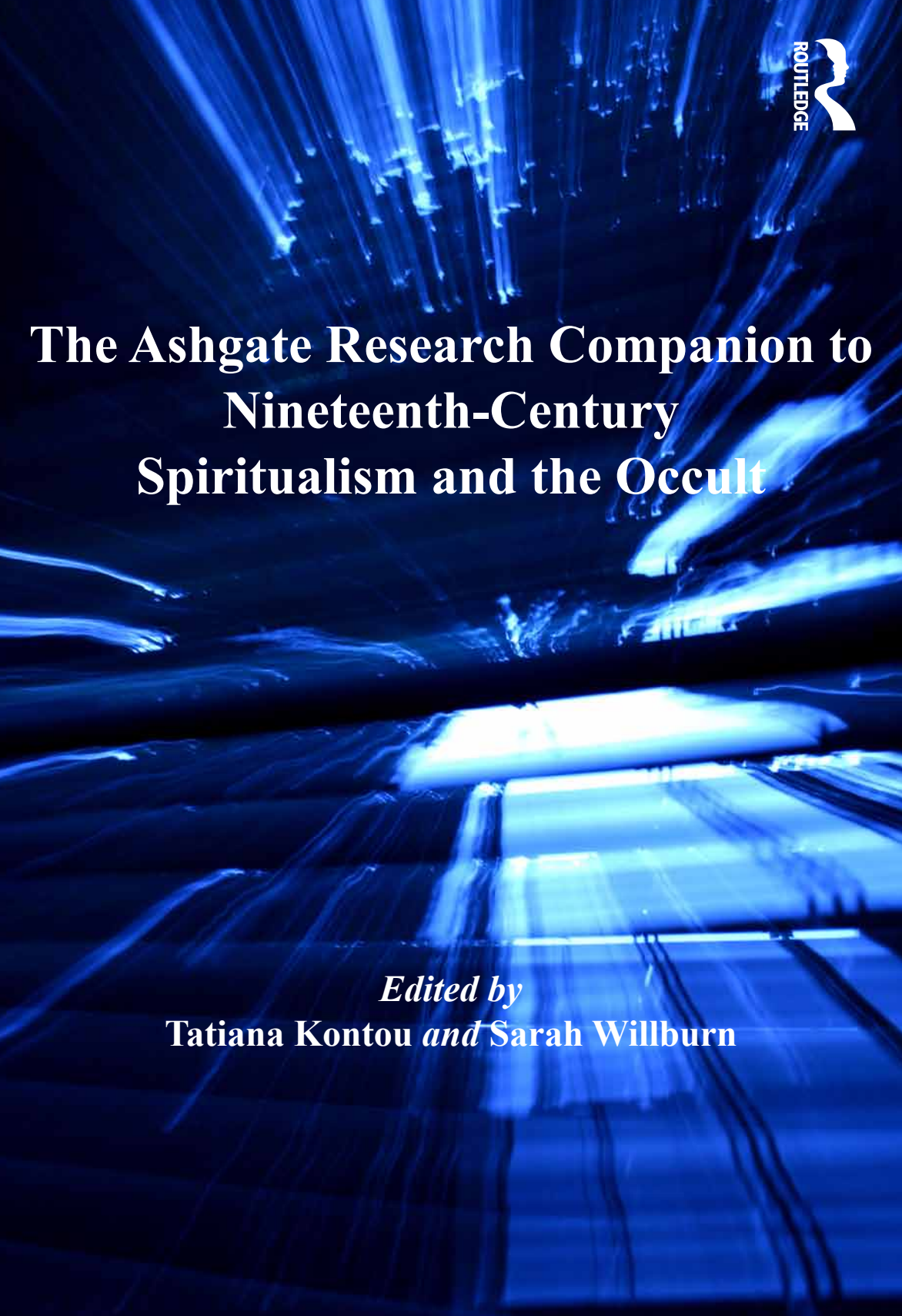

ROUTLEDGE

The Ashgate Research Companion to Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism and the Occult

Edited by

Tatiana Kontou *and* Sarah Willburn

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THE ASHGATE RESEARCH COMPANION TO NINETEENTH-CENTURY SPIRITUALISM AND THE OCCULT

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The Ashgate Research Companion to Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism and the Occult

Edited by

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Foreword

Jennifer Tucker

'The history of what, for want of a better name, we call occultism, is the history of mankind', declared the British newspaper editor and pioneering investigative journalist William T. Stead in 1894. Against those among his contemporaries who classified spiritualism, clairvoyance, astrology and Theosophy as the proper domain of cranks and quirky cabinets of curiosity, Stead countered that investigations of the 'borderland' between life and death were protean, generous and unconfined.

The growing body of scholarship on spiritualism and occultism over the past thirty years offers proof of Stead's claim that the nineteenth century's engagement with ideas of the spirit world was immense and far-reaching, from literature, the visual and performing arts, politics and material culture, to music, sexual politics and everyday life. Spiritualism and the occult have been shown in several recent important studies as central forces in nineteenth-century debates over technology, medical science, spiritual authority and religion, relationships among diverse social causes, and questions of love, sex and culture. To this work, *The Ashgate Research Companion to Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism and the Occult* adds something signally new: a resource that presents new scholarship, synthesizes previous findings, highlights useful archival sources, articulates various historical methods and critical approaches to the study of spiritualism and the occult, and suggests avenues for further research. Involving the participation of leading scholars convened by the editors from a wide array of disciplines and fields, including literature, history, religion, history of science and technology, philosophy, politics, gender and sexuality studies, and the history of art, the volume is significant for the unusual breadth and depth of its research findings and critical perspectives.

The *Ashgate Research Companion* appears at a moment of keen contemporary interest in the topic of Victorian spiritualism and the occult among scholars and the general public. From novels such as A.S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990), Sarah Waters's *Affinity* (1999), Melissa Pritchard's *Selene of the Spirits* (1998), Michèle Roberts's *In the Red Kitchen* (1990) and Julian Barnes's *Arthur and George* (2005) to television shows, films and online communities, spiritualism and the occult have emerged in recent years as a popular theme of neo-Victorian fictional entertainment. Public and private institutions, meanwhile – from local libraries, historic houses and art museums to city bus and walking tours – have responded to and stimulated

popular awareness of Victorian spiritualism and the occult. A subtle shift has taken place in popular historical understanding and spectacles of the nineteenth century: in contrast to an older image of spiritualism as a restricted and stigmatized practice, spiritualism has become central to what many people think it meant to *be* Victorian. Why is there such an interest in this topic today and why has it somewhat become iconic of Victorianism more generally? Is it perceived as something that will attract tourists who are seeking to be entertained? Does it reflect a resurgence in spirituality in US and UK popular culture? How does the emphasis on spiritualism shape or distort the larger picture we have of the Victorian era?

This volume inserts some of the best new research into the mix. As Tatiana Kontou and Sarah Willburn note in their exceptionally informative Introduction, occultism was a point of entry for nineteenth-century thinkers interested in a range of vital questions: how did mediums function as relays in the new circuits of technological communication? What did spiritualist writing practices suggest about authorship and subjectivity? Did the discourses on spiritualism pose new questions about what constitutes humanity? How did visual images mediate the divide between the material and the immaterial? Were occult phenomena *real*? A new picture of nineteenth-century society emerges in this book, as different sites of practice and interpretation that are often studied separately (music halls, parlours, literary salons, art galleries, courtrooms, photographic studios and the stage) are shown as interconnected through spiritualism and the occult in dynamic, often surprising ways. Through the lens of nineteenth-century spiritualism and the occult, readers are treated to fascinating reflections on the state of nineteenth-century science and technology, the status of writing, problems of evidence, *fin-de-siècle* belief systems, fiction and autobiography, the theatrical cultural trends of the period, Victorian food practices, spiritual authority and the body, and European artistic production.

Questions of the history and popular memory of nineteenth-century spiritualism and the occult call to mind what the philosopher of history Eelco Runia calls 'presence', or 'the unrepresented way the past is present in the present'. Proposing a shift from the study of 'meaning' to the desire for the 'presence' of the past, he writes: 'One might say that historical reality travels with historiography not as a paying passenger but as a *stowaway*. As a stowaway, as what is absently and unintentionally present on the plane of time, metonymy is a metaphor for discontinuity, or, rather, for the entwinement of continuity and discontinuity.' For Runia, 'presence' can be said to be stored in *metonymy*: a metonymy is a 'presence in absence' not just in the sense that it presents something that is not there, but also in the sense that the thing that is not there is still present.

