channeling movement—not a channel herself, but rather a kind of meta-channel for figures such as Knight and Ryerson, rebroadcasting their message to a much wider audience of spiritual consumers in the television age.

Conclusions: "We Live in an Extremely Religious Age": From TV to Cyberspace

Many people simply resort instantly to the occult, to ESP and every form of hidden awareness in answer to this new surround of electric consciousness. And so we live...in an extremely religious age, and I think we are moving into an age that...is probably the most religious that has ever existed.

MARSHALL MCLUHAN (1970)⁸

8 Bendetti and DeHart 1997: 190.

To conclude, I would like to suggest that the rise of channeling in the late twentieth century has much broader implications for our understanding of both New Age spirituality and the interplay between religion and new technologies. Among other things, the channeling described by Roberts, Knight, and MacLaine reflects the impact of new technologies like television on both the medium and the message. If the telegraph allowed individuals widely disconnected in space to receive messages instantly from across the country, the advent of television allows us to receive a bombardment of information from all over the planet: "television begins the process of re-tribalization through its ability to transcend time and space, enabling the person in New York, for example, to 'experience' a foreign culture across the globe" (Zechowski). As McLuhan observed in a *Playboy* interview in 1969, the individual in the TV age is relentlessly exposed to "all the news of the modern world—war, racial discrimination, rioting, crime, inflation, sexual revolution...he has witnessed the assassinations and funerals of the nation's leaders; he's been orbited through the TV screen into the astronaut's dance in space." In a sense, children of the TV era live "several lifetimes compared to their grandparents when they began grade one" (M. McLuhan 1969). This shift from nineteenth-century media, such as the telegraph, to twentieth-century media, such as television, is also reflected in the shift from early Spiritualism to modern channeling. Not only do New Age channels explicitly adopt the language of television screens, pre-recordings, and broadcasts, but they also preach a message uniquely adapted to this medium: we are all infinite beings who transcend time and space; we live multiple lifetimes; and we project the reality that we choose to perceive.

The key difference for the New Age channels, of course, is that the 'medium' here is not simply the technological medium of the television but also the *human* medium of the channel herself. Seth's assertion that the 'medium is the message' is thus an ironic—and probably intentional—double entendre that highlights the position of the human medium as both the screen for and embodiment of the central message that we are all divine, creative beings.

Finally, I think these reflections on the links between television and channeling can also give us some insights into the impact of new technologies on the emerging spiritualities of the twenty-first century. If the influence of new media such as television can be seen in the channeling of the 1970s and 1980s, we might well wonder what impact new media, such as the Internet, might have on religious life in the cyber era? A large part of the reason for renewed interest in McLuhan's work, in fact, has been the rise of cyber-culture and new reflections on the differences between the media of TV and the Internet. And McLuhan himself had offered his own quasi-utopian predictions about the future potential of computer technologies (Bendetti and DeHart 1997: 190,

219–220; see also E. McLuhan et al. 1996: 262).⁹ Today both media critics and students of religion are struggling to understand the impact of new technologies in which not only is the medium the message, but, as Manuel Castells (2003: 1–8) put it, “the Network is the Message,” and we are all increasingly “embedded in virtual networks aimed at reinventing society.”

Already, we can see numerous examples of the new medium of the Internet reshaping and transforming the message of new religions. We need only think, for example, of the Heaven’s Gate movement of the 1990s—one of the very first new religions to make extensive use of the Internet for both recruitment and articulation of its central message. Not only did Heaven’s Gate advertise its final message online, but it also made elaborate use of the language of computers and cyberspace to articulate its religious ideas, describing the brain as the “hard-drive” and the soul as the “software,” or describing the present universe as a kind of virtual reality holodeck (Urban 2000).

Or we might look to the example of the diverse body of movements that fall under the heading of neo-paganism or modern witchcraft, which have made perhaps the most extensive use of the Internet to disseminate information and organise new forms of ritual, practice, and community. Many observers have noted, for example, that some of the first and most enthusiastic users of the Internet were modern Witches, Wiccans, Druids, Goddess-worshippers, and other neopagans. As Wendy Griffin (2004: 191) explains in her study of contemporary Goddess-worshippers online, there is a natural sort of affinity between the unruly, connective web of the Internet and the Wiccan view of the Goddess as a polymorphic, pervasive energy; likewise, there is a striking fit between the shifting meshwork of the Internet and the neo-pagan community as an interconnected web of complex relations, very much enmeshed within the larger web of cosmic existence itself: “The Web is an apt metaphor for the Goddess community in general...the community web refers to both the local and global community of women bound to the Web of Life itself” (see also Cowan 2004). Moreover, as Nevill Drury (2002) suggests, the magic of neo-paganism is in many ways a natural fit for the “magic of cyber-space,” where the creative potential of the Internet has become a new extension of the creative power of the human mind into the digital domain:

The Internet has become an extension of the human psyche, a forum for both its realities and its fantasies. From an esoteric or mystical perspective,

9 “The computer.... holds out the promise of a technologically engendered state of universal understanding and unity, a state of absorption in the logos that could knit mankind into one family” (E. McLuhan et al. 1996: 262).

though, what is so intriguing about this interplay between technology and the human imagination is that here we are dealing with the equation *As I imagine, so I become* - and this is the very essence of magic. It comes as no surprise, then, that neopagans and occultists of all descriptions have been quick to embrace the Internet as a new means of communication.

Surely, we could think of many other examples of the new medium of the Internet shaping the message of twenty-first century religions, from the Church of Scientology's ongoing cyber-wars, to explicitly web-based practitioners such as techno-pagans and cyber-magicians. All of these force us to continually rethink the ways in which the technological medium continues to inform the religious message in the spacious present.

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Channeling—The Cinderella of the New Age?

A Course in Miracles, the Seth Texts, and Definition in New Age Spiritualities

Ruth Bradby

Introduction: The Myth of the Great Hotchpotch

New Age spiritualities form part of the public consciousness in many countries of the world today. From India to Israel, Greece to Ireland, Scotland to California, the network of new spiritualities has developed a language understood by members of the public whether or not they consider themselves to be religious. The use of the word ‘channel’, for example, is widely used in a variety of contexts, as happened in *Newsnight* (on BBC2) in April 2010 when a commentator joked, “I am only channeling the words of Alistair Campbell.” Another example occurred in Simon Hoggart’s Sketch column (1 July 2010) in *The Guardian* which began, “I realised that David Cameron had started channeling Gordon Brown when . . . but he is also getting spirit vibrations from Tony Blair . . .” An episode in the second season of the American comedy show *Will and Grace* has Will saying to Grace, “I’m sorry I always make you eat breakfast at my house. I’m sorry I got you involved with *A Course in Miracles*. I’m sorry I took the batteries out of Mr. Good Vibrations and put them in my alarm clock.” Humor apart, few would challenge the fact that the language of the new spiritualities is used in most areas of contemporary culture today (Partridge 2004).

This is evident in a walk down the high street. Music shops have a section marked ‘New Age’. There is a genre of music composed as New Age music, but the 1970s music of Brian Eno and the music of primal people enhanced through synthesisers have also become popular to devotees of new spiritualities and the wider public. The practice of medicine has been influenced, not only through alternative therapies, but also by the demand that a person’s body, mind, and spirit be treated as a whole. Business management training programs in entrepreneurship draw on New Age prosperity consciousness themes. Paul Heelas (1999: 51) quotes Peter Russell of Transcendental Meditation: “My aim is to get all IBM managers to experience themselves as God.” The *London Times* devotes a supplement, ‘Body and Soul’, to spiritual themes, and supermarket shelves marked ‘Well Being’ implicitly cater to spirituality. Knowledge

of New Age spiritualities is assumed in advertising and films, like *Avatar*, with its assumption of the interconnectedness of all reality.

Given the ubiquity of New Age spiritualities, it is no surprise that certain myths have grown up around them. The most commonplace of these concerns the assumption that New Age spiritualities defy definition. It became a convention in academic writing in the 1990s to comment on their amorphous nature (Partridge 1999: 77; Bednarowski 1994: 67). The word amorphous was sometimes used in a pejorative sense (Lewis 1992: 6; Basil 1988: 28) with the implication that the hotchpotch of New Age spiritualities is inferior to older religious traditions.

A second widespread assumption concerned the lack of authority within these spiritualities (Bradby 2011a: 687–706; York 1994: 16). However, even in the 1990s, some scholars found these assumptions misleading. Paul Heelas (1996: 2) argued that New Age spiritualities showed a remarkable consistency regarding the “human (and planetary) condition and how it can be transformed,” and Partridge (1999: 77–78) noted that New Age worldviews are connected by “common themes” which give New Age thinking a distinctive shape (see also Hanegraaff 1996: 522; Melton et al. 1990: xvff; Perry 1992: 4ff).

An Emic Definition of New Age Spiritualities

In 1990, New Age activist William Bloom, while reluctant to box the new spiritualities into anything like a religious creed, nevertheless pointed to six ideas that he found to be common to the new spiritualities. He called them “open-ended scaffolding on to which we can hang our experiences, wisdom and intuition” (Bloom 1990: 12). Bloom, having canvassed other devotees, found followers of the new spiritualities united in the beliefs that (1) all life is the manifestation of spirit; (2) all life is interconnected energy; (3) each person has two levels of consciousness—a temporary outer personality and a multidimensional eternal inner being (or Higher Self); (4) all souls in incarnation are free to choose their own spiritual path; (5) individuals may seek supernatural guidance from spiritual teachers (angels, guardian spirits, extraterrestrials, spirits of the dead—all beings who have been released from the cycle of reincarnation) through channeling; (6) there are a greater number of ‘enlightened teachers’ at this time than ever before who will help to usher in a New Age (Bloom 1990: 13–14).

Bloom’s ‘scaffolding’ reveals a unity within New Age spiritualities (with the implied belief in reincarnation). It shows what New Age devotees are united

against. The New Age would replace (1) the closed rational mechanistic view of the universe based on Newtonian science and the positivist edifice built on this foundation; (2) the Enlightenment belief in the omnipotence of human reason, built on the foundation of the temporary outer human personality; (3) the hierarchical structures and dogmas of traditional religions, which are seen to be compromised by, if not constructed and nurtured by, the first and second points above. Following the path of a New Age spirituality meant transformation of the ego-centered temporary personality, with its emphasis on individual gain, to a holistic outlook based on the belief in divinity within, and the connectedness of, all life. Against those commentators who claim there is neither cohesion nor a shared language in the new spiritualities, Partridge argues in his contribution to this volume that what he calls 'occulture' now supplies that common language. He defines 'occulture' as a reservoir of ideas, beliefs, and theories, as well as practices drawn on by devotees of the new spiritualities to such a degree that they permeate all aspects of culture (Partridge 2004: 186; Partridge 2005: 2–3).

These shared beliefs have become 'taken-for-granted' truths that now impinge on the wider culture. How did a core of defined beliefs emerge from spiritualities that recognise no spiritual authority beyond that of the Self? (Woodhead 2001: 9). If, as Roy Wallis (1984: 100) has argued, followers of New Age spiritualities are "epistemological individualists," why is there a coherence binding together the diverse beliefs found under the New Age umbrella? Wouter Hanegraaff (1996: 27) points to the teaching in channeled texts largely from the 1970s: "Many of the fundamental New Age beliefs have first been formulated in channeled messages. It is therefore fair to say that, in spite of the tendency among New Age believers to emphasise personal experience as the exclusive basis of religious truth, New Age religion must to a large extent be considered a religion of revelation, *Offenbarungsreligion*." He calls *A Course in Miracles* (1975) the closest thing new spiritualities have to a sacred scripture because of the "sheer awe and reverence" in which it is held (Hanegraaff 1996: 37–38). Olav Hammer (2004: 342) points to the Seth texts channeled by Jane Roberts between 1970 and 1984 as the source of basic metaphysical concepts that became common currency for New Age followers from the 1980s onwards. To understand its influence on New Age spiritualities, it is useful to examine more closely the nature of channeling.

The Context of Channeling

Hanegraaff (1996: 23) defines channeling as "the belief of individuals that they are able to act as a channel for information from sources outside themselves.

People receive information which they believe comes from a source other than their normal consciousness . . . from entities living on higher levels of being . . .” This source is believed to represent “a level of wisdom . . . superior to that of most humans” and communication with such sources is “sought for the purpose of learning and guidance” (Hanegraaff 1996: 24). The authority implicit in channeled messages makes a contrast with messages received through mediums in traditional Spiritualism where the purpose is communication with a loved one who has died. Another scholar calls it a “process in which information is accessed and expressed by someone who is convinced that the source is not his ordinary consciousness” (Riordan 1992: 105).

Jon Klimo (1998: 2), writing from an emic perspective, defines channeling more broadly as “the communication of information to or through a physically embodied human being from a source that is said to exist on some other level or dimension of reality than the physical as we know it, and is not from the normal mind (or self) of the channel.” Klimo (1998: 4, 10) stressed the importance of the phrase “is said to” and argued that one’s own intuition and inspiration were potentials for channeling. Given the New Age belief in the interconnectedness of all reality, one’s intuition and inspiration could also be viewed, at least in some understandings of the Self, as divine wisdom coming from that which is greater than the individual self.

Channeling may be spontaneous or intentional. In the former, the channeler is at the mercy of the revelation, while for the latter, there are techniques taught in spiritual self-help books, DVDs, workshops, and websites, to teach people how to become channels (De Alberdi 1998; Andrews 1992; Harman and Rheingold 1983; Muhl 1963; Neate 1997; Ridall 1988; Roman and Packer 1987; Walters 1987).¹

Intentional Channeling

Information gained from intentional channeling is claimed to be specifically helpful for the person acting as channel. The activity of channeling is thought to have beneficial effects on the channeler. One author of a channeling manual writes that “typically people who channel become more self-confident, happier, clearer about their path and their choices, less selfish, less stressed over life’s problems, calmer, more loving and psychologically stronger” (De Alberdi

1 In the last decade, teaching on channeling is also offered on the Internet, for example on the website *Opening to Channel* at <http://www.orindaben.com/catalog/prodno/C100>. See also www.josephspeaks.com and www.bandoflight.co.uk.

1998: 8). When channelers Sanaya Roman and Duane Packer (1987: 16) asked their spirit guides what channeling will do, they received the reply, "You can gain a greater sense of what you want to create and find easier ways to bring it about. If you follow the advice of your guide . . . changes will occur in your emotional nature and you will less frequently have feelings of depression, anxiety or heaviness."

The popularity of these 'how to' manuals and websites suggests that New Age devotees look outside themselves for spiritual wisdom. The literature on channeling, as well as individual stories of channeling experiences, suggest that these channeling manuals have encouraged many to see channeling as central to their spiritual experience. I have spoken to informants who value the daily discipline of channeling as a form of meditation. Others speak of instruction that has helped them find a life partner, improve career and relationships, overcome stress, and help with the training of pets. Thus, while a belief in spirit guides says something about a devotee's beliefs about the nature of reality and metaphysics, anecdotal evidence suggests that those involved in spontaneous channeling are firmly anchored in this world and welcome channeled help in negotiating their way through it (Bradby 2011b: 159–161).

Spontaneous Channeling

Hanegraaff argues that messages from intentional channeling have not commanded the authority that messages from spontaneous channeling have achieved for the wider New Age community. The core beliefs of New Age spiritualities, he writes, were first articulated in spontaneous channeling (Hanegraaff 1996: 31). J. Gordon Melton (in Barker and Warburg 1998: 138) agrees: "Channeling was the instrument through which the New Age vision was articulated and the supernatural entities were the authorities . . . for New Age teachings."

Scholars cite Alice Bailey (1880–1940) and the Theosophy movement of the early twentieth century as a source for many of the New Age ideas that flowered in the 1980s. Here too, the process of spontaneous channeling was significant: the idea of a coming "New Age" was originally channeled by Bailey. Born into a well-off family in Manchester, and a member of the Church of England, Bailey saw a vision of Jesus, had an evangelical conversion, visited India, and eventually emigrated to the United States. In California she encountered Theosophy and became editor of the Theosophical Society's magazine. Soon afterwards, a disembodied entity revealed himself to her, claiming to be a Tibetan master, Djwal Khul, who had earlier appeared to her as Jesus. She also

understood he had dictated the writings of Theosophy's founder, Madam Helena Blavatsky. She channeled Djwal Khul, also referring to him as "the Christ," for the rest of her life, turning the material into a series of books (Bailey 1922; Bailey 1925; Bailey 1934; Bailey 1936; Bailey 1944, Bailey 1948; Bailey 1954).

By claiming to channel the same entity as that behind Blavatsky's messages, Bailey claimed the imprimatur of Theosophy yet maintained a link with her Anglican (and evangelical) past by teaching about the millenarian hope of the coming of 'the Christ': "There will be a pouring in of light . . . which will change world affairs." The advent of Christ would either be physical, or as an "inflow of the Christ principle, the Christ life working through the human family" (Bailey 1991: 46). Bailey never fully broke with her Christian roots, and mixed teaching about the greater light to come with the return of the Christ principle. This remnant of Christian hope in Bailey's writing may, in part, account for the strand of eschatological optimism that became a feature of many subsequent New Age writers and is implied in the term 'New Age'.

While there are many well-documented theories as to the roots of the holistic milieu (Lewis and Melton 1992: 13–57; Sutcliffe 2003: 9–77), Alice Bailey, perhaps as much as anyone, should be recognised as a founder of New Age spiritualities. Her writings became sources for the ideas and language used by Marilyn Ferguson in her influential manifesto, *The Aquarian Conspiracy* (1980). Bailey was perhaps the first to predict that the violent Age of Pisces would give way to the 'Aquarian Age' used by Ferguson in the title of her book (Bailey 1991: 416). Bailey mixed economics, political thought, and social theories with interior spirituality: "the best thought of the centuries is available for all; and ancient techniques and modern methods must meet and interchange . . . a structure of truth will be found to emerge which will embody the spirit of the New Age" (Bailey 1987: 4). This foreshadowed Ferguson's synthesis of medicine, ancient mysticism, science, education, and psychology—a mix that, she predicted, would bring a 'paradigm shift' for the world (Ferguson 1989: 213–218, 314–319, 358–362). A section entitled 'The Vision: Light and the Coming of Light' looks like a specific borrowing from Bailey to describe the coming transformation (Ferguson 1989: 423; see also Sutcliffe 2003: 31–54).

Bailey also influenced William Bloom. He points to over two hundred passages in her writings that refer to a new age (Bloom 1991: 2). Bailey saw channeling as fundamental to the development of the spiritual elite, which would bring light to the world and usher in the new age: channeling would come to them naturally because of their responsiveness to spiritual vibrations. She was also a harbinger of Bloom's belief in the interconnectedness of all life and energy, writing of the connection between interior spirituality and the cosmic whole. An inner spiritual change of a sufficient number of people would cause

global change. In this she prefigured an important strand of teaching in *A Course in Miracles* and in the teaching of Gary Renard (Renard 2004), a recent channeler in the Course tradition.

Steven Sutcliffe (2003: 52) suggests that Bailey's optimistic vision was questioned after the horrors of World War II and the advent of the atomic bomb. Her teaching about the select few who would survive into the new age helped to advance the rise of UFO religions, in which extraterrestrial space ships would rescue the 'elect'. Again, channeling figured significantly as spontaneously channeled material during the 1950s conveyed messages from extraterrestrial beings spawning various manifestations of UFO religions (J. Lewis 1995; Partridge 2003; S. Lewis 2003; Tumminia 2005). Hanegraaff (1996: 95) views this spontaneous channeling in the 1950s as the specific precursor to the channeling that took place in the 1970s and suggests that David Spangler, another 'father of the New Age' (Hammer 2004: 342) and the author of the influential channeled text, *Revelation: The Birth of a New Age* (1977), is the link between these two periods of spontaneous channeling. Spangler was involved in UFO groups in the 1950s and possibly absorbed their apocalyptic beliefs during this period (see also Festinger et al. 1956; Partridge 2003; Tumminia 2003; S. Lewis 2003; Tumminia 2005).²

While the intentional channeler has control over the phenomenon, the spontaneous channeler is taken by surprise by the 'dictation' coming from a source outside her consciousness. The stories of Helen Schucman and Jane Roberts show how authoritative spiritual entities appear to invade the ordinary lives of the channelers.

Helen Schucman and A Course in Miracles

A Course in Miracles channeler, Helen Schucman, Associate Professor of Psychology at Columbia University in New York, was an atheist who viewed the hearing of 'voices' as pathological behavior (Bradby 2004: 349). In her unpublished autobiography, she describes how she resisted the process and insisted the material be published anonymously, fearful that it would damage her professional reputation (Wapnick 1999: 183–187). In October 1965, Schucman

2 Hanegraaff (1996: 96) refers to the UFO cult movement as a "kind of proto New Age movement." Tumminia 2005 challenges some of the assumptions of Festinger et al. See too the discussion about Leon Festinger and his subject as channeler in Michael Barkun's chapter in this volume.

heard an inner voice commanding her, “This is a course in miracles. Please take notes.” As Schucman later wrote,

That was my introduction to the voice. It made no sound, but seemed to be giving me a kind of rapid, inner dictation which I took down in a short-hand notebook. It made me very uncomfortable, but it never seriously occurred to me to stop. It seemed to be a special assignment I had somehow, somewhere agreed to complete.

Course 1996 [1975]: VIII

Schucman took down the daily dictation over the next eight years, but never accepted her role. She said to a friend, “I know the Course is true, but I don’t believe it” (Skutch 1984: iv). In spite of this ambivalence, she seems not to have doubted the authority of the voice which she implies was that of Jesus: “I did not understand the calm but impressive authority with which the Voice dictated . . . the particular combination of certainty, wisdom, gentleness, clarity and patience” (Wapnick 1999: 179). Schucman clearly viewed this inner voice as having the authority of something like a divine entity (Bradby 2007: 213).

Jane Roberts and ‘Seth’

Jane Roberts was a housewife from upstate New York whose channeled material became perhaps the most influential of all for New Age spiritualities of the 1980s (Hanegraaff 1996: 126; Hammer 2004: 342). She writes similarly of her surprise at her first encounter with ‘Seth’. At the time she was not looking for a purpose in life. While writing poetry on a autumn evening in September 1963,

an avalanche of ideas burst into my head with force. It was as if the physical world were really tissue-paper thin, hiding infinite dimensions of reality, and I was suddenly flung through the tissue paper. My body sat at the table, my hands scribbling down the words and ideas that flashed through my head. Yet I seemed to be somewhere else, at the same time, travelling through things. I went plummeting through a leaf, to find a whole universe open up; and then out again. I felt as if knowledge was being implanted in the very cells of my body so that I couldn’t forget it—a biological spirituality . . . feeling and knowing, rather than intellectual knowledge. When I came to, I found myself scrawling what was obviously meant as the title of that odd batch of notes: The Physical Universe as

Idea Construction. Later the Seth material would develop those ideas, but I didn't know that at the time.

ROBERTS 1970: 10–12

Roberts later went into a trance to speak the words of Seth. Her voice deepened and her demeanour became that of a man (Roberts 1970: 46–50). Like Schucman, Roberts and her husband were not religious and she claims to have had no background in paranormal experience (Roberts 1970: 6). “No one was more surprised than I was, then, to find myself quite abruptly speaking for someone who was supposed to have survived death” (Roberts 1970: 6–7).

Roberts resisted the idea that she was speaking for a personality who had survived death and looked for other explanations from psychology and Spiritualists (Roberts 1970: 4–5). By 1969, she had received more than fifty notebooks of dictated material and felt compelled to believe that “the Seth material springs from sources beyond myself, and that it is much less distorted by pat, conventionalised symbolism than are other paranormal scripts we have encountered” (Roberts 1970: 6–7).

The word “revelation” came to mind . . . I was familiar with inspiration in my own work, but this was as different from inspiration as a bird is from a worm! All my ideas of reality turned upside down. I'd been sure of one thing: you could trust physical reality . . . Now I could never feel that way again. I knew that we formed physical matter, not the other way around; that our senses showed us only one three-dimensional reality out of an infinite number . . .

ROBERTS 1970: 12

After the first book in 1966, Roberts went on to produce six more before she died in 1984. As her books went out of print, the continued demand for them caused her husband to bring out new editions in the 1990s. He also published posthumously four books based on Roberts's notebooks.

Hanegraaff (1996: 126–127) has suggested that the Seth texts, *A Course in Miracles*, and other channeled texts largely from the 1970s helped to spawn the New Age movement of the 1980s onwards and that the common ‘pool of ideas’ referred to by Partridge, the ‘taken-for-granted truths’ uniting devotees, derive from these channeled texts. Hammer (2004: 324) believes that the basic metaphysical concepts that became common currency for New Age devotees were developed from the Seth material. One test of this premise is to return to Bloom's definition to see if there is coherence between his ‘scaffolding’ and the teaching in the Seth material and *A Course in Miracles*.

Bloom's Scaffolding and Themes from 'Seth'

Bloom's first and second points, "All life is the manifestation of spirit and is interconnected energy" are the foundation of teaching about reality in the Seth texts. Seth refers to himself as an "energy personality essence" and teaches that "we are individualised portions of energy, materialised within physical existence to learn to form ideas from energy, and make them physical" (Roberts 1970: 13). While Bloom writes of all life as 'spirit' and 'energy', the Seth texts refer to all life as 'consciousness' and 'energy' (Roberts 1970: 13). The Seth material teaches that "everything has its own consciousness." Roberts wrote: "Now I felt vitality present even in things I'd previously considered inanimate. A nail was sticking in the windowsill, and I experienced ever so briefly the consciousness of the atoms and molecules that composed it" (Roberts 1970: 12). For Bloom, all things are the manifestation of spirit; Roberts sees matter as the manifestation of thought: "We project ideas into an object . . . the basic idea is that the senses are developed, not to permit awareness of an already existing material world, but to create it . . ." (Roberts 1970: 13).

Bloom's second point, that all things—people, animals, plants, all existence—are part of the same interconnected energy, lies at the core of New age spiritualities. It is possible that this holism, also found in the Seth material, resonated with New Age followers as a corrective to the non-holistic views perceived in the dualism of the Judaeo-Christian tradition: the distinction between God and creation, the distinction between humanity and nature, and the distinction between spirit and matter (see MacCulloch 2002). Also to be opposed as non-holistic are forms of reductionism associated with the Enlightenment, especially the reduction of spirit to matter, viewing the spiritual as part of material processes. The Seth material appears to turn this thinking on its head, viewing the material as spiritual, as in the case of Jane Roberts's 'nail'.

In Roberts's (1970: 267) scheme of interconnectedness, God is referred to as "All That Is," and "Primary Energy Gestalts." The Seth material tells a version of a purposeful creation:

At first, all probable reality existed as nebulous dreams within the consciousness of "All That Is" . . . "All That Is" saw an infinity of probability, and foresaw all possible probabilities from its dream . . . It let go that portion of Itself . . . It has given life to infinities of possibilities. Yet all individuals remember their source and dream of "All That Is." And they yearn toward that immense source . . . to give it actuality through their own creations.

Roberts's form of interconnectedness uses the holographic paradigm. Holography, originally a technique for making three-dimensional images of objects, was adopted by New Age thinkers following Roberts, because it suggests that objects can be converted to frequency patterns and back to objects, thus changing the Newtonian/Cartesian mechanistic view of physical reality.³ Using the holographic paradigm, Roberts (1994 [1972]: 358) writes, "Each part of the soul contains the whole." According to Seth, reality is a singularity outside time and space, containing the potential for all creation. The Seth material sees each mind as containing all the information of the universe in the "spacious present." "What you call God is the sum of all consciousness . . . God is more than the sum of all personalities, yet all personalities are what He is" (Roberts 1970: 271). Roberts's writing gave rise to a powerful theme in today's self-help literature, that 'we create our own reality'. In *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, Ferguson (1980: 198) applied holographic vocabulary to human consciousness: "Our brains mathematically construct 'hard' reality by interpreting frequencies from a dimension transcending time and space. The brain is a hologram interpreting a holographic universe."

Bloom's third theme described each person as having two levels of consciousness—a temporary outer personality and a multidimensional eternal being, which he described as the 'Higher Self'. The Seth texts use the phrase 'Higher Self' as well as 'the soul' and the 'inner self' (Roberts 1994: xv, 88). The Higher Self is contrasted with the limited five senses which reveal only one dimension of reality (the temporary outer personality): "The physical senses actually create the physical world in that they force you to perceive an available field of energy in physical terms" (Roberts 1994 [1972]: 78). In contrast, the Higher Self is not limited: "The Higher Self is . . . a powerhouse of probabilities seeking to be expressed" (Roberts 1994 [1972]: 88). As with Roberts's theme of interconnectedness, the belief in the Higher Self was interpreted by later New Age writers in many ways, and Shirley MacLaine's books (among others) and television programs made the term popular in the 1980s.

Bloom's fourth theme, that all souls in incarnation are free to choose their own spiritual paths, is allied with Roberts's teaching that in our minds we create our own reality: "You will discover the multidimensional energy that gives consciousness to all things. This will inspire you to take a hand in the job of creation" (Roberts 1994: 460). Creating your own reality means becoming a cocreator with

3 Wouter Hanegraaff (1996: 143) points out that "the holographic model does not imply that holographic blur is the true reality. The true reality is the original object." To Hanegraaff, this shows that the holographic worldview is not derived from holography but is used to "defend an already existing intuition."

God. The idea of the ‘spacious present’ makes it possible for Roberts to suggest to readers that they are/were active participants in the energy which created the universe. The Seth texts assert that through us “All That Is” created all reality. Whether we know it or not, we are “constantly creating our own reality as surely as we breathe” (Roberts 1970: 202; Roberts 1994 [1974]: 458–459).

The existence of the Seth texts and *A Course in Miracles* illustrate Bloom’s fifth and sixth themes: that individuals may seek supernatural guidance from spiritual teachers through channeling and that there is a greater number of these teaching entities now than was previously the case. Hanegraaff (1996: 126) calls Roberts the “Muhammad of New Age and Seth its angel Gabriel.” He questions whether New Age spiritualities would have developed as they did without Roberts’s ‘revelation’.

Bloom’s Taxonomy and *A Course in Miracles*

Proponents and critics of the Course have tried to disassociate *A Course in Miracles* from the larger New Age milieu. This feature goes back to Schucman, who recoiled at manifestations of the New Age in the 1970s. Kenneth Wapnick, final editor of *A Course in Miracles* and its publisher, asked that it not be labelled in bookshops as a New Age text because he associated the New Age with superficiality, celebrity glamour, and commerce-driven motives that seem alien to sincere spirituality. Yet Bloom (2001) himself, though not a Course activist, acknowledged his debt to *A Course in Miracles* in an article in *Miracle Worker* in 2001. My analysis of the text of *A Course in Miracles*, study of emic Course literature and self-help books, and interviews with Course teachers and students suggest that (with one caveat) Course spirituality fits appropriately within the larger network of New Age spiritualities as defined by Bloom.

Bloom’s first two points, “all life is spirit” and “all life is interconnected energy,” agree with Course ontology. Like Bloom’s scheme, Course ontology sees spirit as the only reality; the Course denies the existence of the physical world. It teaches a monism of radical unity that is all-encompassing. Course ontology posits two levels of reality. Level one is God (the real), and level two is the material world (the unreal). In a much-loved passage from the Introduction, this teaching of all life as spirit is simply laid out:

Nothing real can be threatened.

Nothing unreal exists.

Herein lies the peace of God.

Course 1996: 1

God is defined as ‘all-encompassing’ love, and all that is wrong in the world can be traced back to the false belief that separation from God (level one/spirit) is possible. The Course offers disciplined mind training to “remove the barriers to the awareness” of our oneness with love/God (*Course* 1996: 1). The Course teaches that the opposite of love is fear, the key attribute of level two/the unreal. Logically, what is ‘all-encompassing’ (God/love) can leave room for no other presence: “The opposite of love is fear, but what is all-encompassing can have no opposite” (*Course* 1996: 1). If separation from God is impossible, what went wrong is our choice to believe in the possibility of separation. “You have chosen to be in a state of opposition in which opposites are possible” (*Course* 1996: 76). The ‘fall’ from level one to level two can be seen as a metanarrative derived from the biblical fall-redemption story; but it also resonates with the Seth teaching of the need to return to the Source. ‘All That Is’, Seth’s name for God, is something like the ‘all-encompassing’ nature of the God of the Course.

Bloom’s second point on the interconnectedness of all energy is also emphasised in the Course. The Introduction speaks of God as being “all encompassing and the only reality.” God is believed to be pure, loving Mind, outside the realm of time and space (that is, outside what ‘Seth’ would call dimensional reality). Even the word ‘outside’ does not do justice to the Course’s radical teachings about the all-encompassing nature of God, for nothing can be ‘outside’ of what is all-encompassing. “Oneness is simply the idea God is. And in His being, He encompasses all things” (*Course* 1996: 323). Everyone is a member of what the Course calls the ‘Sonship’:

It should be noted that God has only one Son. If all His creations are His sons, everyone must be an integral part of the whole Sonship. The Sonship in its Oneness transcends the sum of its parts. However, this is obscured as long as any of its parts is missing. That is why the conflict cannot ultimately be resolved until all the parts of the Sonship have returned.

Course 1996: 33

Holography is not mentioned, but there is a resonance with it in statements such as: “Everyone lives in you, as you live in everyone. Can you, then, perceive unworthiness in a brother and not perceive it in yourself? And can you perceive it in yourself and not perceive it in God?” (*Course* 1996: 208).

Bloom’s third point, that each person has two levels of consciousness—a temporary outer personality and a multidimensional eternal inner being (or Higher Self)—can be seen in Course ontology, which posits the two levels, level one/God/love/spirit/the real, and level two/the unreal/the ego. Schucman does not use the term ‘Higher Self’. However, her teaching about the reality of

God/level one, and the unreality of the self/ego, which trusts the five senses, agrees with Bloom's two levels of consciousness.

Bloom's fourth point, that all souls in incarnation are free to choose their own spiritual paths, echoes the importance of 'choice' noted in the Seth texts. As in Seth, the importance of choice is a leitmotif running through *A Course in Miracles*. Freedom from the false belief in the illusion of level two/separateness comes when a person realises he has the power 'to choose': "You are free to believe what you choose" (*Course* 1996: 7). The final chapter of the *Course* brings the theme of 'choice' to a climax with the chapter title "Choose Once Again." The reader is urged to choose that which is the only logical possibility, that of level one/God/reality. The empowering attributes of choice are explained: "Do you not see that all your misery comes from the strange belief that you are powerless, that is, without the power of choice? Helplessness is sin's condition; the one requirement is that it demands to be believed. Only the helpless could believe in it" (*Course* 1996: 461). As noted, the theme of empowering choice became important in later spiritual self-help books where readers are urged to 'create your own reality' (Bradby 2007: 207–228).

Bloom's fifth and sixth points concern channeling and the increase in the number of channelers. In 1990, Bloom (1990: 14) believed the cosmos was evolving towards a New Age, and there may have been a millenarian dimension to his thought at that time. As the turn of the millennium did not see a significant dawning of a New Age, the eschatological belief in an imminent shift became routinised into the promise of limitless personal development. More recently, the published channeled material of Gary Renard (2004), a *Course* teacher, returns to an eschatological theme: as more people die who have practised the *Course* and come back reincarnated, a 'tipping point' will be reached (before long, it is implied) whereby all humankind will be 'home' with God and the physical universe as we know it will disappear.

However, the *Course* differs from Bloom's definition and from most New Age spiritualities in its uncompromising otherworldliness. In another sense, there is a difference between *Course* teaching and Bloom's fourth point about each person being free to choose his own spiritual path. This is something that is emphasised in *Course* writing, and I have heard it taught in *Course* meetings: "Only you can determine if the *Course* is the right path for you—it is not for everyone. It is but one way back to God." But there is also an implication of superiority (which marks it out from other spiritualities). The *Course* teaches that while it does not claim to be superior to other spiritual paths, it does claim to function as a kind of spiritual fast track. *Course* students may save themselves "thousands of years" by practising its lessons. This acceleration sometimes serves as a legitimating device: one of the signs that a student has achieved

spiritual acceleration is that things begin to go wrong for him (Miller 2008: 90). The Course never teaches that we are God. It may be a fine point of distinction between saying one is God (Seth) and believing one cannot be separate from God (the Course), but the emphasis is significant. That said, Course spirituality connects well with Bloom's definition; and my research, participation in Course meetings, and conversations with Course students confirm this.

A Canon and Orthodoxy?

Hammer (2004: 394–395) notes that spontaneously channeled messages have evolved into “a canon . . . with enough common themes to identify a New Age theology.” He notes that the texts claim we have forgotten who we really are. We are not material bodies, but sparks of the divine, incarnated on earth. In many texts there is the combination of spirituality and psychology in the attempt to understand this forgetfulness. Forgetfulness results in feelings of separation from the divine, whether this is conceived as our own true nature or as an external force. We create the world we live in and our inner states are reflected in the outer world. Suffering and evil are projections of our own fear and forgetfulness. As the Course teaches, what we experience is actually an illusion; since we forgot our true natures, we created a flawed reality, but our grounds for hope lie in incarnating again and again, learning spiritual lessons along the way until now we are ready for a great spiritual leap forward. The imminence of coming change drives many of the spiritualities forward, giving them a frisson of excitement. There are ascended masters, extraterrestrials, even Jesus, to help us make the evolutionary step forward so we become aware of the truth of our real nature. Hammer (2004: 394–395) finds that while different channeled messages have different emphases and narratives, all conform to the story of falling into a spiritual sleep and awakening to our true divinity. This narrative is well-known to those participating in the new spiritualities.

Bridge of Self Help

The hundreds of spiritual self-help books based on channeled wisdom form a bridge from esoteric communities (where the Course and Seth texts are well-known) to the wider culture. Most significant was M. Scott Peck's (1978) *The Road Less Travelled*, which drew on Course themes and alerted publishers to the commercial value of spiritual self-help literature. Marianne Williamson's *A Return to Love* (1992) and Gerald Jampolsky's (1979) *Love Is Letting Go of Fear*

(co-written with Thetford) were the first two self-help texts based wholly on the Course, and they have been bestsellers. Louise Hay's (1984) *You Can Heal Your Life*, based partly on the Course, is a perennial bestseller and has been translated into a dozen languages. Since the 1990s, new channeled books have emerged. The *Conversations with God* books by Neale Donald Walsch, which appeared almost yearly in the decade after 1995, share much with Course ontology, quote from the Course, and claim to be channeled material on a par with the Course. As noted above, Gary Renard's *The Disappearance of the Universe* (2004) adds a new strand to eschatological themes. Another best-selling channeled self-help book, *The Power of Now* (2004) by Eckhart Tolle, draws on Course and Seth themes and has also been translated into many languages. Over the last five years, the teaching of Tolle and others has found a new clientele through DVDs offering help in the nurture of children, pets, and horses. Some DVDs teach a combination of elements of Buddhism, Vedantic Hinduism, tai chi, and the Course and Seth material (for example, 'Riding from Within' on horsemanship). The voices of Seth and the Course are prominent in the new permutations.

