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Modern Spiritualism: Its Quest to Become A Science

John Haller Jr

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Modern Spiritualism:

**Its Quest to
Become A Science**

By

John S. Haller, Jr.

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Spiritualism, then, is a science, by authority of self-evident truth, observed fact, and inevitable deduction, having within itself all the elements upon which any science can found a claim.

(R. T. Hallock, *The Road to Spiritualism*,
1858)

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INTRODUCTION

In 1907, an article appeared simultaneously in *American Medicine* and the *Journal of Psychological Research* that not only evoked discussion within the medical community but drew an equally significant response from the popular press. In speculating whether it was possible for the psychic functions of personality and consciousness to exist after death, Duncan MacDougall, M.D., of Haverhill, Massachusetts, hypothesized that a material, space-occupying “soul substance” essential to the body in life, escaped at death and entered the ether where it retained its identity in “a real world above the storm zone of the earth’s atmosphere.” There, the psychic functions of human beings continued their existence and although the soul substance was no longer subject to the earth’s gravitation, “it follow[ed] that ever since human beings began to die upon the earth, the complex pathway of the earth around the sun in space, and of the earth as part of the solar system moving in space, is littered with these non-gravitative spiritual principles.”¹

MacDougall tested his hypothesis on a man dying of tuberculosis. Several hours prior to death, he placed the patient in a bed “arranged on a light framework built upon very delicately balanced platform beam scales.” While looking to the man’s comfort in his last hours, he carefully noted a weight loss at the rate of an ounce per hour from respiration and sweating. During this time, he monitored the balance to ensure the accuracy of the man’s weight. At the moment of expiration, “the beam end dropped with an audible stroke hitting against the lower limiting bar and remaining there with no rebound.” He determined that at the precise moment of death, the man lost three-fourths of an ounce in weight. Not content with a single example, he tested his hypothesis on yet another dying patient. “In the eighteen minutes that elapsed between when he ceased breathing until we were certain of death,” MacDougall wrote, “there was a weight loss of one and a half ounces and fifty grains.” In a third case, he ascertained a loss of one and a half ounces at death. With each of these tests, MacDougall insisted that there had been no loss from the bowels or kidneys that might have accounted for the weight change. Three additional tests convinced him that “a substance capable of being weighed does leave the human body at death.” From experiments he eventually carried out on six humans and fifteen dogs, MacDougall concluded that weight loss at death represented the weight of the departed soul-substance. In other words, a “space-occupying body of measurable weight” left the body at death and survived as a “conscious ego” within the

earth's ether. With the soul-substance differentiated from the physical body and from the ether, he surmised that he had at last proven the materialistic conception of the mind, spirit, or soul that continued to exist after the body's death.²

The hypothesis of a non-gravitative existence of the mind after death may have been less satisfying to Christians who for centuries believed in physical resurrection; nevertheless, it implied a mode of survival that appeared to be scientifically verifiable. "The essential thing," MacDougall explained, "is that there must be a substance as the basis of continuing personal identity and consciousness, for without a space-occupying substance, personality or a continuing conscious ego after bodily death is unthinkable." Though he recognized that more experiments would be required to prove his hypothesis, he was sufficiently convinced that the spiritualistic conception of the soul's immateriality was wrong, there being no basis for the theories advanced over the centuries by theologians and metaphysicians. Instead, the evidence suggested that a "space occupying body of measurable weight disappearing at death, if verified, furnishe[d] a substantial basis for persisting personality or a conscious ego surviving the act of bodily death."³

What MacDougall evoked with his "soul substance" was another example of what humans throughout the ages have speculated about the finality of death. Time and again, they have insisted on some form of continuity beyond physical existence. From ancient times

to modernity, the chain connecting the living with the departed has seldom been broken. Both individuals and whole societies have persisted in viewing the departed as a body of spirits who continue to attend the needs of mortals, guiding, instructing, and protecting them. During the frenzied decades of early nineteenth-century America, this connection between the natural and spiritual worlds contained elements of radical individualism, antinomianism, sentimentalism, liberal Protestantism, democracy, and the rule of natural law. It was a period remarkable for all manner of truth-seekers dedicated to making the world not only happier for its inhabitants but enhancing that happiness by connecting the living with those who were dead.

In previous centuries, spirit manifestations were depicted as intuitive experiences of an individual, group, or society, and attributed to the agency of the devil. These included the epidemic of spirit-possession recorded among the Ursuline Nuns of Loudun in 1633-40; the sightings recounted by the Rev. Joseph Glanvil, fellow of the Royal Society and chaplain to Charles II in 1661; the strange behavior of the peasantry in Cevennes in 1707; and the disturbances affecting the family of the Rev. Samuel Wesley (his son John was the founder of Methodism) in the parsonage at Epworth in 1716-17. Later instances included reports of mysterious knockings at Stockwell, England, in 1772, and similar occurrences at Slawensick Castle, Silesia, in 1806; at Weinsberg in 1825 and 1828; and at Canandaigua, New York, in 1834.⁴

By contrast, the spirit manifestations that occurred in modern Spiritualism are founded on an unbridled faith in their common purpose to lead mankind toward greater progress and a conviction that communication with these spirits could be scientifically confirmed and verified. Proof of this belief was based on *rappings*, a term describing the first tapping out of messages between living persons and spirits which reputedly took place at the home of the Fox family in Hydesville, New York, on March 31, 1848. This initial manifestation filled a vacuum that both society's elite and the aspiring lower and middle classes celebrated at various levels of understanding. Utilizing philosophical, theological, and scientific explanations, all buoyed by corroboration from committees of respected citizens, the rappings became proof of religious promises made over the centuries of an afterlife. It postulated that life continues in the form of an indestructible spirit which has always been a part of the human constitution. The material body is the covering of the soul which acts as the bridge between the spirit and the material body. After physical death, the soul lives on and continues to reflect the temperament of the individual, his feelings, and even his physical characteristics. Spirit is the divine part of man descended from a Universal Spirit or Infinite Intelligence. Though the body and soul had a beginning, the spirit continues to exist after its material body dies. Death is simply that moment in time when the spirit separates from the material body. From that point onward, the spirit alone exists as the organized

entity; it represents a transformation, a change in status, nothing more.⁵

As the rappings spread across villages, towns, and cities in the United States, the Fox sisters and their imitators borrowed from Mesmer's novel *baquet* to create their *spirit-circle* or *séance*—Spiritualism's laboratory for demonstrating and manifesting messages from beyond the grave. The *séance* became the portal for all classes to communicate with family and friends on the "Other Side." These were not magisterial demonstrations of great minds imparting wisdom, but simple queries to answer questions concerning personal family matters. What formerly had been in the hands of a few inspired revelators now became the property of all willing participants—a democracy of hearts and minds. Within the darkened room of the *spirit-circle* formed a legacy of individual and collective behaviors that were both highbrow and vulgar. In polite circles, numerous poems, essays, and commentaries were produced allegedly written by dead poets, politicians, novelists, and divines affirming the continuance of their careers in the spirit-world. Corroboration of their characteristic style lent identity and an imprimatur of authenticity. Similarly, the *séance* and its accompanying materializations entered households through religious literature, fiction, children's books, paintings, theater, musical performances, and church rituals. By describing these apparitions of the dead as 'spirits,' the term *Spiritualism* captured a more serious concept of the dead than the historical use of the term *ghost*. As

materializations sprung into existence, they brought the world of spirits into everyday conversation.⁶

The rappings sent streams of converts to the spiritualist movement. Supporters and detractors alike exaggerated their numbers, but it is fair to say that its explosive growth was enough to threaten mainstream denominations in the second half of the nineteenth century. The inability of traditional Christianity to explain what was happening, sent ministers searching through their creeds to find reasons to accept or reject the phenomena. It was one thing for pastors to recount stories of mythical saints and miracles in their sermons, and another to condone a local incident as a part of that supernatural tradition. Torn between the desire to believe and the rising skepticism coming from the findings of evolutionary theory, the higher criticism, and Auguste Comte's positivism, people found themselves questioning the basic beliefs of Christianity, the divinity of Christ, the survival of the soul after death, and its account of the origin of the universe.

Notwithstanding these challenges, the proponents of Spiritualism insist it is not only a religion, but a philosophy and a science based on knowledge acquired through facts (i.e., multiple investigative studies), new methods (i.e., spirit-circles), and natural laws that humankind can comprehend. As a religion it claims to conform to the laws of God; as a philosophy it claims to follow the laws of Nature; and as a science it claims to investigate, analyze, and classify facts that validate a spiritual side of life.⁷ Combined, they posit a wise and purposeful being who transcends the world and whose

associated phenomena are authenticated by multiple methodologies. Spiritualists claim at long last that the natural and the supernatural have come together in a rational and empirical manner. Now, they explain, it is possible to produce psychological and therapeutic breakthroughs that can heal social wrongs, build moral character, and propel humanity toward a more perfect society.⁸

Modern spiritualists come with all levels of education. They tend to be open-minded about the paranormal (“psi”); desire to make the world a better place; are influenced by an uncertain future; view the world subjectively; and accept the existence of a hidden reality. They claim to belong to a religion based on both rationalism and empiricism. The former relies on spiritual or intuitive conjectures justified prior to application, while the latter emphasizes the outcomes of individuals or groups using a combination of observation, fact-finding, the development of a working hypothesis, experimentation, and outcomes. Rationalists trust in the intuition and personal judgment of mediums who acquire their knowledge through practice and who incorporate metaphysical explanations into their *modus operandi*. Empiricists, on the other hand, demonstrate their outcomes using a body of systematized knowledge obtained, tested, and replicated.

Unable to receive validation from the normative sciences, spiritualists turned to the pseudo-sciences including *phrenopathy*, *psychometry*, *telepathy*, *pneumatology*, and *sarcognomy*, among others—which have yet to be persuasive. They regard testimonies

(i.e., personal experiences) and anecdotal evidence with having equivalent validation as that authenticated by the double-blind clinical trial. This includes the odysic research of Baron von Reichenbach in Germany, the work of mesmerists John Ashburner and William Howitt in England, the electrical psychology of John Bovee Dods of Boston, the psychometric investigations of Joseph Rodes Buchanan, the ectoplasm research of Charles Richet,⁹ and the spirit photography of William Munler.¹⁰ The objective of this book is to recount the origin and growth of modern Spiritualism and the extent to which it has used the sciences—both pseudo and normative—to prove the reality of the Other World and the manner in which its spiritual inhabitants communicate with earthly humans.

1

AWAKENING

By mid-nineteenth century, less than thirteen in every hundred people in the United States lived in towns of eight thousand or more. Beyond their boundaries was a nation of sparsely populated townships and open lands where the dreams of ambitious men and women extended far beyond the limits of their education. In that vast expanse of small farms and communities lacking libraries and other sources of cultural guidance, the fluid character of society lent itself to a myriad of religious awakenings. Aside from the necessity of providing for their immediate needs, Americans young and old were preoccupied with the prospect of future life and eager to grasp whatever signs might confirm their hopes and dreams. As a nation of twenty-three million, they appeared to be waiting for something that would combine their esteem for individualism with proof of Divine purpose. As evidence of these awakenings, religious excitement flourished within the “burnt-over district” in

the Finger Lakes and Genesee regions of western and central New York. The term, coined by Presbyterian minister Charles Grandison Finney, identified the region as an area of extravagant religious fervor, giving birth to Joseph Smith's Latter-Day Saints, William Miller's Adventists, John Humphrey Noyes's Oneida Community, the Hydesville and Rochester rappings, the Shakers, abolitionism, the Social Gospel, and the Seneca Falls convention devoted to women's suffrage. All were descendants of evangelical revivals that began in the 1790s and lasted until mid-century. Beliefs that were extravagant, undisciplined, and even crude, became novel ratiocinations for the nation's faith in God and democracy and helps to explain the multiplicity of sects, socialisms, schisms, and crusades that migrated westward from this region, igniting further religious excitement and offering a vision of social and spiritual regeneration.¹

Spiritualism, a phenomenon based on the belief that spirits of the dead have the ability to communicate and even intervene in human affairs placated the descendants of the Second Great Awakening by replacing Christianity's pitiless Calvinism with a merciful Deity who, in sweeping away the clouds of fear that shrouded death, offered support from an Other World that was judged close enough to the earth to allow its spirits to periodically interact with friends and family members. In prior centuries, the accounts of inter-world communication depicted spirits as creatures from some nether world, not former human beings. While this claim is debatable given that in

Luke 16:19-31 a discussion takes place between the beggar Lazarus and the rich man in hell, spiritualists viewed communication with spirits positively while most churches viewed it negatively.

For truth-seekers, however, the foundation blocks on which Spiritualism rested derived from two distinct but complementary sources. The first was the scientist and mystic Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) whose communion with departed spirits from earth and other planets made a broad impact on nineteenth century England and America. Swedenborg proposed a spirituous fluid he called *influx* that filled the ether, flowing into the lungs and recesses of the cortical glands to form a union of matter and spirit. The second was the German physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815), the theorist behind the phenomenon known as *animal magnetism* and the modern practice of hypnotism. Mesmer's magnetic tides, the elements of which were magnetism and electricity, provided a materialistic medium connecting living and non-living matter.

Age of Swedenborg

In the history of western thought, there has always existed a shadowy aspect that included occult and mystic attempts to short-circuit the empirical road to knowledge. Although the modern world accepted Baconian logic which advocated inductive over deductive reasoning, there remained those whose preferred path to knowledge came through introspection, meditation, revelation, and dogma. For this latter group,

reductionism lacked the intense excitement that came with ecstatic insight. This change in thinking can be attributed in large measure to the scientist and philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg, a man who conversed intelligently in almost every discipline and who shared his wisdom with an international cadre of royalty, scientists, philosophers, tradesmen, and literati. A man of scientific and speculative pursuits, he anticipated the nebular hypothesis, the circulation of the blood, the translator motion of the stellar universe, and crystallography. Similarly, he demonstrated a working knowledge of cosmogony, geology, mineralogy, anatomy, metallurgy, physiology, chemistry, mathematics, and mechanics. Not surprisingly, he enjoyed a reputation that ranked him with Euclid, Copernicus, Laplace, Galen, Harvey, and Goethe. Yet Swedenborg was mystical even as a scientist. Thus, while the gulf between the Cartesian universe and that of revelatory wisdom was considerable, as a mystic, he was able to move swiftly from one to the other while holding to the doctrine of divine immanence. Schooled in the environment of the eighteenth century's rising skepticism where the empirical sciences prospered at the expense of revealed religion and outright disbelief in age-old theories and practices, he sought a place of repose for the human spirit that was compatible with the God of the Christian Bible. Recognizing there was much in the Cartesian world-view left unsaid, he provided an intellectual bridge between the God of rational religion and the God of the Bible—one that gave reassurance of a coherent universe containing

both the scientist's love of precision and the mystic's quest for illumination.²

Swedenborg's cosmographic views were sweeping in their breadth, pointing to the creation of a universe derived from centers or points of energy out of which emerged multiple suns and planets. From the most elementary particles of energy—all under the guidance of a Divine force—originated the different spheres of animal, vegetable, and mineral existence. Everything in the material world depended ultimately on a corresponding cause in the spiritual world and nothing occurred in either that did not serve a final purpose or use.³ His worldview began with the curiosity of an Enlightenment-era scientist, but as he grew older his views turned deeply spiritual and even mystical. In doing so, he plumbed the wisdom of Aristotle and Plato as well as Europe's most renowned scientists and philosophers; studied the writings of the best anatomists of Europe; recorded and interpreted his dreams; and experienced psychic visions. His solution to Descartes' dualism was a body whose respiration drew into the blood vessels the spirit-pulse of the universe, a body/soul nexus that involved both the natural and spiritual worlds. Working through the recesses of the cortical glands, the soul, which existed at a level beyond mechanics and geometry, served as the instrument of God's purposes. It was this spiritual influx from the Divine that enabled an individual to live and follow God's commands.⁴

The human soul, being the chief component of the body, was of the same substance as the cosmic

elements in the universe and its ideas were the vibrations of Divine influx acting on the senses. The cortical matter in the brain, which attracted the purest spirits from the blood before transmitting them into the fibers, became the locus for the universal forces breathed by the lungs. It served as the exchange center between the soul and the body, the infinite and finite. Swedenborg identified the cortical substance as the principal agent for the body's functions and determined by the spirituous fluid that flowed into its tissues. This spirituous fluid represented the highest form of thought and the medium for influx from the Divine.⁵

Swedenborg documented his ascent from empiricism into biblical revelation in his eight-volume *Arcana Coelestia* (1749-56), applying a combination of the law of correspondences and revelatory knowledge to explain the spiritual meaning of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.⁶ Founded on the relation that exists between the body and its spirit, or between heaven and earth, the law of correspondences held that there was nothing in the material world that did not correspond to something spiritual. Besides clarifying the language of scripture, Swedenborg addressed such topics as heaven and hell, regeneration, faith, charity, marriage, the nature of God and divine providence, and free will. His meditations morphed into waking visions allowing him special insight beyond the strict empiricism he knew as a scientist. Much of what he wrote in this phase of his life was done anonymously but eventually became the cornerstone of the New Jerusalem Church founded by his followers.⁷

Swedenborg accepted the Bible as the work of God, but like other Hermetic philosophers, he held that the true depth of the book's meaning was something other than the written Word. With help from angels, he claimed an illuminated ability to cipher its true significance. In doing so, he reinterpreted the Trinity; rejected atonement and original sin; insisted that divine purpose was not limited to Christianity; introduced the doctrine of uses; and relied on the law of correspondences to explain the relationship between the natural and spiritual worlds. Similarly, he made death a less ominous moment in the life of humans; turned the spiritual world into a replica of the natural world; insisted that each soul would find a spiritual condition that most fitted his or her earthly persona; claimed that all humans would become angels or devils according to their life's profile; taught that humanity lost nothing in death; insisted that children, regardless of their being baptized, were received lovingly at death; argued that hell was not eternal; and that married couples, separated at death, had the choice of continuing their married life into the next world if desired. Then again, Satan had no substantial being or existence; there was no principle of evil; no one was born predestined to hell; and true religion consisted in love to God and love to man. These matters, having been left unresolved over the centuries, found their outlet in Swedenborg's illumination. Thus, while his biblical exegesis ended like scraps left behind by a taxidermist, his reform teachings migrated into many of Christianity's denominations. For the first

time, modern man understood issues that had been left vague and unresolved by the older churches. His subsequent revisionism spread through western Christendom, much of it without his name attached.

For more than a hundred years, Swedenborg's doctrines were treated as revolutionary, suggesting an overthrow of the reigning beliefs among the principal denominations. Nevertheless, the fundamentals of his writings and the work of the New-Church eventually migrated into the more liberal pulpits, often without the identification of Swedenborg as their author. His doctrines proved to be popular at a time when large sectors of Christendom were looked upon as corrupt and destitute of any true religious spirit. As explained by Sydney Ahlstrom in his *Religious History of the American People*, Swedenborg's influence "was seen everywhere: in Transcendentalism and at Brook Farm, in spiritualism and the free love movement, in the craze for communitarian experiments, in faith healing, mesmerism, and a half-dozen medical cults; among great intellectuals, crude charlatans and innumerable frontier quacks."⁸

Besides Swedenborg's published theological works which represent his revelatory interpretation of the Divine Word, he left numerous unpublished manuscripts that his family gave to the Royal Academy of Sciences at Stockholm. Among them was a *Spiritual Diary* (1747-65) which, along with *Apocalypse Explained* (1757), was taken to England and published. Swedenborg's *Spiritual Diary* provided an almost daily record of his spiritual state; his conversations with

angels, spirits, and devils; and the entire range of his spiritual interests. His experiences included spirits of all kinds—good and bad, infernal and celestial, single and groups, notable and anonymous—who helped him to transform his psychic experiences into both a visual and material record of his innermost thoughts. Prior to the *Spiritual Diary*, he had referenced portions of his spiritual experiences in *Adversaria, or Notes on Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings* published in 1842 and 1843.⁹ Translated in 1861-62 from its original Latin by Dr. J. F. I. Tafel at the Royal University of Tübingen, the *Spiritual Diary* was printed with expedient omissions.¹⁰

William White was the first biographer to draw from the *Spiritual Diary*. For him, it mattered little whether Swedenborg was sane, mad, or self-deluded. Having made that admission, he pointed out that “It is only pert scientific ignorance which imagines, that Swedenborg’s life and writings for seven and twenty years subsequent to 1745 are in any way accounted for by asserting, that he was out of his mind in 1744.”¹¹ According to Swedenborg, his intromission into the spirit-world and his open intercourse with spirits occurred between 1743 and 1745. While White regarded the claim as “startling,” at no time did he consider it a “willful deception” since, from early childhood, Swedenborg had been gifted with the power to suspend respiration during meditation. As the Swede explained, “My respiration has been so formed by the Lord, as to enable me to breathe inwardly for a long period of time, without the aid of

the external air; my respiration being directed within, and my outward senses, as well as actions, still continuing in their vigor, which is only possible with persons who have been so formed by the Lord. I have also been instructed that my breathing was so directed, without my being aware of it, in order to enable me to be with spirits, and to speak with them."¹²

The *Spiritual Diary* contained an in-depth record of the heavens where Swedenborg wandered, observed, and inquired during his dream and half-dream states. In them, he observed the heavens as sensual regions whose spatial qualities, using the law of correspondences, could be seen, and touched. They resembled the earthly landscape, including the built environment, except more beautiful, displaying treasured gardens, structures, and celestial views. Behind each object was a deeper spiritual reality. Swedenborg's vision stood in contrast to those Catholic and Protestant theologians whose heavens remained in the hands of an angry God ready to mete out summary justice.¹³ Moreover, it revealed the extent to which Swedenborg became an instrument explaining the doctrines of Christianity and the relationship of all things natural, spiritual, and divine. Basic to his understanding were three ideas respecting the spiritual world: *First*, that it consisted of three regions: the heavenly world, the infernal world, and the world of spirits which was intermediate between heaven and hell and the first residence for souls after death. *Second*, that the topography of the societies in heaven corresponded to the specific nature and function of the body parts, i.e., hand, heart,

lungs, feet, etc. And *third*, all things in the world of spirits—both the beautiful and the hideous—were best understood using the law of correspondences.¹⁴ It was in the world of spirits, or what Swedenborg called the intermediate sphere and where he spent most of his time since it had been the scene of the General Judgment which occurred in 1757. It was a sphere that included every thought and imagination of man, and where spirits acted out their innermost phantasies. All spirits had their sphere of activity according to their order.

Originally, explained Swedenborg, the earth's ancient inhabitants lived in the company of angels who, with the Lord's permission, appeared in human form and with the full exercise of speech, sight, and the power to move material substances. Of the angels, there were three classes based according to their perfection: celestial, spiritual, and natural. They were not categorized based on some created nature but on how they accepted God. With permission granted by God, Swedenborg was able to communicate with them over long distances and "act conjointly as though they were one, in which case they also speak as one." Although natural speaking was ruled out because the speech of angels was imperceptible to humans, he found an intermediate speech formed "from such representations as, whilst they are presented to our ideas, are transferred into celestial things which are understood by the angels."¹⁵

According to Swedenborg, angelic power ended when humans destroyed their receptivity to heaven.

With the departure of angels, men were left to contend with the disorderly company of evil *spirits* who acted out under special circumstances but with limitations. Unlike angels who had the power to produce natural effects, spirits could only communicate through mediums.¹⁶ This connection, considered by Swedenborg's followers as a privilege extended only to the Seer himself, would later be claimed by countless numbers of mediums and clairvoyants and would become the common democratic ground for modern Spiritualism. Not only did Swedenborg communicate with the spirits of people who had once lived, he spoke of future life as a state that was the same in character as life on earth. These claims placed the New-Church in a quandary regarding the legitimacy of the manifestations that erupted across the US and Europe.¹⁷

As Swedenborg explained, spirits had little knowledge of the world and therefore acted out a peculiar set of affections. They delighted in treating men cruelly and desired nothing better than to "excite animosities" by representing themselves as serpents, animals, and other forms that affected the imagination. They also lied.¹⁸

I have observed from much and long experience, that evil spirits could sometimes exercise and carry out their malice or wickedness to a great extent, and sometimes only to a small extent; the cause thereof was this day more clearly discovered to me than before; namely, that in proportion as their restraints, or bonds, were loosened and relaxed,

they did evil; but in proportion as they were acted upon by the angels, the restraints or bonds were, as it were, tightened; that is, the power of acting was taken away from them, so that, at length, they could do nothing, nor did they even know what they should do.¹⁹

* * * *

When Spirits begin to speak with Man, care should be taken not to believe them, for almost everything they say is made up by them, and they lie. If it were permitted them to relate what Heaven is, and how things are in Heaven, they would tell so many falsehoods, and with such strong assertion, that Man would be astonished. Wherefore I was not allowed, when such Spirits were speaking, to believe anything they said. They love to feign. Whatever may be the topic discussed, they think they know all about it; they form different opinions concerning it, and conduct themselves altogether as if they were perfectly informed; and if a Man listens and believes, they insist, and in various ways deceive and seduce him.²⁰

Among those supporting Swedenborg's claims was the German author John Heinrich Jung-Stilling (1740-1817) who accepted the belief that the spirits of former living beings filled the ether, including the

atmosphere surrounding the earth. There was also the abode of fallen angels and of humans who had died in an “unconverted state.” He further believed that somnambulists, in an ecstatic vision, could directly access the world of spirits and bring forth information unavailable by any other means. Nevertheless, he warned against communicating with spirits. “Animal magnetism is a very dangerous thing,” he cautioned. “When an intelligent physician employs it for the cure of certain diseases, there is no objection to it; but as soon as it is applied to discover mysteries, to which we are not directed in this life, the individual commits the sin of sorcery—an insult to the majesty of heaven.” Jung-Stilling applied this warning to Swedenborg as well, convinced that he should not have communicated with the Other World since it was a violation of God’s Word. Accordingly, he charged Swedenborg with unlawful somnambulism and mediumship. He maintained Swedenborg used a form of magnetism to become conscious of the spiritual world and thought it something abnormal in his constitution, amounting to a species of disease.²¹

Franz Anton Mesmer

Franz Anton Mesmer had a much different experience from Swedenborg. After facing opposition from the medical profession in Vienna and suffering through a bitter feud with the Jesuit priest and astronomer Maximillian Hell over claims to the discovery of animal magnetism and the use of magnetic plates to cure

disease, Mesmer decided to improve his fortune by moving to Paris in 1778. There he befriended Charles D'Eslon, medical adviser to the Count d'Artois and found himself drawn into the fashionable and lucrative world of the French court where his reputation took root—so much, in fact, that he was offered a lifetime pension provided he establish a school and make public the secrets of his methods. Instead, Mesmer chose to treat his healing methods in a proprietary manner. Those who joined his Société de l'Harmonie Universelle with the intent to practice his methods were required to sign a document swearing to the secrecy of his healing techniques and agree to sharing half of their practitioner fees with Mesmer.²²

D'Eslon propounded several laws of animal magnetism, most of which were synonymous with those held by Mesmer.

1. Animal magnetism was a universal fluid filling the medium between the celestial bodies and the earth and between the earth and all animal bodies.
2. It was a subtle fluid capable of multiple kinds of motion.
3. The living body was influenced by this fluid by way of the nerves.
4. The living body had the property of a magnet, including poles.
5. Animal magnetism could be communicated from one body to another, whether living or inanimate.

6. Animal magnetism can operate at great distances.
7. The power of animal magnetism can be increased with the use of mirrors and sound and may be accumulated and even transported.
8. Not all bodies are affected by animal magnetism.
9. Animal magnetism can be used to cure nervous and other diseases of humankind.²³

In 1784, the French government established two separate commissions to examine Mesmer's claims. The first report, signed by the Faculté de Médecine on August 11, 1784, described the methods employed by Mesmer and D'Eslon, the behaviors which ensued among patients sitting around their healing *baquet*, and the so-called *crises* that accelerated the successful outcome. It concluded that the effects attributed to animal magnetism were the result of an active imagination and that the practice, if encouraged, could cause much mischief in the country.²⁴

A similar condemnation came from the commission formed by the Société Royale de Médecine although one of its members, the botanist Antoine Laurent de Jussieu, prepared a minority report suggesting that the commission members had taken too narrow of a view of animal magnetism and its cause and effect. He suggested instead that there was much to be learned from the somnambulant trance, the power of a patient's imagination, and the "fluid" or "agent" that exercised influence on the living organism. Calling this agent "Animal Heat," de Jussieu treated it as a

universal energy (“the principle of life”) whose material manifestation was electricity. De Jussieu’s theory evolved into a view that the will of the operator, when combined with the imagination of the patient, could control, and direct the concentration of this fluid for specific purposes. While Mesmer and his disciples preferred a more speculative and cosmic approach that involved the planets and stars, de Jussieu chose to present his theory in a distinctively human format that emphasized the power of suggestion.²⁵

Over time, the extravagancies of Mesmer and D’Elson were supplanted by more practiced and observant disciples whose scientific training and common sense concentrated around the role of the nerve-force of the operator and less on astronomy and the existence of a universal or transcendental medium. Such were the modifications put in place by Joseph Philippe François Deleuze and Alexandre Bertrand who pursued a more materialistic explanation of the manifestations. Nevertheless, there remained an inclination among members in scientific community to consider the possibility of ascribing its marvels to the power of a sixth sense which served as an intermediary between the material body and the spiritual soul.