Nineteenth-century spiritualist and occult practices can be seen perhaps as conduits of historical presence. We might think about how the contact nineteenth-century spiritualists sought with the past, for example, invigorated historical experiences that were saturated, redolent, evocative and suggestive. Sarah Willburn's essay reminds us that spirit photography can be 'a powerful place to look for Victorians intentionally at work describing their fantasies, imaginings, and proscriptions not only for everyday life, but also for the past, the future and

the world beyond'. Similarly, in other spiritualist and occult practices, the past became 'present in the present' by its articulation through smells, touch, sounds and tastes: the tapping of typewriter keys; the voices of laughter and tears; the scraping across the floor of moving furniture; clapping hands; tingling sensations; houses trembling; the sound of pages being turned by invisible hands; musical instruments playing; the thump of flowers falling from the ceiling; a physical embrace; the touch of skin and hair; the texture of ectoplasm as it shrank to the touch, as if alive; sounds of a harmonium and of human voices; living, breathing bodies; the laughter of spirits and sitters (sounds of 'ghostly mirth'); the chewing of apples being eaten by a spirit. Experiences like these, which Stead and others gathered and interpreted, suggest a world marked by the presence of and rich with engagement with the spirit world.

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Tatiana Kontou owes many thanks to Sarah Willburn for inviting her to co-edit this work and for becoming a good friend in the process. Tatiana thanks her parents and grandfather for their support during the completion of this *Companion.* Deepest gratitude is owed to Pam Thurschwell and Jenny Bourne Taylor for their inimitable friendship and encouragement. Tatiana has the best of friends and readers in Sofia Pelendridis and especial thanks go out to her. Finally, Tatiana would like to offer many thanks to David Tucker who helped her at various stages with extraordinary generosity and often at the expense of his time.

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Introduction

Tatiana Kontou and Sarah Willburn

Increasingly, spiritualism and the occult are not viewed as having been on the outskirts of society and culture, but rather as culturally central for many Victorians.[1] The essays in this volume build on and extend Victorian supernatural scholarship. Binaries that often seem intuitively clear in our contemporary moment, such as faith versus reason, spiritualism versus science, and tradition versus progress, did not similarly structure the Victorian age. As the essays in this collection will indicate, spiritualism was scientific, and even, perhaps, a type of secularism. It was a technology; and far from being opposed to other social and progressive movements of the era, such as socialism or modernism, was actually linked to them. A guiding principle in many of the essays here is that spiritualism and the occult provide flexible allegories for many concepts that are distinctly modern – such as the permeability between remote places, instantaneous communication from afar, and the recording and reproduction of the historical past. The occult presents helpful allegories, in fact, for many modern cultural technologies such as mechanically enhanced communication, speedy inspiration, and the relationship between individual and group identities, which are often fostered at a distance. Placing death beside life, as spiritualism and the occult did, produces a modern aesthetic that insists on commensurability between disparate people and things as well as the virtual immediacy enabled by many much more recent technical media.

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[1] See, for instance, Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in Victorian Britain, 1850–1914* (Cambridge and New York, 1985); Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (London, 1989); Pamela Thurschwell, *Literature, Technology and Magical Thinking 1880–1920* (Cambridge, 2001); Roger Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy 1870–1901* (Oxford, 2002); Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Baltimore, 2001); Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (Princeton, 1998); Marlene Tromp, *Altered States: Sex, Nation, Drugs, and Self-Transformation in Victorian Spiritualism* (Albany, NY, 2006); and Shane McCorristine, *Spectres of the Self: Thinking about Ghosts and Ghost-Seeing in England, 1750–1920* (Cambridge, 2010). These works, while a partial and not exhaustive list, are representative of the kinds of connections, technological, political and postcolonial, that contemporary scholars have brought to our attention for the past twenty years.

Studies of spiritualism and the occult, like the cultural phenomena themselves, often take on a mediumistic quality in which one concept stands in for and enhances the workings of another one. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick wrote, '*Beside* comprises a wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivalling, leaning, twisting, mimicry, withdrawing, attracting, addressing, warping, and other relations'.[2] The cultural productions of spiritualism and the occult are significant because they enable all types of the Victorian quotidian practices that stand beside them to become visible. While a séance transcript might capture a typical parlour party, it does so with surprising particulars such as a medium tied with tapes and chains, or kisses shared between the living and the dead. Thus, regular sociability and customs seem both quotidian and unusual. Occult practices represent a vast array of ordinary ideas, events and encounters made extraordinary because several of the living participants are working beside the dead or the ghostly. Common practices are captured and framed as sublime because these accounts signal the possibility of representing what is normative transformed into the extraordinary. In this sense, séances and other occult occurrences make strong claims to be types of significant performances that create a new world betwixt the heavens and earth. Through mediums, materializations, correspondences, storytelling and other surprising encounters between the living and the ghostly, these events allow us to read anew 'the rich dimension of space' as full of uncanny juxtapositions just waiting to be noticed.[3]

The essays in this collection look at connections between spiritualism and the occult and science, technology, politics, art, gender and custom. Spiritualism and the occult, then, are increasingly recognized as central cultural forces, ones that directly relate to and take their place among other Victorian cultural formations such as family, friendship and social organizations. We might want to consider, along with the collection's authors, that spiritualism and the occult reveal the spirit of the age in an evanescent, shape-shifting, glimmering manner.

These essays also ask us to consider that spiritualism and the occult are not just glimmering and evanescent, but, rather, are also persistent, solid, and even material and often materialistic, entities. Whether the essays treat long novels, the reports of psychical research, spirit drawings, spirit photographs, or the food, bodies and machineries described within various accounts, the weight of the occult's ephemera reaches into tonnage. Between cakes, typewriters, planchettes, ectoplasm, a transported Mrs Guppy, the bulk of Bulwer-Lytton's novels, mediums' boxes and various other paraphernalia, ghostly topics are scarcely delicate ones – they are not fine-boned, but fleshly. There is a lengthy joke in Trollope's 1873 novel *The Eustace Diamonds* that the term *paraphernalia*, if it got into the hands of Lizzie Eustace, who has stolen her own diamond necklace, would be a very dangerous term. Perhaps the same is true of phrases like 'spiritualist materiality' or 'occult objects' for scholars today. Ironically, it is perhaps the number of material things that the

[2] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham and London, 2003), p. 8.

[3] Ibid., p. 9.

practices of spiritualism and the occult have left in evidence that is the creepiest aspect of these cultural events. Many of these things, whether texts or other objects, have been archived in collections around the globe, which were utilized by several of this collection's authors.[4] These mystical details are also given weight as the participants claimed to touch them and to see them. The immediacy of holding and seeing the dead in these accounts provided evidence to participants of their reality. Large, trudging, 'ghostly' paraphernalia that will not leave the twenty-first-century scholar alone fill the pages of this volume. The essays presented here treat these intermediate traces of the paranormal, the paraphernalia, whether by text or by practice.

Critical attention to Victorian mysticism has grown greatly since the early 1990s. Whether it is spiritualism or Theosophy, mesmerism or the occult, dozens of book-length studies and hundreds of articles have appeared in recent years that reflect the avid interest in Victorian mystical practices.[5] This *Ashgate Research Companion* is organized by current critical approaches within this extensive body of scholarship. Topics such as Victorian spiritualism, the occult, Theosophy and mesmerism, especially in their relations to literature and culture, attract a huge audience and the field, as such, remains remarkably diverse. For instance, it is rare for any two books on Victorian spiritualism to treat the same authors, and, often, they do not even treat the same broader themes. The array of this vibrant field can easily overwhelm the scholar new to the topic. This *Companion* is intended to serve as an entryway for the reader who desires to do his or her own research in the field of spiritualism and the occult.

If spiritualism sought to make the spiritual world visible, scientifically proven and technologically advanced, resulting in overcoming death, distances, and socio-economic, racial and gendered differences, the occult did not. Hidden and dark, instead of sunlight at daybreak, the occult signalled secret societies, magic, strange ancient languages and more than a touch of the Gothic. Exclusive, esoteric, intellectual and perhaps at times unintelligible, to conceptualize the occult is to think of Sheridan Le Fanu's 'Green Tea' with its references to obscure and menacing metaphysics, the dark arts and Bulwer-Lytton's novels. Yet, ironically perhaps, the occult, being a broadly defined older term, could also encompass the term 'spiritualism' in both the nineteenth century and today. Especially early in the heyday of spiritualism, the 1850s and 1860s, someone opposed to spiritualist séances or premises might indeed term these practices and concepts as occult.

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[4] For instance, Marina Warner, in *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors, and Media into the Twenty-first Century* (Oxford, 2006), relates a story of looking at an ectoplasm, housed in the SPR archives in Cambridge. Similarly, Tatiana Kontou has seen catalogued a cracked blue-and-white porcelain vase, with the crack caused by poltergeist action. Occult archives offer a fascinating array of texts and paraphernalia.

[5] See, for example, Alison Winter, *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain* (Chicago, 1998); Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy*; and Nicola Bown, Carolyn Burdett and Pamela Thurschwell (eds), *The Victorian Supernatural* (Cambridge, 2004).

Further, the very breadth of spiritualist practices, especially as spiritualism was not a formal religion with a centralized institutional structure, means that these practices sometimes remain unknown and, thus, occult. We have included both terms – spiritualism and the occult – in the title to this *Companion* because both were terms used in the nineteenth century to encompass a range of spiritual and material practices dedicated to erasing or crossing the boundary between the living and the dead, and sometimes, also, analogous boundaries, such as between the present and the historical past, or between the physical and the metaphysical.