Voices of Devotees

Hammer (2004: 342) notes that there has been an explosion of interest in channeling: "Today there are probably thousands of channels, conveying messages from a bewildering array of sources. Many have only a local audience." In the last decade, however, websites have given them a worldwide audience. Michael Reccia from Lancashire, for example, channels an entity called Joseph, a "highly evolved spirit guide who is deeply worried about the fate of mankind and returns to channel important spiritual information from higher realms" (www.michaelandjane.co.uk). Reccia writes that he "believes the true importance of spirit communication is not simply to prove evidence of life after death but to provide a blueprint for a better life and make a difference to this world." Another website, www.heartcirclenetwork.com, offers "group channeling sessions, short personal readings for guests channeling the entity Kryon, and a Circle of the Heart eleven week channeling course which teaches how to become a channel using techniques such as guided visualizations, connecting to your Higher Self, automatic writing and personal life coaching."⁴

4 For more, see for example, [www.talkingtospirit.com/how to channel.html](http://www.talkingtospirit.com/how%20to%20channel.html); www.wikihow.com/Channel; www.buzzle.com/articles/how-to-channel-spirit-guides-by-automatic-writing.html; and www.ehow.com/how_2246496_channel-spirits.html.

The influence of the Course and the Seth texts continues. Conversations with those who practice channeling, either as part of their daily meditation or to receive guidance at special times, often feature references to *A Course in Miracles* or the Seth texts. One informant spoke of her daily channeling of the angel Gabriel. Messages that she wrote down each day validated *A Course in Miracles* and gave her new confidence after a period in which she had lost her job and home. I have also encountered antipathy towards the teaching of *A Course in Miracles*. There is discomfort that the Course uses Christian vocabulary and male language (in describing universal oneness as being part of the 'Sonship'). Some speak of disagreement with Course teaching, feeling it does not conform to the norm of New Age spiritualities as described above. This in itself points to lines of demarcation within the minds of devotees and suggests a degree of definition (or orthodoxy?) within new spiritualities.

As one informant said, "The Course is monotheistic, something I could never be. I believe I create my own reality. I suppose I am polytheistic if you use such terms—each person is God and creates his own reality, chooses his parents and so forth." Another respondent wrote, "I enjoy a personal spirituality, individualism. I reject all outside authority unless it feels right for me." When I asked if he knew of the Seth texts, he responded positively. Still another found the Course too prescriptive: "The *Workbook* of the Course was too directive for me; I don't need a book or scripture to tell me what to think during each hour of the day. I have learned to trust my intuition and my Higher Self." I have not encountered negative comments about the Seth material from Course devotees. This may reflect Course teaching that all paths lead to God and one must choose the one right for oneself. If devotees are inclined to articulate metaphysical beliefs, they might say, like the above informant, that they are polytheists: "Each of us is God. Subjective reality precedes and creates objective reality. My problem with the Course is that for me material reality exists. We create it, but still it exists as much as one's mind exists."

When I have asked why devotees were drawn to channeling, I have received a variety of answers. A common theme is the loss of faith in various metanarratives—democratic ideals, socialism, traditional religion, material progress, the hope of science and technology. This loss of faith is one of the motivations for reaching out to an entity beyond the five senses. Tension continues between those willing to receive teaching from outside the self and those who rely on individual experience as proof of spiritual reality. Anecdotal evidence suggests that it is experience that authenticates a message rather than the opposite. Rightly or wrongly, the Course is often seen as prescriptive and

authoritative and the Seth texts as encouraging an epistemology of individual experience. Yet the Course conforms in the most radical way to Bloom's teaching on the interconnectedness of all reality. The point is that, forty years on, the ideas found in the Course and Seth texts continue to influence a new generation of seekers.

Channeling: The Cinderella of New Age Spiritualities?

Rereading Ferguson's manifesto, *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, recently, I was struck by the correlation between its themes and those of Alice Bailey and the Seth texts. So it is surprising that neither Bailey nor channeling is mentioned by Ferguson. She writes in quasi-scientific language and may have felt embarrassed to include references to the channeling of ascended entities. Likewise, Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, in their report of a research project in Kendal, used a questionnaire listing possible spiritual activities to be filled in to determine what forms of spirituality were being practised in Kendal. They spread a wide net of suggested spiritual activities that included art therapy, chiropractic, counselling, nutritional therapy, and osteopathy, but not channeling (Heelas and Woodhead 2005: 156–157). Heelas (1996: 45) also points to Ferguson's lack of interest in Bailey and Theosophy as proof that channeling is no longer significant; the reason may be that Heelas's focus has been on the equally important this-worldly, prosperity-conscious aspect of New Age spiritualities. Yet one feels something important has been left out.

M. Scott Peck, author of the popular *The Road Less Travelled* (1978), drew on themes and vocabulary from the Course, which he had recently studied, and he paraphrased passages from it. The book is laden with footnotes but contains no acknowledgement of the Course, and in subsequent books Peck attacked it. Perhaps, like Schucman, he was embarrassed to acknowledge a channeled source.

Since the turn of the millennium and the proliferation of websites offering channeling instruction, the practice of channeling is now open to anyone. Just as the sixteenth century Reformation allowed ordinary people to read and interpret the Christian scriptures free from the mediation of priests and church, so anyone now can channel, and all are encouraged to do so. Given the multitude of new intentional and spontaneous channeled messages emerging, further research is required to see if Bloom's orthodoxy persists, if a new 'scaffolding' (or what Hammer calls 'theology') is emerging, or if New Age spiritualities have now become the hotchpotch of popular mythology.

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Individual Power, Cultural Constraints

Israeli Channeling in Global Context

Adam Klin-Oron

The Doctors Have Landed

Haya Levy was bedridden with a slipped disc when the extraterrestrial doctors visited her for the first time. They came “out of the wall” (Arbel 2004: 50), after she had lain in excruciating pain for a dozen hours, and reassured her: “we are good aliens,” they said, “we have come to treat you.” This they did, during a week in which Levy felt “tingling, heat, cold, shivering and a lot of energy” (Nevo 2004). Her back no longer giving her trouble, Levy was still apprehensive when her benefactors asked her permission to open a medical clinic in her home; after all, she explained to them quite sensibly, no one would come to a clinic where the physicians and instruments were invisible. Once the clinic, ostensibly filled with highly advanced equipment, was completed, it would be just a few days before Levy would be proven wrong.

The aliens’ veracity was proven by Levy’s first patient, Adrian Dvir, a fellow resident of Rishon Lezion, a middle-class satellite town of Tel Aviv. The meeting made a strong impression on Dvir: in an empty room, he sat in front of Levy for half an hour, while she described the medical procedures that took place. Dvir himself felt as if he were being pricked, and currents seemed to run through his body. Out of the corner of his eye he could almost make out a gallery, not unlike the ones used in operating theaters, where entities were seated behind a table, some of whom descended to participate in the treatment (Dvir 1999: 26).

During this day, April 26, 1994, Adrian Dvir not only found a cure for his obesity, he found his vocation. He would dedicate the following decade to developing and spreading the practice of ‘ET Clinics’ throughout Israel. Dvir offered a specific brand of channeling, which I label ‘Healing with aliens’ channeling: emphasising physical healing, utilising technological jargon, and bowing to the superior authority and knowledge of the ‘physicians’, that is, the extraterrestrial entities. He was very successful in spreading this belief, becoming the unofficial leader of a group of over a dozen ‘healers with aliens’ (Eshed 2004; Eshet 2006: 103–105), publishing two books, which went through several printings, and making numerous media appearances.

However, upon Dvir's sudden death in 2004, this variant of channeling was rapidly eclipsed, both in media coverage and among Dvir's former followers, by the more 'standard' American variant, which I label 'Self-divinity channeling'. This latter variant, where a person claims that non-material beings speak through him (use him as a channel to bring information into the material world, hence the name), teaches an empowering creed of self-divinity, one concerned with well-being and personal success, and mostly lacking an interest in cosmology and metaphysics. For a while, both variants existed concurrently in Israel, and then one waned while the other bloomed. Why did one variant prevail while the other lost prominence?

Individualism and Channeling

Three factors were responsible for the entrance and spread of channeling into the Jewish, mostly Ashkenazi, middle and upper classes of Israel. The most important was the decline of collectivist Zionism as the dominant narrative among these classes and its replacement by an individualistic narrative of self-accountability and meritocracy—in essence, a neo-liberal creed (Almog 2002; Beit-Hallahmi 1992; Kimmerling 2001; Ram 2008; Soffer 2008). Channeling, with its emphasis on self-divinity, echoes and augments this individualistic narrative, claiming that any and all life events and circumstances are self-created (Brown 1997; Hanegraaff 1998; Riordan 1992). Thus, as the individualistic narrative spread among the middle and upper classes, more and more members of these classes found that channeling 'made sense'.

The second force was comprised of people who, for a variety of reasons, encountered channeled materials before they were widespread in Israel and found them compelling. For them, channeling rearranged their worldview into one that made sense both externally and internally, and they wanted to share the resultant sense of fulfillment and purpose with others. They became pioneers, even missionaries, arranging study groups, writing, and later, publishing texts and moonlighting as healers and counselors. While these agents shared many core beliefs of channeling, and especially its self-empowering message, they each had their idiosyncrasies, these spread among those exposed to each agent. Some of these agents were more effective in spreading the word than others, and none was more effective than Adrian Dvir, whose variant of channeling became, for a while, the dominant one.

The third force was the extraterrestrial craze (sparked, at least in part, by the approach of the year 2000) that spread around the world during the 1990s (Lewis 1995; Tumminia 2007), manifesting in Israel in an all-time peak in the

membership of the Israeli Center for the Study of UFOs and extensive media interest in UFO sightings (Eshet 2006).

However, the extraterrestrial craze was short-lived, and it waned when the millennium came and went without event. The Israeli public lost interest. In addition to this, Adrian Dvir passed away in June 2004. As channeling's self-empowering message is inherently resistant to institutionalisation, no attempts were made by Dvir to establish any form of church or dogma, and his 'disciples' went their separate ways, slowly abandoning the idiosyncrasies of Dvir's variant of channeling. The first factor, however, remained, and now, agents who adhered to the more individualistic variant of channeling and emphasised personal spiritual growth rather than contact with extraterrestrials and medical procedures were more successful. The global—in reality, American—version of channeling asserted itself as the dominant variant.

To substantiate this thesis, I will present both variants of channeling, highlighting their similarities and differences, and then explain why the characteristics of Self-divinity channeling made it, in the long run, more successful than Healing with aliens channeling.

Two Variants of Channeling: Self-Divinity Channeling: First and Second Stage

On September 9, 1963, science fiction author Jane Roberts sat down to write in the living room of her home in Elmira, New York.¹ Suddenly, she felt “a fantastic avalanche of radical new ideas burst into my head with tremendous force, as if my skull were some sort of receiving station” (Roberts 1970). When she came to her senses, she found before her an essay entitled “The Physical Universe As Idea Construction.” She knew her hands had written the text, but felt it was not her own. Three months later, on December 15, Roberts—not without apprehension—let the alleged author take possession of her body, and Seth, a disembodied, multifaceted entity, spoke through her for the first time. Hundreds of sessions followed, and these were eventually collected into *The Seth Material*, published in 1970. Nine more books followed, and while they sold well, neither were they bestsellers nor did they gain much public attention. This was to change in 1987, when Roberts's brand of channeling became an American sensation with the release of Shirley MacLaine's ABC miniseries, *Out on a*

¹ As will become clear later on, the choice to present Self-divinity channeling through the story of an American (rather than Israeli) channel is intentional.

Limb, which documented, among MacLaine's other experiences, a session with channel Kevin Ryerson. Channeling had come of age, reaching prime-time television.²

Within a few years, the self-help section of bookstores was bursting with channeled books, ostensibly written by Light Beings, Ancient Masters, Atlantan Warriors, Jesus, The Pleiadians, and many other entities (Albanese 2007; Brown 1997). While in many respects these newly successful channeled texts of the second stage followed Roberts's first stage model of channeling in both framework and content, my claim is that a few important changes took place (Hanegraaff 1998; Riordan 1992). The interest in metaphysics in the first stage—prolonged discussions about the nature of the universe, time, the soul, light beings, and more—is absent from the second stage, in which focus has shifted to quotidian life—achieving success and happiness here and now. This also brings about a much lighter style of writing that is easier to follow and produces shorter texts. In essence, the world-affirming and exoteric nature of channeling, already present during the first stage, became very salient during the second stage.

However, both stages reached Israel at the same time, during the 1990s: the first channeled text translated into Hebrew was Sanaya Roman's *Living with Joy*, originally published in English in 1986, and published in Israel in 1994 (the same year of Adrian Dvir's revelation). The same year saw the publication in Hebrew of Jane Roberts's *The Seth Material*. The books were published in English sixteen years apart, but for the Israeli audience, the two stages were one and the same.³ Thus, I will describe the characteristics of Israeli self-divinity channeling without distinguishing between these stages.

Characteristics of Channeling: Framework and Content

We now turn to a discussion of the characteristics of Israeli channeling in general and of each variant. I distinguish between characteristics pertaining to framework, the setting and character of channeling sessions, and characteristics

2 *Out on a Limb* was based on MacLaine's best-selling book published in 1983; the channel JZ Knight appeared on *The Merv Griffin Show* in 1985. The ABC mini-series should be seen as the apogee of the legitimisation of channeling rather than as its instigating event. See Hugh Urban's contribution to this volume for a full exploration of early channeling.

3 While Sanaya Roman started studying channeling because she read Jane Roberts's books (Roman and Packer 1989: 127–130), I often heard Israeli channels claim that Roman was the one that influenced Roberts.

related to content, the materials written or dictated. I will describe the common denominator in each characteristic, and then the variants unique to Healing with aliens channeling and to Self-divinity channeling, supplying specific examples when necessary.⁴

Framework Characteristics: Demographics—Middle-class, Middle-aged, Ashkenazi Women

The most crucial characteristic of contemporary channels in Israel is how normal and mainstream their lives are. In stark opposition to most channels from the 1950s to the 1980s (Albanese 2007; Bjorling 1992; Sutcliffe 2002), and most UFO contactees from the 1950s to this day (Bjorling 1992; Eshet 2006; Lewis 1995; Tumminia 2007), they do not live on the margins of society, do not relocate to remote geographical regions, do not live in communes or initiate churches. They live in the suburbs, go to the parents on holidays, raise families—and channel.

Women dominate the channeling field in Israel, as they do elsewhere (Brown 1997; Wessinger 1993): in the inaugural Israeli Channeling conference, out of the one hundred fifty attendees of the closing plenary session, only ten were men. Out of the thirty-eight published channels in Israel, twenty-nine are women.⁵ Men were often in the forefront of Israel channeling⁶—the first original Israeli channeled book, *Every End a New Beginning*, was published by Jacob Roth in 1994; Adrian Dvir led the Healing with aliens variant for almost a decade; Yaron Zafran opened the first public course teaching channeling in 1997—but, quantitatively, they have always been the minority. In 2000, of the thirty Healing with aliens channels Eshet (2006: 106) located in her study, twenty were women. I discuss this female predominance later in the chapter.

Most channels are from the middle and upper-middle classes, living in middle-class neighborhoods, towns, and suburbs. Some manage to earn well

4 Where the source of the example is publicly available—a book, a lecture, a website—full names are provided. Where the example originates in an interview or personal communication, first-name pseudonyms are used. Unless otherwise stated, all examples were originally in Hebrew, and the translations are my own.

5 I have managed to locate eighty-three channeled books written and published in Israel, but the actual number is probably closer to one hundred: most channeled books are self-published and often do not appear in the catalogue of any library or in most bookstores.

6 It is interesting to note that this was not the case in the USA, neither in the first nor second stages of Self-divinity channeling.

in their channeling profession, but not all—and almost none are made wealthy by it. They are either supported by family members, a spouse, or an inheritance; by funds accumulated during a previous profession; or by continued work in a second profession; Adrian Dvir, for instance, was a computer engineer (Eshet 2006: 107).

Channels usually belong to the dominant ethnic group in Israel, Ashkenazi Jews. They usually have an undergraduate (BA) or graduate (MA) level education.⁷ They are also mostly secular (Ruah-Midbar and Klin-Oron 2010). Finally, most are middle aged, married (or, less often, divorced), and have children.⁸

Demographically, I found no difference between channels of both variants.

Activity: One-on-one Sessions, Channeling Messages, and Channeling Courses

Channels conduct three main activities: private, one-on-one sessions with clients; channeling messages in verbal or book form; and courses that teach others to channel. Channeling is very easy to accomplish and maintain: unlike many other forms of possession (Bourguignon 1976; Boddy 1994; Lewis 2003), entering a channeling trance is described as instantaneous, as well as intentional. Adrian Dvir, for instance, would sit in front of his computer, and type:

Adrian: Channeling, please.

Aliens: We are already channeling. (Dvir 1999: 190)

One-on-one channeling sessions take place in the private home of the channel, usually in a designated room, sometimes adorned with a picture or statue or a few New Age-themed products (such as crystals or drawings of angels) but often rather bare (Zaidman 2003).

As a rule, channeling sessions (public or private) begin and end without ceremony or rituals: rarely a short personal prayer will be recited, but usually the

7 While my emphasis is on the channels themselves, these demographics seem to hold true for their audience as well. For instance, in a public session where a Native American chief was channeled, the channel explained she (or, rather, the chief) will speak in English, and asked those who needed Hebrew translation to move to the front seats, where an aide sat. Out of sixty audience members, only four moved.

8 It should be noted that much of the Israeli New Age scene is populated by people in their 20s and 30s, often graduates of a popular Israeli custom: a post-army trip to the Far East, especially India. Channels are usually from an older generation.

channel will take a few deep breaths, sometimes close her eyes, and begin. Channeling also lacks paraphernalia: no deck of cards, no crystals, no holy texts, no special garments. Additionally, the channel will hardly use her body in the process of channeling, although sometimes she will perform hand gestures. The client is also inert physically, sitting or lying down in front of the channel (Eshet 2006: 140). Finally, there are no sacred times: activities usually take place during the evenings, so working people can attend, but any evening will do, and specific days of the week, the month, or the year are not more or less holy, and thus appropriate for channeling, than others.

Channeling messages and course teaching are identical, in their framework characteristics, in the two variants. This is not the case for most one-on-one sessions.

Activity, Healing with Aliens: Subservience to the Aliens

With the exception of past regression sessions (see below), Healing with aliens channels interact less with the client. The client will enter the clinic, describe her problem, and then lie down on a massage table, usually with eyes closed. The channel will stand over her, arms stretched, palms down, moving—or, rather, moved by the aliens—to another position or moving her arms from time to time. The cause of the problem is explained by the aliens to the channel, and she explains it to the patient. The patient is encouraged to share her physical sensations, often described as tingling and pricks in the afflicted area, and mental images, with the channel providing the interpretation. However, even this minimal active participation on the patient's part is optional, as channel Haggai Katz demonstrates:

Patient: 13 years ago I had 3 hernia operations [...] lately I have been in so much pain, I have trouble passing urine.

H.K.: The patient falls asleep after a few minutes of alien treatment. I started feeling, and my hands started moving automatically, and a strong current came out of them. With my third eye, I saw a plate-sized object in the crotch area. I asked what it was, and Gideon from the alien team answered.

Gideon: It's a parasite from another dimension [...it's been there] for 13 years.

H.K: What are you doing with it?

Gideon: We are taking it apart. It is very strong and stubborn [...it] caused the hernias, and very soon, if we wouldn't have taken it out, could have caused infertility!

H.K: Thank you very much.

[The patient woke up and went to the lavatory, and] after a few minutes came back and said to me:

Patient: Listen, you won't believe this, this is the first time since the onset of the inflammation that that I've peed without any pain at all, I still can't believe what happened here, I have no logical explanation but thank you Haggai.⁹

As can be seen, almost all of the interactions are taking place in an internal dialogue between the channel and the aliens. The patient has been sleeping throughout the whole process: he just describes the problem at the beginning of the session and its disappearance at its end. Even when the patient is more active, taking part in describing the aliens' actions, for instance, it is the aliens themselves who explain *why* they are performing these procedures, and they explain this to the channel, not the patient.

Sometimes, no explanations are provided during the session: Adrian Dvir, for instance, had difficulties with mental channeling, and he used automatic writing much more often. This meant that in many of his sessions, both he and his patients would describe physical sensations and mental images if they had any, but neither knew exactly what was going on. Only after the treatment was over would Dvir sit by his computer and receive explanations.

Activity, Self-divinity: The Spiritual Talking Cure

In essence, a self-divinity channel talks with her clients, either as herself or, more often, as the entity she is channeling. This is done with the two of them sitting across from one another. Almost always, some form of past regression is applied (see below). A client will enter, describe her problems, and be treated for them in an interactive process: questions are asked and answered, and guided meditation is usually applied. The patient is encouraged to take responsibility and is almost always involved in the healing process: the channel, or the entity she is channeling, will describe the source of the malady, but, at the very least, wait for confirmation from the client. Usually, much more is expected: the client takes an active part in describing

⁹ <http://www.etclinic.com/80192/%D7%93%D7%9C%D7%A7%D7%AA-%D7%A9%D7%A0%D7%A2%D7%9C%D7%9E%D7%94>, in Hebrew, describing a session taking place May 15, 2002. Accessed 30/12/2010 (no longer online).

what she is seeing at the moment, how she feels about it, and how she interprets these experiences.

The process is very verbal, with both sides contributing information. Rarely, energy is channeled through from the entity (or entities) to the client, with or without laying on of hands, but otherwise, no physical gestures are involved.

Peer Support: From Group to Individual Action

The process of becoming a channel, often called 'opening to channel' (Roman and Packer 1989), usually involves studying in a New Age class of some sort: tarot reading, Reiki, energy healing, and so on. However, most active channels started channeling only after this class ended, and even if this was not the case, they *left* the group once they started channeling. The group is where channels-to-be were exposed to the New Age culture, and where they internalised its ideals. Often, they kept on studying on their own, mostly through reading New Age books. and then, one day, usually in their own homes, started to channel. Once this had occurred, the channel performed channeling activities on his own, with clients or an audience, but not with colleagues.

However, beyond these common grounds, this is probably the framework characteristic where the two variants differ the most. This is exemplified by another common way for people to 'open to channel': visiting a channel as a client, and then gradually beginning to channel on your own (the two paths may co-occur). However, while Self-divinity channels 'break away' from their mentors at this stage, Healing with aliens channels maintain contact and join a larger group of channels.

Peer Support, Healing with Aliens: Power in Numbers

While Healing with aliens channels never quite coalesced into a movement, they did form a loose group, about forty people strong during the 2002–2004 peak, with Adrian Dvir at its hub. Aside from setting up meetings, Dvir also 'initiated' new channels into the group.

For instance, when Avi Farag was taught how to properly channel with aliens, Dvir (2001: 162) invited his colleague, Tovi Baary, to "help Avi enter the business." The reason, he explicitly writes, is to help the new recruit pass the first stages in a supporting environment, where his experiences are not ridiculed.

Peer Support, Self-divinity: The Power of the Self

Self-divinity channels work on their own—they seek an audience or clients, but not colleagues.¹⁰ Not only are their activities mastered solely by them, with an occasional aide taking care of administration, but never of planning or content, but in the rare cases in which circumstances bring channels together, no ongoing joint ventures emerge. Such circumstances were mostly the fifteen or so conferences dedicated to channeling from 2004 onwards. These festivals lacked group activities and mostly offered lectures and workshops, usually forty-five minutes in length, offered by individual channels, who treated the occasion as an opportunity to advertise their trade. Most channels did not even bother attending the workshops of other channels, but only arrived in time for their own activity, after which they left the venue. The public spaces in these venues, mostly coffee shops and lounges, were always much emptier and less lively than the lecture halls.

Content Characteristics: Aim: Utilitarian Aid

The aim of channeling is *not*, with very few exceptions, to contact the divine or to bring cosmic information into this world, in tune with the shift from first to second stage channeling described above. Channels aim to help their clients with their problems, heal their bodies or their minds; theirs is, above all else, a professional ethos. As Adi says: “[Channeling] heals, mends your deficiencies. You really learn to achieve better goals in life. It’s completely spiritual, but it’s also down-to-earth.” Or as Gaia Levy wrote: “[I want] to help others see things from a higher perspective, and guide them to a path suitable to them.”¹¹

This emphasis on being in service of their clientele also extends to the entities, who only wish to cure, guide, and help people. However, Healing with aliens entities also have further motives, as Haggai Katz explains:

The purpose of the aliens’ [visits] to Earth is to create a better life in as many aspects of living as possible, though bringing real knowledge and

10 The only Israeli exception I am aware of is the ‘Messages from the Valley’ (www.messarim.co.il) project, a website with many channeled messages, some of which were collected into a book in 2010. The site is operated by two channels, Mira Cohen and Daniel Norel, and the identity of the channel responsible for each message is not given.

11 http://www.ima-adama.co.il/forums/Forum_Message.asp?MessageId=41029, accessed 21/11/2014.

aid [and performing] medical procedures [...] Their interest in us is to gather information about us, as we [humans] study animals or ancient cultures.

Aside from this difference between the two variants, the other major difference is the ways by which channels achieve this goal of aid. Healing with aliens channels, as mentioned, do so mostly through claims to cure physical ailments with bodily, surgical interventions; Self-divinity channels do so through claims to assist in psychological problems.

Authority: Personal Accountability

While the two variants differ in the extent of responsibility, authority, and agency they place upon the individual, both agree that these are substantial: a person needs to take charge of his own life. People who rely on outside authority—religious institutions, family, therapists, the community, or even the channeled entities or the channels themselves—are regarded with contempt, and often compared to young children. As Adrian Dvir (1999: 99) writes:

I've encountered the improper phenomenon of people who develop a strong dependency on the [spirit] guides. With every step they need to make, they ask the guides, and, in effect, transfer the control over their lives to outside elements [...These are] people who find it difficult to handle everyday difficulties. Looking for dependence on a superior element (much like a child's dependency upon his parents) partially releases them from personal responsibility.

Like many other channels, Adi, who channeled first in the Healing with aliens variant, then in the Self-divinity one, told me that while she is eager to help people and accept them as clients, if she finds a person is coming back to her over and over again, she becomes apprehensive. She is not interested in replacing other forms of authority in the clients' lives—"up to now her husband told her what to do, and now it's my turn?" The clients need to learn to take responsibility for their own lives, and the best method is to learn to channel themselves.

This objection to external authority often takes the form of oppositions to institutionalised religion. We have already seen that channeling lacks traditional religious institutions, including a church, rituals, holy texts, sacred times and places. All of these are regarded as external devices a fully-grown person

should not require. Ilan Aviv, a prominent figure in the Self-divinity variant, channels a message from the angels:¹²

My message to all religions is clear: remove your control and reveal the truth to all men as they are all created in His image which is an infinity of light, freedom and love. Inflexible rules are for those who fear this freedom. And for rulers, the time has come for peace and love—every man doing whatever is good in his own eyes.

Aviv is very clear about where all political power should be located: within the individual only. Man is God, and who can tell God what to do? Any other forms of distribution of power stem from the fear of some people of controlling their own lives, and the greed of others to take this control. In the same vein, channels (of both variants) are strongly opposed to predicting the future—it takes away from a person's agency, making her believe her future is pre-determined, while it is completely open to her choices. In other words, "Channeling is not meant to predict the future, but to provide guidance" (Tomer 2009: 137).¹³

However, while both variants agree that self-empowerment and self-agency are crucial, they disagree most widely as to the extent to which a person can, and should, rely only on himself.

Authority, Healing with Aliens: A Tripartite Hierarchy

While a person is responsible for a substantial part of what takes place in his life, forces beyond his control certainly affect him. Mostly, these are alien forces: extraterrestrial parasites might have infected him; sinister aliens may have kidnapped him in the past (of this life or in a previous incarnation) and caused physical and mental traumas. Or he may be affected by something much more mundane, like a physical ailment that has no significant cause. In general, in contrast to Self divinity channels, Healing with aliens channels do not ascribe meaning to every event.

With the exception of past life regression sessions (see below), when a client visits a Healing with aliens channel, there is a good chance that no self-awareness work will be required: the aliens, working through the channel, will locate the cause of the problem and attempt to cure it. They will remove

¹² <http://www.ahavana.co.il/articles/god.htm>, accessed 30/12/2010 (no longer online).

¹³ Orit Ish Yemini Tomer is a Self divinity channel who published *Spot of Light* in 2009.

parasites, clean clogged arteries, transplant artificial organs or cells, and so on (Dvir 1999: 74–76; Dvir 2001: 405, 440).

There is a tripartite hierarchy here: at the bottom is the patient. Neither does he know the cause of his problem, nor can he solve it. Above him is the channel, who can see, either with extrasensory perception or with the help of the aliens, the cause of the problem, and who is the tool through which it is solved. Not everyone can become a channel—“according to the aliens, about a quarter of the world’s population have the potential for extrasensory perception” (Dvir 1999: 107)—so the channels have a sense of being uniquely gifted. But yet above them—far above—are the aliens. The aliens diagnose, offer a course of treatment, and have the technology and know-how required to perform the necessary procedures. The channel need not, and often cannot, understand these procedures, although the aliens may be kind enough to try and explain them to him. They do not, however, offer explanations to the patient, instead giving only a brief diagnosis and an even briefer prognosis.

There is an exception to this rule: when the patient is gifted with extrasensory perception of his own and claims to be able to see the aliens, he may be raised to the level of the channel and asked to take a more active interest in his treatment. The top rung, however, cannot be reached: it is the aliens who treat the patient, with alien technology.

Authority, Self-divinity: An Egalitarian Creed

Self-divinity channeling’s main maxim is that a person creates any and all aspects of his life. Thus, everything that happens to person is, in a sense, an extension of his personality, and has a meaning that can, and should, be deciphered. Every person’s core essence is divine, and whether he chooses to act with insight and self-awareness, or out of blindness and misplaced interests, the power of this core essence is all consuming: it creates all circumstances of his current life, as well as past and future incarnations. In the words of a prominent Jerusalem channel, “all that you can bring to mind, as you already know, is yours.” Daniel Norel and Mira Cohen channel the famous Jewish kabbalist, the Ari (Rabbi Isaac Luria):¹⁴

We deeply believe we are [our] body, we are [our] money, we are [our] religion and that God exists somewhere far up in the clouds and we

14 It is rather obvious from this text that Norel and Cohen either do not know the historical Luria (1534–1572) and his teachings, or do not care. This may reflect their secular background.

should pray to him to get what we seek. Wrong!!!! You shouldn't pray to him, you should pray to yourselves, beg, ask, get down on your knees, persuade yourselves to listen to yourselves, bless and give yourselves plenty of love, good, joy and happiness.¹⁵

An interaction with a Self-divinity channel still involves three parties, the entity being channeled, the channel, and the client, but there is no overt authority hierarchy. All three parties are divine—they just differ in self-knowledge of their own divinity. This is also the source of a great democratisation of religious authority: Self-divinity channels claim that everyone can channel. The title of Sara Altman's fifth channeled book, published in 2009, is *Everyone Can Channel God*, a unanimous sentiment among Self-divinity channels in Israel. While there may be covert power structures beneath the surface of a channeling session, the ethos remains strongly egalitarian.

This lack of overt hierarchy means that the channel regards both the entity and the client as partners. Channeling always commences on the channel's request; it is never forced upon her by the entity. In a channeling course I attended, the guide kept emphasising that the goal is not to obey the entities—"there's no coercion in the light"—but, rather, to become "a team, working together: [...] he guides you and you guide him." Likewise with the client, as Adi emphasises: "Everyone who comes to me [...] knows I expect the patient to take full responsibility. [...] There's no point [...] in treating him] if he doesn't do consciousness work."

To summarise this crucial point: as we create our own reality, Self-divinity channels see their goal as helping people to, first, realise why they create the specific reality they are in; second, understand what reality they would like to actually live in; and, finally, go about creating this reality. This requires what is referred to above as "consciousness work"—bringing all aspects of one's self to the light of consciousness, leaving none in the murky depths of the unconscious, where they can cause harm. Mostly, channels find these depths to lie not in childhood, but in past incarnations—to which we now turn.

Past Life Regression: Looking Way, Way Back

Virtually all channels believe that each person has a unique and everlasting essence—usually called a 'soul'—and that this essence has been, and will be,

¹⁵ <http://www.messarim.co.il/Index.asp?ArticleID=107&CategoryID=105&Page=1>, accessed 11/10/2007 (no longer online).

incarnate in many lives. It is claimed that past incarnations can leave scars, which this essence carries into its following lives. As Gil, a prominent Self-divinity channel, told me: "Freud was right in saying that what you don't know harms you; but he didn't go far enough: he should have gone past childhood, and into past lives." Channels often guide their clients through past life regression meditation sessions (known as 'reincarnation therapy'; see Chodorow 1997; Hanegraaff 1998: 262–275, 475–479; Utay and Miller 2006), with the purpose of bringing these past traumas into conscious light, often reenacting the trauma in order to resolve it. In this way, they claim, the suffering will cease.

Lila Barzesky shares such a session on her website.¹⁶ The Divinity, the entity Barzesky is channeling, tries to help Ruth understand why she is unhappy, alone, and unable to enjoy music. Ruth is instructed to go to the source of the feeling, and finds herself in a room, by a piano. She is happy there. She now recalls she is a young Jewish girl, and it is the second world war. Her family must escape the Nazis, but she likes to play so much she begs for five more minutes by the piano—and thus, her whole family is caught and eventually killed. Her sense of guilt gets associated with music and joy. The Divinity guides Ruth through a reenactment: she plays the piano, and her whole family gathers around. She plays for them, they are transfixed by joy, and they join her in playing. They all understand their fate is inevitable, and they state that Ruth is not the one responsible. The Divinity instructs her to "release her guilt because now she knows," and that she is to "accept, accept, accept, accept herself." Eventually, Ruth says, "[Now, finally,] I want to shout out that I'm important, that I'm worthy!"

Past Life Regression: Is There Anything But Me?

Past life regression sessions occur in both the Healing with aliens and Self-divinity variants, and they are very similar in content. There are two major differences—first, in the proportion such sessions take of the whole treatment. Within Self-divinity channeling, virtually every course of one-on-one treatment will involve at least one past life regression session—and, often, the lion's share of the whole treatment will be such undertakings. Self-divinity channels believe that much of what the patient doesn't know about herself lies in her past incarnations, and all aspects of one's self have to be raised to consciousness, so that the *actual* control the patient has over her life is also *intentional* control.

16 <http://www.lailabr.com/ruthy.htm>, accessed 30/12/2010 (no longer online).

With Healing with aliens channeling, this is not the case—many treatments, whether they take one meeting or more, will not involve past life regression sessions. If the problem is physical in nature, even if it originated in a physical trauma incurred during a previous incarnation, the damage can be fixed by the aliens, and no consciousness work is required. Even if past life regressions are involved—usually, when the problem is also psychological in nature, for instance, depression—they will be augmented by physical healing sessions, where the patient again assumes a passive role.

This leads us to the second difference: the purpose of past incarnations. With Healing with aliens channels, the purpose is often left obscure—the traumas of past incarnations cause problems in the current incarnation, the problems should be fixed, and that's that. No clear purpose for the trauma or the problems is given. Past life regression is applied to locate the traumatic event, not the cause or purpose of this event.

This is never the case with Self-divinity channels. The purpose of incarnations is to bring the divine potential of each person's essence to its full flowering: we incarnate in order to learn valuable lessons. The curriculum is self-determined: between incarnations, the essence decides what lessons it is in need of at the moment, and plots the course of its coming incarnation—whether it will be male or female; wealthy or poor; live to an old age or die young. Having been born, these plots are forgotten—the essence does not know its true nature, only its physical existence—although with proper self-awareness techniques (mostly meditation) the plots can be recalled. Thus, learning can occur via recalling the purpose of past traumas, without having to live through the lengthy, and often painful, lessons. In other words, past life regression is applied in order to find—and cure—not only the traumatic events, but also the reason one inflicted such an event on one's self in the first place.

Entities: When JFK and Jesus Met the Central Computer

There is a wide array of channeled entities, and channels from both variants sample from the whole gamut: Healing with aliens channels may occasionally channel angels, Moses, or Jesus, and many Self-divinity channels also channel aliens (although rarely alien physicians). In both cases, exclusivity is rarely maintained: different entities are channeled during different periods in life, and even during the same period, but for different purposes. In his first book (1999), summarising five years of channeling, Adrian Dvir reports channeling with at least two dozen alien physicians, as well as Moses, Elijah, Jesus, Itzhak Rabin, John F. Kennedy, and the Central Computer on an alien mothership.

This is not an especially extensive list for channels, nor is it unique that Dvir does not supply any details about the nature of most of these entities, save the alien physicians (see below).

Finally, most channels agree that the criterion by which an entity is to be measured is utilitarian: “are his intentions good or bad, and can he help us in our everyday life and guide us?” (Dvir 1999: 85). Entities are not meant to be friends or companions, nor does the channel aim to bathe in their divine light, and certainly not to fear or revere them—they are engaged in a professional relationship. If the channel (and her clients) finds this relationship beneficial, it will continue; if not, it will be terminated.

This being said, the differences between the entities in the two variants outweigh the similarities.

Entities, Healing with Aliens: The Good, the Bad, and the Hippie Doctor

Most entities in this variant are, unsurprisingly, aliens. Sometimes an occasional spirit (that is, deceased human), such as “Michael, the naked hippie doctor” (Dvir 1999: 92), will join the treatment, but mostly, the physicians will be humanoid aliens from many different races. “Some are 70 centimeters tall, some measure up to 4 meters. The faces and eyes come in a variety of shapes,” as do the skin texture and the clothes (Dvir 1999: 110). They come from known star systems—Sirius, Alpha Centauri, the Virgo constellation—as well as planets with unfamiliar names like ‘Eezek’ or ‘Million 4’ (Dvir 1999: 137, 139). The aliens are invisible to regular vision, and can only be seen with extrasensory perception (often called ‘the third eye’), because they exist outside of three dimensional space, in a “parallel dimension” or the “fourth, fifth and sixth dimensions” (Dvir 1999: 107).