Much like the French, the German magnetizers Eberhardt Gmelin, Christoph von Hufeland, Frederich Gustav Kluge, and Dietrich George von Kieser, were eager to use animal magnetism for healing purposes. In the course of their experiments, they claimed the ability to identify light streaming from the fingers of the operator; metals that could influence a

somnambulant; and thought transference as a branch of the physical sciences rather than a mystical component of the universe. Despite their rejection of the noetic point of view, they tended to agree that in certain higher-level trances, the soul could free itself of space and time.²⁶

Initially, animal magnetism found few adherents in Great Britain, a situation made more emphatic due to its French origins and the historical enmity between the two countries. Nevertheless, several early French forays were made by a Dr. John Bell, professor of animal magnetism and member of the Society for Universal Harmony of Paris, and by John Benoit de Mainauduc. These efforts died out after a few years and not until 1828 did interest again materialize with demonstrations given in London and elsewhere by Richard Chenevix and John Campbell Colquhoun. The next significant French influence on members of the British medical profession occurred with the work of Dr. John Elliotson at University College Hospital.²⁷ According to reports, Elliotson used mesmerism to conduct over two hundred and fifty painless operations that included amputations and the removal of tumors.²⁸ Contemporaneous with the Elliotson's work was that of Scottish surgeon James Esdaile and James Braid of Manchester who applied the term *hypnotism* to their respective practices. Notwithstanding their innovative application of mesmerism to medicine, the introduction of chloroform as an anesthetic in 1847 brought an early end to its usefulness in surgical operations.²⁹

Starting in the 1840s, reports concerning animal magnetism surfaced in William Lang's *Mesmerism: Its History Phenomena, and With Reports of Cases Developed in Scotland* (1843); William Newnham's *Human Magnetism* (1845); Harriet Martineau's *Letters on Mesmerism* (1845); George Sandby's *Mesmerism and its Opponents* (1848); Joseph Haddock's *Sommolism and Psycheism* (1849); and the research of Baron Karl von Reichenbach on odyllic force.³⁰ A chemist and metallurgist, Reichenbach approached the topic of somnambulism as a scientist, explaining that it was possible for *sensitives* to "feel" and "see" the glow of *odylic* radiance or an luminous vapor hovering over the substance, studying the gradations of its strength and color to determine its type, quality, strength, and capacity.³¹ He was also enamored with magnets and their power to produce different effects on the body. These effects, which he described as an *aura* or *breath* when passed over the body, were noticeable by *sensitives* whose constitutions could sometimes be thrown into convulsive fits by the magnet's power. Nevertheless, magnets created a light or luminous vapor at their poles which increased or diminished with the power of the magnet. This same luminous appearance was visible on individuals and varied in intensity with their health or infirmity. The flame, which rose upwards of eight inches above an individual, was considered verification of animal magnetism and its conductivity through other bodies either by directly charging them or by dispersion.³²

The works of these innovators were followed in short order by Sir John Forbes' *Illustrations of Modern Mesmerism* (1845); Joseph W. Haddock's *Somnolism and Psycheism* (1851); James Esdaile's *Natural and Mesmeric Clairvoyance* (1852); Edwin Lee's *Animal Magnetism* (1866); and John Ashburner's *Notes and Studies in the Philosophy of Animal Magnetism and Spiritualism* (1867). These books are significant in that, for the first time, their authors replaced Mesmer's hypothetical magnetic fluid with the physical influence of the operator on the subject.³³

Unlike in England where Elliotson and his circle of friends represented mesmerism's scientific standing, there was no one individual in America who stood out as its spokesperson. Instead, the mesmeric trance became the property of dozens if not hundreds of popular lecturers, medical doctors, and preachers—each with his or her own title, theory, and claim of authorship. Experiments carried out in the United States on animal magnetism were reported as early as 1837 in Wrentham, Massachusetts, where Dr. E. Larkin conducted a series of experiments using magnetism as a curative agent. By 1844, Larkin reported success in developing clairvoyant abilities in individuals placed in magnetic sleep who could then provide remarkable diagnoses of diseases, a claim that resulted in a series of resolutions and bans from nearby churches.³⁴ Other innovators included the Reverend John Bovee Dods, author of *Six Lectures on the Philosophy of Mesmerism* (1847), and Dr. James Stanley Grimes of Castleton Medical College in Vermont who proposed the term

etherium to describe the subtle fluids through which the trance-state currents operated.³⁵

Phrenology

In 1807, almost a generation after Mesmer's triumph in Paris, Viennese physician Franz Joseph Gall arrived in the French capital to showcase his science of phrenology. Author of *Anatomy and Physiology of the Nervous System and the Brain in Particular* (1819), his new science came with the prospect of understanding the character, intellectual capability, and psychological tendencies of individuals by measuring the size and proportionality of the cranium. The prevailing opinion at the time treated the mind as a non-material unitary substance inserted into the body at birth by the Creator and removed at death. After asserting that the brain was the locus of the mind and consisting of twenty-seven separate and independent organs, Gall went on to explain that each organ related to a distinct mental faculty or propensity. Before long, he had attracted numerous disciples who saw in his science the possibilities of a behaviorist approach to reform.

Gall's most noted disciple, Johann Gaspar Spurzheim, author of *Phrenology; In Connexion with the Study of Physiology* (1824), added to his mentor's work, including laying the groundwork for its acceptance in the British Isles with a lecture tour in 1814 and 1815. Years later, in 1832, he began an ill-fated tour through the United States, a visit brought short by his untimely death. Nevertheless, he laid the foundation

for George Combe's visit six years later. Combe, a Scottish phrenologist, moral philosopher, and author of the popular *Constitution of Man* (1828), won converts, including New York publishers Orson Squier Fowler, Lorenzo Niles Fowler, and Samuel Robert Wells, who helped transform the empirically-based science into a practical and secular philosophy for personal, social, and political improvement.³⁶

Almost a decade before Spurzheim's visit to the United States, Dr. Charles Caldwell had traveled to Europe where, along with Dr. John C. Warren of the Massachusetts Medical College in Boston and Dr. John Bell of Philadelphia, he listened to the lectures of both Gall and Spurzheim. Upon his return, he promoted the study of phrenology earning the nickname "The American Spurzheim." For nearly twenty years, phrenology flourished among the American population, finding numerous advocates among the nation's scientists, doctors, and literati. Caldwell published the earliest American work on the subject in 1824, a book that created a "trail of enemies and controversy" that continued throughout his professional career. His version of phrenology followed the more deterministic approach of Gall than the environmentalist approach taken by Spurzheim—a factor that reflected his views on racial determinism and played well in the southern psyche of the time.³⁷

Born of Irish immigrants in Caswell County, North Carolina, Caldwell began his career as a grammar schoolteacher at age fifteen. He then began a preceptorship in medicine, followed by more formal study

at the University of Pennsylvania in 1792 where he published a translation of *Blumenbach's Physiology* in 1795. Upon receiving his degree in 1796, he opened a practice in Philadelphia and taught as a lecturer in natural history at his alma mater where, for several years, he sought to attain a permanent teaching position in the school's medical department. Failing in that endeavor due to a falling out with his mentor Benjamin Rush who he considered a competitor, he moved to Lexington, Kentucky, where he became professor of the institutes of medicine and clinical practice at Transylvania University.³⁸

From 1819 to 1837, Caldwell reigned forth at Transylvania University, proving to his colleagues that he was a force to be reckoned with. A gifted independent but coarsely acerbic thinker and writer, he was known to have an "iron character;" he was also a formidable lecturer who made enemies as well as allies.³⁹ Dismissed in 1837 after a falling out with the president and trustees, he moved to Louisville where he helped establish the Louisville Medical Institute, later known as the University of Louisville School of Medicine.⁴⁰ There, too, following numerous skirmishes with his rival, Dr. Lunsford Yandell, and for having the boldness to defend phrenology and mesmerism to his colleagues, he was eventually forced to relinquish his chair, but not before sharing his enthusiasm for these two new sciences with a generation of students, including Joseph Rodes Buchanan (see chapter 4) who, among others, tried to merge phrenology and magnetism into a new medical science.⁴¹

At the time, phrenology was treated as a science aligned with both psychology and physiology. This was surely the feeling of Horace Mann, an early convert to phrenology and the educational reforms suggested by George Combe in his *The Constitution of Man*. The approach, namely, the separation of mental powers and faculties, represented an effort to find in the works of Gall, Spurzheim, and Combe an alternative to Locke's *tabula rasa* with its denial of innate ideas and intuitive faculties.⁴²

Phrenopathy

Given the popularity of both mesmerism and phrenology in the late 1830s and early 1840s, it did not take long for their advocates to identify areas of commonality and construct a platform on which to build a more defensible system. It was claimed, for example, that when the somnambulant's head was touched by the hand or finger of a mesmerist, the action prompted a specific characteristic in the organs identified by Gall and Spurzheim. Thus, the combination of the two systems lent strength to their legitimacy and tended to deflect the arguments of critics. Evidence of this merger of systems came with the publication of Spencer T. Hall's monthly *Phreno-Magnet* (1843), and *Zoist, A Journal of Cerebral Physiology and Mesmerism* (1843-56) by Drs. John Elliotson and W. C. Engledue. Both journals introduced the new combined science variously known as *phreno-mesmerism*, *phreno-magnetism*, or *phrenopathy*. Among the advocates of this

science were Henry G. Atkinson (the “mentor” of Harriet Martineau), Dr. Robert H. Collyer (a pupil of Elliotson at University College Hospital), the Reverend LeRoy Sunderland, Andrew Jackson Davis, and Joseph Rodes Buchanan.⁴³

Self-styled scientist Henry G. Atkinson, who co-authored with Harriet Martineau *Letters on the Laws of Man's Nature and Development* (1851) which expounded on their views of mesmerism and clairvoyance, preferred the term *phreno-physiology* to explain the mind which they defined as “the consequence and phenomenon only of the brain It is not a thing having a seat or home in the brain.”⁴⁴ By contrast, English physician and American émigré Robert H. Collyer, editor of the *Mesmeric Magazine* (1842), combined phrenology with magnetism in a way that appealed to both religious-minded readers and those seeking a more material explanation of its modus operandi. In doing so, he reintroduced the séance or spirit-circle which became the common practice among the proponents of Spiritualism a decade later. Another supporter of the combination of mesmerism and phrenology was the Rev. La Roy Sunderland whose sermons often resulted in group hysteria. In 1842, he founded the monthly *Magnet* (1842-44) which reflected a brand of phreno-mesmerism he called *pathetism*. He was also author of the *Spiritual Philosopher* (1850) which reported on spirit messages from the Other World. Unlike others, he chose not to emphasize the phrenological side of the equation, preferring instead to focus on the trance-state nature of the participants in his

group hysteria which he explained without using the terminology of “fluid,” “aura,” or other “effluences.” He identified the trance-state as the result of an individual’s mental response to the voice and suggestion of the operator.⁴⁵

Convergence

Swedenborgians were profoundly interested in the reports associated with animal magnetism, particularly those instances of persons placed in a trance who were able to communicate with spirits of the dead. Except for the fact that they had long believed that the Seer alone had been given this gift of spirit-land communication, most other aspects of discourse between somnambulant and spirit intelligence followed the experiences of the Swedish Seer. Those who envied Swedenborg’s spirit discussions could hardly fail to see mesmeric communications as a corroboration of their beliefs. And even though interest in animal magnetism lay principally in its healing functions, Swedenborgians welcomed evidence of this new force as supportive of their belief in a transcendent universe of spirit-spheres.⁴⁶

In 1848, George Bush, an ordained Presbyterian minister and professor of Hebrew at New York University, who later turned to the Swedenborgian Church of the New Jerusalem, published *Mesmer and Swedenborg; Or, the Relation of the Developments of Mesmerism to the Doctrines and Disclosures of Swedenborg*.⁴⁷ Against the wishes of the conservative members of

the New-Church, he elevated the importance of mesmerism by linking its science with the religious principles of the Swedish Seer. He believed that friends and members of the New-Church should be thankful for what they saw in mesmerism since it provided scientific validation that the great body of Swedenborg's system was true. Bush came to believe in mesmerism but did not fully understand it until he learned how Swedenborg constituted the human mind to permit intercourse with spirits. While man in his original state before his 'fall' experienced intercourse between the spiritual and natural worlds, the privilege had stopped except by special act of providence because of the dangers in seeking knowledge from such sources. Instead, the Bible was substituted for this medium of communication and instruction.

Bush made it clear that he did not place the discoveries made through mesmerism on the same level as Swedenborg's revelations. Nevertheless, he felt confident that the marvels of the mesmeric trance afforded additional proof of "the grander truths of Swedenborg's teachings."⁴⁸ Provided that mesmerism was true, then Swedenborg was also true, "and if Swedenborg is true, the spiritual world is laid open and a new and sublime era has dawned upon the earth. We are no longer estranged from the verities of the future life. The world of spirits is no longer a land of dim shadows peopled with the creatures of our dreams."⁴⁹

While the editors of the *New Jerusalem Magazine*, the official organ of the General Convention, loudly condemned the inferences made by Bush in his book,

there were numerous defenders, not least of whom was Woodbury M. Fernald, a Swedenborgian minister who explained that it was a “transition work, to help those over the bridge of darkness who had not as yet a clear vision of the eternal realities We doubt if even one mind has ever fallen from the rational heights of a New-Church faith . . . by the perusal of this work.”⁵⁰

* * * *

The foundation blocks on which modern Spiritualism rests derive from the complimentary work of both Swedenborg and Mesmer, and although the lives of these two men overlapped briefly, there is no evidence that either was aware of, or communicated with the other. There was, however, ample evidence of extensive communication between and among their disciples. This would eventually include Andrew Jackson Davis and Joseph Rodes Buchanan who attributed their prophetic abilities to both. Modern Spiritualism, for which Swedenborg was its “John the Baptist,” and Mesmer its “Christopher Columbus,” disclosed aural mansions and other beauties that awaited humanity among the stars. Future life was not one of rest but “a progressive life, a heavenly life of growth, of love, of wisdom, and of truth.” It was not intended for spirits to talk with the dead out of curiosity, amusement, or other irreligious purpose. Nor was it considered equivalent to materialism, secular socialism, or anarchism in any sense of the term. Instead, Spiritualism was intended to be an uplifting state of love and purity

whose supporters believed it would become a universal religion, with or without Jesus as the “mediumistic man” filled with the Christ-spirit.⁵¹

2

RAPPINGS

Spirit communications, believed to have occurred in Abraham's and Isaiah's time and later among the Apostles, Disciples, and early Christians, revealed the existence of another world through visions, trances, and apparitions. Not only did these communications happen in the past, but their prophetic aspects became integral to Shaker communities in Mount Lebanon, Watervliet, and Rochester—all located in the region known as the 'burnt-over district'—whose members participated in singing hymns, dancing, trance-speaking, mimed performances, and encounters with spirits and imaginary objects. Similar expressions of spiritual communications were observed in Adventism, Mormonism, and Fourierism. In fact, the same spirits who visited these communities would later appear in the séance which proffered to unlock the mysteries of the ages through the work of its inspired mediums. Drawing sustenance from inspiration, prayer, vision-trances, and heavenly voic-

es, spiritualists proposed two distinct angelic forms: those who were once humans and divested their material bodies at death but continue to “walk by our side often, and yet unseen,” and others who are separate and distinct beings of different orders and duties. In other words, there are humans who have taken on a spirit form, and there are higher intelligences that never were and never will be human.¹

The Fox Family

Modern Spiritualism marked its debut on the evening of March 31, 1848, in the village of Hydesville, near Rochester, New York, when two sisters, fifteen-year-old Margaretta (“Maggie”) and twelve-year-old Catherine (“Katie”) Fox, claimed the ability to communicate with the spirit-world. The daughters of a tenant farmer and his wife, they heard rapping noises coming from the walls of their family’s rented house soon after the family had moved in December 1847. For several months, these annoying sounds occurred only at night, never during the day. Now, they were taking place at all hours and the sisters discovered that when they imitated the sounds by snapping their fingers and calling out “Mr. Splitfoot do as I do,” they were repeated as often as they made them. After the family solicited advice from Isaac and Amy Post, highly esteemed Quaker citizens and activists in Rochester, the sisters successfully communicated with the mysterious rapper by transforming the sounds into an alphabet-based message system. From their numerous questions, they

were able to ascertain that the spirit belonged to a thirty-one-year-old peddler, Charles Rosna, who had his throat cut with a butcher knife and then buried in the cellar by his murderer who was still free.²

Over the course of several days, the rappings were witnessed by hundreds and sworn depositions were taken attesting to their observations by E. E. Lewis, an attorney from the nearby town of Canandaigua.³ To avoid the crowds of curiosity seekers, the sisters fled to Rochester where they stayed with their married older sister, Leah Fox Fish, a teacher of music. There, the sisters found an advocate in E. W. Capron who, in November 1849, staged a public exhibition of the rappings which followed them from their home in Hydesville. At the time, Rochester claimed about forty thousand inhabitants and was the last station on the underground railroad for runaway slaves heading for Canada, a cause that was strongly held by its citizens. On the evening of November 14th, a committee composed of "highly respectable and responsible citizens" witnessed the first public demonstration of the rappings at the Corinthian Hall in Rochester. Other committees followed. Based on their multiple findings, supporters claimed that man's survival after death could now be demonstrated under the right conditions. The laws of the universe governed both body and spirit which meant that communication was possible between one in-body and another out-of-body by assembling into séances to evoke the phenomena.⁴

Following their Rochester visit, the sisters spent several months at P. T. Barnum's Hotel on the corner of

Broadway and Maiden Lane in New York City where they received favorable coverage of their séances which they held each day from 10 to 12; 3 to 5; and 8-10. Horace Greeley's *Tribune* called them the "Lions of New York" and the "Rochester Knocking Girls." The similarity of the rappings to the telegraph which had made its debut in May 24, 1844, when Samuel F. B. Morse electrically transmitted his message: "What hath God wrought?" gave legitimacy to the possibility of spirits in attendance of humans in the natural world. Like the telegraph, it was common practice at séances for mediums to use the alphabet to ask questions of spirits like Channing, Swedenborg, and Franklin whom they called from the Other World.⁵

Despite a barrage of criticisms from skeptics assailing the character of those who expressed their support for the Fox sisters, New York publisher Horace Greeley used the pages of his *Tribune* in December 1849 to correct the record. In several lengthy articles, he reported on the visit of the three daughters to Rochester during which time they met with hundreds of visitors to demonstrate their mediumship abilities. He described how a committee of ladies even had the sisters disrobe to prove that the rappings had not been produced by subterfuge. "If all were false," Greeley reasoned, "they could not fail to have involved themselves ere this in a labyrinth of blasting contradictions, as each separately gives accounts of the most astounding occurrences as this or that time. Persons foolish enough so to commit themselves without reserve or caution could not have deferred a thorough self-exposure for a single week."⁶

The *Tribune's* endorsement of the sisters turned the events into a national dialogue where scientists, ministers, educators, and other prominent citizens convened as committees to ascertain the sum and substance of the manifestations. In report after report, the accumulated testimony from eminent citizens either confirmed the manifestations, expressed the probability or possibility of their truthfulness, or simply expressed astonishment at what they saw and heard. Among those present who witnessed these occasions were author James Fenimore Fennimore Cooper, historian George Bancroft, poet Nathaniel Parker Willis, and editor John Bigelow of the New York *Evening Post*. Typically, a series of questions was presented to the sisters who proceeded to ask the spirits to provide answers. In this manner, Spiritualism became a "scientific discovery" verified by committees charged with judging the merits of its claims.⁷

Within weeks of Greeley's endorsement, a virtual epidemic of copycats came forward to announce similar rapping experiences. For the public, the reports seemed to confirm what had earlier been discovered in the areas of phrenology, magnetism, and phrenopathy. What differed, however, was the claim that science had at last unlocked its secrets and offered to the world a series of breakthrough techniques enabling communication over distances once thought impossible. The validations triggered an explosion of events that centered around the séance as the most trusted method for connecting the natural and spiritual worlds. Before long, thousands of men and women, but particularly

women, were bringing solace to those grieving the loss of a child, sibling, or partner.⁸

Within months, knockings were reported in Bridgeport, Auburn, and in Syracuse, followed by sightings in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Michigan, New Jersey, Indiana, and Virginia. The sightings increased exponentially along with news that spirit-music, slate-writing, and other manifestations were making their presence. As news spread, the nature and sophistication of the experiences became decidedly less spiritual and more like an open field of contact sports. Not only were mediums summoning the oracular thoughts of the world's more notable leaders, but they began communicating in forms less dignified. Beginning with raps and knockings, the manifestations evolved into automatic writing, flying objects, levitated tables and chairs, ringing bells, veiled faces, bouquets of flowers, tickling, and touching. What began as a sober spiritual séance devolved into circus-like antics.⁹

Despite stubborn skepticism, believers from all walks of life came forward to claim its validity. These included chemists Robert Hare and William Crookes, physicist Sir Oliver Lodge, journalist Hannen Swaffer, physician Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and Judge John Edmunds. By 1851, an estimated hundred mediums were plying their trade in New York City and half that number in Philadelphia.¹⁰ News of what began in a section of western New York spread into almost every village, town, and city in the United States and abroad. It was a phenomenon that historians

might have predicted had they understood the decades that preceded. None, however, surmised that judges, senators, clergymen, and professors of the physical sciences would add their names to the voices of support.¹¹

The Doubters

When Margaret Fuller conveyed to Emerson the exciting news of “mesmeric experiments” carried out at the home of James Freeman Clarke where the clairvoyant Anna Q. T. Parsons read a letter from recently deceased William Ellery Channing, Emerson thought poorly of the news, excoriating it as a “rat-revelation.”¹² Those like Emerson who identified the first half of the century as “the age of Swedenborg,” saw a world of difference between the esteemed Seer and this new breed of trance-speakers, craniologists, physiognomists, rappers, and mediums.¹³ Emerson had shown a curiosity toward Spiritualism but ultimately concluded it was “a midsummer madness, corrupting all who hold the tenet.”¹⁴ He identified Spiritualism as an “aimless activity” of the “superficial sciences.” Instead of seeking out the true carriers of ideas that contributed to the world, “We run to Paris, to London, to Rome, to Mesmerism, Spiritualism, to [Edward B.] Pusey, to the Catholic Church, as if for the want of thought, and those who would check and guide have a dreary feeling that in the change and decay of the old creeds and motives there was no offset to supply their place [We] have

turned the eyes downward to the earth, not upward to thought.”¹⁵

In a letter to his sister Sophia, Henry Thoreau responded with an even heavier hammer intended to blunt the imposture or delusion of the manifestations.

Concord is just as idiotic as ever in relation to the spirits and their knockings. Most people here believe in a spiritual world which no respectable junk-bottle which had not met with a slip would condescend to for a moment—whose atmosphere would extinguish a candle let down into it like a well that wants airing; in spirits which the very bullfrogs in our meadow would backball. Their evil genius is seeing how low it can degrade them. The hooting of owls, the croaking of frogs, is celestial wisdom in comparison. . . . Hear music! See, smell, taste, feel, hear—anything—and then hear these idiots, inspired by the cracking of a restless board, humbly asking, ‘Please, Spirit, if you cannot answer by knocks, answer by tips of a table.’¹⁶

Henry James Sr., a close friend of Emerson, expressed similar contempt for Spiritualism, writing his feelings in two articles in the *Atlantic Monthly* (“Spiritualism, Old and New,” and “Spiritualism: Modern Diabolism”) where he vented his feelings.¹⁷ Like Emerson, he thought little of its manifestations. In his 1849 lecture on “Success,” he offered an especially acerbic comment regarding America’s fascination with Spiritualism:

Give us an invention like the electric telegraph, or the spinning jenny. Give us a solution to some of the great questions of the day—the questions of finance, of an increased agricultural production, of the abolition of poverty and crime. Give us an improved medication, say a cure for smallpox, scarlet fever, gout, or even tooth-ache. Do any of these beneficent deeds for us, and then you shall talk sentiment to us, and give us your opinions about cosmogony, and “classification of spheres,” ad libitum. Until you consent to this proof of your benevolence, a proof so completely appreciable to us, and therefore so incumbent on you if you would fairly win our regard, be off—tramp—keep moving!¹⁸

The Rev. Charles Beecher, son of the educator, reformer, and Presbyterian minister Lyman Beecher, accepted the genuineness of the manifestations and referenced the Bible as confirmation because of the abundance of spirit communications that were contained therein. Nevertheless, he insisted that the manifestations were the effects of Satan rather than of the Word.¹⁹ Similar feelings were expressed by the Rev. W. H. Corning who set out to prove that the manifestations were really a form of infidelity whose presence derived from the “deep want in the soul of man for a divine revelation of truth.”²⁰

What appears to be the practical mission of these new manifestations? To gather together into one band the universalists and infidels scattered over

the world, and furnish confirmation to their unbelief; to shake the faith of some, giving them over the prey to doubts and fears cruel as the grave; to gratify the prurient curiosity of others, who seek communion with departed friends, and are satisfied even though they are informed of nothing which they do not already know; to declare some common-place axioms immorality, in new forms far inferior to the old, as for example the much-admired precept, rapped out so universally, "live in harmony;" to stir up the intellectual powers of some persons, and set them upon thoughts unrestrained and unguided in the region of infidelity;—this is the practical work of the new revelation.²¹

Compared to the great works written in the name of Christianity, Corning judged the manifestations altogether inferior, if not sinister in nature. Sitting in a circle for hours spelling out questions and answers one letter at a time was a perverse waste of energy. Besides, only knowledge gained was nowhere comparable to conversations with the living. Using combative rhetoric, he found nothing in the séance that authenticated any Divine presence, purpose, or mission. "What evidence have we that the highest mesmeric state is not more analogous to dreaming than to the reality of the soul's thoughts after death?" Corning asked. Any inspiration, if there be any, was the product of the human mind. If mesmeric power was valuable for discovering the truths of the invisible world, what was to be made of the method and its results? Are we

to believe that the only true method of knowledge is intuition of the mesmeric state? Corning dismissed the whole subject of mesmeric revelation as wholly unreliable for any truth, much less the discovery of divine truth. "The mesmeric states are strange phenomena of the mind, worthy of investigation, but they have no power to reveal the will and ways of God."²²

Miles Grant, editor of the *World's Crisis* and author of *Spiritualism Unveiled and Shown to be the Work of Demons* (1866), pointed out that human spirits had nothing to do with the manifestations. Recognizing that Spiritualism had grown from its small beginnings with the Fox girls into a world-wide movement with all invited into its "broad church" and with scores of ministers who left their churches to preach its "new gospel," Grant accepted the manifestations as real and not the result of trickery. There were examples worldwide to make that assertion. However, the true cause of the phenomena came from evil angels, unclean spirits, and devils. True angels, when they visited earth, always came "on important business, spoken in harmony with the Bible." Seducing angels, on the other hand, caused humans to "depart from the faith" which is why they wished for the séance room to be darkened so they might practice their trickery. Just as mediums formed an image in the subject's mind using "magnetic aura" to concentrate their power on the brain and nerves, demons did the same. The only difference was that mediums were human, while in Spiritualism, demons created the mental picture. "The demons mesmerize their mediums, and then 'speak, write, act, through'

them just as a mesmerizer does.” Their whole purpose is to “lead men away from God and the Bible.”²³

Grant put together what he termed the “Spirit Creed” whose individual and collective tenets represented a rejection of Christianity:²⁴

- The Bible was not a reliable book
- There is no sin
- There is no devil
- Christ is not raised
- Man is his own judge
- There is no resurrection of the dead
- Man is his own savior
- Christ will not come personally
- Man is the son of God as truly as Christ
- Man is God
- There is no God

The Supporters

Despite Emerson’s condemnation, the manifestations seemed not to bother his friends and neighbors who rallied around the banalities uttered in séances, taking note of conversations between and among departed souls, and combatting detractors with claims of ‘scientific’ validations.²⁵ “When Spiritualism . . . offers proof,” observed advocate George Lawton, “and ‘scientific proof’ at that . . . it is no wonder that it wins adherents, not only from laymen, but from scientists . . . when it comes to the problem of man’s ultimate destiny.”²⁶ Similarly, when the poet and Unitarian clergyman and

reformist, John Pierpont, was informed by medium J. V. Mansfield that his friend William Ellery Channing, who had been dead fifteen years, had spoken in several séances of his desire to contact him, Pierpont responded by writing a letter to Channing which he handed over to Mansfield to share with his friend. "Is God in this movement, and is his kingdom to be advanced by it, or not? Are He and his good spirits for it, or are they against it?" Pierpont asked. Mansfield received a response from Channing's spirit urging Pierpont to preach to the world on behalf of Spiritualism which, he was assured, produced good, and not evil. Convinced the response was real, Pierpont joined the lyceum lecture circuit stumping on behalf of modern Spiritualism.²⁷

Robert Dale Owen of Indiana, a notable American who sought to pierce the veil of everyday experience to discover something new and worthy of gifting to others, offered views on everything from marriage, to libraries for country people, newspapers for the laboring man, feminism, architecture, and politics. He won a seat in Congress, served as minister to Italy, and like his father, was wholly skeptical of religion until he came to believe in Spiritualism. Awakened to it by séances conducted by Prince Luigi, brother to the King of Naples, Owen became a contributor to its literature, authoring *Footfalls on the Boundary of Another World* (1865), *Village Life in the West, or Beyond the Breakers* (1870), and *The Debatable Land Between this World and the Next with Illustrative Narrations* (1872). In response to claims of fraud, he replied: "If,

because we detect imposture in a single case, we slur over twenty others as equally unreliable, we are acting no whit more wisely than he who, having received in a cert town a bad dollar, presently concludes that none but counterfeits are to be met with there.” Repeatedly, he insisted that the proof of Spiritualism rested on scientific laws and not on the occasional instance.²⁸

R. T. Hallock, author of *The Road to Spiritualism* (1858), defined Spiritualism as “that doctrine which boldly asserts the continuity of human consciousness and individuality, unbroken by the event popularly, but most unscientifically, denominated death.” Proven as a self-evident truth like the multiplication table of numerical science, Spiritualism stood as a “Divine form of eternal use.” It was also a philosophy of life revealing that the cosmos was no longer a mystery but the unfolding of the soul—the cosmic, eternal, and divine energy force in inorganic matter—and proven by the science of psychometrics discovered by Joseph Rodes Buchanan and confirmed by geologist William F. Denton in his *Soul of Things* (1863).²⁹ Mesmerism, on the other hand, was “the Columbus of a new and virgin spiritual continent, rich in beauty, and prolific of unimaginable use.” Like Spiritualism, it was “a science, by authority of self-evident truth, observed fact, and inevitable deduction; having within itself all the elements upon which any science can found a claim.”³⁰

