

“SPIRITS IN THE MATERIAL WORLD”: SPIRITUALISM AND IDENTITY IN THE *FIN DE SIÈCLE*

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BOOKS ARE SOMETIMES published posthumously. In the nineteenth century, books were occasionally written posthumously when spiritualist mediums claimed to receive communications from the spirits of famous writers anxious to keep in touch with their public from beyond the grave. Oscar Wilde wrote his last book twenty-six years after his death, *Oscar Wilde from Purgatory: Psychic Messages* (1926), edited by Hester Travers Smith, the medium who received the messages while in trance and inscribed them through the process known as “automatic writing.” The book was highly regarded in the spiritualist community, boasting a preface by Sir William Barrett, a famous physicist, a member of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, and – along with a number of other illustrious men of science such as physicists Sir William Crookes and Oliver Lodge as well as biologist Alfred Russell Wallace – a convert to spiritualism.

Ghosts-written texts were not a new phenomenon; a steady stream of them followed in the wake of the great spiritualist movement of the second half of the nineteenth century. Scientists, writers, musicians, saints, Indians, and pirates, not to mention Jesus and Buddha, vied in transmitting messages to the living through entranced mediums.¹ Among them was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle who, while still in the flesh, intervened in the argument over Wilde’s “psychic messages.”

The substance of this argument centered on issues of style and performativity. In Doyle’s letter to the *Occult Review*, a Spiritualist journal, concerning Wilde’s messages, the creator of Sherlock Holmes applied his deductive skills to a stylistic analysis of the text. He claims that the communications are genuine because they so closely correspond to the authorial *persona* of Wilde, known from his authenticated texts: “It is difficult to note these close analogies of style and to doubt that an Oscar Wilde brain is at the back of it” (“Oscar Wilde” 305). Doyle lists six criteria of corroboration:

When I consider the various corroborations in this case of Oscar Wilde:

- 1) The reproduction of his heavy style;
- 2) The reproduction of his light style;
- 3) The reproduction of character;
- 4) The recollection of incidents, some of them quite obscure, in his own life;

5) The reproduction of his handwriting;

6) And (at least in my eyes) the similarity of the conditions which he describes upon the other side with those which our psychic knowledge would assign to such a man, I consider that the case is a very powerful one indeed. (306)

These criteria derive identity from stylistic performance. When Doyle briefly returns to Wilde's case in his two-volume *History of Spiritualism*, he reiterates the same strategy of authentication: the identity of Wilde the man is confirmed by the identity of Wilde the author:

When, for example, in the case of the late Oscar Wilde, you get long communications which are not only characteristic of his style, but which contain constant allusions to obscure episodes in his own life and which finally are written in his own handwriting, it must be admitted that the evidence is overpoweringly strong.

In the same passage Doyle makes the crucial distinction between the author of ghostly communications and their writer. The author is the disembodied persona who inspires the text, the writer is the medium who inscribes it:

The verity of any particular specimen of such [automatic] writing must depend not upon mere assertion, but upon corroborative details and the general dissimilarity from the mind of the writer, and similarity to that of the alleged inspirer. (2: 221)

The spiritualist medium, in other words, is a *ghost's writer*, somebody who lends his (or more often her) body to an immaterial spirit in order to produce a text. The same performative dynamics structure another spiritualist practice, materialization, whereby a spirit is clothed in temporary flesh derived from the medium's own body.

Both automatic writing and materialization are activities in which identity is constructed by a set of social practices. As such, they are historical enactments of the theoretical premise articulated by, among others, Judith Butler: that identity is performative and that material, gendered corporeality is produced through discursive strategies. In *Bodies That Matter* Butler invokes the notion of materialization, apparently unaware of its historical specificity. She sees "a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface That matter is always materialized has, I think, to be thought in relation to the productive and, indeed, materializing effects of regulatory power in the Foucauldian sense" (9–10). These materializing effects are visibly played out in the tableau of the spiritualist séance, in which the complex interactions of power – between men and women, mediums and sitters, skeptics and believers – momentarily "fix" the elusive corporeality of the spirit.

However, spiritualism as a historical praxis is a record of failure. "Wilde's" *Psychic Messages* are not found in any of his collected works. Materialized spirits were almost universally rejected as frauds. If, as Butler argues, the materiality of corporeal identity may be seen as an effect of "Foucauldian regulatory power" (10), why has spiritualism's regulatory power failed so dismally in producing normative subjects or indeed any subjects at all?

The most obvious answer is that it is because spirits do not exist, or at least are profoundly uninterested in séances, and that spiritualism is therefore a mixture of self-deception, illusion, and fraud. While I largely concur with this opinion, the issue is not so simple, for in falling

back on the fact that nothing actually *happened*, we are guilty of the same flat-footed common sense that Butler excoriates in the preface to *Bodies That Matter*. Her argument is that while bodies may indeed pre-exist discourse, it is impossible to access this “pure” material being other than through socially inflected language. Any statement whatsoever about the materiality of the body or its sex is already involved in the social circulation of meaning. This is not to claim that discourse causes sexual difference or the physical composition of the body but rather that both are “indissociable from discursive demarcations” (1). Thus, saying that spiritualism failed because spirits do not exist still does not address the issue of spiritualist discourse and its inability to cope with the phenomena it called into being. For it is not true to say that nothing happened during the *séance*; plenty of things happened, as even skeptics had to admit. The problem was that Victorian and Edwardian culture refused to accept the spiritualist explanation of these events, a refusal that continues to this day, minorities of true believers excluded.² The identities that were performed within the spiritualist milieu received no social imprimatur of authenticity and either remained within the narrow confines of a sect or landed their possessors in asylums. This does not mean that such identities were not lived or did not constitute an attempted “fashioning” of the self. But it does mean that, for some reason, such fashions fell by the wayside in the process of cultural selection. Just like “Wilde’s” text – which is quite real but invisible in culture at large because seen as inauthentic – spiritualist identities are invisible, incomplete, and aborted bids for subjecthood.

If identities are performed, they are performed according to scripts that are written within specific historical, cultural, and ideological contexts. Such scripts have to be not only socially acceptable but also coherent in their own terms. The failure of spiritualism may be attributed to a schism within its own defining concepts. This schism, I will argue, resides in the oxymoronic view of materiality, expressed in the movement’s defining trope of “natural supernatural.” Underlying the production of identities within the spiritualist milieu and, in particular, within the praxis of the *séance*, this oxymoron results in a paradoxical, self-contradictory, and self-consuming subject. Such a subject is not only subversive of the law, as Butler claims, but literally unlivable in society at large unless cushioned by a group – a sect, a commune, a movement – that constitutes an external carapace, holding the paradox in by endlessly elaborating on the original discourse, without resolving any of its inner contradictions. The result is a utopian subject, capable of sustaining a degree of deviance unthinkable in the mainstream, a challenge and an alternative to the common molds of selfhood.

Calling the mediums and their clientele “utopian subjects” might seem exaggerated, but there are two reasons for doing so. First, in terms of intellectual influences, there was a clear continuity between the radical utopian-socialist movements of the first half of the nineteenth century and spiritualism, exemplified by the spiritualist conversion of aged Robert Owen and later by the astonishing career of Annie Besant, a socialist, feminist, and birth-control campaigner who eventually became the world leader of the theosophical movement.³ Second, and more importantly, in terms of Karl Mannheim’s classic definition of the utopian mentality as “shatter[ing] either partially or wholly, the order of things prevailing at the time . . . burst[ing] the bonds of the existing order” (173), spiritualism undoubtedly attempted to create a new human subject, standing in sharp contrast to the materialistic *Weltanschauung* of the period. This subject would transcend the division between reason and ecstasy, spirit and matter, femininity and masculinity. However, precisely because spiritualism unquestionably accepted the prevailing dichotomies, this new subject turned out to be impossible to

achieve. Moreover, in promising an impossible unity, the spiritualist ideal came close to another utopian dream of the *fin de siècle*, the Nietzschean superman, whom Slavoj Žižek describes as “man as harmonious being, a New Man without antagonistic tensions” (5). The difference between the two consisted in their *modus operandi*: while the superman poured his unresolvable paradoxes into violence, the spiritualist subject (re)performed his/her ambiguity, staving off the psychological collapse by repetition. But while repetition is seen by Butler in *Gender Trouble* as the glue of (gender) identity, spiritualist performances were likely to generate ruined selves that were held together only by the external “skin” of an in-group. The history of spiritualism thus adds a cautionary note to those postmodern theories that see a subversive, utopian subject as a desideratum.

In this essay I will discuss the performance of (gendered) identity in *fin-de-siècle* spiritualism, focusing on two practices, automatic writing and materialization. My goal is to show how this performance derives from the underlying script of the “natural supernatural,” which shapes the inscription of sex and gender within the inherently paradoxical matrix of the materiality of the spirit.