Some authors in this collection – for example, J. Jeffrey Franklin, Mazen Naous and Matthew Beaumont – treat topics first and foremost occultly-turned, rather than spiritualist in nature, such as the relationship between the mystical, empire and modernist poetics, Theosophical philosophies, Rosicrucian novels and the alchemy of socialist politics, with analyses that reach into the twentieth century. Several other essays in the collection treat theories of being and practice that might be categorized as spiritualist and as occult: for example, those by Jill Galvan, Anthony Enns, Sarah Willburn, Joy Dixon and Erika Dyson. Topically, however, most, though far from all, essays in this collection treat various aspects of self-termed spiritualist practices such as séances, mediumship, spirit photography, spirit writing, spirit drawing, cross-correspondences, full-body materializations and psychical research. These practices consistently sought to make spiritual mysteries plain and to show how, to quote Florence Marryat, 'there is no death'. One might ponder why something potentially insignificant, the 1848 Rochester rappings of the Fox sisters, became the best-known origin story for Victorian spiritualism, causing a wave of international cultural influence. The Fox sisters heard raps in their home outside of Rochester, New York. They started to ask the invisible rapper questions only to learn about a long-ago murder in their own home from their ghostly interlocutor. Soon, séances, table-rapping and even table-tipping (possessed intelligent furniture dancing and walking meaningfully around a room) became widespread popular practices in America and Europe, not only as entertainments but also as a way to seek spiritual enlightenment. But why so? Why did this bit of mystical finery in 1848 create a new spiritual fashion? Several hypotheses are likely in part true: it was an age of rising mass consciousness (breaking down social boundaries was newly desirable; it was the age of increasing democratization (the expansion of the franchise in England and America); it was the age of reform and revolution in both Europe and America; and it was the Industrial Age with advances in science and technology both visible and dazzling, such as the 1860s completion of the Atlantic Cable – a popular spiritualist metaphor for the instantaneous communication between this world and the next.

The practices presented in this collection show a widespread cultural grappling with what it meant to be a modern individual who was curious, scientifically-minded, technologically current and spiritually advanced. Spiritualism and the occult signal a quest to understand the relationship between nature, humanity, deity, science and culture in sophisticated, modern ways. To examine these practices, as these authors here show, is not to look at quirky cabinets of oddities but to understand fundamentals of the modernizing individual in our modern age.

This *Companion* treats wide-ranging topics in part because, as Steven Connor puts it, 'We cannot fully specify the shape of the Victorian supernatural, because it is not an inert and finished shape in space, but a continuing potential for reshaping of the space it is in, and so partly includes us'.[6]

This flexibility of the topics of spiritualism and its cultural expansiveness create a truly borg-like enormity not only for the object of study but also for the approaches one might take. This is what keeps scholarship about the Victorian occult lively, engaging and relevant. A better understanding of the representational forms of the occult and the appropriation of the esoteric as a practically important realm for understanding sociability, expression, aesthetics and technology helps to show the emergent concept of the modern in the long nineteenth century. Spiritualism and the occult are, in fact, central for understanding all types of discursive networks in the Victorian era and beyond.

Especially interesting in many of the essays collected here is the relationship between the occult and concepts of the historical past and history-making in the Victorian era. Steven Connor, in speaking of philosopher Michel Serres' work, writes:

> *Serres's mode of reading history topologically, looking for irregularities in the continuum of history, places where the fabric of time may be folded or pleated or stretched, provides a model for the way in which we might find our own spatio-temporal predicaments and exhilarations implied in those of the later nineteenth century and our acts of attention prefigured in theirs.*[7]

Not only do the strings of temporal proximity and shared culture link us historically to Victorians, it is also specifically through the occult that we garner a useful allegory about historiography. Namely, the permeability and shape-shifting of the ghostly occult causes us to attend to a history in motion and one that comes in and out of view in concurrent yet radically distinct, changing forms. If, indeed, we consider seriously the difficult task of thinking about history spatially, through a language of topology, rather than only temporally, as is a popular convention, we can really understand the significance of the occult as a case study in the theorization of social meaning – as a praxis. Practices of the occult in the nineteenth century entertain and enact new models for culture and community with a consistent interest in removing and remaking social boundaries between the genders, social classes and races, through erasing the line between the living and the dead. As this *Companion* indicates, contemporary scholarship in this burgeoning field of inquiry is no longer about recovering what was once considered an obscure set of mystical practices, but is now about looking at the important cultural narratives and theories of life, death, science and society that the occult, seemingly dark and hidden, ironically enough, brings to light.

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[6] Steven Connor, 'Afterword', in Bown et al., *The Victorian Supernatural*, pp. 258–77, p. 174.

[7] Ibid., p. 174.

Mapping the Occult and Spiritualism

The very definition of the term 'occult' is elusive and subject to constant change. Sharing a root with the 'ocular', the 'occult' is hidden but can be revealed; it is arcane and modern at the same time. As Alex Owen suggests:

> *… [the term] encompasses such a broad spectrum of beliefs, ideas, and practices that it defies precise definition. It is often applied without qualification to activities as diverse as divination (astrology, palmistry, tarot reading, crystal gazing, and so on), sorcery and black magic (the manipulation of natural forces, often for self-interested purposes), and various kinds of necromancy or spiritualist-related practices. This diversity is underpinned, however, by an implicit acceptance of the idea that reality as we are taught to understand it accounts only for a fraction of the ultimate reality which lies just beyond our immediate senses. It is this hidden reality that the psychic, medium, or magician claims to access, and serious occultists invariably conceive of their endeavors as the study and exploration of an occluded spiritual realm. Nineteenth-century occultism was cast in this mold.*[8]

For the modern-day reader, the 'occult' might carry with it connotations of New Age mysticism, crystal healing and aural photographs. Yet for the Victorians it was a deictic term. What do we expect to read in a book titled *Mystic London or, Phases of Occult Life in the Metropolis*? Images of groups initiated in magic or sorcery, necromancers or gothic revivalists come to mind. But for the Victorian reader, such a book is a travelogue into the city. Writing in 1875, Charles Maurice Davies, eager to protect his readers from potential misconceptions, explains in the introduction to the volume:

> *It is perhaps scarcely necessary to say that I use the term Mystic, as applied to the larger portion of this volume, in its technical sense to signify my own* initiation *into some of the more occult phases of metropolitan existence. It is only to the Spiritualistic, or concluding portion of my work, that the word applies to its ordinary signification.*[9]

Davies peripatetically uncovers mysteries of the urban space. The London fog is dispelled to reveal the city's inhabitants, waifs, stranded Bedouins, East End tradesmen. Some frequent psychiatric institutions and get invited to phrenological soirées; others are involved in spiritualist gatherings and visit professors of astral knowledge. Davies's occult knowledge spreads from social to spiritual underworlds – a London brimming with phrenologists, mesmerists, spiritualists, with social

[8] Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago, 2004), p. 19.

[9] Charles Maurice Davies, *Mystic London: or, Phases of Occult Life in the Metropolis* (London, 1875), p. ii.

reformers and women's rights activists. The phases of occult life are numerous and diverse. Davies becomes the guide in Virgilean mode, and the reader is initiated into the mysteries of the city. Davies's definition of the various strata of initiation he undergoes in the metropolis, together with the title of his book, gestures towards a strange mixture of the occult and the everyday experience: mesmerists were socialists, were trance speakers and were women's rights activists. Materialized spirits would travel across the Empire, as the spirit faces of Egyptians and Arabs, appearing in velvety Victorian parlours. The parallel engagement of the everyday and the occult also resonates strongly in the work of W.T. Stead. Published ten years after Davies's *Mystic London*, Stead's series of articles formed a significant social critique of child prostitution in the era of modernity and progress – a very different depiction of London life from that of Davies's work. Yet Stead was not only a famous social commentator and critic of grim world practices. An active mystic, he acted as a human transmission machine, reporting from the other world and publishing *Borderland*, a magazine including articles on Theosophy, yoga and crystal gazing. The social and the mystical would cross-pollinate in often unexpected ways and, as the essays in this volume demonstrate, to be engaged in politics was not exclusive of being active in spirit circles.