Another enthusiastic supporter was John Townsend Trowbridge, one of the founding publishers of *The Atlantic Monthly*, who recalled his first experience with Spiritualism which occurred shortly after the

Rochester rappings when he visited the home of Dr. William R. Hayden, publisher of a weekly newspaper in Boston, whose wife was a medium. At a séance held their home, he watched as Mrs. Hayden worked with a printed alphabet to communicate with the spirit-world. At times, spelling mistakes forced her to re-spell the message which she usually sent to departed friends. He described his participation in the seance as a “bewildering” experience. As the words came forth from the alphabet table, he felt overcome by the evidence of an intelligence separate from himself and the medium. Names of persons and places he had forgotten came forward, followed by his bewilderment that such pieces of private information were known to the dead. In accounting for the different forms of manifestations, Trowbridge concluded that while some mediums were fraudulent, most were genuine. “It is no argument against the spiritualistic origin of the messages that so many of them are imperfect or contradictory or even illiterate and vulgar,” he admitted. But it was equally unwise to disparage and condemn the communications as “false or foolish or broken by baffling echoes.”³¹

The Swedenborgians

The early manifestations that followed the Hydesville rappings drew considerable interest among members of the New-Church or Church of the New Jerusalem. The prospect of these ghostly utterances being real caught its ministers by surprise having made the point

that Swedenborg had alone been blessed with the ability to converse with spirits. Given the extent and popularity of the manifestations, there were enough New-Churchmen willing to accept these ghostly utterances. Scruples aside, they felt the spiritual manifestations deserved examination by every enlightened mind particularly since Swedenborg's *Spiritual Diary* had mentioned myriads of spirits, some working for good and others for evil. In New York City, for example, members of the New-Church were drawn into the so-called "New Era" movement which claimed open intercourse with heaven using the aid of an astrologer and sorcerer in Brooklyn. Out of this, one New-Church minister associated with this group proceeded to ordain a new priesthood.³² For good reason, preacher and radical religious philosopher John Humphrey Noyes remarked: "After 1847 Swedenborgianism proper subsided, and 'Modern Spiritualism' took its place . . . Spiritualism is Swedenborgianism Americanized."³³

Notwithstanding these exceptions, the leadership of the New-Church feared their church being regarded as identical with Spiritualism and therefore warned early and often that spirits were not to be relied upon as they were prone to give information that was utterly delusive and false. New-Churchmen were expected to act with caution, knowing that mediumship offered no legitimate source of knowledge. Thus, before the rappings catapulted into a widespread spiritualistic movement, the lines were drawn by the New-Church's leadership ruling out any divinely directed psychic

powers among these elements. When spirits spoke to man, warned Swedenborg, “care should be taken not to believe them; for almost everything they say is made up by them, and they lie wherefore it was not permitted me, when spirits were speaking, to have any belief in what they stated. They love to feign.”³⁴ The poet and playwright Epes Sargent who hosted séances and philosophical discussions concerning communications with spirits, blamed the Rev. Lewis Pyle Mercer and the conservative elements within the New-Church’s for its opposition to Spiritualism. It was their insistence, he maintained, that ultimately struck scientifically based Spiritualism from their beliefs.³⁵

Another remonstrance came from the Rev. James P. Stuart, editor of the *New-Church Messenger* of New York and former professor of philosophy at Urbana University in Ohio where he championed the creation of a Swedenborgian School of Theology. In a sermon delivered before his New-Church congregation in Cincinnati January 12, 1851, he spoke of four types of communication between the natural and spiritual worlds: revelations which the Lord made to his creatures; revelations made to the Patriarchs, Prophets, and Apostles by angels and spirits; communication with spirits and demons by clairvoyants; and mysterious manifestations, noises, and rappings caused by spirits and demons intent on disturbing the forces and laws of nature. After researching the phenomena unleashed by the Hydesville rappings and similar events, he attributed the manifestations to the work of a “very low and groveling class of spirits” whose minds

were connected to the electrical and galvanic forces of the world. These were the “noisy and mischievous spirits” who descended into the physical world simply to create mischief.³⁶

Having agreed that the facts surrounding the mysterious knockings and other manifestations were “indisputable” since the intelligence displayed in the phenomena indicated “the presence of *mind* of no common order,” Stuart then gave two plausible explanations for them. The knockings, he reasoned were either “appearances wrought on the minds of those who see these things” (i.e., manifestations which took place as “phantoms of the imagination”), or, that the manifestations were the resulting volitions of spiritual agents flowing into the “plane of existence [and] into crude inanimate forms of matter.” In other words, given that the spiritual world permeated every particle of matter, spirits “glide and operate without contradiction or impediment” in all aspects of the natural world. He concluded, nevertheless, that the evidence confirmed “that death is neither a temporary nor an eternal sleep” but that “the sphere of immortal life is continuous to the sphere of mortal life.”³⁷

The question posed by William Hayden, minister of the New Jerusalem Church in Portland, Maine, was whether humanity should rely more on the revelations made through Swedenborg or those communicated through mediums. He explained that Swedenborg had enjoyed twenty-seven years of open intercourse with the Other World. Even though his communications formed no part of New-Church doctrines, there was

good reason to favor his revelations. Besides, he was familiar with the laws and phenomena of the Other World. "When a spirit approached Swedenborg, he saw him, could observe his appearance, his manners, . . . and form an idea of his character." Not so with mediums who had no sensible perception of those who they were communicating with in a séance. Unlike the experiences of mediums, the revelations of Swedenborg constituted a coherent, compact, and homogeneous system, not a fragmentary set of disclosures. Besides, Spiritualism explained little about the inhabitants of the other world. The two hardly justified comparison. Given the power and habit of spirits to deceive, it was far better to rely on Swedenborg's judgment than the mediums of modern spiritual manifestations. Thus, there was reason for admitting the superior claims that the New-Church established for preferring the disclosures made through Swedenborg than those derived from modern mediums. The contents of Swedenborg's revelations were based on Scripture and the interior sense of the Word which was the grand objective of Swedenborg's mission.³⁸

In 1851, Benjamin Fiske Barrett, Swedenborgian pastor in Germantown, Pennsylvania, insisted that it was wrong to deny any of the remarkable phenomena that had occurred. As far as he was concerned, a new era had been ushered in. It was not that what the spirits did was necessarily evil or false; rather, they simply could not be relied upon. This applied to rappers who, while frequently providing information that was true, also passed on information that was utterly false.

Forewarned with this information, New-Churchmen were alert to the fact that opening intercourse between the outer and inner worlds came with consequences, including the possibility of making an oracle out of information that was likely false. Thus, there was the real possibility that persons could be harmed by this form of spiritual manifestation. The best advice, therefore, was to “keep aloof from the peril.” The New-Church alone was the “ark of safety.”³⁹

Barrett went on to explain that nothing in the writings of the New-Church, or in Swedenborg’s *Spiritual Diary* afforded clues to the rappings and the other manifestations that had occurred at Hydesville and Rochester. Nevertheless, he thought it incumbent to believe what had been witnessed not just once, but hundreds of times and in multiple places by thousands of individuals—including lawyers, doctors, clergymen, judges, editors, merchants, and scientists—was no deception. “We know of nothing in the theological writings of Swedenborg that affords any explanation of them,” he warned. The New Theology is as void as the Old of any rational explanation of these mysteries. However good the intentions, “We are guilty of a positive wrong . . . by pretending that we and we alone hold the key to the solution of these things. We have no such key.”⁴⁰

The Rev. George Bush, now editor of the *New-Church Repository*, argued that Swedenborg’s ability to communicate with the spirit world had been tantamount to miraculous, implying a special designation as the herald or proclaimer of the New Dispensation

of the Heavenly Jerusalem, the expounder of the mysteries of heaven and Hell, and the laws and phenomena of the other life. Bush preferred the term *supernatural* to counteract the impression that the state which Swedenborg experienced was simply a “superior kind of clairvoyance” with no authority or sanctity. “We anticipate no controversy with those who have come to understand the true grounds and reasons of the faith we repose in Swedenborg’s revelations, and controversy with others scarcely deserves the name. Objections from such a source are a mere idle beating of the air.”⁴¹

In 1855, in an article titled “Pseudo-Spiritualism,” Bush noted that among members of the New-Church, there was a strong impression that Swedenborgians should keep themselves “entirely aloof” from all debate over the manifestations, even for the purpose of investigation. For himself, he had no such scruples. He knew of no teachings that forbade the examination of natural or supernatural phenomena and, in fact, was satisfied that the phenomena were not the product of fraud or human contrivance. The manifestations were a “wonderful fact” even if the rapping spirits gave information that was delusive and false. Given what New-Churchman knew, Bush thought it unlikely that they would fall victim to delusions from this new source since few of the communications imparted any important truths. In fact, most abounded in the “grossest falsities.” As a churchman, his concern was not whether the manifestations were real as the likelihood that they would be made an oracle of great

truths pertaining to both worlds. Those who were addicted to Spiritualism and yielded to an unbounded credence in all that was spoken through mediums needed to realize that the communications abounded with falsities.⁴²

Bush referred to the array of works written about Spiritualism as a “new literature, if not a new science.” Having admitted to the authenticity of the manifestations, the question became whether they should be given a “favorable character” when “the very best of them” were little more than “mere lisping, babbling, and badinage.” While there was nothing in New-Church teachings that forbade the examination of this phenomena, it was clear that Swedenborg’s own communications from the world of spirits were much more advanced. While the manifestations were not the product of fraud, collusion, or human contrivance, they were of a “preternatural origin” whose mediums were prone to deception. The manifestations were, of course, “a very wonderful fact,” but the mode of communication by rappings, table-moving, etc. provoked ridicule and seemed “utterly beneath the dignity of the dwellers of the spiritual spheres.” Viewed in the light of the New-Church, the manifestations assumed a character much different from what Swedenborg had experienced.⁴³

Believing the time had come to settle the matter of the manifestations once and for all, the delegates attending a meeting in Boston in April 1858 of the Massachusetts Association of the New Jerusalem adopted the following resolution:

Resolved, That the Committee of Ministers be requested to consider the subject of what is usually known as 'Modern Spiritualism,' and to endeavor to learn what the Doctrines of the New-Church teach in regard to it, and what are the duties of its members in relation thereto; and that they be authorized to present the result of their deliberations to the Association at its next meeting, or in print, previous to that time.⁴⁴

In compliance with the request, a committee, chaired by Rev. Warren Goddard, formed to study the Scriptures, and identify those instances when persons or objects from the spirit world had been seen or heard by the living. In its report, the committee concluded there were two types of communication: one from the Lord which was given unsought; and the other produced by the "unregenerate desires and efforts of spirits and men." The latter caused man to fall and "is the same that keeps him fallen." Beliefs in such things led humankind to disregard divine revelation and "to seek for sensual evidence and outward demonstrations of eternal things."⁴⁵

While the committee recognized there were those who regarded the manifestations as an "imperfect beginning" to what would hopefully be "open intercourse with the spiritual world," the manifestations had not changed in their quality or character. They remained "spiritual juggleries," counterfeits, and deceptions that showed no evidence of growing into "heavenly manifestations." For that reason, the

committee urged supporters of Spiritualism to avoid using Swedenborg as justification of the practice since he was “different from that of any other man at any time;” that the spiritual senses of Swedenborg were unsought and unexpected; that the Lord himself had appeared to Swedenborg; that he was “specially commissioned in a way unsought by himself;” and that all revelations came to Swedenborg directly from the Word.⁴⁶

A final word came from homeopath William Holcombe MD who explained that like John the Baptist, Swedenborg had been sent to prepare the way of the Lord by teaching a system of spiritual truth showing the organic connection and correspondence between the spiritual and natural worlds. By contrast, the manifestations of Spiritualism were “thoroughly unchristian and pagan,” and fraught with great danger to the will and rationality while adding nothing of value to the stock of human knowledge. Moreover, they added nothing to what the Bible had taught, namely that the soul of man was immortal; that the spiritual world was close by and not “away off in material space;” that we rise at death out of our natural body; and that life after death is real, organic, and full of activities as “genuine and as positive as anything we here experience.” The spiritualists ignored the one fundamental truth of Swedenborg’s explanation, namely “that the spiritual and natural worlds are discretely separated from each other—that each has its specific forms and forces and its special life resulting from them.” In other words, the two should not be mingled.⁴⁷ Though Holcombe

refused to believe that all the spirits who communicated with humanity were evil or came with evil intent, it was only with the New-Church that spirit-phenomena had “the light and power to do so with benefit to all concerned.” If there were spiritualists who denied the divinity of Christ, that was reason enough not to expect inspiration from the spiritual world. The rule kept by Holcombe was never to submit to a medium and never pay attention to anything spoken or written by someone under the control of spirits.⁴⁸ Those who broke the rule faced “blind surrender of the mind to spirit control.”⁴⁹

The Roman Church

The Catholic Church assumed that communication with spirits was possible. “Each of us has a Guardian Angel,” reminded H. V. Gill, S.J.: “Angels, as the catechism tells us, have often been sent as messengers from God to man.” Thus, the history of the Church, no less than the Bible, was full of instances of good and bad spirits. Moreover, the Church taught that the human soul at death did not cease to exist but awaited resurrection of the body. Since the time of the Apostles, however, there had been no revelation made to the church which demanded an act of Divine faith. “The attitude of the Church is therefore that we find in the Faith all that it is proper for us to know about the next world, and that messages from the other world are to be received with all possible reserve.” While Catholics should treat with reverence all that pertained to the

deceased, there was a “natural delicacy” not to penetrate the mystery behind death by consulting soothsayers, charmers, or anyone who communicated with the dead. For that reason, the revival of Spiritualism created a clear and present danger due to the potential fraud carried out on bereaved relatives.⁵⁰

So, what was the decision of the Church regarding such experiments? Was it lawful for Catholics to attempt to converse with spirits? Were Catholics allowed to attend séances? In 1898, the Catholic Church rejected communication with the unsainted dead, condemning all spiritistic practices. Again, on April 27, 1917, the pope announced that Catholics should have nothing to do with any spiritistic communications or manifestations. Though no explanation was given, the decision concerned the danger of hypnotism by which mediums became passive, thereby suppressing their personality and will to the influence of another.⁵¹

* * * *

Spiritualists championed the public’s examination of the manifestations, believing that under the proper testing, their spirit-circles provided ample opportunity to demonstrate their legitimacy. They insisted that those scientists who ignored or refused to examine their claims violated the very fundamentals of their own science. However, coming to agreement on just what constituted instruments of measurement for matters that extended beyond earthly boundaries

became an issue difficult to identify, much less agree on an accommodating compromise. Did spirits have to be redefined or transformed into matter to become an object of science? The implications for both sides became a matter of considerable debate. On balance, it seems that Christianity, not science, prompted most of the opposition to Spiritualism, a position that held true even among scientists.⁵²

3

POUGHKEEPSIE SEER

Unlike in England where interest in animal magnetism arrived late due largely to its French origins and the history of relations between the two countries, this was not the case in America where an abundant crop of mesmeric and Swedenborgian theories thrived alongside the expectation of some form of new heaven or new earth where social justice would reign. One notable example of this combined secular and religious notion occurred within the Universalist Church whose members had long been preoccupied with questions involving future life and their relationship with both the living and departed. Viewing themselves as rationalist challengers to Biblical revelation, they supported the higher criticism and took a lively interest in mesmerism by demonstrating its practical power of clairvoyance. Numerous clergymen, believing that a quickening of the spiritual nature was happening, left the denomination to become supporters of Spiritualism. Those who helped shape the belief

in Spiritualism as part of their rationalist challenge to intuition, found their spokesperson in Andrew Jackson Davis, known as “The Poughkeepsie Seer,” who impressed large numbers of Universalists with his exalted visions and predictions. The initial cadre of Universalists who gathered around him, joined in proclaiming the coming spirit communion.

Early Years

Born August 11, 1826, in Orange County, New York, Andrew Jackson (“Jackson”) Davis, the son of Samuel and Elizabeth (Robinson) Davis, lacked a stable family life due to his father’s alcoholism and the depressions and early death of his mother when he was a boy. Because of these impediments, he claimed that the full extent of his schooling had barely covered five months of class attendance. Nonetheless, having been named after the hero of the Battle of New Orleans, Davis was blessed with a combination of natural talents and a strong sense of self-esteem that allowed him to adapt quickly to his environment. In 1842, at the age of sixteen, he apprenticed himself to Ira Armstrong, a boot and shoe merchant and manufacturer, a choice not too distant from his father’s half-weaver and half-shoemaker livelihood before becoming a grocer.¹

In his youth, Davis attended various churches—Episcopal, Presbyterian, Methodist—common to the region but found them difficult to accept. “In short, I got no relief from the deep-seated and painful apprehension that . . . most of mankind would be severely

dealt with after death for sins committed before that event.”² About the time he began questioning his faith, Davis met James Stanley Grimes, a professor of jurisprudence at Castleton Medical College who visited the village of Poughkeepsie giving lectures and experiments on mesmerism and phrenology—topics that fascinated the young apprentice. Following Grimes’ visit, William Levingston, a local tailor, and enthusiast of mesmerism, invited several townspeople to his home to test his abilities as a hypnotist. Davis offered himself, and once in magnetic sleep, proceeded to describe the illnesses of several who were present at the time. Over the next several weeks, he spent his free time in Levingston’s parlor demonstrating his clairvoyant power to diagnose and treat disease. After weeks of experimentation, the two decided to travel in and around the Poughkeepsie region practicing magnetic diagnostics.³

Davis claimed to have no memory of what transpired in his clairvoyant states. Instead, he explained that he was “a sort of connecting link between the patient’s disease and its exact counterpart (or remedy) in the constitution of external Nature.”

In this silent and mysterious manner—that is, by looking through space directly into Nature’s laboratory, or else into medical establishments—I easily acquired the common (and even the Greek and Latin) names of various medicines, and also of many parts of the human structure—its anatomy, its physiology, its neurology, &c.; all of which

greatly astounded the people, and myself not less when not clairvoyant—for then I had to rely solely upon hearsay and gossip. The secret, then, of my prescribing successfully was, the bringing together of specific medicines to supply a physiological demand, or to equalize the unbalanced vitalic principle.⁴

On March 7, 1844, Davis reported falling into an abnormal state, and without the assistance of Levingston, wandered into the nearby mountains where, in a condition of mental illumination, he conversed with the scientist and mystic Emanuel Swedenborg and the Greek physician Galen. With the admonition to take up the role of a clairvoyant healer, Davis received from Galen a “magic staff” to symbolize his new role. “Up to that time, I had never heard anything of the names or works of these persons, by means of either books or reports,” Davis explained. Gifted with the staff which had supposedly materialized out of his vision, Davis proceeded to attend the sick and mete out his diagnoses and treatment. Before long, his adeptness with clairvoyance earned him the title of “Poughkeepsie Seer.”⁵

A year later, in 1845, after meeting Dr. Silas Smith Lyon, a Bridgeport physician and hypnotist, and the Reverend William Fishbough, both Universalists, Davis left the service of Levingston, and intent on improving his fortunes, appointed Lyon as his magnetizer and Fishbough as his scribe. Together, the trio moved to New York City intent on opening a medical clinic where Davis, at age nineteen, could diagnose

and treat disease while in a trance-state. New York City was to America what Paris was to France. If one could “make it” in either of the two, there was a future to be had. Mesmer found Paris to do his bidding, and so had Samuel Hahnemann, the founder of homeopathy. Now Davis and his two partners felt a similar opportunity.⁶

After building a reputation for Davis as a clairvoyant healer, the trio decided to exploit his talents further by having him give a series of lectures while in a clairvoyant state. From November 1845 to January 1847, he delivered 157 lectures with Fishbough transcribing them to paper. During his trance-states, Davis reputedly conversed with different spirits from whose instructions he recounted the origin of the universe along with visionary schemes for reorganizing society. Other than the occasional grammatical corrections, neither Lyon nor Fishbough claimed to perform any editing of Davis’s dictation.⁷

During several of Davis’ trance-utterings, representatives of Fourierism and the Swedenborgian New-Church were often in attendance. For example, when Davis visited Troy in 1847, he met the Swedenborgian mystic Thomas Lake Harris who not only attested to Davis’s spiritual power, but traveled the region advocating on his behalf.⁸ Another was the Rev. George Bush who declared that he heard him correctly speak Hebrew and other languages during his trances.⁹ Permitted to read sections of the book before publication, Bush affirmed that “The work is a profound and elaborate discussion of the philosophy of the universe, and

for grandeur of conception, soundness of principle, clearness of illustration, order of arrangement and encyclopedic range of subjects, I know no work of any single mind that will bear away from it the palm.”¹⁰ Others who attended his lectures included writer and literary critic Edgar Allan Poe, Fourierist and social reformer Albert Brisbane, and Taylor Lewis of New York University.

Principles of Nature

When income from the lectures and medical diagnoses failed to cover the cost of publication, Davis turned to a divorcee and wealthy patron, Mrs. Catherine (“Katie”) DeWolf Dodge, who came to him in 1846 as a patient. Later, she joined him at the home of Universalist minister Samuel Byron Brittan in Bridgeport, Connecticut, where she offered financial support to advance his efforts. On July 1, 1848, when he was twenty-two years old, Davis wedded Mrs. Dodge, twenty years his senior, in a “fraternal marriage.” He called her “Silonia,” and she addressed him as “Dearly Beloved Brother” or “My Jackson.”¹¹ Besides supporting the book’s publication, she helped edit and support his other publishing ventures, acting as his agent and manager. She also entertained his friends, of whom Judge John Edmonds and Transcendentalist Bronson Alcott were frequent visitors. She died in 1853 but not before bequeathing Davis her property.¹²

In 1847, Davis’ 800-page *Principles of Nature, Her Divine Revelations, and A Voice to Mankind* was

published, laying out his grand harmonial philosophy, a work that borrowed extensively from the writings of Immanuel Kant, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling, George Wilhelm Hegel, Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Lorenz Oken, and particularly Emanuel Swedenborg—all with little or no attribution.¹³ A compendium of occult history, philosophy, science, and mysticism, the book addressed three specific topics: revelations on the origin of the universe, its extent, and the laws governing it; general remarks on the condition of society and the rationale of animal magnetism and clairvoyance; and the social reorganization required to align humanity with the laws of the universe. Drawing heavily on Swedenborg's *Economy of the Animal Kingdom* (1740-41), Davis traced the origin of the universe, the process of differentiation which led to a vast solar system of suns moving in concentric circles, and the Great Eternal Center from which emanated the Divine power. Anticipating the "Big Bang" cosmologies of the twentieth century, it opened with the following statement:

In the beginning the Univercoelum was one boundless, undefinable, and unimaginable ocean of Liquid Fire! The most vigorous and ambitious imagination is not capable of forming an adequate conception of the height and depth and length and breadth thereof. There was one vast expanse of liquid substance. It was without bounds — inconceivable— and with qualities and essences incomprehensible. This was the original condition

of Matter. It was without forms, for it was but one Form. It had not motions, but it was an eternity of Motion. It was without parts, for it was a Whole. Particles did not exist, but the Whole was as one Particle. There were not suns, but it was one Eternal Sun. It had no beginning, and it was without end. It had not length, for it was a Vortex of one Eternity. It had not circles, for it was one Infinite Circle. It had not disconnected power, but it was the very essence of all Power. Its inconceivable magnitude and constitution were such as not to develop forces, but Omnipotent Power.¹⁴

From these cosmic beginnings, Davis proceeded to account for the planets, the first appearance of living organisms, and the communion of humans through a system of correspondences or analogies with the spirit-world. It was a universe whose planets contained diverse orders of species, including human inhabitants, who were adapted to their environment based on the planet's density, elements, and distance from the sun. Much like the eighteenth century's *Chain of Being*, the universe consisted of an "unbroken chain joining the inhabitants of the lowest planet to the comparative spiritual inhabitants of the highest." Similarly, Davis used the term "influx" from which man's interior form derived; ranked human beings according to their internal desires (i.e., self-love); and made frequent reference to the terms "interiors," "exteriors," "inner," "outer," and "self-love"—all common topics of discussion in Swedenborg's writings.¹⁵

The book not only included a description of the layered spheres and their respective societies but referenced the common practice of spirits communing with one another as well as with inhabitants on distant planets. Davis classified man into five distinct varieties: Caucasian, Mongolian, Malayan, Negroes, and American Indian. These were the same varieties specified by John Friedrich Blumenbach, professor at Göttingen, in his treatise *On the Natural Varieties of Mankind* (1781). His division of the races, with the added Linnaean descriptive peculiarities, became the subsequent basis of most nineteenth-century anthropologists. Central to Blumenbach's study was the Caucasian, a term which he originated, taking the name from Mount Caucasus because its southern slope had cradled what he considered to be the most beautiful race of men, the Georgian. The Caucasus, near Mount Ararat, on which the biblical Ark reputedly came to rest after the Flood, seemed the appropriate source for the original race of man.¹⁶ Davis's descriptions of the inhabitants of the other planets represented a blending of Blumenbach's division of the races with Fourier's theories of reincarnation, and Swedenborg's visions of Heaven.¹⁷

In another section of his book, Davis described a scheme for organizing society into phalanxes and cooperatives that reflected a combination of Owenism, Fourierism, and Swedenborgianism—a clear reflection of Albert Brisbane's *Social Destiny of Man* (1840) and the contents of the Fourierist paper *The Phalanx* (1843-45). Of the two, Davis favored the socialist

theories of Charles Fourier who described the history of religion from a deistic perspective and rejected the authority of the Bible. Anticipating nineteenth century Spiritualism, Davis declared that it “is a truth that spirits commune with one another while one is in the body and the other in the higher spheres—and this, too, when the person in the body is unconscious of the influx, and hence cannot be convinced of the fact.”¹⁸

Despite garbled language and mistakes of grammar and fact, the work found supporters in America and England. The book offered assurances of the moral regeneration of mankind, something that Owen and Fourier had earlier inspired and which had led to phalansteries, religious revivals, and reform movements involving the abstinence of tobacco, alcohol, and meat diets. All this preceded the Hydesville and Rochester rappings. For someone in his early twenties, the book was an extraordinary feat, not only because Davis claimed he had only five months schooling, but also because of his bizarre insistence of having read only one book in his life, a romance called *The Three Spaniards*.¹⁹ Rev. A. R. Bartlett who knew Davis during these years, told a different story. He insisted that Davis “loved books, especially controversial religious works, which he always preferred whenever he could borrow them.”²⁰

Surprise Reversal

Within weeks of the book’s publication, the Rev. George Bush broke ranks from Davis, warning readers of the

errors and falsehoods in the work. In a pamphlet titled *Davis' Revelations Revealed*, he and co-author Benjamin Fiske Barrett condemned the work as a "shameless imposture." Besides misinterpreting Swedenborg's revelatory writings, "Our conclusion therefore is that Davis has been grievously deluded by the arts and machinations of deceitful spirits and that occasion for this has been given by the lack of a true faith, the product of a moral state rightly affected towards all divine things. He has thus been prevented from associating with a sphere of pure truth and been made the subject of the most enormously false impressions regarding the whole circle of religious doctrines. We are shut up to this conviction by the very nature of his utterances."²¹

In their critique, Bush and Barrett pointed to the similarities between Davis' dictations and Swedenborg's *Economy of the Animal Kingdom* and *Arcana Coelestia* where, in several instances, the language was nearly verbatim. Nevertheless, they declined to accuse Davis of outright plagiarism; instead, they attributed the similarities to Davis's exceptional powers of recall, saying that he had been controlled by Swedenborg during his trance-dictation. "Although the general tone of his allusions to this distinguished man [Swedenborg] is respectful and honorary, yet we propose to show that they are calculated greatly to mislead the reader as to the true character of his teachings and of the relation which they sustain to the doctrines set forth in the present volume."²² Davis eventually admitted to resemblances between his own writings and those of Swedenborg. Where the two diverged, he insisted,

was in Swedenborg's "ever-present, over-mastering, persistent, and paramount biblical theology, which blistered, and distorted, his awakened perceptions of spiritual things." In Davis's view, Swedenborg was "an ultra-orthodox theologian" who, like the poet Dante, held to the cardinal doctrines of the Church while modern-day seers sought to harmonize the principles of spiritual philosophy with the latest discoveries and deductions of progressive science.²³

Not only was there a striking similarity between Davis's book and Swedenborg's *The Economy of the Animal Kingdom* (1845), but also with James John Garth Wilkinson's *Remarks on Swedenborg's Economy of the Animal Kingdom*, published in 1846. Davis claimed no knowledge of these books, but it seems highly unlikely to be the case.²⁴ One suspects that Davis had also acquainted himself with Robert Chambers' *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844) along with Hugh Miller's *Old Red Sandstone* (1841).²⁵ Notwithstanding the criticism, Davis became a household name for having provided the intellectual context for the emerging spiritualist movement. His book went through thirty-four editions in less than thirty years, a tribute to its remarkable appeal and the advocacy of his philosophy which spoke of a New Dispensation that would transform the world.²⁶

Univercoelum

With public acknowledgment that his clairvoyant visits to the spirit-world were real, cadres of disciples

gathered around Davis who, with his wife's financial support and encouragement, published on December 4, 1847, the first issue of the sixteen-page weekly magazine *Univercoelum* (coined from Swedenborg's "universum coelum") edited by Universalist minister Samuel Byron Brittan. Assisting him were the Rev. W. Fishbough ("the Scribe"); twenty-two-year-old Rev. Thomas Lake Harris ("the Poet"); New-Church minister Woodbury Melcher Fernald; land reformer Joshua King Ingalls; poet Thomas Holly Chivers; and the poet and abolitionist Frances Harriet Green. The object of the magazine was "the establishment of a universal system of Truth, the Reform and the Reorganization of Society." Among the contributors to the magazine were phrenologist and lecturer Orson Squire Flower; Transcendentalist and Unitarian minister Theodore Parker; journalist Park Godwin; Universalist preacher and lecturer Edwin Hubbell Chapin; French philosopher Auguste Comte; abolitionist and feminist Lydia Maria Child; and Davis' wife who contributed poetry. The magazine became the official voice for Davis's *harmonial* philosophy.²⁷

Davis's supporters included Unitarians, Universalists, free thinkers, and Swedenborgians, all of whom gave their imprimatur to his special talents. Though not all of one mind, they championed Davis's clairvoyant abilities and used the pages of *Univercoelum* to advance the acceptance of spirit communication. Dedicated to "a thorough reform and reorganization of society on the basis of NATURAL Law," the magazine popularized Davis' opinions, making frequent

reference to both Mesmer and Swedenborg almost as if there was little difference between them and Davis' writings. Animal magnetism and the spiritual influx of God's love were treated as a unified force filling the ether and connecting all living and non-living matter. Coincidental with the publication, Davis claimed to have entered into a "superior condition," allowing him to write without the services of Lyon and Fishbough by using a process he called "inner perception."²⁸

Of those who assisted in the publication of *Univercoelum* and became editors of magazines devoted to the spiritualist movement included the Rev. R. P. Ambler and Apollos Munn who published the *Spirit Messenger*; James Leander Scott and Thomas Lake Harris, publishers of *Disclosures from the Interior and Superior Care for Mortals*; T. S. Hiatt and Fishbough, publishers of *The Spiritual and Moral Instructor*; William Melcher Fernald, publisher of *Heat and Light*; and S. B. Brittan who published the monthly *Shekinah* in 1852 and the weekly *Spiritual Telegraph* in 1853.