The most distinct feature of the aliens is that they are not, in any form or manner, divine. They may not exist in our three material dimensions, but their dimensions are just as material—the aliens are very much incarnate, with physical bodies. More than this: they are quite mundane. They have spouses and children back home, attend medical conferences, and are part of a vast bureaucracy, with supervisors, specialists, apprentices, and various technicians (Dvir 1999: 90, 110–112, 122). The aliens, in short, are far more advanced than us technologically, but not spiritually or even intellectually.

Furthermore, while the aliens channels choose to keep in contact with are always benevolent—if sometimes impolite and short-tempered—there are also malevolent aliens who deride and harm humans. These malevolent aliens may

implant chips in humans' brains or kidnap them in the night and experiment on them (Dvir 1999: 150–158; Dvir 2001: 362–364). The benevolent aliens have formed powerful interstellar alliances and are attempting to police and control the malevolent aliens, as they “only want to help you [humans]” and “all we do, we do for your own good” (Dvir 1999: 178).

Entities, Self-divinity: The Better

This variant's entities share two common features: they are non-carnate (in any dimension) and are spiritually advanced. As Ilan Aviv writes:

The Light Entities are consciousness levels higher than we are, who have finished the course of learning (or have never been in it), and have devoted themselves to the vocation of guidance, in order to escort humans on the process of growth. These light beings have the ability to acquire information more easily, as they are purer.¹⁷

The entities' “purity” is the result of their “having finished the course of learning”—not needing to incarnate any more. They are, in short, free of the shell of the flesh and its obscuring effect, allowing their divine essence to shine in its full glory. This allows them, says channel Ronit Biton, to provide “information untarnished by ego and manipulations, pure information.”¹⁸ They are always patient and understanding, good-natured and compassionate, wise and eager to help; as, channels will hasten to add, are we all, beneath the shell of the flesh.

An interesting by-product of the entities' perfection is their similarity: while some channels describe their relationship with an entity in very emotional terms (“deep love and personal trust” as Biton says of Ma'arag, the entity she channels most), the entities do not have distinguishing personal characteristics. The crucial upshot of this is that many channels *do not care whom they are channeling*.¹⁹ In interview after interview the channels emphasised the

17 http://www.ima-adama.co.il/channeling/channeling_ilan_aviv2_what_is_channeling.htm, accessed 21/11/2014.

18 In Anat Ben-Ari, 2007, “Trying to Help as Much as Possible,” *DerechHaOsher*. 66. At <http://www.ifeel.co.il/page/5245>, accessed 30/12/2010 (no longer online).

19 In this, I am in disagreement with most research on the subject to date (Brown 1997; Hanegraaff 1998; Hughes 1991; Riordan 1992).

importance of their messages and of the service they provide their clients, and did not care, or could not recall, the origin of most messages.²⁰

Metaphysics and the Immaterial World: This-worldly Enchantment

Both variants share the conviction that there is an immaterial aspect to this world, invisible to the eyes of the flesh. In a typical instance, speaking in front of a half-empty lecture hall, a channel stated that “it’s wonderful to see such a crowded room!,” and, in response to surprised looks from the audience, added, “all of the angels and guides and light beings are here as well.” For channels, both phenomenologically and ontologically, the world is full of invisible spiritual beings.

However, Self-divinity channels are, with a few exceptions,²¹ simply not interested in mapping out the realm of these beings. When one mentioned she talks with Angels, Cherubs, and Seraphs, I asked her what the differences among the three were; typically, she said she neither knew nor cared. If the transcendent aspect of *this* world is left uncharted, the existence of *other*, spiritual, realms is simply not discussed. Metaphysics and theology do not interest contemporary Israeli channels—if there is a re-enchantment of the world (Wexler 2000), it is expressed by suffusing quotidian, material life with the divine; not by exploring divine dimensions outside of the quotidian. The emphasis is on the here and now, as Sara Altman’s (2005: 73) channeled entities write: “Please, live your life and do not ponder what is to come.”

20 The pathways by which the different channels reached their vocation, and their progress within channeling, is a subject worth pursuing. For the moment, suffice it to say that this disregard for the messages’ progenitor was also reflected in the evolution of the entities channeled—quite often, a channel would ‘open to channel’ with the spirit of a deceased acquaintance, progress to an entity that was incarnate in the past, move on to a ‘light being’ that was never incarnate, and finally communicate with vaguely defined ‘guides’, often unnamed. “And slowly,” Shelly told me, “the guides changed: [the] spiritual guides with body and form [were replaced] by higher spiritual guides.”

21 Even the few references channels make to divine locations or periods—for example, the Garden of Eden, The Temple, The *Sephirot*—are metaphorical in nature: a visit to one’s Garden of Eden is a visit to one’s inner place of tranquility etc. The major exception in Israel is Zeev Aviraz, (<http://www.zeevaviraz.co.il/>), one of the country’s first, and its most prolific, published channels. Since 1994 he has been describing an ever-increasing mythology of universal proportions, revolving around a battle between light and darkness that has been raging for millennia.

The absence of interest in metaphysics and theology persists with Healing with channels aliens, though Adrian Dvir, specifically and idiosyncratically, was very much interested in the physical and social aspects of planets outside of Earth. He would often interrogate the aliens with whom he, as well as other channels, worked: where did they come from? What is their average life expectancy? How did they raise their children? Could their ships travel faster than light, and how? Do they reincarnate? (Dvir 1999: 118, 122, 303, 348–358; Dvir 2001: 118). Other Healing with aliens channels—those Dvir reports about in his books during the heyday of the phenomenon and the very few still operating today²²—were rarely interested in the aliens' home planets. The sole exception, perhaps, was Haya Levi, who, along with Dvir, reported having been physically flown to Sirius once, where they only visited a hotel at the local space port where, peculiarly enough, they were served a giant strawberry (Dvir 1999: 254–258).

The Two Variants in Israel: Rise of Both

The first Israeli New Age magazine,²³ a monthly titled *Consciousness*,²⁴ was published between 1984 and 1989. It covered a wide variety of subjects, including Spiritualism, Theosophy, kabbalah, tantra, Mesmerism, and hassidism. In issue 5, May 1985, there is a short article on a book called *A Message from another Dimension*—the first channeled text published in Israel.

This book, as well as the magazine, was published by the Israeli Society for the Development of Consciousness, a one-woman project of Gila Buyum, founded in 1984 and operating to this day.²⁵ *A Message from another Dimension* was written in English, but in Israel, by Menorah Charney, who channeled the

²² See for example: <http://www.haggaiatz.com/>, accessed 21/11/2014.

²³ During the 1950s and 1960s, the spiritual scene in Israel was comprised of a small circle of intellectuals interested in metaphysics, philosophy, and parapsychology. Led by Margot Klausner, a leading television and movie producer, they dedicated more and more of their meetings to séances (mostly of famous Zionist leaders) and Spiritualism, until in 1968 Klausner started publishing the monthly *Mystery World*, which lasted until 1972 (Eshed 2006). The subject matter, however, was closer to Spiritualism and parapsychology than to New Age themes (such as self-divinity).

²⁴ The Hebrew word *mooda'aoot* also means 'awareness'. From 1984 to 1985, the magazine was published under the name *Information Pages of the International Society for the Development of Consciousness*.

²⁵ See <http://www.oryada.com/eng.htm> for some details in English.

messages in her home from 1984 to 1985. As with Buyum during the 1980s, Charney's ties to Spiritualism and Theosophy (or, rather, Alice Bailey's Arcane School) led to a channeling still interested in metaphysics, and characterised by lengthy, dense, almost scholarly writing. But Charney already started to shift her focus towards the practical aspects of channeling—healing the mind and the body.

And so, first and second stage channeling reached Israel at the same time—metaphysics mixed with a utilitarian creed, rapidly becoming more and more simplified and easy to follow. Charney is typical of the way channeling began to spread, tentatively, in classes and group meetings in private houses, often led by Anglo-Saxon female immigrants to Israel, or native Israelis who visited the spiritual scene in the United States (as was the case with Buyum in 1981), England, or Australia. It was still practiced quietly, not because the knowledge was considered esoteric, but because of fear of social rebuke. And, indeed, Israel in the 1980s was, on the one hand, experiencing a significant increase in spiritual practices (Ariel 2010; Beit-Hallahmi 1992; Inbari 1999); but, on the other hand, many of these practices were considered bizarre, and even dangerous, by mainstream society (Beit-Hallahmi 1991; Beit-Hallahmi 1992)—the Israeli government even founded a committee to investigate “the cult phenomenon in Israel,” which operated between 1982 and 1987 (Beit-Hallahmi 1991; Zaidman and Sharot 1992).

As a result of this hostile atmosphere, early spirituality in Israel was not led by individual entrepreneurs, but rather by organisations and movements like Scientology, Transcendental Meditation, and Emin, groups that had people dedicated to the cause and resources from abroad and so were better equipped to withstand ostracism. Furthermore, the sacrifices required of spiritual seekers in Israel in the 1970s and 1980s often led them to cut their former social ties (if they were not from the artistic avant-garde; see Inbari 1999) and join a group dedicated completely to a spiritual creed and often following a harsh authority structure. Channeling, with its domestic orientation, complete rejection of authority structures, and hyper-individualism, could not flourish under these conditions.

However, the public uproar against ‘cults’ was, in retrospect, part of the death throes of Israeli collectivism in the middle and upper classes. Israeli economists were moving from the pseudo-socialism of an economy dominated by the state to neo-liberalism in the 1980s (Maman and Rosenhek 2007; Shalev 2000), and the middle and upper classes followed suit in the 1990s. The delicate balance between Zionism and democratic-liberalism shifted, and the individualistic motifs of the latter gained the upper hand in these classes (Almog 2002; Kimmerling 2001; Ram 2008). Psychotherapy prospered, and talk

of self-growth was everywhere: in 1975, there were 391 belles-lettres books published in Israel and only 39 self-help books; in 1995, 541 belles-lettres books and 291 self-help books were published—a growth by 1.4 percent in the former, but an astonishing 7.4 percent in the latter (Baruchson-Arbib and Kvity 2004).

The conditions for channeling's success were ripe. By the mid-1990s, what a person did in his own home was his own business, and private salvation was just as legitimate a goal as the salvation of the nation or the Jewish people (Beit-Hallahmi 1992). Much more than this, though: channeling was not only tolerated, it now fit the zeitgeist—it taught that a person creates any and all circumstances of her life; that she, and she alone, controls her destiny; that peace and happiness in this life are not only possible, but every person's birthright. The secular, Jewish upper and middle classes in Israel came to believe in a very similar creed anyhow (Almog 2002; Soffer 2008), and the added mystical bent of channeling no longer required an immense leap of faith.

And, indeed, in 1994 the first channeled text in Hebrew was published, followed rapidly by translations into Hebrew of several channeling classics (including Roberts books) and more and more original texts. Most of the channels active in Israel today began operating in the late 1990s, which is also when the New Age scene in Israel came into bloom, with festivals (Tavory and Goodman 2009), magazines, self-growth centers, shops (Zaidman 2003), and more. However, what became almost mainstream in the 2000s was still considered, at the very least, bizarre in the 1990s. Effective marketing was required, and local entrepreneurs had a major influence on the field of channeling. For instance, one of the first channeled books distributed widely was Ze'ev Aviraz's *I Am Raphael the Angel*, published in 1996; as a result, for a while many people in the country channeled Raphael and used kabbalistic terms like Aviraz did.

Adrian Dvir was one of the most important cultural entrepreneurs in Israeli channeling. Married, with two children and a steady and prestigious job, he had enough social, economic, and cultural capital, as well as charisma (all of which were characteristics Haya Levy lacked) not only to pursue channeling, but also to advertise it extensively. If, from 1996 onward, he worked hard to reach people with his message of Healing with aliens channeling, the publication of his first book in 1999 made him a media sensation. He was invited to several radio and television programs, and a prime-time talk show he was on was viewed by 24.4% of the households in Israel (Dvir 2001: 308). His first book went through several printings, and he opened a website as early as 1998, which he updated extensively. Acting as a nucleating agent for the loosely-knit spiritual scene, he encouraged many of its participants to understand what they already did (for example, energy healing) as channeling with aliens; others, who only read books up to this point, began to treat people. As stated above,

following this publicity, Dvir also rapidly became the unofficial leader of a group of channels, with many of his patients becoming channels as well. This group provided peer support, cushioning the critical responses from family members and acquaintances.

Another reason for Dvir's extensive influence was the 'alien craze' of the 1990s (Eshet 2006; Lewis 1995; Tumminia 2007).²⁶ Riding its last crest, just before its post-millennium crash, Dvir also operated in the temporarily inflated ranks of the Israeli Center of UFO Research, recruiting channels from its ranks, and received, as mentioned, extensive media attention.

Decline of One

In the early hours of June 6, 2004, while sitting at his desk, Adrian Dvir, at forty-six years of age, passed away. Upon the disappearance of its hub, Healing with aliens channeling rapidly fell apart. Haggai Katz, one of the last, and the youngest, to join the group attempted to continue Dvir's legacy, by arranging meetings, speaking in New Age festivals, and maintaining Dvir's website. But most of the remaining members of Dvir's circle spread their wings and moved to the other variant. Margalit Iylon and Shula Israeli, for instance, who both started channeling after reading Dvir's first book and were in his inner circle, published books firmly planted in the Self-divinity variant (in 2004 and 2006, respectively). Some of the other members of the group returned to their origins as healers and mystics, talking of, and with, aliens less and less. Between 2004 and 2006, one by one, all of the web forums dedicated to Healing with aliens shut down.

While the Self-divinity variant of channeling always operated alongside the Healing with aliens variant, it kept rising in power from 1996 on, losing none of its momentum after the millennium came and went. More and more channeling books were published, courses were offered, and the media never lost interest.²⁷

As of November 2014, there is not one channel in Israel who operates exclusively in the Healing with aliens variant. Even Haggai Katz, the only channel

26 While this is a debated record, one claim for the highest rated show in Israel was a talk-show broadcast in January 1997, where the host, based on an interview with channel Elinor Harar, claimed aliens would land in his studio. It was viewed by 46.8% of the Jewish households.

27 By way of example, I myself have been interviewed for articles and shows discussing the phenomenon, all on national television, radio, and newspapers, at least twice a year since 2007.

still advertising himself as also healing with aliens, chose the term 'Holistic Healing' as the title of his website.²⁸

External Influences, Internal Pressures

Why would a phenomenon that had such influence within the Israeli New Age scene, that had become immensely important for some of its members, die out with the death of its unofficial leader? After all, 'unofficial' was always the key word—Dvir never claimed he had any unique abilities, never kept any hidden knowledge, and was strongly opposed to forming any sort of institution (holy texts, times, and people; a church; rituals; a dogma). His books are written in an inquisitive tone, not an authoritative one: he shares his doubts and invites other opinions.

And this antipathy to dogma may be exactly the cause: when Dvir died, not only was there no institution left behind, but his 'followers' shared his strong opposition of such an institution and made no attempt to erect one. Self-empowerment, it must be remembered, is almost as important in Healing with aliens channeling as it is in the other variant. There would be no routinisation of charisma here (Weber 1964).

However, two other forces were operating against Healing with aliens channeling: the influence of Self-divinity channeling ideologies produced outside of Israel and the changes in Israeli society that made channeling appealing to its audience in the first place.

I chose to introduce Self-divinity channeling with the story of Jane Roberts, rather than an Israeli channel, because of how close in spirit the local version of this variant remained to its American source. About half of the channeling books published in Israeli are translated works. At least three prominent American channels, Steve Rother (in 2009), JZ Knight (in 2010), and in Lee Carroll (in 2000, and 2005), visited the country, each drawing crowds of thousands. Many of the entities channeled in Israel originated in the USA, among them Kryon, Seth, Orin, Tom the Speaker of Nine (Altman 2005), and the Pleiadians. In other words, local innovations always compete with a stream of international cultural products related to channeling that pervade the country. And while American channels differ from one another, none of them mentions physical, pseudo-surgical healing; and none channels alien physicians.²⁹

²⁸ www.haggaikatz.com, accessed 21/11/2014.

²⁹ Two prominent American channels, Barbara Hand-Claw and Barbara Marciniak, do channel aliens, but these are identical in nature to Self-divinity channeling's entities in that they are advanced spiritually rather than technologically.

However, the most important force for the decline of Healing with aliens channeling is the social situation that made channeling successful in 1990s Israel in the first place. Healing with aliens channeling, with its emphasis on peer support, was suited for channeling's first years in Israel, as was the channels' claim that they themselves were completely devoid of power and only the aliens had any form of expertise. Finally, surgical, technology-based, help (even if invisible) seemed more plausible than vaguely defined 'spiritual growth' support, especially in a country with the highest rate of doctors-per-population in the world (Filc 2005).

When channeling became a less deviant phenomenon, however, these three factors became burdens, causing Healing with aliens channeling to collapse under its own weight. Healing with aliens was defined, by its practitioners, as a form of channeling, and self-empowerment elements were always crucial to it. However, self-empowerment, at least in its extreme form of self-divinity, does not sit comfortably with group orientation or with subservience. If each person is a divine creator of his own fate, why should he require assistance from other people or play the passive role of an instrument used by experts whose knowledge he cannot access? And how come the patient had no part in curing himself? Furthermore, if material reality, including the physical body, is determined by mental beliefs, it makes little sense to treat the effect (the body) rather than the cause (the mind). In short, Healing with aliens channeling contained too many contradictory beliefs and practices, and it never cohered into a more complete worldview.

Self-divinity channeling, however, did, and this complete worldview was quite appealing to the newly liberalised (or, rather, neo-liberalised) Israeli middle class. It made sense of their world, deepened and augmented their belief that each person is in charge of his own life, even made this belief into a religious creed, with personal contact with the divine (both its personal aspects and external, non-material, entities) possible and welcome.

And so, both external influences—the continued presence of American Self-divinity channeling in the Israeli New Age scene—and internal pressures towards individualisation made Self-divinity channeling prosper. While alive, Adrian Dvir managed to dampen the effects of these influences and pressures, aided by the alien craze of the late 1990s. When these two died away, very little was left to hold Healing with aliens channeling in place, and it was swept aside by its sister variant.

Summary

Self-divinity channeling offers a form of non-institutionalised religion well-suited to 'spiritual seekers' of the Western middle class: centered around the

individual and the home, it dispenses with external authority structures and institutionalised religion and offers personal, egalitarian, contact with the divine—and this for clear and everyday purposes. Channels claim that we each make our own reality, and their goal is to help people realise what their own true wants and needs are, so that they can create the reality they want to create. And so, they channel their creed of self-divinity through books and websites; offer one-on-one sessions that aid people in realising why they are creating a flawed reality for themselves; and teach channeling to others, so they can spread the word as well as reach better self-awareness through personal contact with the divine.

Healing with aliens channeling shares these characteristics, but it also offers more peer support and puts more emphasis on physical healing, not only on self-awareness as the road to both mental and physical health. Most of all, though, the channels do not regard themselves as equal to the entities they work with, but see the aliens as superior in technology and knowledge, if not in spiritual awareness. All of these detract from the individualistic, agency-centered nature of Self-divinity channeling.

With the strong leadership of Adrian Dvir, peer support from like-minded people to cushion social rebuke, and a wave of interest in aliens, Healing with aliens channeling succeeded in Israel for a short while. With Dvir and the alien fad gone, the strongly individualistic nature of Self-divinity channeling reasserted itself, mostly because this very nature was the basis of the phenomenon's appeal. Members of the newly individualistic Israeli middle class found in channeling a religious echo of their everyday beliefs in a person's agency and self-accountability, as well as their professional and utilitarian ethos. Healing with aliens channeling had too many discrepancies with these beliefs and ethos.

And so, in an ironic twist, after a short period of flourish, the highly original, agency-fueled, local creation of Healing with aliens channeling subsided before the more global variant. Individual power, it turned out, could not hold the line against social and cultural constraints.

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Channeling Extraterrestrials

Theosophical Discourse in the Space Age

Christopher Partridge

“This is central control. This is central control. Stand by for information to follow. We are ready to transmit. We are ready to transmit.” So begins a typical communication from Korton, an alien being channeled by the Reverend Bob Short of Blue Rose Ministry. Since he was interviewed by the British broadcaster and champion of the weird and wonderful, Louis Theroux, he has gained something of a faux cult following. Indeed, the first time I came across the voice of Korton was during research into reggae. While working my way through a broad range of contemporary British dub music, I happened upon a sample of Rev. Short channeling Korton on a piece of music entitled “Kortonic Dub” by Alien Dread (available on *Kortonic Dub*). This, however, is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the fascination with the idea that extraterrestrial intelligences might want to communicate with humanity. For example, the Scottish comic book writer Grant Morrison, for example, relates an “abduction experience” in 1994, while he was visiting Kathmandu with a friend, following which he was able to channel extraterrestrial knowledge into his apocalyptic series *The Invisibles*, which ran to seven volumes (1994–2000) (Morrison 2012: 253–64). The point is that, not only is popular culture saturated with evidence of the contemporary interest in extraterrestrial life, but there are many who believe that there are beings beyond the Earth’s atmosphere that are able to speak through psychically sensitive individuals. Moreover, they do so, because, like benevolent deities, they care about the planet Earth, they care about the human race, they care about human politics, and they care about the well-being of individual humans. From deep in space, from the other side of the universe, even from other universes and other levels of existence, they reach out to humanity, offering advice (which is usually platitudinous) and wisdom (derived largely from New Age occulture) to small groups of people gathered in hired conference rooms, community centers, and homes. Whether one considers this fascination with the channeling of aliens an important and possibly inevitable replacement for traditional, institutional religion in the modern world or an unfortunate, but hardly unusual, outbreak of public irrationality, a ministry to the gullible, it is a persistent and certainly an interesting recent phenomenon that deserves analysis (Brown 1997; Klimo 1987). As well as telling us something about contemporary alternative spirituality, it tells us something more generally about the continued human desire to reach beyond the mundane for succor and wisdom.

This human searching and fascination with benevolent intelligence and sage wisdom from beyond the confines of the planet is now catered to by an increasing number of channelers. For example, in recent years the following have become popular: Barbara Marciniak channels the ever popular Pleiadians, “a collective of multidimensional spirit beings from the Pleiades star system” (*Pleiadians*); Darryl Anka channels Bashar, “a being of extraterrestrial origin, a friend from the future” (*About Bashar*); Solara An-Ra channels the ‘Councils of Light’, a collective of Andromedans, Sirians, and Pleiadians; Lyssa Royal of ‘Royal Priest Research’ channels Germane, “a group consciousness energy” (*Lyssa*). Numerous other channelers, often advertising their services and sharing their ideas on the Internet, communicate messages and goodwill from organisations of space beings and star people, such as the Council of Nine and the Galactic Federation of Light (*Galactic*), as well as particular alien beings and entities, such as the space commandant Ashtar (Helland 2003; Bellos 1999: 3) and the reptilian hybrid who teaches peace and love, TReb Bor yit-NE (TReb).

While there are many channelers and numerous space entities, beings, and collectives channeled, the messages communicated tend to be uncomplicated and similar. This similarity is, I argue in this chapter, the result of common roots in a prominent alternative spiritual discourse. They represent the most recent manifestation of a space-oriented spirituality that can be traced back, principally, to Theosophy and, secondarily, to a broader occult tradition, including Spiritualism and the theological speculation of Emmanuel Swedenborg (Partridge 2003: 7–21). Having said that, while rooted in Theosophy, typically, much channeled material of this type represents an eclectic mix of Western popular culture and modern alternative spirituality. It is, in other words, typically ‘occultural’.¹

Modern Mouthpieces for Modern Deities

Popular speculation about extraterrestrial life quickly becomes embroiled in discussions of an occultural nature. Perhaps needless to say, much of this type

1 Concerning the sociological theory of ‘occulture’, briefly: it refers to the environment within which, and the social processes by which, particular meanings relating, typically, to spiritual, esoteric, paranormal, and conspiratorial ideas emerge, are disseminated, and become influential in the lives of individuals and in the societies in which they live. Often, central to these processes is popular culture, which disseminates, deconstructs, and reinterprets occultural ideas. Remixed, such ideas incubate new spores of occultural thought (Partridge, 2004; Partridge 2005; Partridge forthcoming: 1). Channeled material from extraterrestrials provides an excellent example of occultural creativity, in that it draws widely from, as well as contributing to, the constantly replenished reservoir of ideas and theories available in the West.

of thinking, certainly when it concerns alien visitation, is treated with derision by academics, who understand it to be a mixture of fantasy and occulted judgment. As Carl Sagan (1977: xi) commented, “the possibility of extraterrestrial intelligence is something I and many other scientists take very seriously...If there were good evidence that in the past we were visited by such beings, our task would be made immeasurably easier. But unfortunately there is no such evidence...We must be careful not to permit our hopes and wishes on such important questions to cloud our judgment.” And, concerning popular discourses based on clouded judgment, he makes the following observation: “Our times are very perilous. The immediate relevance of traditional religions to contemporary problems is not so obvious as was once the case. At just this moment arises the beguiling doctrine that all-powerful, all-knowing, and benevolent creatures have in the past and will one day in the future come out of the sky and save us from ourselves” (Sagan 1977: xiii). In other words, in an anxious age, the spaces left by the decline of institutional religion in the West are being filled by occultural coalescences. People are still gazing heavenward, but whereas once prophets declared, “Thus sayeth the Lord,” now channelers insist “Thus sayeth the star people.” Diane Purkiss’s (2000: 3) comments regarding fairy stories are pertinent here:

Given how incredible fairies seem to most of us, where do fairy beliefs come from in the first place? Human nature seems to abhor a blank space on a map. Where there are no human habitations, no towns, where villages dwindle into farms and farms into woods, mapping stops. Then the imagination rushes to fill the woods with something other than blank darkness: nymphs, satyrs, elves, gnomes, pixies, fairies. Now that we have mapped every inch of our own planet, our remaining blank spaces lie among the stars. Unable, like our forebears, to tolerate space uninhabited, we have made with our minds a new legion of bright and shining beings to fill gaps left by our ignorance. Aliens are our fairies, and they behave just like the fairies of our ancestors. In this sense, fairies are not part of a dead-and-gone past.

Channelers, like prophets and seers of the past, are the mouthpieces of these new supernatural entities. Hence, again, bizarre though they may appear to many, the channeled messages of alien intelligences cannot be dismissed. For, if, following Max Weber, we understand ‘disenchantment’ to be, at least in part, the process whereby magic and mystery are driven from the world, and nature is managed rather than wild, unpredictable, and enigmatic, it is difficult not to understand UFOs, alien intelligences, and extraterrestrial communication as,

to some degree, a reversal of that process (Partridge 2005). As such, they naturally find a home within occulture and intersect with a wide range of similarly spiritual and paranormal beliefs (Brown 1997; Partridge 2005; Porter 1996; Saethre 2007).

Flying Saucers and the Emergence of Extraterrestrial Occulture

When searching for the origins of extraterrestrial occulture, whilst many Ufologists and religionists seek to construct what amounts to a sacred history of sightings and contacts stretching back into prehistory (for example, Clark 1992), it is hard to avoid one date which appears more frequently than any other, 24 June 1947. This is the date on which Kenneth Arnold, a businessman from Boise, Idaho, reported a sighting of ten shining discs flying over the Cascade Mountains when flying his private plane near Mount Rainier in western Washington. According to Arnold, they flew “like a saucer if you skipped it across the water” (Lagrange 2000: 33). Misquoted, the sighting was reported as Arnold’s encounter with ‘flying saucers’. While there had been previous modern sightings of, for example, ‘balls of fire’ accompanying planes during the Second World War (nicknamed ‘foo fighters’) or cigar- and disc-shaped objects in the sky (such as the wave of Scandinavian ‘ghost rocket’ sightings in 1946),² these tended to be sporadic and vague. Moreover, before 1947 “there is not a single recorded episode involving mass sightings of saucer-like objects” (Bartholomew and Howard 1998: 189). It was Arnold’s ‘flying saucers’ that both began the modern waves of sightings and ushered them into the popular consciousness. The public interest in his story was immediate and massive. Despite frequent dismissals and explanations by scientists and military experts, such was the level of interest that, by the beginning of July the same year, the US Air Force felt it necessary to carry out an investigation. “A Gallup poll taken on August 19, 1947, revealed that while one out of two Americans had heard of the Marshall Plan, nine out of ten had heard about the saucers” (Lagrange 2000: 34). By the end of that year, 850 UFO sightings were reported in America alone. Part of the reason for this enormous increase in popular fascination was that it provided a consistent vocabulary with which to discuss enigmatic aerial phenomena, a vocabulary which quickly became occulturally significant. Prior to Arnold there had been no terminological consensus. Following 1947, ‘flying

2 These sightings had been reported throughout America, Europe, and Scandinavia. Indeed, three days prior to Arnold’s sighting, Harold Dahl reported several disc-shaped objects flying towards the Canadian border (see Bartholomew and Howard 1998: 21–235).

saucer' and then 'UFO' quickly became household terms and equally quickly became attached to a wide spectrum of myths and stories.

Having said that, as noted above, the fascination with extraterrestrials has roots that go deep into Western occulture. Beginning with Swedenborg, one can produce a modern religious history of individuals who claim to have had encounters with extraterrestrials and even travelled to other planets and experienced advanced alien civilisations (see Mayer 2000: 70–74). Even when such fantastic claims were not made, notions of beings from other planets and their advanced civilisations have entertained the minds of thinking people for centuries. Notable pre-twentieth century examples include the following: Voltaire, in *Micromégas*, relates the story of a visit to Earth by inhabitants of Saturn and Sirius, the latter visitors being a mile high; Kant speculated about the possibility of life on other worlds; the philosopher Kurd Lasswitz's novel *Aus Zwei Planeten* (1897) explored the implications of Martians travelling to Earth; and of course the genre of science fiction, which explores many of these issues, became increasingly popular and valued since the publication of novels particularly by Jules Verne and H.G. Wells (see Dick 1998: Chapter 4). More recently, while the exegesis is unconvincing, there are numerous claims, for example, that the Hindu scriptures contain accounts of UFOs (see Rothstein 2003a: 266–267; Scribner and Wheeler 2003: 159), or that the Bible relates such material in passages about the Nephilim (Genesis 6:4), the ascension of Elijah in a chariot drawn by 'horses of fire' (2 Kings 2:11), or Ezekiel's enigmatic vision of mysterious creatures and gleaming wheels emerging from a "great cloud, with brightness round about it, and fire flashing forth continually" (Ezekiel 1:4, 15) (see, for example, the claims made in Alford 1996: 1–35; Däniken 1969; Däniken 1970; Downing 1968; Thompson 1995).

As to claims regarding contact and channeling prior to 1947 (see Melton 1995: 2–8), there are several. Notable examples include Sara Weiss and Guy Ballard. At the turn of the twentieth century, Weiss, a Spiritualist, reported contact with Martians, describing an advanced, peaceful civilisation (see Weiss 1903; Weiss 1906).³ However, interestingly, her channeled messages from Mars (or 'Ento', the Martian name for the planet) were primarily a validation of Spiritualism, in that they settled some theological issues within the Spiritualist

3 Some have described Weiss's work as science fiction (Davin 2009: 45). This confuses the intention of these books, which are clearly understood by the author to be nonfictional, as she makes clear in the lengthy sub-subtitle to her second book: *Decimon Hûydas: A Romance of Mars: A Story of Actual Experiences in Ento, Mars, Many Centuries Ago Given to the Psychic Sara Weiss and by Her Transcribed Automatically under the Editorial Direction of Spirit Carl de L'Ester*. This is, therefore, quite different from 'science fiction' *per se*.

community. For example, they declared the veracity of the doctrine of the necessity of mediums. As Melton (1995: 5–6) has commented, “such conclusions far outweigh any information about life on Mars that were also included in the contact.” In other words, the channeling of extraterrestrial intelligence was not understood by Weiss to be as significant as the support given to the doctrine of the necessity of mediumship within Spiritualism. It’s also worth noting the rather obvious point that Weiss’s Martian messages were themselves understood as a form of Spiritualist mediumship, rather than anything more avant-garde. Again, Ballard, who formed the Theosophical organisation, I AM Religious Activity, claimed in his book *Unveiled Mysteries* (1934),⁴ not only to have met the enigmatic nineteenth century alchemist (now ascended master) Comte de Saint-Germain on Mount Shasta in California, but also to have been subsequently introduced to twelve Venusians who revealed their planet to be home to a race of technologically and spiritually advanced beings. However, whereas Weiss’s ideas were fundamentally Spiritualist, Ballard’s are conspicuously Theosophical. That is to say, his contact with extraterrestrials clearly supports his development of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky’s⁵ Venusian ‘Lords of the Flame’, the highest rank in the hierarchy of ascended masters (to whom we’ll return below).

Not a lot of substance has changed since these early days. Not only can Ballard and Weiss be understood as early examples of the contemporary fascination with extraterrestrial wisdom, but their grounding in Spiritualism and Theosophy is still key to understanding the channeling of alien intelligences. Indeed, not only are many of the entities channeled more Theosophical than extraterrestrial, but channeling is essentially understood in terms of mediumship. As Weiss had done with Spiritualism, so Ballard and others do with Theosophy. They simply develop ideas that already exist within the tradition to which they belong, ideas that populate the occultural thought world they inhabit. For example, the early forays by Ballard and Weiss into speculation about extraterrestrial life identify the early stages of a process by which ascended masters and spirit entities are culturally updated. That is to say, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the popular culture of the day had a formative impact on their experiences. There was certainly significant interest in extraterrestrial life during this period, stimulated to a large extent by the growth in space-oriented popular culture, such as John Munro’s evocative tale

4 The book was published under a pseudonym, Godfre Ray King.

5 H.P. Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott were the principal founders of the Theosophical Society in New York City in 1875.

of Venusians and Martians, *A Trip to Venus* (1897) and, of course, the enormously influential works of writers such as Jules Verne, H.G. Wells, and Edgar Rice Burroughs.

Concerning post-1947 developments, while there are several notable contributors to extraterrestrial occulture, a key figure, who is typical of those early UFO religionists to develop a space-age version of Theosophical discourse, is George Adamski, the most famous and arguably the first post-1947 contactee. Although he is not known as a channeler of extraterrestrial intelligences as such, he did claim a psychic connection with Venusians, and, thereby, was able to communicate their messages to humanity. However, his significance as far as this discussion is concerned is his role as a shaper of extraterrestrial occulture. A Californian Polish-born occultist, in 1936, Adamski founded the Theosophically-oriented Royal Order of Tibet (see Grünschloß 2000: 5–6). He had also been briefly involved with the California-based metaphysical group, the Order of Loving Service. Hence, it is unsurprising to find in his influential 1953 book, *Flying Saucers Have Landed* (coauthored with the British occultist Desmond Leslie; Leslie and Adamski 1977 [1953]), not only numerous references to Theosophical themes and doctrines, but also a bibliography that is little more than a short list of key Theosophical and occult writings by authors such as Blavatsky, Charles Leadbeater, Annie Besant, Alice Bailey, Dion Fortune, Rudolf Steiner, and Paramhansa Yogananda. Furthermore, Adamski's 'space brothers' are not the almond-eyed aliens most commonly reported by contemporary contactees, such as Whitley Strieber (1988), but are rather 'humanoid', resembling popular Theosophical descriptions of the masters. Moreover, bearing in mind that the masters were often termed 'Brothers' in Theosophical literature, it is significant that Adamski deliberately chose to refer to aliens as 'space brothers', a term that has continued into current channeled discourse. Indeed, while contemporary contactees/abductees tend to describe experiences with the almond-eyed aliens, contemporary channelers are much more likely to depict them in Theosophical terms (see, for example, the illustrations accompanying Gorgo 2006). Again, just as Ballard had claimed that Saint-Germain lived according to 'the Great Laws of Life', so Adamski's space brothers, like those described by some contemporary channelers, "adhere to the Laws of the Creator instead of laws of materialism as Earth men do." He continues, "Pointing to himself, then up into space – which I understood meant the planet on which he lived – he conveyed the thought to me that there they lived according to the Will of the Creator, not by their own personal will, as we do here on Earth" (Leslie and Adamski 1977: 216–217). Extraterrestrials are, in other words, like ascended masters, perfect examples of the Theosophical ideal of a spiritual being.

It is not difficult to trace the occultural rhizomes that have led to the growth of extraterrestrial occulture, which, in turn, informs channeled discourse. The ideas communicated through channelers of extraterrestrial intelligences belong to a tradition that can be traced back, through particularly Alice Bailey, to the mixture of Hindu, Buddhist, Spiritualist, and occult thought disseminated by the Theosophical Society and particularly Blavatsky. This is why not only is it unsurprising that Spiritualists and Theosophists were amongst the first to communicate the messages of extraterrestrial beings, but also that the principal religious response to the wave of interest provoked by the Arnold sighting in 1947 was made by those closely involved in Theosophical occulture.

Ascended Masters and Extraterrestrial Intelligence

Theosophy is founded on a philosophy of 'cosmic evolution', which, interpreted in terms of the doctrine of progress typical of Western thinking during this period—linear, developmental, and inevitable (see Tierney and Scott 2000: 110–113)—posits the evolution of all levels of existence (see Blavatsky 1888). However, while, on the face of it, this may not appear particularly contentious, Theosophy departs significantly from evolutionary science in positing 'intelligent evolution', the principal thesis of which is that 'an intelligent consciousness [guides]...evolution and progress' (Blavatsky 1888: 247). Central to intelligent evolutionary theory is the existence of a hierarchy of beings, at the apex of which are spiritually, morally, and technologically superior Masters of Wisdom who seek to help those further down the evolutionary chain (see Besant 1907; Leadbeater 1925). Hence, contact with the masters bestows a high degree of significance and charismatic authority upon an individual or an organisation. Not unreasonably, therefore, Blavatsky claimed the Theosophical Society to be the latest earthly organisation established by the masters to channel their guidance to humanity, to communicate the wisdom necessary for humanity to participate fully in cosmic evolution. Likewise, most channelers will, in the final analysis, ascribe absolute authority to their messages, simply because, as in most doctrines of revelation, the source of the messages is assumed to be infallible. Of course, the channeler too is, in turn, also invested with significant charismatic authority as, in effect, the trusted and chosen conduit for the master's wisdom.