Coming back to Wilde’s “psychic messages,” it is easy to see how the affair exemplifies what Alex Owen calls spiritualism’s “challenge to the apparent autonomy of the ego” (204). To begin with, there is a basic distinction between the embodied medium and the disembodied spirit, corresponding to the Cartesian distinction between the body and the soul. Ideally, the medium is supposed to be precisely what the word indicates: a neutral, transparent conduit between the two worlds. Regardless of the fact that it is the medium’s hand that puts the words on the page, the authorship of the text should be unquestionably Wilde’s. But, in fact, the body and the soul, the writer and the author, are not so easily disentangled.⁴ While the entranced medium’s will is efficiently neutralized by the alien spirit, her *body* somehow leaves its imprint on the resulting text: “The stained glass will still tint the light which passes through it, and our human organism will never be crystal clear” (Doyle, *History* 2: 221).

A response to Doyle’s letter by one C. W. Soal, published in the following issue of the *Occult Review*, claims that the *Psychic Messages* are an unconscious fake by the medium. Since neither accuses Mrs. Smith of fraud, the disagreement between the two spiritualist luminaries is about the degree of autonomy that the medium’s body possesses. For Soal “the human organism” contains resources which are liberated by the state of trance but which, in the case of Smith, fall short of the real Wilde’s talent:

Further I maintain that a person might possess the power to imitate Wilde in his capacity of essayist and wit, and yet be entirely destitute of his power of inventing a plot or a faculty for telling a story. The mere production of epigram and decorative prose by no means exhausts the literary versatility of the real Wilde, who, besides being a clever playwright and excellent classical scholar, was in addition a born story-teller. (44)

The gender dynamic is obvious here: the female medium is unable to imitate the masculine thrust of Wilde’s narratives (not to mention his Oxbridge accomplishment as an “excellent classical scholar”). Both Doyle and Soal agree that the medium’s corporeality is involved in the production of the text, and both gender its activity as feminine, but their versions of femininity differ. For Doyle, the female body is a passive filter for the masculine voice from the Great Beyond. For Soal, femininity involves wild, chaotic, unruly productivity,

unconstrained by will or intellect. Soal's reading of the text, however, is potentially more subversive than Doyle's, for according to him, the psychic messages are a text without an author. By rejecting the spirit hypothesis and refraining from accusing the medium of conscious fakery, Soal is left with a writing that flows directly from the body and the unconscious, bypassing the ego. This is an elaboration of the concept of automatic writing that may be seen later in the Surrealists' experimentation.

The text of the psychic messages itself is as flat as products of automatic writing generally are (T. H. Huxley was quite right when he quipped that the boredom of spirit communications is sufficient to cure any longing for afterlife). But one constant theme in them is "Wilde's" obsessive harping on the problem of the body and the relation between corporeality and creativity. At some point, "he" coyly points out that "It is not by any means agreeable to be a mere mind without a body" (*Psychic Messages* 15). On the other hand, "his" diatribes against contemporary writers – "he" has a particular axe to grind with H. G. Wells, Bernard Shaw, and James Joyce – contain not a little criticism of their "fleshiness." Of Joyce, for example, "Wilde" says indignantly that his ideas "sprung out of his body, not his mind" (39). This is a charge that was leveled at the pre-Raphaelites, Wilde's predecessors, more than fifty years earlier and it is comic to think of the aesthete's spirit made to mouth the platitudes of his enemies as part of his penance.⁵ But on the other hand, anxiety about the body seems entirely appropriate in a text whose own spooky provenance is tied up with the author's missing corporeality. Another instance of this anxiety is the fact Wilde's homosexuality is not mentioned, while there is a lot of coy chatter about women – a sort of postmortem "heterosexualization" of the infamous sexual dissident.

The *Psychic Messages*, along with the whole corpus of automatic writing, promulgates a surprisingly (post)modern notion of identity as *style*, as constructed in, and through, discourse and thus easily detachable from the physical body. In the second part of the book Hester Travers Smith herself assumes the authorial "I" and eloquently defends the genuineness of the messages, which, she claims, prove the reality of an afterlife: "If I were asked, then, to state what I consider proof of an after life, I should reply reconstruction of personality" (136).

Reconstruction or construction? Style, especially Wilde's style, is easy to imitate. Paradoxically, what is adduced as proof of the survival of individuality after death easily flips over into denial of individuality altogether. The soul undergoes the same process that Walter Benjamin describes as happening to the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction: "the technique of reproduction . . . substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique essence" (221). To use Benjamin's term, the "aura" of authenticity is now exiled from its last stronghold: the unique, irreplaceable human individual. Moreover, in becoming mobile, the soul also becomes divisible and quantifiable. The style of the *Psychic Messages* is rather like Wilde's on a bad day, but how much resemblance is enough to establish identity? Smith disingenuously claims that even a poor reproduction conveys enough of the unique flavor of the original but her argument is not only self-serving but self-contradictory, for if her book had indeed been stamped with the indelible mark of Wilde's personality, there would have been no need for the aesthetic debate that actually ensued:

I do not consider that, even if we do accept the view of some of *our* critics that Wilde's genius is diminished and that the edge of his wit is less finely ground than when he was alive, it detracts from the enormous importance of our having produced something so much akin to his style that it invites discussion. (91)

The most interesting thing in this passage (apart from the sensible view that death may be rather traumatic to a wit) is the pronoun “our.” Are the first person plural the spiritualist community, Smith and her sitters, Smith and Wilde, or all of the above? The ambiguity both dissociates the medium from the spirit, as required by the spiritualist protocol, and covertly establishes their commonality, not to say identity. The “author” of an automatic writing is, thus, a peculiar psychological centaur composed of the medium and the spirit “control” (“control” was the technical name for the spirit that took over the medium during the séance). Not only does this composite being violate our notion of the singularity of the psyche, but in most cases, as in the case of Smith/Wilde, it is also androgynous. Most (though not all) mediums were female, most “controls” masculine. Interestingly, even cross-gender materialization was not uncommon, despite the obvious technical difficulties it presented.

Mediumship, argues Owen, stages a scene of desire and subversion, operating “as both acquiescence and resistance, conformity and transgression, representation and its refusal” (233–34). In particular, it dramatizes the contradictions inherent in the nineteenth-century ideal of passive and compliant femininity. Paradoxically, the considerable power of the medium was predicated on her literal self-annihilation: “the most powerful medium was the most powerless of women, the final coinage of exchange being the apparent abdication of self for possession by another” (233).

I will argue, however, that spiritualism violated not only the notion of stable gender identity but of identity altogether. By aping the discourse of nineteenth-century materialistic science, it acted out its hidden tensions, exaggerating them into unresolvable paradoxes. It positioned itself on the unstable boundary between body and psyche, dramatizing the contradiction inherent in the idea of conscious matter. If the male spirit in the female medium is a scandal and a transgression, so is any materialized spirit. And the obvious gender trouble of spiritualism is part and parcel of the deeper trouble of corporeal identity.

Natural History of the Supernatural

SPIRITUALISM IN ITS modern form was an American import that took England by storm in the early 1850s. What began as a domestic ghost story – two young girls, Kate and Margaret Fox, claiming to communicate with the ghost of an itinerant peddler haunting their house at Hydesville, near Rochester, New York – resulted in an international movement which, at the time of its glory, boasted scores of public and private mediums, several organizations with card-carrying membership, at least five major periodicals, and a network of lyceums (Sunday schools). Spiritualist séances became an acceptable pastime for members of the aristocracy; and many men and women of letters, thinkers, and scientists either dabbled in spiritualism or became enthusiastic converts. Among the first to see the new light was the aged Robert Owen whose example influenced numerous freethinkers. Later converts included Alfred Russell Wallace, the co-discoverer with Darwin of natural selection, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Harriett Beecher Stowe, Andrew Lang, Cesare Lombroso, John Addington Symonds, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who characterized the atmosphere of the time as of “some psychic cloud descending from on high, and showing itself to those people who were susceptible” (Inglis, *Natural and Supernatural* 206; see also Oppenheim 39–44). However, despite its stunning success, dramatic flair, and unparalleled silliness, spiritualism was only an exaggeration of a general nineteenth-century trend: the quest for the science of the supernatural.