In the March 20, 1848 issue of the *Univercoelum*, ten days before the Hydesville phenomenon, Warren Chase (see chapter 6), one of the organizers of the Ceresco Phalanx in Wisconsin, wrote an article titled "The Philosophy of Today." In it, he predicted what he believed were signs of a new era of truth in the discovery of knowledge.

It is by no means singular that the new philosophy which shadows forth a brighter day, indicating our connection in this physical sphere with a

succeeding spirit life, should meet with strong and stubborn opposition from the tardy and conservative world of mind. The prevailing theology and philosophy of this age is the ultimate development of principles once new and strenuously opposed, but which contained more truth and light than the conservative world was prepared for at the age of their discovery. But they have nearly developed themselves, completed their circle, and finished their destiny. The evident signs which this age bears of a transition, show plainly that they must now give way to a new system, containing — as the greater circle contains the less — all truth and light which is within its sphere; thus rendering useful the little truth which past ages have discovered, and embracing in its wider range all knowledge contained in former systems.²⁹

When Davis's refused to assume more of a financial role in its publication, the *Univercoelum* was absorbed into the *Christian Rationalist*, and then into William M. Channing's *The Present Age*, a socialist organ, before merging with *The Spirit Messenger* of Springfield, Massachusetts, jointly edited by Ambler and Munn.³⁰

The Great Harmonia

In 1850, Davis moved to Hartford, Connecticut, where he organized the Harmonial Brotherhood whose members formed supportive groups in New England,

Virginia, and Arkansas. He also joined with reformers traveling through the Northeast and Midwest lecturing on the approaching New Dispensation, remonstrating against the established churches, and advocating on behalf of abolitionism, women's rights, and temperance. For a period, Giles B. Stebbins served as the group's reformer; Mrs. L. H. Brown as the musician; Mary, Davis' second wife, as the poet; and Davis as the star philosopher. Together they visited Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Missouri, Michigan, Ohio, and New York with programs intended for educated adults who appreciated the sciences, literature, and arts.³¹

Between 1850 and 1855, Davis published his *The Great Harmonia*, a five-volume set of philosophical revelations on the natural, spiritual, and celestial universe. The volumes, each of which averaged four-hundred pages, provided the intellectual framework for Spiritualism, including much of its phraseology and cosmology. The volumes also served as a source for much of the reform thinking of the day. Like the utopian socialism of Fourier, Davis urged reconstruction of society as an integral part of spiritual regeneration. And like Swedenborg, he explained how spirits of the dead gravitated first to a sphere most reflective of how they had lived their lives, after which they progressed through a series of spheres reaching greater degrees of perfection until arriving at Summer-land, or Paradise. Davis preached an optimistic worldview for earth and its inhabitants, and unlike the supernaturalism of orthodox Christianity, he portrayed a spiritual realm governed by natural laws.³²

Davis combined all existing reforms of the day into what he called his harmonial philosophy. By this, he meant to apply to human society the same harmonious relations that existed in the planetary world. This involved bringing together the anti-slavery, anti-capital punishment, and similar groups into a united Brotherhood.³³ From his interior visions, he spoke of the nation becoming a land of love, justice, wisdom, peace, progress, and happiness. While material America still teemed with evils and injustices, he predicted the coming of a Spiritual Republic that would avoid the tempests of Communism, Socialism, and Nihilism. His interior vision contemplated a world where humanity found its “new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness.”³⁴ This meant employing man as a “designed instrument—a use—to develop a more sublime Ultimate.” Borrowing from Swedenborg’s principle of uses, Davis taught that each living organism had its *use* for the accomplishment of a more perfect end and ultimate.³⁵

Davis advocated Spiritualism as an alternative to organized Christianity. It was nature and nature’s laws alone that explained the after-death experiences of spirits, their temporary dwelling places, and their progression through the concentrically layered dwelling places or spheres in their personal advancement. Davis’s negative attitude toward Christianity suggests the influence of the higher criticism in that the books of the Bible had been “brought together under very suspicious circumstances,” leading him and others to doubt the verity of its supernatural accounts. He

viewed the Old Testament as a form of primitive history that had no title to being either exclusive or infallible. As for the New Testament, he regarded Jesus as a great moral teacher, but not divine. Christianity was probably the most spiritual of the world's religions and could eventually attract spiritualists back into its pews. However, the final church would be the universal diffusion of fraternal and universal love, thus ending the misuse of long-cherished superstitions.³⁶

By 1860, Davis had become a nationally recognized spokesman for the Spiritualist movement, founding the Spiritualist paper *Herald of Progress* (1860-64) and speaking at various conventions where he was fond of explaining Spiritualism as a doorway to freedoms of all types, including the proper education of children using harmonious methods.³⁷ As a reformer, he wrote plainly and reasonably on marriage; advanced the moral life of the community; regarded harmonial philosophy as having the status of a religion; and professed that Spiritualism, was "doing more than all the sects put together to establish a rational religion, and to confirm a true morality and a correct science of society."³⁸ His advocates claimed that he taught Darwinism before Darwin, reflected much of Herbert Spencer's thinking, and as a Comtean positivist, conceived of spirit as a form of matter. The harmonial philosophy, which he substituted for religion, consisted in knowledge of the laws of God and obedience thereto; the humanity of Jesus; continued inspiration; human divinity; eternal progression; and practical morality (uses) as the remedy for most evils.

In *Present Age and Inner Life* (1853), Davis announced that societies in the Western hemisphere were emerging from “a long night of ignorance and superstition” to realize marvelous accomplishments of positive knowledge. Both skepticism and doubt, which had been handmaids to enquiry and unmistakable steps to realizing the harmonial philosophy, had at last resulted in concessions from the churches.³⁹ In addition, the sciences were now instructing man in the mysteries of the universe and correcting the dogmas of antiquity. The world had needs, beginning with a philosophy that explained the truths of God, of nature, of immortality, and of social reorganization and progress. While the Mormons, Socialists, Shakers, Free-Masons, and Odd-Fellows had set out on new paths to correct society’s missteps, there remained millions who lacked spiritual illumination. Unfortunately, the world was divided. The Romish God, the Episcopalian God, the Presbyterian, Methodist, Quaker, Universalist, and Unitarian Gods competed with one another but only the harmonial philosophy offered hope for man’s present and prospective existence.⁴⁰

Mankind was on the threshold of a New Dispensation of love through the harmonial philosophy. The signs of this were the communications received by departed spirits to the earth’s inhabitants, and while their manifestations arrived through “imperfect and fallible channels,” their information was instructive. “When the eye scans the whole ground already occupied by these phenomena,” Davis concluded, “it is . . . by the best minds conceded, that none but a spiritual

solution can cover and explain them, even in the crude shape of sounds, vibrations, and movings.”⁴¹

When viewed altogether, the manifestations showed signs of a mental and social reformation rendering the world a better and happier habitation for all. Arriving as they did in “humble” places and capturing the most illiterate classes “sequestered from public knowledge,” they were a sign of the New Dispensation serving all classes of people, a true democratization of humanity. Davis insisted that no one should expect that all communications be at the level of a Swedenborg, Galen, Socrates, Washington, or other illustrious minds; instead, most would occur “with their own particular and congenial guardian spirit.” In other words, a long chain of mediums operated between the exalted minds in the higher spheres and the “person on the footstool” in the lowest.⁴²

Rather than settle for a single source of spiritual insight, Davis promised a new collection of gospels that would turn away from the prejudices of the old. They included Rishis from the Vedas, the Zend-Avesta of the ancient Persians; the gospel according to the son of Brahma of the Hindoos; St. Confucius; the Persian Prophets; Syrus the Syrian; and the writings of Saints Theodore Parker, S. B. Brittan, Emma Hardinge, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Selden Johnson Finne, among others.⁴³

In January 1863, Davis addressed an audience of Spiritualists in Dodsworth Hall on Broadway in New York City, recommending a type of Sunday School system of education which he identified as the “Children’s

Progressive Lyceum.” Reflective of the assemblies in his visionary Summer-land where children grew in love and wisdom, the Lyceum assumed responsibility for educating children for living in a harmonial society. Under the auspices of the Religio-Philosophical Publishing Association, the semi-monthly *Little Bouquet* (later renamed *The Lyceum Banner*) began publication with Lou H. Kimball as publisher and Mrs. H. F. M. Brown as editor.⁴⁴ To provide added support to this endeavor, Davis published *The Children’s Progressive Lyceum. A Manual* (1865) which offered directions for the Lyceum’s organization and management as well as rules, methods, exercises, marches, lessons, questions and answers, hymns, and songs adapted to the Great Harmonial. By the 1870s, the Lyceum had spread to seventeen states and the British Isles. In 1897 a Lyceum Association was organized and in 1902 a National Superintendent of Lyceums was appointed to provide supervision of all the Lyceums. In 1938, the National Convention organized the Lyceum Luncheon program as a new method of teaching.⁴⁵

Troubles

Davis intended for the National Association of Spiritualists to become the catalyst for a wide range of progressive reforms and not simply a closed club of spiritualists. Despite his efforts, by the association’s fourth annual convention in 1867, the differences among those who supported *phenomenal* Spiritualism as distinct from *philosophic* Spiritualism broke out in

open warfare. To Davis' displeasure, the manifestations of mediumship had acquired the attributes of a "Grand Traveling Museum, Menagerie, Caravan, and Hippodrome" replete with called-up spirits, music, photographers, flying objects, and voices of deceased friends and relatives. To make matters worse, the press was thick with allegations and exposures of fraud. *The World*, the *Boston Herald*, the *Boston Record*, and the *Religio-Philosophical Journal* teemed with narratives of alleged exposure of some form of trick, pretense, or deception. Understandably, Davis cooled to the prospect that phenomenal Spiritualism could salvage its reputation. In *Fountain with Jets of New Meaning* (1870), he decried Spiritualism's excesses, denouncing its Faustian deal for money, and its self-inflicted wounds.⁴⁶ The book, explained Robert Delp, "marked the beginning of an extended struggle between the phenomenal and the philosophic spiritualists, the latter whose position Davis supported."⁴⁷

By the late 1870s, Davis concluded that his harmonial philosophy no longer comported with the practices of Spiritualism and, in an address before a convention of New York Spiritualists in 1878, attacked the Russian occultist Helena Blavatsky, co-founder of the Theosophical Society, and Emma Hardinge Britten, an English advocate of the Spiritualist movement, for their misrepresentation of Spiritualism's original principles by making it into a magical show that was seductively but tragically perverse in its activities.⁴⁸ That same year he organized the First Harmonial Association of New York to formalize his rejection

of phenomenal Spiritualism's circus-style manifestations. With a constitution and by-laws written by benefactor William Green, the Association established departments of popular instruction, publication, and benevolence intended to advance social, intellectual, and industrial education. For its management, the Association had a fifteen-member board of trustees with headquarters in New York City.⁴⁹

Using the pages of the *Religio-Philosophical Journal*, Davis attacked phenomenal Spiritualism and its purported manifestations, preferring the more philosophical and scientific Spiritualism practiced among the European harmonialists.⁵⁰ To his displeasure, Spiritualism seemed only to define itself through manifestations and the séance, attracting audiences "who delight in wonder" and who seem all too willing to "breakfast and dine of miracles, and sleep on beds rocked by spirits." This was not how Spiritualism should be.⁵¹

Magnetic Healing

When the American Medical Association succeeded in obtaining a proscriptive law against healing mediums, clairvoyant physicians, and magnetists practicing in the state of New York unless they earned a regular orthodox medical diploma, Davis urged the establishment of a chair of psychological science and magnetic therapeutics at the United States Medical College to meet the requirements of the law. Alexander Wilder, who had been president of the Eclectic Medical Society of

New York and professor of psychology in the college, responded positively to the suggestion, remarking that magnetic science should have a recognized place in the healing arts and noted that Swedenborg was one of several great thinkers whose writings should be consulted. To support Davis's recommendation, the First Harmonial Association of New York endowed a chair of magnetic healing in the college. Davis matriculated as a student and earned his medical degree in 1883, receiving two diplomas, one for a Doctor of Medicine and the other, a Doctor of Anthropology. With these degrees in hand, he claimed legal status to continue his practice using clairvoyance to diagnose patient ills.⁵²

In all, Davis published over thirty books covering a wide range of subjects from philosophy to cosmology and almost everything in between. None except his *Principles of Nature* was written with the aid of mesmerism. Among his more significant works were *The Penetralia, Being Harmonial Answers* (1856), *The Philosophy of Spiritual Intercourse* (1856), *The Harbinger of Health* (1861), *A Stellar Key to the Summer Land* (1867), and *The Children's Progressive Lyceum* (1893). His two autobiographies, *The Magic Staff* (1857) and its sequel, *Beyond the Valley* (1885) were equally important. *The Magic Staff*, which he wrote when he was only thirty-one years old, was intended as the first history of a clairvoyant's experience. In *Beyond the Valley* (1885), he continued his biographic account as he journeyed with his Magic Staff to the majestic lands between mountains of Beauty and Aspiration, an analogy for life's challenges from the time one arrives

on earth to the call from the 'Sumer-land. In 1873, Davis opened the Progressive Publishing House on East Fourth Street in New York City to reprint his books which were owned by three or four different publishers. The publishing house was later bought by Isaac B. Rich, owner of the *Banner of Light*. Late in life, he opened a bookshop in Boston and continued practicing medicine and, reflective of his eclectic medical background, prescribed herbal medicines for his patients.

When Davis died January 13, 1910, he left a significant legacy to the history of modern Spiritualism through his mediumistic revelations and harmonial principles. His contributions regarding after-death spheres for departed spirits remains a vibrant part of modern Spiritualism. Because of his work, American Spiritualism contained elements of mesmeric trance, Swedenborgian and Neoplatonic metaphysics, utopian perfectionism, and reforms regarding sex, education, and marriage. Though not much noticed today, Davis' books and lectures once carried significant cache in nineteenth-century America, echoing the romantic musings of the Transcendentalists, the energy of social reformers Robert Dale Owen and Fourier Albert Brisbane, and the poetic musings of Thomas Lake Harris.

* * * *

Davis was once thought to be living oracle intuiting the spirit flowing in man and showing that the whole of Nature was in the grasp of human understanding.

With language drawn from Swedenborg, the Transcendentalists, Unitarians, and the emerging sciences, *nature* became the single most important word in the lexicon—a term that stood not just for the harmony of science and theology, but for the immanent presence of the Divine. Nature represented the community of spirits past and present, living side by side in harmony, and reaching out with the newly acquired tools of science to bridge their separate but now unified worlds. For good reason, the British spiritualist E. Wake Cook, in an address before the London Spiritualist Alliance in 1903, praised Davis as the “Father of Modern Spiritualism.”⁵³ William F. Otis called Davis “one of the greatest if not the greatest Spiritualist of Modern Spiritualism.”⁵⁴

4

ARCHITECT OF THE SPIRIT WORLD

During a visit by Joseph Rodes Buchanan to New Harmony as part of his lecture circuit in 1842, Robert Dale Owen introduced him to the crowded audience as a “bold, original, philosophical naturalist.” Decades later, medical reformer and colleague Alexander Wilder, M.D., described him as an “investigator, speculative reasoner, a scientist, and a general scholar.” Notwithstanding these laudable comments, there was much more that could have been said of this man who served as dean of four medical colleges; president of several societies; a pioneer in medical and social reform; and the author of books on the confluence of body, brain, and soul.¹ Admirers placed him shoulder to shoulder with the likes of astronomer William Herschel and physicist Michael Faraday while critics accused him of narcissism, self-deception, rascality, and outright fraud. Viewed from a distance, his life seemed to alternate between moments of great personal triumph, believing that he

had deciphered some of the most mysterious aspects of the universe, and utter despondency on learning that people judged his views, most of which were tied to paranormal science, to be outside the pale of acceptable belief.²

Early Years

Born in Frankfort, Kentucky, in 1814, and home-schooled by a gifted parent and strong admirer of the Pestalozzian method of teaching, Buchanan immersed himself in sophisticated studies, including the recent fascination with magnetism and phrenology. In 1832, while still in his teens, he examined the works of the German physician Franz Joseph Gall and his assistant Johann Spurzheim, learning early in his education that their phrenological discoveries had come with endorsements from leading physicians in France, Germany and England. Gall gave the name *craniology*, or science of skulls, to his study of the forms and functions of the brain, and *cranioscopy* or *organology* to the science or art of manually surveying the head for purposes of estimating its indications. As Spurzheim delved deeper into the examination of the mind, he substituted the term *phrenology*, or science of mind, as a more comprehensive descriptor. The term was intended to give full recognition to the mind as the subject of investigation and regarded the brain and cranium as ancillary in their importance.³

Although phrenology treated humans as intelligent beings, it included only the mind, and not the

body. It spoke of the brain merely to show how the mind acted through it, but phrenology was not a true science of the brain. It had practical bearing upon morals and education; however, it related little to health and disease, the materia medica, and the practice of medicine; nor did it relate to diet and regimen. It was important, explained Buchanan, to understand that the brain was an organ of physiological as well as mental powers in that it governed every part of the body—from breathing and circulation of blood to the blush on the face.⁴

As Buchanan proceeded with his research, he distinguished between his own neurological system and the Gallian system. The difference began when he identified a greater number of cerebral organs than claimed by either Gall or Spurzheim. Arguing that the brain exercised specific functions in each of its convolutions, he concluded that there was a more complex organology at work in the human mind. Although the Gallian system had established a nomenclature, it failed to capture the full span of intellectual powers, emotional expressions, and passions of the mind. Gall had grouped together similar cerebral organs, but the names provided limited applicability and therefore limited significance.⁵

Dissatisfied with both phrenology and craniology, Buchanan chose the term *psychology*, believing that the former terms failed to transcend the brain's materialistic functions. The term psychology recognized the brain as an instrument of the soul reaching through its corporeal connection. Thus,

while phrenology and craniology gave an anatomical basis to an individual's congenital tendencies, they lacked the recognition of psychological intuitions and their more accurate revelations of character.⁶ Nevertheless, Buchanan lamented the lost art of cranioscopy and its proportional examination of the cranium. Misled by the errors of popular phrenology and subsequently neglected by medical colleges as the "offspring of ignorance and superficial thinking," it stood as a discredited science when, in truth, he believed it laid the basis for a philosophy of human qualities and faculties. Gall's contribution to the multiplicity of cerebral organs meant that it was no longer possible for scientists and philosophers to treat the brain as a "homogenous unit in either structure or functions."⁷

All things considered, Buchanan chose to call his reform system *anthropology* believing that the term implied an even broader application than psychology.⁸ Thus, beginning with the rudimentary discoveries of Gall and his disciples, Buchanan claimed to have found the key to building a complete science of man. All mental phenomena resulting from an organ were associated with a particular action which he called the "pathognomic line." Each of these lines, when thoroughly analyzed, connected the functions of the body to their cerebral source and each was arranged harmoniously and in sympathy with its cerebral counterpart. Anthropology offered a true science of the mind and subject to strict mathematical laws.⁹

Lecturer

With encouragement from Charles Caldwell, Buchanan joined the lecture circuit in 1835 traveling through the South and Midwest teaching his science of anthropology which involved conducting public demonstrations using hypnotism and submitting himself to committees appointed to comment on his experiments. In his demonstrations, Buchanan claimed that his actions were different from those who practiced ordinary hypnotism. Unlike others, his subjects experienced a “natural sleep” from which they could easily be aroused. The difference lay in the fact that his form of magnetism, which he called *nervaura*, involved the use of touches on the cranium to transfer “vital force” to a specific location in the brain. By touching the spot on the cranium that housed the intended organ (i.e., benevolence or reverence, mirthfulness, or combativeness), *nervaura* radiated from the operator’s brain to the hand and then to the subject.¹⁰ In most of his public experiments, he preferred to operate upon the external senses because few could mistake the change in the patient’s expression or countenance. Operations on the mind, or feelings, were left for private practice.¹¹

Reports of Buchanan’s discoveries were published in the *Baptist Banner*, *Louisville Public Advertiser*, *Louisville Journal*, *Newark Daily Advertiser*, *Cincinnati Republican*, and *New York Watchman*. Based on his successes, he requested an audience with the Board of Managers of the Louisville Medical Institute in December of 1841, laying before them a statement of

his philosophical discoveries and urging a reorganization of medical science based on his findings. Claiming that half of humankind's diseases were produced by the sympathy of one part of the body on another part, he reasoned that, by modifying the sympathetic influence through the nervous system, physicians could greatly improve health and reduce the impact which harsh medicinal agents made on the body. The core of his presentation focused on demonstrating that the seat of the functions of mind and body was located in the nervous system and that he could perform "all that medicine can do . . . with far more simplicity, certainty, and precision."¹²

Two years following his presentation, Buchanan received an honorary M.D. degree from Louisville Medical Institute. Because it was only an honorary degree, he wrote no thesis, and took no classes. The presumption is that he received the degree because of his discovery of the neurological science of anthropology and the support he received from Professor Caldwell. In the 1845 catalog of graduates, however, he is listed among those receiving a degree, which suggests either a mistake, or that he returned to the Institute to earn the degree.¹³

Even with his medical degree—whether earned or honorary—Buchanan was not much of a practitioner. Like his father and his mentor Caldwell, he preferred involvement in more esoteric subjects. Reflecting on the status of medicine, he observed that medical colleges offered no real philosophy in dealing with the human constitution and were virtually "wandering

in the dark with disastrous results.” He blamed medicine’s failure on its ignorance of the brain, “the master organ of the body and center of its conscious life.” The medical colleges were teaching a “brainless” and “soulless” physiology. To rectify this problem, he continued carrying out experiments demonstrating the vital functions of the “soul powers” connected with the brain. Whether before public groups or medical students, he taught that a spirit inhabited the body and survived after death. Although not evident in his earliest writings, this “fact” would eventually form the basis of his science of *sarcognomy* which explained the “continued life of the eternal man,” the laws governing man’s “temporary residence in the body,” and the laws of sympathy between the body and the soul.¹⁴ Human life was not simply the product of material forces but “belonged to a spiritual constitution inhabiting the body and surviving its destruction” at death.¹⁵

Eclectic Medical Institute

Not long after receiving his medical degree, Buchanan relocated in Cincinnati where he joined the faculty of the Botanico-Medical College of Alva Curtis. The college, whose therapeutics was based solely on the Thomsonian combination of herbal medicines and steaming, had originally organized in Columbus in 1839, but moved to Cincinnati in 1841. Little information is available on Buchanan’s activities at the school, but one can assume that he found favor with Curtis since both mesmerism and phrenology were

incorporated into the school's curriculum. It is also reasonable to assume that Curtis gave Buchanan permission to introduce his anthropology into the program as well. By all accounts, the school, which was renamed the Literary and Botanico-Medical Institute of Cincinnati, and in 1851 to the Physio-Medical Institute, had a checkered history, becoming a notorious diploma mill before closing in 1880.¹⁶

While a member of the Botanico-Medical College faculty, Buchanan made the acquaintance of Thomas V. Morrow, a Kentucky native and dean of the Reform Medical College of Cincinnati, located a few blocks away. Morrow's school descended from the United States Infirmary which opened on Eldridge Street in New York City in 1827 and where Wooster Beach, its owner, first introduced his "American Practice," a system of therapeutics that sought to break away from Old World theories and regimens. Unable to obtain a charter from the New York legislature, Beach sought a more accommodating home in the Midwest, becoming the Worthington Medical Department in Worthington, Ohio, in 1830, the first sectarian medical school in the United States to receive a state charter. The school remained in Worthington until 1842 when a resurrection riot forced its closure. The faculty subsequently moved to Cincinnati where it organized first as the American Medical College, and then as the Eclectic Medical Institute (EMI).¹⁷

On March 25, 1846, after concluding a private course of lectures on the subject of neurology at the Fourth Street Hall in Cincinnati, Buchanan resigned

his position in Curtis's school and accepted the chair of institutes, medical jurisprudence, and physiology tendered by Morrow and the school's trustees. His efforts to analyze man physiologically and psychologically had given him the reputation as a pioneer, teacher, and demonstrator of a new system of medical philosophy that seemed very much in step with eclectic philosophy. In his acceptance of the offer, Buchanan represented himself as a reformer against the tyranny of regular medicine, making it evident from his earliest statements that he would become EMI's public face for communicating the spirit of rational eclecticism. Alone among the faculty with name recognition, he promised "to accomplish as much for the enlargement and correction of the materia medica and therapeutics as the knowledge of the cerebral functions will accomplish for the improvement of physiology."¹⁸

As teacher and spokesperson for reform medicine, Buchanan devoted much of his time to cerebral physiology which he claimed would change medicine and therapeutics forever. In this endeavor he came quickly to understand the foibles of advocating novel and unorthodox regimens that stood against the prevailing wisdom of orthodox practice. Nevertheless, his views, when combined with his charisma, tenacity, and clarity of vision, made him a popular teacher and a recognized voice in Cincinnati and neighboring counties in Kentucky. His colleagues, however, questioned whether he was using the school to advance the cause of eclecticism, or his own novel beliefs.