Certainly, this cross-pollination is nowhere more evident than with the group of Victorians who formally studied the mystical phenomena of their own era and founded the Society for Psychical Research (SPR). Under the auspices of psychical research and in the names of 'progress, science and modernity', eminent chemists and physicists, philosophers, philologists, biologists and embryologists conducted boundary-work across scientific fields and realms. If philosophy was the art of dying,[10] then psychical research was the means of attaining knowledge of what happens next. The afterlife was an enigma to which the Society's members, ranging from bright Cambridge scholars to their American counterparts, brought an interdisciplinary approach. We only have to mention Henry Sidgwick, who served as the SPR's first president and was Chair of Moral Philosophy at Cambridge – his political and economic writings still resonant today; Eleanor Balfour Sidgwick, mathematician and later Principal of Newham College; Frederic Myers, prominent classicist, essayist and poet, whose studies on consciousness, hysteria and multiple personality influenced his contemporaries; William Crookes, renowned chemist and discoverer of thallium; Oliver Lodge, physicist who influenced wireless telegraphy; William Barrett, physicist and instigator of the SPR; William James, philosopher

[10] In Plato's *Phaedo*, Socrates, who is joined in his cell by his students on the last evening before his execution, states: 'For it appears that all who apply themselves to the study of philosophy aright are, unknown to the rest of the world, as far as depends on themselves, engaged in nothing else than in studying the art of death and dying' (*Phaedo*, 67e). Platonism and neoplatonism in particular figured in Psychical Research writings as is evident in Frederic Myers's *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death* (New Hyde Park, 1961), in which he discusses Socrates' genius in terms of a universal discarnate spirit. See J.P. Williamsm, 'The Making of Psychical Research: An Intellectual Elite's Approach to the Spirit World' (PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1984).

and psychologist; and Edmund Gurney, a classicist whose philosophical work *The Power of Sound* (1880) propagated a new theory of musicology. Psychical research was defined, if not enlivened, by a hybrid approach to phenomena such as mesmerism, thought-transference, haunting and spirit communication.

Marina Warner, commenting on the hybridized interests and methods of psychical researchers, describes:

> *… men and women [who] were well-to-do and well connected; they were also philanthropic and liberal, and their work unexpectedly sustained the original link between paranormal interests and social experiment which turned esoteric quests such as psychic research and Spiritualism into a nursery of emancipatory change in education, politics, women's status, and the approach and enterprise of scientific knowledge itself.*[11]

The contributors to this volume adopt a similarly interdisciplinary approach to the examination of spiritualism and the occult. As their essays demonstrate, the veil between the two worlds – that was perceived to be lifted in the nineteenth century, revealing knowledge that would otherwise be occluded – was not a barrier but a conductor, its porosity encouraging transactions and transmissions.

Of course, perspectives on spiritualism are not limited to the permeability that it enabled between discrete realms. Spiritualism may also be thought of as a tightening of a grasp, a refusal to let go of the dead, a desire to take the dead along into the present and the future. But isn't looking back cautioned against when one visits the underworld? Don't the spirits only come back from the dead if we resist the desire to turn round to have one final look, as Orpheus did with Eurydice? It is an ironic twist that the scholars in this volume look backwards, removed by time and space, to locate the ways in which spiritualism was a forward-looking movement, a movement that defies a strict dogma or practice but is adaptable, modern, keeping pace with its milieu – spirits are photographed, they strike typewriter keys, they quote and misquote canonical texts and hint at modernist narrative experimentations. Spirits create abstract paintings and are in tune with the new discoveries on matter. By the same token that Theosophy speaks of political change as well as higher spheres, occultism becomes a means not only of attaining higher knowledge, but also of employing this wisdom in the here and now.

The philosopher Gaston Bachelard, addressing his students at the Sorbonne, insists that 'The dramatic problem of philosophy is how to integrate scientific truths with human reality'. Perhaps we may read this 'dramatic problem' in terms of psychical research, spiritualism and the occult. For the Victorians, as for many of us today, scientific truth is beyond human experience yet it is a reality that we try to access through imagination, or fantasy. Bachelard spoke of the poetic imagination, of reverie and dreams and of what he called the 'material imagination'. As he explains it:

[11] Warner, *Phantasmagoria*, p. 239.

> *The image-producing forces of our mind develop along two very different lines.*
>
> *The first take wing when confronted by the new; they take pleasure in the picturesque, in variety, in the unexpected event. The imagination to which they give life always finds a springtime to describe. In nature, far removed from us, they produce already living flowers.*
>
> *The other forces which produce images plumb the depths of being; there they seek at once the primitive and eternal. They rise above seasons and history. In nature, within ourselves and without, they produce seeds, seeds in which form is buried in a substance, in which form is* internal.
>
> *To speak immediately in philosophical terms, one might distinguish two imaginations: that which gives life to the formal cause, and that which gives life to the material cause – or, more concisely,* formal imagination *and* material imagination.[12]

The 'material imagination' might be a useful term in thinking about the ways in which spiritualism and the occult were talked about, understood and mediated in the long nineteenth century. Perhaps it was the 'material imagination' that produced 'spirit extras' in photographs, or interpolated Browning's verses in automatic-writing scripts. Perhaps, the 'material imagination' produced ectoplasm or materialized spirits. It allowed scientists and spiritualists, mediums and occultists, poets and social reformers to imagine their lives and their afterlives. We may even say that the materialized spirits that spiritualists held in their arms, squeezed and examined were products of this kind of imagination, stretching beyond history, seasons, questioning what really happened. Their flights of fancy took shape both within the darkened room and textually within so many narratives. As for the psychical researchers – who removed themselves from the materiality of spirit forms that perspired, coughed or laughed – who can say that they were immune to this second kind of imagining, an imagining of a vastly expanding natural world?

Synopsizing Victorian Spiritualism and the Occult

The *Companion* is divided into three thematic sections that further posit the centrality of spiritualist and occult practices to the mainstream and counterculture of the Victorian and early twentieth-century epochs. The essays presented here alert our attention to the most recent approaches to the study of the Victorian supernatural world, and direct us towards possible areas and topics that future scholarship on the long nineteenth century might involve. Part 1, 'Haunted Laboratories and Ghosts in the Machine: Spiritualism, Science and Technology' considers both the

[12] Gaston Bachelard, 'The Necessity of Material Causes in Aesthetics', in *On Poetic Imagination and Reverie*, trans. Colette Gaudin (Putnam, CT, 2005), p. 10.

nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scientific and spiritualist discourses that would so frequently collide.

Christine Ferguson provides a succinct overview of the recent scholarship that has uncovered the vibrant networks established between science and spiritualism, professional and amateur investigators, elite and popular cultures.

Richard Noakes's essay examines the conflicting relationship between science and séance from the 1850s, when the spiritualist craze arrived in Britain, until the turn of the century. Drawing on a wide variety of sources from spiritualist magazines to scientific journals, Noakes looks at the ways in which the nascent 'spiritualist science' negotiated the rigorous scientific culture of mid-Victorian Britain whilst appropriating the rich vocabularies of mesmerism, phrenology and physiognomy in order to establish its own identity as a physical science. Whilst developments, and their implications on technology, in physics, chemistry, physiology and astronomy gave confidence to spiritualist investigators, who saw the psycho-physical phenomena of the séance as yet-to-be-discovered facts, Noakes demonstrates that for séance-investigators, it was faith in scientific experimentation that was not blind.

Anthony Enns's essay 'The Undead Author' traces the parallel history between spiritualist writing practices and the development of new writing machines in the latter part of the nineteenth century. There is something suggestively productive in thinking about the ways in which women entered the workforce as stenographers and typists at the same time as they were privileged for being the most suitable media for communication with the dead. Enns explores what 'writing automatically' really means for clerical workers, for spiritualists and for psychologists, by contextualizing developments in typewriting, in spiritualist séances and in dynamic psychology. Using poststructuralist theories from Roland Barthes to Gilles Deleuze and from Michel Foucault to Friedrich Kittler, Enns raises a critical cadre on which the tensions between authorship and subjectivity, writing and transcription, and authenticity and transmission are played out. Through an analysis of texts allegedly dictated to spiritualist mediums between 1870 and 1920, Enns examines the ways in which spiritualist writing experiments exposed the instabilities of human identity, and argues that such experiments were directly linked to the rise of mechanical writing. As Enns shows, the 'death of the author' was as much a critical metaphor as it was a reality for Victorian and Edwardian spiritualists.

Also focusing on the Victorian séance medium as an emerging technology, Jill Galvan reads modern spiritualism as a version of posthuman discourse. As she demonstrates, preoccupations with the ontological status of the human are not particular to modern-day posthumanist reflections, but also lay close to the hearts of Victorian and turn-of-the-century spiritualists in their evolutionist conceptions of the spirit. Spiritualist discourse further anticipates a discourse of the posthuman in persistently framing the medium as a human technology, specifically a human transmitter. Dubious séance phenomena – such as spirits who closely resembled their mediums – were then perceived by advocates as failures in transmission, or 'noise,' to use a modern term. Analysing Florence Marryat's spiritualist memoir *There Is No Death* (1891) and automatic-writing scripts in the psychical research

case of the 'cross-correspondences', alongside twentieth- and twenty-first-century theories on augmented humanity, information transmission and 'noise', Galvan transposes the Victorian posthumous and the latter-day posthuman.

What constitutes 'evidence' of survival after bodily death? For many spiritualists and sceptics, the scientific experimentation of séance phenomena could be inconclusive yet authoritative. However, in the early part of the twentieth century, the SPR's quest for concrete proof of the psyche shifted from the laboratory to the library. In the next essay, Leigh Wilson uncovers the surprising connection between literary criticism and psychical research. Looking at the 'cross-correspondences', a case that is still highly regarded by psychical researchers, Wilson suggests that the automatic-writing scripts and transcripts of direct-voice phenomena produced by a group of mediums over a thirty-year period provided for investigators the best 'evidence' for survival and also gestured towards emerging forms of experimental writing and literary criticism. Rich in allusions to classical philology, Western canonical texts and Victorian poetry, the scripts' intertextual nature offered itself up for literary detection at the same time as it resisted interpretation. Wilson shows how psychical research was influenced at the turn of the century by new discoveries on the nature of matter, linguistics and anthropology, to place 'writing', with its mythical and mystical status, at its very centre.