The supernatural is not some pristine island of belief, preserved among the corrosive ocean of skepticism that flooded the West during the Enlightenment. On the contrary, the modern concept of the supernatural is a by-product of scientific empiricism. Here are two quotations:

To the vulgar, who do not see the universal law which governs the universe, everything out of the ordinary course of events, is a prodigy; but to the enlightened mind there are no prodigies; for it perceives that in both the moral and the physical world, there is a chain of uninterrupted connection; and that the most strange and even apparently contradictory or supernatural fact or event will be found, on due investigation, to be strictly dependent on its antecedents. (16)

This is from an 1848 treatise on the supernatural *The Night-Side of Nature* by Catherine Crowe, a prolific author of triple-decker novels and ghost stories. And here, almost precisely a hundred years later, are the comments of another ghost-story writer, H. Russell Wakefield:

We have to remember and face the fact that we have not, and cannot have, any acquaintance with, let us say, more than a millionth part of what is loosely called “reality”, or the final truth about the universe, which may be, indeed, from our point of view, fundamentally irrational We see perhaps only one octave of the rays of reality, and ghosts, it may be, lie outside this octave, or rather just in and just out of it; they are Dwellers on the Threshold. (9)

Both authors make the same point: that supernatural manifestations are entirely natural. Both state this naturalness in terms borrowed from science. The difference in tone and imagery between the two quotations is due to the differences between their respective physical paradigms. Crowe, relying on the classical physics of Newton, writes about “universal law” and causal chains, which can be deduced from observation. Wakefield’s model of the real is quantum physics and Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle. His awareness of the limits of observation comes from the same source as his “rays of reality,” the vocabulary of modern physical science.

The two quotations belong to a vast body of discourse that, throughout the last two hundred years, has attempted to construct the supernatural as part of the natural order of things, obeying the same kind of laws and knowable in exactly the same way as the natural phenomena which constitute the object of science. There is no generally accepted name for this body. Some authors refer to it as “deviant science” (Dolby); some as occultism (King); some as psychical research or paranormal studies (Oppenheim, Inglis). Nineteenth-century spiritualism was an integral part of this body, which is as heterogeneous in its origins as the phenomena it studies, composed of bits and pieces of knowledge rejected by science, folk tradition, esoteric mysticism, and established religions. Like Wakefield’s ghosts, it is a Dweller on the Threshold, occupying the borderline between science and belief.

This position of liminality was the result of an unstable balance of opposing forces: occultism’s continuous struggle for recognition and respectability and science’s vehement rejection. The division between the natural and the supernatural is neither self-evident, nor fixed; it is a by-product of the development of science itself. The difference between the Crowe and Wakefield quotations demonstrates how each new scientific paradigm constructs the supernatural in its own image, as its own reflection and negation.

From the acceptance of the Newtonian universe, governed by uniform natural law, “it proved to be an easy step to making a distinction between natural phenomena, which were real, and the supernatural, which were compounded of myth, legend, mysticism (henceforth regarded as anti-rational), delusion, hallucination and fraud” (Inglis, *Natural and Supernatural* 138). The Age of Science was also the age of what David Knight calls “scientism,” “the idea that science is the guide to all reasoning and will provide the answers to all the questions which can reasonably be asked” (5). In “The Spirit of the Age” John Stuart Mill sees in physical sciences the paradigm of all knowledge:

[T]he man who is capable of other ideas than those of his age, has an example in the present state of physical science, and in the manner in which men shape their thoughts and their actions within its sphere, of what is to be hoped for and laboured for in all other departments of human knowledge; and what, beyond all possibility of doubt, will one day be attained. (79)

But what about unreasonable questions that are nevertheless being asked? The problem is that science still provides “the guide to all reasoning,” even when this reasoning is invalid, and that Mill’s worship of “the manner in which men [of science] shape their thoughts” inspires even those whose thoughts wander in very dubious directions.

The supernatural is what science purges out of its reality paradigm. It is a hotchpotch of disparate elements which are held together by their shared status of science’s outcasts. Francis King defines contemporary occultism as “rejected knowledge” and severs its continuity with the Renaissance tradition of hermetic studies. According to him, “it was only after [magical] arts had been rejected by orthodoxy, had ceased to be elements in the world-picture of the dominant intellectual establishment, that they became occult” (22). Occultism swallows up motley discourses whose only shared feature is ideological disenfranchisement. Spiritualism, for example, allied itself with phrenology, mesmerism, homeopathy, and vegetarianism, though in none of them did spirits play any discernible part. The feeling that all doubtful subjects were tainted by association with each other was very strong among scientists. At the 1914 meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, Vernon Harcourt, a chemist, opposed admitting psychology as one of the topics because, if it were allowed, “it would be impossible to keep ‘psychics’ out” (Inglis, *Science* 308–09). William James whose own interest in psychic phenomena seems to confirm this diagnosis defines the supernatural as “the unclassified residuum” of the scientific world-view treated by professional scientists with “contemptuous . . . disregard.” Occultism’s stock-in-trade are “wild facts, with no stall or pigeonhole, . . . facts which threaten to break up the accepted system” (26–28). But once organized into a discursive system, these “wild facts” mirror the structure of science. Occultism becomes Mr. Hyde to science’s Dr. Jekyll, a dark double aping its original’s dignified demeanor.

Transgression always replicates by inversion the structure of the law it violates. The ambition of nineteenth-century occultism was to set itself up as an alternative body of knowledge, whose aim was, in the words of the spiritualist J. Arthur Hill, to “retain our scientific gains, but . . . extend our vision beyond the material” (298). The central clearing-house for James’s “wild facts” was called Society for Psychical Research, and its charter stated: “Membership of the Society does not imply the acceptance of any particular explanation of the phenomena investigated, nor any belief as to the operation, in the physical world, of forces other than those recognised by Physical Science” (Hill 101).⁶ The SPR thus

attempted to have its cake and to eat it too, to retain the mantle of scientific respectability (many of its members were well-known scholars) and yet to be empirically convinced of the reality of soul survival. Peter Washington describes the spiritualist séance as “a new version of holy communion, in which faith is replaced by evidence” (10).

Those scientists who accepted spiritualism saw their new work as continuation of their scientific research. Cesare Lombroso, the founder of criminal anthropology, converted to spiritualism in his old age and published a book describing his experiments with the famous medium Eusapia Paladino. Despite the inevitable ridicule, he is unrepentant, accusing (as spiritualists were wont to do) his skeptical colleagues of betrayal of science:

When, at the close of a career . . . in which I have figured as a champion of the new trend of human thought in psychiatry and criminal anthropology, I began investigations into the phenomena of spiritism . . . my nearest friends rose against me on every side, crying “You will ruin an honourable reputation . . . and all for a theory which the whole world not only repudiates, but, worse still, thinks to be ridiculous.” But . . . I thought it my predestined end and way and my duty to crown a life passed in the struggle for great ideas by entering the lists for this desperate cause It seemed to me a duty that . . . I should unflinchingly stand my ground in the very thick of the fight, where rise the most menacing obstructions and where through the most infuriated foes. (xv–xvi)

The military metaphor here indicates not only the height of passion engendered by the struggle between science and its double but also a covert need for the male scientist engaged in spiritualism and psychic research to defend his masculinity. For as we shall see, not only were women predominant in occultism and spiritualism but the deviant discourses themselves were gendered feminine.⁷

Occultism and science parted ways in the 1920s, with theosophy and Rudolf Steiner’s anthroposophy giving up the dream of naturalizing the supernatural and instead laying greater stress on spiritual enlightenment. The massive infiltration of Eastern philosophies and religions into the West also played its part. But even today, such cults as the brazenly called Scientology use a smattering of scientific discourse, betraying occultism’s origin as a by-blow of positivism.

Transgression simultaneously consumes and renews the law. By claiming that “psychical research is absolutely and essentially scientific” (Hill 229) and by pleading that the supernatural be studied scientifically, spiritualists and occultists strengthened the authority of natural sciences, which was predicated on the exclusion of the supernatural. Science is not a pile of facts but a structured discourse, based on the distinction – as much rhetorical as epistemological – between the natural and the supernatural. The discourses of spiritualism and occultism collapse the poles of this defining dichotomy by insisting that the supernatural is natural. This collapse results in a rhetorical loop that strangles occultism itself.

T. H. Huxley defines the scientifically impossible as an oxymoron: “Strictly speaking, I am unaware of anything that has a right to the title of an ‘impossibility,’ except a contradiction in terms A ‘round square,’ a ‘present past,’ ‘two parallel lines that intersect,’ are impossibilities because ideas denoted by the predicates round, parallel, intersect, are contradictory of the ideas denoted by the subjects, square, past, parallel” (*Science and Christian Tradition* 197). Hill quotes this as proof that science does not deny the existence of strange and exceptional phenomena, but he fails to see that Huxley’s definition renders occultism impossible in terms of the rhetorical system that sees “natural” and “supernatural”

as contradictory as “round” and “square.” Hill’s own discourse pays the rhetorical price of this impossibility: it evolves into a series of extended tropes, which repeat, displace, and elaborate on the underlying paradox of natural supernatural. This paradox marks the breakdown of the ideology of scientism but does not reach beyond its limits. Within these limits, the supernatural is destined to remain an intruder, a prodigy, and a monster.