Deanship

When Morrow died, Buchanan bullied his way past rival aspirants into the deanship and proceeded to incorporate into the curriculum his particular brand of reformed practice, including his science of anthropology.¹⁹ Besides using the school's *Eclectic Medical Journal* to advance his beliefs, he channeled his more esoteric ideas into his own publication, *The Journal of Man* where he advocated a host of reform topics, including women's rights, political affairs in Ireland, Papal tyranny, the free school movement, land reform, and the evils of tobacco, to mention but a few. More importantly, the journal became one of the earliest spiritualist periodicals in the United States, tracing the spread of mediumship from its roots at Hydesville and Rochester to séances across the country. Among his guest authors was the poet-preacher Thomas Lake Harris (see chapter 7) who offered a mixture of Spiritualism and Swedenborgianism and whose manifestations included spirit poetry and lengthy communications from the spirit-world.²⁰

Buchanan intended his journal to settle lingering questions surrounding consciousness in the aftermath of man's mortal nature. Christianity had declared immortality for mankind, but there were millions who had no understanding of what this meant, and others lived in disbelief. If living bodies were simply the effects of organized matter, then the science of man was nothing more than "the highest department of chemistry," and theology simply "a mass of poetical superstitions." But if it was correct to say that mankind

contained “a permanent, substantial, spiritual entity within him, capable of surviving the destruction of his body,” then it was possible to make more of man’s spiritual nature and determine if, after death, “we may continue to look back . . . upon the scenes of this life, and to take an interest in its progress.”²¹

Buchanan challenged his readers to address the question whether “our departed friends are or are not living.” Finding an answer required full knowledge of the constitution of man as understood through physiology and experimental explorations of the brain. Most importantly, it required an understanding of the mental endowments and their greater complexity among the higher divisions of the animal kingdom. In the lower orders of life there was ample evidence of the diffusion of conscious life through the body; but in the higher orders, a greater amalgamation of mind and matter occurred. In humans, the amalgamation was such that they live through their brain, making it possible to regard the spiritual principle “as something definite and distinct.”²²

Fox and Friends

Like others of his generation, Buchanan was particularly taken with the events in the village of Hydesville and published numerous reports of the Fox sisters’ manifestations, including what Horace Greeley had written in his *Tribune*. The suddenness of the rappings as well as their contagiousness seemed only to confirm that special events were happening that were real

and believable, having been verified by “enlightened, cautious, honorable and skeptical persons whose testimony leaves us no room to doubt the fact.”²³ Among persons with highly sensitive organs of spirituality, he had no hesitation in affirming their communication with the spirits of departed friends and relatives. Sometimes these communications resulted in warnings or advice; in other instances, the organ of spirituality cooperated with the intuitive faculties to gain a stronger perception of a truth or abstraction.²⁴ He also agreed that the nature of these messages indicated the highly intelligent character of spirits by answering difficult questions accurately and thoughtfully. Like other believers, he insisted the spirits were former living beings and not separately created divine beings (angels) who participated in these manifestations. Finally, he observed that the communications typically appeared only in the presence of highly sensitive individuals whose spiritual faculties served as a “connecting medium” between the material and spirit worlds.²⁵

Buchanan insisted that the wonders of Spiritualism, or what he preferred to call *Spiritual Science*, could no longer be ignored by the nation’s scientific community. While its supporters were often ridiculed and misrepresented in the press, he was convinced that cautious investigation would prove the skeptics wrong. Agreeing with William T. Coggshall, author of *The Signs of the Time: Comprising a History of the Spirit-Rappings, in Cincinnati and Other Places* (1851) and others who had investigated the Hydesville rappings, he concluded that the Fox sisters had not been the

first, nor the last, to experience rappings from the spirit-world. Not only had there been similar occurrences in previous centuries, there were manifestations also reported in Cleveland and Cincinnati, Ohio; Chicago, Illinois; Oswego and Buffalo, New York; Providence, Rhode Island; Pittsburgh and New Brighton, Pennsylvania; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and Richmond and Crawfordsville, Indiana. These included the family of Harmon Beaver in Sennett, New York; the Deacon Hall family in Greece, New York; the families of the Rev. C. Hammond, Rev. A. H. Jarvis, and Lyman Granger in Rochester, New York; and the family of La Roy Sunderland in Boston, to mention but a few. The rappings revealed a “new order of telegraphing . . . from earthly to celestial spheres” and the evidence was now before the world to investigate honestly and candidly.²⁶

Besides the rappings, which were the most common form of spirit communication, spirits were known to move objects, causing them to fly across a room, and sometimes known to create violent shocks when a spiritual hand touched a living body. In other instances, mesmerized persons professed to recognize spirits who attended their needs, watching and helping them through life. These phenomena, Buchanan explained, corroborated the fact that the spirit-world existed in close approximation to the natural world and his own nerveraic experiments confirmed the ability of individuals with highly impressible and intuitive faculties to carry on mental communication with departed friends.²⁷

In September and October of 1850, Buchanan reported on a host of spiritual communications that occurred in Cincinnati in the presence of Mrs. Olivia Bushnell. The messages which she brought from the spirit-world were delivered by rappings using the letters of the alphabet and occurred in the presence of numerous citizens.²⁸ On hearing the news, Buchanan offered his home to Mrs. Bushnell for several additional sessions during which unusual noises were heard by the assembled group. Mrs. Bushnell called the rappings a form of electrical vibration and, at her urging, the group formed into a spirit-circle or séance to communicate with the spirit-world.²⁹

Buchanan used *The Journal of Man* as a “faithful chronicler” of these spirit communications. Not surprisingly, the Fox sisters figured prominently in his chronicles, having participated in one of their séances at the Burnet Hotel in Cincinnati. Admitting that the noises were “not so ready or clear as might be desired,” he nevertheless insisted that what he heard had been genuine. The question, however, was not whether the spirit noises were real but whether there was value in the communications since so often they were inaccurate or fanciful. For himself, he was content with their limitations. “Let us rejoice that we have any glimpses of the departed, however dim and fleeting they may be,” he wrote. It was enough to know that we were able to “exchange signals” with departed friends.³⁰

Buchanan trusted the reports of mesmerists and clairvoyants when they spoke or wrote of spiritual life after death. What he found instructive was evidence

that their reports were uniformly consistent in their descriptions of a “calm, elevated, and serene existence” in the afterlife. Having carried out experiments with both religious and non-religious subjects, he found little difference between the two groups in their description of the celestial heavens. The evidence, he concluded, was overwhelming. “Clairvoyants, seers, sages, poets, and theologians have distinctly perceived the existence of disembodied spirits, and held communion with the departed.” From Swedenborg to Andrew Jackson Davis and countless others before and after, the testimony had been the same, i.e., that the intuitive faculty “not only perceives the spiritual power in the living man, but perceives its separation from the body in the act of death, and its continued life thereafter.”³¹

Buchanan filled his journal with articles on palmistry, Theosophy, apparitions of the dead, reports from English and American psychic societies, human anomalies, and excerpts from spiritualist newspapers such as *The Banner of Light* (Boston), *The Religio-Philosophical Journal* (Chicago), *Light for Thinkers* (Chattanooga, Tennessee), *Golden Gate* (San Francisco), *Light on the Way* (Boston), *The Carrier Dove* (Oakland, California), and *World's Advance Thought* (Salem, Oregon). He reported on Madam Blavatsky's magazine *Lucifer*, Alice B. Stockham's *Tokology*, the success of Dr. R. C. Flower's nerve and brain pills, and the clairvoyant visions of physician Julia M. Carpenter of Boston. In addition, he recounted numerous instances of mediumship, faith-cures, mind-reading, auras surrounding the head, trance-speaking, and writing.

Buchanan took note of the numerous investigations that had commenced to verify the claims of spirit communications. Given that spirits were tricksters, he did not consider it a matter of any great importance whether the answers returned by spiritual raps were truthful or not. The only important question was whether the sounds and displays were produced by “invisible intelligent beings, or powers which claim to be the spirits of departed friends.” That the mode of communication was “so imperfect” and the answers often “from so low a grade of intelligence,” made it reasonable to expect that some would doubt their authenticity. However, the production of sounds and the movement of tables and other material objects, all without human assistance, compelled him to accept “a vast world of invisible spirits struggling with the laws of Nature, to break through the separation between them and those who dwell in the flesh, and to repossess themselves in their disembodied condition, of that control over matter which they enjoyed when living in organized bodies.”³²

Psychometry

The term *psychometry*, first coined by Buchanan in 1842 (from the Greek *psyche*, or soul, and *metron*, measure), implied the capacity for soul-measuring. He considered it a science capable of drawing into its orbit the full gamut of human endeavor—from individual character, disease, and physiology, to supernatural life and destiny.³³ His earliest experiments in

psychometrics involved Charles Inman, the younger brother of the painter Henry Inman. A person with extraordinarily impressionistic sensibilities, Charles Inman could define the characteristics of an individual simply by touching the cranial surface with his fingers or with a metallic rod. What particularly struck Buchanan was Inman's discernment of minute gradations—not between the larger functions identified by Gall and Spurzheim, but between individual convolutions which opened a much larger range of functions than originally thought existed. So keenly did Inman feel their sentiments that he sometimes requested a suspension of the experiment due to the “unpleasant feelings” they caused.³⁴

Buchanan documented Inman's ability to take an object in his hands and provide its history with lucid clarity. He once described Inman's gift as a “divine faculty,” a demonstration of the “Divine exterior of the human soul and the marvelous approximation of man toward Omniscience.” Astounded by his discovery but fearing negative publicity, Buchanan decided to withhold reporting on it until 1849 when he announced his results. The only difference between his early cases and those identified in later years was his choice of the word *cryptesthesia* rather than *psychometry* to describe his discovery. In both, however, knowledge came from impressions received from the object.³⁵

Early in his experiments, Buchanan questioned whether it was necessary to have direct hand contact (i.e., hands on the forehead to create a mental stimulus) or whether impressions could be sensed through

other material objects such as a metallic or wood rod. He also wondered if it was possible for a highly sensitive person to receive impressions from an autograph or other material objects belonging to the individual being investigated. To his amazement, he discovered that sensitive persons were able to describe with high accuracy the mental character of individuals known only by touching their autograph. He then went on to experiment with locks of hair, pieces of clothing, and other personal objects which he called "infectious." Buchanan speculated that perhaps one in ten persons had this latent power and that it was especially evident among women. Because of his investigations, he likened psychometry to a mental telescope capable of piercing the vast expanse of the universe to bring into view the whole of history. Like the oceans which still contained the earliest waves, so too, the vibrations emanating from every organic and inorganic form still traveled the ether and were capable of being identified and interpreted. Every particle of dust floating in the cosmos had a story to tell.³⁶

Psychometrists were gifted with the ability to feel, see, hear, and have knowledge of individuals, things, and events in a super-normal manner. They were highly sensitive to the thoughts and emotions of others and were guided by living and dead auras impinging on their fields of sensitiveness.³⁷ Unlike the thermometer or stethoscope used to understand the purely physical aspects of an individual's health, psychometrists could detect invisible emanations coming from the subject.³⁸ Having this gift enabled the psychometric physician

to enter a sickroom and immediately gauge the state of the patient's health. Buchanan claimed that four of his colleagues at EMI manifested this psychometric ability: William Sherwood, Daniel Vaughan, Horatio P. Gatchell, and John King. Equally interesting, all four were Swedenborgians and members of the New-Church.³⁹

Buchanan distinguished between the powers displayed in psychometry and those used by mediums. Unlike the medium who was submissive to the purposes of the unknown spirit, the impressions the psychometrist obtained from sensing the power of an autograph touching the forehead formed the equivalent of a daguerreotype of the subject's mental state, making it an open history. The object evoked perceptions and insights once thought impossible. Histories long since lost were now within reach as artifacts belonging to the dead were available to psychometrists to delve into their most secret of secrets, describing deep feelings and affections once thought hidden forever. So powerful was this gift that it was "impossible to set any bounds to the future explorations" of past historical figures.⁴⁰ Impressed by Buchanan's newest science, Madame Blavatsky referred to him as "one of the most respected authorities in the American spiritualist world" and urged the world-wide circulation of his book on psychometry.⁴¹

Buchanan encouraged the use of psychometry for self-culture and improvement, including conjugal relations; the investigation of diseases and their remedies; and in the disciplines of geology, geography,

anatomy, physiology, and zoology. Believing that marriage was a lottery of chance producing far more discordant unions than true companionship, he urged those intending to marry to seek psychometric guidance. A properly trained psychometrist could provide advice on the conjugal compatibility of prospective partners by analyzing their photographs or autographs to predict the type and character of a couple's future domestic life and of their children.⁴²

Psychometry had a "prophetic power" that validated the divine element in human nature. It had a range of forecast or prophecy that was neither miraculous nor exceptional, but one that could be developed through proper training. Buchanan lamented that prophecy had been expunged from the college curriculum as the detritus of vulgar minds and misguided somnambulists. Nevertheless, he claimed that examples abounded of its almost daily occurrence, pointing to numerous illustrations of the soul's higher powers long suppressed by the forces of materialism. The source and method of prophecy were "too divine to be entirely analyzed," he opined, but it had occult ramifications, including reference to the law of "periodicity."⁴³

Failing to elicit interest from the scientific world when he first announced his science of psychometry, Buchanan requested in 1877 an investigating committee be formed by the Kentucky State Medical Society to examine his discovery. The society courteously received Buchanan's request but chose not to act.⁴⁴ Recently widowed and disconsolate over his

political and economic prospects, Buchanan moved to Syracuse, New York, where he became involved in efforts to improve salt manufacturing at the Onondaga Salt Springs reservation, an area of about nine hundred acres on which numerous salt manufacturers operated leases. A year later, he returned to medical education, joining the Eclectic Medical College of New York City as professor of physiology, anthropology, and institutes of medicine. In 1882, Buchanan and his second wife, Cornelia H. Decker, a respected medium and psychometrist, moved to Boston where they joined the First Spiritual Temple, an independent Christian Spiritualist Church founded by Marcellus Seth Ayer who became a close friend and supporter of psychometrics.

In 1882, Buchanan obtained incorporation approval to establish the American University of Boston which planned to open three separate colleges: Therapeutics, General Culture, and Industry. Because of limited funding, only the College of Therapeutics opened, focusing much of its curriculum on psychometry and the psycho-physiological aspects of sarcognomy. In addition, the college offered six-week courses addressing treatments using spiritual mediums and the application of electric and magnetic therapies.⁴⁵ Over the next several years, however, the college came under fire from legislators and allopathic medical societies because of Buchanan's intent to confer medical degrees on the school's graduates. According to the Commissioner of Corporations, the power to confer medical degrees had been limited to only a

select number of institutions. Unimpressed, Buchanan claimed there was more latitude under the *Public Statutes of Massachusetts*. Encouraged by Buchanan's interpretation, the College of Therapeutics, the New England University of Arts and Sciences, the Bellevue Medical College of Massachusetts, and Excelsior Medical College opened store front operations in Boston on the premise that the statutes allowed the faculties of these schools to grant medical degrees. Their actions caused the Massachusetts Medical Society to seek stricter regulation of the practice of medicine.

Sarcognomic Therapeutics

In 1891, Buchanan introduced the science of *sarcognomy*. The term, which derived from *sarx* or *sarcos*, meaning flesh, and *gnoma*, opinion, suggested that all the human faculties present in the soul were manifested in the body by way of the spinal cord. According to his explanation, a sympathy existed between the convolutions in the brain and a corresponding surface on the body. For every function there was an external locality which could be reached by electricity, nervaura, heat, cold, or other medical applications that could treat a health issue. This was by far his most sophisticated work to date and incorporated numerous references to past and contemporary research. Less theoretical than his other writings, it focused on the practical aspects of healing.⁴⁶

“When we understand clearly that life is located in the brain and its subordinate spinal and ganglionic

structures,” Buchanan wrote, “we may inquire whether it originates there, or comes by influx [from] the oversoul of the universe.” With this remark, he expressed his deep and abiding reliance on Swedenborg. Questioning whether and to what extent influx originated from the spirit-world, or indirectly from “ideas and emotions from the wise organization, order, beauty, and benevolence of the visible world,” he answered by saying that it came from both sources, with the latter subordinate to the more spiritual.⁴⁷ The spiritual nature of man allowed him to commune with the entities. In instances of a strong relationship between patient and physician, the mere presence of the healer could substitute for drugs and other healing techniques. On such occasions when patients were cured without contact—even at great distances—Buchanan considered it the work of “attendant spirits.” When this occurred, the healer acted as a medium or passive instrument transmitting a healing force from an invisible power. The operator’s hand became the healing agent and proceeded on the principle that, when acting on an area or spot, it exalted the body’s vital powers.⁴⁸

Buchanan claimed ignorance of Swedenborg’s works during his early years of theorizing. Nevertheless, every time he presented his ideas on the faculties of the soul, brain, and body, and of their correspondences, the similarities were clear. Like Swedenborg, he employed the law of correspondences to show that “every function of the eternal or spiritual man, whether intellectual, emotional, or physiological, has its special apparatus in the nervous structure of the

brain.” Similarly, every function and organ of the brain had “a corporal correspondence or region of the body with which it is in close sympathy.” His science of correspondence implied that for every area on the surface of the body there was an “exact physiological and psychic influence with belonged to it.” By identifying the source or seat of the influx, it was possible to understand why a disease had certain symptoms and what each physician needed to gain mastery over the disease. Knowledge of this influx determined where to apply heat or cold, stimulants, counterirritants, electricity, or the power of the human hand for the best results. Life, he explained, “is not in the tissues but is entirely and absolutely an influx coming through the nervous system aided by the lungs.” This statement was a clear indication of his intellectual debt to Swedenborg.⁴⁹

Primitive Christianity

Following the death of his second wife, Buchanan attempted to renew a “spirit friendship” with a woman he had known in his early youth but who had died in 1850. To accomplish this, he sought the aid of a medium who, instead of finding the woman Buchanan had been searching, received a communication from “St. John” commissioning him to undertake a new challenge of bringing forth the lost gospels of the Apostles.⁵⁰ Surprised by the message and doubtful of its authenticity, he tested its validity through psychometry and was convinced that the message was

authentic. At a subsequence séance, Buchanan was assured that he would not be called to the spirit-land (Buchanan was then 83 years of age) until he had completed his mission.⁵¹ With the admonition that “All earth needs you, all heaven needs you,” he set out on his last venture which entailed rewriting the scriptures and the role of Jesus and the Apostles through revelations obtained during séances that were unencumbered by the apostate church and its denizens of churchmen.⁵²

As with Swedenborg who reported having visited the heavens, Buchanan claimed to have met with Jesus living in the spirit-world and whose presence at a place called the “home of the Nazarene” generated a magnetic force that “dispersed throughout the atmosphere” and was absorbed by anyone encountering it. This force not only spread through the celestial planes but streamed downward into the spiritual worlds inhabited by earthly souls. The force even reached “unselfish lives who are yet treading the pathway of earth.” Those who were thus illuminated, were “led onward by that subtle power which cometh from above.” As for those loved and loving souls who lived near the home of the Nazarene, they were “so self-possessed and so superior to all antagonisms” that they could gaze calmly at the physical world with its scorching misdeeds and still work unceasingly for their benefit.⁵³

In 1897, Buchanan fulfilled half of his challenge by publishing the first of an intended two-volume *Primitive Christianity, Containing the Lost Lives of Jesus Christ and the Apostles*. In it, he discussed the dawn of Christianity, the pagan origins of the Roman Church, the falsification of the Bible, and what he called the authentic gospel of “St. John.” Primitive Christianity was not historical Christianity; neither was it the Christianity of the churches whose corruption he blamed for much of the world’s misery. Due to the machinations of the Roman Church and its popes, the true religion of Jesus had become extinct, its teacher dead, and its record suppressed. Not until “St. John” summoned Buchanan to reveal the true Christianity from its pseudo-philosophies had the situation changed.⁵⁴ Buchanan hoped his first volume would become the standard history of religion for future generations since it revealed the true nature of immortality and fulfilled his objective publishing the Gospel of St. John that had been suppressed by the Roman priests for centuries. All this he had achieved through a series of séances.⁵⁵ His proposed second volume, intended to contain the revised gospels of Mathew, Mark and Luke, the Acts of the Apostles, the Epistles of Paul, John, James, Peter and Jude, along with the history of primitive Christianity’s suppression, and additional testimony from the spirit-world, was never completed. He died in 1899, leaving behind those who lamented “St. John’s” failure to let him complete his second volume.

5

ESOTERIC WISDOM

The term *Theosophy*, drawn from *theopathy*, meaning the perception of the divine by feeling, and *theurgy*, meaning action through divine power, implies the acquisition of knowledge from a divine source. While the term could easily describe Neo-Platonism and mystics like Jacob Boehme, it instead applied to the system of esoteric beliefs extolled by Madame H. P. Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott, co-founders of the Theosophy Society who claimed to receive illumination from a tight-knit society of Mahatmas (sometimes called “Masters,” “Adepts” or the “Brotherhood”) living in the highlands of Tibet. Alone among the world’s most secretive societies, they had assiduously kept records of the ancient religious, philosophical, and scientific seers in previous centuries.¹ According to religious scholar Stephen Prothero, Theosophy “represents a modern surfacing of an ancient hermetic tradition that runs through Swedenborgianism and Mesmerism, Pythagoreanism and Neo-

platonism, Gnosticism and the Eleusian mysteries, the Jewish Cabala, and the Hindu Vedas.” It served to offset Spiritualism’s democratic and populist vulgarities with a top-down effort to ‘gentrify’ and ‘aristocratize’ the spiritualist tradition. His thesis bears strong consideration given how quickly the rappings of the Fox sisters became a Pandora’s box which, when opened, unleashed a host of frauds.² By contrast, Theosophy tied itself to a literary tradition whose uplifting speculations appealed to the nation’s cosmopolitan elites who, having identified decades earlier with Emerson’s eastern awakening, found it a welcome replacement for the untethered and often raucous manifestations of the séance. These ties eventually linked its founders to the New York publisher James W. Bouton and the erudite philosopher and philologist Alexander Wilder who helped prepare Blavatsky’s *Isis Unveiled* for publication. Theosophy brought a decidedly upscale religion into the orbit of New York’s patrician elite before spreading to India, Ceylon, and Japan.³

Early Contacts

The principal culture brokers who prepared the nation for Theosophy’s spiritual aristocrats included the Transcendentalists who were early aficionados of the Asian classics; the admirers of Swedenborg whose writings referred to a shadowy Tartary on the frontiers of Christianity; and Anglican minister Edward Carpenter and novelist and literary critic Edward Morgan Forster in Britain. Unconcerned with the dogmatics of eastern

religions, these brokers found comfort in beliefs more attuned to the eternal soul than the world's material pleasures. Emerson and Carpenter looked for insights that reinforced their preferred interest in Idealism, Swedenborgianism, and liberal Christianity, albeit without the doctrines of reincarnation and karma—a heady discourse that appealed to Victorian sensibilities. From the first meeting of the American Oriental Society in 1842, to Thoreau's 1844 translation of the *Lotus Sutra*, to Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia* (1879) which sold nearly a million copies, to the eccentric writings of Herman Vetterling, publisher of the *Buddhist Ray* (1888-94) and author of *Swedenborg the Buddhist* (1887), Americans and their English cousins were drawn to a spiritual medley of Buddhism, Hinduism, Spiritualism, and Swedenborgianism.

Not until New England Transcendentalism did American interest in Asian culture and philosophy acquire a scholarly and less dismissive approach.⁴ Emerson became decidedly supportive after reading Victor Cousin's survey of world philosophies and the accounts of social reformer Ram Mohan Roy, founder of the Brahmo Sabha, a theistic movement within Hinduism.⁵ After taking over editorship of *The Dial*, Emerson acquainted readers with articles, translations, and references to non-western cultures, particularly after obtaining a copy of Charles Wilkins's translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* (1785) which he mistook for a book on Buddhism.⁶

Emerson and his Concord colleagues examined Horace Hayman Wilson's translation of the *Vishnu*

Purāna (1840) and Edward Röer's selected English translation of the *Upanishads* (1853). Each of these writings contained components consistent with Christian theism and became references for his essay on Plato in his *Representative Men* (1850), his poetry (i.e., "Hametreyā," 1847; and "Brahma," 1856), as well as his Hindu reflections in *The Conduct of Life* (1860), and *Society and Solitude* (1870). Later contributions to this literature included Max Muller's fifty-volume series of *Sacred Books of the East* (1879-1910), Paul Jacob Deussen's *The Sutra of the Vedānta* (1906), *The Philosophy of the Upanishads* (1906), and *The System of the Vedānta* (1912); Swami Vivekananda's interpretation of Hinduism; Josiah Royce's *The World and the Individual* (1899); and William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), all of which drew heavily on Eastern religious experiences.

Partners in the Occult

Best known as co-founder and first president of the New York Theosophical Society and responsible for the revival of Buddhism in the East, Colonel Henry Steel Olcott came of age at a time when the "burnt-over district" of New York made its initial imprint on American society. He began his study of Spiritualism in 1852 and, having no satisfactory reason to deny the phenomena he witnessed, remained a spiritualist for the next twenty-two years. Olcott attended the College of the City of New York after which he became a correspondent for the *New York Tribune* and the

Mark Lane Express. Not a man to be taken lightly, he fought in the Civil War and, following the death of Lincoln, the War Department appointed him to a three-person investigative commission to examine the assassination. Like others of his generation, the loss of colleagues precipitated a desire to explore various forms of spirit communications as a way of healing the psychological sores stemming from his wartime experience.⁷

Following the war, Olcott practiced law but found himself drawn to Spiritualism. Awakened to its reform elements, he viewed himself as someone who could make a difference. As a reporter and reformer, he aimed to direct fellow spiritualists toward self-cultivation and the repair of society's core problems. His objective was order and harmony and he worked feverishly to cultivate and harvest its opportunities. In 1874, as a reporter for the *New York Sun*, he spent several weeks in Chittenden, Vermont, investigating spirit manifestations of two farmer-magicians, William and Horatio Eddy, who performed slight-of-hand tricks. While examining their claims, he met Helena Blavatsky who was there to defend the authenticity of the brothers' claims against the skeptical Dr. George Miller Beard, a New York physician who had called them out as frauds.⁸

Helena Petrovna von Hahn was born in the Ukraine. Her father was a Russian army officer and her mother a novelist. In 1849, she married Nikifor Vladimirovich Blavatsky, Vice Governor of Erivan Province, but abandoned him that same year, fleeing

to Constantinople. For the next twenty-four years, she traveled through Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and South America. During that time, she became an advocate of reform, and after being initiated into the occult mysteries, joined the spiritualist movement. According to various reports, she was converted to Spiritualism in 1858 by Daniel Dunglas Home in Paris where she became a well-known medium before moving to New York in July 1873 where she lived as a bohemian. Together with Olcott, they formed the Theosophical Society on September 7, 1875, embarking on a search for esoteric truth. Their expressed purpose, as explained in the society's preamble and by-laws, was "to collect and diffuse a knowledge of the laws which govern the universe."⁹

Most of the Theosophical Society's earliest members came from the gentry class. Dedicated to using science to study and defend the occult laws that stood behind spirit phenomena, the society offered a platform for its members to attack false religions, support reform, and utilize science as the tool to defend its legitimacy.¹⁰ As explained by its founders, Theosophy was an ancient system of thought and not some new invention. It represented a font of wisdom regarding humankind and the universe handed down through generations of Adepts. Claiming that the inner or sacred teachings of Jesus, Buddha, Krishna, and Zoroaster were one and the same, the Theosophists looked towards unification and the universality of their doctrines with those of the world's great religions. "We ask for truth in everything," claimed Blavatsky, "our

object is the realization of the spiritual perfectibility possible to man, the broadening of his knowledge, the exercising of the powers of his soul, of all the psychical sides of his being.”¹¹

In a series of jointly authored articles published in the *Spiritual Scientist* in 1875, Olcott and Blavatsky marked the beginnings of what would become a movement proposing a more genteel and spiritual esotericism than the existing circus-like manifestations. They particularly criticized the way spiritualists had fixated on the séance since its expressiveness in the form of rappings and levitating tables was not so much a verification of communication with the dead as an example of a highly democratized religious movement that had lapsed into anarchy. Instead of darkened rooms and theatrical props to bring forth disembodied spirits, Blavatsky became the movement’s single voice channeling the wisdom of the Tibetan Brotherhood. Rather than answering odd questions with taps, the information she communicated from the Adepts arrived through telepathy or fell from her ceiling in the form of letters addressing issues of moral import for the improvement of society and an appreciation of esoteric philosophy.

Isis Unveiled

In 1876, Alexander Wilder, the philosopher, physician, and confidant to several the century’s reform thinkers, received a note from the spiritualist Emma Hardinge urging that he meet with the Russian occultist. Wilder

did not respond to the note, believing Blavatsky to be a pretender who falsely claimed paranormal powers. “I had barely heard of Madame Blavatsky,” he admitted, “but in no connection with anything relating to Theosophy, or other subject that I knew anything about.”¹² Hardinge had sent the note because of Wilder’s interest in the arcane as well as his free-lance work with J. W. Bouton, a New York importer, publisher, and bookseller. Bouton had been among the earliest publishers of esoteric works, including Charles Leland’s *Fusang, or, the Discovery of America by Chinese Buddhist Priests in the Fifth Century* (1875).

Several months after receiving the note, Wilder received a surprise visit from Colonel Olcott enquiring if he would examine Blavatsky’s manuscript and possibly edit it for publication. Olcott, who “appeared to hold her in high regard closely approaching to veneration,” invited Wilder to accompany him to her flat on Forty-Seventh Street. The building where she lived had been “transmogrified” into a suite of apartments whose tenants met at mealtimes but otherwise kept to their separate lifestyles. The rooms in Blavatsky’s flat were divided by partitions to separate her office from other areas where she handled her correspondence, received visitors, and slept.¹³

During his numerous visits to the apartment, Wilder had the opportunity to learn how Olcott and Blavatsky worked together: “A tall, lanky man of the Lincoln type, with a noble, dome-like head, thin jaws, grey hair, and language filled with quaint Saxon-Americanisms, [Olcott] used to come and talk by

the hour with Blavatsky, often lying recumbent on the sofa, with – as she used to say – ‘one long leg resting on the chandelier, the other on the mantel-piece.’”¹⁴ She described herself as “a hippopotamus of a woman . . . As stout as he was thin, as voluble as he was sententious and epigrammatic, smoking innumerable cigarettes and brilliantly sustaining her share of the conversation.”¹⁵

Bouton placed the manuscript in Wilder’s hands with instructions to shorten it “as much as it would bear.” Wilder judged it to be “the product of great research, and that so far as related to current thinking, there was a revolution in it, but . . . too long for remunerative publishing.” Agreeing to undertake the task, he set out to “preserve the thought of the author in plain language, removing only such terms and matter as might be regarded as superfluous, and not necessary to the main purpose.” The book was based on the hypothesis of a prehistoric Aryan people who once lived in India and could hardly be said to represent a religion or wisdom coming out of Egypt. Nevertheless, Bouton, who was a skillful marketer, changed the original title to *Isis Unveiled* because Egyptian lore was more highly marketable.¹⁶

Blavatsky claimed that the manuscript had been dictated to her by the Tibetan Adepts who recounted the origins of the cosmic universe. Utilizing insights from the occult, she fashioned a positivistic science out of the period’s evolutionary vocabulary. Though she claimed telepathic powers to carry on a discourse with those whom she also called the Brotherhood

and from whom she had received her wisdom, Wilder observed no such communications. Nevertheless, the two had long discussions on the revisions Wilder made to her manuscript. She admitted to appreciating his changes, remarking that Wilder had removed what she described as “flapdoodle.” Nevertheless, she continued to add material to the manuscript, so much that an additional volume was necessary.¹⁷ Blavatsky liked the final outcome and the two made an extraordinary partnership—Blavatsky with her myriad of facts and run-on sentences and Wilder with his short, pithy style. They worked long hours together. For Wilder, it was not so much her claim of psychical powers but Eastern philosophy that drew him to her workplace.¹⁸

Wilder’s thirty-six-page introduction to the book, much of which he borrowed from his *New Platonism and Alchemy*, published in 1869, took issue with the progress claimed by humankind due to the “divine light of Christianity” and the “bright lamp of modern science.” These two assumptions ignored the history of debauched clergy, warring religions, unproven dogmas, rancorous quarrels, ill-conceived scientific hypotheses, and the steady drift of materialism. The struggle between science and theology for infallibility had exposed both with feet of clay. Because of their warfare, Western society was “losing all belief in man’s personal immortality, in a deity of any kind, and rapidly descending to a level of mere animal existence.”¹⁹

Looking among the ruins left from the battles waged between the two titans, Wilder suggested that Platonic philosophy offered the only true refuge. As the

greatest philosopher of the pre-Christian world, Plato faithfully mirrored the minds of the ancient world beginning with the Vedic philosophers who lived thousands of years before him and others who left their imprint in the intervening centuries. He absorbed all he could from the Greek philosopher/scientist Philolaus, Socrates in Athens, Pythagoras in Italy, and then whatever he could glean from Egypt and the East. Not only did Plato teach justice as the greatest good but that the most important object of attainment was *real* knowledge which existed permanently in contrast to modernity's more transitory knowledge. Beyond all secondary causes, laws, ideas, and principles was the lawgiver, the supreme Good which existed as a permanent principle of unity beneath the forms and changes in the universe. *Nous*, or the rational soul of man, possessed a love of wisdom and a nature like the supreme mind making man capable of understanding the eternal realities. However, like the captives in the cave portrayed in Plato's *Republic*, man perceived only the shadows of objects and falsely thought them to be real. Still, within man was a glimmer of a higher world and it was the province of philosophy to break man from the bondage of the senses and experience the eternal world of truth, goodness, and beauty.²⁰

The two-volume 1,268-page *Isis Unveiled* became the philosophical core of Theosophy, explaining the extent to which the world owed its existence to the hidden forces that controlled human destiny. Of principle importance were the Adepts who kept the ancient secrets handed down through the ages and through

whose guidance humankind would again ascend the evolutionary ladder and inherit the wisdom to which it had rightful claim. The object of the book was not to force on the reader the personal theories of the author or to give her ideas the imprimatur of a scientific work. Rather, the book offered a summary of the religions, philosophies, secret doctrines, and traditions that the Brotherhood had braved persecution to convey to the West.²¹

Blavatsky was careful in describing Wilder's contributions to the final product. "It is he [Wilder] who made the excellent *Index*, who corrected the Greek, Latin, and Hebrew words, suggested quotations and wrote the greater part of the introduction 'Before the Veil.' If this was not acknowledged in the work, the fault is not mine, but because it was Dr. Wilder's express wish that his name should not appear except in footnotes."²²

As a moral alternative to Darwin's chance universe, Blavatsky presented an evolutionary narrative that attracted both British and Americans to her drama of human history rising to a state of blessedness and justice. Guided by the Adepts, she offered their wisdom to avoid existential threats coming from the materialistic world and from those institutions associated with Christianity whose efforts to control and stigmatize knowledge had at last been quenched. As Olcott explained, Theosophy was the most practical of philosophies taken "from the long-hidden stores of knowledge that had been possessed by the early sages of the Aryan race in India." Theosophy was not opposed to

Spiritualism; in fact, there was no better friend and ally. He accepted the manifestations as being real but disagreed with the intelligence behind it. Spiritualists maintained that the intelligence came from departed spirits, whereas Theosophists taught that it came from a living person's mind by way of telepathy. "Telepathy working through an Astral body accounted for a great deal of the results that were obtained by mediums, and that explained a great many of the phenomena," including how matter (i.e., tables, utensils, etc.) could be hurled across a room.²³

Olcott and Blavatsky offered the mysticism of the East as the answer to the West's crisis of faith. Its practical and evolutionary cosmology rested on the proposition of ascent as part of a single, divine whole. It provided a comforting response to Darwin's theory of natural selection. By giving Spiritualism an occult basis in a reconstituted Hinduism and Buddhism, it effectively offset the increasing skepticism toward the century's magician/mediums who were almost daily accused of fraud.²⁴

Adyar

In 1878 Olcott and Blavatsky sailed for India, settling in Adyar, a suburb of Madras, to continue their work. There, the two began steering in different directions. Despite efforts to accommodate both within its ranks, Theosophy proved to be a stern master. While the genteel Olcott treated Theosophy as a scientific body of truth meant to advance moral and social harmony,

Blavatsky used the occult laws to unveil the secretive cosmic agenda of the Adepts. The former was democratic while the latter chose a top-down authoritarian approach. In *the Secret Doctrine* (1888), she discussed the extent to which Theosophy encompassed spiritual, psychic, intellectual, and physical differences among the seven races or divisions of humanity. Of the seven root races, the fifth, called the Aryan race, was expected to last for approximately 210,000 years and then replaced by a sixth, the germs of which were found in southern California, Australia, and New Zealand. Along with this replacement was the expected ascension of a World Teacher who would initiate a new religion.