Part 2 of this collection, '*Occult*ure: Sex, Politics, Philosophy and Poetics', traverses the ways in which a range of occult practices, magical societies, spiritualist beliefs and psychical research anxieties permeated and perhaps even gave shape to the literature, culture and philosophy of *fin-de-siècle* Britain and America. Edward Bulwer-Lytton, an active figure in the political arena of mid-Victorian Britain, author of popular novels and perennial student of the occult – from mesmerism to spiritualism, from Neoplatonism to Rosicrucianism – is the focal point of J. Jeffrey Franklin's essay. By providing a model of evolutionary spirituality in the later part of the nineteenth century and tracing a lineage from animal magnetism to Theosophy, Franklin demonstrates how, far from being an eccentric or picturesque figure, Bulwer-Lytton was tapping into the cultural concerns of his milieu. Franklin examines two of Bulwer-Lytton's novels, *Zanoni* (1842) and *A Strange Story* (1862), in which the supernatural and natural worlds, arcane knowledge and parallel spheres interpenetrate each other, to uncover how these occult romances negotiate Bulwer-Lytton's quest for a literary form that reached beyond realist conventions and the limitations these posed.

Next, Joy Dixon turns our attention to the ways in which 'piety' and 'sodomy' overlapped and intersected, providing an informed understanding of the historical relationship between religion and sexuality in *fin-de-siècle* and early twentieth-century England. Edward Carpenter, best remembered today as an early advocate of 'homogenic love' – sexual love between men – is the central figure of this essay. Dixon turns her critical gaze to the relationship between Carpenter's spiritual vision and his writings about sexuality. Reading Carpenter's prose poem *Towards Democracy*, Dixon examines how sexual intimacy became a means to salvation, not only of the individual but also of the entire cosmos. This sexualized spiritual utopia was developed in conjunction with Carpenter's own idiosyncratic versions of

Hinduism and Buddhism, which provided a colonial context for his condemnation of Christianity, capitalism and materialism. Dixon also shows how Carpenter's later works, such as *The Drama of Love and Death* (1912), transposed these concerns into the language of science, invoking the latest scientific ideas as proof of the Oneness of the universe and the reality of the spiritual.

Matthew Beaumont's essay, 'Socialism and Occultism at the *Fin de Siècle*', uses the eighteenth-century chemical concept of elective affinities as a critical metaphor through which to examine the dialectical relationship between occultism – particularly the practice of Theosophy – and socialism in the 1880s–1890s. Exploring W.B. Yeats's work in the *fin de siècle* and the influence of William Morris and H.P. Blavatsky on the poet, Beaumont reveals how occultism, utopianism and nationalism amalgamated in Yeats's creative imagination and practices. Beaumont proceeds to argue how the discourse of utopianism that represents the point of confluence between socialism and occultism in the late nineteenth century – the idea of a utopian brotherhood – was central to the appeal of both movements, as texts by Blavatsky and Annie Besant make apparent. The theory of elective affinities provides a useful model for understanding the interconnectedness between the celestial and the political, between Theosophical and socialist concepts of 'brotherhood'.

Christoforos Diakoulakis is concerned with William James's writings on supernatural phenomena writings that formed a significant part of his multivalent career. A founding member of the American Society of Psychical Research, Professor James was undoubtedly one of the most eloquent exponents of the spiritualist movement of the *fin de siècle*; his meticulous and moderate meditations on what the prevalent scientism of his time chose to forcefully exclude constitute an invaluable point of reference for an educated appreciation of the work executed and the problems raised by psychical research. Diakoulakis reads James's testimonies with the thoroughness that they deserve, and with the earnestness that James himself openly asks for. Particular emphasis is paid to the explicit and implicit ties between these texts and James's 'properly' psychological and philosophical texts, an inquiry all the more necessary because so rarely attempted. Diakoulakis argues that James's unwavering fascination with spiritualism cannot but be treated as part of the organic whole that is his legacy. In light of James's established relevance to contemporary philosophical discourses (from American neo-pragmatism to Continental poststructuralism), on the one hand, and the renewed attention paid to Victorian spiritualism across literary studies on the other, an astute reading of James's *Essays in Psychical Research* paves the way for a rigorous confrontation with the question that lies at the core of psychical research: what, precisely, is the 'presence' of supernatural phenomena?

The next essay is concerned with the automatic writing and a popular Victorian translation of *A Thousand and One Nights* that permeate W.B. Yeats's 1923 poem, 'The Gift of Harun Al-Rashid', and *A Vision* (1925). Mazen Naous pays particular attention to Yeats's poem and teases out the connections between George Yeats's automatic writing, stories from *A Thousand and One Nights* and references to Irish Orientalism. Naous's readings relay Yeats's theory of synchronic history and

question the fixity of the boundaries between time, space and nations. Focusing on Yeats's language in the poem, Naous traces the inception of what Yeats came to call his 'System', developed later in *A Vision.* A parallel can also be traced between Naous's reading of William Butler Yeats, George Yeats and the poetic personae that breathe life into the poem. Naous suggests that, for Yeats, spirit mediumship and literary mediumship are not only a metaphor but became a very tangible reality.

Finally, Part 3, 'Staging the Victorian Afterlife: From Magic Shows to Dinner Parties', examines the various ways in which cultural and artistic practices were influenced by contact with the spirits. Perhaps 'staging' implies a certain theatricality or even fraudulence, but the essays in this section show that spirits, whether real or assumed, were not immune to legislation, or to recent developments on affective theories. In fact, spirits influenced Henry James as much as they did his brother and even attended dinner parties; they offered artistic vision and a way of thinking about history and one's relationship to fantasy. We may even return here to Bachelard's 'material imagination' to question those aspects of the Victorian afterlife that are 'staged', photographed, tinted, painted, tasted, fictionalized, laughed with, and even subjected to revenue.

Tatiana Kontou opens this part of the *Companion* with a compact discussion of Florence Marryat, a figure active on the stage, in the séance room and in the literary circles of her time. By reading Marryat's spiritualist memoirs, *There Is No Death* and *The Spirit World* (1894), as hybrids between life-writing and the Gothic, Kontou shows that, for Marryat, spiritualist investigation was not devoid of literary flourishing and could often lead to debates between her readers as to whether she was writing fiction or statements of fact. Marryat's melodramatic accounts, her advice on séance settings, her literary style of drawing the audience into her confidence reflect the porousness of boundaries between Marryat's many careers and her beliefs, and, most importantly, accentuate the ways in which spiritualism, whether believed in or doubted, had seeped into the lives, practices and customs of the Victorians. In fact, this common culture of the occult is explored in all of the essays in this section.

Is spiritualism staged or real magic? Do spirits upstage magicians? Some are familiar today with Harry Houdini and the dispute he embroiled himself in with Arthur Conan Doyle. Houdini was trying to show the human deftness behind spiritualist phenomena whereas Doyle, having lost a son in the First World War, was supporting authentic spirit communication. Erika White Dyson's essay illustrates how spiritualism and professional magic were strange bedfellows in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America and Britain. Although stage magic provided spiritualism with its 'visual vocabulary' and prepared audiences for phenomenal spirit manifestations, it was instrumental in debunking fraudulent spiritualist mediums and 'clearing' professional magicians from any allegations of spirit phenomena. Dyson teases out the ways in which 'secular magicians' and spiritualist religionists courted public approval and authority by defining themselves against each other. However, as she explains, each claimed the mantles of science and civic virtue while declaring the other's perspectives as malicious bunk. Dyson traces how stage magicians and spiritualists adapted their practices

and organizations, developing a means of self-policing their ranks to avoid legal prosecution and public censure.

From the laughter heard at the Courts of Justice when spiritualists and magicians were trying to copyright their talents, we move on to the laughter in the séance. Laughter is contagious; like the voice, it is both inside and outside of one's body, but in the Victorian séance, laughter literally becomes a medium between spirits, séance attendants and spirit mediums. In her essay 'Mirth as Medium', Mackenzie Bartlett explores a wide variety of spiritualist and non-spiritualist sources to examine the ways in which laughter became a familiar sound in spirit-circles. As Bartlett demonstrates, the intuitive association of the mourner in heavy crepe, drawn to the séance for consolation, is questionable, as those drawn to séances were searching for religious proof, consolation, scientific evidence and entertainment. Bartlett considers how, on the one hand, the disembodied laughter of the spirits was understood as being both demonic and atavistic whilst, on the other, laughter was perceived as proof of the personality's survival and as an ethereal connection between the living and the dead. Drawing from a wide variety of sources, from séance reports published in spiritualist periodicals to writings on affect and emotion theory, Bartlett pricks up our ears to the strange, mimicking power of laughing at the face of death.