Fin-de-siècle horror fiction reflects the scientification of the supernatural. In the early-nineteenth-century Gothic novel the man who confronts the supernatural menace is a priest; in the *fin-de-siècle* horror thriller he is a scientist. In Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, Dr. Van Helsing is a physician whose occasional and offhand use of sacred paraphernalia is overshadowed by his far more extensive deployment of soporifics, tonics, hypnotism, and blood transfusions. Van Helsing, the supernatural sleuth, had a substantial following in the fin de siècle, as a hybrid of the ghost story and whodunit became a flourishing popular genre. Among the Sherlock Holmeses of the Beyond were Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu’s Dr. Hesselius (who probably influenced Stoker’s Van Helsing), William Hope Hodgson’s Mr. Carnacki, Algernon Blackwood’s Dr. Silence, not to mention Doyle’s own Professor Challenger investigating spiritualism in *The Land of the Mist*. All these scientific ghostbusters (just like their late-twentieth-century descendants) unabashedly mixed a watered-down scientific method, technological paraphernalia, and spiritualist twaddle. Mr. Carnacki, for example, professes to be as objective as Lombroso or William James: “I am as big a skeptic concerning the truth of ghost-tales as any man you are likely to meet; only I am what I might term an unprejudiced skeptic. I am not given to either believing or disbelieving things ‘on principle,’ as I have found many idiots prone to be . . . I view all reported ‘hauntings’ as unproven until I have examined unto them” (Hodgson 11). Having examined unto them, however, he invariably finds them real and fights them with pseudo-kabbalistic spells, a rubber outfit, and dangerously overloaded vacuum tubes.

In the praxis of spiritualism, with its vast array of “manifestations,” from table-rapping to automatic writing, “apports” (materialization of objects), and full-scale spirit materialization, the underlying aporia of occultism was acted out with striking clarity. Both alarmed skeptics and enchanted converts agreed that there was one feature of spiritualism that distinguished it from all religious revivals and mystic fads: its insistence on objective proof. Spiritualist Samuel Carter Hall wrote in 1884 that spiritualism is “to confute and destroy materialism, by supplying *sure and certain and palpable evidence* that to every human being God gives a soul which he ordains shall not perish when the body dies” (qtd. in Oppenheim 63; emphasis mine). And the mediums delivered, at least for a while. Doyle claims “that there is no physical sense which I possess which has not been separately assured, and . . . no conceivable method by which a spirit could show its presence which I have not on many occasions experienced” (*Psychic Quest*, 401). Spiritualist treatises are, in most cases, dreary compendiums of facts and observations. The method of spiritualism is materialism at its most naive: “heaping up data until the tendency of the whole is seen” (Hill 169). Empiricism becomes the last defense of ghosts. The meticulous cross-referencing of witnesses’ testimonies in *Dracula* mirrors the striving for verisimilitude that structures spiritualist discourse.

However, since spiritualism’s facts, such as they are, are subjective impressions received by susceptible witnesses, spiritualism had to redefine “scientific evidence” by eliminating the all-important aspect of repeatability. If Medium A performed splendidly among believers and was caught cheating by a skeptical observer, the explanation was that skepticism disturbed the balance of “psychic force” and distorted the results of observation. In Doyle’s spiritualist

story “Playing with Fire” the medium is simultaneously an objective “telescope” affording glimpses of the Other Side and a sensitive performer whose “results were vitiated by the presence of an outsider” (191). But such foreshadowing of the Heisenberg uncertainty principle did not sit well with nineteenth-century philosophy of science. Not only did it violate the notion of scientific objectivity but, more importantly, it ascribed to the medium the impossible position of both subject and object, both an instrument and an actant.

The attempt to naturalize the supernatural was meant to cancel out the divide between matter and spirit, knowledge and value, science and revelation. However, in replicating in their own discourse the dichotomous structure of science, spiritualism and occultism wrote themselves into the position of perpetual transgression, of an always pending collapse. And when this collapse finally happened, it either blew them into incoherence or led to a total rejection of science and western rationality, the road taken by the heirs of spiritualism: theosophy, anthroposophy, and various New Age cults.

Crowe in *The Night-Side of Nature* consistently uses “contradictory” as a synonym for “supernatural.” She sets out to illuminate the side of nature which is defined by being perpetually shrouded in darkness. Like Doyle’s “psychic cloud,” which is also a harbinger of light, her rhetoric is an attempt to unite opposites by constructing a middle space between the stark poles of a dichotomy: “[In the nineteenth century] we are disposed to extend the bounds of nature and science, till they comprise within their limits all the phenomena, ordinary and extraordinary, by which we are surrounded” (16). Within this middle space the supernatural could be shown to blur into the natural, ordinary into extraordinary. However, instead of stretching opposition into continuity, Crowe twists it into an oxymoron. The Promised Land of the reconciliation between science and religion, material and spiritual, natural and supernatural turns out to be a wasteland of paradox.

Lost Souls

THE VICTORIAN DOCTRINE of separate spheres was taken by spiritualism to an uncanny, if logical, extreme: men belonged in this world, women in the next. Women constituted the vast majority of both mediums and sitters in the spiritualist circles; spiritualism and occultism, as Owen shows, held unparalleled opportunities for female professionals (one only has to consider the amount of power wielded by Madame Blavatsky who founded theosophy and her successor, the erstwhile feminist Annie Besant).

But apart from practical considerations, there were ideological reasons for women’s affinity with occultism. Throughout the nineteenth century a strong link was forged between the supernatural and femininity. Catherine Crowe’s discussion of this issue, written before middle-class ladies threw themselves into table-turning, is typical:

Man is more productive than receptive Thus the ecstatic woman will be more frequently a seer, instinctive and intuitive; man, a doer and a worker; and as all genius is a degree of ecstasy or clear-seeing, we perceive the reason whereby in man it is more productive than in woman, and that our greatest poets and artists, in all kinds, are of the former sex, and even the most remarkable women produce but little in science or art; while on the other hand, the feminine instinct, and tact, and intuitive seeing of truth, are frequently more sure than the ripe and deliberate judgement of man; and it is hence that solitude and such conditions as develop the passive and receptive at the expense of the active, tend to produce this state and to assimilate the man more to the nature of the woman; while

in her they intensify those distinguishing characteristics; and this is also the reason that simple and childlike people and races are the most frequent subjects of these [psychic] phenomena. (217)

Women have a privileged access to the invisible world by virtue of being disenfranchised in the visible one. However, just as the intrusion of the supernatural into the natural world cannot help but create the oxymoronic scandal of “natural supernatural,” the female privilege, of whatever kind, produces a sexual confusion whose outcome is “to assimilate the man more to the nature of the woman.” Crowe attempts to ward off this confusion by stressing her dedication to the ideal of sexual polarity. But women aligned with ghosts descend into sexual chaos, as the passage, built on carefully balanced oppositions – “productive – receptive,” “worker – seer,” “judgement – instinct” – collapses into the muddle of the penultimate clause where both men and women melt into femininity.

William James personifies the opposing sides in the debate between science and spiritualism as the “scientific-academic mind” and the “feminine-mystical mind” (27). His brother elaborates on the last category in *The Bostonians* where Verena Tarrant’s milieu comprises feminists and occult cranks of both sexes.

The coupling of femininity and the supernatural persists in contemporary occultism. In explicating the work of a Victorian psychic researcher Thomas Jay Hudson, Crowe’s editor Colin Wilson uses the metaphor of the marital relationship to illustrate the interaction of the objective and subjective parts of the psyche where the latter is the conduit to the spiritual reality:

It is as if the mind had two faces: one turned towards the outside world, the other turned towards the inner worlds of memory and intuition. For practical purposes, they are rather like a husband and wife: the husband – the objective mind – assertive and aggressive, the wife shy and taciturn, inclined to doubt her own judgement in the face of her husband’s superior forcefulness. (63)

By means of states of ecstasy or trance, the wife rebels. Since Wilson believes in the existence and power of the “subjective mind,” he ostensibly welcomes this state of affairs, yet the misogyny of his simile undermines his own position. The irreducible ambiguity of the spiritualist women’s position consisted in the fact that they were empowered by their own powerlessness. Women who found the séance a perfect venue for power-brokering and self-dramatization had to insist that their greatest gift was their feminine passivity: “When spiritualists came to present an argument for women’s rights founded on an acknowledgement of innate sexual difference – specifically spiritual superiority – they were drawn into a familiar set of contradictions” (Owen 28).