Blavatsky, who insisted that all religions were true, distanced herself from Olcott's growing affinity for Buddhism. In place of Blavatsky's combination of Spiritualism and science, Olcott inserted a mix of scientific reasoning and Buddhism. With his faith anchored in Buddhism, Olcott proceeded to utilize Western translations of ancient texts to teach a reform type of Buddhism. In 1880, he traveled to Ceylon where he publicly announced his conversion to Buddhism. A year later, he published the *Buddhist Catechism* which offered a westernized version of Buddhist thought. Stephen Prothero identified the two adversaries as "feuding kin" who poached on each other's spheres. Their provocations against each other ended with Blavatsky's death in 1891. With her passing, Olcott restructured the Theosophical Society, directing it away from Spiritualism to a more traditional religious

organization. During the ensuing years, he led the opposition to Christian missionary control over Ceylon's educational system, and expanded his reform efforts to Burma, India, and Japan.²⁵

In his claim that Buddhism was a scientific rather than a revealed religion, Olcott approached science as the exploration of the unseen universe and the sphere of causes at the center of creation. In particular, he advocated Buchanan's science of *psychometry* which permitted a person to sense the history of an object simply by holding or touching it, and the science of *odyic force* proposed by the Austrian chemist and philosopher Baron Karl Ludwig Von Reichenbach and Dr. H. Baraduc, a French physician and parapsychologist. Baraduc claimed the existence of an "aura" or halo surrounding all human beings, animals, trees, plants, and even stones. Olcott used these pseudo sciences to explain the textual descriptions of the Buddha with *buddharansi* rays or auric light emanating from the head. Belief in the powers attributed to the Buddha (or the Adepts in Theosophy) derived not from unquestioned faith or miracles but an alternative world of occult science centered on the unseen forces of magnetism, clairvoyance, mediumship, auras, and similar paranormal claims.²⁶

Olcott had a penchant for the work of Rhys Davids and Max Müller who had transformed their Oriental interests into academic fields of study. Drawing from their research, he reconstructed a modern manifestation of Brahmanism and Buddhism out of what remained of its ancient truths. As explained

by Prothero, “Olcott set himself up as Asia’s savior, the outsider hero who would sweep in at the end of the drama to save a disenchanted subcontinent from spiritual death.” In doing so, he joined with other reform Orientalists in defining their religion in ethical and moral terms rather than in ritualistic creeds. Revered as the “White Buddhist,” Olcott brokered a religious tradition that, while Buddhist in name and type, included “the religious beliefs and behaviors of American Protestant modernists, the cultural assumptions of European academic Orientalists, and the social class preoccupations of New York City’s metropolitan gentry.”²⁷

Divine Science: Anthroposophy

The Austrian philosopher, reformer, economist, esotericist, and architect Rudolf Steiner devoted his life to uncovering the purpose and nature of humanity through an occult-leveraged belief in the unity of science (i.e., materialism) and religion (i.e., spirituality). Objecting to a world that favored materialism as the universal solvent for all living and non-living phenomena, he countered by asserting that humanity and the physical universe had a spiritual origin involving higher forms of life and consciousness. He insisted that one could not understand the world by only using the analytical tools of modern science.²⁸ He viewed history as the progressive development of human consciousness including the assertion that the thoughts, feelings, and impulses of the living were connected

with the dead. “All history, all social dynamics, all ethical life, proceed by virtue of cooperation between the so-called living and the so-called dead.”²⁹

Born of Austrian parents of peasant stock in the village of Kraljevec, between Hungary and Croatia, in the Slavic hinterland of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Steiner grew up amidst the claims of two competing realities—those living in the shadow of the Catholic Church whose ritualism gave him access to both the sensory and supra-sensory worlds, and the birth pangs of modernity with its unanticipated effects from the railroad and telegraph culture. The eldest of three children, he was schooled until age nine by his father, a minor railway official for the Southern Austria Railway. After the family moved in 1868 to Neudörfl, a Hungarian village near the Lower Austrian frontier, he entered school where he found joyous curiosity in the subject of geometry. The more he studied it, the more conscious he became of the invisible aspects of the universe. For example, he claimed at age nine to have seen the spirit of his aunt who had died in a distant town, and using geometry, confirmed the experience to his satisfaction. It was geometry, Steiner argued, that allowed him to perceive the existence of the unseen world.

When people died, I followed them as they journeyed into the spiritual world. After the death of one former classmate, I wrote about this aspect of my inner experiences to a former *Realschule* teacher with whom I had retained a friendly

relationship. His reply was unusually kind, but not a single word in the letter referred to what I had written about the dead schoolmate. . . . no one wanted to hear about it.³⁰

Notwithstanding Steiner's personal preferences, his father intended for him to make a career as a railroad engineer and enrolled him at the *Realschule*, an intermediate-level prevocational school where he expanded his interest in geometry to include mathematics, physics, the theory of probabilities, and geometric drawing. By age fifteen, he was reading Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and seeking to understand the power of thought and the degree to which reasoning could allow one to understand the true nature of things. While his teachers kept Steiner focused on the development of skills that would bind him to a practical life, his access to the private library of a physician in Wiener-Neustadt drew him into the world of poetry, history, literature—a direction that allowed him to cover nearly the whole of a *Gymnasium* education and earn money tutoring other boys.³¹

After graduating from the *Realschule*, Steiner entered the Institute of Technology (*Technische Hochschule*) in Vienna in 1879 where he quickly immersed himself in the study of Goethe and a broad range of artistic, scientific, and historical literature. So impressive were his academic accomplishments that a year before his graduation in 1883, he was invited to become editor and archivist for Goethe's writings on natural science. Under the sponsorship of Grand Duchess

Sophie of Saxony, the project eventually took 113 volumes to complete. From Goethe, Steiner learned to appreciate the spiritual relationship between humankind and the world of science. "To me," wrote Steiner in his *Autobiography*, "Goethe is the Galileo of organic nature."³²

When Steiner moved to Weimar in 1890 to work at the Goethe Archives, his position brought him in contact with an international group of writers and artists. There, too, he took additional coursework at the University of Rostock, earning him the Doctor of Philosophy in 1891 writing a dissertation that examined the concept of the ego in Fichte's writings which he published as *Truth and Knowledge: Prelude to a Philosophy of Freedom*, followed by *Philosophy of Spiritual Activity* in 1894. These two works were among the earliest examples of European philosophers looking beyond the dualism of Rene Descartes and the subjectivism of Kant.

In 1897, Steiner moved to Berlin where he became editor for the *Magazin für Literatur*, a journal he used as an outlet for his own ideas, including his defense of Emile Zola during the Dreyfus Affair. Increasingly, too, he found himself breaking from the materialistic direction society was taking and speaking out openly on the spiritual and occult forces at work in the cosmos, the inner or spiritual nature of the human soul, and life after death. Drawn to the city's literary, artistic, and political activities, he made important contacts among poets and playwrights; taught courses in history and science at the Berlin Workers' Training

School (*Arbeiterbildungsschule*); published articles on Goethe; and began speaking to groups of Theosophists who he had become acquainted with during his student days in Vienna when he happened upon a copy of A. P. Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism*.³³ By 1899, Steiner had become a regular lecturer at the German branch of the Theosophical Society addressing subjects such as the interaction between humanity's earthly and spiritual existence; mediumistic Spiritualism; Christianity as a mystical fact; and opposition to the growing influence of scientific materialism.

Steiner's belief system, which he called *Anthroposophy*, (from the Greek meaning "man-wisdom"), represented a form of spiritual science that combined ethical individualism with ideas and practices drawn from science, Theosophy, Rosicrucianism, German idealism, and Freemasonry. Together, they guided the spiritual elements in the human being and the universe. Forever a searcher of truth, Steiner sought a world free from the siren appeals of both egotism and resignation. True knowledge does not depend on opinion or belief but on an experience in the spirit; this alone provided certainty about the true self. In a career that included thirty books and thousands of lectures, Steiner savored each new experience as contributing positively to body, soul, and spirit.³⁴

Steiner borrowed the term Anthroposophy from the title of a book published in 1856 by Robert von Zimmermann, a Czech-born Austrian mathematician and philosopher at the University of Prague. Zimmermann used the term to imply "human knowledge"

while Steiner expanded its meaning to identify something new, namely, that within human beings there existed a spiritual, or inner man, whose knowledge he identified as *spiritual science*.³⁵ However, as Helmut Zander at the University of Fribourg explained, Steiner's approach was simply a German variation of Theosophy rather than something wholly divergent in its approach.³⁶

Anthroposophy meant fostering the life of the individual and the broader humanity based on knowledge from the spirit-world. Although requiring no mandatory beliefs or practices, it included mantras intended for meditation and improved thinking, feeling, and willing. The life of the mind served as a reflection of what the soul experienced in the spiritual world and radiated into the person's physical world. Steiner was fond of the terms "etheric," "life-body," and "formative forces" to express the vitalistic force that derived from the cosmic ether.³⁷ Human consciousness stood between the organic forms of the sensory world and the universal types found in the spiritual world. Neither had primacy as both were essential to an understanding of the world. Truth was objective and an expression of the free human spirit. In this regard, Steiner accepted Darwin's and Haeckel's evolutionary perspective except when it came to human consciousness and human culture which he viewed much like Alfred Wallace, i.e., as a product not only of natural selection but of an evolution that transcended self. Anthroposophy enabled the individual to cut through competing epistemological methods

to understand the creative activity of non-physical processes.³⁸

Early in his thinking, Steiner began a search for real Christianity, an experience that resulted in a series of lectures titled “From Buddha to Christ.” In them, he showed nothing but contempt for the formal, organized aspects of Christianity. Instead, he addressed Christianity’s esoteric, syncretic, and cosmic elements, whose inner content—not doctrines—dealt with the central meaning the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ. Christ carried a special status with Steiner due to a personal experience in 1899 which he called “the Mystery of Golgotha.” This resulted in an idea of Christ that was not affiliated with being a Christian but as a unifier for all religions, bringing love to human consciousness. It was the Incarnation of the being known as Christ that transcended all religions. That said, only the gnostic elements of Christianity drew his interest.³⁹

From 1903 to 1908, Steiner published the magazine *Lucifer-Gnosis* with articles that addressed such subject matter as reincarnation and karma, spiritual and natural influences on evolution, the path of spiritual development, and the human being as body, soul, and spirit. At this time, Steiner explained, the natural sciences were capable of solving the great riddles of human existence. So dazzling had been the advances in human progress that society failed to understand that the fruits of modern science extended only so far, beyond which was darkness. Those who fell in step with Haeckel and the views of Darwin, believed that the world was formed out of purely material substances

and forces. In this scenario, modern man lost his connection with spiritual life and the soul aspect of his being.⁴⁰ But Darwin's views proved unstable in spite of his imposing stature to provide a satisfactory understanding of the spiritual forces at work in the cosmos. Evolution may have explained humanity's mastery over the material environment but the transitioning of humanity to self-consciousness had yet to be calculated into the formula. Humans existed between two worlds: "We are incorporated into a 'lower world' with our bodily development; with our psychic being we constitute a 'middle world': and we strive with our spiritual forces for an 'upper world.'"⁴¹

Like other gnostic thinkers, Steiner hoped to reconcile his perception of the spiritual world, which included clairvoyance, with modern science. This meant rejecting the unbridled acceptance of natural selection for a more tailored form of evolution driven by spiritual forces that infused it with a teleology and a self-consciousness that had evolved over the centuries. Different forms of this evolutionary vision were already evident in the works of Asa Gray, Alfred Russel Wallace, St. George Mivart, Helena Blavatsky, and Lester Ward. With consciousness came choice and the ability of humanity to participate in the direction evolution took. Their works sought to encompass the progressive development of human consciousness and freedom. Through meditation, reflection, intuition, and prayer, humanity had the power to accelerate evolution toward an unified destiny which was another way of saying that human evolution included blind

chance in the early stages of human development, but changed to choice and creativity as it transitioned into greater consciousness. Left unresolved was whether Christian occultists or their Oriental counterparts had greater claim to this esoteric form of evolution. For Steiner, the matter was simple to resolve. The Mystery of Golgotha had proven pivotal in man's evolution. This implied that Christianity was different from every other religion and insured a spiritual future for humanity and the fulfilment of the prophetic visions of the ancient Mysteries, offering a state of consciousness that lifted human beings to a higher supersensible reality than simply the sense world.⁴²

Like Spiritualism, Anthroposophy insisted on being identified as a "spiritual science" that involved disciplined meditation in place of laboratory experimentation. In Steiner's thinking, the spiritual world, much like the natural world, was amenable to scientific investigation. Any examination of that world, which he insisted was an indivisible unity, required the ability of human consciousness to divide that unity into sense perceptible units. He based this decision on his own clairvoyant experiences which, like the Fox sisters, he regarded as verified research. Steiner intended to make spiritual science the equivalent of natural science by forging a path of knowledge leading to a better relationship between inner spiritual consciousness and the world of ordinary thought and experience. The knowledge gained from learning the secrets of the spirit-world were of momentous significance to what the soul inwardly needed and the life that took place

between death and a new birth. It meant bringing the human soul into communion with souls of those formerly of earth and beings from other hierarchies.⁴³

Both Theosophy and Anthroposophy believed that truth could be attained through direct communication with the spiritual world. However, while they shared a similar vocabulary, their words did not always mean the same. There was much in Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine* that was nowhere to be found in Steiner's thinking. Steiner once commented that "Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine* is a peculiar book: the great truths side-by-side with terrible rubbish."⁴⁴ Nevertheless, they both gave birth to "New Age" thinking with its path to spiritual enlightenment. The differences between Theosophy and Anthroposophy were such that, rather than Theosophy's emphasis on Buddha, Steiner described Buddha as the precursor to Christ.

Steiner was never a card-carrying member of the Theosophical Society; nonetheless, he served as General Secretary of the Theosophical Society's German branch from 1903 to 1913, and leader of the *Esoteric Society* for Germany and Austria. It was only when Annie Besant, president of the General Theosophical Society, announced that the Indian boy Jiddu Krishnamurti was the Christ reincarnated, the second Messiah, that Steiner decided to leave the society. He explained that Blavatsky and Besant had mixed so much error into their spiritual worlds that he considered it necessary to give Anthroposophy a dramatically different expression. As his society took on a life of its own, there was the felt need among its members

to construct a building to house its research and creative activities. The result was a uniquely designed structure known as the “Goetheanum” on the hills outside the village of Dornach. Much of the spirit of Anthroposophy was represented in its architecture.⁴⁵

When the schism materialized, nearly all the membership in the German branch of Theosophy chose Steiner’s Christian views over Besant’s Orientalism. The schism resulted in the formation in Cologne of the General Anthroposophical Society in 1913, and was re-founded in Dornach, Switzerland, in 1923. All things considered, Steiner identified with Western occultism and the European cache of ancient knowledge of esoteric thinkers and mystics. Arguably the principal reason for the break stemmed from Steiner’s insistence in Christ being a unique divine act, the fulfillment of what the ancient religions had prophesized.⁴⁶

The Great War proved to be a personal disappointment to Steiner and his family, a situation made worse by the social upheavals that came with the Wilsonian plan for the resettlement of Europe. Steiner reacted by becoming heavily involved in postwar politics, expressing his opposition to Wilson’s rewriting the map of the Europe around ethnic groupings by promoting an alternative. In *The Threefold Social Order*, published in 1919, he offered an answer to the riddle of how best to organize human society. Its core concept formed around economic, legal, and cultural recommendations. All this was done in the wake of the communist revolution in Russia and the challenge by socialist movements to reorganize the German nation.⁴⁷

Anthroposophy's metaphysical framework includes not only the development of the soul but the race as well, leaving evidence of a Social Darwinian view of the world and a contextual basis for racial concepts that negatively affected Steiner's legacy. However, it is difficult to separate his views from those concepts of evolutionary development in human capabilities imbedded in almost all Western science and its social sciences. In them, terms such as "Negro," "Mongol," and "Caucasian" carried clear implications of racial taxonomy. Racial progress occurred only when certain grades of human existence were attained and others left behind, and where the conditions or encounters of individual racial and ethnic groups conjoined with certain biological and psychological constructs. Steiner's racial theories were no different from other Social Darwinian views common to the United States and the European community. Along with other Western thinkers, his concepts of a racial hierarchy, anxiety over racial decline and stagnation, anti-Semitic imagery, retrograde ethnic and racial groups, and the existence of decadent branches of humankind were either stated or implied. Thus, the contextual nature of Anthroposophy's racial and ethnic concepts was consistent with the intellectual landscape of Western thought of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, a period when such ideas and classifications were embedded in its scientific and social scientific thought. What made his *Knowledge of Higher Worlds* (1905), *Cosmic Memory* (1908), and *The Mission of the Folk Souls* (1910) stand out was not any particular theory

or notion of race, but the intersection of Steiner's classifications of different racial groups with the social, political, economic, and cultural fallout from Germany's defeat in the First World War.⁴⁸

In December of 1923, Steiner took part in the Christmas Conference in Dornach involving over eight hundred participants. At the conference, he announced the formation of a School of Spiritual Science which included sections for general Anthroposophy, education, medicine, performing arts, the literary arts and humanities, mathematics, astronomy, science, agriculture, and the visual arts. Rather than place Anthroposophy at odds with science, he urged each section to become comfortable in the other's existence. His spiritual science was intended not to replace religion or become a separate religion. Instead, he intended to make Christianity better understood which required identifying Christ as the future of humanity. As a philosopher, he thought it possible for the individual to access a spiritual life beyond the senses. Besides providing research, teaching, and training activities in each of the Society's interest groups, all branches offered a common set of core courses that included evolution, the history of humanity, and training in spiritual science.⁴⁹

In explaining the leading thoughts of the Anthroposophical Society, Steiner insisted that it should not become the expression of a single personality or group. Instead, the society was a place whose greatest benefit derived from those instances where opinions were broadly accepted. Anthroposophy was a path for the human spirit to move beyond sensory intuition

by opening vistas into the spiritual world. Because Steiner objected to ritual practices, none were mandatory. Except for study and meditation, there was little structure. Thus, the content of its exercises varied widely as members learned the forms of thinking, willing, and feeling.⁵⁰

Not until the 1920s, did occultism and science part ways when Steiner gave up his dream of “naturalizing the supernatural and instead [placed] greater stress on spiritual enlightenment.” Steiner’s intent, as explained by Elana Gomel of Tel Aviv University, “was meant to cancel out the divide between matter and spirit, knowledge and value, science and revelation. By replicating their own discourse, the dichotomous structure of science, spiritualism and occultism placed themselves in a position of perpetual transgression. When the collapse finally happened, it either blew them into incoherence or led to a total rejection of science and western rationality, the choice taken by the heirs of Spiritualism, i.e., Theosophy, Anthroposophy, and various New Age cults.”⁵¹

Those who now come together in the Anthroposophical Society are cognizant of the limitations of the natural sciences when it comes to understanding consciousness and matter. It is therefore the aim of spiritual science and Anthroposophy to provide the answers. It is this science that sees beyond the human physical body to the etheric body that lies hidden. Spiritual science comes to know the etheric life of beings and how they are

connected to the earth and other cosmic bodies and the rhythm of the cosmos. Given that the spiritual element surrounds us every bit as much as does the physical environment, it was imperative to understand through spiritual research just how spiritual beings and spiritual powers affect our world. The dead are very much around us and much of it arises out of “mere capriciousness.”⁵²

Steiner's intended his spiritual science to accomplish for the spirit what natural science did for nature. By this, he did not mean the use of asceticism, vegetarianism, rappings, telepathy, materializations, or other sense-perceptible activities related to Spiritualism. His form of spiritual science regarded the dead as living in a sphere different from those in the physical world but the exercise of any power over them was unlikely to come from the intentions of a medium.⁵³ Communication with the dead was possible, but difficult, requiring control and discipline. When such intercourse did happen, it was through clairvoyance. Ordinary consciousness knew nothing of this communication with the dead because it lay in the subconscious. For too long, civilized life conspired to hinder contact with the spiritual world. Nevertheless, the moments of waking and going to sleep were especially important times to communicate with the dead. The dead neither heard nor communicated in normal speech; instead, communication came in the form of dreams.⁵⁴

In response to the Victorian crisis of faith which questioned the inevitability of human progress, a cadre of intellectuals began a discourse suggesting that Theosophy, more so than Christianity, best suited the needs of the emerging scientific world. While Christianity continued to struggle with the existential challenges resulting from the higher criticism and the unintended consequences of Darwin's evolutionary dysteleology, Theosophy encountered the world with a sophisticated set of beliefs that included psychic intuition, occult racial theories, bursts of energy or chakras, and spiritual enlightenment. It projected humanity moving through an ascending arc of reincarnation before arriving at pure consciousness. Purported to be the esoteric wisdom of the world's most revered religious prophets (Moses, Krishna, Lao-tzu, Confucius, Buddha, and Christ) handed down through an ancient brotherhood, it became a worldwide movement drawing into its fold such luminaries as George Bernard Shaw, Lyman Frank Baum, James Henry Cousins, William Butler Yeats, Lewis Carroll, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Jack London, James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, T. S. Eliot, Thornton Wilder, Kurt Vonnegut, Lewis Carroll, Susan B. Anthony, and Thomas Edison. By 1884, there were 104 chartered branches of the Theosophical Society world-wide and nearly 200 by 1890.⁵⁵

By contrast, the Anthroposophy chose a reconstituted form of Christianity whose Christ became the unifier of all religions. With branches in fifty countries it supports programs that include the Waldorf network of schools; the Camphill network of communities;

a performance art movement known as *eurythmy*; a Christian Community emphasizing the healing presence of Christ; an alternative form of biodynamic agriculture; a vitalistic and holistic form of integrative medicine; and a Curative Education program for the treatment of children with disabilities. The movement known as “The Christian Community” founded by forty-five pastors led by Friedrich Rittelmeyer involves both Protestant and Catholic pastors seeking a free and personal relationship to Christ independent of any dogma or doctrines. The path to knowledge requires freedom of spirit, love, and a sense of equality and concern for human rights. As for Anthroposophical medicine, it started with two assumptions that are also common with homeopathy, the first being that all illnesses are spiritual in nature; and the second, that all material drugs are infused with spirit. Its advocates explain that good health is based on the alignment of the “self” or “I” with the life forces of the “etheric body” and the soul forces of the “astral body.” Because of one’s “karmic destiny,” disease reflects the errors of one’s previous lives and serves as a purging or cleansing process for the individual. Thus, medical intervention is sometimes considered unwise. Though opposed to inoculations for fear of interfering with karmic destiny, anthroposophical doctors make common use of herbal and homeopathic products.⁵⁶

6

AMERICAN PORTRAITS

According to Hudson Tuttle and J. M. Peebles, editors of *The Year-Book of Spiritualism for 1871*, modern Spiritualism is “thoroughly democratic, seeking the advancement and the good of all [without the] distinction of caste, birth, or talent.” Those mental and moral differences that exist among human beings are gradually disappearing along with “the arbitrary barriers which oppress the lower and exalt the higher classes, in mental life.” Unlike their British cousins, American Spiritualists possess “greater freedom and independence elevating the masses from theological bigotry and superstition.” Theirs is a form of Spiritualism where “every individual receives and determines for himself” and where there are neither dogmas nor creeds.¹ Part of Spiritualism’s strength grew out of the communitarian movement in the United States where spiritualists, steeped in the writings of Swedenborg, found a ready home among the laboratories of socialisms created by the

supporters of Owenism and Fourierism. Altogether, the Owenite and Fourierist communities were established in Ohio (10), New York (9), Pennsylvania (7), Indiana (5), Massachusetts (3), Illinois (3), New Jersey (2), Michigan (2), Wisconsin (2), Tennessee (1), and Iowa (1). Those spiritualists who were members of these communities experienced both prophecies and practical failures. Swedenborg's offer of a new heaven and a new earth charmed members as they sought to reduce the universe to some semblance of scientific order. Even non-Christians liked him because he discarded much of the Bible as not belonging to the Word. As explained by John Humphrey Noyes, "Unitarianism produced Transcendentalism; Transcendentalism produced Brook Farm; Brook Farm married and propagated Fourierism; Fourierism had Swedenborgianism for its religion; and Swedenborgianism led the way to Modern Spiritualism."²

Adin Ballou

The Rev. Adin Ballou, one of the early religious reformers attached to the Universalist and Unitarian fellowship, founded the Hopedale Community in Worcester County, Massachusetts, a spiritualist community that exploded in 1850 with rappings, trance-writings, and flying furniture. In 1853, he published *Exposition of Views Respecting the Principal Facts, Causes and Peculiarities Involved in Spirit Manifestations* in which he claimed a middle ground between the "over credulous believers" of Spiritualism on one side, and the

“pertinacious sceptics” on the other, both of whom had made “rash and wholesale conclusions.” He insisted that the manifestations represented the beginning of a regeneration of mankind and provable by the conclusive testimony collected by different investigative committees. “I believe that departed spirits cause many of these phenomena, but not all of them,” Ballou admitted. Sometimes the mind of the medium, or the collective minds of persons in the spirit-circles affected by the manifestations of “low and very imperfect departed spirits” distorted the effects.³

An ardent spiritualist, nonetheless, Ballou held that ignorance had kept the world in fear of “evil spirits, ghosts, goblins, and witches.” For himself, having collected different statements concerning phenomenal demonstrations, he concluded that fear of these evil spirits had been a self-inflicted wound caused by pernicious skeptics of the American psyche, resulting in an unanticipated delay in humanity’s advancing knowledge. Believing that humanity was only at the dawn of these manifestations, society must become more mindful of its truths: “Some of them are seemingly, if not really, miraculous, and all of them astonishing to the common mind.”⁴

Ballou recounted dozens of manifestations in and around the Rochester region in the months following news of the Fox sisters. Believing they were well authenticated, he accepted them as true behaviors of departed spirits. After itemizing dozens of incidents, he had witnessed during séances, he concluded that God, the angels, and all the higher spirits were

“forever seeking the elevation of the inferior spirits, by all just, wise, and appropriate means.” This included ministering to struggling spirits on earth to elevate and bless them. “Spirits in any circle can descend into all the circles below their own, but cannot, except by temporary permission, ascend into a higher sphere, until qualified by spiritual progress.”⁵

As for the theory behind the manifestations, Ballou speculated that matter and spirit co-existed in the universe: matter being inert and passive while spirit was active. Each consisted of different degrees of refinement with an endless interaction of magnetic effects that influenced each. Both matter and spirit were eternally co-existing substances in the universe. Although different in their nature and operating levels, they complimented each other. Every individual was a combination of spirit and matter, with the spirit animating the fleshy body during mortal life and departing at death. Human spirits had two spheres of consciousness—an external material sphere, and an internal spiritual sphere. Only a select few individuals had the ability pass from one sphere to another, blending their two consciousnesses into one. These were the dreamers, somnambulists, mesmerists, clairvoyants, and seers capable of opening intercourse between the two states of existence.⁶

Ballou admitted to different classes of manifestations, namely, those of the first class that were made by reliable departed spirits; a second class modified by undeparted spirits; and a third class caused by “low departed spirits consociated with kindred spirits in the

flesh.” Believing that the New Testament confirmed these different spirit manifestations, it was important for everyone to examine, consider, reason, and judge for himself. Overall, however, there was too much data to simply ignore. Highly respected men and women, including many educated professionals, came to accept the manifestations. The explosion of these manifestations in thousands of locations established the reality beyond dispute. While some were uncouth and even vulgar, Ballou remarked, “few mortals are yet free enough from low and undignified conduct themselves, to justify this spiritual fastidiousness.” In due time, he predicted, humanity would witness higher levels of manifestations.⁷

In an article titled the “Practical Christian,” Ballou wrote about the need for correcting skepticism in the public mind. Over time, he hoped that truth would work its course, but he was disappointed in the outcome thus far. Despite its astonishing and convincing phenomenal developments, Spiritualism continued to move forward “in chaotic crudeness,” encouraging its opposers to treat its claims in a “contemptuous and unjustifiable manner.” Nevertheless, he remained convinced that “absolute good had been done” in demonstrating the existence of a spirit-world after death. While a firm believer that departed spirits sometimes manifested themselves to the living, he did not believe “in the wisdom, goodness, or infallibility of spirits indiscriminately.” Too much false reliance had been given them.⁸

Warren Chase

Warren Chase, another of Spiritualism's early pilgrims, defended mediumship as the instrument through which the spirit-world made itself known to the world. He remembered in the early 1840s how highly sensitive individuals had begun to 'toss and sigh'" as if experiencing premonitions of some great event about to be born. He noted, for example, in 1842 and 1843, the sect known as Adventists had predicted the end of the world. This was followed by a wave of Fourieristic communities, the expansion of the Lyceum Movement, and the endorsements of myriad reform ideas through the pages of Greeley's *Tribune*. All foreshadowed a higher and nobler social life that seemed just around the corner.⁹ Nevertheless, he claimed not to have been affected by the religious tidal waves from the Second Awakening. As a non-Christian, he came to Spiritualism following the deaths of two of his children and wondering where they had gone. This caused him to look initially for answers in mesmerism and its "tangled maze of curious experiments," none of which opened the spiritual world to his perception. From there, he and his wife looked to Fourierism and helped organize the Ceresco Phalanx (latter called "Ripon") in the northwest corner of Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin in 1844.¹⁰

As a resident of the Phalanx until it closed in 1850, he recalled participating in experiments with mesmerism; reading the work of La Roy Sunderland on pathetism; and finally, in 1847, sharing copies of Davis's *Principles of Nature* with his fellow communitarians.