In *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), Blavatsky argues in some detail that Theosophical teachings are the result of her instruction by the masters in an 'ancient wisdom', which is the source of the principal spiritual and ethical truths found in the world religions (see Leadbeater 1925: 5–6). That is to say,

throughout history, the masters, including the Buddha and Jesus, sought to teach the wisdom now taught by the Theosophical Society. This is why the doctrine of the ‘ascended master’ is, as Leadbeater (1925: 3) comments, “one of the most important of the many new facts [Theosophy] puts before us.” Likewise, Besant (1907: 60) argues that “the Society was only worthy to live, if it were a witness to and a channel for the masters’ teachings, was [Blavatsky’s] constant declaration, and she only cared for it as an instrument for carrying out their work in the world.” Indeed, as implied above, for Blavatsky, the true founders of the society were two such masters, namely Koot Hoomi (sometimes spelled Kuthumi and usually referred to as K.H.) and Morya (or simply M.). Their teachings were channeled through Blavatsky and other *chelas* (pupils of the masters) to two Anglo-Indian Theosophists, A.P. Sinnett and A.O. Hume, and subsequently compiled and published as *The Mahatma Letters* (edited by Barker, 1962).

Theosophy can, therefore, be understood as a form of perennialism that teaches a typically post-Enlightenment understanding of the universality and absoluteness of ‘truth’, hence their motto, “there is no religion higher than truth” (see Blavatsky, 1889: 2). This is why the Society encourages the comparative study of religion, philosophy, and science, for the acquisition of truth and spiritual progress are two sides of the same coin.

Particularly important, as far as this discussion is concerned, is Blavatsky’s claim that some of these advanced intelligences have their origins on Venus. This, of course, is not surprising since Venus has its own occult history, which she clearly had some familiarity with. Swedenborg, for example, claimed a knowledge of Venusians, believing them to be of two types: “some are gentle and benevolent, others wild, cruel and of gigantic stature. The latter rob and plunder, and live by this means; the former have so great a degree of gentleness and kindness that they are always beloved by the good; thus they often see the Lord appear in their own form upon their earth” (Spence 1978: 713). In Blavatsky’s thought, of course, there are no wild and cruel Venusians, only advanced, benevolent masters. As Melton points out, “these masters she termed Lords of the Flame and the Lord of the World, the head of the hierarchy for humanity. Under these Venusian lords are the Lords of the Seven Rays (or colors) who have direct contact with human adepts such as Blavatsky” (Melton 1995: 6; but see also Stuppel 1984: 131). This belief was subsequently developed by Leadbeater (1925: 296–297), who makes the connections among Venus, the masters, and cosmic evolution explicit:

Our world is governed by a spiritual King—one of the Lords of the Flame who came long ago from Venus. He is called by the Hindus Sanat Kumara...

and we often speak of him as the Lord of the World. He is the Supreme Ruler; in his hand and within his actual aura lies the whole of his planet. He represents the Logos, as far as this world is concerned, and directs the whole of its evolution...In his mind he holds the whole plan of evolution at some high level of which we know nothing; he is the Force which drives the whole world-machine, the embodiment of the Divine Will on this planet...His consciousness is of so extended a nature that it comprehends at once all the life on our globe...At a certain point in the progress of an aspirant on the Path he is formally presented to the Lord of the World, and those who have thus met him face to face speak of him as in appearance a handsome youth, dignified, benignant beyond all description, yet with a mien of omniscient, inscrutable majesty, conveying such a sense of restless power that some have found themselves unable to bear his gaze, and have veiled their faces in awe.

Such is the occultural significance of Theosophy, that some form of this doctrine is evident in the teachings of all who have channeled extraterrestrials up to the present day, whether or not they explicitly refer to, or are even aware of, the Theosophical Society. While Venusians may have dropped out of favor in recent years, the notion of masters as 'space brothers' has been simply absorbed by channelers.

A good example of this is the re-branding of prominent masters from within Theosophical-New Age occulture. That is to say, while there are numerous, so to speak, 'local masters', limited to the discourses of particular channelers, such as Bashar, Aetherius, Korton, Hilarion, and TReb Bor yit-NE, there are also 'shared masters', most of which tend to be taken directly from Theosophy, such as St Germain, Koot Hoomi, and—hardly surprisingly in Western societies shaped by their Christian histories—Jesus (see Klimo 1987: 204; Stupple 1984). The Theosophical understanding of these masters as benevolent intelligences with a deep salvific concern for a spiritually immature race is simply given space age, science-fictionesque packaging. Jesus, for example, not only transmits messages from Venus (see for example King 1963: 1, 10–12), but, according to Ashtar (channeled through Van Tassel), was born of a space being, Mary (Helland 2003: 167). Again, from a more explicitly Theosophical perspective, Jesus, as space brother, was central to the legitimating narrative constructed by Ernest and Ruth Norman of the UFO religion Unarius (see Tumminia 2005: 78; Tumminia 2003: 65–66). Ruth, for example, claimed that her husband was the reincarnation of Jesus: "He was reestablishing on earth the mission of Jesus...it was He, the Nazarene, Himself returned!" (quoted in Tumminia 2005: 54). Ernest Norman himself verified the narrative by claiming an experience of

stigmata. The account was then incorporated in an increasingly complex narrative of past lives, which drew widely on Theosophical-New Age occulture.⁶ For example, the Normans gradually began “to embellish their stories, adding some narratives of Atlantis and Lemuria to stories of space travelers and spiritual planets...In 1967, a student gave Ernest Norman an out-of-print book entitled *The Occult Life of Jesus of Nazareth* (1899), written through the mediumship of Alexander Smyth. This book...became their version of Jesus’ life” (Tumminia 2005: 54). Similarly, drawing from the same occultural pool, Nada-Yolanda of Mark-Age (1995) channeled the following message from the extraterrestrial Sananda,⁷ who is identified as Jesus: “I have come many times to the Earth planet as a leader and as a spiritual ruler responsible for that which does happen in this plane or cycle.” This is followed by an editor’s note, which is, again, conspicuously Theosophical: “Past incarnations of Sananda include: Khufu, Melchizedek, Moses, Elijah, Zarathustra, Gautama Buddha, Socrates, and Jesus of Nazareth. In addition, he was leader of the Abels and leader of the Noahs” (Nada-Yolanda 1995).

In more recent years there has been a development of the idea of extraterrestrial intelligences away from individual space brothers and towards communities of intelligences, such as the Pleiadians. Indeed, although the messages are still conspicuously Theosophical in content, the names of single entities and masters are now thought to refer to these communities. For example, Jon C. Fox, who channels Hilarion, comments that “although it is easier to relate to Hilarion as a single, male entity, Hilarion insists on being considered as a group. Over the years I have grown accustomed to this, and suggest you do the same” (Fox, n.d.). Again, although we are informed that Bashar, channeled through Darryl Anka, “is a male member of a 5th dimensional civilization called the Essassani” (Iasos). Bashar (“Blueprint”) has also made

6 This relationship with wider occulture is evident in Diana Tumminia’s research. For example, those Unarian members she interviewed “indicated prior interests in alternative religions... Parapsychology and paranormal philosophy...ufology or alien abduction narratives...and psychic healing. The oldest members...had studied the texts of early contactees, like Adamski, and they were acquainted with some of the philosophy of Spiritualism, Theosophy, and other parts of the older American metaphysical milieu that promoted psychic and paranormal phenomena. One had studied Swedenborgianism...” (Tumminia 2005: 191).

7 References to Sananda are not uncommon within the New Age. The following explanation is typical: “Sananda” is the evolved name of Jesus the Christ. When Jesus ascended from the Earth plane, He was given the new Spiritual title of Sananda. This means “He who has ascended.” The term “ascended” in this context related to His overcoming all obstacles and challenges that He HimSelf needed to in order to evolve to a finer version of HimSelf. At <http://www.godumentary.com/sananda.htm>. Accessed 25/04/2011.

the following point: “let me say that even though you seemingly perceive a single identity, I represent hundreds of thousands, even millions of consciousnesses that make up the Association of Worlds...So understand that while there may be a gathering of individuals on your side for these channelings, there is a gathering of individuals on our side as well” (see also Anka 1990).

Overall, however, while there are some differences between the Theosophical masters of wisdom, the early post-1947 accounts of space brothers, and later channeled extraterrestrial intelligences, in actual fact the similarities among the three are striking and the differences relatively superficial.

Theosophy Technologised

Space: the final frontier. These are the voyages of the starship *Enterprise*. Its five-year mission: to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no man has gone before (the title sequence from the original series of *Star Trek*).

These words, which few will fail to recognise, sum up a particular period or, perhaps, a particular feeling I was hoping to elicit by the use of the term ‘space age’ in the title. My aim was to evoke that shiny, silver, metal-plated optimism, which, I suggest, shaped much extraterrestrial occulture of particularly the 1950s and 1960s. Beginning in 1957 with the launch of Sputnik, the notion of a ‘space age’ epitomised post-war progress, identifying humanity’s reach towards ‘the final frontier’. The human species had finally left the protective embrace of the Earth’s gravity and atmosphere, and as we marvelled at photographs of our blue planet, our perception of ourselves changed immeasurably. For many, a sense of awe was mixed with the excitement of adventure as they looked into the vastness of space. Again, few also would not have considered the implications of being alone in the universe, as well as the possibility that we might not be. Certainly, popular culture was saturated with ‘space age’ narratives and speculation. The point is that it was this sense of excitement, awe, wonder, and adventure evoked by the notion of a ‘space age’ that is conspicuous in the UFO religions of the 1950s and 1960s. These religions were formed by the culture that bore them. Hence, it is very difficult, when reading channeled texts from this period, not to imagine the influence of popular media speculation, pulp fiction, and films such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951)—the last of which could almost be read as a blueprint for UFO religion: flying saucers, a benevolent master from space, a Christ-like being with significant healing powers,

omnipotence (in the form of Gort), all contrasted with a foolish and violent humanity.

Shaped by the popular occulture of the space age, Theosophy and Spiritualism are explicitly technologised. For example, George Van Tassel's Ministry of Universal Wisdom, which disseminated the channeled teachings of the extraterrestrial Ashtar, claimed to be a 'science philosophy organization' and promoted itself as 'a scientific research consortium' (Helland, 2003: 162). The channeled messages, of course, reflected that self-perception:

I am Ashtar, Commandant Vela Quadra sector, station Schare. You have just heard the authority granted by Schonling Lord God of the 3rd dimensional sector, for our authority to take corrective measures. We are creating a Light energy vortices near the planet Shan in an effort to stabilize your planet. This effort requires the combined forces of 86 projections, 9100 waves, of 236,000 ventlas.

quoted by HELLAND, 2003: 166

Similarly, religious doctrines were technologised for the space age. Ashtar, for example, describes God as "the infinity of an endless electrical universe that thought atoms, solar systems and galaxies into being. Humans are thought forms of God's creation of individual life forms" (quoted in Helland 2003: 168). More recently, based on his own channeled communications from Ashtar, the Brazilian Ergom Abraham describes 'an interdimensional portal' near Alto Paraíso, as well as a technologised rapture involving people being 'taken up on immense platforms' prior to the cleansing of the Earth by extraterrestrials (Bellos 1999: 3). Marshall Herff Applewhite and Bonnie Lu Nettles, founders of Human Individual Metamorphosis, which was to become Total Overcomers Anonymous and, finally, the UFO group Heaven's Gate, described the biblical 'Kingdom of Heaven' as 'the Next Level', "not an etheric spiritual place, but a many-membered physical Kingdom that exists in deep space" (quoted in Partridge 2006: 58). As we have seen, there were even technologised Theosophical versions of Jesus. Applewhite, for example, claimed that he had ascended bodily as the Bible describes, but had done so as a result of the advanced technology on board a flying saucer. Similarly, Van Tassel insisted that Jesus was an advanced extraterrestrial who did not die, but rather was 'taken up on [a] transistor beam' (see Helland 2003: 166–167). Indeed, much early channeled discourse articulated a view of the Bible as an ancient repository of information about extraterrestrial activity.

As far as the process of channeling itself was concerned, Unarius was quick to describe humans in terms of 'television receivers'. We are capable of

receiving images and messages, whether from past lives or other universes, because “humans have an electronic nature, as do all atoms and all universes” (quoted in Tumminia 2005: 27). Likewise, George King of the Aetherius Society understood channeled messages in terms of ‘transmissions’. They are, he claimed, “transmitted by light beams operating upon mental frequencies capable of impressing themselves upon my mind in such a way that translation into the English language was possible. This process of mental reception is called telepathy, which is now regarded by science as an indisputable fact” (George King 1957: 5). Hence, while the principal components of Theosophy are all there, as well as much from contemporary occulture, including biblical material, they are technologised using pseudo-scientific, science-fictionesque terminology.

As well as the technologisation of doctrine and mediumship, the post-1947 shift towards a focus on other planets, flying saucers, and space brothers also led to a greater focus on the more universal themes of Theosophy, such as human evolution into a new age of peace and spiritual maturity. That is to say, extraterrestrial intelligences such as Aetherius and Ashtar generally avoid communicating the type of personal messages one would expect in a Spiritualist séance. Rather than focussing primarily on individual wellbeing, they were more concerned to ‘transmit’ grand statements of universal import, usually within a context of catastrophism. This latter point, of course, needs to be understood within the Cold War context of the 1950s and 1960s. At the time, fear and insecurity about the thermonuclear bomb (developed in 1952) and the distrust of the Russians (see DeGroot 2005) segued easily into apocalyptic discourse and a distrust of all earthly governments. This thinking, of course, easily translated into occultural conspiracies and apocalypticism (see Rothstein 2003b). An explicit millenarianism, interpreted within a broadly Theosophical framework, insisted that spiritual immaturity was directly related to greed, aggression, and militaristic irresponsibility. Humanity’s only hope was the space brothers, who were concerned not only for the survival of humanity, but also for the survival of their own civilisations, which stood to suffer from humanity’s destruction. As Christopher Helland (2003: 164) comments in his discussion of the messages of Ashtar channeled through Van Tassel, he “spoke with a great deal of apocalyptic concern over the development and testing of the hydrogen bomb. According to the messages, detonation of this device would trigger catastrophic destruction—destruction which would have implications not just for Earth, but also for this section of the galaxy! Indeed, he claimed that it was principally to prevent this from occurring that he was contacted by Ashtar.” Again, some of the messages from the period can be understood as technologised rapture discourse. For example, Dorothy Martin, known

to her followers as Mrs. Marian Keech, claimed to receive messages from an extraterrestrial 'Guardian'. The communications were, on the one hand, adventist, in that they stated that extraterrestrials, including Sananda, were visiting earth "in numbers and will be seen by many over the cities of New York, Washington D.C., Seattle, and Chicago" (Festinger et al. 1964: 45–46). On the other hand, the messages were millenarian, in that they included warnings of 'the holocaust of coming events', during which the wicked "will meet a dark and awful justice soon." The people of the earth "are rushing, rushing toward the suicide of themselves" (Festinger et al. 1964: 46). In particular, she prophesied a great flood that would destroy many inhabited areas of Europe and North America, prior to which the faithful would be saved by flying saucers.

It's worth briefly noting at this point that the type of anthropocentrism demonstrated above, which accords the actions of humanity cosmic significance, is typical of UFO religion and the channeling of extraterrestrials. However, when reading channeled material from alien intelligences, an obvious question presents itself: Why would an advanced, benevolent, peaceful civilisation on the other side of the universe bother communicating with a warring, primitive species many light years away? It is difficult not to conclude that the obvious hasty response to this question (the response that was in fact given) is that human karma and human violence might in some way impact extraterrestrial lives as well. While it was difficult to argue that humans might physically harm extraterrestrials on other planets (although we have seen that Ashtar was concerned about the possibility of a hydrogen bomb doing this), if our corruption was linked to spiritual laws, such as karma and cosmic evolution, it began to make some sort of occultural sense. While the reasoning behind such arguments was, to say the least, unconvincing, it was very common within early channeled messages. And, we will see below, *it was very common and it made some sort of occultural sense* because it was rooted in Theosophical discourse.

Theosophical discourse had always had this potential for technologisation and was, therefore, particularly suited to emergent UFO religion. For example, that the salvific efficacy of the space brothers was understood to relate directly to their superior technology is a direct development of the Theosophical teaching that the masters had a breadth of scientific knowledge. Indeed, not only do they introduce new scientific ideas, they warn of potentially harmful developments and catastrophes, and, insists the Theosophist T.H. Redfern (n.d.: 32), "having themselves solved and mastered the problems of human living, they make a periodical effort to bring more enlightenment to mankind." Again, as with the space brothers, they have 'direct insight into the spiritual, psychic and physical workings of our solar system' and communicate these insights through

specially chosen intermediaries. “On their behalf,” insists Redfern (n.d.: 32), “Mme Blavatsky gave out teachings giving a corrective lead in the fields of science, religion and ethical standards.” By way of example, he quotes and comments on the following interesting passage from one of the channeled *Mahatma Letters*:

‘...every atmospheric change and disturbance’ is ‘due to masses between which our atmosphere is compressed! I call this meteoric dust a “mass” for it really is one. High above the earth’s surface the air is impregnated and space is *filled* with magnetic...dust which does not even belong to our solar system’. The origin of cosmic rays is still debated and the Van Allen belt, which has been described as the Great Barrier Reef in space, was not discovered until 1957. The meteorology of the Mahatma Letters is still not confirmed, but if Mme Blavatsky forged these letters how did she know there was a magnetic mass above the atmosphere. Again, ‘Science will *hear* sounds from certain planets before she *sees* them. This is a prophecy’. In 1882...Jodrell Bank wasn’t even a dream, radar unthought of, radio-stars unheard of. Radio-planets are still not discovered, but who dare deny the possibility.

REDFERN n.d.: 33–34

Again, this type of science-oriented apologetic discourse is typical of UFO religionists. From extraterrestrial sources we can know what secular science later discovers. For example, Ruth Norman of Unarius points out that the reason we don’t understand UFOs and their ability to travel great distances is because our scientists cannot comprehend why “Vehicles of Light [UFOs] do not use fuel. They operate by using the energy of the electromagnetic force fields which surround all worlds—fields which hold worlds together (or apart) by the alternating phase reversal energy principle” (quoted in Tumminia 2005: 29). One day, as humanity evolves spiritually, we too will learn to manipulate this ‘energy principle’.

From Venus to the Pleiades, from the Cosmos to the Self

We have seen that a central theme of much of the earlier channeled material from extraterrestrials was a concern about the destruction of the planet and the implications for the rest of the solar system. This, we have noted, was particularly apparent during the Cold War period when early UFO religion initially emerged from out of the Theosophical-occult milieu. More particularly, as

Wallis (1974: 28) notes of King, his advent as a public channeler in 1954 “coincided with two prominent concerns in public thought of the time—reported sightings of spacecraft and contact with their personnel, and apprehension regarding the testing of nuclear weapons.” These twin foci are key in that they merged in Theosophical occulture, becoming the principal drivers behind the emergence of modern UFO religion. In short, the public concern about nuclear annihilation was joined to a belief in extraterrestrial intelligences, which had, in turn, been shaped by Theosophical teaching about highly evolved masters with divine attributes. As Wallis (1974: 30) comments of King’s early messages, they demonstrated a conspicuous concern about “the dangers of atomic experimentation, the nature of the other inhabitants of the Solar System, and the metaphysical activities of the Cosmic Masters, who through the manipulation of spiritual energies unknown to human beings were seeking to save man from destroying himself by indifference, selfishness and greed.” Hence, in the final analysis, the early channeled teaching of extraterrestrials tended towards being an eclectic mixture of reflection on current crises and their relationship to spirituality, morality, and evolutionary progress. However, over time, we see further adjustments being made to Theosophical ideas in UFO religion. For example, we have noted that there is a clear shift of emphasis during the 1970s and 1980s towards the channeling federations and communities, which, we will see below, parallels a shift from a focus on global concerns to a focus on the service of the self.

Furthermore, whilst Venus tended to retain its privileged position for some years amongst contactee and UFO groups, gradually other planets were identified as inhabited, including unknown ones, such as Clarion and Cerus (see Bethurum 1954; Festinger et al. 1964). Indeed, Venus’s popularity as the home planet of advanced civilisations waned when it was discovered to be shrouded by clouds of sulphuric acid, with an atmosphere constituted almost entirely of carbon dioxide and a surface temperature of 480°C—hardly ideal as a comfortable home for an advanced civilisation. That said, some of the older groups that have created what amount to sacred channeled narratives expounding the significance of the Venusians, such as the Aetherius Society, continue to insist that masters reside on Venus (see Smith 2003; Saliba 1999; Scribner and Wheeler 2003). Any cognitive dissonance is simply assuaged by teaching that Venusians do not actually live in the rather uncomfortable physical dimension, but on another, less bracing level of existence. One recent channeled extraterrestrial, Leah, made the following comment on YouTube: “[critics] think [Venus] is uninhabitable because it is not inhabitable by physical life forms. We have bodies of light. They are non-physical. We exist in a dimension that you have not yet encountered, where atoms move so very rapidly that you

could put your hand directly through, let us say, a solid wall.”⁸ However, generally speaking, Venus has dropped out of favor, and other less vulnerable celestial bodies many light years away, such as those of the Pleiades cluster, have become far more popular as the homes of benevolent extraterrestrial intelligences (see for example Marciniak 1993; Marciniak 2004; Quan-Yin 1995; Quan-Yin 1997; Hand Clow 1995).

The overall point to note is that, again, because extraterrestrial channeling is occultural—a mix of New Age-Theosophical ideas, science fiction, and popular speculation about space—the content of channeled messages evolves according to trends in occulture. Hence, for example, it is very difficult not to associate channeled descriptions of advanced civilisations, such as the Venusians and the Essassani, with depictions in popular science fiction. For example, it is surely significant that Adamski had, in 1949, published a spiral bound science fiction novel, *Pioneers of Space: A Trip to the Moon, Mars and Venus*, that contained many of the elements he would discuss four years later in *Flying Saucers Have Landed*. Likewise, Maurice Doreal, founder of the Brotherhood of the White Temple in Sedalia, Colorado, drew not only on ideas developed within the New Age-Theosophy cultic milieu, but also on popular culture when he identified “three types of flying saucers including one piloted by ‘serpent people’ who once were ice-bound in Siberia, became defrosted and then overthrew and replaced the Communist regime in Russia” (Stupple 1984: 134). Doreal’s narrative is conspicuously influenced by Cold War anxiety, as well as being indebted not only to the recent public interest in flying saucers, but also to the popular fiction of Robert E. Howard, who, in 1929, began his King Kull stories in the pulp magazine *Weird Tales*, which describe a race of subterranean serpent people (Howard 2005). These stories were later to influence H.P. Lovecraft (1936) and those, such as Lin Carter and Clark Ashton Smith, who developed Lovecraft’s occulturally significant ‘Cthulhu Mythos’. Doreal’s UFO spirituality is simply a confluence of these occultural tributaries. Again, more explicitly, members of Uniarius not only channeled extraterrestrial intelligences and practiced past-life therapy, but “actively watched television episodes of *Star Trek* looking for details about their forgotten [past] lives.” Indeed, not only did they develop a mythology around ‘the fictional Borg, the cyborg society that terrorized the *Star Trek: Next Generation* crew’ (Tumminia 2005: 66), but they even considered the possibility that Gene Roddenberry, the creator of *Star Trek*, had, wittingly or unwittingly, channeled the scripts for spiritual reasons. This eventually led to the belief that Roddenberry himself

8 At http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R_v-AmohTDk. Accessed 15/04/2011.

might have descended “from a higher realm of intelligence as a Brother, a spiritual teacher” (Tumminia 2005: 67).

A key theme that has, however, remained relatively consistent within such channeled discourse is that, while there may be evil forces at work, responsibility ultimately lies with humanity. According to Mark-Age (2002), for example, “the human race is responsible for evil...There is no such thing as Satan, except the evil that lives in men’s minds, hearts, desires, ambitions and greed.” This thesis is then mythologised according to preferred extraterrestrial narratives, and humanity is placed at the heart of cosmic evil and, thereby, made responsible for any spiritual problems other beings in the universe may experience. For example, according to the Aetherius Society, as one of the least evolved races in the universe, at some point in human pre-history, we “elected to have free-will, unlike most other beings in the Cosmos who elected ‘Freedom under Karmic Law’. The consequence of this is that man is liable to gross acts of selfishness and greed, which not only retard his own spiritual development, but threaten that of other Beings in the Cosmos” (Wallis 1974: 33). And as Phyllis Schlemmer comments in *The Only Planet of Choice* (Schlemmer 1995), a collection of channeled messages from an interstellar organisation, the Council of Nine, humanity is hindering the spiritual development of the entire universe. Hence, according to this narrative, because this resistance to spiritual evolution has karmic implications reaching beyond Earth, humanity’s spiritual ignorance cannot be allowed to continue. Extraterrestrials must, therefore, intervene, for ‘whilst we may be foolhardy enough to upset our own karmic balance, we cannot be allowed to threaten that of other beings’ (Wallis 1974: 33). The human race must be educated. Until it is, it requires protection from itself, and other races need to protect themselves from humanity. This is why flying saucers monitor us, advanced masters visit us, channelers warn us, and some groups, like the Aetherius Society, seek to manipulate humanity’s karma through the skilled use of spiritual energy. Hence, in much the same way that Blavatsky understood the mission of the Theosophical Society in relation to the masters of wisdom, channelers have consistently understood their role to be the communication of the wisdom and the spiritual energy of extraterrestrial intelligences for the sake of humanity’s spiritual evolution and the karmic wellbeing of the cosmos. This focus on the human, however, was to become dominant in later channeled messages.

Put bluntly, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that extraterrestrial intelligences have themselves increasingly become part of a New Age toolkit. Like crystals, they have become tools for wellbeing; instruments in the service of the self. This trend is distinct from the discourse dominant in earlier channeled material, in that, while the self has always been important, it has gradually taken center stage over the last thirty years. Moreover, as it has done so, the

focus on human corruption (indebted to Christian notions of 'sin') has declined, and, tracking the emphasis on the sacralisation of the self and the emergence of New Age capitalism (see Heelas 1992), it has been replaced by a focus on the development of human potential. For example, Paul McCarthy, the founder of the Sirius Temple of Ascension and a channeler of 'energies from the Star Masters', works "closely with the guides from Sirius, Pleiades, Arcturus, Andromeda, Ashtar Command, Orion and Vega," as well as "the ascended masters and angels" (McCarthy "Sirius"). He has, in other words, a range of products on offer to spiritual consumers. His privileged access to extraterrestrial intelligences has enabled him to identify various species of alien (common within extraterrestrial occulture) with particular 'attunements', or what we might call wellbeing technologies. Such attunements, he tells us, "work on many different levels to help you. Each group of masters bring their own focus and abilities to their attunement." Each master is ready to meet your need. For example, 'Pleiadian attunements', provided by Pleiadian Masters,

help us to anchor the energies and consciousness of the Pleiades, such as unconditional love into our daily lives. They help us to ground this higher consciousness by finding ways to express this in the physical world. They help us to connect to creative energies and help us to be light and to find beauty/the divine in the world around us...The Pleiadian Masters help us to find harmony and co-operation amongst ourselves and with the planet earth herself.

MCCARTHY "Star"

Indeed, McCarthy tells us that, "the energies of the Pleiades are ideal for artists, musicians and dancers or anyone wishing to develop these aspects of themselves." Alternatively, the 'masters' from the Vega Star System

help us to connect to universal compassion and divine love from the heart of God/source. These are profound energies and levels of consciousness that transcend normal human behaviour and experience. To embody these is to be like the Saints and Buddhas. The Masters of Vega introduce these divine experiences to us and help us grow our consciousness in these directions.

MCCARTHY "Star"

Again,

Arcturians...are well known for their healing abilities. They also are experts at managing our energy systems so that we are balanced and

aligned across all dimensions. This provides healing and helps with our energetic work. These attunements from Arcturus also act to prepare our energetic systems to carry more energy...The Arcturian Masters also help us to recognise other star energies by making our energy fields more sensitive to them.

MCCARTHY "Star"

Similarly, while Bashar, channeled through Anka, "discusses the transformation of our planet," actually central to his teaching is individual transformation. For example, in the volume of Bashar channelings, *Blueprint for Change*, we are told that Bashar "shares the secrets of ecstatic personal transformation and how to apply these ideas in your daily life so you can fully live the life of your dreams."⁹ Indeed, with utopian descriptions of alien civilisations, the messages are marketed like hair care products—this is how you could look and feel if you purchase this product. Bashar's extraterrestrial 'Essassani' society¹⁰ is described as follows: "The entire Essassani civilization is based on unconditional love, ecstasy, fun, following your excitement, being totally non-judgmental, and giving validity and equality to the uniqueness of each individual in the society" (Iasos). The point, however, is that the focus of the projection gradually became less global and more personal and, as it did, more commodified. That is to say, typical of much New Age thought, while there is often still a concern for the planet and identifiable continuities with earlier Theosophy-informed discourse, many channeled messages have gradually become wellbeing technologies in the service of the self. In a New Age capitalist economy (see Heelas 1996: 138–141), individuals simply purchase the entities/channelings that service their perceived needs. Again, the following extracts from a channeled message of the Pleiadian elders are typical:

Welcome...We come to fill in the spaces in your life, in your heart, in your thinking, and even in-between the letters and energies of your names... The haze from your eyes will be lifted so that you will be able to see the past potential within every ingredient and choice of your life. Every failure, every success, every loss, and every gain will fuel the fires of transmutation. Finally, opening your eyes to fully understand what the word 'Creation' means and how it takes all elements and all choices to fully create as a God-in-training-without fear...Look in-between the letters of

9 At <http://www.Bashar.org/catalog/books.html>. Accessed 25/04/2011.

10 Another extraterrestrial, 'Elan', is also from the Essassani civilisation and, like Bashar, "offers profound information on the mechanics of 'how' we each create our own reality." At <http://iasos.com/metaphys/elan/>. Accessed 25/04/2011.

your name. Look in-between the vowels of your life. And look in-between the consonants of your expectations. Just for a moment, focus upon your name; see it etched in the mind. Now in-between every letter, there is another letter, a vibration, a sound. It is the name of your soul that is etched in-between your human name. Look for it. It will explain much to you. In-between is where you are right now...You are moving quickly through time gates of self. You are at the octave in-between these next levels of self, of soul, and of expansion...Remember that anything that is accomplished by another can also be accomplished by you. Do not give up in your life. Do not give up in what you perceive to be the wantings and the needings of your existence. You have the capability to move past these perimeters of limitation if you choose. We are the Pleiadian Elders. We leave.

“Pleiadian Elders”

Moreover, while some of the apocalyptic elements remain, these also have followed the turn to the self. For example, in 2009 there were messages from the star people concerning an imminent apocalyptic event, widely discussed within conspiracy occulture. NASA and those in authority were, it was claimed, concealing information about ‘Hellion-1957’, a dead brown dwarf star that would, possibly by the end of 2009, collide with the sun and thereby terminate all life on Earth. Channeler Judith K. Moore, however, revealed the following: “There is significant scientific information about this Brown Dwarf and the possible devastation of the planet. Lord Sananda assures us we can transmute the energy with the help of our Star Brethren and that the Brown Dwarf has come to suck negativity generated from ancient Anunaki agendas to instigate Armageddon and a total collapse” (Moore 2009). While the same narrative components are evident (the Earth in peril and the intervention of space entities), the way these are framed is less about human culpability and more about the manipulation of energy and the development of human potential.

Conclusion

As will be evident to any who have studied the bewildering array of constantly changing ideas circulating within occulture, attempts at dogmatic characterisation are bound to lead to procrustean caricature. However, with that in mind, this discussion has sought to identify some broad contours in channeled discourse since particularly 1947. As the title indicates, the principal of these is the confluence of Theosophical discourse with popular speculation and space age occulture. In the early period of UFO religion, following Arnold’s 1947 sighting of ‘flying saucers’, Theosophical occulture was dominant. Not only had all

of the early channelers and contactees, such as Adamski, King, Van Tassel, Norman, and Martin, been involved in a Theosophically-informed cultic milieu, but they simply rebranded prominent ideas from that milieu in accordance with the new occulture of the space age. Indeed, we have seen that, for the most part, it was almost literally a case of Theosophy sprayed silver. For example, as ascended masters were rebranded as space brothers, their oriental dress was simply replaced with silver space suits. They were now commanders, commandants, and captains travelling in flying saucers and 'transmitting' messages electronically on light beams. No longer did they reside in Tibet, but, drawing on early Theosophical speculation about the Lords of the Flame, as well as ideas circulating in popular culture, they were reimagined in advanced societies on Venus, Mars, and other planets.

It has also been noted that these ideas should not be understood apart from the anxiety created by the fear of global annihilation during the Cold War. This drew out the millenarian elements within Theosophical discourse, leading to a focus on human culpability, cosmic destruction, and the need for salvation from superior space brothers. Indeed, although there is still debate over the relationship between paranormal belief and anxiety (see Irwin 2009), there do appear to be correlations among beliefs in extraterrestrial intervention, insecurity, and death anxiety. This certainly makes sense of channeled messages during the Cold War, in that, to some extent, the belief in extraterrestrial saviors allayed anxiety about the threat of nuclear destruction. Consequently, as that threat has decreased, so, we have seen, the messages about space saviors and global annihilation have all but ceased. As with all channeled material, to some extent, it tracks occulture as well as the assumptions and values dominant in a particular society. Hence, like much New Age belief, contemporary channeled discourse epitomises the individualistic epistemology, consumerist ethos, and therapeutic focus so prevalent in Western societies (see Partridge, 1999). In addition to the end of the Cold War, the conspicuous turn to the self, evident in the shift from religion to spirituality (see Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Partridge 2004) has had a formative impact on the content of channeled messages from extraterrestrials.

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PART 5

The Next Move



Secret Lives of the Superpowers

The Remote Viewing Literature and the Imaginal

Jeffrey Kripal

I often say that I worked as a psychic spy for the CIA and found God.

RUSSELL TARG

Declassified government documents and recent revelations from retired military officials and intelligence officers on both sides of the former 'Iron Curtain' have revealed that the Americans and the Soviets were involved in a wide range of paranormal programs and psychical espionage activities during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. The still growing literature on these literally esoteric activities, although quite mixed in terms of both philosophical subtlety and historical reliability, is nevertheless very impressive in places and is quite large now. These texts represent a virtually untapped source for historians of religions and scholars of Western esotericism to think anew about the ways that traditionally magical and occult disciplines have been redeployed in the modern era for what were thought to be purely secular purposes, but which, in some cases at least, turn out to possess some quite extraordinary innate or spontaneous spiritual dimensions.

As the very recent work of a joint American-Russian writing team has demonstrated, both superpowers were involved in a wide range of paranormal programs. The Russians, for example, attempted to create a 'parapsychological shield' around Brezhnev, engaged in various projects to build psychotronic super-weapons, and created a whole team of (mostly female) psychics that were sent into battle zones, allegedly as late as the war in Chechnya, in order to guide and aid a particular military operation. The latter special ops group even had their own official Soviet medal. The Russian writers, like the American ones, of course differ about what this all means, but most call upon some kind of mind-matter dualism and, at the very least, many have seen this material as a direct, and exciting, challenge to our present, very limited conceptions of the human being and the nature of consciousness (May et al., n.d.).

This original essay by Jeffrey Kripal was first published in French as a contribution to *Des Médiums: Techniques du corps et de l'esprit dans les deus Amériques*, IMAGO (2012), and it draws upon several parts of his books, *Esalen and Mutants* and *Mystics*, both of which were published by the University of Chicago Press. The essay appears here with their permission.

The Americans too possessed their own elite corps of psychic spies, whom they called 'remote viewers'. The practice of remote viewing involved a small team of carefully screened and selected individuals who were systematically trained—largely, as we will see, through mental discipline, but also through bodily postures, sketching and cueing practices, and mild sensory deprivation—to locate and describe targets around the world that were otherwise hidden, secret, or simply unknown (for example, the location of a Soviet bomber crashed in an African jungle), very much as police departments are said to occasionally use psychics to help crack particularly difficult cases or locate bodies. For over two decades, from 1972 to 1995, the CIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the army, and the navy together invested over twenty million dollars in research and development. Most of the work was done at just two locations, a private think tank called SRI (formerly Stanford Research Institute) in Palo Alto, California, and an army base in Maryland called Fort Meade. Since many of the secret files were declassified in 1996 under the Freedom of Information Act, many of the details of this story have been elaborately documented and analyzed from a variety of perspectives, including a number of first-hand accounts from those who took part in the secret programs, programs with evocative names like Gondola Wish, Grill Flame, Center Lane, Sun Streak, and Star Gate.

The present essay, based on the available literature and multiple conversations and personal correspondence with physicist Edwin May, one of the major scientific directors, seeks to describe and interpret some specific elements of this fantastic story on the American side of things. I will proceed in three parts. In the first, I will construct a specific genealogy of my three working categories—the imaginal, the subliminal, and the supernormal—back through the twentieth-century study of religion, through Swiss depth psychology, to the British psychical research tradition. In the second, I will recount the American side of the Cold War story as it is presently recorded in the available English literature and, in the process, describe some of the bodily and spiritual techniques that were used to alter the states of consciousness of the remote viewers. In the third, I will highlight some of the explicitly metaphysical themes of this history in order to suggest that the remote viewing literature cannot, in the end, be adequately and fully explained in the terms of modern science or in any purely secular military terms. A more inclusive and ultimately satisfying reading, I suggest, can be obtained through the genealogy sketched in part 1, that is, through the terms of the history of religions, depth psychology, and the psychical research tradition.

The Rise of the Imaginal: A Genealogy

First, a few words are in order about my three 'terms of art'—the imaginal, the subliminal, and the supernormal. All three are historically connected. Indeed,

all three emerge from a single tradition. All three go back to the last decades of the nineteenth century in England and an elite group of intellectuals, many of whom were connected to Cambridge University.

Those who are familiar with the term 'imaginal' usually trace it back to the French historian of Iranian Islamic mysticism, Henri Corbin, who famously used it to discuss the profound effects mystical experience is said to have on the powers of the imagination within his medieval Iranian sources, especially Ibn 'Arabi and Suhrawardi (from whom Corbin claimed a personal initiatory transmission across the centuries). Following these sources, Corbin used the adjective 'imaginal' to name the unique powers of a gnoseological organ that accessed a genuine dimension of reality whose contours and content were nevertheless shaped and translated by what he alternately called the 'creative imagination', the 'active Imagination', or the 'theophanic Imagination'. Put much too simply, the imaginal for Corbin is the human imagination temporarily empowered by spiritual forces and the graces of the mystical life that give access to the divine realm, but always in and through the ciphers of religious symbol.