At the core of spiritualism as a social practice was the medium. Without the women and men who went into a trance and delivered greetings from one’s departed relatives, played musical instruments with their hands bound, levitated, and in general gave their audience their money’s worth, there would have been no psychic cloud raining revelations on the heads of writers, scientists, and laymen. In Doyle’s “Playing with Fire” the narrator says: “Our experience had shown us that to work on these [occult] subjects without a medium was as futile as for an astronomer to make observations without a telescope” (188). But the price of centrality was self-erasure. A telescope is, after all, a mere instrument in the hands of an astronomer, who would be automatically gendered as masculine. Mediums, regardless of sex, were placed in the feminine position of having to renounce the self in order to become

what the word signifies: pure conduits, permeable membranes at the border between two worlds. Doyle in “The Psychic Quest” stresses that whatever miracles a medium causes to happen, “little or nothing comes from him, but all or nearly all comes *through* him” (404). Despite the masculine pronoun, the medium’s receptivity is culturally marked as feminine. Self-renunciation is easier for a woman who can admit with equanimity that she is indeed an instrument played upon by another. “My gifts, such as they are,” says the female medium in E.F. Benson’s story “Machaon,” “have nothing to do with this person who sits eating and drinking and talking to you. She . . . is quite expunged before the subconscious part of me – that is the latest notion, is it not? – gets into touch with discarnate intelligences . . . [M]y idea is that [my new] control has to get used to me, as in learning a new instrument” (218).

Spiritualist women acquired unprecedented power by taking their passive feminine role to the extreme. But power is masculine. Thus, the totally passive spiritualist woman becomes as gender-ambiguous as her rebellious sister, the New Woman. The scandal of the supernatural meshes with the scandal of androgyny.

The same dynamic works for the male medium but in the opposite direction. Whatever power and prestige he may command, he renounces his masculinity by assuming the receptive position of an instrument. Many male mediums, such as the famous Daniel Dunglas Home, were accused of being “effeminate” – the loaded euphemism for homosexual. Thus, both men and women who dabbled in the occult were seen as gender transgressors, and the supernatural itself became tainted by association with sexual perversion.

This association is evident in the works of spiritualism’s supporters no less than those of its detractors. Lombroso, who in his capacity as a criminologist previously found masculine women and feminine men to be responsible for delinquency, continues to discover sexual ambiguity in his forays into the supernatural. Most of his subjects – mediums and those with sundry paranormal powers – have psychological and even physical characteristics of the opposite sex. Thus, a “certain C.S.” who possesses the enviable ability to see with “the point of her nose and the left lobe of the ear” also displays “a virile audacity and immorality” (2–3), while the male telepathic subject E.B., who apparently developed his unusual abilities as the result of a thwarted love affair at the age of fifteen, has a face “extraordinarily asymmetric, with a feminine look” (11). There is even a servant girl who manages to be both a criminal and a psychic (though her talents seem to be of little use as she is regularly caught and imprisoned for swindling and theft). She “exhibits a purely masculine type of character” (37). Here, the pressure of the paradigm seems to be stronger than Lombroso’s desire for credibility: in terms of his own earlier theories, these ambiguously gendered creatures are inborn cheaters whose testimonies are worthless.

Conventional medicine simply dismissed all mediums as pathological cases of sexual indeterminacy. Henry Maudsley, a pioneer of psychology in Britain and a tireless crusader against the perils of female education, attempted to explain supernatural powers in terms of the brain’s “natural substrata engaged in disordinate, abnormal, or, so to speak, unnatural function” (qtd. in Owen 145). Other physicians were even more explicit in attributing “mediomania” to diseased femininity, seeing it as the result of hysteria or of a “misangled womb” (149).

Thus, spiritualism necessarily entails “gender trouble,” just as its attempt to combine faith and science necessarily entails epistemological confusion. Performing a gender identity in the context of the séance means treading a thin line between compliance with and transgression

of the social scripts of sexuality. But more than that: sexual confusion eventually becomes a metaphor for the convoluted relation between body and soul.

Spiritualism reflected the anxieties surrounding psychological and corporeal identity at the *fin de siècle*. These anxieties centered on the collapse of the simple Cartesian duality of the body and soul. As the soul, or the psyche, became fragmented, splintered, and mobile, the body acquired an uncanny and stubborn agency, ceased to be a simple instrument or a Cartesian machine, moved by the ghost inside. Spiritualism, informed by intense religious longings, attempted to restore the simplicity of the old “principle of Spirit as opposed to Matter, or Soul, acting and existing independently of the body that enshrines it” (Doyle, *History* 1:181). Instead, however, it became hopelessly entangled in the fluid exchanges between body and soul, as illustrated by Doyle’s description of the medium Eusapia Paladino, in whom “the bodily weakness caused what may be described as a dislocation of the soul” (2: 28). Oscar Wilde summed up these twin anthropological fears, the instability of psychological subjecthood and the material intractability of the body, in a passage in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*:

[Dorian] used to wonder at the shallow psychology of those who conceive the Ego in a man as a thing simple, permanent, reliable, and of one essence. To him, man was a being with myriad lives and myriad sensations, a complex multiform creature that bore within itself strange legacies of thought and passion, and whose very flesh was tainted with monstrous maladies of the dead. (457)

The “dislocation of the soul” is tied to fascination with the flesh, which is not solid and singular but massively infected and incorporating the dead. New sciences of heredity and of psychoanalysis sprang into being on the unstable and permeable boundary between body and soul. Spurred by scientific materialism, matter was encroaching on the erstwhile preserve of spirit. But at the same time the opposite process was also taking place. Matter became uncertain, etiolated, shot through with mysterious rays, or entropically crumbling under the onslaught of the Third Law of Thermodynamics. Science, instead of dispelling the epistemological fog, contributed to it.

Mainstream biology and physiology at the *fin de siècle* still clove to the positivism of Claude Bernard, who wrote in 1865 that “the behavior of living bodies, as well as the behavior of inorganic bodies, is dominated by a necessary determinism linking them with conditions of purely physico-chemical order” (61). Bernard denounced “vitalistic ideas,” the belief in what Henri Bergson was later to call *elan vital*, as “a kind of medical superstition – a belief in the supernatural” (68). But paradoxically, by banishing the spirit, Bernard created a loophole for its return, for he denied any a priori assumptions, including the assumption of materialism. “For physiological experimenters, neither spiritualism nor materialism can exist” (66). By thus limiting the role of science to observation and experiment, Bernard left enough space for Mr. Carnacki and Dr. Van Helsing to pursue their psychic investigations, for they could claim that their evidence was as good as anybody else’s. If the goal of science was “to learn the material conditions of phenomena” (67), the existence of spiritual phenomena could be proven by their material manifestations.

The paradoxical figure of the medium exemplified the materiality of the spirit. The medium was a male soul in a female body, the inversion of the *fin-de-siècle* formula of male homosexuality, *anima muliebris in corpore virili inclusa* [a female soul imprisoned in a male body]. But his or her provocative behavior masked a deeper disturbance than transgression of

gender codes. As Marjorie Garber argues in relation to the transvestite, the presence of such a figure “indicates a *category crisis elsewhere*, an irresolvable conflict or epistemological crux that destabilizes comfortable binary, and displaces the resulting discomfort onto a figure that already inhabits, indeed incarnates, the margin” (17). The category crisis incarnated in a female medium, who would talk in a bass voice and tell tales of pirate exploits on the high seas, had to do with the impossibility of disentangling active and passive, cause and effect. The medium was the spirit trapped in the flesh and having to prove its existence by sordidly material phenomena. Within the scientific episteme, these phenomena were the only evidence for the independent existence of the spirit; indeed they *created* the spirit. Passivity, thus, became the first cause of activity, masculinity became a by-product of femininity, and soul issued from matter. But caught in these contradictions, the medium did not simply disintegrate; instead she stubbornly attempted to hold together a paradoxical subjectivity by turning it into a show.

Maurizia Boscaglia documents the emergence of a new corporeal masculinity at the turn of the century: the phallic Nietzschean superman with his aggressive corporeality, the proto-fascist male nude, whose body flaunted “its anti-Cartesian materiality” (3). While seemingly poles apart, the medium and the superman were alike in that in both a paradoxical gender inscription conveyed an epistemological and ontological instability. The medium and the superman were bodies on display. If the superman figured “the spectacle of the commodity” (12), the medium enacted the spectacle of materiality itself. In both cases, the spectacle was of its own impossibility.

As an ungraspable fetish, always a substitute for something else, the commodity slides down an endless chain of economic exchange. The superman teased his worshippers with the constantly revoked promise of the “denial of castration, loss, division” (Boscaglia 5), the imaginary plenitude just out of reach. The medium similarly advertised the final truth, which dissolved into obscurity and incoherence. The perpetual frustration of the séance, in which the revelation seemed to be at the sitters’ fingertips only to melt away, paralleled the frustration of scientists who knew that, as Bernard put it, “the nature or very essence of phenomena, whether vital or mineral, will always remain unknown” (81).