Like his colleagues at the Phalanx, he felt new impulses shaking the Universalist churches a year or two before the Hydesville rappings and viewed the work of Thomas Lake Harris, S. B. Brittan, R. P. Ambler, William Fishbough, and John M. Spear as precursors to a new wave of religious fervor that he viewed as both scientific and metaphysical. By the time the rappings materialized, he and members of the Ceresco Phalanx were convinced of the spiritual origin of the information received through hypnotism. Among those he most admired were Davis, Brittan, Fishbough, and especially Harris whose eloquence and poetic imagery made him an inspirational lecturer and writer.¹¹ As for Swedenborg, Chase viewed him as a special messenger sent to reveal the Word of God's revelation. Others included Martin Luther, John Calvin, George Fox, John Wesley, John Murray, and Alexander Campbell. Among his own contemporaries he identified Thomas Lake Harris, A. J. Davis, and Joseph Rodes Buchanan as representatives of a select group of messengers from the spirit-world.¹²

In 1848, Wisconsin entered the union and Chase was elected to the State Senate as a Democrat, remaining for two successive sessions. In the election of 1849, he ran for governor of Wisconsin as the Free-Soil Party's candidate. His personal acquaintances included President Lincoln and Senators Henry Wilson, Benjamin Wade, Jacob Howard, and other leaders of the Republican Party, all of whom he knew to be Spiritualists. In 1876, he moved to California where he was elected U. S. Senator, edited a Greenback paper,

supported Henry George's reform measures, and lectured across the country on the topic of Spiritualism.¹³

Epes Sargent

Drawn to the notion of communicating with "the beyond," the American editor, poet, and playwright Epes Sargent hosted numerous séances and philosophical discussions on the spirit-world. The author of *The Scientific Basis of Spiritualism* (1880), he lamented the ridicule, denunciation, and scorn from the scientific community and particularly their refusal to examine occurrences like clairvoyance, direct-writing, and other psychic phenomena. As far as he was concerned, Spiritualism was the one true safeguard against superstitions in that it showed that "the unseen world is as much within the sphere of universal nature as our own; it is the solvent of many mysteries that have perplexed philosophers and stultified historians." Admitting that individuals had brought Spiritualism to ill-repute, he nevertheless considered it essential to counter those feelings with data.¹⁴

The progress of modern Spiritualism had been enormous, Epes argued, claiming at least twenty million adherents in all parts of the world. The time had come, he insisted, for its detractors to realize that Spiritualism's claim to scientific recognition was no longer a matter of doubt considering that geniuses such as Swedenborg, Johann Albrecht Bengel, Jung-Stilling, and Joseph de Maistre had saluted its existence. It was even professed by the Dutch philosopher Baruch

Spinoza when he said that all things are alive in different degrees. "The man claiming to be scientific, who imagines that he knows all the laws of nature so thoroughly that occurrences like clairvoyance and direct writing cannot take place without transcending the boundaries of scientific recognition," wrote Spinoza, "is himself under a hallucination more serious than any which he affects to deplore."¹⁵

Epes insisted that modern Spiritualism had well-established facts supporting its reality. He admitted, however, to confusion in the use of the term *spirit* which suggested an inner, intelligent, indestructible essence or force which animated the living organism and capable of existing outside the organism upon its death. The reasoning that accounted for these innate principles, he explained, concealed faith in thought, reason, and in God. ¹⁶

The Spiritualist's theory is, that life is continuous; that the word immortal must be taken in its etymological sense as not-dying. Continuity of being must then be a natural effect of present causes. Thus the inquiry into the grounds for a belief in the existence of spiritual organs and powers in our human complex, already manifesting their operation in the earth-life, and forming the basis of life common to this state of being and the next, becomes a strictly scientific and experimental process, dealing with the finer and more recondite parts of the science of physiology, or with the psycho-physiological developments of our mixed

nature. It is because the fact of a future life has been confounded with speculative theological or religious questions, that it has shared their reputation as something transcending the verification of science.¹⁷

Drawing upon ‘experts’ such as Ira and William Davenport (whose trickery was exposed by Houdini and P. T. Barnum), the Bangs Sisters (fraudulent spiritualist mediums from Chicago who made a career out of painting ‘spirit portraits’), and Frederick L. H. Willis (expelled from Harvard Divinity School for acting as a spirit medium), and the pseudo sciences of pneumatology and pneumatography, Sargent claimed unequivocally that Spiritualism was a science, albeit still rudimentary in its development. Much like physiology and embryology which grew from small beginnings into scientific disciplines, he considered it necessary for Spiritualism to grow scientifically or die. For those who really knew its phenomena, Spiritualism was already as much a science as astronomy and chemistry. For these individuals, it was no longer necessary to deduce immortality from the emotions or as something of “vital necessity” to give meaning and purpose to life. For others, however, belief would depend on the further growth of the positive sciences.¹⁸

Thomas Lake Harris

The Rev. Thomas Lake Harris embraced Universalism at age twenty-one before turning to Spiritualism.

Born in Fenny Stratford, England, and brought to the United States by his parents as a young child, he was raised in a strict Calvinist environment, but became homeless following a rift with his family. After leaving Calvinism, he became a Universalist and held several pulpits in the Mohawk Valley before called to the Fourth Universalist Society in New York City where, following the spirit rappings of the Fox sisters, he became deeply involved in mediumship. For a time, he was a devout follower of Andrew Jackson Davis but parted ways over Davis's free-love scandals. Harris continued his experiences as a medium and organized his own First Independent Christian Society which involved a complex weaving of Swedenborgianism into his teachings and revelations.

In 1851, Harris and the Rev. James Scott, minister of an offshoot sect of the Seventh Day Baptists, joined a spirit-circle known as the "Apostolic Brotherhood" in Auburn, New York, where a Mrs. Benedict served as the group's medium. One of numerous spirit-circles in the Auburn area, it garnered notoriety when Scott announced himself as the mouthpiece of "St. John." Together with Harris, they published *Disclosures from the Interior and Superior Care for Mortals* (1851), a magazine whose columns were filled with messages and poetry from the spirit-world. The periodical pronounced both men as "chosen vessels" because of their visits to celestial regions in their trance-states. Despite distrust from other spiritualists, the two men grew more outspoken, claiming communication with the "Lord Himself." As opposition grew against them,

Scott received timely “instructions” to find a new home at Mountain Cove in Fayette County, Virginia, which he claimed was the location of the original Garden of Eden.¹⁹

With a band of over a hundred followers, Scott moved to Mountain Cove in 1851 where he claimed full authority in all matters financial, social, religious, and eternal. Those who dared to doubt his leadership were cast out as heretics. As dissension grew against him, particularly following charges of licentiousness, and as money ran short, Scott received a new “instruction” from the heavens to return to New York where he resumed his alliance with Harris. Months later, both men led a new group of families to Mountain Cove and published *The Mountain Cove Journal*. Once back in power, the two “chosen vessels” declared Mountain Cove to be the true gate to Heaven. Discord continued, especially after Scott demanded all followers to give up their possessions as gifts to the Lord. With that, all vestiges of peace were lost, and large numbers of the community departed. Dissentions continued, and the community died in 1853.²⁰

Following the breakup of the Mountain Cove community, Harris returned to Washington Square in New York City where the spiritualists received him as the prodigal son and where he ministered to a large congregation that included Horace Greely among its members. Called the Independent Christian Church, it formed along Universalist principles which included large amounts of Spiritualism in the form of automatic-writing which Harris used to explain his beliefs

and purposes.²¹ To the congregation's disappointment, however, Harris began delivering scorching lectures on the Scriptures, rejecting them as divine revelation. With opposition growing against him, he and his most loyal followers separated from the church and began meeting under the auspices of the Swedenborgians where "his teachings even out-Swedenborged Swedenborg himself" to the annoyance of New-Churchmen. As pastor of the Church of the Good Shepherd, he published and edited the *Herald of Light* which ran nearly six years and contained large amounts of his poetry which consisted primarily of realms of fancy, including accounts of "fays," or fairies.

In 1857, the New-Church Publishing Association of New York printed Harris's *Wisdom of Angels*, a work that consisted of Harris's communications with angels. However, according to the editor of the *New-Jerusalem Magazine*, the official publication of the General Convention, there was no evidence beyond Harris's own assertion that he had received these communications by the opening of the "spiritual degree of the mind." Moreover, the so-called New-Church Publishing Association suggested that the book had been authorized by the New-Church. "Who the persons are who are publishing such productions in the name of the New-Church, we do not know," reported the editor who suggested that Harris had apparently acquainted himself with the revealed truths of Swedenborg and then mixed them with "the vain imaginations of his own mind." The editor went on to explain that Harris had stigmatized the members of the New-Church

as a pernicious sect of “technical Swedenborgians” who hoped to become members of a church in heaven where Harris claimed to be a member. This heaven “may exist in his own mind, and in the minds of the spirits with whom he is associated, but which has no real and abiding foundation.”²²

A year later, Harris published *Arcana of Christianity* (1858), a book which he claimed was guided by the “Apostle John.” In it, he described a universe filled with suns and planets including pre-Adamic beings, choruses of angels, heavenly expanses, and layered orbs. Repudiated by New-Church leaders as a direct challenge to Swedenborg’s *Arcana Caelestia*, Harris nevertheless claimed to have discovered the divine plan of redemption and the cosmic struggle between the forces of heaven and the infernal spirits of hell.²³

Harris continued to lead his small group of admirers until persuaded that the Lord had more pressing demands of him, namely, to disseminate his wisdom in England where he taught a modified Swedenborgianism.²⁴ There, too, he gave a series of sermons at the Marylebone Institution and published several lengthy poems (“A Lyric of the Golden Age,” “An Epic of the Starry Heavens,” and “the Morning Land”) inspired by the spirits of Byron, Shelly, and Coleridge.²⁵ With the outbreak of the Civil War, Harris returned to the United States and settled in Dutchess County where he prospered as a banker and agriculturist, gathering around him a small cadre of devoted disciples. Central to his thinking was his belief that every individual had a counterpart in the opposite sex with whom he

could have both a physical and spiritual union after death; in the meantime, he permitted one's spiritual counterpart to inhabit and use the body of another living person.

These beliefs formed the basis of his Brotherhood of the New Life which he gathered in 1861 at Wassaic, and later at Amenia in Dutchess County, New York. In October 1867, after claiming to receive a direct message from God, he led his followers to the southern shore of Lake Erie where he founded the Brocton Community to grow grapes and maintain a dairy business. Comprising over sixteen hundred acres, it supported sixty adults and children, five orthodox clergymen, a small number of Japanese, and several individuals of high social position in British society, including Lady Oliphant and her son Lawrence Oliphant, a former member of Parliament. A strongly religious community, it drew the fundamentals of its doctrines from Swedenborg, to which Harris introduced additional revelations. As a sign of the community's intentions, its members called their community "The Use," a term drawn from Swedenborg's Doctrine of Uses. For Harris, who represented a Christianized form of Spiritualism, life in accordance with Christ's commandments meant that man was born of the Spirit and, as such, was drawn into communal relations with his fellow man. Aware of the problems attendant to communism, he claimed that he had vouchsafed through his revelatory communications that whatever issues had once existed, they were now rectified in this autocratically managed community.²⁶

The pivotal activity in the Brocton Community revolved around “internal respiration,” or “divine respiration,” which involved a form of suspended respiration under deep thought that brought each member into contact with the Divine (“oracular influx” or “afflatus”). In this condition, individuals were suffused with the spiritual atmosphere of the heavens, a state of purity and innocence without any detrimental effect on one’s freedom. The doctrines of Swedenborg, reinforced by Harris’s revelations and by the new respiration, served as the spiritual path taken by the community.²⁷

In the new respiration, God gives an atmosphere that is as sensitive to moral quality as the physical respiration is to natural quality; and this higher breath, whose essence is virtue, builds up the bodies of the virtuous, wars against disease, expels the virus of hereditary maladies, renews health from its foundations, and stands in the body as a sentinel against every plague. When this spiritual respiration descends and takes possession of the frame, there is thenceforth a guiding power, a positive inspiration, which selects the recipient’s calling, which trains him for it, which leads him to favorable localities, and which co-ordinates affairs on a large scale.²⁸

In 1875, Harris purchased four hundred acres at Fountain Grove in Santa Rosa, California, where he moved his favorite members.²⁹ Around that time, William Holcombe, MD, had several long interviews with

Harris and found him to be a “polished gentleman, exceedingly cordial in his manner and fascinating in his conversation.” Harris gave Holcombe the impression of someone who taught that the new heaven had descended and was regenerating humanity and whose Swedenborgianism derived from spiritual sources *outside* the New-Church. Holcombe likened him to one of the “virtuous and noble philosophers of antiquity” who derived his influx “from some other heavens, with states of thought and life, remote, unfamiliar and uncongenial to us, however great and good and useful they may be in themselves and under their own proper conditions.”³⁰

When several members of his Brotherhood turned to Theosophy, Harris chose not to ridicule Blavatsky’s communications with the Adepts but offered his own account of this mysterious group of Tibetan monks by publishing *The Wisdom of the Adepts. Esoteric Science in Human History* (1884), a five-hundred-page conversation between himself and “Adonai,” an Adept who offered a more comprehensive understanding of the universe than explained by Blavatsky or Swedenborg. With Adonai as his guide, Harris recounted the making of the solar system with its planets and races, including those of earth.³¹

We class the existing mankind of the earth into three divisions: The Survivalists, the Unfitnesses and the Inversives. The great portion of the race is of this middle type; unfit. Their internal spirituality is but little more than a living germ; their

soul-form is but a small embryo; their spiritual self-life is but the resemblance of an inferior orb; their memory form is but a sketch or an unfilled outline: their natural soul is but a cogener to the ape: their natural self-desire, unless disturbed, is easy and acquiescent; satisfied with the solace of a few inferior appetites; their life-body is filled up mainly by absorbed magnetisms, and the outer physical form imperfectly generated and made up of substances that are but partially cohesive . . . their seeming evil is largely from the drift of a general current of depravity and disease.³²

Having learned from Adonai that some of the Adepts sought to use occult methods to overturn Europe and America's faith in Christ, he used the book as a prophetic reaffirmation of his *Arcana of Christianity*. Rather than attack those enamored with Theosophy, he set out to win their support by expounding a story involving good and evil kingdoms, processions of souls passing from form to form, special rites and festivals, arcane mysteries, peaceful and learned civilizations, ancient books, existential threats, primeval secrets, and animating powers. The book paralleled Swedenborg's *Arcana Caelestia*, Davis's *Great Harmonia*, and Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled*.

Spiritualist Associations

In the April 1855 issue of the *North American Review*, the number of spiritualists in the United States was

estimated at nearly two million. According to Emma Hardinge, however, Spiritualism had a numerical strength of nearly nine million by 1861.³³ Judge John Edmonds, who estimated there were three million Spiritualists in the United States in 1854, claimed it had grown to eleven million by 1870.³⁴ Though a skeptic, Theodore Parker thought Spiritualism was more likely to become the religion of American in 1856 than Christianity would be the religion of the Roman Empire in 156, or that Mohammedanism would be the religion of the Arabian population in 756.³⁵

The explosion of periodicals dedicated to Spiritualism provides a good indication of its popularity in the United States. According to David K. Nartonis, an analysis of newspaper coverage confirmed the involvement of nearly eight-hundred cities and towns in spiritualist activities of one sort or another.³⁶ Ann Braude's superb analysis of spiritualist periodicals in the United States notes that from 1847 to 1850, only seven periodicals addressed spiritualist matters. Each decade that followed, saw the start of new publications. From 1851 to 1860, the number increased to 73; from 1861 to 1870, 41; from 1871 to 1880, 42; from 1881 to 1890, 51; and from 1891 to 1900, 34. Most publications survived only a few months, with barely fifteen percent lasting five years.³⁷

The first spiritualist church was built at Salem, Indiana, in 1858. The state also claimed two state organizations: the Indiana Association of Spiritualists which formed in 1888, and the Indiana State Association of Spiritualists which formed in 1904. Camp

Chesterfield, a camp on the banks of White River, was the second largest in the nation after Lily Dale in New York. Each year, an average of twenty thousand attended its six-week sessions beginning in July to observe manifestations and hear mediums explain the philosophy of Spiritualism and its different forms of communication. At the core of their sessions, a medium entered a trance-like state to deliver greetings from the spirit-world and orchestrate manifestations that gave the spirit-circle a sense authenticity. But the price proved too high as competition forced mediums into ambitious but stressful efforts to out-perform their competition.³⁸

The First Spiritual Temple, a Christian Spiritualist Church, was organized by Marcellus Seth Ayer who received a charter under the Massachusetts Commonwealth to establish the Working Union of Progressive Spiritualists in 1883. Born in Embden, Maine, Ayer fought for the North during the Civil War, and on his return, settled in Boston where he taught school and pursued a deep interest in religion and spirituality. Ayer's interests were broad-based, supporting women's suffrage and working with Andrew Jackson Davis in psychical research, mediumship, and religious thought. He was also a friend of Joseph Rodes Buchanan and thoroughly impressed with his science of psychometry and his ability to 'read' emanations given off by substances. Like Buchanan, he viewed psychometry as a psychic faculty, not one of mediumship. Following the refusal of the Kentucky State Medical Society to examine Buchanan's psychometric

claims, Ayer served as an honorary treasurer for a committee established in Boston to promote the doctor's research. Included on the committee were numerous New England spiritualists, including Andrew Jackson Davis.³⁹

Ayer personally financed construction of the First Spiritual Temple at the corner of Exeter and Newbury Streets in the Back-Bay section of Boston which was dedicated in 1885. Though its membership grew quickly to over a thousand, not all spiritualists were pleased with the church because its worship services were devoted to Christian ethics, God, and the Holy Spirit, rather than to spirit communication.⁴⁰ Despite the skepticism that surrounded Spiritualism, Ayer distinguished his church's spiritualist beliefs from the "heavy pall of negativity" surrounding the more traditional forms of Spiritualism.⁴¹ Ayer eventually deeded the temple to the Spiritual Fraternity Society of Boston which joined the National Spiritualist Association in 1895.⁴²

The earliest training school for spiritualists formed in Maple Dell Park in Mantua, Ohio, in 1851 by Moses and Mattie Hull. Forced to close because of financial difficulties, the school became the project of Morris Pratt who made his money in iron ore and who, in 1888, constructed a spiritualist school and temple in Whitewater, Wisconsin (later located in Milwaukee). The Morris Pratt Institute, the only spiritualist college in the country, was incorporated in 1901 and managed by a nine-person board of trustees and presided over by Moses Hull, president, and professor of

Homelectics. Professor A. J. Weaver served as first Principal, Florence Johnson as teacher of Oratory, and Mattie Hull was placed in charge of the Psychic Department. Its courses included Oratory, Voice and Physical Culture, English and Rhetoric, Bible Exegetics, Higher Criticism, Logic and Parliamentary Law, Comparative Theology, and Psychic Culture. Its educational objectives provided an opportunity for everyone to further his or her spiritual education and understanding and to prepare individuals for certification in the spiritual ministry.⁴³

Wisconsin was also home to *The Spiritualist* (1868) and the National Spiritualist Association of Churches which had its headquarters in Milwaukee. Among the state's most vocal advocates were ex-Governor Nathaniel P. Tallmadge who was a friend of the Fox sisters; Warren Chase, founder of the Ceresco Phalanx; the Spiritualist and healer Cora L. V. Scott who diagnosed illnesses while in a trance state; Lyman C. Draper of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin; Mary Hayes Chynoweth, spiritual advisor to Lyman Draper and Morris Pratt; the German-American labor reformer Robert Schilling; inventor Peter Houston; and author and poet Ella Wheeler Wilcox.⁴⁴

Loosely organized spiritualist churches were spread across the country. By 1870, twenty different spiritualist associations and 105 societies were operating in the United States, with several hundred mediums demonstrating their powers on the lecture circuit. Similar statistics confirmed spiritualism's popularity in Great Britain and on the Continent.⁴⁵ In New York

City there were approximately forty churches by 1930, fifty in Boston, and about the same number in Chicago. There was also a spiritual radio station which broadcast three times weekly at which time its members were to send out their thoughts; and an actual radio station (W.M.C.A.) which operated by arrangement with the Spiritual and Ethical Society of New York City.⁴⁶

The National Association of Spiritualists formed in 1864 and functioned until 1873. It had some eighty auxiliary societies but, according to critics, was dominated by “an element which did not represent the views of the great body of Spiritualists.” In Sept. 27, 1893, the year of the Parliament of Religions, a Convention of Spiritualist Societies organized the National Spiritualists Association (NSA). Its office was located in the Barr Building at 910-17th Street, N.W. Washington, D.C. until 1946, when it moved to 765 Oakwood Blvd. in Chicago, predicted to be the first city in the United States to throw off the chains of old theology and to proclaim herself an adherent of new religious sentiments.⁴⁷

The definitions adopted by the NSA in 1914, 1919, and 1930 were the following:

1. Spiritualism is the Science, Philosophy and Religion of continuous life, based upon the demonstrated fact of communication, by means of mediumship, with those who live in the Spirit World.
2. A Spiritualist is one who believes, as the basis of his or her religion, in the communication

between this and the spirit world by means of mediumship, and who endeavors to mold his or her character and conduct in accordance with the highest teachings derived from the communications.

3. A Medium is one whose organism is sensitive to vibrations from the spirit world and through whose instrumentality intelligences in that world can convey messages and produce the phenomena of Spiritualism.
4. A Spiritualist Healer is one who, either through his own inherent powers, or through his mediumship can impart vital, curative force to pathological conditions.⁴⁸

The NSA's "Declaration of Principles" adopted in 1899, 1909, and 1945, was not binding upon any member; neither was it an endorsement of the idea of God taught by orthodox Christians. They included the following:

1. We Believe in Infinite Intelligence.
2. We believe that the phenomena of nature, both physical and spiritual, are the expression of Infinite Intelligence.
3. We affirm that a correct understanding of such expression and living in accordance therefore constitute true religion.
4. We affirm that the existence and personal identity of the individual continue after the change called death.

5. We affirm that communication with the so-called dead is a fact, scientifically proven by the phenomena of Spiritualism.
6. We believe that the highest morality is contained in the Golden Rule.
7. We affirm the moral responsibility of the individual, and that he makes his own happiness or unhappiness as he obeys or disobeys nature's physical and spiritual laws.
8. We affirm that the doorway to reformation is never closed against any human soul, here or hereafter.
9. We affirm that the Precepts of Prophecy contained in the Bible are scientifically proven through Mediumship.⁴⁹

Reflecting the nation's racial divide, at the 32nd Annual Convention of the N.S.A. held in Los Angeles in 1924, President Warne called for a meeting of representatives from those societies composed of colored members to plan for a separate National Organization of Colored Spiritualists in 1926. This was followed by a new constitution and by-laws creating a National Colored Spiritualists Association of the U. S. A. with headquarters was in Detroit, Michigan.⁵⁰

Spiritualist churches and reading rooms were chartered by one of several national organizations: The U. S. Spiritualist Association (1893), the National Spiritualist Association (1893), the Progressive Spiritual Church (1907), the National Spiritual Alliance (1913), the International General Assembly of Spiritualists

(1936), and the Universal Spiritualist Association (1956), and. Besides competing with the Theosophical Society (1875) for members, these associations certified ministers, conducted courses, and sponsored summer campus in locations such as Ephrata, Pennsylvania; Chesterfield, Indiana; Lake Pleasant and Onset at Ocean Grove, Massachusetts; Cassadega, Florida; and Lily Dale, New York.⁵¹

7

SPIRIT COUSINS

The jeremiads of positivism insisted that true knowledge derived from sensory experience interpreted through reason and logic. Indebted to the works of Auguste Comte, Henri de Saint-Simon, and Pierre-Simon Laplace, this philosophic movement advocated the use of theory and observation to arrive at authentic verifiable knowledge. All knowledge, whether scientific, philosophical, or religious, was discernible in a concise and exhaustive manner through natural laws rather than from unquantifiable *a priori* or intuitive thought. For others, however, the vital issues of life and being existed outside the scope of rational science which they considered fragmentary and limited. For them, the most complete knowledge came from a unitary or universal science consisting of sense, reason, and wisdom. Their idea that the laws governing the natural and spiritual worlds were one, and that in either realm they were equally and effectually operative, resonated at a time when skepticism

and agnosticism had obtained traction among intellectuals questioning the meaning of life. These individuals saw two discrete realms, one material, the other spiritual, with man as the connecting link. On one side was the supersensible realm; the other, belonged to the sensible. The transition from one to the other was not a matter of distance but of vision.

The spiritual manifestations introduced into England by waves of amateur and professional mediums intent on money and fame produced a broad assortment of questionable claims and techniques. After a brief craze, the movement seemed to sputter out due to the skepticism resulting from British physicist Michael Faraday's claim that electrical or magnetic forces were responsible for the phenomena of flying objects and other manifestations. With the aid of skilled performers, he used the discoveries of electromagnetic induction and the laws of electrolysis to reproduce the manifestations claimed by mediums as spiritualistic phenomena.¹ Following the surprising manifestations produced by Daniel Dunglas Home, arguably among the most authentic of the century's mediums, Spiritualism again took hold of the public's interest. Supporters included genuine religious (William Howitt, Thomas Shorter, Mrs. Sophia De Morgan, John Garth Wilkinson) and scientific (Cromwell Fleetwood Varley, William Crookes, Alfred R. Wallace) interest in believing it worthy of both belief and serious study. To its credit, as explained by Frank Podmore, English Spiritualism "never attained to such dimensions as a popular movement, nor sunk to quite

so low a level of fatuity and imposture as the latter-day American Spiritualism.”²

Daniel Dunglas Home

The Scottish clairvoyant, psychic, and medium Daniel Dunglas Home emigrated when he was thirteen with his aunt and uncle to America sometime between 1838 and 1841. While living in Waterford, Connecticut, he turned to religion, embracing the Wesleyan faith before turning to Congregationalism. Claiming that his home had been disturbed by rappings like what had occurred in Hydesville, he began holding his own séances after which he traveled a circuit healing and communicating with spirits. Within a year, he was holding several séances a day and relying on gifts and donations from those he served, including Harvard professor David Wells and the poet and editor William Cullen Bryant.³

Diagnosed with tuberculosis in 1854 while studying medicine, Home returned to England where he continued his séances. Not long after holding a séance at the home of James John Garth Wilkinson, a close friend of Emerson and Henry James, Sr., Home's name became a household word.⁴ In his *Lights and Shadows of Spiritualism* (1877), Home recounted the presence of good and bad spirits communicating with humans since ancient times. The histories of Egypt, Assyria, Chaldea, Persia, Greece, Rome, India, and China were steeped in Spiritualism. In each of these ancient civilizations, invisibles walked among humans

and became guardians and guides to those who were agreeable. But eventually, Home explained, the good angels abandoned the earth, leaving dangerous spirits to counsel the living. He insisted that the manifestations were consistent with the doctrines of Swedenborg and noted that the most eloquent divines in his age tinctured their sermons with both Spiritualism and Swedenborgianism.⁵

Robert Browning found Home a very suspect character who he felt had fraudulently turned his wife toward Spiritualism. After his wife Elizabeth died in 1861, he wrote a satire titled “Mr. Sludge the Medium.” Published in *Dramatis Personae* in 1864, it was not so much a provocative attack on Spiritualism as it was on Home. The character known as Sludge maintained that even though he was caught in the act of cheating, he was an authentic representative of spiritual communication.⁶

Home traveled the Continent performing séances and demonstrating feats of levitation. His supporters included Robert Owen, Queen Sophie of Holland, John Ruskin, Robert Chambers, Napoleon II, and Tsar Alexander II. Among the guests at his sittings were Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Thomas Adolphus Trollope, Michael Faraday, and even Thomas Huxley.