For Corbin, this meeting place of the invisible divine world and the visible human and sensory world is a real third world and a dimension of 'immaterial matter'. Corbin called this the imaginal world, which he glossed with the Latin phrase *mundus imaginalis* and the Arabic phrase *'ālam al-mithāl*. He further argues that this is the 'the place' where genuine religious symbols and archetypal images do their paradoxical work of simultaneously revealing and concealing the divine nature through the mediating function of images and symbols. Corbin (1969: 4) describes this space as "an intermediate universe 'where the spiritual takes body and the body becomes spiritual', a world consisting of real matter and real extension, though by comparison to sensible, corruptible matter these are subtile and immaterial."

It is a very difficult, often misunderstood, but crucial point that the symbolic dimensions of this third imaginal space or dimension cannot be somehow 'removed' to reveal the divine object as it is in itself, for there is no such simple divine 'object', not at least one that can be known by the human 'subject'. Rather, the human and the divine share a common ontological ground and are intimately intertwined in a complex, essentially nondual dialectic through which the imaginal vision simultaneously reveals and conceals the divine nature within human nature and human nature within the divine nature. Hence we have Corbin's rich notion of the symbol, which he distinguishes sharply from the allegory:

Allegory is a rational operation, implying no transition either to a new plane of being or to a new depth of consciousness; it is a figuration, at an

identical level of consciousness, of what might very well be known in a different way. The symbol announces a plane of consciousness distinct from that of rational evidence; it is the “cipher” of a mystery, the only means of saying something that cannot be apprehended in any other way; a symbol is never “explained” once and for all, but must be deciphered over and over again....

CORBIN 1969: 14

To encounter the divine within the imaginal realm, then, is no simple thing. It is not at all like a social experience of meeting another person or a sensory experience of seeing and measuring an object. All of this is quite impossible here, for we are now in the realm of what Corbin names a *coincidentia oppositorum*, a ‘coincidence of opposites’ between the divine and the human poles. “The ‘place’ of this encounter,” he explains, now glossing his Iranian sources, “is not outside the Creator-Creature totality, but is the area within it which corresponds specifically to the Active Imagination, in the manner of a bridge joining the two banks of a river.” The “crossing itself” is “a hermeneutics of symbols,” that is, “a method of understanding which transmutes sensory data and rational concepts into symbols...by making them effect this crossing” (Corbin 1969: 189). Put simply (if such a thing is possible), the divine realm is inaccessible to the measures of reason and the objectification of the senses, but it can be accessed through a properly attuned imagination, whose empowered imaginal ‘translations’ reveal and conceal the divine at the same time.¹

Although Corbin certainly shaped and informed their modern uses in subtle ways, he did not originate the categories of the imaginal or the creative imagination. He almost certainly borrowed the expression *imagination créatrice* from the depth psychologist Carl Jung (1994), who tells us that he himself borrowed and adapted it from Théodore Flournoy, the elder Swiss psychologist who worked with a Swiss medium and silk-shop worker by the name of Élise Müller in the 1890s in order to write a book on her Martian and Indian ‘subliminal romances’, his classic *From India to the Planet Mars* (1899). Flournoy, moreover, derived his notions of the ‘subliminal romance’ and the ‘subliminal imagination’ from the subliminal psychology of the English classicist and psychical researcher Frederic W.H. Myers (1843–1901). It was Myers, it turns out, who brought all three of our major terms—the subliminal, the imaginal, and the supernormal—into wide usage in the 1890s. Here are the basics.

1 I am deeply indebted for my understanding of Corbin here, and so much else, to Elliot R. Wolfson, whose own scholarship on Kabbalah is deeply informed by a similar *coincidentia*.

Frederic Myers was trained as a classicist at Trinity College, Cambridge University. He abandoned Christianity after an exposure to science and turned to psychical research after meeting the famous medium and preacher Stainton Moses in 1874. At the encouragement of his teacher Henry Sidgwick, a professor of moral philosophy at Cambridge, he helped found the London Society for Psychical Research with Edmund Gurney, Mr. and Mrs. Sidgwick, and a few other colleagues in 1882. This group would place ads in newspapers, asking for letters of evidence of unusual experiences around the death of a loved one. They would then follow these up with interviews and crosschecks. Early in 1884, for example, Gurney guessed that he had written about 1,600 letters in the last two months, 55 that day alone (Blum 2006: 80).

As all those letters suggest, the Society's methods were primarily ethnographic and empirical, not to mention epistolary. They checked their stories, required signed affidavits from witnesses, and threw out or marked as such any cases that could not be sufficiently verified (most could not be, with the solid cases settling at about five percent). One of the types of data collected by the London Society for Psychical Research was what came to be known as the 'veridical hallucination'. Examples include dreams or waking visions of a dying or dead loved one that are clearly hallucinatory, that is, products of the imagination, but also just as clearly carry accurate and veridical information about the time, nature, or details of the death, all unknown and unknowable to the conscious self until the 'veridical hallucination' occurs. As Myers and company documented, crosschecked, and confirmed many hundreds of times, the unsuspecting visionary, sometimes separated by hundreds or even thousands of miles, somehow *knows* immediately what has happened, and often in astonishing and inexplicable detail.

Myers died in Rome in 1901, fully convinced that the human spirit survives the disintegration of the body. However, this spirit, or 'soul' (the term was already an embarrassing word), cannot be equated with the conscious subject or what he called the 'supraliminal self', what we might call the social self, persona, or psychological ego. Below the *limen* or 'threshold' of this conscious self exists another dimension of consciousness, a 'subliminal Self' with extraordinary powers of sensation and cognition, including something Myers named in 1882, for the first time, 'telepathy', or 'deep feeling at a distance'. Telepathy was Myers's explanation of all those veridical hallucinations. It was a name for the non-sensory channel of communication, or ontological unity, between two human beings, one of whom was almost always in crisis or grave danger (Myers also felt that it was intimately connected to *eros*, but that is another story; see Kripal 2010: chapter 1).

It is within Myers's psychology of the subliminal, of veridical hallucination and telepathic communications below the threshold of the supraliminal self, that the imaginal first rises in modern theory. Drawing on over a century of romantic poetry and literature that recognised the imaginative powers as capable of both floating fantasy and revelatory cognition—as both 'fancy' and 'imagination', to use Coleridge's famous distinction—Myers understood that the imagination works in many modes and on many levels. More specifically, he became convinced that in certain contexts, the imagination can take on genuinely transcendent capacities, that is, that it can make contact with what appears to be a real spiritual world or, at the very least, an entirely different order of mind and consciousness. In the opening pages of *Human Personality*, Myers (1903: I, xviii) defined 'imaginal' this way: "A word used of characteristics belonging to the perfect insect or *imago*;—and thus opposed to *larval*;—metaphorically applied to transcendental faculties shown in rudiment in ordinary life."

Myers, however, did not quite coin this term. The seventeenth-century Cambridge Platonist Henry More appears to have done so, in 1642, as 'the imaginall' in his *Psychodia Platonica or a Platonick song of the Soul*. It is unclear whether Myers was familiar with this source (although his thought is profoundly Platonic or Neoplatonic in numerous places). He seems to have had entomology and Darwin in mind. More specifically, what Myers appears to have intended to communicate by his own definition was the idea that the human imagination, under certain very specific conditions, can take on extraordinary capacities that represent hints of a more highly evolved human nature. In his more technical terms, such states were "preversions" that represented "a tendency to characteristics assumed to lie at a further point of the evolutionary progress of a species than has yet been reached" (Myers 1903: I, xx). Hence, just as the larval stage of an insect looks nothing like the imago or mature image of its adult form (which indeed appears bizarre or alien-like in comparison to the larval slug), so too the images of the human imagination can mature into extremely strange but nevertheless accurate evolutionary forms as imaginal visions or veridical hallucinations.

Or put in another coinage of Myers, the imagination is to the imaginal as the normal is to the 'supernormal', defined as "something which transcends existing normality as an advanced stage of evolutionary progress transcends an earlier stage" but that remains nevertheless entirely natural (Myers 1903: I, 71). Myers's original evolutionary language was not intended as metaphor, and it went back to the very origins of evolutionary biology. Alfred Russel Wallace, the cocreator of the evolutionary thesis with Darwin, attended the first meeting of the Society for Psychical Research on February 20, 1882. He was an avid

student of séances and Spiritualism, the phenomena of which he saw, with Myers, as evidence for a separate non-physical line of moral or spiritual evolution.

Finally, it is worth noting here that Myers's notion of the supernormal, as the name for an evolutionary advance catalyzed by a spiritual influx, in turn flowed into the writings of Flournoy. In a fascinating final chapter of his *From India to the Planet Mars* entitled "Supernormal Appearances," for example, Flournoy states very clearly his conviction that both telepathy and telekinesis are real phenomena. His medium, he explains in some detail, had produced both telekinetic phenomena and apports (materialised objects), the latter in 1892–1893 before he came on the scene: "in midwinter roses showered upon the table, handfuls of violets, pinks, white lilacs...seashells were obtained that were still shining and covered with sand" (Flournoy 1994: 230). In terms of telekinesis, he speculates that "certain abnormal and emotional states set at liberty in the organism latent forces capable of acting at a distance" (Flournoy 1994: 233). "As to the supernormal," he concludes, "I believe I have actually found a little telekinesis and telepathy. As to lucidity and spiritistic messages, I have only encountered some brilliant reconstructions, which the hypnoid imagination, aided by latent memory, excels in fabricating in the case of mediums" (Flournoy 1994: 267).

On the rest, he remained agnostic, that is, he refused "to ascertain whether these facts are messengers of a superior economy or forerunners of a future evolution [which is exactly what Myers thought] rather than the survival of a condition of things which has disappeared, or whether they are purely accidental, *lusus naturae*, denuded of signification" (Flournoy 1994: 224). "Unless," he adds in a stunning passage, "it is the cosmic power itself, the amoral and stupid demiurge" (Flournoy 1994: 231). For his part, Flournoy preferred a classic middle way—a *tertium quid*, as Myers and his colleagues called it—that bowed to neither the "ostrich philosophy" of the materialists nor the embarrassingly silly beliefs of the Spiritualists (Flournoy 1994: 250).

Remote Viewing in the Cold War²

The American story begins in 1972 with a young laser physicist by the name of Harold Puthoff. Puthoff had just finished some postdoctoral research at Stanford University. He had already also done a stint in the navy as an intelligence officer and had worked as a civilian for the National Security Agency.

2 I made a first attempt to understand this material in Kripal 2007.

He was now working in laser research for SRI, but his real interest was in the interface between quantum and biological processes, or quantum biology. He was especially interested in parapsychological phenomena and how they might throw some much-needed light on the strange interface between physics and consciousness.

As Puthoff was settling into his research at SRI out in California, an artist by the name of Ingo Swann was working with some parapsychologists in the department of psychology of City College of New York. They were exploring something they had just named 'remote viewing', which involved Swann in highly unusual tasks, like psychically detecting weather patterns in randomly named cities. About this time, a research proposal of Puthoff's came to Swann's attention through his City College colleagues. He decided to write the physicist on March 30, 1972, outlining his experiments in the psychology department and suggesting that he might be able to help Puthoff investigate quantum biological effects. Three months later, on June 4, 1972, Swann stepped off the plane in California to meet Puthoff.

What happened two days later, on June 6, is as legendary in the annals of remote viewing as it is controversial outside them. Puthoff and his SRI colleagues were interested in Swann's alleged psychokinetic powers. More practically (or impractically), they wanted to see if he could manipulate the recorded output of a superconducting magnetometer or quark detector, a kind of super-sensitive compass used to register super-subtle magnetic fields that was located in a vault below the building under a three-foot deep concrete floor. Beyond the concrete, the apparatus was also protected by "a mu-metal magnetic shield, an aluminum container, copper shielding, and most important, a superconducting shield" (Targ and Puthoff 1977: 21). To the great puzzlement of the physicists, Swann successfully and dramatically altered the output of the magnetometer in their presence. He also "saw it," that is, he described a gold alloy plate that was part of the apparatus. To say that the physicists were impressed would be a gross understatement. According to Swann, one researcher was so freaked out by what he witnessed that, in his haste to get out of there, he walked into an orange support pillar (Smith 2005: 60).

Still in that same June and soon after the Swann affair with the magnetometer, Puthoff delivered a public lecture at Stanford. Afterwards, another laser physicist by the name of Russell Targ, then working for Sylvania, approached Puthoff and proposed that they work together at SRI. Targ was hired on. The collaboration between these two men would last for ten years, from 1972 to 1982. It would also come to define much of the early history of remote viewing.

Then the plot thickened. Shortly after the Stanford lecture, two CIA officials showed up at Puthoff's door, asking about a privately circulated report that he had written on the Swann magnetometer incident. After speaking to him about the paper, they were sufficiently intrigued to leave the physicist some money in order to get Swann back to Palo Alto and see if they could find a psychical capacity that was replicable and therefore useable. Swann returned in December.

Paul Smith, who would himself become a remote viewer later in the program's history, explains why Puthoff and Targ were initially interested in psychokinesis (PK):

If PK skills could be developed and controlled, one could use them to manipulate the physical world, including the enemy's weapons. Using "mind over matter" to melt tank barrels or stop bombers in mid-flight was the stuff of comic books. Far more likely, given the subtlety of typical PK effects, was the possibility of mucking up the intricate guts of military computers, electronic equipment, or missile guidance systems.

SMITH 2005: 70

Alas, after thousands of experiments, the researchers had to conclude that, although they had witnessed some very suggestive evidence for the phenomenon, controlling psychokinesis was in the end simply not possible or, as they put it in more technical language: "Willed perturbation effects appear to be intrinsically spontaneous" (Smith 2005: 71). In short, the stuff is probably real, but fundamentally unpredictable.

Swann quickly grew bored with the standard parapsychological tests that followed. He suggested instead that he be allowed to view distant places and objects, anywhere in the world. "There was an awkward silence" (Targ and Puthoff 1977: 27). Finally, they decided to give in to Swann's request as a diversionary game, if nothing else. The results were no game, though. On too many occasions to dismiss, the results were simply stunning. More trial tests followed, including one that August in which Swann described an object some CIA scientists had put in a box as leaf-like, somehow alive, and attached to the lid instead of the bottom of the box. The object, it turned out, was a living moth clinging to the lid whose natural camouflage looked, well, like a leaf. It was hard-to-ignore moments like this that led to the CIA awarding SRI an initial grant of \$49,909. The same agency would continue to fund parapsychological research at SRI for three more years.

The results of Targ and Puthoff's experiments with Ingo Swann and Pat Price at SRI were published in the prestigious British science journal *Nature* (Targ and Puthoff 1974). A second essay followed two years later in the

Proceedings of the IEEE (Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers). A year later, these two technical essays grew into the first published book on remote viewing, Targ and Puthoff's influential *Mind-Reach: Scientists Look at Psychic Ability* (1977).³ Well-known anthropologist Margaret Mead wrote the Introduction. Richard Bach, author of the mega-hit *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, wrote a Foreword and gave \$40,000 towards the research behind it. Swann provided the cover art, a painting called "Salt Flats Vision."

Gradually, Swann and Puthoff developed an elaborate six-stage protocol that used coordinates (at first longitude and latitude and later random numbers) to 'locate' the desired target. This mind-bending method (with a random number providing a workable coordinate for the viewer to find an object anywhere on the planet!) became known as Coordinate Remote Viewing (CRV).⁴ Intriguingly, the protocol drew intimately on concepts from the British and American psychical research traditions, psychoanalysis, and split-brain research. These included the most basic categories of the preconscious and the unconscious, the 'limen' or threshold between the conscious and the unconscious, the notion of analytical overlay or AOL (more or less equivalent to what Freud had called 'secondary revision'), and the central role of right-brain processing via intuition, symbol, and sketching. Even more intriguingly, the protocol also drew on something Swann called the Matrix, which was basically a kind of hyperspace containing all the universe's information whether from the past, present, or future. In his own technical language, Swann believed that the remote viewer receives a 'signal line' from the Matrix through an 'aperture' or opening in the subconscious, which is then transmitted through the right brain and 'objectified' via the feedback 'loops' of sketching 'ideograms' and writing descriptors.

Ingo Swann and Pat Price were the main psychical talents at early SRI. In a fascinating twist on our Super-Story, both men were involved in Scientology at this point, as was Puthoff and one of his lab assistants. Puthoff would leave the Church in the mid-1970s and align himself with its critics. Swann would leave as well. And Price would not live long. Still, obviously, some comment is in order here (Schnabel 1997: 198–200).

Scientology is an incredibly complicated and highly controversial phenomenon, but for our present purposes, it is perhaps sufficient to understand that: (a) the Church of Scientology is a religious system formalised out of an earlier

3 A discussion of the reception history of both publications can be found in Tart, Puthoff, and Targ 1979. For another early collection of papers of both theoretical and historical interest, see Oteri 1975.

4 For a precise description of CRV that privileges the metaphysics of non-local mind and humorously preserves the apparent impossibility of it all, see Smith 2005: 277–279.

set of beliefs and writings and later founded as a formal religion in 1953 by a science-fiction writer, L. Ron Hubbard, who appears to have had his own very real mystical and occult experiences; (b) Hubbard's *Dianetics* first appeared in a science-fiction magazine, *Astounding SF*, in May of 1950, which laid the foundations for his new religious movement, Scientology, which was incorporated three years later; (c) Hubbard's system involves a complex esoteric understanding of the human being as a trillion-year-old superbeing, called a 'Thetan', whose true nature is pure consciousness beyond—that is, 'alien' to—all matter, energy, space, and time (what Hubbard calls the MEST universe); and (d) any such 'clear' or realised Thetan is believed to manifest incredible powers that include, and indeed surpass, anything dreamed up in science fiction or superhero comics (Halperin 1983: 257–266). The powers of the fully realised Thetan are basically infinite. They include the ability to recall past lives, telepathy, telekinesis, clairvoyance, the ability to manipulate space-time, produce matter and energy, even the power to create and manage entire universes. Hubbard was fully aware of how much this all sounded like a science-fiction novel. Perhaps this is why he called his entire cosmic vision a 'space opera', the term for a well-known genre within science-fiction literature.⁵

I would add a further point here. If psychical powers are real human potentials, it is easy to see how such a belief system might play a powerfully 'permissive' or 'enabling' role in the elicitation and development of such psi abilities. It is one thing, after all, for a college sophomore who thinks of himself as a kind of biological robot to guess (or more likely, not guess) a few abstract shapes on a few boring playing cards in a laboratory run by a scientist who is out to prove all this nonsense to be nonsense. It is quite another for an aspiring Scientologist who thinks of himself as a transcendent Thetan to see across the world in order to spy on the Soviet Union at the height of the Cold War in a secret paranormal laboratory run by two parapsychologically inclined physicists, one of whom also happens to be a Scientologist. At least with respect to human performance, one often gets pretty much what one expects.

Not that one needed Scientology to expect a lot and get a lot. There were other enabling experiences and worldviews. Easily the most storied remote viewer out at Fort Meade was a man named Joseph McMoneagle. Known as RV Agent 001, McMoneagle became a remote viewer after a dramatic near-death experience in 1970 convinced him that consciousness was not restricted to the biological boundaries of the skin and skull. Not even close. The subtle body McMoneagle knew in that out-of-body experience he describes this way: he was "cruising just above the car, zipping up, down, and through the overhanging

5 My thanks to Hugh Urban for help with this material.

telephone and electric wires” as he followed the Volkswagen Beetle that was taking his body to the hospital. And the total experience climaxed in an erotic encounter with God that McMoneagle (1997: 31–32) himself compares to a “sexual peak” or “normal climax” times twelve to the thirty-third power. The mystical as the erotic again.

McMoneagle would become known for feats like accurately remote viewing the interior of a still experimental, highly secret XM-1 or Abrams tank, or describing, in great detail, the interior of an immense Soviet Naval structure in northern Russia, including a weird submarine inside that fit no present standard. McMoneagle was angered when he learned that the analysts scoffed at his work for many reasons, including the fact that the building was well off the water. McMoneagle had his ‘I told you so’ moment, though. A few months later, American spy satellites showed the never-before-seen *Typhoon* submarine (560 feet long) being floated out to sea through a channel the Soviets had recently dug from the building to the icy waters.

Fellow remote viewer Paul Smith notes that, of the thirty-three real-world assignments performed at Fort Meade by 1984, almost all of them were the work of McMoneagle. Edwin May, who worked closely with McMoneagle for years, adds to this already impressive resume by describing his friend and colleague as “the most certified psychic in the country” (May 2009). The intelligence community seems to agree. In 1984, it awarded him a *Legion of Merit* for “producing crucial and vital intelligence unavailable from any other source” (McMoneagle 1999: “About the Author”).

For our own purposes, it is also important to know that McMoneagle was closely involved with the consciousness laboratory of Robert Monroe, the business entrepreneur who, after he began spontaneously and regularly leaving his body at age 42, developed an elaborate ‘Hemi-Sync’ technology (involving interfering sound waves designed to integrate the two sides of the brain) for inducing various altered states of consciousness, from ‘Focus 10’ (the ‘mind awake, body asleep’ state) to full-blown out-of-body experiences and astral-like travels. Monroe wrote three important books on his experiences, including the classic *Journeys Out of the Body* (1971). As Smith explains it, Monroe was also involved with the army remote viewing programs from almost the beginning (without knowing it). Remote viewers were sent to his institute in the Virginian Blue Ridge Mountains to receive training.

On Metaphysics and the Military

Like any complex phenomenon, there are competing narratives here, claims and counter-claims, much debate about what actually happened, and even

more debate about what whatever happened really means. Consider, for example, another key player in this story, physicist Edwin May. An accomplished and broadly published expert on low-energy, experimental nuclear physics, May joined the SRI team in 1975. He directed the research program there from 1985 until 1991, after which he shifted his affiliation to another US Defense contractor, where he continued his involvement with government-sponsored parapsychology until 1995, when the Star Gate program out at Fort Meade was finally shut down. May's importance is signaled by the fact that he presided over an astonishing seventy percent of the total funding and a full eighty-five percent of the data collection for the government's twenty-two-year involvement in parapsychological research. Just as significantly, May has since worked closely with his counterparts in Russia and is a coauthor of a two-volume manuscript that will add yet more detail and nuance to this growing literature.

The key point here with respect to May is that he is extremely dubious about most of the more extreme claims, *and* he is convinced that at least some of the parapsychological phenomena are real. The latter, he argues, will eventually be explained through the principles of physics, that is, through the nature and behavior of matter and the structure of space-time. May describes his final conclusions as 'materialist', that is, he is convinced that the final and fundamental nature of reality is matter. Although I hardly know what to do with them, I am reminded here of Corbin's constant references to 'immaterial matter' within the imaginal realm.

Another physicist, Russell Targ, sees things differently. He is convinced that his former espionage activities hid profound metaphysical truths, and that they essentially constitute scientific proof of what he likes to call 'non-local mind'. Non-local mind is a form of consciousness "that connects us to each other and to the world at large" and "allows us to describe, experience, and influence activities occurring anywhere in space and time" (Targ and Katra 1999: 27). Accordingly, Targ has been deeply drawn to nondual Asian philosophies, like Advaita Vedanta and Tibetan Buddhism. His final conclusions can be described as 'idealist', that is, he is convinced that the final and fundamental nature of reality is mind.

As a civilian with no military or scientific background, I cannot make any claims about the details of the remote viewing history, much less the fundamental principles of physics. So I will not. However, as a historian of religions who specialises in the interpretation of unusual, extreme, or anomalous states of consciousness, many of which bear a rather obvious relationship to the phenomena of remote viewing (hence the attraction of the government remote viewers to Monroe's out-of-body training sessions), not to mention the perennial debates around materialism and idealism, I can and will make three observations here.

First, it seems important to point out that any scientific explanation of something like remote viewing must, in principle, remain an abstract, third-order account of what are, in the end, deeply personal, often fantastically meaningful, states of consciousness. Yes, there is an objective scientific perspective here, and it is absolutely crucial to the story. But there is also a subjective human perspective, a perspective, moreover, without which this history could not have taken place. May's materialism and Targ's idealism, then, need not be read as mutually exclusive options. Both may capture a key part of the larger picture. Indeed, *both* may be right, as we will see in a moment via Apollo astronaut Edgar Mitchell's 'dyadic' vision of matter and mind.

Second, we always need to keep in mind the limitations a military organisation (or a scientific method) likely puts on the expression of something like a psychical capacity. The intelligence and military monies, after all, were hardly aimed at pure research, much less at healing another's suffering or as signs of a person's sanctification (which is precisely how psychical capacities often function in the deeper history of religions). Quite the contrary, they were after highly specific results defined by the goals of the military and intelligence communities.

Smith, for example, tells the humorous story about a remote viewing session of his in which he clearly saw a donut shop in the target area, but not the assigned target itself: even though he clearly 'nailed' it, the it he nailed was not the it they were after. The session was thus deemed a failure. Put most crudely, then, we might reasonably suggest that, if in fact psychical capacities have evolved in the human species, they have probably evolved for reasons other than those the CIA or army can justify in a tax-funded research budget. As Puthoff and Targ concluded early on, something like telekinesis shows every sign of being *intrinsically* spontaneous and therefore more or less 'useless' for military and intelligence purposes. This does not mean that such phenomena are unreal or impossible, only that they cannot be controlled or replicated on command, as is required by the scientific method and the military goals.

Third, and perhaps most provocatively, I am struck by how, if we focus on the deeply personal descriptions of those who actually experienced these things, as an anthropologist or historian of religions might, what we encounter is a rich spectrum of mythical, science-fiction, and even superhero allusions. Following our opening genealogy, I want to call this the 'imaginal dimension' of the remote viewing history. Given all the superhero allusions, we might just as well call it the 'supernormal dimension'. Such patterns appear to be nearly irresistible. The same patterns, moreover, are as evident in the first-person descriptions of the remote viewers themselves as they are in the third-person analyses of critics and commentators alike.

Why is this? Is it possible that such fantastic modes of expression evoke truths about the nature of human consciousness—whatever that nature is—that the purely historical or scientific languages simply cannot touch? Is it possible that, although the imaginal descriptors are not, of course, literally true, they are in actual fact ‘more true’ than any other language currently available to us, and that we cannot simply ‘remove’ them without rendering this entire history null and void? This is precisely what our category of the imaginal would suggest, for recall that the imaginal is not a matter of a ‘subject’ observing and measuring an ‘object’, but of a paradoxical middle realm of symbol and myth through which human and divine forms of consciousness ‘make each other up’, as it were.

Consider the following. Science writer Jim Schnabel (1997: 35–36) described McMoneagle’s psychic ability to detect radioactive material within his remote viewing sessions as green and glowing as “the kinds of talents one might imagine in comic book superheroes.” Superman’s dreaded Kryptonite (literally, “of the Secret”), after all, is portrayed in precisely this way in the comics. Historically speaking, the superhero allusion is deeper than Schnabel probably realised, as it was McMoneagle’s friend and teacher of the out-of-body experience, Robert Monroe, who produced the early radio shows of “The Shadow,” a clear and unambiguous precursor of the later superhero comics (Tart 2007: x). Nor is it an accident that McMoneagle has used expressions like ‘the Verne effect’ and titled one of his books *Mind Trek*, an obvious allusion to *Star Trek*. And this is before we get to the fact that, in the early years of remote viewing, both Puthoff and Swann were members of Scientology, which, as we have noted, is a modern religious tradition created by a very well-known science-fiction writer, L. Ron Hubbard. Swann (1975a: 196) even claims that his early psychical feats would have been impossible “had there been in me an absence of the transcendental structural ideas presented by Hubbard.”

Invoking an older mystical framework, Schnabel (1997: 59, 114) has also described the remote viewers as “Shamans in Army Boots.” Even the *Washington Post* could not resist the obvious. One of its early columns (January 9, 1981) on the remote viewing program boasted the headline, “The Pentagon Invades Buck Rogers’ Turf.” Journalist Jack Anderson (2005: 13), once a harsh skeptic (in the same *Washington Post*) but now a self-described “firm believer” (“my initial reports were wide of the mark”), opens his Foreword to Smith’s history with the phrases “psychic warfare” and “straight from the pages of pulp-fantasy magazines.”⁶ Indeed. Smith himself opens up his own story a few

6 Anderson is alluding here to the work of one of his reporters, Ron McRae, who wrote an early book on remote viewing, *Mind Wars*.

pages later by explaining the unofficial but affectionate acronym that he encountered early in his own journey: TZO, or Twilight Zone Officer. He also describes what he felt immediately after being chosen as a remote viewer trainee in mythical terms. The “sense of adventure,” he writes, “of having been chosen as a wizard’s apprentice in some portentous quest, was palpable, and danced around me like bucket-toting broomsticks as I made my way home” (Smith 2005: 52–53). Smith is being playful here, but he is also being serious. And, I dare say, accurate.

Paul Smith entered the story of remote viewing a little less than halfway through its twenty-two-year run. His initial exposure to what he describes as the army’s “secret paranormal espionage program” involved a certain Major Stubblebine. In early 1983, Major General Albert Stubblebine, III, was the Commanding General of INSCOM, the US Army Intelligence and Security Command. He had created his own staff agency called the Advanced Human Technology Office, whose chief was a man named John Alexander. Alexander had a PhD in education, had been a Green Beret, and had a long-standing interest in near-death experiences. Even more significantly, he was the author of “The New Mental Battlefield,” an essay on the possible military uses of psychical powers, which “to the astonishment of many of the Army’s brass,” Smith explains, “became the cover story for the normally staid *Military Review*, the official journal of Fort Leavenworth’s Command and General Staff College.” The Army major who edited the review, it turns out, had had a near-death experience of his own and “as a result was open to possibilities that most of his peers would likely have rejected” (Smith 2005: 32). As with most things mystical, it is ultimately extreme experience that finally convinces. Pure reason and pure science are impotent before such things. In any case, “Be all that you can be” was probably much more than a catchy army slogan thrown up on hundreds of millions of television screens, posters, and T-shirts. It was also likely a remnant, a kind of public echo of an early 1980s dream of a ‘New Age Army’, a human potential special ops team with deep connections to the very paranormal research program that we are tracing here (Horowitz 2009: 257).

Major Stubblebine was inspecting the intelligence school at Fort Huachuca, Arizona, where Smith was stationed. Sitting in a gathered crowd, Smith listened to him as he described how the technological advances in intelligence gathering “cannot compare to the power that lies within our own minds. We only have to learn to tap it.” The Major then did something very odd: he threw tangled pieces of clanking silverware into the audience. Weirder still, each fork or spoon was contorted in unfamiliar, seemingly impossible ways. Smith, a trained linguist capable in German, Hebrew, and Arabic, picked up

one. “An eerie feeling washed through me, dredging up from somewhere deep in my subconscious the German word *unheimlich* [usually translated ‘uncanny’]. What I was holding in my hands was *creepy*” (Smith 2005: 20–22). The Major explained that these had all been bent and twisted by himself and his staff with nothing but the power of their minds.

Enter the Israeli superpsychic Uri Geller. After a stint in the Israeli military during the Six-Day War and before he became wealthy psychically finding oil for energy companies, Geller was world famous for doing things like bending spoons like butter, fixing watches during television broadcasts, photographing UFOs, and, in one bizarre scene, spontaneously teleporting from a street in the East Side of Manhattan through the porch screen window of his colleague Andrija Puharich’s house in Ossining, almost an hour away. Good luck with the spoons, the UFOs, and the porch crash. The fixed watch scene, at least, is almost certainly a trick, since if you can get hundreds of thousands of people to hold up their “broken” watches in front of their warm television sets, it is extremely likely that many of the watches will suddenly be “fixed” by the movement and heat of the hand and screen.

From the perspective of the SRI scientists, Geller was an artful mixture of stage magician and the real deal (as are many famous psychics and traditional shamans). They studied him at SRI for six weeks towards the end of 1972. He never managed to demonstrate his psychokinetic powers under the controlled laboratory conditions of SRI, but he did produce some fantastic effects outside the lab, including one really weird instance of teleportation with Apollo astronaut Edgar Mitchell.

As Geller reports the story, the two men were having lunch with Russell Targ in the SRI cafeteria when Geller almost broke a tooth on something in his ice cream. It turned out to be half of a miniature arrowhead. Mitchell thought it looked familiar. Back in the laboratory after lunch, everyone suddenly saw something fall on the carpet. “We picked it up, and it was the rest of the arrow. Together, the two pieces made a tie pin” (Geller 1975: 248–249).⁷ Mitchell was shocked, as he now recognised the arrowhead tie pin for what it was: *his* tie pin, which he had lost years ago. Somehow it had now returned to him, in two parts, from God only knows where.

A trick? Hardly. Not at least from Mitchell’s perspective, which differs in a number of details but not in substance. From Mitchell, for example, we learn that that same day the American astronaut had just challenged the Israeli psychic to produce a camera he had left on the moon. Mitchell knew that the camera had its own NASA serial number, which he did not

7 For a balanced and elegant study of the superpsychic, Uri Geller, see Margolis 1999.

know. So he had a kind of perfect experiment dreamed up here. Except for the fact that, as usual, the psychical event refused to follow the experimental design.

Mitchell also explains that he had lost the tie pin, along with a whole box of pins and cuff links, during one of his frequent trips to and from Cape Kennedy, well before he had even heard of Uri Geller. He also explains that there were actually *three* pieces, not two, that fell that day, as if out of nowhere: “a silver miniature hunting arrow mounted over the silver image of a longhorn sheep”; a tie bar that fell on a tile hallway floor and perfectly matched the hunting arrow emblem down to the broken solder joint (the two halves of Geller’s story); and, finally, another pearl tie pin that his brother had given him and which he had lost with the same box of jewelry. The astronaut concludes: “Three of Edgar Mitchell’s lost articles recovered telekinetically within the span of thirty minutes. But no camera. Startling phenomena, but accepted science still remained just outside the door” (Mitchell 1996: 92–93). As it always would, almost as if the phenomena themselves were keeping it out, intentionally, mischievously.

It was no accident that Mitchell and Geller were together at SRI. Mitchell had helped raise the funds to get him there. Edgar Mitchell walked on the moon on February 5, 1971. On his trip back home in the Kittyhawk command module, he became absorbed in a weightless contemplative mood before the beauty of a blue jewel planet suspended in black space and had an overwhelming experience of the universal connectedness of all things within an intelligent, evolving, self-aware universe. This “grand epiphany,” as he described it, led him the following year to found the Institute of Noetic Sciences (the same one featured in Dan Brown’s recent novel, *The Lost Symbol*) in order to pursue the study of psychical phenomena and what he would eventually call the ‘dyadic’ relationship between the material and the mystical worlds.

Such a vision is the key to assuring the survival of the species for Mitchell. Rejecting the usual trust in ‘bionic computers’ and artificial intelligence, the wise astronaut writes:

I find it more promising were we to allow the natural process of evolution to continue, aided and augmented by an informed, kindly, and intentional science that fully understands the processes of consciousness. In a dyadic scenario, the bionic processes remain the assistant, not the destiny.... A dyadic model [which posits the fundamental unity of mind and matter] predicts that evolution is ongoing but coming under conscious control. To suggest that evolution is coming under conscious control also implies that it has been under subconscious or unconscious

control...The individual who exhibits startling conscious control with mind-over-matter processes represents only the tip of an iceberg in an aware and intentional sea. The untapped potential that lies just under the surface is almost incomprehensible at our current stage of evolution.

MITCHELL 1996: 186–187

What he has in mind in regards to “the individual who exhibits startling conscious control with mind-over-matter processes” are individuals like Uri Geller and Ted Owens, or “the PK-Man” or Psycho-Kinetic Man with whom he also worked (Mishlove 2000). Geller or no Geller, Mitchell’s vision of a ‘dyadic scenario’ in which mind and matter are two sides of the same fundamental and evolving super-reality is an almost perfect translation into modern scientific language of the imaginal and the supernormal as we have them in the Myers/Flournoy/Jung/Corbin lineage sketched above.

These imaginal and supernormal patterns, moreover, are just as bright and just as bold in the figure and writings of Ingo Swann. Within the remote viewing community, Swann is a kind of living legend whose apparent abilities and provocative ideas attract sci-fi and superhero adjectives like some supermagnet. Jim Schnabel, for example, includes a chapter on Swann with a *Star Wars* title, “Obi-Swann,” which appropriately quotes the seer to the effect that, “The potential is there, just like Obi-Wan Kenobi said it was.” Another author, John Wilhelm, wrote a remarkably early book on Swann, Geller, and Price with the title *The Search for Superman*.

Playful exaggerations? Playful, yes. Exaggerations, no. Not at least in the light of what Swann himself has written. The artist-seer, for example, has written extensively about what he calls the “superpowers of the human biomind.” This is also the title of his present website, which includes a section entitled, “Can the Superpowers Be Trained?” The short answer, of course, is Yes. Towards this end, Swann has also published, among other things:

- an early autobiography filled with remarkable stories, including a particularly delightful one about a telepathic pet chinchilla who set him on his path: *To Kiss Earth Good-Bye* (1975b);
- a book about the paranormal, apocalyptic, and possible holographic dimensions of twenty-two historical Marian apparitions: *The Great Apparitions of Mary* (1996);
- a second autobiography focusing on alien-human communication (including a sexy alien Swann encountered in an LA grocery store) and the government’s knowledge and denial of the same: *Penetration: The Question of Extraterrestrial and Human Telepathy* (1998);

- and, perhaps most provocatively of all, a very red book about “human energetics,” basically, the Western history of metaphysical energies we traced under “Radiation,” with a focus on the submerged erotics of the psychical research tradition and intuitive comparative gestures towards Indian Tantra and Chinese Taoism: *Psychic Sexuality: The Bio-Psychic “Anatomy” of Sexual Energies* (1999).

The last book is one of the most insightful works I have come across on the unity of what Swann calls sexual, creative, and power energies. Its basic theme is the same theme I have been writing about for almost twenty years now, namely, that there is a profound (always censored and denied) connection, even identity, between mystical and erotic experience (another version of Mitchell’s dyadic universe), and that the subtle but incredibly powerful energies that produce both types of experience are not simply pious ‘metaphors’ or social ‘discourses’ relative to this or that culture, but *real forces* at work in every human being on the planet. Put in Swann’s unique language, such a ‘Force’ is the morphing basis of all “superpowers of the human biomind.” The Force might explode in an orgasm, a creative work of art, a clairvoyant power-perception, or in a near-death experience and erotically charged encounter with a loving God, but it is always and everywhere the same ‘thing’. Which, of course, is not a thing at all, but *us*.