The ambiguously gendered bodies of both the medium and the superman figured the ambiguity of knowledge and desire that grappled with the challenge posed by nineteenth-century science to the Cartesian duality. And in both cases, this ambiguity was written into scripts of behavior that were supposed to shape individual identities. While the reign of the superman came in the mid-twentieth century, flooding Europe with blood, the medium modestly faded out of sight by the 1920s, doing damage only to some credulous souls. But this is not to say that at the heyday of its popularity spiritualism did not create some astonishing paradoxes in the flesh.

Writing the Body

AUTOMATIC WRITING IS, as Hill defines it, “any writing produced without conscious will,” distinguished from “direct writing” in which there is no material involvement of the medium and the pencil writes by itself (307). Automatic writing was one of the most widespread mediumistic gifts, as it required nothing more strenuous than the ability to enter a trance. It was seen as respectable, in contradistinction to such grossly physical phenomena as table levitation, raps, and especially materialization. The famous spiritualist-cum-preacher

Stainton Moses, one of the most respected members of the spiritualist community in the 1870s and 80s, published *Spirit Teachings* (1883) in which he emphasized the distance between the purity of his own texts and what he obliquely called the “vulgarity and incongruity” of other spirit messages, particularly those conveyed through female mediums. He sees this purity as conclusive proof of his own corporeal erasure: nothing in the text comes from his own “human organism.” But this assumption of feminine passivity does not sit well with a man who sees himself as a prophet and a spiritual teacher. Moses reinstates himself in the text by vouching for the truthfulness of the messages: “Judged as I should wish to be judged myself, [the spirits] were what they pretended to be” (qtd. in Doyle, *History* 2: 61). The judgment conflates him and the spirit controls into one entity: if Moses is sincere, so are they. Instead of being erased by the spirits, Moses incorporates them. His integrity is what gives the spirits their authentic being.

The dilemma of the female medium was the reverse: passivity was easier for a woman, but coping with the responsibility for the text she produced was more difficult. Some fearless few developed the gift of passivity into a successful public career. Spiritualist and feminist Emma Hardinge Britten, for example, was a famous trance speaker, drawing large audiences to hear spirits deliver fiery speeches through her lips. One Mrs. Oliver diagnosed and cured diseases, while honestly warning her patients that she had no idea what she was saying or writing during the healing séance (see Owen 117–18). Such women had it both ways then: the splitting of identity in automatic writing or speaking protected them from the liabilities of authorship while allowing them to enjoy its assets (including very considerable royalties and fees). More typical was the famous Bostonian medium Leonora Piper, who persuaded William James of the reality of psychic phenomena on the strength of her automatic writing, in her ordinary life a modest, unassuming, apparently fairly uninteresting housewife. Together with other female mediums in the early years of the twentieth century, she participated in the production of copious scripts that were sifted through by members of the SPR in search for what they called “cross-correspondences.” Not surprisingly, in three thousand scripts, many such correspondences were found, some of them apparently referring to the love affair between Arthur Balfour and a Miss Lyttleton, who had died some twenty-five years previously.⁸

However, whether used by bored gentlewomen to while away hours or by spiritualist entrepreneurs to make money, automatic writing had one well-known pitfall, obliquely referred to by Stainton Moses. It was very common for a beginner automatic writer to find herself scribbling obscene or shocking messages. By renouncing all conscious control, the medium opened the floodgate to what were euphemistically known as the “notorious characteristics of automatic expression” (Owen 214). Spiritualists saw the source of obscenities in the control by evil spirits; later Freudians, unsurprisingly, located it in the writer’s unconscious. But the result was the same: a body of writing was marred by traces of the medium’s sexual body. Automatic writing is the ultimate attempt of discourse to purify itself from the corporeal presence of the subject. Its failure, as summed up by Doyle, signifies that the Foucauldian death of the author is not final even when the author is truly dead:

Of all forms of mediumship the highest and most valuable, when it can be relied upon, is that which is called automatic writing, since in this, *if the form be pure*, we seem to have found a direct method of obtaining teaching from the Beyond. Unhappily, it is a method, which lends itself very readily to self-deception. (Doyle, *History* 2: 220; emphasis added)

“If the form be pure.” But how can it be pure when writing passes through what Doyle calls “the stained glass” of the flesh (221)? Automatic writing is never cleansed from the presence of the writer’s corporeal identity; in fact, this presence is felt more strongly than in ordinary texts, in which an array of literary conventions veils the authorial self. And when automatic writing becomes the subject of fictional treatment, as happened not infrequently in the *fin de siècle*, the problematic of the body comes to the fore.

In E. F. Benson’s story “Machaon,” the female medium inscribes the instructions received from a Greek deified healer, Machaon, son of Asclepius, that eventually save the life of the narrator’s faithful servant, Parkes, who suffers from cancer. The story is at pains to separate the medium from the all-masculine world of the upper-class narrator, his best friend, and his servant. Benson’s stories are notoriously pervaded by obsessive fear of female sexuality, featuring some memorable female monsters, such as his jolly handsome vampire, Mrs. Amworth, who preys on adolescent boys. Mrs. Forrest the medium, however, is nothing like Mrs. Amworth.⁹ While earthy, she is not at all sexual: “She was inclined to be stout but carried herself with briskness, and neither in body nor mind did she suggest that she was one who held communication with the unseen . . . Her general outlook on life appeared to be rather materialistic than otherwise” (218). Here, then, is medium as passive matter: down-to-earth, brisk, appreciative of good food, and reassuringly ignorant.

All these qualities are supposed to demarcate the distance between her and the text she produces while in trance. The text is filled with obscure classical allusions, part of it is in Greek, and it takes the narrator’s Oxbridge expertise to decipher the prescription, which turns out to be a Greek pun referring to the treatment of cancer by x-rays. Here the medium’s feminine ignorance of the classics, as opposed to the case of “Wilde,” corroborates the genuineness of the manifestations. In the scene of the séance itself, the boundaries between masculinity and femininity and between spirit and matter are drawn with reassuring clarity. The medium is totally unaware of what is going on: devoid of even minimal agency, she writes and speaks in tongues, but all this activity has “nothing to do with this person who sits eating and drinking and talking to you,” as she herself puts it (218). The narrator and his friend, on the other hand – feverishly consulting encyclopedias and classical writers in order to decipher her gnomic scribbles, directing the course of the manifestations, asking questions of the disincarnate spirit – represent active, questing, powerful masculinity. Their own corporeality is expunged as totally as the medium’s subjectivity. Together with Machaon, they constitute a hermetically sealed community of masculine spirit, making use of but untainted by the compliant female body.

However, this idyll unravels very soon. After the first séance Machaon himself makes an unexpected appearance, and not as a pure spirit either. Looking idly out the window, the narrator suddenly sees a Greek youth, a radiantly sensuous vision of a lovely semi-naked body, suffused with barely concealed homoerotic longing: “There, anyhow, was a boyish Greek god, stepping blithely and with gay, incomparable grace along the street, and raising his face to smile at this stolid, middle-aged man who blankly regarded him” (223). The “boyish god” enters the narrator’s home and after this glimpse of physical beauty and perfection, the subsequent séance is tinged with impatience and even revulsion: who needs this heavysset woman anyway? But without her, Machaon remains a mere mirage, for the only material, tangible token of his presence is the Greek she writes, not even knowing the letters. In the relationship between men, the female medium plays the role ascribed by Sedgwick to

the woman in the love triangle: “as exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men” (25–26). But what makes this particular bond so charged is that without the woman one side in it literally has no existence. In the homosocial relationship, whether sexual or not, the possibility of a physical consummation is at least theoretically always present by virtue of all sides having bodies. But desiring a spirit – or a confirmation of a spirit’s existence – necessarily involves reliance on female corporeality not only as a symbolic property but as an actual embodiment of the beloved. A pure longing for a Greek god turns out to mean a nauseating involvement with the egregious Mrs. Forrest.