In the next essay, 'Eating, Feeding and Flesh', Marlene Tromp reveals an unexpected link between séances and Victorian dinner parties. What does it mean to have a 'well-appointed' last supper? What is the etiquette for immaterial guests? Applying recent scholarship on food studies and feminism alongside nineteenth-century manuals on household management and contemporary séance reports, Tromp expounds the subversive potential of women as food providers. Since women largely controlled food management, the manipulation of food and drink became a means for women to seize control of their bodies and the séance – especially to counter the expectation of women's bodies as passive receptacles. Spiritualism's resistance to dogma and women's central role as hostesses enabled them to attain religious status during séances. Tromp draws parallels between the provision of food for guests, spirit guests and the Eucharist, to configure the Victorian hostess as a liturgical figure. What seems most surprising is the concern for spiritualists' dietary requirements and the contemporaneous apprehension on food purity that, for Tromp, are inflected with anxieties about gender.

Perhaps what Henry James made of William James's illustrious involvement with psychical research is nefarious, but the supernatural and the spiritualistic did not leave him untouched. Bridget Bennett reads two seminal texts, *The Bostonians* (1886) and *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), as key narratives for examining the development of transatlantic spiritualism and belief in the supernatural. Bennett perceives these works not only as representative of the changing attitudes to spiritualism, but also as emblematic of a point in literary history where the reader is invited to partake in the construction of meaning, to decipher the coded text of the author and ultimately to share in the making of the text. This is not dissimilar, as we have seen, to psychical researchers' intent in deciphering messages.

How can art mediate between the material and immaterial realms? This was an important question for Victorian spiritualists, especially for members of the artistic and intellectual middle class, for whom spiritualism was bound up with questions of visual representation. For them, a drawing had to 'translate' the language of disembodied spirits into the language of humans, rewrite heavenly discourse as earthly discourse, without sacrificing its sublimity. Rachel Oberter's essay examines the challenge spiritualists faced in materializing an idea while retaining its fundamentally immaterial character by taking Anna Mary Howitt, the artist and spiritualist medium, as her case study. Oberter explores the ways in which spiritualist language of lifting the veil or opening a window into the other world became, for Howitt, a way of producing artwork that challenged its very existence as a material object. Howitt's artworks, some of them on flimsy tracing paper, produced through involuntary motions of the hand as the medium communicated with her spirit guides, enact for Oberter a conflict on representation and translation. Oberter suggests that there are several ways in which Howitt's drawings function as material objects that undercut their own materiality: erasure, absence, multiplicity and inscrutability that at the same time illustrate a possible meeting point for material and spiritual entities.

In her essay 'Viewing History and Fantasy', Sarah Willburn focuses on the practice of spirit photography and dorchagraphy in the 1870s and 1890s, respectively. Willburn sensitively captures the aura photographs held for a Victorian viewer. A photograph of a white-clothed figure might be construed as evidence of spirit appearance but it is also a pictorial representation of fantasy, desire and imagination, dynamics that are at play between sitter and photographer. One of Willburn's case studies is the popular spirit photographer Frederic Hudson whose London studio became a meeting place for living and spirit sitters. Hudson's most famous model, the spiritualist Georgina Houghton, would be photographed with spiritual entities as controversial as Satan. Willburn does not attempt to expose the imposture of these ghostly images but reads these photographs as visual evidence of a mode of historiography and simultaneously as an enactment of fantasy with which the Victorians were already experimenting in art and literature. Willburn proceeds to show how, at the turn of the century, the photographic camera – a modern invention that mediated the spirits of the dead – became redundant as spirits and ideas could imprint themselves on paper without the use of a technological medium. The abstractness of these *fin-de-siècle* images points towards new, fluid ways of representing the world and the inner workings of the psyche. From the cabinet portraits of Victorian sitters and materialized spirits to the nebulous representations of a dorchagraph, Willburn brings to light the intricate ways in which fantasies are fixed, historiography is visualized, and how, amidst these, interpretation becomes key to reading spirit photographs as cultural registers.

What the essays in this volume tell us are stories of metaphors – very fleshy yet flighty – of how, for example, the spirit cabinet developed apparitions in similar ways to the photographer's darkened room, or of how wireless telegraphy was seen as a form of telepathy. Navigating the rich network between science and séance, art and spirit possession, social etiquette and the Eucharist, laughter and

death, socialism and Theosophy is the main objective of the authors included in this collection. There is a Graeco-Roman custom of placing coins in the mouths or on the eyes of the dead for Charon, the ferryman, who would receive these as fare for safe passage to Hades.[13] Metaphors for Victorian spiritualists and occultists were, like these coins, fares for the safe passage to the other world.

[13] Charon's obol or viaticus was the coin, gold or silver, that was placed in the mouths of the dead and delivered to Charon who took it to ferry the dead across the Styx. The custom of burying the dead with a coin in their mouths survived in Europe until the nineteenth century.

PART 1
Haunted Laboratories and Ghosts in the Machine: Spiritualism, Science and Technology

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Recent Scholarship on Spiritualism and Science

Christine Ferguson

In 1974, when nineteenth-century spiritualism was just beginning to be reconstituted as a legitimate object for serious historical inquiry, Malcolm Jay Kottler lamented that 'it has been forgotten, ignored, or perhaps never known ... that in the second half of the nineteenth century a considerable number of renowned scientists were favourably disposed toward ... psychical phenomena'.[1] Since then, and largely as a result of pioneering history of science studies such as Kottler's, this seemingly lost affinity has been recovered. Now the links between Victorian science and spiritualism are so well established as to be virtually truistic in the scholarship on the movement, second in ubiquity only to the assertions of spiritualism's potential for feminist emancipation and gender subversion.[2] This new awareness has effectively challenged the supremacy of the crisis of faith hypothesis hitherto used to account for the popularity of séances and mysticism in a technologically sophisticated and ostensibly rational era. No longer is spiritualism viewed as a purely reactionary formation, a desperate, backwards clinging to the consolatory faith in spiritual immortality that contemporary science was rapidly eroding; now

[1] Malcolm Jay Kottler, 'Alfred Russel Wallace, the Origin of Man, and Spiritualism', *Isis*, 65.2 (June 1974): 145–92 (p. 145).

[2] Examples of recent scholarship on the continuities between nineteenth-century spiritualism and science include Eleana Gomel, '"Spirits in the Material World": Spiritualism and Identity in the *Fin de Siècle*', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 35.1 (2007): 189–213; Peter Lamont, 'Spiritualism and a Mid-Victorian Crisis of Evidence', *The Historical Journal*, 47.4 (December 2004): 897–920; Roger Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy: 1870–1901* (Oxford, 2002); John Warne Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith: Mesmerism, Spiritism, and Occultism in Modern France* (Ithaca, NY, 2008); Richard Noakes, 'Spiritualism, Science, and the Supernatural in Mid-Victorian Britain', in Nicola Bown, Carolyn Burdett and Pamela Thurschwell (eds), *The Victorian Supernatural* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 23–43; Jon Palfreman, 'Between Scepticism and Credulity: A Study of Victorian Scientific Attitudes to Modern Spiritualism', in Roy Wallis (ed.), *On the Margins of Science: The Social Construction of Rejected Knowledge* (Keele, 1979), pp. 201–36, pp. 210–23; Judith Walkowitz, 'Science and the Séance: Transgressions of Gender in Late Victorian London', *Representations*, 22 (1988): 3–28.

believers are instead usually painted as iconoclastic radicals whose convictions stemmed not from opposition but deference to the logic of a newly authoritative empirical epistemology, one which insisted that knowledge be derived from direct observation rather than faith. It is this empiricist edge which, according to Elana Gomel and others, distinguishes Victorian spiritualism from earlier forms of mystical belief.[3] Writing in 2007, she states, 'Spiritualism was only an exaggeration of a general nineteenth-century trend: the quest for the science of the supernatural ... the modern concept of the supernatural is a by-product of scientific empiricism.'[4] Some, including myself, might question the alleged novelty of science and spiritualism's consilience in the nineteenth century – after all, as Thomas Laqueur writes, 'Every age, and not just the modern age, has felt the need to make its religious beliefs comport somehow with the best scientific and philosophical learning of its day'.[5] There can be no doubt, however, that the rhetorical structures and Darwinist paradigms through which this synthesis came to be imagined in the Victorian period were decidedly new, reflecting, among other things, spiritualism's defiantly democratic exotericism and science's nascent professional status and cultural authority.