Sexual-mystical energies aside, what is my point about the remote viewing literature, taken as a whole now, instead of as this or that author or book? My point is this: if we are going to understand—and I mean *really* understand—something like the history of remote viewing, we need to acknowledge the subjective experiences and belief systems of the remote viewers themselves with as much unblinking honesty as we do the objective science of the physics, the mathematical models, and the laboratory protocols. If the world really is ‘dyadic’, we must take the subjective side of the coin as seriously as the objective side. And with respect to the subjective-mental side of the dyad, *the imaginal is key*. Put more bluntly, the simple truth is that you don’t get Joseph McMoneagle without the super-erotic mystical encounter with God, nor do you get Ingo Swann without the art, the aliens, and the psychic sexuality. It’s *all* part of the Super-Story.

In terms of bodily practices as spiritual disciplines, the roles of sketching and artistic ‘right-brain’ skills also need flagging here with respect to the central role of the imagination within these paranormal projects. As Smith (2005: 252–253) puts it with his usual clarity, “there is more art than science to this process.” And it helps to *be* an artist.

The researchers recognised early on that what the remote viewer sketched through the kinesthetic right-brain wisdom of the hand was often much more accurate than what he or she said through the left-brain's rational and verbal modes. The latter processes, they came to conclude, could in fact really mess things up, through what Swann came to call AOL, or analytic overlay. And it was Swann again who took this basic, right-brain insight and developed it into a very specific drawing technique involving the initial sensing of an uncanny 'aesthetic impact' (or AI) and the subsequent sketching of 'ideograms', basically symbolic doodles that, according to his theory, filtered through the aperture of the right brain as an early 'gestalt' or 'symbolic whole' of what was coming through the signal line from the Matrix—in essence, *sketching as a psychical technique*.

A number of writers have traced the origins of remote viewing back to the mysterious and essentially occult processes of artistic creativity and, in particular, to the art of telepathic drawing as it was explored in a 1946 Paris lecture at the Sorbonne by René Warcollier. Or, a bit further back, to Upton Sinclair's *Mental Radio* (1930), which describes Sinclair's telepathic drawing experiments with his wife, Mary Craig. Telepathic drawing certainly goes further back than this, however. As a close cousin of automatic writing, psychical drawings were well known already in the nineteenth century. F.W.H. Myers, for example, includes a set of ten such drawings in his chapter on sensory automatisms in *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* (1903). We are back to the London Society for Psychical Research. We are back to the beginning of our story, which is my point.

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Psychics, Skeptics, and Popular Culture

Douglas E. Cowan

Hey, Sam, who do you think is the hotter psychic? Patricia Arquette, Jennifer Love Hewitt, or you?

DEAN WINCHESTER, "Asylum," *Supernatural*

Three Scenes from the Year of the Primetime Paranormal

Scene One. Clutching her chest, Allison DuBois (Patricia Arquette) sits bolt upright in bed, frightened and alarmed. As she calms down, her breathing gradually returns to normal. "It was just a dream, I guess," she says, as much to convince herself as her husband. While he drifts back to sleep, another voice asks from off-screen, "You sure you're OK?" Allison looks up and the camera cuts to a group of people gathered at the foot of her bed: an old man in a sweater-vest, a young boy with a bicycle helmet, a woman in a hospital gown holding on to an IV stand, and many others. Allison scowls slightly, "I *said* I'm OK." "OK," responds her husband, nearly asleep again and unaware of their nocturnal visitors. "OK," says the old man, shrugging his shoulders as the screen fades to black. In this, the second scene of *Medium's* pilot episode (and throughout the various story arcs of its six-season run), Allison's simple words "I guess" are key: is it just a dream, little more than psychological seepage from the day's events leaking into our night's attempt at rest, or is it something else, a psychic event, a precognitive vision, a desperate cry for help from the other side of death?

Scene Two. Like Allison, *Ghost Whisperer* Melinda Gordon (Jennifer Love Hewitt) has inherited a generational ability to see and communicate with earthbound spirits. They come to her seeking help, unsure how to move on in death until their business with the living is finished. In its pilot episode, Melinda visits a Veterans of Foreign Wars post in an attempt to help a soldier who died in Vietnam but is known to his family only as missing in action. As Joe the VFW manager leaves the room to search his records, Melinda notices an older woman seated by the wall. The woman smiles and Melinda's eyes widen. Astonished, the woman gets up as Melinda looks conspicuously...elsewhere.

WOMAN

You can see me, can't you? Oh, come on, you can too see me. I'm not blind.

MELINDA

All right, yes, yes, I can see you. But, you know what, it's really not a good time.

WOMAN

It's a small thing. You have to tell Joe the key to the safe deposit box is in the pocket of my blue raincoat. I left it there the last time I had it and there's so many papers and insurance things—

MELINDA

How am I going to tell him something like that? I mean, what's he going to think?

WOMAN

Excuse me, I am the one who's been hanging around here for who knows how long trying to find some way to let him know, so who has the bigger problem, you or me?

Scene Three. Few places have figured so prominently in Western occult fiction as the mental institution. From the insane asylum adjacent to Dracula's English home at Carfax Abbey to the dread Arkham Sanatorium in H.P. Lovecraft's "The Thing on the Doorstep," legends of haunted asylums abound, and many believe that the veil between the worlds is rent in the tormented minds of the inmates. In *Supernatural's* eponymous first-season episode, "Asylum," brothers Sam and Dean Winchester (Jared Padalecki and Jensen Ackles) rescue two teenagers from the derelict Roosevelt Asylum. Vengeful spirits of the criminally insane, men and women who were used in torturous medical experiments by the institution's Chief of Staff, Dr. Ellicott, have supernaturally sealed the infamous South Wing, trapping Sam, Dean, and the teens inside. In order to put the angry revenant to rest and to escape the asylum, the brothers must find the source of the conflict—in this case, the remains of Dr. Ellicott. In what is presented throughout the series as a fairly routine ritual, they are required to burn and salt Ellicott's bones in order to release his spirit and those of his victims. As the first season progresses, viewers learn that Sam, the younger brother, is developing a variety of paranormal talents, including the ability to sense the presence of supernatural entities. As they search the asylum's dark, cluttered hallways, Dean turns to his brother and with the intertextuality crucial to any interpretation of popular culture asks, "Hey, Sam, who do you think is the hotter psychic? Patricia Arquette, Jennifer Love Hewitt, or you?"

If nothing else, for American network television 2005 was the year of the primetime paranormal, premiering an unprecedented six series predicated on unexplained phenomena. Three of these—*Surface* (NBC), *Threshold* (CBS), and *Invasion* (ABC)—dealt with extraterrestrial visitation of one kind or another, while three others—*Medium* (NBC), *Ghost Whisperer* (CBS), and *Supernatural* (WB)—considered more earthbound experiences of the paranormal. Although opinion polls over the last two decades indicate significant levels of belief in either the possibility or the reality of extraterrestrial intelligence and contact (for example, Hargrove and Stempel 2008; Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 2002), and television series based on ET contact have done well in the past (Cowan 2010), none of the alien-themed shows from 2005 survived its first season. *Threshold*, which was easily the smartest of the three, was cancelled after only thirteen episodes, while the most emotionally appealing, *Invasion*, left viewers hanging at the end of the season. The less said about *Surface* the better. Conversely, *Medium* ran for six seasons and *Ghost Whisperer* for five. As I write this chapter in the summer of 2014, *Supernatural* is beginning its tenth season and shows little sign of slowing down.

Based initially on the experiences of real-life psychic Allison DuBois, *Medium* recounts the adventures of a suburban Phoenix wife and mother who uses her psychic talents (few psychics in these series regard them as ‘gifts’) to help law enforcement solve some of their more perplexing cases. In the pilot, for example, DuBois is recruited by the Texas Rangers when her psychic dreams match the details of an unsolved homicide. *Ghost Whisperer*, on the other hand, is less a psychic detective show than adventures in supernatural social work, that is, less a paranormal *Law and Order* than an updated version of *Touched by an Angel*. Based in part on the work of ‘spirit communicators’ James van Praagh and Mary Ann Winkowski, both of whom were involved in the production of the show, Gordon helps earthbound spirits understand the reasons they have not completed crossing over from life into death, why they remain here and have not gone on ‘into the light’. Finally, although ghosts and spirit-communication form only a part of the narrative mix, and there are no specific off-screen inspirations for the main characters, *Supernatural* is *The Hardy Boys* meets *The X-Files* (with more than a touch of *Charmed* thrown in for good measure). In the wake of their mother’s death at the hands of a demon and their father’s obsessive hunt for her killer, the Winchester brothers tour the country in a vintage 1967 Chevy Impala investigating—and usually eliminating—all manner of supernatural evil. Besides the Roosevelt revenant, in the first few episodes, they face a wendigo (a creature from Algonquin mythology), a ‘lady in white’ (the ghost of a young woman who died under tragic, often romantic circumstances), and the same demon that murdered their mother so many

years ago. While each series features a certain amount of skepticism as part of its narrative frame, *Medium*, *Ghost Whisperer*, and *Supernatural* all take their paranormal landscapes for granted and none of their main characters questions the reality of what they experience. For them, the paranormal is, to use William James's (1971 [1890]: 143–145) phrase, the “paramount reality” of the experiencing self.

For others, though, this is precisely the problem. Although few might recognise them as combatants, *Medium*, *Ghost Whisperer*, and *Supernatural* are part of a culture war that has been ongoing in North America and Western Europe for well over a century. Prominent atheists Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens may have fired some of its most recent shots in terms of religion more generally, but the battle between psychics and skeptics was joined with the popular rise of Spiritualism in the late nineteenth century. Since then, one of the principal front lines in this conflict has been the issue of communication with discarnate entities—whether ghosts, spirit guides, angels, or aliens (see Brown 1997; Klimo 1998; Zusne and Jones 1989). The popular *Coast to Coast AM* radio show, hosted for many years by Art Bell and now by George Noory, regularly features channels, mediums, and other psychic practitioners, while magazines such as *The Skeptical Inquirer*, *Skeptic*, and to a somewhat lesser degree *Free Inquiry* seek to debunk precisely these phenomena. *Sedona: The Journal of Emergence* purports to be entirely channeled and features monthly messages from entities such as “Sarrinn and the Masters of Light,” “Laiolin and the Arcturian Crop Circle Makers,” the Archangels Michael and Metatron, and even someone called “Dr. Peebles.” British publications such as *Beyond Magazine* and *Paranormal* habitually run stories about encounters with discarnate entities. In one issue, for example, *Beyond* published a multipart article on “How to Encounter and Communicate with Ghosts,” including several pages of suggestions for a ghost hunter's tool kit (Eason 2007; for a skeptical send-up of this, see Desmoreaux 2008). Each issue of *Paranormal* includes a gallery of alleged ghost photographs submitted by readers, most depicting ‘orbs’—anomalous images that believers contend are the coherent energy patterns of discarnate entities, but which skeptics dismiss as light flare reflected off dust motes, rain drops, and, occasionally, the camera strap (see Pool 2004; Nickell 1996). Since the late 1990s, American television programs such as *Crossing over with John Edward* (aired 1999–2004), *Beyond with James van Praagh* (which lasted only a few episodes in late 2002), and the weekly appearances of Sylvia Browne on *The Montel Williams Show* raised psychic phenomena from the dead of night to the light of afternoon prime time.

Channeling, mediumship, and communication with discarnate entities have never been far from the surface of popular culture in North America and

Western Europe. Thus, rather than simply survey these phenomena in cinema, television, and other pop cultural forms, this chapter explores them in terms of the contours of the psychic-skeptic conflict. Three principal aspects shape this encounter: (a) the infotainment continuum of mediumistic communication; (b) the skeptical challenge to such communication; and (c) the social psychological processes of reality-maintenance for those who continue to believe in discarnate entities despite what skeptics present as disconfirming evidence. Put differently, how is belief in discarnate communication presented in popular culture, how is it contested, and why do people continue to put their trust in the supernatural messages of mediums and ghost whisperers?

Dead-Speak and Popular Culture

It's no secret that for millennia we have sought advice from the dead, believing that those who have 'crossed over' somehow gain increased access to information about the past, present, and future—and can be induced to share that with us. Although he initially “expelled the medium and spiritists from the land” of Israel, 1 Samuel 28 details how when threatened by a vast Philistine army King Saul sought advice from the medium of Endor, who called up the spirit of the prophet Samuel. Many hundreds of years later, appearing on the cold ramparts of his Danish castle, the ghost of Hamlet's father tries to communicate the treachery that led to his murder, and sets the stage for some of the most famous scenes in the English-speaking theater. Shamans from indigenous cultures around the world travel to the spirit realm in search of guidance and healing, and the New Age shamanic industry (beginning with Michael Harner in 1980) purports to train Westerners in these techniques and practices.

During the late nineteenth century, as popular interest in Spiritualism rose, myriad psychics, mediums, and channels claimed to be able to contact the dead on behalf of the living. For at least four centuries, ghost stories have arguably been the most popular form of literary and cinematic horror. From the haunted abbeys and choir lofts of M.R. James to the decaying New England backwaters of H.P. Lovecraft, from Pu Songling's ghostly city in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (2006 [1766]) to *Kwaidan*, Lafcadio Hearn's collection of classical Japanese ghost stories (2006 [1907]), the dead have never been far from the living. With the advent of cinema, ghost stories gained a new medium and new life, ranging from the slapstick comedy of Hong Kong kung fu ghost stories to J-horror offerings such as *Ringu* (“The Ring” 1998) and *Ju-on* (“The Grudge,” 2000; see Cowan 2008, 126–133; Kalat 2007; Schneider 2003).

Many of these stories have themes we find reprised in *Medium* and *Ghost Whisperer*, what I have called elsewhere “caught dead scenarios”—pop culture products that “turn on whether the deceased actually realizes he or she has died, and the process by which such realization occurs” (Cowan 2008: 128). Spirits trapped for whatever reason require the help of the living to move on into death. It’s important to note, though, that discarnate communication—especially of the ‘caught dead’ variety—has not always been interpreted as horrific. Its popularity is rarely out of fashion and it regularly crosses genres that range from horror (see *Carnival of Souls*, 1962) to comedy (see *Beetlejuice*, 1988), from the supernatural thriller (see *The Sixth Sense*, 1999) to the dramatic love story (see *Ghost*, 1990).

In 1947, for example, *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*, a light romantic comedy about the relationship between a young English widow and a deceased sea captain, won an Academy Award for cinematography and is listed among the American Film Institute’s one hundred greatest cinematic love stories. Two decades later, the plot was revived as a situation comedy on both ABC and NBC. Nearly a generation after that, Jerry Zucker’s *Ghost* won two Academy Awards—Whoopi Goldberg for Best Supporting Actress and Best Screenplay—and was nominated for three others, including Best Picture. Although it was shut out on award night, in 1999 M. Night Shyamalan’s *The Sixth Sense* was nominated for all of Oscar’s ‘big six’: Best Actor, Actress, Director, Film Editor, Screenplay, and Best Picture.

Offscreen, bookstore shelves around the world groan with tales of ghostly encounters and how-to books for would-be spirit communicators. Well-known psychics such as John Edward (1998; 2001), James van Praagh (1997; 2008), and Sylvia Browne (2000; 2010)—as well as relative newcomers Allison DuBois (2004) and Maureen Hancock (2011)—have published numerous books about their experiences. Local history and paranormal societies often publish regional ‘ghost walk’ or ‘haunted house’ guidebooks (for example, Boyle 1998), while tour companies and individual paranormal entrepreneurs offer guided ghost tours of cemeteries, museums, and mansions (for example, Pool 2004). For those who want a more personal experience, a number of books even offer to teach you *How to Communicate with Your Departed Loved Ones in Seven Easy Steps* (Keller 2003) and *How to Talk to the Other Side* (Fearn 2002).

Once again, though, others are not so sure.

Seeing Spooks with a Skeptical Eye

For skeptics, book titles such as *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Communicating with Spirits* (Berkowitz and Romaine 2003) or *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to*

Being Psychic (Robinson and Carlson-Finnerty 1999) are little more than tautologies, redundant flotsam on the rising cultural tide of foolishness and gullibility. Skeptics such as Joe Nickell, Ryan Shaffer, and James Randi, for example, are convinced that the majority of psychic phenomena, including but not limited to most instances of channeling and mediumship, are quite simply bogus. Like the original *Scooby-doo* gang, they seek to expose the ghost-of-the-week for the human charlatan that it is. Whether the psychics in question believe in their abilities or not, whether they are genuinely deluded or consciously fraudulent, is not the issue. Whatever the case, skeptics are clear that these men and women are *not* in contact with ghosts, spirits, or discarnate entities of any kind. They cannot predict the future; they cannot read a past to which they were not party; they cannot reveal the location of lost keys, soldiers missing in action, nor anything else claimed by 'spirit communicators' from the Fox sisters to the *Psychic in Suburbia*. Rather, those who prey on the bereaved and naïve use the venerable methods of stage magic to deceive their victims, convincing them of a truth that simply cannot be.

Joe Nickell, who investigates all manner of alleged psychic phenomena and contributes regularly to *The Skeptical Inquirer* (see for example, 2001; 2010a; 2010b) has studied the work of, among others, John Edward, whom he pronounces a "spiritual huckster," and the "real Ghost Whisperer" Mary Ann Winkowski, who he concludes is "participating in elaborate encounters of her own imagination" (2010b, 17). In 2001, when *Crossing Over with John Edward* was at the height of its popularity, Nickell was asked by NBC's *Dateline* to evaluate the medium's performance: in short, "Was he really talking to the dead?" (Nickel 2001: 19). Not really, Nickell concludes, pointing out that Edward uses a variety of standard stage illusionist tricks, such as 'cold reading', bolstered by plainly fraudulent instances of 'hot reading'. In the former, "the 'psychic' can obtain clues by observing dress and body language (noting expressions that indicate when one is on or off track), asking questions (which if correct will appear as 'hits' but otherwise will seem innocent queries), and inviting the subject to interpret the vague statements offered" (Nickell, 2001: 20). Hot reading, on the other hand, uses a variety of surreptitious means to gather information about a subject, information that is later presented as revelation from beyond the grave. In the past, psychics have employed hidden microphones, confederates stationed behind false walls, or researching subjects prior to the alleged reading. Following his investigation, Nickell (2001: 21) reported that "Edward was actually caught in an attempt to pass off previously gained knowledge as spirit revelation."

Mediums, channels, and psychics also increase their credibility by artificially inflating the importance of supposed hits during a cold reading,

“accentuating the positive,” as Johnny Mercer would have it, even as they “eliminate the negative.” As Nickell (2001: 21) found, however, “in the case of Edward, my analysis of 125 statements or pseudostatements (i.e., questions) he made on a *Larry King Live* program (June 19, 1998) showed that he was incorrect about as often as he was right and his hits were mostly weak ones.” However wide of the mark, misses are downplayed, ignored entirely, or deferred, in which case Edward suggests “that people who cannot acknowledge a hit may find a connection later” (Nickell 2001: 22). For a daily television program, even one that purports to be taped live, all these processes are augmented in post-production. Negative responses from the audience are simply edited out and, in some cases, positive responses are rearranged to fit the mediumistic narrative (Jaroff 2001). Not surprisingly, Nickell evaluated Edward’s performance an utter failure and Edward himself a fraud.

One of what we might call the new generation of skeptics, Ryan Shaffer has tracked the success and failure rate of psychics Allison DuBois and Sylvia Browne, concluding that, like John Edward, both women fail in their predictions far more often than they succeed and even when they do ‘hit’ these are far more easily explained by mundane means than supernatural ones (Shaffer and Jadwiczok 2010; Shaffer 2011). Unlike Edward, however, DuBois claims to have assisted law enforcement on over 150 cases and always been able to help them in some way. For Shaffer, however, her claims simply don’t hold up to scrutiny. “In response to questions about skeptics,” he writes, “DuBois told the *Sacramento Bee*: ‘I’m very proud of what I do.’” Though, as Shaffer (2011: 16) points out trenchantly, “Perhaps DuBois is proud of what she does, but that doesn’t change the lack of proof for her claims.”

In “’Twas brillig...,” his regular column for *Skeptic* magazine, professional stage conjuror and arch-skeptic James Randi, arguably the most dogged of those who bait and denounce alleged psychics, chronicles the failures and foibles of numerous mediums, including the (in)famous Sylvia Browne (d. 2013). For many years, Browne was a regular guest on what Randi mocks as “the *Montel Williams’ Psychic Promotion Hour*.” People waited in line for hours to get tickets to be part of the studio audience on days when Browne appeared. She would offer reading for selected audience members, answer questions about deceased friends and relatives, and purport to solve long-standing mysteries.

In one notorious 2003 case, the parents of Shawn Hornbeck were guests on a *Montel* episode with Sylvia Browne. At that time, Shawn was an eleven-year old Missouri boy who had been missing for nearly six months. All regular investigative channels had proved futile, so in desperation Shawn’s mother and stepfather turned to the paranormal. Browne faced these terrified parents and told them that their son could be found “in a wooded area near two jagged

boulders" southwest of their home (Cooper 2007). When asked, "Is he still with us?" she shook her head. "No." One can only imagine their grief at that point.

As it turned out, though, Browne was wrong about every detail of the case. Shawn was not dead but alive, and he would be reunited with his parents nearly four years later. He was not in a wooded area southwest of their home, but had been held captive in a suburban apartment nearly one hundred miles in the opposite direction. He was kidnapped by a man who bore absolutely no resemblance to the suspect she described. When CNN's Anderson Cooper (2007) reviewed Browne's involvement in the case, Browne responded to the wave of criticism on her website: "Those who choose to believe in our philosophy will continue to do so because of their own convictions. Those who negate it after one human error never truly embraced our philosophy anyway and that's OK."

Despite this lackluster explanation, Browne's popularity was not diminished—nor was Randi's pursuit of her. In 2005, Browne released a slim book entitled *Animals on the Other Side*, written with her son, Chris Dufresne (Browne and Dufresne 2005), and which she followed up a few years later with *All Pets Go to Heaven: The Spiritual Lives of the Animals We Love* (Browne 2009). Reviewing the former in his column, Randi points out that "in addition to all of today's animals," Browne writes "animals that have existed throughout the history of the world are there as well, such as dinosaurs, unicorns, griffins, and other species." To which Randi adds sardonically, "Sylvia, you forgot angels, ewoks, Harry Potter and Smurfs" (Randi 2005: 6). Less than a year after Michael Jackson's death, Browne published *Afterlives of the Rich and Famous* (2011), in which, according to Randi (2011: 8), "she dismisses anything like logic and/or rationality."

Rather than simply dispute or ridicule the claims of alleged psychics, however, for over forty years Randi has, as it were, put his money where his mouth is. Through the James Randi Educational Foundation, since 1968 Randi has offered psychics the opportunity to prove their abilities in exchange for a significant windfall. Starting as a radio offer to pay any psychic who could prove his or her abilities one hundred dollars, the Randi challenge now offers one million dollars in negotiable bonds for proof of psychic powers. To date, according to Randi's website (www.randi.org), over 650 people have applied to take the challenge, but none has passed the preliminary test—simple demonstration of a paranormal ability—in order to move on the formal, controlled test that would determine the prize.

In 2001, during a joint interview with Randi on CNN's *Larry King Live*, Sylvia Browne, whom Randi calls "the big operator in this field" (2007), agreed to take up the challenge, something King promised to facilitate through his program.

A decade later, however, she had yet to follow through on her commitment. She didn't need the money, she told interviewers, or she believed that the Randi Foundation did not actually have the funds. Further, reprising a theme common among psychics when challenged, she declared that she had nothing to prove to anyone. "Those who choose to believe in our philosophy," that is, "will continue to do so because of their own convictions"—and despite any credible evidence.

During a 2007 TED talk, Randi scoffed at Browne's most pathetic excuse: she did not know how to contact him to proceed with the challenge. "Duh!" Randi tells the audience, "A professional psychic who speaks to dead people, she can't reach me? I'm alive, you may have noticed" (Randi 2007). More seriously, though, Randi denounces the entire psychic enterprise as practiced by Browne and enabled by celebrities such as Montel Williams as "a cruel, vicious, conscience-less game that these people play and they take advantage of the innocent, the naïve, the grieving, the needy people out there." It is a "cruel farce," Randi (2007) reiterates, and "these people need to be stopped."

Why, then, do people believe, and continue to believe? In "The Persistent Popularity of the Paranormal," anthropologist James Lett lists four principal reasons for the persistence of belief in the paranormal, despite educational and skeptical attempts to dissuade, debunk, and demystify these phenomena: (a) "the uncertainty of the public"—that is, rapid and sweeping changes in social and cultural norms that leave people adrift in a search for meaning and security; (b) "the unreliability of the media," which "unashamedly [fuels] the public passion for the paranormal" (Lett 1998 [1992]: 189); (c) "the inadequacy of the educational system," which, Lett contends, teaches a body of knowledge rather than a desire for critical thinking; and (d) "the inaccuracy of the American worldview"—"dubious assumptions about the nature of reality" that nevertheless are shared by a great many Americans (Lett 1998 [1992]: 192). While one might question Lett's implication that popular media has any sense of responsibility in terms of product reliability over shareholder profit, he correctly identifies one of the principal pop cultural processes in the maintenance and ongoing reinforcement of paranormal belief, what I call the 'infotainment continuum'.

The Infotainment Continuum: Blurring the Boundaries of Fiction and Reality

Few people, I suspect, believe that *Casper the Friendly Ghost* is based on real-life events. But what about fictional programs, such as *Medium* and *Ghost*

Whisperer, that do claim to be based on real life? And what about other pop culture products—talk shows, documentaries, investigative programming, and so-called reality television—that purport to present actual paranormal events experienced by real people?

Before Allison's disturbing dream and nocturnal visitation, for example, a black screen opens *Medium's* pilot episode with the words: "There really is an Allison..." The screen goes blank, then: "Really." Millions of *Ghost Whisperer* fans may not know that Melinda Gordon is based on Mary Ann Winkowski, but *Medium* fans can purchase books by the real Allison DuBois, visit her website, watch her television interviews and appearances—not all of which are flattering. In 2010, for example, DuBois made a guest appearance on Bravo TV's 'reality' series, *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*. During the episode, "The Dinner Party from Hell," to which DuBois had been invited by her friend Camille Grammer (a cast regular and then-wife of executive producer Kelsey Grammer), DuBois drew awkwardly on an electronic cigarette and made consistently snide remarks about the other cast members when they asked about her abilities. Eventually, she revealed, "I can tell you when she's going to die and what's going to happen to her family. I love that about me" (*Real Housewives* 2011). The point here is not that DuBois displayed a distinctly unattractive side of herself—we all have those—but that her appearance on an allegedly nonfictional program contributed to the blurring of boundaries between the fictional *Medium* and the real Allison. Where, audiences might wonder, does one end and the other begin? Consider the case of Maureen Hancock.

Like DuBois, Hancock is a suburban wife and mother who, when not shooting her 'reality' television show *Psychic in Suburbia* for NBC's Style Network, works as a litigation manager for Boston's Logan Airport. Interviewed by *American Morning's* Kiran Chetry to promote her book and television program, she reveals a number of aspects of the culture war between psychics and skeptics, and the manner in which the media contribute to the infotainment problem.

The segment begins with Hancock recalling an episode in a Boston firehouse, with clips from *Psychic in Suburbia*. She wanders around the room and, while looking at a sign, reveals that a voice is telling her, "Grab the E and the D." She asks if "Ed" or "Eddie" means anything to the firefighters present—never mind that Edward is a very common American name and is almost always shortened to Ed or Eddie. Like the other professional psychics, she does not reveal a fact: she asks a question, then validates the response. Apparently, a firefighter named Eddie passed away recently. "He likes to be here," she tells them, "watching over you guys" (Chetry 2011). Once again, skeptics would argue that this is nothing more than common sense if a person knows anything

about the intensely protective subculture of first responders. Not only is this precisely the kind of sentiment one might expect in this environment, it is the one with which other first responders would almost certainly resonate. What we are not shown in the edited segment, of course, are the non-hits, the questions or suggestions that received no validation or were simply wrong. Instead, Hancock gushes, "One of them said, 'You know, I was an atheist. I didn't even believe in God. And she just turned my whole world upside down.'" To which Chetry, the dutifully supportive interviewer, responds, "That's unbelievable!"—though she clearly does not mean that what Hancock has just said is unbelievable.

Like Winkowski, Hancock deflects criticism of her talents, claiming to be a practicing Roman Catholic and part of a parish whose priest believes that hers is a gift of the Holy Spirit. When Chetry suggests that skeptics could argue Hancock gets her 'impressions' from a Google search, she replies, "I say to them, 'Google yourself, you're not that interesting.'" Although her responses are not answers—they do not address the key issues of paranormal ability—Hancock reiterates, "I come up with things are just not out there." Moreover, all her work is volunteer, "so that sets me apart" (Chetry 2011)—but it still doesn't answer the basic skeptic question: are you for real?

Two particular aspects of this interview are worth noting in the context of the infotainment continuum. First, pop culture replicates successful products far more than it innovates them. That is, without the success of television series such as *Medium* and *Ghost Whisperer*, without the constant media validation given to psychics such as Sylvia Browne and John Edward, new talent such as Maureen Hancock would have a much more difficult time gaining acceptance and, let's be clear, employment. Hancock may state breezily that her work is all volunteer, but it's doubtful she is pursuing *Psychic in Suburbia* for free.

Second, her appearance on CNN, one of the most watched television networks in the world, and on one of its very popular morning talk shows, demonstrates what Randi criticises as media collusion in the promotion of psychic nonsense. Merely by entertaining Hancock as a guest, by treating her claims as though they are in the least credible, by offering only token skepticism and taking Hancock's replies without rebuttal, Chetry reinforces Hancock's status as a genuine psychic, elevates her prominence as a pop culture product, and contributes to her place as an authoritative voice on the issue of paranormal contact with the dead. For skeptics such as Randi (2007), this is precisely the kind of belief in "the paranormal, the occult, and the supernatural, all of this total nonsense, this medieval thinking," for which the media must assume responsibility. "Largely, it's the media who are to blame for this sort of thing,"

he told the TED audience. “They shamelessly promote all kinds of nonsense of this sort because it pleases the sponsors. It’s the bottom line, the dollar line, that’s what they’re looking at” (Randi 2007). By all accounts, it seems to be a very lucrative bottom line.

In her excellent study, *Paranormal Media*, communications scholar Annette Hill (2011; see also Goode 2000) describes the growing array of paranormally themed pop culture products, including what she calls television programming for “armchair ghost hunters.” Television series include: *Most Haunted* (Living), *Ghost Hunters* (SyFy), *Ghosthunters* (Discovery), the youth-oriented *Ghost Trackers* (YTV), and a variety of one-off documentaries on this or that haunted house, castle, hotel, or asylum. In 2007 BBC’s Channel 5 launched its *Psychic Challenge* and eventually named Diane Lazarus (no pun intended, I’m sure), a Welsh wife and mother, as “Britain’s Best Psychic” (Hollocks 2007). Although Randi is undoubtedly correct that media producers are far more interested in the health of the corporate bottom line than the reality of non-corporeal communication, he and his colleagues less often consider why the demand for this kind of pop culture product remains so high.

Psychics, Skeptics, and the Problem of Democratic Discourse

In her discussion of “Aliens in the Academy,” literature scholar Bridget Cowlishaw (2004: 593) describes “the contemporary American taste for ‘democratic’ discourse,” that is, “discourse that privileges knowledge derived from personal experience rather than from objective reasoning, a way of knowing that requires no credentials but the ability to render oneself a speaking subject.” This notion of ‘democratic discourse’ is exactly how aspects of the infotainment continuum inform the divide between psychics and skeptics, between those willing to give credence to the former despite the latter’s best efforts to dissuade them. Unwilling simply to discount what another claims as his or her experience, especially when that would imply that the other person is deliberately lying, we often accept the concept that belief in something is tantamount to evidence for that thing. Of course, this is not necessarily true, and that is the skeptic’s point: belief in something, no matter how deeply rooted or firmly held, is not sufficient evidence for the reality of that thing. Indeed, it is evidence for little more than what I have called elsewhere “the Pandora problem of open source religion” (Cowan 2005: 49–50). That is, when subjective experience is raised to the level of personal ontology, tensions among dreams, desires, individual sentiment, and empirical facts inevitably arise.

Moreover, given the infotainment continuum, the blurring of boundaries between fiction and reality that makes it even more difficult for the average viewer to discern where one ends and the other begins, the “ability to render oneself a speaking subject” is often a function of programming economics. As Randi (2007) points out in his TED talk, “Montel Williams is an intelligent man....he’s intelligent, he’s smart, he knows what Sylvia Browne is doing. But he doesn’t give a damn! He just doesn’t care, because the bottom line is the sponsors love it and he will expose her to television publicity all the time.” With advertisers willing to underwrite Browne’s weekly appearance on *Montel*, she was able to render herself a speaking subject, an authoritative voice in the mediumistic debate. Indeed, rather than answer critics such as Nickell, Shaffer, and Randi, mediums and psychics often assume what to them appears the moral high ground, refusing to dignify criticism with a response and adverting instead to their belief in the importance of what they do and the faith others place in them.

Two aspects of this are important for consideration in terms of the way reality is constructed along the contours of the battle between psychics and skeptics: (a) the domains of evidence operant in different ‘epistemic communities’ (Holzner 1968: 68–71), and (b) the social psychological processes that underpin those domains of evidence and reinforce each community’s plausibility structures and legitimation strategies (Berger and Luckmann 1967: 110–146, 174). As I noted in my discussion of Christian countercult apologists, “for any group, specialized social and cognitive mechanisms are required to establish and reinforce the essential correctness of the subjective reality the group inhabits” (Cowan 2003: 43).

First, the weight and species of evidence required to convince skeptics that mediums are legitimately in contact with discarnate entities is very different from what would satisfy someone whose worldview—whose ‘paramount reality’—already includes the possibility of communication with ghosts, spirit guides, angels, and aliens. For skeptics, the dictum ‘extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence’—known as ‘the Sagan Standard’ (1980), although it almost certainly did not originate with him (Truzzi, 1978)—has become an article of faith and claims of paranormal abilities are, by skeptical definition, extraordinary. On the other hand, those for whom paranormal claims are neither extraordinary nor anomalous require significantly less evidence to underwrite belief and reinforce behaviors based on that belief. Among others, the social and cognitive processes involved in this include the ‘true story’ and availability heuristics, both of which are supported by source dissociation, confirmation bias, and the ‘in print’ fallacy, as well as the social force of multivalent repetition.

“Inspired by a true story...”: few readers will be unfamiliar with this kind of a tagline for pop culture products ranging from television series to Broadway musicals. “Based on real events...,” “Ripped from the headlines...,” “Taken from real life...” —all are variations on the same theme. We are meant to understand that this is not fiction, at least not all of it. What I am calling the ‘true story heuristic’ is not a fallacy, *per se*. Many pop culture products *are* based on real events. However embellished, however differently the various competing agendas are portrayed, any number of war movies, for example, are based on real events, real histories, and real people. That the Allies landed at Normandy on D-Day is not in question. That there was never a real mission to “save Private Ryan,” though, is another story and places us squarely at the heart of the heuristic.

The ‘true story heuristic’ is part of the social psychological model according to which we order our understanding of pop cultural products. The magic mirror as a psychic event in Walt Disney’s *Snow White* is rarely confused with real-life events. We know it’s a fairy tale. For one thing, on the screen it is in cartoon form. No visual cues suggest to us that it is based on true events. It is not the same as, say, television documentaries or the kind of pseudoscience programming that populates cable TV and is so despised by skeptics. Neither would cartoons be mistaken for psychic talk shows, whether aired in the wee hours of the morning or in prime time, such as John Edward’s *Crossing Over*, for ‘reality’ programming such as the *Psychic Next Door*, or for Sylvia Browne’s weekly appearances on *Montel* or Allison DuBois on *Larry King Live*. The problem is that media consumers are rarely aware of the extent to which fantasy is mixed with, and often supplants, what purports to be the truth. In other words, we very often forget that “Based on a true story...” should not be confused with “Based on a story that is true....” This may seem a bit picky, but the importance of the distinction cannot be overstated, and our willingness to overlook it is often shaped by the “availability heuristic.”

The availability heuristic organises both the importance and perceived correctness of information according to the ease with which we can recall relevant examples. At the beginning of this chapter, I noted that in 2005, six primetime television series based on paranormal themes premiered on America networks. Since a variety of opinion polls indicate that roughly the same percentage of Americans believe in ghosts and the possibility of communication from beyond the grave as believe that Earth has been visited (or is being visited) by extraterrestrials, why would three television series about supernatural communication do so much better in the pop culture market than any of the ones about alien visitation? It could be that whatever we believe, few of us actually expect to encounter extraterrestrials or to see a UFO.

Belief in the supernatural, on the other hand, is deeply rooted both in our historical psyche and in our experiential present. As Gustav Jahoda (1969: 19) points out in his classic study of superstition in the twentieth century, when “talk comes around to the supernatural, the chances are that several persons will tell stories of occult occurrences that allegedly happened either to themselves or their relatives and friends; such stories are apt to range all the way from vague premonitions to seeing ghosts.” This is the availability heuristic at work. In terms of the infotainment continuum, two other well-known cognitive processes—source dissociation and confirmation bias—reinforce the perceived validity of the examples we recall.

Source dissociation is our tendency to forget where we learn something, especially if it is something with which we agree or in which we are emotionally invested. When talk turns to ghosts and discarnate communication, for example, we may remember that we heard about a woman whose ability to speak to the dead has been proven beyond doubt. We may not recall, however, that this information came from the television program *Medium*, reinforced perhaps by an interview with Allison DuBois on *Entertainment Tonight*. Moreover, if we are emotionally or intellectually invested in the truth of mediumship, our propensity to privilege information with which we agree—confirmation bias—will reinforce our belief in the phenomenon even further, excluding or minimising other possible explanations.

Despite the fact that on any number of issues Western media has demonstrated itself less than trustworthy, many people still succumb to the ‘in print’ fallacy, the groundless belief that simply because something has been published it must be true. “I saw it on the news,” or “I read it in the paper,” or, now, “I found it on the Internet” are all variations on this theme. Reinforced by source dissociation and confirmation bias, the mass media version of the ‘in print’ fallacy leads people to believe that Montel Williams, for example, would never knowingly host a fraud on his program, let alone invite her back on a weekly basis for several years, let alone allow her to work with desperate, distraught people such as Shawn Hornbeck’s parents. That is, so the fallacy goes, he wouldn’t be allowed to have her on the show if there wasn’t something to it.