This hidden subtext of revulsion and nausea breaks free in Parkes’s illness, cancer. The narrator’s relationship with his servant is an ideal homosocial bond untainted by the presence of women: both are unmarried and their quasi-feudal mutual fidelity supports a cozy domestic arrangement. Cancer, however, is a shocking intrusion into the body at its most disgusting, the disease that exaggerates its opaque materiality into self-consuming degeneration. Cancer is not just a disease of matter but matter as disease; it is “a demonic pregnancy” (Sontag 18). Benson’s most celebrated story is “Caterpillars,” in which a lovely Italian villa is literally haunted by cancer, represented by a host of repellent caterpillars, a “hideous tide of flesh” that drowns a male guest (85). Benson is by no means a great writer, but “Caterpillars” approaches greatness in the intensity and purity of its governing emotion, disgust. The “dreadful insects . . . yellowish-grey . . . covered with irregular lumps and swelling” represent not just a terrible disease but all the failings of the flesh, equally, if not as powerfully, epitomized by Mrs. Forrest’s gluttonous body (82). Machaon’s cure of Parkes is the cure of his mortality. But this spiritual blessing has to be filtered through matter: the obscure text inscribed by the medium’s distastefully female hand. Returned to the bliss of his union with Parkes, the narrator is still haunted by the vision of Machaon, the god of health whose very presence invokes terrible sickness; the god of purity whose beauty raises the disturbing ghost of sex.

Material Girls

SPIRIT MATERIALIZATION was on the opposite end of the spectrum of respectability from automatic writing. Many prominent spiritualists dissociated themselves completely, while others took an uneasy wait-and-see attitude. Materialization, especially popular among the young generation of female mediums in the 1870s (though not going out of fashion until the 1920s), involved a spirit clothing itself with a material form derived from the medium’s own body. What it amounted to was the medium secluding herself in a dark cabinet beyond a curtain and then eventually emerging in a human form and parading among the sitters in the dimly lit room. Sometimes only partial materialization was achieved, with grimacing faces, flapping hands, and so on poking out from the cabinet. The most famous materialization medium in England in the 1870s was Florence Cook, a young and pretty woman with a spirit familiar “Katie King.” Florence was investigated by the famous physicist and later Nobel laureate William Crookes who vouched for the genuineness of the phenomena. Crookes was so taken with the vivacious spirit that during séances he habitually kissed and embraced “Katie,” giving rise to salacious gossip in spiritualist circles, posing the interesting question of whether it is possible to commit adultery with a ghost.¹⁰

The question, in fact, is not as frivolous as it seems, for it was precisely the corporeality of materialized manifestations that was the greatest conundrum to spiritualism. All authorities agreed that materialized spirits were palpable and fully physical. Their hearts beat, they breathed, moved objects, dispensed kisses, and delivered playful punches. This physicality was the chief lure of materialization séances. While all respectable female mediums were models of Victorian propriety, their scantily clad spirit controls would allow a great deal of touching, cuddling, and caressing in public. “Katie King” distributed locks of her hair and encouraged a female sitter to run her hands over her naked body, not to mention her encounters with Crookes.¹¹ However, despite the obvious (to us) erotic quality of such séances, it is important to stress that in the spiritualists’ own idiom, the bodies of the spirits were not ordinary flesh and blood. “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 221).

The materialized spirit seems to resemble the *simulacrum*, Baudrillard’s phantom corporeality of the scopic realm. But spiritualism went further than Baudrillard’s humdrum examples from electronic media. Not until the invention of virtual reality technologies was there to be seen such a paradox of a body tangible but not material, sensuous but not real, desirable but not attainable. And by all accounts, “Katie King” and her equivalents were much more fun than virtual sex nowadays, whatever its future potential.

Materialization was supposed to have a physical basis in the special substance secreted by the body of the medium, the ectoplasm. There are many photographs of viscous, whitish stuff oozing down the medium’s face and limbs. Infinitely plastic, ectoplasm was supposedly capable of being molded either into excrescences protruding from the medium’s body or into a separate entity. Doyle, an ex-physician, is fascinated with the ectoplasm and discusses its properties in *History of Spiritualism*. He quotes various accounts of mediums losing weight and height during materialization séances and ponders the problematic of the two-in-one, both physically and spiritually. At what point does the materialized spirit assume independent existence, considering that the extrusion of ectoplasm is a gradual process? And what if the projected being is not a spirit but a fragment of the medium’s own self? During the materialization, according to Doyle, “there forms a complete figure [out of the ectoplasm]; this figure is moulded to resemble some deceased person, the cord which binds it to the medium is loosened, a personality which either is or pretends to be that of the dead takes possession of it, and the breath of life is breathed into the image” (2: 110–11). The ambiguity of this description lies in the impossibility of separating the medium and the spirit, linked as they are by a continuous process of projection.

Materialization was the most extreme attempt to reconcile natural and supernatural, material and spiritual, masculine and feminine. And yet instead of producing Butler’s effect of “boundary, fixity, and surface,” it generated an endless string of scandals, conclusively proving that, within the late-nineteenth-century episteme, these poles were irreconcilable. No matter the degree of power exercised during the séance (and it was very considerable indeed), in the outside world its results were unacceptable, rejected out of hand not just because they were produced by fraud, as they were, but because the spiritualist matter was a discursive monster, a transgression made flesh, which could only evoke horror and revulsion. Even within the spiritualist community the ambivalence that attached to materialization betrayed the emotional and epistemological strain of the practice. Nothing expresses this strain better

than “Playing with Fire,” Doyle’s materialization story that, despite the author’s unwavering spiritualist beliefs, is one of the darkest and most disturbing in his oeuvre.

In the story a circle of wealthy dabblers in spiritualism, employing a private medium, the sister of one of them, gathers regularly to “obtain those usual phenomena of message-tilting, which are at the same time so puerile and so inexplicable” (188).¹² Everything goes as usual until they rashly invite a sinister French occultist to join one of their sittings. Not unnaturally bored with the pious platitudes dispensed by a visiting spirit through the medium’s vocal cords, M. Le Duc decides to try materialization. But instead of a fetching lady spirit, the circle materializes an unhuman entity, a capering, powerful, aggressive beast that wreaks havoc in the darkened room and almost kills the medium. The beast is apparently a unicorn, as one of the sitters, a painter, has been painting mythical monsters and gotten stuck trying “to imagine what a real live, ramping unicorn would look like” (190). After the séance, traumatized and scared out of his wits, he gives up both the painting and further forays into the supernatural.

The nightmarish description of being locked in with something “which breathed deeply and fidgeted in the darkness” (199) provides a startling contrast to Doyle’s usual saccharine perorations on the “good news” of spiritualism. It is as if all his suppressed unease over his scientific beliefs broke out in this short story, concentrated in the image of uncontrollable animality emerging in the séance. For obvious reasons unicorns were not usual objects of materialization. But such a mythical monster, a product of the imagination suddenly clothed in a terrifying body, is a perfect emblem of the spiritualist transgression of the boundary between matter and spirit. Like Benson’s caterpillars, it is a word become flesh, but flesh invested with all the horror and disgust of the Victorian attitudes toward carnality.

The folkloric associations of the unicorn are purity and virginity. So its transformation into a “huge thing . . . rearing, stamping, smashing, springing, snorting” (199) is doubly shocking. It discloses the perverse nature of the séance itself which, in attempting to materialize spirit, succeeds only in enacting the fall and debasement of faith into science. And there is an additional suggestion of sexual perversion as well, for the fragile body of the lady medium generates a huge phallic creature, whose “long white spike” is its only clearly visible attribute (200). The ostensible goal of “Playing with Fire” is to warn of the dangers of reckless and unsupervised spiritualist pursuits. What it actually indicates is that spiritualism itself is a grotesque and illegitimate activity, a bearer of good tidings that suddenly and inexplicably mutates into a monster.

A similar horrific materialization takes place in another E. F. Benson’s story “The Thing in the Hall.” Here the materialized creature is an Elemental, a giant blood-sucking slug, with “a head shaped like the head of a seal, with open mouth and panting tongue” (161). The difference is that women are excluded from this story altogether; the circle consists of a homosocial couple, two physician friends, aided by a young male medium, who afterwards dies of blood poisoning. But without the mediation of femininity the sexual subtext of the story is all the more obvious, with the charged relationship between the narrator and his credulous friend who becomes “depraved” and “bestial” under the influence of his gross familiar (163). Just as Doyle’s unicorn is a phallic monster, Benson’s slimy, slippery slug is a vaginal one. What is striking about this story is not the projection of the author’s sexual idiosyncrasies but the way in which sexual symbolism functions as an inscription of the hopeless aporia of spiritualism itself. In trying to climb the ladder of the spirit, masculinity gives birth to a revolting and dangerous material femininity.

Utopias of (Un)Reason

IN *MADAME BLAVATSKY'S BABOON*, Peter Washington lucidly documents the way the dream of “a spiritual science that would in time provide a key not only to mysteries of life after death but to the meaning of everything” (16–17) degenerated into a proliferation of sects, whose most salient feature was mutual bickering. From spiritualism to theosophy to New Age, the promise of a spiritual science has consistently failed its adherents. There are, of course, many reasons, both social and ideological, for this failure. One is that such a science offers the believers an impossible subject position, so fissured by contradictions that it cannot be sustained for any length of time and can only be occupied, if at all, through constant movement along the discursive range of occultism.