Attentive to these nuances, much of the best recent work on Victorian spiritualism has moved beyond simply asserting the existence of this scientific turn to focus instead on its implications and outcomes within specific contexts. Such studies consider to what extent, and where, modern spiritualism's attempt to annex contemporary scientific authority and concepts succeeded. For Elana Gomel, the answer is not at all. In *fin-de-siècle* England, she argues, the movement's appropriation of and deference to the truth-claims of science only worked to buttress an increasingly professionalized scientific community whose authority was based largely on its exclusion of the metaphysical.[6] Considering an earlier episode in British spiritualist history, the scientific investigations of pre-eminent Scottish-American medium Daniel Dunglas Home in the 1860s, Peter Lamont comes to a pointedly different conclusion, arguing that the anti-spiritualist scientific establishment emerged the weaker from its contest with the mystics. The failure of sceptical scientists to provide a non-supernatural explanation of Home's ability, Lamont compellingly argues, revealed the profound limitations of their own putative objectivity and insistence on verifiability.[7] Lamont never suggests that this evidential dearth constituted proof of Home's genuine ability (although the medium's contemporary supporters were more than willing to embrace this negative proof fallacy), but rather that Home's prowess induced a 'crisis of

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[3] See also Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith*; Noakes, 'Spiritualism, Science, and the Supernatural'; and William H. Brock, *William Crookes (1832–1919) and the Commercialization of Science* (Burlington VT, (2008).

[4] Gomel, '"Spirits in the Material World"', pp. 194–5.

[5] Thomas Laqueur, 'Why the Margins Matter: Occultism and the Making of Modernity', *Modern Intellectual History*, 3.1 (2006): 111–35, p. 119.

[6] Gomel, '"Spirits in the Material World", p. 197.

[7] Lamont, 'Spiritualism and a Mid-Victorian Crisis of Evidence', pp. 917–18.

evidence' for scientists unable to provide empirical proof for their insistence that he was a charlatan.[8] Thus the establishment position on Home – if not on the other prominent mediums such as Mrs Guppy, Henry Slade and Florence Cook who were all detected in fraud at various points in their careers – rested not on evidence, or even on viable hypothesis, but rather on a form of rationalist faith.

Although parts of Lamont's argument seem unconvincing to me – I sense that 'crisis' might be too strong a word to describe the after-effects of the Home tests – I remain keenly impressed by his admirable willingness to interrogate the relationship between mid-century scientists and spiritualists at both of its poles, uncovering not just scientific responses to séance phenomena, but also spiritualist manipulations and subversions of scientific paradigms. The benefits of such a lateral approach are equally evident in Jennifer Porter's fascinating work on the legacy of Victorian spiritualism's metaphysical empiricism in twenty-first-century New Age belief. In her 2005 article 'The Spirit(s) of Science', Porter traces the survival of scientific metaphor and allusion in the movement's modern incarnation, one in which followers regularly articulate their faith through scientific language and in which dead scientists – Einstein is a particular favourite – have replaced native Americans as the favoured type of spirit guide.[9] Porter's work seems to me immensely important for a number of reasons: first, for moving away from the singular focus on spiritualism's reception by scientific elites – Alfred Russel Wallace, William Crookes, Oliver Lodge – that dominated much of the early scholarship on science and spiritualism;[10] second, for forcing us to reconsider the criteria through which occultist and spiritualist – or, indeed, any popular – appropriations of scientific knowledge might be deemed unequivocally to have succeeded or failed. The success of spiritualism's tactical deployment of science, argues Porter, lies not in its accuracy, but rather in its imaginative potency within its own faith community. Viewed from this perspective, it is irrelevant that Victorian spiritualists and their twentieth-century successors use terms such as 'energy', 'vibration' or 'wave length' in ways that would appal professional physicists; what matters is that they have found a way of making these ideas – however misapplied – productive within and constitutive of their own belief system, thus challenging science's ability to copyright and police its own language. Porter concludes:

> *When members of the scientific establishment draw upon the authoritative image of science to bolster their own claims to legitimacy, or to debunk popular misconceptions of science, the perception of science as 'sacral' in the pursuit of truth is simply reinforced. As a result, science will continue to be colonized by spiritualists and other religious groups seeking to assert*

[8] Ibid., pp. 917–18.

[9] Jennifer Porter, 'The Spirit(s) of Science: Paradoxical Positivism as Religious Discourse among Spiritualists', *Science as Culture*, 14 (2005): 1–21, p. 9.

[10] Porter's focus echoes and in part fulfils Richard Noakes's recent call for a more systematic investigation of the ways in which occult and spiritualist communities transform rather than simply echo scientific language.

> *what they know, intuitively and spiritually, to be true, for in spiritualist perceptions, truth and science are inextricably linked.*[11]

Also central to the new science and spiritualism reception studies just described is a consequent refusal to treat either Victorian science or spiritualism as monolithic or internally consistent entities. Their depiction of spiritualist believers and, for that matter, of the Victorian scientific establishment, is becoming increasingly and commendably particularized, focusing on interactions between specific although non-mutually exclusive groups of converts – women, the working classes, non-whites – and carefully stipulated medical and scientific disciplines such as neurology, alienism, physics, psychical research, evolutionary biology, anthropology, sexology and telecommunications.[12] What this rich range of encounters reveals is that there was no such thing as a single, definitive scientific attitude towards afterlife belief and psychical phenomena in the nineteenth century, nor, for that matter, a uniform spiritualist position on all of the sciences. The movement's relationship with the Anglo-American medical establishment, for example, was necessarily more vexed and anguished than its connection with the other scientific professions given that a significant proportion of its believers – Louisa Lowe and Georgina Weldon being the most prominent – were either subjected to or threatened with institutionalization as a result of their faith. Victorian doctors, neurologists and alienists were, as Edward Brown and S.D. Shortt have shown, generally the least likely of the scientific professionals to have sympathy with the movement, often suggesting that it had either caused or symptomized an epidemic of mental illness

[11] Porter, 'The Spirit(s) of Science', p. 19.

[12] For reasons of space, it is impossible to list all of the relevant titles here. The three most prolific of these sub-genres comprise spiritualism's relationship with medicine and abnormal psychology, with psychical research, and with technology and telecommunications. Readers interested in the first topic should consult Edward Brown, 'Neurology and Spiritualism in the 1870s', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 57.4 (1983): 563–77; Molly McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley, 2008); Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (London, 1989); Roy Porter, Helen Nicholson and Bridget Bennett (eds), *Women, Spiritualism, and Madness*, 2 vols (London, 2003); and S.E.D. Shortt, 'Physicians and Psychics: The Anglo-American Medical Response to Spiritualism, 1870–1890', *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 39.3 (1984): 339–55. For studies on spiritualism and psychical research, see Trevor Hamilton, *Immortal Longings: FWH Myers and the Victorian Search for Life After Death* (Exeter, 2009); Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy*; and Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850–1914* (Cambridge and New York, 1985). Finally, the best recent work on spiritualism and technology and telecommunications includes Jill Galvan, *The Sympathetic Medium: Feminine Channeling, the Occult, and Communication Technology, 1859–1919* (Ithaca, NY, 2010), Richard Noakes, 'Telegraphy is an Occult Art: Cromwell Fleetwood Varley and the Diffusion of Electricity to the Other World', *British Journal for the History of Science*, 32 (1999): 421–59; Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham, NC, 2002); and Pamela Thurschwell, *Literature, Technology, and Magical Thinking, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, 2001).

within the population. But the medical disdain was by no means shared evenly across the wider spectrum of the scientific professions. Perhaps most receptive of all, if only to judge by the numbers of notable converts who came from their ranks, were those practitioners trained in the physical sciences. One might argue that physical scientists such as Oliver Lodge, William Crookes, Camille Flammarion and Johann Zöllner were more open to the spiritualist hypothesis by virtue of their awareness of the operations of unseen but potent physical forces; an equally viable if somewhat less flattering explanation lies, as Thomas Laqueur points out, in their unfamiliarity with the new developments of psychology that were, at the end of the century, transforming traditional understandings of the mind.[13] The fascinating questions of what difference, if any, disciplinary affiliation made in determining nineteenth-century scientific responses to spiritualism, and of which scientific disciplines were most likely to be courted and assimilated by believers, will hopefully receive more attention as ongoing research on the subject diversifies.

But perhaps more than any further localization of context, what the next generation of science and spiritualism studies seems, at least to me, to require is a careful reconsideration of its current historiographical and political assumptions. Chief among these is the oft-repeated notion that there is something uniquely modern and, with one hugely problematic *hence*, implicitly progressive or at least proleptically postmodern about the Victorian affiliation of spiritualism and science. The reasoning behind this assumption is understandable and to, a certain extent, convincing; after all, science's status as a professional vocation and a culturally authoritative, not to say hegemonic, means of acquiring and ordering knowledge is undeniably recent. It is equally clear that many nineteenth-century spiritualists believed that the empirical and apparently objective nature of their séance investigations was proof of the movement's radical innovation, of its rejection of the outmoded religious and political beliefs that they also held accountable for the oppression of women, the working classes, and African and Native Americans.[14] But we are under no compunction to accept these assertions at face value, nor should we mistake the simultaneity of spiritualism's scientific pose and its common – although by no means universal – advocacy of progress as proof of their mutual affinity. To do so is both to produce a one-sided picture of spiritualism's wide-ranging ideological commitments and to hide or reject the movement's relationship to the long-established tradition of Western esotericism, one that has always sought recourse to naturalist *and* mystical explanations of supernatural

[13] Laqueur, 'Why the Margins Matter', p. 119.