Underpinning all of this is the strength of multivalent repetition in the infotainment continuum. Although, as of this writing, both *Medium* and *Ghost Whisperer* have been cancelled, other programs such as *Psychic in Suburbia* are ready to fill in the pop culture gap. Propaganda researchers, advertising companies, and learning theorists have recognised for decades the simple power of repetition: *repetitio est mater studiorum*. The more often someone hears or sees something, the more likely that person is to remember it and, over time, the more likely he or she is to regard it as credible. This phenomenon

is reinforced further when repetition of a particular thing comes from a variety of different, seemingly disconnected sources: fictional television, reality programming, documentaries, and special interest interviews. Rather than separate information sources into appropriate categories, however—a fictional television program versus an investigative journalism report—and evaluate the information according to its category, multivalent repetition adds to the overall media noise about a particular topic and discourages discrete evaluation. Instead, we fall prey to the *ad populum* fallacy, the mistaken belief that because a great many people hold something to be true—or in this case we see it in so many places along the infotainment continuum—it must be true. Or, at least, we hope there must be something to it.

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The Occultist and the Spaceman

The Metamorphosis of Dorothy Martin

Michael Barkun

Most social scientists know very little about occultists, but there is one occultist they are likely to know something about: Marion Keech. Marion Keech was not her real name. Rather, it was the pseudonym given to her by researchers from the University of Minnesota who made her the centerpiece of a book that quickly became a classic of social science literature, *When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group that Predicted the Destruction of the World* (Festinger et al. 1964 [1956]). *When Prophecy Fails* achieved its status because it described and vividly demonstrated a concept of broad utility, namely, cognitive dissonance, the situation that “arises when the beliefs, values, or opinions individuals hold (that is, their cognitions) come into conflict with reality” (Stone 2000: 3–4). As the subtitle suggests, the research examined a situation in which belief in world destruction collided with the reality that the world continued stubbornly on its way.

‘Marion Keech’ was in fact a middle-aged Oak Park, Illinois, housewife-turned-medium named Dorothy Martin. The episode chronicled by the Minnesota scholars occurred in 1954, yet Martin’s occult career continued for another thirty-eight years, most of it through another persona, that of ‘Sister Thedra’, during which time she intersected with a strange assortment of figures in the occult milieu. It is that subsequent career that will be examined here, but in order for it to be understood, the first phase of her life needs to be described, for it provides the essential context.

Who Was Dorothy Martin?

Dorothy Martin’s early life (Clark 2007) prior to the episode that brought her notoriety is obscure. She appears to have been born in West Virginia in 1900. Suggestions on the Internet that she was born on Mount Shasta (“Providentia” 2008), a locale dear to mystics and occultists, seems to have been driven largely by a desire to embellish her pedigree. Martin lived in New York City in the late 1930s, and it was there that she became acquainted with occultism through Theosophy, but over the next fifteen years or so she appears to have read widely in and was perhaps affiliated with a variety of other movements.

These included the 'I AM' Activity and later Dianetics, the precursor to Scientology. By at least the early 1950s, she had moved to the Chicago suburbs. She was married (when is not clear) and little is known of her husband, beyond the fact that he did not share her occult interest, but neither did he stand in the way of her enthusiasm for it.

In considering what took place in 1954, it is important to bear in mind that 'flying saucers' emerged in American media and popular culture in 1947. By the early 1950s, a group of individuals had appeared who claimed to have either received messages from the saucers or met their crews. These 'contactees' need to be distinguished from the later and better known population of 'abductees', who claimed to have been taken into UFOs against their will. Some of the contactees said that they had received radio or Morse code messages from the ships, but most claimed to have received them through some psychic means. In that sense, the paranormal communication utilised by contactees almost exactly paralleled, or may be seen as an extension of, mediumistic activities long practiced among occultists (Melton and Eberhart 1995).

Saturated as Dorothy Martin was in occult ideas, she began in the early 1950s to experiment with automatic writing. This initially produced messages from her dead father, but by 1954, she was getting communications from extraterrestrial figures called Guardians, who resembled the Ascended Masters of Theosophy. Since by then Mrs Martin had joined a local occult group, these messages began to find an audience. Through intermediaries, news of the messages reached Dr and Mrs Charles Laughead of East Lansing, Michigan. The Laugheads, who were embedded in both occult and contact circles, quickly contacted her.

Meanwhile, the messages Mrs Martin was receiving became increasingly apocalyptic. They prophesied massive, cataclysmic events that would alter the very geography of the earth, cause immense human suffering, and bring nations to their knees. The shape of whole continents would be changed. To the extent that one could make sense of the Delphic pronouncements, they foretold that the waters of the Great Lakes would empty, drowning Chicago, among other disasters. A great new mountain range would appear in the center of the country. The Egyptian desert would flower. Western and Central Europe would sink under water. The legendary sunken island of Lemuria (Mu) in the Pacific would rise. The only safe places in the United States would be the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains, the Catskills, and the Alleghenies.

Martin had very likely gotten the idea for such calamities from the American psychic, Edgar Cayce, who had died in 1945. Cayce had predicted a somewhat different but equally daunting set of "earth changes," as he called them, during trance states over several decades. However, the disasters that Cayce foresaw

were supposed to take place during the period between 1958 and 1998, not more or less simultaneously, as Dorothy Martin's sources told her. Although earth changes were known to occultists at the time, they were to become far more popular in New Age circles much later, by the 1970s and 1980s. The most famous prediction transmitted by Martin, the destruction of Chicago, was consistent with the many 'readings' given by Cayce, who claimed the Great Lakes would eventually empty into the Mississippi (Cayce 1980; Hutton 1996: 1–20).

Dorothy Martin might have remained a relatively obscure figure had she and the Laugheads (who had by now relocated to the Chicago area) not chosen to reach out to the media. They did so not out of a desire for self-aggrandisement but out of a genuine wish to warn others of impending danger. Consequently, on August 30, 1954, they sent a document to newspapers giving December 20 as the last day for evacuation. A second mailing emphasising the flooding of Chicago followed in mid-September. The first newspaper story appeared on September 23. By then Mrs Martin and the Laugheads were the nucleus of a small group, drawn together by the extraterrestrial messages. Sometime after the press reports began to appear, a group of faculty and graduate students from the University of Minnesota also joined, apparently without indicating their affiliation or intentions.

Geological catastrophe was, however, only one prediction from the Guardians. The other, and equally sensational, message was that the Martin group would be saved not by migration to one of the mountain ranges spared inundation but by being taken up in a spaceship just before the calamity. In the critical period of December 19–21, 1954, the group was the victim of practical jokes, harassment, and the ambiguous interpretations of banal events. But it eventually became clear that there would be neither a spaceship landing nor a great flood.

The Invention of Sister Thedra

The Martin group quickly dissolved. Only Mrs Martin and the Laugheads retained their faith in the veracity of her contacts from beyond. However, there were also worldly problems, specifically the danger that Mrs Martin would face institutionalisation in a mental hospital if she remained in Oak Park. There had already been an unsuccessful attempt to institutionalise Dr Laughead. Dorothy Martin prudently chose to leave town. Under an assumed name, she flew to Arizona in January 1955, by which time the Laugheads had gone to Southern California. Martin's new location put her in close proximity to several contactees, notably George Hunt Williamson (1926–86), who was to become a

significant figure in her new life. He was a full generation younger than Martin. Although he liked to describe himself as an anthropologist, his academic credentials were shaky in the extreme. However, Williamson also claimed to have witnessed the most dramatic of all contactee events, the meeting between George Adamski and a Venusian in the California desert on November 20, 1952. Williamson made a plaster cast of the visitor's footprint. One could hardly have more cachet in the contactee community.

Dorothy Martin continued to channel her Guardians, including Sananda, the earthly incarnation of Jesus. Sananda now christened her 'Sister Thedra', the name she bore for the rest of her long life. That life was about to enter a momentous new chapter, for in 1956 Williamson received channeled communication that greater enlightenment might be had by connecting with a mysterious group of ascended souls called the Brotherhood of the Seven Rays. That revelation was to take Williamson, Martin, and the Laugheads on a strange pilgrimage to northern Peru.

Except for the overlay of communication from extraterrestrials in space-ships, the content of Williamson's and Martin's messages was lifted directly from neo-Theosophy, with its emphasis on superior souls who after physical death retained form and activity in another, higher sphere in order to guide and nurture humanity.

The five of them, George Hunt Williamson, Sister Thedra, the Laugheads, and perhaps others, apparently believed that they could attain even greater communion with these exalted souls (that is, the Ascended Masters and the Great White Brotherhood) by moving in December 1956 to the vicinity of Lake Titicaca. There they established what has been variously termed the Abbey, Monastery, or Priory of the Seven Rays. To some later occultists, it resulted in nothing less than a rediscovery of the sacred teachings of the lost continent of Lemuria, long sunk in the Pacific.

The most conspicuous tangible product of the Peruvian expedition was a thin volume of Williamson's, *Secrets of the Andes*, written under the penname 'Brother Philip' and published in 1961. Whether Williamson wrote all of it is another matter. It purports to describe the spiritual developments that occurred at the Abbey. Much of it deals with familiar occult themes, invoking Atlantis, Mu, and the Great White Brotherhood. However, the channeled transcripts of the 'Ascended Master Saints' contained in *Secrets of the Andes* sound very much like the channelings of Sister Thedra, although some web commentators have suggested they might have been cribbed from the Laugheads. Even more interesting, Brother Philip, too, included predictions of 'earth change'. In his version, portions of the coasts would be submerged, along with parts of Colorado, Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico. Again, there are

echoes of Edgar Cayce (Brother Philip 1961: 118). However, Brother Philip's disasters are different, for they are intended as cleansing for political sins.

Here we come to a new aspect of Dorothy Martin/Sister Thedra's career. Although her own activities were completely apolitical, beginning with *Secrets of the Andes*, we see a theme that continues through much of the rest of her life, namely her association with individuals who held extreme political views.

George Hunt Williamson and Extremist Politics

While most of *The Secret of the Andes* was couched in the murky rhetoric of Theosophy, when its otherworldly sources ventured into the political realm, they were perfectly clear. The cleansing of the world was necessary, according to Brother Philip's informants, because of the 'Black' 'anti-Christ' forces present in two related forms, the United Nations and International Bankers. In language that anticipates that of the New World Order conspiracists a quarter century later, Williamson wrote, "The war lords, the 'International Bankers' will use the United Nations to form their super-government" (Brother Philip 1961: 118). Not only does the language smack of conspiracy theory, but 'International Bankers' was a frequent code word for 'Jews'. What was this kind of language doing among American occultists camped out in Peru in the late 1950s, and where had Williamson gotten it? And did Sister Thedra share these beliefs? Certainly, they were not present in the channeled material witnessed by Leon Festinger and his associates during the Oak Park episode in 1954.

There were two possible sources for George Hunt Williamson's political ideas. One was William Dudley Pelley. Pelley's peculiar career had straddled radical politics and occultism. During the Depression, he founded the Silver Legion, or the Silver Shirts, a quasi-fascist organisation with a strong anti-Semitic cast. His political activities led to a sedition conviction in 1942. When he was paroled in 1950, he was forbidden to engage in political activity and was restricted to a small area of Indiana (Beekman 2005: 144). However, Pelley had had a significant earlier career in Spiritualism, psychic research, and metaphysics, going back to the 1920s, and this offered a rich vein that could be safely mined without violating the conditions of his parole. Privately, however, as his biographer, Scott Beekman, demonstrates, Pelley remained convinced that the Jewish conspiracy was the enemy and that the Silver Shirts' goal of an American 'Christian Commonwealth' remained valid, even though he was precluded from advancing these ideas publicly (Beekman 2005: 147). Pelley enthusiastically greeted the UFO phenomenon that began in the late 1940s, since it could be easily fitted into occult and metaphysical frameworks.

Williamson, then in his late 20s, joined Pelley's publishing operation in Noblesville, Indiana, in 1953. He worked there, writing a UFO column for Pelley's magazine *Valor*, until the following year. Pelley continued to print letters from Williamson in the magazine even after the young man left his employ (Barkun 2003: 154; Beekman 2005: 154–155). Despite Williamson's relative youth, he had substantial cachet, as far as Pelley was concerned, because of his connection with George Adamski and his presence at the meeting with the Venusian emissary. Williamson was obviously strongly affected by his brief association with Pelley, since his later writings clearly show the imprint of Pelley's metaphysical ideas, although he often failed to acknowledge their provenance. It is impossible to know whether Pelley imparted any of his political views to his young employee-cum-disciple. However, it seems entirely plausible that Pelley's small staff would quickly have become acquainted with the full range of the master's positions, whether or not he articulated them publicly.

The second possible source for Brother Philip's politics is much easier to trace. In 1958, three years before *Secrets of the Andes* appeared, Williamson published a book under his own name, *UFOS Confidential!*, coauthored with an obscure figure in the contactee milieu, John McCoy. Although the political material anticipates what would later appear in *Secrets of the Andes*, it is far more detailed and strident. The United Nations "would...destroy our sovereignty and nullify our Constitution...it is Anti-Christian from first to last." The International Bankers are a "Hidden Empire" supported by the Communists. Not surprisingly, all those who are named are Jews: Bernard Baruch, Herbert Lehman, Felix Frankfurter, and the Warburgs. Among their crimes has been the alleged mutilation of the Bible itself, from which they have "removed vital books and sections...until it is unrecognizable..." (Williamson and McCoy 1958: 42–44, 53). Some websites claim that these ideas were really McCoy's, not Williamson's. However, unlike most coauthored books, the nature of each author's contribution here can be precisely determined, for each chapter is individually signed, and all the political and anti-Semitic material appears in Williamson's sections. He derived much of it from a pamphlet issued by the Cinema Educational Guild, a California-based organisation cofounded and largely funded by America's leading anti-Semite, Gerald L.K. Smith (Jeansonne 1988: 122).

There is, of course, no way of knowing how much of his views on Jews, the UN, and related subjects Williamson shared with Sister Thedra while they lived together in the short-lived Brotherhood of the Seven Rays. But it would have been surprising had he not done so, since he, like his mentor Pelley, clearly viewed these groups as instruments of cosmic evil. Williamson seems to have

returned to the United States by the late 1950s, as the publication date of *UFOS Confidential!* would suggest. However, Sister Thedra remained in Peru with very slender resources and in precarious health until 1961. When she returned, it was to establish yet another base, this time on the slopes of Mount Shasta in Northern California.

There is a long association of mystics and occultists with Mount Shasta (Frank 1998). Guy W. Ballard, the founder of the 'I AM' Activity, claimed that he met the Ascended Master, Saint Germain, on its slopes in 1930. Maurice Doreau, the founder of the Brotherhood of the White Temple in Denver, said that in the following year two Atlanteans had whisked him from a Los Angeles lecture hall to a cavern twelve miles beneath the mountain (Barkun 2003: 114–115). And there were no end of UFO sightings near its summit. There, consequently, Sister Thedra set up her Association of Sananda and Sanat Kumara (A.S.S.K.), which was little more than a direct mail operation. Two male associates transcribed her channelings for distribution to followers. Yet upon her return from Lake Titicaca there remained one further intersection with politicised occultism, her involvement with Hatonn and the Phoenix publications.

Anti-Semitism from the Pleiades

This is the strangest and most complicated chapter in Sister Thedra's life, since it involved a relationship that can be only partially documented on only one side. In the Williamson case, we know the two interacted when she lived in Arizona, and we know they went to Peru together. In the case that is about to unfold, there is scant evidence of face-to-face meetings, only a few brief published reports. Those reports come from a series of periodicals that appeared mainly from about 1989 to 1999, although a few issues were published later. The titles changed, but often contained the word 'Phoenix'. That referred not to the city but to the name of a spaceship whose transmissions the journals purported to publish. The term 'Phoenix publications' will be used here to refer collectively to this set of periodicals, which were first published in Tehachapi, California, but transferred to Las Vegas, Nevada, in 1992 (Barkun 2003: 147–153). Their principal function was to print the pronouncements of the Phoenix's Pleiadean commander, Gyeorgos Ceres Hatonn, who styled himself "Commander in Chief, Earth Project Transition, Pleiades Sector Flight command, Intergalactic Federation Fleet – Ashtar Command; Earth Representative to the Cosmic Council and Intergalactic Federation Council on Earth Transition." Hatonn's transmissions were supposedly received by a woman in Tehachapi named Doris Ekker, called in the Phoenix materials 'Dharma'. While the

messages were presented as though they were radio transmissions, the procedure, as described in a memoir, appears to have been conventional channeling: "...Hatonn was...speaking through Doris and recording his messages on audiotape. She would lie on the bed or couch with a dark scarf over her eyes, quiet her consciousness through the use of some self-hypnosis technique, Hatonn would identify himself and either ask if there were questions or state that he wished to talk about something" (Ekker 2003: 8).

Doris Ekker and her husband, E.J. Ekker, apparently knew Sister Thedra well. Thedra held annual gatherings for members of the occult community at her home, and the Ekkers attended as early as 1986. No gathering was held in the Summer of 1987, the year of the famous Harmonic Convergence, when Jose Arugelles's interpretation of the ancient Mayan calendar promised a moment of cosmic enlightenment to the New Age world. Sister Thedra preferred to spend that part of August with the Ekkers in Tehachapi along with other channelers (Ekker 2003: 7). Initially, Thedra was also among a small circle of recipients of audiotapes of the Hatonn channelings. Later, when Hatonn began dictating books, the Ekkers asked her to publish them through her organisation, the Association of Sananda and Sanat Kumara. After three were published, she realised that she lacked the capital to underwrite large printing expenses and asked the Ekkers to make other arrangements in the future. These eventually led to the Phoenix publications (Ekker 2003: 12).

Many of Hatonn's 'broadcasts' consisted of long anti-Semitic rants. For an extraterrestrial, he was strikingly familiar with the ideas currently fashionable among Earth-bound anti-Semites, such as the belief that Jews are descended from Asiatic Khazars. Hatonn on more than one occasion even transmitted the full text of the twentieth century's most potent anti-Semitic document, the famous Czarist forgery, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (Hatonn 1991a; Hatonn 1992). However, he had nothing but good things to say about Sister Thedra, and the Hatonn messages are threaded through with encomiums to her sanctity and virtue.

The Hatonn transmissions were not always printed near the time when Dharma was said to have received them. Months might pass before a message was printed. Occasionally, too, a message would refer to an effort several months or even a few years earlier. The narrative that follows lays out the references to Thedra in the order of either the date an event occurred or the date of message transmission, rather than the date of publication.

The first is one of the most bizarre, since it refers to what purports to be an actual, observable event. Hatonn claimed that in October 1987 he was in contact with officials at Vandenberg Air Force Base, when he warned them not to fire Atlas missiles. After they did so on October 28, 1987, despite the warning,

the missile was supposedly destroyed by Hatonn's ship. According to Hatonn, Sister Thedra witnessed this event (Hatonn n.d.). There may be some confusion about the date. Sister Thedra stayed with the Ekkers in August, but it seems unlikely that she remained there until late October. In any case, by then, of course, Sister Thedra was an old woman, 87 to be precise.

Most of the numerous remaining references to Thedra are less concrete. For example, in June 1989, none other than Jesus Sananda proclaims that "her name is boldly written in the book of life." He refers to her as "my beloved handmaiden" ("Sannada" 1995: 33). The following month a semi-coherent message from Hatonn arrived, much of it in capital letters, warning of tests and temptations from Satan and suggesting that Sister Thedra had been especially sorely tested.

Thus, in 1990 she figured in a bizarre message concerning intrigues in the UFO/conspiracist community. These involved a shadowy figure named Ed De Mar and the better-known Milton William Cooper. Cooper, author of *Behold A Pale Horse*, was one of the principal conspiracy theorists of the 1980s, with his baroque plots linking extraterrestrials and earthly confederates. Cooper's conspiracism lacked Hatonn's anti-Semitism, but his book's wide circulation gave him significant influence in the conspiracist community. He was killed in November 2001 during a shootout with law enforcement near his Arizona home. Parsing Hatonn's vituperations (Hatonn 1990) is difficult. However, he reserved the bulk of his venom for De Mar, although his writings make clear that he had little use for Cooper.

In the absence of De Mar's materials (other than those selectively quoted by Hatonn), it is difficult to put the entire matter together. However, it appears that Hatonn alleges that De Mar manipulated William Cooper and Sister Thedra into believing that the material Dharma claimed to receive, from entities such as Hatonn and Sananda, either came from fraudulent sources or was plagiarised. This is the closest Hatonn ever came to criticising Sister Thedra, although she is portrayed here primarily as a victim who would have understood better had she read the Phoenix publications more fully. There are also suggestions that De Mar was threatening some sort of civil suit, and that he may have had direct contact with Sister Thedra: "It is not Dharma who discredits 44 years of labor of Sister Thedra – it is you [De Mar] who claim of her confidence this day in her very own dwelling" (Hatonn 1990: 8). She had moved from Mount Shasta to Sedona, Arizona, in 1988. Sedona had become a major center of New Age activity. De Mar was apparently there as well, and Cooper lived not far away. Hence Hatonn's handlers saw De Mar plotting to usurp Dharma's place as the channel for Ascended Master communication.

There was more serious trouble the following year. In a February 1991 transmission, Hatonn began with an attack on 'Zionist-controlled media', but then

he had to deal with a more intimate and troubling matter. He presents a reader's letter claiming that Sister Thedra, through a newsletter, has called Sananda and Hatonn "frauds." Hatonn's response is predictably angry, yet carefully phrased (Hatonn 1991b). At no point does he specifically condemn Sister Thedra. He suggests that those in Sedona, where she was now located, had not read enough of Dharma's material to correctly evaluate it and that, in any case, neither God nor the truth could be monopolistically owned. This episode goes unmentioned in the otherwise detailed memoir that E.J. Ekker published in 2003, which treats Sister Thedra in uniformly positive terms. The fraud allegation, if it was made, was in the year before her death, when she was 91, and one might speculate that either her faculties had deteriorated or that in a weakened condition, she could not prevent those on her staff from circulating material in her name.

What does seem beyond dispute is that she knew the Ekkers well enough that she must have been aware of the substance of the Hatonn messages. Unlike Williamson, whose anti-Semitic views appeared only occasionally, for Hatonn it was one of, if not the only, central theme. He was obsessed by fears of Jewish power and evil. By lending herself to the Hatonn enterprise as a publisher, Sister Thedra must have found herself in sympathy with these views.

By the following year, 1992, Sister Thedra was dead, at the age of 92.

The Meaning of the Tale

What are we to make of this strange story? At the most superficial level, it demonstrates, of course, that Dorothy Martin was a survivor. Having been prophetic for one of the most highly publicised false predictions of the twentieth century, she managed not only to avoid condemnation by her occultist colleagues but to flourish for another thirty-eight years. Now, it might be said that her natural constituency was not made up of individuals likely to read such scholarly studies as *When Prophecy Fails*. However, the Chicago fiasco in 1954 was amply publicised in the mass media. Not only did it fail to dent Martin's confidence in her own powers, it failed to make her a pariah in contactee circles. In her new persona, as Sister Thedra, relocated in the West where contactees were more active, she became part of a network of channelers bringing communications from extraterrestrial entities. While this strongly resembled pre-UFO activity familiar to Dorothy Martin and other occultists, Sister Thedra's associations, as we have seen, had a particular penchant for anti-Semitism. How had this come about?

Much of the channeled material, ranging from Dorothy Martin, through George Hunt Williamson, Sister Theodora, and Hatonn, showed the strong influence of Theosophy and its offshoots. Begun in the late nineteenth century by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott, Theosophy postulated the existence of a group of spiritually evolved beings on a non-material plane of existence, who communicated with worthy earthly disciples and guided the spiritual course of humanity. Although the movement was originally centered on the Theosophical Society, it eventually splintered into numerous, often mutually hostile variants under such figures as Alice Bailey, Guy and Edna Ballard, and Mark and Elizabeth Clare Prophet. Each depended upon individuals who claimed to have privileged communications with one or more Ascended Master, whose teachings had divine authority for followers. The first such figures identified by Madame Blavatsky were Indian or Tibetan sages, suggesting the spiritual cachet attached to Eastern mystics.

Theosophy itself developed troubling associations with anti-Semitism. There was a racial strain in it from the outset, since Madame Blavatsky spoke of seven primeval 'root races', among whom were the Aryans. It was scarcely surprising, therefore, that while the Theosophical Society itself did not develop into an explicitly racist organisation, racials quickly developed their own versions of Theosophy. This added to an already overgrown jungle of what some have termed 'esoteric Nazism'. Those who have mapped it, such as Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke (2002) and Joscelyn Godwin (1996), point out that racials and anti-Semites on both sides of the Atlantic actively incorporated Theosophical motifs.

It is tempting, therefore, to see the anti-Semitic motifs in George Hunt Williamson and the Phoenix publications as merely the latest manifestation of an occult anti-Semitism that had circles of adherents in Europe, Latin America, and the United States for many decades. Although this seems logical, in the end it is not entirely convincing. If we examine the anti-Semitic materials with which Sister Theodora was associated, they were either linked explicitly with or were traceable to standard anti-Semitic sources, not to the 'occult Nazism' that derived from Theosophy. As we have seen, George Hunt Williamson, writing as Brother Phillip, and later in his own name, directed his ire at the UN and international bankers. These passages, particularly in *UFOS Confidential*, are directly traceable to literature sponsored by the doyen of American anti-Semitism (and no Theosophist!), Gerald L.K. Smith. Hatonn is a more complex case, but the end result is the same.

Whether because his spaceship had a small library or because Hatonn's 'ground crew' (as they sometimes called themselves) had their own intellectual limitations, there is no sign in the Phoenix publications of sophisticated

Theosophy, much less of its more recondite racialist variants. What does appear is a highly derivative form of Theosophy, or what might better be termed neo-Theosophy, almost certainly lifted from sects that had broken away from the larger movement. This generalised Ascended Master milieu gives to the Hatonn materials a fragmentary and superficial Theosophical gloss.

However, the anti-Semitism itself comes directly from core anti-Semitic texts. These include *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and the works of writers such as the Ezra Pound disciple, Eustace Mullins, and the prolific anti-Semitic British conspiracist, David Icke. Hatonn is fully conversant with the literature on the alleged Khazar origin of Jews ("Zionist Khazars who call themselves Jews"). This, too, suggests that the author of the messages is familiar with conventional anti-Semitic literature, no different from that found among non-occult extremists, but in this case a veneer of Theosophy has been overlaid upon it.

What links the themes in Dorothy Martin's/Sister Thedra's life is ultimately neither occultism nor Theosophy. Rather, it is what I term 'stigmatised knowledge' (see also Barkun 2003: 26–38). Stigmatised knowledge refers to knowledge claims that are not recognised by such validating institutions as universities, the scientific and medical communities, government agencies, and mainstream religious organisations. Such claims are made for knowledge that lacks this kind of validation, ranging from knowledge said to have existed in the ancient past that has been forgotten, to knowledge once recognised and later superseded or rejected, to knowledge that has been ignored or said to be deliberately suppressed. It should be clear that 'knowledge', as the term is employed here, is a *claim* that a statement is true and says nothing about the actual truth status of the claim. Indeed, in the examples below it will be, I think, clear to most readers that the claims were not merely stigmatised but in fact untrue.

Examples of stigmatised knowledge run through the life of Dorothy Martin/Sister Thedra and those with whom she associated. Channeled messages, by the very nature of the communication, are stigmatised. Beyond this fundamental procedural objection, the substantive nature of Dorothy Martin's initial prophecy, with its emphasis upon sudden, massive geological upheavals, was a form of stigmatised knowledge, since it flew in the face of all that is known about physical processes. When subsequently 'Earth changes' became a popular New Age motif, that popularity provided retroactive validation for Dorothy Martin despite the fact that her prophecy had failed, and Earth changes, too, was stigmatised knowledge. As Leon Festinger and his colleagues (1964: 28) had observed, when a prophecy fails, those invested in it can reduce cognitive dissonance if others can be convinced that the belief remains valid. The spread

of Earth changes in the New Age subculture provided that consolation for Dorothy Martin and those who remained committed to her predictions.

George Hunt Williamson's belief that a Jewish financial cabal held the strings of world power was a hoary bit of stigmatised knowledge, embedded in Western anti-Semitism since the early modern period. In his variation, it was interwoven with a fear of internationalism as embodied in the United Nations, a fear that was endemic among ultra-conservatives. Beginning in the 1970s, this linkage, greatly embellished, came to characterise many of the 'New World Order' conspiracy theories that continue to dominate the extreme right. Williamson had served an apprenticeship with William Dudley Pelley, whose peculiar variety of stigmatised knowledge blended anti-Semitism, fascism, and metaphysics.

When Sister Thedra became friendly with the Ekkers, as she apparently did at least from the mid-1980s, that put her in an association with what some have termed the UFO community's 'dark side'. Where anti-Semitism had been only an occasional theme in George Hunt Williamson's writings, it was the central concern for Doris Ekker's/Dharma's source, Hatonn. He ranged across virtually all of the major themes in contemporary anti-Semitism, paying particular attention to *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. One could scarcely find a clearer example of stigmatised knowledge.

Dorothy Martin thus began with conventional occult associations. Her readings, prior to the 1954 predictions, as far as one can judge, may have been wide-ranging, but they appear to have remained within fairly traditional occult sources. The fact that she began with automatic writing from a deceased family member would seem to confirm this. However, she quickly moved into contactee circles. Her first intimations of extraterrestrial contact were reinforced by the Laughheads, who were better connected than she in contactee circles. Her forced migration from the Chicago area to Arizona made links to contactees much easier and opened up a large new body of individuals with a distinctive brand of stigmatised knowledge. A second migration, this time to Peru, implied yet other forms of stigmatised knowledge, linked now to sacred places. She could invoke not only the messages from outer space but the wisdom of the ancient Incas and the lost continent of Lemuria, hidden until now. Her association with George Hunt Williamson, both in the Southwest and in Peru, linked her to the most eminent of all the contactees, George Adamski, who had met a Venusian. And it also connected her to William Dudley Pelley, the mystic fascist in Indiana. All told, she was a part of a spectacular stigmatised knowledge coterie.

Yet in the final stage of her life, particularly after she had moved from Mount Shasta to Sedona, Arizona, the New Age capital, she acquired the most

significant link to stigmatised knowledge through her relationship with the Ekkers and Hatonn. The reason for that goes beyond the fact that Doris Ekker was a channeler and that she channeled Hatonn's anti-Semitism.

Those suspicious of one kind of authority are likely to question other kinds of authority as well. This was certainly true of those associated with the Phoenix publications, in which the Hatonn channelings appeared. In addition to the anti-Semitic material, other kinds of stigmatised knowledge could be found in abundance in the pages of *The Spectrum*, one of the primary Phoenix publications. For example, a lengthy article on the SARS outbreak asserted that it was part of a plot to wipe out half the world's population, in which the Rockefeller family, the UN, and the World Health Organization were said to be key players (Horowitz 2003). A lead article in one issue was entitled, "Our *Busy* Solar System: What is NASA Hiding? Get Ready For What's Coming!" (Martin 2003). Those who read on learned that catastrophic events on Earth would occur with the approach of a hitherto unknown planet, Planet X. This knowledge was allegedly being suppressed by a conspiracy involving NASA, the Vatican, and the Jesuits, in the service of a One World Government agenda.

One's first reaction to such material is to cast it aside as unworthy of serious attention. But the same might also be said of documents such as *The Protocols*, and unfortunately, all too many people have taken them seriously. There are those, such as Sister Thedra, for whom stigmatised knowledge claims are considered authoritative precisely because they have been stigmatised. Rejection by universities, respected newspapers, major religious organisations, and scientific and medical communities confers the ultimate form of validation, since the institutions that have rejected are viewed as tainted, evil, or immoral. To those already disposed to suspect authority, what could be more persuasive than ideas that authority itself rejects?

When we view Dorothy Martin/Sister Thedra not in isolation but in the context of her associations, she emerges as a denizen of stigmatised knowledge subcultures rather than as simply an occultist or a channeler. She associated with individuals and publications that, across many subjects, took positions at wide variance with accepted knowledge and norms. Sister Thedra either espoused similar views herself or took no action to dissociate herself from those of persons close to her. Indeed, she seems to have had a particular gift for maintaining good relations with others in the stigmatised knowledge community throughout her long career. Save for a minor scrape a year or two before her death, she remained a revered figure. The events in Oak Park that had made her a laughingstock and might have led to her institutionalisation proved to be a valuable credential. What really mattered to those who believed

in stigmatised knowledge was rejection, and in that respect, Dorothy Martin had earned the ultimate seal of approval.

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Historical Imagination and Channeled Theology

Or, Learning the Law of Attraction

Catherine L. Albanese

For a scholar using historical method, theologies come across as just-so stories. They are not built on the sort of external evidence that would count as such in historiographical quarters. They involve, more, intellectual and aesthetic constructions grounded in intuitive insights about the nature of the world and the human place in it. Sometimes they arise from within a faith tradition as rational reflections on it. Often, in contemporary times, they appear outside such reassuring boundaries. Either way, their ‘proof’ comes through their resonance with the rest of a community’s or an individual’s life—their ability to pull things all together and render them intelligible, meaningful, and satisfying. One knows the theology is ‘true’ because heart and head respond together; things click into place, and the flow of life is experienced as better and stronger. So imagination stirs feeling, and feeling tones the ‘objective’, rational realities of received tradition and of one’s living in ways that—if it all works—bring greater joy and freedom, at least in some ultimate register.¹

But if theology is a labor involving the imagination, arguably history itself, for all its use of external evidence, is also predicated in important ways on an imaginary.² Histories portray the past in terms of ideas and concerns that present time and experience prompt. In effect, histories answer or provide data concerning feeling-framed questions that generate their own form of propulsion. Such questions can fuel searches into time that has come and gone—or is still with us. Or, when asked less deliberately, such questions turn into assumptions or carry-alongs from the past that continue to live unexamined, or only partially examined, in present time. For a working historian who observes such processes, issues of difference and resemblance, cast in a temporal register, are key. If these observations are applied to traditional theologies, the

1 These observations put me in the not-so-shabby company of William James. In his Gifford Lectures that became *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, he announced his conviction “that feeling is the deeper source of religion, and that philosophic and theological formulas are secondary products, like translations of a text into another tongue.” See James 1961 [1902]: 337. With some twists and turns, my observations also echo a tradition in Anglo-American liberal theology beginning with Horace Bushnell. See, especially, Bushnell 1876 [1849].

2 See the classic study by Hayden White (1973) that makes just this point from the perspective of literature and its poetic base as expressed in figures of speech.

question that arises immediately is whether and how they change across time and thus shift traditions and their outcomes. Beyond that, do such theologies learn from one another, and, if so, can they be seen to build on one another in exercises of historical imagination? And do they sometimes work under the radar and carry assumptions forward that are based more on surrounding cultural perceptions than on intrinsic parts of an inherited message?

With these observations in the background, I want to tell a story—a story that involves multiple texts and contexts and that juxtaposes historiographical concerns with theological ones in acute and especially interesting ways. In the metaphysical religiosity that I study—that is, in Spiritualism, Theosophy, New Thought, the New Age movement, and the like—original revelatory events (that is, trance productions) frequently lead not to discursive interpretations as in traditional Western theologies, but to further trance productions. Thus, the general questions I raised concerning theologies take on new sharpness and insistence. Do trance productions with a general family resemblance—demonstrably different in construction from more rationally reflective theologies—build upon one another across time? And if trance theologians can be seen to learn historically and imagine out of the reservoir of the past, what might that tell us about similar processes in other, more rationally constructed theologies?

One place to look for answers is within the mediumistic phenomenon that now, in imitation of technology, is called channeling.³ The human ‘receivers’ who are the channels have generated considerable interest in the popular media and among psychologists, neuroscientists, and similar professionals. Yet little if any scrutiny has been given to the content of channeled messages as forms of theological expression. Moreover, as little attention has been given to the ways such channeled discourses reflect a historical imagination related to previous ideas and constructions. Yet channeled theologies often bounce off one another with a circumscribed set of themes, even as they incorporate non-trance-produced ideas that are agreeable to the general tenor of their messages. Indeed, at times they shift, almost, into novella mode as they recount their stories and messages in what seem didactic fictions. Given all of this, in what follows I explore one prominent story in the tradition of American

3 Etymologically, if Gordon Melton is right, the twentieth-century (and after) term *channeling* gained currency in the 1950s out of interest in unidentified flying objects (UFOs), extraterrestrials and ‘space commanders’, and a community of people who consider themselves space contactees (J. Gordon Melton, personal communication, 14 July 2010). But the term had already been used to reflect radio, thus technological, frequencies as early as 1934, when Guy Ballard (writing as Godfré Ray King) published his *Unveiled Mysteries*.

channeling. My story concerns the production of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Teachings of Abraham, channeled by Esther Hicks and based on what Abraham called the law of attraction. By telling the story, I hope to illustrate the complex web of cultural production as trance discourse grew out of earlier trance discourse and, at the same time, incorporated spiritual teachings that agreed with its message, even if not delivered originally in channeled form.

And I hope to shed light, more generally, on how the constructed—‘just-so’—nature of the theological genre may offer clues to an understanding of religion that sidebars a science of religion in the interest of aesthetics.

Trading Sex for Money

Let the story begin with Andrew Jackson Davis (1826–1910)—Spiritualist scion, medical clairvoyant, trance physician, marriage and divorce-law reformer, and producer of numerous hastily written books. The first of these—a composite of 157 trance-originated lectures—was published in 1847 as *The Principles of Nature, Her Divine Revelations, and a Voice to Mankind* (Davis 1847; for a synopsis of Davis’s life and work, see Albanese 2007: 206–220). This work exhibited Davis’s Spiritualism and exploited the metaphorical potential of magnetism nearly exhaustively. In his reading, the positive and negative force fields of physical, and then animal, magnetism were transmuted into metaphysical and spiritual principles in an attraction-based universe in which God functioned as the Great Positive Mind (Davis 1881: 43, 69, 145; subsequent citations are from this edition).

Despite his claims to minimal education (he had moved to the small Hudson River city of Poughkeepsie from the rural regions of upstate New York), Davis also integrated aspects of the work of the maverick French philosopher Charles Fourier into his trance-produced *Principles*. The entire third section was a lengthy reinscription of the work of Fourier as it had become available in the US through Albert Brisbane. Like Davis himself, Fourier (1772–1837) had been an autodidact. With a mercantile livelihood, he never married nor had children and instead poured his passion into thousands of pages of manuscript, only some of which saw publication while he was alive. Fourier dreamed loftily—of an ideal society called Harmony in which “natural association” brought cohesion and bliss. Here human sexual desire and a general creative instinct functioned in the service of the whole, with corresponding iterations of the grand scheme in every register from the sexual to the economic. Followers lived a utopian life that at the same time involved flesh and bones and bodies in connection. Gratified passion, though, had practical results,

and the Fourierist phalanx worked as an intricately multifaceted economic community in which each individual was drawn or attracted to the work that fulfilled the person most in every way. Thus, individual preference not only profoundly absorbed the individual; it also provided, in perfect symmetry and style, for *all* community needs (Beecher and Bienvenu 1971: 1–64).