Consider again “Wilde’s” “psychic messages” with their confusion between the subject of enunciation and the subject of *enounce*. The “I” that speaks cannot be comfortably occupied either by Wilde’s spirit or by Mrs. Smith: it is only sustainable as a constant fluctuation between the two subject positions. But this forces the implied reader into the same unsettling performance: instead of identifying with the narrator, the process that is almost automatic in any first-person text, the implied reader has to scrutinize every statement for the traces of the medium’s “human organism” (if she or he is a believer) or for evidence of fakery (if she or he is a skeptic). No conversion such as spiritualists hoped for can be achieved under these conditions; at most, believers can have their doubts temporarily allayed by the sheer weight of the endorsements by others (Doyle, Barrett Browning, Mrs. Smith herself). This is why spiritualist treatises are such name-droppers; this is also why automatic writers invariably called upon the illustrious dead rather than receiving dictations from a deceased Joe Smith next door.

The last chapter in Cesare Lombroso’s *After Death – What?* is called “Biology of the Spirits.” This ultimate oxymoron, summing up the scientific career of the man who made his reputation by developing a new grammar of the body, may serve as the epitaph for the spiritualist subject. It is a subject in tatters, literally eaten up by the paradoxes that comprise an impossible corporeality. Without a trace of hesitation Lombroso describes mediums who observed the gradual disappearance of their hands and feet as a spirit was being materialized; mediums who became invisible as their materialized controls paraded in front of the sitters; partial, incomplete, half-perceptible bodies, visibly dissolving even as they were forming. There is something chilling in the contrast between Lombroso’s well-rehearsed scientific voice and the Gothic menagerie of monstrosities he displays before his readers. Suddenly the absurdities of spiritualism are not funny anymore.

In this dark wonderland there are no longer any distinctions among individuals. Spirits possess mediums, and mediums create spirits. The medium’s own corporeality suddenly becomes as fluid as the phantasmagoric bodies of the dead: “This metamorphic power the phantasms frequently transmit to their mediums” (333). Women wake up to find their faces sprouting beards in imitation of a deceased acquaintance. Young girls become their dead brothers. Old women become a gaggle of children. And this carnival is not a revelation of some hidden mysterious order but a random, contingent metamorphosis, without a discernible goal: “The human forms assumed by the spirits are not such as properly belong to their existence, but form temporary incarnations by which they may make themselves known to us, and may therefore be extremely variable” (333).

But if the body is rendered contingent and illegible, the soul fares no better. As opposed to the savage, mystical traditions Lombroso copiously cites as confirmation of his observations, the spirits of the séance have no message to deliver. The total puerility of spiritualism's content is shockingly emphasized by Lombroso's painstaking gathering of evidence. All those witnesses interrogated, observations recorded – and for what? “The phantasms show very little inclination to express themselves in words; or if they do, it is in a laconic form” (337). Unfortunately, even this is not true, as the reams of automatic writing, filled with nonsense or obscenities, demonstrate. Spirits are plain stupid. “The intelligence of these discarnate personalities, even in the case of those who were in life of strong intellect, being now deprived of their own organism and being obliged to make use of the brain of the living, is but fragmentary and incoherent” (347). The nineteenth-century heroic attempt to reunite body and soul leaves both of them in pieces.

In the preface to his last book, which he sees as his scientific testament, Lombroso figures the hidden truth of spiritualism in terms strikingly similar to Freud's “dark continent” of female sexuality or to all those lost worlds and drowned Atlantises that so fired the *fin-de-siècle* imagination:

But the spiritistic hypothesis seems to me like a continent incompletely submerged by the ocean, in which are visible in the distance broad islands raised above the general level, and which only in the vision of the scientist are seen to coalesce in one immense and compact body of land, while the shallow mob laughs at the seemingly audacious hypothesis of the geographer. (xvi–xvii)

But what the intrepid scientific explorer finds as he ventures into this body is the same thing that Kurtz found in the interior of Africa: darkness, incoherence, broken bodies, and lost souls. And, like Kurtz, he never realizes that the massed shadows are cast by his own torch of enlightenment.

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NOTES

1. One particularly hilarious example is the dreary treatise “The Beginning and Way of Life,” published in 1919 by Charles Wentworth Littlefield, portions of which, as he claimed, had been dictated posthumously by English physicist Michael Faraday. Faraday was an early and vehement opponent of spiritualism and one can easily imagine his impotent fuming on the other side of the Great Divide (Gardner 102).
2. If spirits do not exist, it means they have never existed. And yet it would be superfluous to list all the human cultures that wholeheartedly accept not only the reality of a spiritual realm but its constant interaction with the material world, precisely the contention of Western spiritualism.
3. Interestingly, Taylor's exploration of socialism and feminism in the nineteenth century, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, contains no reference to Besant's occult career and no entry for spiritualism.
4. See my essay on *Oscar Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray, and the (Un)Death of the Author*.
5. See the infamous review in the *Contemporary Review* in 1871 by Buchanan, “The Fleshly School of Poetry: Mr. D. G. Rossetti.”
6. The Society for Psychical Research was founded in 1882 by Henry Sidgwick, Frederic Myers, and Edmund Gurney – all of them men with impressive intellectual credentials (Sidgwick, for example,

was Professor of Moral Philosophy in Cambridge). Among members of the Society were social and intellectual luminaries of England, including Arthur Balfour and his sister Eleanor, a skilled mathematician in her own right, who married Sidgwick and became a life-long member and later President of the SPR. Other presidents of the Society included William James, Andrew Lang, W. Boyd Carpenter, and Henri Bergson. Freud was its correspondent member (see Oppenheim 135ff., and Inglis, *Natural* 317–79). The Society generated an enormous amount of meticulously researched reports, investigating not only the claims of various mediums (whom it very often exposed as frauds) but such related subjects as telepathy, poltergeist effects, and “phantoms of the living.”

And yet, despite the combined effort of so many intellectual heavyweights, the Society failed to push psychical research into the closed ranks of sciences. In 1898 Andrew Lang called psychical research the Cinderella of the family of sciences, who “must murmur of her fairies among the cinders of the hearth, while they go forth to the ball, and dance with provincial mayors at the festivities of the British Association” (Inglis, *Natural* 401). No Prince Charming has appeared. Oppenheim analyzes the paradox that lies at the root of the SPR’s failure:

The resolution towards which [SPR] members groped was a masterful attempt to have and eat their cake simultaneously. They were quick to convey the shortcomings of materialism, but could not quite bring themselves to jettison the interpretative framework that scientific naturalism has imposed upon their world. Rather, they aimed to naturalize the supernatural by inserting into this framework some non-material phenomena, preeminently mental telepathy, thereby challenging the sole sufficiency of physical agents in the universe. They persisted in believing that they could operate as scientists and could preserve for themselves and their fellow human beings, on strictly scientific grounds, legitimate reason to endow man’s life with a significance far transcending blood, bones, and tissue. Yet the desire to so endow human life was not, at base, a scientific one. (152–53)

7. This view of themselves as new Galileos attempting to break the hold of the hidebound scientific orthodoxy was very common among defenders of spiritualism. Doyle in “The Psychic Quest” condemns scientists “who broke the first laws of Science by pronouncing upon a thing which they had not examined” (396), and James echoes him by decrying the willful blindness of those who refuse to accept the “facts” of the supernatural because they do not fit into preconceived schemes (41–42).
8. For details of this story, known as the Palm Sunday case, see Oppenheim 133ff. She seems to regard trance scripts with some awe. Perhaps a literary critic might be forgiven for being less impressed with the “cross-correspondences” among a very large number of incoherent and cryptic texts. For myself, the antics of materialization mediums are far more interesting, for they definitely presupposed great daring and dexterity if not more occult gifts.
9. Benson, author of the “Mapp and Lucia” novels, was best known in his lifetime for his ghost and horror stories, collected in four large collections, published in 1912, 1923, 1928, and 1934.
10. The story of Florence Cook is detailed in Owen’s book. “Katie” was repeatedly photographed by Crookes and others, and these pictures are available. There was also a BBC production based on new archival material, which seems to suggest that there might have been something there, after all.
11. Materialized spirits wore loose draperies (skeptical newspapers made fun of their material being proven to be ordinary calico, manufactured in Manchester). However, even the most credulous sitter balked at the notion of an otherworldly visitor wearing stays. Thus the practice developed of allowing the ladies present to inspect the spirit for evidence of undergarments.
12. The distinction between “public” (those who performed for money) and “private” (those who did it for more subtle rewards) mediums was of great importance in the spiritualist world (see Owen 18–45, and Oppenheim). Many researchers would only investigate private mediums who, being of higher social standing than their professional counterparts, elicited more trust from their upper-middle-class investigators.

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