[14] For more on the feminist, socialist, abolitionist and anti-colonial aspects of transatlantic spiritualism, see Owen, *The Darkened Room*; Logie Barrow, *Independent Spirits: Spiritualism and English Plebeians, 1850–1910* (London, 1986); Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston, 1989), Robert S. Cox, *Body and Soul: A Sympathetic History of American Spiritualism* (Charlottesville and London, 2003); John Kucich, *Ghostly Communion: Cross-Cultural Spiritualism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Lebanon, NH, 2004); and Marlene Tromp, *Altered States: Sex, Nation, Drugs, and Self-Transformation in Victorian Spiritualism* (Albany, NY, 2006).

phenomena. In celebrating nineteenth-century spiritualism's apparent postmodern precocity, we neglect its inheritance from older and more clearly essentialist forms of philosophical, scientific and, yes, religious modes of conceptualizing identity. By paying equal attention to nineteenth-century spiritualism's links to the past as to its alliances with the modern, we stand to gain a deeper understanding of this fascinatingly hybrid and ideologically flexible movement's cultural, political and scientific work.

The Sciences of Spiritualism in Victorian Britain: Possibilities and Problems

Richard Noakes[1]

Introduction

After attending a series of spiritualist séances in December 1872, a baffled writer for the London *Times* concluded that it was 'strange indeed' that 'in a generation which boasts of itself to be one of exact science and plain matter-of-fact belief' the 'epidemic' of spiritualism had gained an estimated twenty million 'adherents'. It was evident that 'in this matter our scientific men have signally failed to do their duty by the public, which looks to them for its facts'.[2] For this writer, the relationship between science and spiritualism seemed to be one of opposition and the only sense in which spiritualism could become scientific was if it was investigated by professional scientists. This argument informed countless other Victorian commentaries and criticisms of spiritualism and later historical analyses of the so-called movement. Frank Podmore's critical *Modern Spiritualism* (1902) and Arthur Conan Doyle's sympathetic *History of Spiritualism* (1926) may have disagreed sharply on what histories of spiritualism could say about the genuineness of mediumship and spirit manifestations, but they both identified the scientific 'aspect' of the subject with the investigations of such scientific practitioners as William Crookes, Michael Faraday, E. Ray Lankester and Alfred Russel Wallace.[3] The trend continued well into the later twentieth century, especially by historians looking for precursors to

[1] I thank the National Archives for permission to quote from material held in their collections. I also thank the editors for their comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

[2] 'Spiritualism and Science', *The Times*, 26 December 1872, p. 5.

[3] Frank Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism: A History and a Criticism*, 2 vols (London, 1902), vol. 2, pp. 140–60; Arthur Conan Doyle, *The History of Spiritualism*, 2 vols (London, 1926), vol. 1, pp. 236–57. Other early twentieth-century histories of spiritualism that followed this approach include: J. Arthur Hill, *Spiritualism: Its History, Phenomena and Doctrine* (New York,

those young sciences of psychical research and parapsychology.[4] The studies of American and British spiritualism by R. Laurence Moore and Janet Oppenheim respectively, however, signalled the beginnings of a historiography that was at once more sensitive to the ways in which spiritualistic claims and practices were shaped by possibilities and uncertainties in sciences of the period, and to the independent scientific identity of spiritualist cultures.[5]

This chapter seeks a more nuanced account of what Victorian spiritualists considered scientific about their 'movement'. Developments in the historiography of the nineteenth-century sciences and spiritualism made since the 1980s suggest a number of ways of rethinking the issue. One of the most fruitful has been a revisionist approach to 'popular science'.[6] Historians have paid increasing attention to groups who were located outside establishment and elite sciences but who put together their own scientific culture or actively transformed elite sciences. Rather than assume that such groups passively adopted the fruits of elite sciences, this literature seeks to recover what Bernard Lightman calls the 'agency of groups' in the construction of scientific knowledges and skills.[7] These scientific cultures involved individuals largely absent from the circles of professional scientists – for example, artisans, women, journalists and showmen – and many focused on ideas and practices such as phrenology and mesmerism which were deemed 'heterodox' by professional scientific practitioners. The most sophisticated historical analyses of nineteenth-century phrenology and mesmerism embody a further shift away from traditional historiography of 'pseudo-sciences': they regard boundaries between, on the one hand, 'normal', 'orthodox' and 'mainstream' sciences and, on the other,

1919); Edward Clodd, *The Question: 'If a Man Die, Shall He Live Again?' A Brief History and Examination of Modern Spiritualism* (London, 1917), pp. 265–301.

4 John Beloff, *Parapsychology: A Concise History* (London, 1993); Ruth Brandon, *The Spiritualists: The Passion for the Occult in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London, 1983); Hereward Carrington, *The Story of Psychic Science* (London, 1930); Brian Inglis, *Natural and Supernatural: A History of the Paranormal* (London, 1977); Ronald Pearsall, *The Table-Rappers* (London, 1972); Harry Price, *Fifty Years of Psychical Research: A Critical Survey* (London, 1939); Rene Sudré, *Treatise on Parapsychology* (London, 1960).

5 R. Laurence Moore, *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology and American Culture* (New York, 1977); Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850–1914* (Cambridge, 1985).

6 Among the most significant works in a vast and growing field are Roger Cooter and Stephen Pumfrey, 'Separate Spheres and Public Places: Reflections on the History of Science Popularisation and Science in Popular Culture', *History of Science*, 32 (1984): 237–67; Adrian Desmond, *The Politics of Evolution: Medicine, Morphology and Reform in Radical London* (Chicago, 1992); Aileen Fyfe and Bernard Lightman (eds), *Science in the Marketplace: Nineteenth-Century Sites and Experiences* (Chicago, 2007); Bernard Lightman, *Victorian Popularizers of Science: Designing Nature for New Audiences* (Chicago, 2007); James A. Secord, *Victorian Sensation: The Extraordinary Publication, Reception and Secret Authorship of the Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (Chicago, 2000); Jonathan Topham, 'Beyond the "Common Context": The Production and Reading of the Bridgewater Treatises', *Isis*, 89 (1998): 233–62.

7 Lightman, *Victorian Popularizers*, p. 15.

the 'pseudo', 'heterodox' and 'marginal' sciences as boundaries that cannot be taken for granted and whose construction requires historical analysis.[8] In a period when what counted as science, scientific and scientist was being actively debated and defined, and when very different cultural groups sought scientific authority for their very different enterprises, it becomes difficult to sustain a historiography underpinned by rigid demarcations between science and pseudo-science. A more fruitful approach has been to explore the ways in which 'alternative' scientific cultures were forged and eventually came to be seen as marginal or heterodox.

Developments in the historiography of spiritualism since the 1980s have in many ways reflected these changes in the historiography of the sciences.[9] Here we see the beginnings of an attempt to recover the agency of nineteenth-century spiritualists in constructing independent scientific cultures. In *Independent Spirits* (1984), Logie Barrow showed how nineteenth-century English plebeian spiritualists defined their direct, empirical and experiential approach to the spirit world as a more 'scientific' approach than that upheld by the intellectual, clerical and medical practitioners whose authority on this and other-worldly matters they persistently challenged.[10] Bret Carroll, in his study of spiritualism in antebellum America, agrees with Barrow that spiritualists made much use of scientific concepts of 'imponderables' to give scientific plausibility to their interpretations of séance effects. They 'applied the ideas and vocabulary of the physical sciences to their understanding of spirit, tapping the epistemological authority of empirically based knowledge to suit their religious ideology to the demands of a scientific age'.[11]

Barrow's and Carroll's studies highlight the potential of treating spiritualism as a species of popular science and of using mass-circulation spiritualist periodicals to support this analytical approach. The significance of periodicals in the nineteenth century has long been recognized by historians and literary scholars, but it is only comparatively recently that their importance in the construction of scientific knowledge and the identity of scientific cultures has begun to be explored.[12] Roger Smith has argued that non-technical or generalist periodicals certainly played a critical role in the shaping of that new branch of science most closely associated

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[8] Roger Cooter, *The Cultural Meaning of Popular Science: Phrenology and the Organization of Consent in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1984); Alison Winter, *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain* (Chicago, 1998).

[9] For an analysis of this change see Richard Noakes, 'The Historiography of Psychical Research: Lessons from the Histories of the Sciences', *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, 72 (2008): 65–85.

[10] Logie Barrow, *Independent Spirits: Spiritualism and the English Plebeians, 1850–1910* (London, 1986), p. 90.

[11] Bret E. Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America* (Bloomington, 1997), p. 66.

[12] Geoffrey Cantor et al., *Science in the Nineteenth-Century Periodical: Reading the Magazine of Nature* (Cambridge, 2004); Geoffrey Cantor and Sally Shuttleworth (eds), *Science Serialized: Representation of Sciences in Nineteenth-Century Periodicals* (Cambridge, 2004); Louise Henson et al. (eds), *Culture and Science in the Nineteenth-Century Media* (Aldershot, 2003); Lightman, *Victorian Popularizers*; James Mussell, *Science, Time and Space in the Late Nineteenth-Century Periodical Press: Moveable Type* (Aldershot, 2007).