Fourier's foremost American disciple and populariser, Albert Brisbane (1809–1890), in his *Social Destiny of Man* (1840) decidedly toned down the sexual message of Charles Fourier. Already scandalous to the French, the Fourierist gospel was appropriately reshaped for a post-Puritan society that still frowned on the pursuit of pleasure. In the Brisbane rendition, Fourierism became an innovative and radical way to deal with abiding issues of economy, industry, and labor in the midst of the Industrial Revolution (Brisbane 1840). Davis's *Principles of Nature*, then, besides its Mesmeric and Spiritualist themes, reflected the ideas of Fourier, with Fourier touted under the banner of the 'law of association'.

As early as 1852, pulling together these influences, Davis had declared the "paramount law" of human nature to be "Attraction." He gave notice that man obeyed "this law every instant of time; true as the needle to the positive magnet." And Davis told readers, "the *chief attraction* of every soul" was "Happiness" (Davis 1868 [1852]: 239, 251; emphasis in original). By the end of the middle-century Spiritualist era, then, the available argot for metaphysical theologising included an attraction-based universe in which physical law and human passion worked hand in hand. Davis claimed that he had come to these convictions by what he called 'impressions'—in other words, trance receptions. It remained for others in succeeding eras, in and out of trance, to augment the message for their own times and purposes.

New (Thought) Voices

The next chapter in the story of the law of attraction occurred outside of trance under the aegis of New Thought.⁴ With some of its roots in Christian Science, which—unlike Spiritualism and Mesmerism—eschewed matter, New Thought dwelled preeminently in regions called Mind. Yet, as I will show, 'Mind' managed to encompass hardy material referents and to find a home for human emotions including satiety and pleasure. The storyline here turns on three figures—Emma Curtis Hopkins, William Walker Atkinson, and Napoleon Hill—and it spans several generations.

4 For a discussion of the history of New Thought, see John Patrick Deveney's contribution to this volume.

Hopkins (1849–1925) had studied with Mary Baker Eddy from the end of 1883, after she worked out a scholarship arrangement with Eddy because of financial difficulties. By 1884, when she left the Congregational church, she was working without pay for Eddy as the editor of *The Journal of Christian Science*. After incurring Eddy's displeasure and getting herself fired, she made her way to Chicago in 1886, began a seminary, and taught most of the major New Thought teachers. As she expressed her views for class after class of ordinands, many of them women, she proclaimed the motherhood of God. She also proclaimed an evolving gospel of prosperity. If God was Mother, then God nourished and nurtured, and these constituted a primary divine function. If God nourished and nurtured, then God sent good (read earthly sustenance and material abundance). As Hopkins affirmed repeatedly in one formal lecture during her Chicago years, “*There is good for me, and I ought to have it.*” The key was simple. Turning one's mind to the ‘truth’ of the good attracted the divine outflow and supply (Hopkins 1990: 100; emphasis original).

Emma Curtis Hopkins's theology of abundance caught fire in what became New Thought, advanced especially by the Unity movement and its founders, Charles and Myrtle Fillmore. By the early twentieth century, it took new turns—away from the Mother principle of divine love and nurturance that had shaped the work of Hopkins and towards a more mechanical, aggressive, and male-oriented version. In both earlier and later renderings, desire governed destiny, and destiny moved less in erotic directions and more in economic ones (on the two versions of New Thought and their ramifications, see Matterna 1997 and Satter 1999). But in the newer form, will dominated and fired intellect and emotions according to the tenets of a blatantly acknowledged law of attraction. William Walker Atkinson (1862–1932) became a major proponent of this new way.

Although details of his life are murky, Atkinson apparently had a business and legal background. He suffered a time of financial, physical, and mental breakdown in the late 1880s and found recovery through New Thought. Thereafter Atkinson became an important New Thought editor in Chicago and also wrote prodigiously—with probably close to 100 books, published in his own name and under at least six pseudonyms, including Yogi Ramacharaka. In them, he blended his version of the New Thought message with Theosophy and a related occultism, with nineteenth-century magnetism, and with a generic ‘orientalism’ that moved with the times.

In his first book, Atkinson was already adumbrating the law of attraction under the rubric of the “adductive quality of thought” (Atkinson 1901).⁵

5 Strangely, WorldCat lists the first edition of Atkinson's *Thought-Force in Business and Everyday Life* in Auckland, New Zealand (Floating Press, 1900). Multiple editions appeared in the

Five years later, invoking the law by name in *Thought Vibration; Or, The Law of Attraction in the Thought World*, he acknowledged “one great Law” with “multi-form” manifestations. This was “THE LAW OF ATTRACTION IN THE THOUGHT WORLD.” Surrounded, as we are, “by a great sea of Mind,” he wrote, “our thought-waves move through this vast mental ether.” In this context, we attract to ourselves “the thoughts of others of the same order of thought.” Into this world of magnetic law, Atkinson posited desire. “Strong expectancy is a powerful magnet.” “The stronger the Desire the greater the force set into motion.” The moral of the story, for Atkinson, was clear. Desire was “a manifestation of this Universal Life Love” (Atkinson 1906: 10, 12, 43, 53, 89; upper case in original).

Here was a plebeian cosmology—a theology, if you will—predicated on the earlier magnetic and Spiritualist one of Davis’s era but now intertwined with the affirmative and affective message of New Thought. Still, Atkinson brought yet another new note here—perhaps inspired by his orientalism and what he knew of South Asian notions of the ‘play’ of the gods. “The things we see around us are the playthings of the Kindergarten of God,” explained Atkinson. They were “playthings which we use in our game-tasks.” “If you don’t see just what you want, ask for it,” and “play, play, play, to your heart’s content.” So, with New Thought, God was the source of all supply, but—as in South Asia—life was all really a game, a play, a drama for the fun of it, as in children who were drawn into a game for the sake of the game itself. If thoughts were “real things,” you were supposed to have fun with them in a desire-based universe, a message that the Teachings of Abraham would echo again and again at the end of the twentieth century and after (Atkinson 1906: 104; on *lila* and the play of the gods in Hinduism, see Smith 1995: s.v. “lila”).

Well before Abraham, though, came the message of Napoleon Hill (1883–1970). Born in poverty—supposedly in a one-room cabin in Virginia—he became a journalist and then, after a pivotal meeting with Andrew Carnegie, a widely noticed writer of success books. The most well-known today is the best-selling *Think and Grow Rich* (1938), with probably over 30 million copies in print and multiple editions ever available (Hill 2007 [1938]).⁶ Hill’s first book,

dozen or so years after its initial publication. For the somewhat obscure details of Atkinson’s life, see Herringshaw 1909: I, 168; and “William Walker Atkinson” 1999: I, 717–719.

6 This is a reprint of the original edition, and I cite it specifically because the original edition is what Jerry Hicks insisted that he had read. There are numerous later revised editions available. The only available biography of Hill is the noncritical and promotional one by Michael J. Ritt and Kirk Landers (1995). On *Think and Grow Rich*, the last time I checked, the revised edition was ready to buy in the ‘Business’ section at the (now defunct) Borders Bookstore in Santa Barbara.

however, was *The Law of Success*, published in 1928, with an ambitious subtitle announcing that it was “Teaching, for the First Time in the History of the World, the True Philosophy upon Which All Personal Success Is Built.” It was here, and not in *Think and Grow Rich*, that Hill explicitly named the law of attraction—at least sixteen times. He called it first the “law of magnetic attraction” and later affirmed that “all energy and matter throughout the universe respond to and are controlled by the Law of Attraction which causes elements and forces of a similar nature to gather around certain centers of attraction.” “Like attracts like” was his mantra, so that negatives drew negatives and positives brought positives. Significantly, as in the tradition of Fourierist passion revisioned so emphatically in Atkinson’s business success, Hill (2009 [1928] 24, 380, 132, 134, 381; upper case original) proclaimed that “Attraction that constant, deeply seated, strong DESIRE attracts the physical equivalent or counterpart of the thing desired.”

Still, it was Hill’s later and resoundingly successful *Think and Grow Rich* that would profoundly influence the male member of the team who, until his death in 2011, produced the Teachings of Abraham, the current most clearly articulated version of the law of attraction. Jerry Hicks, in his telling a poor boy (like Hill), found a new path after reading *Think and Grow Rich*, with its ‘Carnegie secret’ concerning the key to abundance (it included large doses of will and desire). Jerry’s wife, Esther, the trance channel of the two, would reproduce the basic insights of Hill, continuing them still after the death of her husband.

So far my story has told of the middle nineteenth-century intertwining of magnetism, Spiritualism, and Fourierist passion—already transmuted into the economic realm—in the teachings of Andrew Jackson Davis. I have looked at further transmutations in the era of New Thought as themes of healing were augmented and even often replaced by principles of abundance. God was now the mother-source of all supply, and the emotions—especially the burning passion of (material) desire—attracted objects and conditions desired. Physical healing itself was being construed in terms of the theology of abundance; humans in conditions of pain and disease needed to accept the outpouring of health that emanated from the divine source. By the early twentieth century, humans who bought the message inhabited an attraction-based universe in which like drew like for good or ill. A sense of the power of the collective in the co-creation of abundance hovered on the horizon. So did a strong sense of the power of the will and ideas about the importance of delight and play. It remained for a new generation of the entranced to reiterate these ideas and principles and add their own embellishments.

Theosophical Transmissions

Before the era of New Thought, Russian immigrant Helena Blavatsky, with Henry Steel Olcott and William Judge, had founded the Theosophical Society in New York City in 1875. Blavatsky forged a path for twentieth-century and later channels with her publication of *Isis Unveiled* in 1877 and, even more, *The Secret Doctrine* in 1888 (Blavatsky 1975 [1877]; Blavatsky 1974 [1888]). Both of them massive works and probably produced by a trance process akin to automatic writing, they instructed readers on a vast cosmology predicated on spiritual forces. In *The Secret Doctrine*, Blavatsky referred matter-of-factly to universal “laws of cohesion and affinity” but rejected the “law” of gravitation because of its materialism. She saw attraction and repulsion as “two aspects of the universal unit, called ‘MANIFESTING MIND’” and controlled by “an innumerable Host of operative Beings.” Their essence was “co-substantial with the universal Electric Ocean,” which was “LIFE” (Blavatsky 1974, vol. 1: 259, 490ff, 604; see also 529–530; emphasis and upper case original).⁷ If all of this remained cosmological in terms of attraction (and repulsion), Blavatsky was still laying important ground for an increasing belief in the inner divinity of humans. She had bowdlerised Hindu concepts of the *atman*, the individual soul spark, and its identity with *brahman*, the all-power in the universe (Smith 1995: s.v. ‘atman’, s.v. ‘brahman’). And she offered her own expanded gloss on reincarnation and karma. Such ideas fit well with notions in the metaphysical community of the day, notions that would be valorised in a New Thought discourse, inherited in loose terms from Spiritualism, about the mighty ‘I Am’ and its residence within the self. As the channels learned from one another, they would unite the discourse about the lofty inner secret of the self with the infinite attraction of cosmological forces, and they would reiterate the reality of reincarnation. They would shape all of this into a pragmatic tool for living, at the same time subjecting the Atkinson-Hill rendition of abundance to a new metaphysical reading that emphasised spirituality.

It was later inheritors of the theosophical message, however, who led more directly to the late twentieth- and twenty-first-century versions of the law of attraction. Consider, if you will, the ‘autobiography’ of Guy Ballard (1878–1939), in the theosophical lineage but distinctly not a Theosophist (King [Ballard] 1934). A Midwesterner by birth, Ballard went west to superintend his uncle’s mine near Tucson, Arizona. He also steeped himself in occult and metaphysical

⁷ William Judge (2002 [1893]: 154) also noted the law of attraction in *The Ocean of Theosophy*, which was essentially his textbook on Blavatsky’s teachings. He thought that for the “Oriental sage” the “real term” (instead of gravitation) was “attraction.”

lore, absorbing Blavatsky's ideas and theosophical literature in general and incorporating huge doses of New Thought as well. He had studied for a time at an 'occult' library in Los Angeles and also absorbed New Thought especially as rendered by Hopkins student Annie Rix Miltitz, founder of the Homes of Truth. Ballard's reading must have included Edward Bulwer-Lytton's utopian novel *The Coming Race* (1871)—about an advanced civilisation deep within the earth—because the 'plot' of his own autobiography seems clearly derivative.⁸

It is easy to be dismissive of Ballard's writing as a Western version of a 'tall tale'. It was the Ballard case, after all, that went to the US Supreme Court twice (1944 and 1946), raising crucial questions about sincerity and fraud in religious belief (*United States v. Ballard* 1944; *Ballard v. United States* 1946). But cast against a background of channeling phenomena, his narrative may be read as a didactic fiction created to instruct readers. And it can be read, too, as the story of a trance experience, a visionary series of out-of-body episodes that transformed channeling into a full-circuit experience. Still more, since all channeling is a form of teaching, the didactic quality of the autobiography would continue the imaginative work of Ballard's text, even as the text was historically constructed. In this context, the most striking thing that Ballard did was to help free the theosophical masters from their exclusive relationship to Blavatsky. Now they were 'Ascended Masters' and this—in the person of the French Saint-Germain—with an emphasis on non-Asian provenance.⁹ A path had been opened for later channels to claim revelation from spiritual masters who, given their liberty by Ballard, could now transmogrify into space commanders, or Atlanteans, or Lemurians, or group entities, or other unknown spiritual mentors.

Guy Ballard had gone trekking on Mount Shasta because it was rumored that Blavatsky's Great White Brotherhood (her Masters or Mahatmas) kept a branch lodge there. However, when he stopped to take a drink from a spring, he felt an "electric current" run through him and turned to find another hiker (or so he thought) who promised him "a much more refreshing drink" that came "directly from the Universal Supply" (King 2001 [1982]: 3; subsequent citations are to this edition). The hiker, who was Saint-Germain, did not stop with the creamy drink. With a panther guarding Ballard's physical frame, he took his

8 Lord Bulwer-Lytton was an English novelist much esteemed by Blavatsky. His *Coming Race* was actually set in the United States at its beginning and end, although most of it transpired in a mysterious land inside the earth. On Ballard and the 'I AM Religious Activity' he founded, see Braden 1949: 257–271.

9 Admired by Blavatsky, the Comte de Saint-Germain was an eighteenth-century French necromancer, mystic, and alchemist, who—according to reports—avowed that he had lived for several centuries.

student on a series of out-of-body excursions. They travelled to faraway places and times, mostly—as befit a mining engineer and/or reader of Bulwer-Lytton—far inside the earth. In these adventures, Ballard encountered earlier incarnations of his wife and child, thrilled to exotic civilisations and utopian social arrangements, and mostly was instructed by Saint-Germain in a mixture of New Thought and theosophical principles.

Saint-Germain taught Ballard meditation techniques for entering what New Thought devotees call ‘the silence’. He invoked the ‘I Am’ language of New Thought—a language inherited from Spiritualism that straddled the ambiguity between the Old Testament God (“I AM THAT I AM” [Exod. 3:14]) and the New Thought individual claiming the God within. Nor was the language of *ascended* mastership free of New Thought connections, since Annie Rix Militz was already teaching the possibility in one’s own lifetime of ascending forever, thus avoiding successive reincarnations. Still more, as Saint-Germain instructed Ballard on the techniques for entering the silence and so drawing closer to ascension, he urged—as in New Thought practice—the use of affirmations. He went even further to teach decreeing—an exercise begun by Emma Curtis Hopkins that used strongly will-driven statements in order to command specific outcomes from the stance of the High Self (Melton 2004: 274–275; Melton 1986: 45–46; Militz 1990: 213–214). As blessing or what resembled old-fashioned cursing, decrees went forth in ways that look very much like the mental applications preached by William Walker Atkinson and Napoleon Hill.

Carrying forward earlier notions of passion and desire, Saint-Germain expressed keen awareness of connections between desire and love. “Whatsoever I desire manifests itself when I command in Love,” he told Ballard. And indeed, “the more intense the *feeling* within the desire, the more quickly it will be attained.” It was all, for Saint-Germain, an expression of the law of attraction—“a Great Law of Magnetic Attraction in the Universe” (King 2001: 4–5, 6; emphasis original). Always, desire was intertwined with material abundance. The inner-earth civilisations that Saint-Germain and Ballard visited displayed fabulous wealth, with their built environments looking like vistas one could find in the palace of an Aladdin. They were studded with jewels and stunning shapes, substances, and lights, massive in their richness, and technologically advanced beyond an American’s wildest dreams.

As he continued to mentor Ballard, Saint-Germain in numerous ways inserted the abundance theology that had become the hallmark of New Thought, making it clear that prosperity was the natural inheritance of humankind and the direction of one’s thoughts was the way to attain it. Saint-Germain went on to declare how important was the relationship between one’s thoughts and feelings—in ways that presaged the late twentieth-century Teachings of

Abraham. Thoughts had to be “clothed with feeling” before they could become things. And so Saint-Germain urged that “the need of *guarding the feeling* cannot be emphasized too strongly.” Always, desire lay at the heart of divinely tuned activity. “The *intensity* in the desire itself will reorder the world of people, conditions and things” (King 7, 14; emphasis original).

Theosophy had not disappeared in all of this. Beside the mastership claimed by Saint-Germain, Ballard recorded Saint-Germain’s instructions on projecting one’s astral body. Saint-Germain acknowledged Akashic records—Blavatsky’s mysterious astral light that contained all memory and was, in fact, the divine memory. And in classic theosophical mode, karma and reincarnation continued to be the rule for most of humankind—much of Ballard’s book, in fact, recounted journeys into previous incarnations. Finally, in a litmus text of theosophical inclination, Atlantis and Lemuria were real places.

Still more, in language that sounded like later channels, Saint-Germain instructed that “Projected Consciousness” was “but increasing the rate of vibration of the atomic structure in both the mind and body of the student.” And also hinting of channeling, he observed that “such a raising process” was “as simple as the tuning of your radios to any desired wavelength.” In fact, Saint-Germain explicitly cited channels at least five times in the autobiography, calling himself “the channel” and acknowledging the existence of many other “sincere channels” (King 2001: 35, 37, 230, 234, 233, 244, 254).¹⁰ Ballard’s fusion of Theosophy and New Thought had paved the way for new turns in the abundance theology that encapsulated the law of attraction—in the New Age movement and the new spirituality that followed.

The Coming of Seth—and Abraham

“The spiritual teacher that launched the New Age”—so proclaims the front cover of one of the Seth books, with Seth the complex entity channeled by Jane Roberts (1929–1984). Although this judgment is an exaggeration, Roberts’s entity has been widely credited with initiating the channeling practices associated with the New Age movement in the 1970s (Roberts 2001 [1970]; Riordan 1990: 101; see also Urban, Chapter 14 in this collection). Roberts, who attended Skidmore College from 1947 to 1950, was reared a Catholic but grew away from the Catholic church. She endured a troubled childhood and significant health

10 The pagination comes from the 4th edition reprint (King 2001 [1982]), but I have checked the references against the original edition of 1934, and they are present there. So the explicit reference to “channels” is no later editor’s addition.

problems but in adulthood emerged as a writer of short stories, novels, and poetry in Elmira, New York. With the somewhat teasing encouragement of her husband, the artist Robert Butts, she began work for a how-to book on developing extrasensory perception (ESP). And so she began experimenting with a Ouija board in 1963, out of which came her first contacts with the “energy personality essence no longer focused in physical reality” who called himself Seth, and out of which came, too, what must be seen as the first of the Seth books (Roberts 1966).

Roberts, although quite skeptical, eventually became convinced that, as she declared, Seth was her “channel to revelational knowledge,” meaning by this, knowledge that was “revealed to the intuitive portions of the self rather than discovered by the reasoning faculties.” With messages channeled over twenty years—recorded by Butts with what looks like meticulous care—she produced a huge body of literature, with almost a book every year or two after 1970. All told, easily several million copies of these made their way into print. Seth societies and conferences sprang up in a movement that is still growing in the present. At least one Religious Studies scholar with a theological background now does research and writing on Sethian themes.¹¹ Meanwhile, other channels have asserted their belief that they, too, are communicating with Seth (Roberts 1966: 268; Hastings 1990: 74; Melton 1990: 274).

Seth has stood out among channeled entities of the late twentieth century for the complex cosmology that he offered as well as for his essentially New Age vision. At the same time, the content of Seth’s teachings hints suggestively that Seth was familiar with the American mediumistic tradition in which key ideas bore a family resemblance to his own. In keeping with New Thought views and theosophical channeled messages but with new rhetorical flair, Seth taught that consciousness creates, and he employed a rudimentary ‘electrical’ science to explain the emotional charge that made thought effective. Seth caught the inherited message of desire, and, in discourse about the law of attraction, could toss the language of emanations from the cells that followed “certain laws of magnetism.” “Like definitely attracts like,” he said, and the emanations were “actually emotional tones” (Roberts 2001: 293).

If Seth gave the New Age its famously quoted motto ‘create your own reality,’ he taught the news in literal ways. As Roberts summarised Seth’s theories, “*we form matter* in order to operate in three-dimensional reality, develop our abilities and help others” (Roberts 2001: 109; emphasis original). Moreover, creating one’s reality had a collective aspect. It was—as Abraham would say, too—cocreation, for, as Seth put it, “*en masse*, you create both the glories and

11 The theologian is Paul Giurlanda of St. Mary’s College of California.

the terrors that exist within your earthly experience" (Roberts 2001: 112; emphasis original). In this context, Seth invoked what he called "the spacious present," which was "so spacious" that it could not be "explored all at once" (Roberts 1994: 6). "Hence, your arbitrary division of it into large rooms of past, present and future" (Roberts 1966: 55). There were multiple worlds and probable worlds, as there were probable pasts, presents, and futures—all available for the out-of-body traveller who learned how to navigate (Roberts 2001: 195–205).

Building on this cosmology with its high doctrine of human nature, Seth taught familiar theosophical concepts of reincarnation and karma, accepted without cavil the literal nature of Atlantis and Lemuria (or Mu), and saw life in theosophical terms as a schoolhouse for learning. Ballard's didactic 'autobiography' of 1934 had clearly chronicled many of the embellishments that Seth also adopted—views on the power of emotion wedded to thought, on desire and its results, on consciousness and vibration, and on out-of-body travel, for example. And Seth brought a new self-consciousness to the mediumistic process. He thought of it as 'translation' and acknowledged its problems. "I do not force my perceptions upon the woman through whom I speak, nor is her consciousness blotted out during our communications. ...The words that she speaks—these words upon the pages—are not initially verbal at all" (Roberts 1994: 10, 13).

The self-consciousness would be echoed by an Abraham to come. So, too, would themes of cocreation and joy that surfaced in Seth's construction of the received tradition. In Seth's restatement, the "creative joy of play" (as for Atkinson) was central. Seth believed that "all creativity and consciousness" were "born in the quality of play, as opposed to work, in the quickened intuitional spontaneity" (Roberts 1994: 32). Seth likewise repudiated "a lack of appreciation for those sensual joys with which you are surrounded" (Roberts 1994: 137). Still more, he assured Roberts that "after-death environments" were "generally far more intense and joyful than the reality you now know" (Roberts 1994: 120). In an idea that presaged notions of universal expansion taught by Abraham through trance channel Esther Hicks, Seth declared that the "soul or entity" was "expanded through reincarnations, through existence and experience in probable realities." It existed, in short, in a "state of becoming" (Roberts 1994: 71). And in what Abraham would also teach about being a group of nonphysical teachers, Seth—following Blavatsky—alluded to "many entities" that formed "a gestalt of which you know relatively little and of which I am not as yet prepared to tell you" (Roberts 2001: 156–157).

More than that, Seth elaborated a vision of being and nonbeing, of All That Is (read Source or God) and the role of desire and 'contracted yearning' in generating life, of the significance of diversity, and of the release in All That Is

that ultimately sparked creation. God dreamed probable individual selves and then had to let them go. One could never pin down who or what God was because God was ever changing, ever expanding (Roberts 2001: 240–244). In fact, Seth insisted on the essentiality of imbalance to drive life forward, declaring that “consciousness and existence do not result from delicate balances so much as they are made possible by lack of balances” (Roberts 2001: 214). He had, in so many words, proclaimed the ‘contrast’ upon which the Teachings of Abraham would be built.

Challenging traditional Christianity in his assertions, Seth reinscribed the language of God and prayer in terms that also led to the Abrahamic law of attraction. There was “no personal God-individual in Christian terms.” A “portion” of All That Is was “directed and focused within each individual, residing within each consciousness.” This could be “called upon for help when necessary.” And so, for Seth, prayer contained “its own answer,” and humans were “cocreators.” No “outside agency” determined an individual’s life (Roberts 2001: 245–246). In short, Seth had paved the way—elaborately and complexly—for the simpler, more pragmatically focused teachings that Esther and Jerry Hicks would begin to offer in the 1980s as the Teachings of Abraham with its central law of attraction.

Unlike Jane Roberts, about whose life a good deal is known, biographical data on the Hickses is sparse. An interview in 2007 presented Jerry Hicks as eighty years old at that time, with Esther Hicks fifty-six. That would make him about eighty-four at the time of his passing after a short bout with leukemia. The pair met in 1976 and married four years later, the marriage Esther’s second and Jerry’s fifth. Initially, it was Jerry Hicks who was obsessed with metaphysical themes and practices. Indeed, he clearly acknowledged Napoleon Hill’s *Think and Grow Rich* and Jane Roberts’s Seth books as major influences in his life. Like Hill, Jerry Hicks started life poor, and his family life was also unsettled. As a young man, he spent two years as a circus acrobat, toured the country as a musician and comedian, and eventually got wealthy at Amway Corporation with its multilevel marketing practices. With a more nurturing past, Esther Hicks was reared in a Mormon family in Park City (near Salt Lake City), Utah, but a family suspicious of the paranormal and, certainly, of contact with the dead (J. Hicks 2009: xiv–xv; Chalmers 2007).¹²

With this background, Esther Hicks at first displayed considerable unease about her husband’s metaphysical proclivities, but she came to listen to Jerry’s

12 I am grateful to Martha Roberts for bringing this interview to my attention.

readings from the Seth books and to read them with him. The couple also visited a trance channel who urged them to meditate and who predicted that Esther Hicks would thereby discover her own spirit guide. So began her meetings with Abraham, whom she has described as a group of evolved nonphysical teachers highly resonant with one another. At present, although she dislikes the term channeling, Esther Hicks has engaged in the practice virtually every day. When Jerry Hicks was alive, the couple travelled the nation in a huge bus and stopped at perhaps fifty cities. Now Esther travels using the airlines, and her schedule for early 2012 showed her appearing in different urban venues, sometimes weekly, while the website still announced events in some forty cities annually.

Until his death, Jerry Hicks was closely involved with the channeling practice of his wife. In fact, he acted as the spur to call forth Abraham's messages, and much of the material in the Abraham books came in reply to his incessant questions. At workshops until his illness he was always present, acting as a stenographer of sorts, even though the sessions are video recorded. Almost, it seemed, Esther Hicks performed as a Scheherazade, keeping her husband engaged through her own rendition of the law of attraction in and through the collectivity known as Abraham. With workshops, books, audiotapes, CDs, DVDs, and other accessory items to spread the message, the two cultivated a huge following. Esther has continued masterfully without her husband, claiming that Jerry Hicks is present at sessions along with Abraham and incorporating the 'spirit' presence of Jerry into her written communications and channeling work. Several of the Hickses' books have been on the *New York Times* bestseller list, and the numbers they have sold are in the millions (by 2007, 1.5 million copies for the last three of their books at the time). The Hickses caught the eye of Oprah Winfrey and appeared on her radio show. More than that, it was their teaching on the law of attraction that sparked Rhonda Byrne, whose small edited volume *The Secret* and video by the same name (with Esther Hicks's appearance in segments of it) far eclipsed their own separate sales and popularity. A dispute over intellectual property rights, however, led to the withdrawal of Esther Hicks from the second edition of the video (Chalmers 2007; Byrne 2006; E. Hicks and J. Hicks 2007).

With the Hickses and their Abraham, my story of learning the law of attraction reaches its present-day culmination. The middle nineteenth-century themes accessible through the work of Andrew Jackson Davis and Charles Fourier and his American disciples have hardly disappeared. To the contrary, their later repristination through New Thought and theosophically influenced voices have come together in the teachings of Abraham. The Hickses' message has been inflected in the pragmatic direction of New Thought. But echoing the

Sethian cosmology, Abraham has produced a new theology of process and expansion that carries devotees distinctly beyond the making of money.

For Abraham, creation is what humans do—either by deliberate intent (consciously focusing thoughts as guided by emotional feedback) or by default (letting thoughts and feelings operate without intervention). Humans as physical beings are manifestations of what Abraham calls the Nonphysical, possessing an older, wiser inner being that is Source or God. By incarnating in the physical realm, humans assume the leading-edge task of expanding Source, and they are thus, according to Abraham, at the tipping point of the process by which God grows. In this situation, they take on what the Hickses and Abraham have called the ‘contrast’. By encountering the conditions of physical existence, they generate strong desire about what they do and do not want. So humans, in their embodied and temporary state, launch ‘rockets of desire’, and these ‘rockets’—whether or not manifested with fulfilled desires on the physical plane—expand the Source energy by which life continues and the universe is enlarged. The smallest desire of any human has a high place in the order of things; it moves the God process forward.

The problem for humans is that, by and large, they are not in on the joy of continuous creation. They worry and stress out, act in anger or from thoughts of revenge, give up in hopeless despair, or live out of other negative feeling states that keep them from the exhilaration and delight that being part of the creative process should bring. But according to Abraham, life is supposed to be fun, and no matter what happens humans never get things wrong. Each disappointment causes them to launch yet another ‘rocket of desire’ that expands the universe. Likewise, they never get things done. Each successfully achieved desire gives only short-term satisfaction before yet another series of rockets is launched. Here the action is transferred from the physical world of what humans call ‘reality’ to a metaphysical plane in which the individualised historical imagination conjures delights already delivered. Abraham explains to devotees that what is important is this metaphysical imaginary, not the flesh-and-blood world of real money, real lovers, real good health, and the like. It is only by taking delight in the imaginary that physical manifestations can come.

How can this be? The answer is that humans are vibrational beings living in a vibrational universe. As they think and feel (their actual guidance system to their thought worlds), they set up a certain vibratory rate that attracts to themselves what is in alignment with their thinking-feeling state. So they *attract* what they are thinking or feeling, and the law of attraction becomes the fundamental mechanism by which the universe expands—either in the direction that human creators think they desire, or in the direction of what their thought

vibrations determine they are unconsciously dwelling upon. Every subject is “actually two subjects,” Abraham says—wanted and unwanted. Humans, by their lack of conscious focus, can attract what is unwanted into their lives. All of this is crystallised, for Abraham, in a three-step process by which the universe works and through which humans can achieve their desires. “You ask”; “the answer is given” (the work of Source and always affirmative); “the answer, which has been given, must be received or allowed (you have to let it in)” (E. Hicks and J. Hicks 2004: 49, 47).¹³

The implications do not stop here. Because the ‘law’ of allowing, of nonresistance, is fundamental to an achieved creative process in Abraham’s teachings, it becomes a social ethic. Diversity becomes intrinsic to the expanding universe. So humans who allow—who let others be, even if their thought- and feeling-worlds evoke moral indignation—such humans are aligning themselves with All That Is. In so doing, they create the conditions that lead to the manifestation of their own dreams. The message is that humans meant, when they entered the physical world, to live in joy, and Abraham has come to teach them how to do it. “*Well-Being is the basis of this Universe. Well-Being is the basis of All-That-Is. It flows to you and through you. You have only to allow it. Like the air you breathe, you have only to open, relax, and draw it into your Being.*” Finally, death is not to be feared, for it is a re-emergence into “pure positive energy” (E. Hicks and J. Hicks 2004: 14; emphasis original). The Abrahamic teaching about never getting it wrong comes full circle in the death experience.

In many ways, thus, the Teachings of Abraham show themselves to be footnotes to Seth, with the pragmatic and economic concerns of Napoleon Hill clearly interlaced. It was Seth who told students that they were creating their own reality and, following the metaphysical tradition already available to him, that they attracted what came into their lives. It was Seth who reiterated notions of reincarnation and suggested a grander, fuller series of worlds beyond the one assumed by those who visited him. It was Seth who emphasised feelings and their generative importance. Seth, too, as I have already remarked, taught the same process of channeling—emotionally tinged thought blocks that got translated by the channel—that Esther Hicks and Abraham do (even if Esther Hicks, unlike Jane Roberts, has insisted that she is a conscious channel and does not go away during the channeling process). Seth taught the contrast that Abraham underlined again and again. Seth taught joy (although Abraham teaches it more), and Seth—with all his probable worlds—surely

13 My explanation above is a digest of writings common to all the Abraham books, and material in quotation marks is commonly used language to be found throughout. For the earliest Abraham books, see J. Hicks and E. Hicks 1988 and J. Hicks and E. Hicks 1991.

taught diversity. Finally, it was Seth who saw the mysterious All-That-Is as ever distant yet ever available with the help of the practices that he (Seth) taught through trance channel Jane Roberts. For his part, the never-entranced Napoleon Hill encouraged Jerry (and so Esther) Hicks in the direction of practicality, the simplification of overarching cosmological schemes and probable worlds, and always money. Money was basic to the law of attraction, even if Jerry Hicks—and so Esther and Abraham—inserted the desire for it and its fulfillment into a worldview that had become transcendentalised.

Morals of the Story

My story has gone as far as, reasonably, it now can go. Since, in traditional lore, stories always have morals, allow me to pull out a few for consideration here. First, conceptually speaking, a major transformation occurred as the middle nineteenth-century law of attraction entered the twentieth century and continued into our own time. In explanations of magnetism (the concept with which the law of attraction began), the north magnetic pole attracts its *unlike* or reverse (the south pole) but not its like—a situation expressed in the well-known platitude that opposites attract. Yet beginning with the affirmative teaching of New Thought, it was *like* that attracted like. Writers and practitioners urged the importance of thought manipulation in a form of conjuring in which one saw as already accomplished that which one desired. This ‘magical’ process was basic to success, and New Thought books such as Atkinson’s and then Napoleon Hill’s endeavored to teach mental magic to their readers. So far as I have been able to determine, it was only Seth—and that fleetingly—who acknowledged the difference between the electromagnetic model of attraction and the one that he was propounding.¹⁴ Received revelation, thus, was working out of intuition more than logic—using a scientific-sounding language to articulate its own ‘vibratory law and patterns’.

A second moral to the story turns on the American substitution of economic interest for Fourierist erotic passion. Yet there are innuendoes that beneath the aggressive drive for business success, the passion that is finally physical and sexual remains. The Teachings of Abraham hold that desire moves the universe, that it is the very heartbeat and pulse of All-That-Is that keeps life

14 Speaking of “animations rising from consciousness,” Seth acknowledged them to be “electromagnetic” and “following their own patterns of positive and negative charge, and following certain laws of magnetism.” Then, he turned the tables: In the instance that Seth was talking about, he noticed, “like definitely attracts like” (Roberts 2001: 293).

expanding and renders it eternal. In fact, in one segment of the Hickses' DVD "The Secret behind *The Secret*" (2007), Abraham averred that the ultimate force behind the universe was sexuality. Much before that, in *Think and Grow Rich*, Napoleon Hill, significantly, had titled one chapter "The Mystery of Sex Transmutation" and seen it as a "step toward riches" (Hill 2007 [1938]: 196). And, of course, a Freudian would have a field day with the constant Abrahamic allusion to 'rockets of desire'. Even in the wealth-oriented version of desire at the heart of the abundance theology and its law of attraction, Fourierist eroticism and passion have not gone away, and they form a foundation in feeling and imagination out of which creation rises.

Both of these morals to the story point in the direction of the nonrational. They lead, then, to the third moral to the story and show themselves as aspects of the questions with which I began. So a third moral to the story has to do with the process of channeling itself. Even as cursory a view of the American history of the law of attraction as is presented here cannot avoid noticing the remarkable overlap in concepts and themes developed over the years. How do we make sense of this situation in ways that advance the study of religion more generally? For the sake of argument, one might take the position that the concordance among recent channeled messages suggests an authentic agreed-upon communication from sources outside the world as we know it (for an example verging on suggesting this, see Riordan 1992: 107, 123–126). Or conversely, one might view the trance process cynically and argue for the conscious manipulation of ideas by those who claim to be channels. Or, as a mediating and more complex possibility, one might accept the reality of the altered states of consciousness in which messages are delivered but still argue for unconscious learning processes from nontrance pasts and situations.

I have no case to make here either for or against the existence of transcendent sources (the first option), although I learned long ago to insist on using simpler, more commonsense explanations for phenomena before moving to more elaborate ones. Nor have I learned a thorough hermeneutic of suspicion that would lead me to dispute the claims of altered states that channelers make—even if, in the case of Guy Ballard, questions might be raised. In a general way, I am convinced that those who channel are reporting experiences as they have felt and understood them. So I am left with the third possibility. Do we have here, in fact, a prime example of the use of historical imagination? Does channeled material suggest a kind of high art of synthesis that takes what more rationally oriented theologians would produce as logic or philosophy or ethics and moves it strongly in an aesthetic direction?

If—acknowledging common reading practices and social networks—we agree to the likelihood of this last possibility, we can make sense of the

confluence of ideas and teachings in ongoing channeled theologies. We can gain insight into mental processes that are subtle and nuanced, even as they continue to be pragmatic. And we can especially appreciate Jonathan Z. Smith's (1982: 89) observation that *homo religiosus* is "preeminently, *homo faber*." Humans are makers, workers, creators—descriptions that, ironically enough, accord with the Teachings of Abraham and earlier teachings of similar ilk. Whatever else the history of the American law of attraction indicates, it suggests that the labor of religion be understood in terms of historical imagination and, so, aesthetics. Indeed, with strong evidence of historical process and aesthetic production, what I earlier called the 'acute' example of the trance-produced law of attraction can be instructive concerning the relationship between history and aesthetics in more conventional theologies. If the story of the law of attraction is a historically dependent story, it is also an art song. And it surely is worth listening for similar songs in theological domains where rational reflection is a stronger suit—that is, in the so-it-is stories that come from more orthodox worlds. Imagination does not disappear in the presence of history and reason but functions, instead, as a powerful team partner. As scholars of religion, an aesthetic approach to our subject is our own necessary team partner.

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