Alfred Russel Wallace

As a member of the scientific community, the British naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace was well attuned

to the philosophical and scientific issues of his day, including the nature and age of the earth, the centers of creation, the meaning of fossils, the geographical distribution and affinity of species, and the succession of types. Together with Charles Darwin, he stands as the co-founder of the theory of natural selection. A spiritualized Owenite with interests in phrenology, life on Mars, ethnology, anti-vaccination, and socialism, he refused to substitute his privately held values for the patronage required for acceptance into Britain's rigid class system. Unfazed by rejection, he affirmed his faith in Spiritualism, using it as a springboard for his progressive political beliefs as well as his modified explanation of human evolution. Whether by choice or by default, Wallace was clearly the national symbol for Spiritualism in nineteenth century England. The indexes to every spiritualist journal in the country included multiple articles, comments, and editorials noting his role as a scientific man of eminence who came to believe in Spiritualism and who not only grappled with its detractors but stood his ground with arguments in favor of further inquiry. A generous, deferential, and warm-hearted man, and author of twenty-two books and over five-hundred articles, he won the admiration of nearly all who knew him.⁷

During his travels as a young naturalist in the Amazon, Wallace remembered reading reports of strange happenings in the village of Hydesville in western New York when "for the first time, intelligent communications" (i.e., rappings) took place between a twelve-year-old girl, Katie Fox, and the spirit of a murdered

man buried in the cellar of the house the family rented. Years later, after returning home from the Archipelago, Wallace continued to read about these events though he admitted being an “utter skeptic as to the existence of any preter-human or super-human intelligence.”⁸ From his knowledge of mesmerism, he knew there were mysteries connected with the human mind which modern science could not explain with satisfaction.⁹ He remained a skeptic until the summer of 1865 when he attended a séance and witnessed “table turnings” and “distinct tappings.”

It was in the summer of 1865 that I first witnessed any of the phenomena of what is called Spiritualism, in the house of a friend,—a sceptic, a man of science, and a lawyer, with none but members of his own family present. Sitting at a good-sized round table, with our hands placed upon it, after a short time slight movements would commence—not often “turnings” or “tiltings,” but a gentle intermittent movement, like steps, which after a time would bring the table quite across the room. Slight but distinct tapping sounds were also heard. The following notes made at the time were intended to describe exactly what took place:—

”July 22nd, 1865.—Sat with my friend, his wife, and two daughters, at a large loo table, by daylight. In about half an hour some faint motions were perceived, and some faint taps heard. They gradually increased; the taps became very distinct, and the table moved considerably, obliging us all to shift

our chairs. Then a curious vibratory motion of the table commenced, almost like the shivering of a living animal. I could feel it up to my elbows. These phenomena were variously repeated for two hours. On trying after wards, we found the table could not be voluntarily moved in the same manner without a great exertion of force, and we could discover no possible way of producing the taps while our hands were upon the table.”¹⁰

By 1866, Wallace was hosting weekly séances in his own home with his sister Fanny Sims and mesmerist Miss Anges Nichol. There, too, he reported observing the manifestations of flowers and fruit in the room besides the usual table-tilting, levitation, musical sounds, and raps.¹¹ In subsequent séances, he observed mediums who drew “ghost pictures” of deceased persons; perform slate-writing and drawing; and questions answered on behalf of otherworldly spirits.¹² In Wallace’s world-view, spiritualism and “intelligent evolution” complemented the larger teleological world.¹³

From then on, Wallace became so sure of the manifestations that he tried to interest friends and colleagues not only in observing and testing their validity but urging that it become part of a new branch of anthropology. Wallace’s willingness to entertain these paranormal experiences precipitated a deluge of criticism from colleagues within the scientific community. While Spiritualism proved to be no obstacle as scientists like William Crookes had already claimed it a

worthwhile approach, Wallace's venture into spiritual voyeurism was judged too extreme. Notwithstanding criticism, he insisted there was something authentic in the phenomena and joined Crookes and Oliver Lodge, philosopher Henry Sidgwick, psychologist Edmund Gurney, philologist Frederick Myers, and other scientists and philosophers anxious to explore its possibilities. He and his colleagues disregarded their critics, particularly since they had refused offers to participate in experiments designed to test their validity.¹⁴

When Wallace added Spiritualism to his theistic beliefs he was attacked by the scientific community. Satisfied, nevertheless, with its authenticity, he became an outspoken advocate anxious to draw others into a world where appearances did not necessarily align with the laws of the natural world, or at least those known at the time to be part of modern science. To the extent that light, heat, electricity, and magnetism were understood, and that an ether-type substance filled space, he felt there could be any number of plausible reasons for linking the material and spiritual worlds with some form of communication. Here was something that merited much more attention than given by the scientific community.

Wallace not only invited fellow scientists to pursue an investigation into the phenomena but encouraged their borrowing research methods from the established sciences and reframing them in the context of anthropology (i.e., a science using observational studies to interact with participants in a real-life environment) to maintain scientific credibility. This meant

identifying reliable witnesses and using fact-based techniques to construct reliable data sets based on observation and inductive reasoning. He urged the application of anthropology as the most appropriate method for examining human life and the spirit-world. Wallace's insistence on the reality of a spiritual world complimented his evolutionary paradigm which involved both the evolution of the material body and that of the spirit after death. Following the death of the physical body, the spirit began a "progression of the fittest" that carried the spirit to yet higher levels of spiritual attainment.¹⁵

Wallace's theory of Spiritualism began with the hypothesis that "spirit" was an integral part of all sentient beings and was how they perceived and acted toward other living beings. It was the spirit which felt, perceived, and thought in proportion to the complexity of its organization. The spirit in humans was their mind of which the brain and nerves were "the magnetic battery and telegraphy, by means of which spirit communicates with the outer world." Though this spirit was generally inseparable from the body, there were times when the spirit could leave the body for a period; however, at death, the spirit left the body forever.

The spirit like the body has its laws, and definite limits to its powers. It communicates with spirit easier than with matter, and in most cases can only perceive and act on matter through the medium of embodied spirit. The spirit which has lived and developed its powers clothed with a human body,

will, when it leaves that body, still retain its former modes of thought, its former tastes, feelings, and affections. The new state of existence is a natural continuation of the old one. There is no sudden acquisition of new mental proclivities, no revolution of the moral nature. Just what the embodied spirit had made itself, or had become—that is the disembodied spirit when it begins its life under new conditions. It is the same in character as before, but it has acquired new physical and mental powers, new modes of manifesting the moral sentiments, wider capacity for acquiring physical and spiritual knowledge.¹⁶

Among his observations, Wallace directed readers to the research of Baron Reichenbach on Odyic-Force, a reference to flames observed by “sensitive” individuals that allegedly surrounded living bodies. From there, he urged readers to look at Dr. William Gregory’s *Letters on Animal Magnetism* (1851), Robert Dale Owen’s *Footfalls on the Boundary of Another World*, (1860), Robert Hare’s experimental investigation of spirit manifestations, and Daniel Dunglas Home’s *Incidents of My Life* (1864). For Wallace, Spiritualism furnished proof of the existence of ethereal beings and of their power to act upon matter. More importantly, it indicated that the “so-called dead are still alive; that our friends are still with us, though unseen, and guide and strengthen us when, owing to absence of proper conditions, they cannot make their presence known.” From numerous observations and experiences, he

concluded that man was a duality, consisting of both a physical body and an organized spiritual form which evolved with the body; death was the separation of this duality but without any change in the spirit, morally or intellectually; progressive evolution was the destiny of each individual spirit; and spirits could communicate through mediums to warn, protect and influence those still in their physical existence.¹⁷

Just as Wallace had once pushed phrenology unsuccessfully to the scientific community, he found Spiritualism a challenge because of the frauds, including admissions from the Fox sisters which they later recinded. Convinced nonetheless that the manifestations were real, and desirous of making Spiritualism a new branch of anthropology, Wallace invited skeptics to examine the evidence. Thomas Huxley, William Carpenter, John Tyndall, and George Henry Lewes refused the challenge (although some would later agree to participate). Lord Avebury remarked in a letter to Wallace, "As to Spiritualism, my difficulty is that nothing comes of it. What has been gained by your séances, compared to your studies?"¹⁸ As for Huxley, he explained to Wallace: "I am neither shocked nor disposed to issue a Commission of Lunacy against you. It may be all true, for anything I know to the contrary, but really, I cannot get up any interest in the subject. I never cared for gossip in my life, and disembodied gossip, such as these worthy ghosts supply their friends with, is not more interesting to me than any other."¹⁹ And, in a letter to the Committee of the Dialectical Society, Huxley minced few words:

But supposing the phenomena to be genuine—they do not interest me. If anybody would endow me with the faculty of listening to the chatter of old women and curates at the nearest cathedral town, I should decline the privilege, having better things to do. And if the folk in the spiritual world do not talk more wisely and sensibly than their friends report them to do, I put them in the same category.²⁰

It seemed cruel that Wallace's invitations to attend and to investigate séances were turned down. Whether it was in reaction to Wallace's strong identification with Spiritualism, his apparent willingness to break with Darwin on the pivotal role of natural selection in the origin of man, his defense in court of several mediums exposed of fraud, or differences of class, the rejections did little to ignore the perceived indignity. Nevertheless, he remained a staunch believer. Wallace often complained, and rightly so, that the same colleagues who refused his offer for them to accompany him to a séance chose nonetheless to participate on other occasions. This included Huxley, Darwin's cousin Francis Galton, George Darwin, John Tyndall, George Romanes, Hensleigh Wedgwood, Augustus De Morgan, and W. B. Carpenter. On January 16, 1874, even Darwin attended a séance at the home of his son Erasmus Alvey Darwin in London but left before it had concluded.²¹

For those critics who pointed out the frivolous nature of the alleged communications, Wallace responded in true Spencerian thinking, that "men are

best educated by being left to suffer the natural consequences of their actions.” In other words, individuals “suffer the natural and inevitable consequences of a well or ill-spent life.” In this manner he explained away the need for spirits to change the course of humanity by providing advice on future political directions, detect crime, or name in advance the winner of a derby. Quite simply, the commonplace communications received during séances came from spirits of “various grades and tastes” who were neither fools nor knaves but “continue to talk after they are dead with just as little sense as when alive.” Still, he did not regard Spiritualism as an idle curiosity. “It is a science of vast extent, having the widest, the most important, and the most practical issues, and as such should enlist the sympathies alike of moralists, philosophers and politicians, and of all who have at heart the improvement of society and the permanent elevation of human nature.” Thus, he remained curiously immune to critiques and to his own inconsistencies in the matter of Spiritualism’s usefulness.²²

When his efforts at making Spiritualism a “science” failed, Wallace settled on combining both evolution and Spiritualism into a religion. To be sure, he was not alone in mixing the two. According to Martin Fichman, “Spiritualism and natural selection were never viewed by Wallace . . . as mutually exclusive . . . of a larger evolutionary teleology.” Not holding with the afterlife described by Christianity, he viewed Spiritualism as offering the “only sure foundation for a true philosophy and a pure religion.” It gave proof of a

future state of existence minus divisive creeds, winged angels, golden harps, and orthodox Christianity's system of rewards and retributions.²³

Given the overwhelming complexity and diversity Wallace found in the world, much of which science had brought to the notice of humanity, the *why* was left unanswered by both science and religion. "Science says: 'it is so. Ours not to reason why; but only to find out what is.' Religion says: 'God made it so'; and sometimes adds, 'it was God's will; it is impious to seek any other reason.'" Wallace rejected both answers. In his *Man's Place in the Universe*, he postulated that some "ministering angels" made it possible to influence the "cell-souls" to carry out their duties in accordance with some general design. "Some such conception as this—of delegated powers to beings of a very high, and to others of a very low grade of life and intellect—seems to me less grossly improbable than that an infinite Deity not only designed the whole of the cosmos, but that himself alone is the consciously acting power in every cell of every living thing that is or ever has been upon the earth." This, he believed, represented the best teachings of modern Spiritualism and directed readers to three authors in particular: W. Stainton Moses (*Spirit Teachings*, 1898), V. C. Desertes, (*Psychic Philosophy, as the Foundation of a Religion of Natural Law*, 1901) and Thomas Lake Harris (*A Lyric of the Golden Age*, 1856).²⁴

Having concluded that the universe was not a "chance product," Wallace accepted Spencer's belief that some "universal immanent force" which was both infinite and eternal underlay both matter and spirit. In

addition to an infinite being, there were infinite grades of influence of higher beings upon lower. "Holding this opinion, I have suggested that this vast and wonderful universe, with its almost infinite variety of forms, motions, and reactions of part upon part, from suns and systems up to plant life, animal life, and the human living soul, has ever required and still requires the continuous co-ordinated agency of myriads of such intelligences."²⁵

Though not reflective of his better works, *The Wonderful Century* (1898), *Man's Place in the Universe* (1903), and *The World of Life* (1910), represent an effort to summarize the last half century with its application of the Darwinian theory of evolution and consolidate his persistent belief in Spiritualism including his references to higher orders of spirits. In addition, he identified what had been accomplished as well as that which had been left undone, especially the shortsightedness of science in refusing to accept phrenology, mesmerism, and psychic phenomena; the perennial problem of wealth and poverty; the future of man's spiritual life; and the potential for the role of Mind in thought transference and in guiding evolution.

Spiritualism retained a special place in Wallace's revised interpretation of human evolution. Determined that natural selection could not explain the full depth of human evolution, he applied a teleological interpretation to *all* evolutionary processes.²⁶ With the publication of *The World of Life. A Manifestation of Creative Power, Directive Mind and Ultimate Purpose* (1910), he affirmed a spiritual causation for the

entire substratum of evolution. In making this final transition, he endorsed a vitalist account of life and a spiritual purpose which guided evolution. As Martin Fichman explained, Wallace should be understood in the context of those Victorian thinkers who found both traditional Christianity and scientific naturalism “incapable of providing adequate guidelines for a holistic philosophy of man.”²⁷ This disenchantment led him to pursue an alternate path that took him into a “World of Spirit” where man was destined to a “permanent progressive existence.”²⁸

Intermixed with Wallace’s feelings was his belief in an unseen universe, a world of spiritual influx that directed conscious and unconscious life outside of natural selection. Included in this world of spirit were gravitation, electricity, cohesion, chemical, and radiant forces—all working towards a “grand, consistent whole adapted in all its parts to the development of spiritual beings capable of indefinite life and perfectibility.”²⁹ According to Fichman, Wallace never viewed spiritualism and natural selection “as mutually exclusive explanatory pieces of a larger evolutionary teleology.” Even with his teleological and theistic views, he remained “the staunchest advocate of the sufficiency of natural selection as the agent of the evolution of animal and plant species—save in the case of human beings.”³⁰ Convinced of the existence of the spiritual world and a reader of Swedenborg as well as being a member of the Society of Psychical Research, Wallace urged the study of Spiritualism in a rational and scientific way to prove the existence of the spiritual world.

Arthur Conan Doyle

The Scottish physician and author Arthur Conan Doyle, whose works include twenty-two novels, twenty-three nonfiction books, 214 stories, fourteen plays, and an operetta, was one of ten children of Celtic-Catholic stock. He grew up in Edinburgh, Scotland, at a time when Victorians and Edwardians were tiring of organized religion. A graduate of the University of Edinburgh medical school and protégé of the diagnostician Dr. Joseph Bell, he became a vocal proponent of Spiritualism in 1887. However, it wasn't until the battle of Ypres and the unfulfilled dreams of those who died in battle, including his son, brother, and two nephews, that he sought to find some clearer perception of that which was so permanently and unexpectedly lost to a generation of young men.³¹

For Doyle, belief in the spirit-world was tantamount to breathing. His commitment was unbending in his resolve.

I have clasped materialized hands.

I have held long conversations with the direct voice.

I have smelt the peculiar ozone-like smell of ectoplasm.

I have seen the 'dead' glimmer up upon a photographic plate which no hand but mine had touched.

I have received through the hand of my own wife, notebooks full of information which was utterly beyond her ken.

I have seen spirits walk round the room in fair
light and join in the talk of the company.³²

Doyle insisted that Spiritualism was a system of thought that garnered universal appeal including the Brahmin, Mohammedan, Parsee, and Christian belief systems. Personally, however, he considered Spiritualism sufficient, without the need for dogmas and other extraneous practices. Doyle did, however, admire the early Christians whose pre-Nicene Fathers were unencumbered with the evils of ecclesiasticism. Nevertheless, Christianity and Spiritualism worked well together, and just as evolution had given Christianity “a broader and more worthy conception of Creation and its Creator,” so the benefits of psychic science promised to “turn an agnostic into a believer in God.”³³

As a member of the Psychological Research Society, the same compulsion that drove his invention of the character Sherlock Holmes caused him to explain both the science and religion of Spiritualism. Alongside his legendary Holmes whose construction of evidence brought numerous criminals to justice, he used similar skills to trace humanity’s search for eternal life and moral improvement through his two-volume *The History of Spiritualism* (1926), followed by the novel *The Land of Mist* (1926). The latter was a literary failure in almost every aspect, in part because the storyline left readers with neither a description nor a sense that spiritual life served any particular purpose. Doyle came to believe that the Summer-Land, as Davis

named it, was quite real, including schools to teach its spirit children. Nevertheless, he remained agnostic when it came to the truthfulness of what he read of others' accounts. "We are not fit yet for a purely spiritual life. But as we ourselves become finer, so will our environment become finer, and we shall evolve from heaven to heaven until the destiny of the human soul is lost in a blaze of glory whither the eye of imagination may not follow."³⁴

A believer in spirit photography, Doyle attributed the earliest account to March 1861 in Boston when William H. Mumler, an engraver whose hobby was taking photographs of himself, discovered a ghost image appearing next to him on a developed plate. In another of his pictures, the form of a young girl, a cousin who had died some twelve years earlier, appeared to be sitting in the same chair as himself. In 1868, Mumler moved to New York where he operated a prosperous enterprise producing "exposures" of spirits from the Other Side appearing in his photographs. With this dubious origin, a genre of spirit photography came of age which helped thousands of mourners cope with the losses of their sons and husbands in the aftermath of the Civil War. By purporting to show images of the deceased, he provided scientific validation for the occult manifestations generated by the séance that communication with the dead was real. In 1911, James Coates, a member of the Society for the Study of Supernormal Photography, published *Photographing the Invisible*. In it, he argued that the X-ray gave validation to the claims of Mumler's spirit photography.³⁵

In England, the first spirit photograph appeared in 1872 showing two deceased boys of William Howitt. Shortly thereafter, Alfred Russel Wallace claimed to have secured a picture of his mother standing beside. Another was Richard Boursnell, a professional photographer in Fleet Street, who reported having produced psychic markings on his plates. While his partner in business accused him of not cleaning his plates properly before reusing them, his “shadow pictures” gave individuals a recognized likeness to a dead relative or friend.³⁶

Although Doyle urged spiritualists to move beyond their fixation with phenomenal séances where fraud and chicanery had discredited their assumptions, observations, and speculations, his credibility and that of the entire spiritualist movement was permanently sullied when he chose to defend the legitimacy of spirit photography. This included the spirit photographs taken by Elsie Wright from the village of Cottingley who claimed to have made the acquaintance of a group of fairies when accompanied by her cousin Francis Griffiths into a nearby woods. One photograph, taken by Elsie in the summer of 1917 when she was sixteen depicted four fairies dancing before her; another showed Elsie seated on the grass with a gnome dancing beside her. The photographs were processed in 1920.³⁷

In his investigation of the sightings, Doyle relied on observations made by a clairvoyant in Cottingley Glen in 1921, and by mediums from Bournemouth, Branksome Park, Yorkshire, South Downs, West Sussex,

Wexford, and the Isle of Man. Each gave unqualified validation of the photographs. He also referred to similar accounts from New Zealand, the United States, Australia, and Ireland of persons observing goblins, gnomes, and fairies playing in groups and rings. His investigation included water nymphs, wood elves, and so-called brownies who stood about eight inches high and dressed entirely in brown. He also described Leprechauns as “thought-forms of the Great Beings, or angels, who are in charge of the evolution of the vegetable kingdom.”³⁸ In the preface of *The Coming of the Fairies* (1922), Doyle expressed hope that Spiritualism would not be weakened by his support of this “subhuman form of life.”³⁹

The great illusionist Harry Houdini encountered Spiritualism early in his career and began corresponding with Doyle several years before either of them became celebrities. Both made the séance a part of their performances. However, unlike Doyle who considered the séance a genuine and necessary component of Spiritualism, Houdini exhibited doubts and eventually outright skepticism. By 1922, Houdini was convinced that the manifestations of the séance could be replicated while Doyle felt more convinced than ever of his own psychic power as a medium. In response to his increasing doubts, Houdini decided to attack the very same charlatanism that he once practiced, debunking mediums for their sleight-of-hand tricks and deceptions. Before long, he was earning a reputation by putting on exhibitions that exposed the mysteries of the séance. Houdini never doubted

Doyle's sincerity, but he called out Spiritualism as a fraud, accusing it of being a "systematic evil . . . the greatest self-imposed calamity in human history." In retort, Doyle described Houdini as "the conjurer, with his preposterous and ignorant theories of fraud."⁴⁰

Time and time again, Houdini shared with his audiences the "secrets" of Spiritualism, demonstrating how the tricks worked and revealing the role of mediums and clairvoyants (whose clients included Supreme Court justices, congressmen, and even First Lady, Florence Harding), by calling them out with skill and dramatic flair.⁴¹ He even testified before a joint House and Senate subcommittee in 1926 to debunk mediums who claimed to communicate with the dead.⁴² His testimony represented the culmination of a decade of efforts to regulate fortune tellers, mediums and psychics. Before Houdini died in 1926, he asked his wife, Bess, to conduct an annual séance to arrange, if possible, contact between them. By 1936, she had concluded that spirits did not exist. The opposite applied to Doyle who, before his death in 1930, continued to affirm the validity of the séance.⁴³ The fact that skeptics like Houdini were able to identify false mediums seemed not to rule out for spiritualists that real mediums existed. Otherwise, remarked G. K. Chesterton in 1906, one might argue that forged banknotes disproved the existence of the Bank of England. For true believers, Spiritualism was founded on demonstrated evidence, and unlike most religions, it did not require the supernatural to justify its beliefs.⁴⁴

Psychical Research

The British were much more aggressive in examining Spiritualism's legitimacy as a science. While its proponents explained Spiritualism as bringing together elements drawn from science, esoteric mysticism, religion, and folk traditions "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," others called it a deviant science.⁴⁵ One such critic was the anthropologist E. B. Tylor who, in a series of papers between 1866 and 1869, argued that when seen within the broad span of history which began with the earliest forms of animism, modern Spiritualism was "pure and simple savagery both in its theory and the tricks by which it is supported." He reasoned that the manifestations of rapping, spirit-writing, Home's levitations, and the box trick of the Davenport brothers were nothing more than delusional "survivals" of savage beliefs.⁴⁶ In November 1872, Tylor visited London where he participated in over a dozen séances. Although there were a few that left him uncertain or perplexed, most he identified as "shameful and shameless" frauds.⁴⁷ Exemplary were the Davenport brothers, Ira Erastus and William Henry, sons of a New York policeman, who made themselves famous in America with demonstrations of their spirit power. After touring the United States for nearly a decade, they traveled to England in 1868 where their claims were examined up by the

Anthropological Society of London and exposed as imposters.⁴⁸

Two public efforts were undertaken to evaluate the claims of mediumship. The first was by the London Dialectical Society established in 1868 to examine matters not ordinarily investigated by other scientific societies. With Sir John Lubbock as president, and Thomas Huxley, Lord Amberley, G. H. Lewes, and Miss Frances Power Cobbe among the vice presidents, a thirty-person committee under the chairmanship of Dr. James Edmunds was directed to “investigate the phenomena alleged to be Spiritual manifestations.” After over forty meetings, the committee presented its results in 1871. The committee reported receiving testimony from believers as well as individuals and groups who felt it was a fraud and delusion. Also available to the committee were scores of periodicals and thousands of volumes published with views on both sides of the issue. In the end, the Committee found itself unable to pronounce judgement.⁴⁹

First, That, under certain bodily or mental conditions of one or more of the persons present, a force is exhibited sufficient to put heavy substances in motion without the employment of any muscular force, without contact or material connection of any kind between such substances and the body of any person' present.

Second, That this force can make distinctly audible sounds to proceed from solid substances not in

contact with, nor having any visible or material connection with, the body of any person present; and which sounds are proved to proceed from such substances by the vibrations which are distinctly felt when they are touched.

Third, That this force is frequently directed by intelligence.

In conclusion, your committee express their unanimous opinion that the one important physical fact thus proved to exist — that motion may be produced in solid bodies without material contact, by some hitherto unrecognized force operating within an undefined distance from the human organization, and, beyond the range of muscular action — should be subjected to further scientific investigation, with a view to ascertain, if possible, its true source, nature, and power.⁵⁰

The second effort to evaluate Spiritualism's claims was the British Society for Psychical Research (SPR), organized in 1882 by the philosopher scholar Henry Sidgwick and consisting of predominately upper-middle-class gentlemen centered around Cambridge who were interested in collecting case histories of supernatural phenomena. The SPR's committee reports on thought-transference, mesmerism, the testing of the divining rod, and haunted houses, demonstrated an effort to bring veracity to its research. In each of these instances, the prevailing language included terms such

as “mode of experiment,” “careful series of experiments,” “independent groups of investigators,” “repetition of experiments,” and “experiments performed under conditions which precluded the possibility of unconscious guidance.”⁵¹

In its treatment of clairvoyance, thought transference, and telepathy, the SPR adopted the suggestions of Frederick W. H. Myers and Edmund Gurney whose census of 17,000 telepathic hallucinations supported a secularized and positivist approach to validating such mental powers.⁵² While admitting that psychical phenomena carried “peculiar disadvantages” prejudicial to their scientific acceptance, the application of the law of probabilities in a long series of trials established a *rapprochement* between telepathy and the scope of science. Science offered no assurance that humans survived the tomb; nevertheless, telepathy was a fact of nature demonstrated by the odyllic force of Reichenbach, the lifetime of work by Dr. Elliotson, and the experiments of Sidgwick, Balfour Stewart, and the Thought-Transference Committee of the SPR.⁵³

William James, founding member of the American branch of the SPR in 1885, and president of the British SPR in 1894 and 1895, contributed to both for nearly three decades, hoping that their work would separate those phenomena that were scientifically demonstrated from those that were fraudulent.⁵⁴ James’s interest in psychic phenomena is often forgotten or purposely left out of contemporary treatments of him even though the subject was of great importance to him. Those who do mention his interest, make little

out of it. Jacques Barzun, for example, spends only three pages of his *A Stroll with William James* (1983) on it.⁵⁵ On the other hand, Ralph Barton Perry claims that the paranormal was central to his thinking. The same applies to Eugene Taylor's *William James: On Consciousness beyond the Margin* (1996) and *William James on Exceptional Mental States* (1983). Essentially, James considered mental telepathy worthy of investigation but psychokinesis and communication with deceased individuals lacked sufficient evidence. Still, the entanglement of telepathic theory with the fictional world of ghost thinking contributed to an inspired set of paranormal sciences used to legitimize the existence of an Other World and the communication between its spirits and earthly humans.⁵⁶

With respect to Spiritualism, James once remarked: "Mediums are scientific outlaws, and their defendants are quasi-insane."⁵⁷ As for the séance, he found it boring and infinitely tedious, with nothing of significance learned.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, there were those like the trance-medium Mrs. Lenora Piper who he believed was legitimate though he knew not how. She was the one exception he could not rebut even though her abilities remained a mystery to him. "Mrs. Piper has supernatural knowledge in her trances: but whether it comes from 'tapping the minds' of living people, or from some common cosmic reservoir of memories, or from surviving 'spirits' of the departed, is a question impossible for me to answer just now to my own satisfaction."⁵⁹ James's "white crow" was Leonora Piper, a medium who presented him with multiple instances

of paranormal events for which he could not provide a naturalistic explanation.

Spiritualist Associations

Spiritualism took root in Britain among both high- and low-brow clientele in the 1850s. On its arrival, there was much about it that offended British taste. “The stories of what have been said and done by deceased persons who have put themselves once more in communion with those yet in the flesh, are such as most of us cannot hear without a smile,” remarked a Broad Church clergyman.⁶⁰ Even as news spread that investigating committees constituted of scientists and clergymen had been unable to invalidate the manifestations, Spiritualism grew as the result of elements embedded in nearly all of the nation’s sects and denominations. Soon, the boundaries that once minimized the differences that existed between those truly dedicated to its purposes and beliefs, and those merely curious or intent on exploiting it for showmanship and profit, became less important.

According to David Masson in a lecture delivered at the Royal Institution in 1865, British philosophical opinion was considerably divided over Spiritualism and its manifestations. From the supporters of Mesmer’s animal magnetism and Swedenborg influx, to the experiences of the spirit-rappers was the idea that the phenomenal world was greater than the knowable sphere of existence. Masson attributed to Swedenborg and his followers the origins of belief in occult

phenomena and the realms of superior spirits, good and bad, leading lives somewhere within the cosmos. “From the most moderate Animal Magnetism to the most involved dreams of the Swedenborgians and Spirit Rappers,” he explained, “is simply the idea, that our familiar world or cosmos may not be the total sphere of the phenomenal.”⁶¹

British Spiritualism boasted organizations, scores of public and private spirit-circles, weekly and monthly periodicals, networks of lyceums, and list upon list of individuals from all classes and careers who had become enthusiastic converts. For those who supported Spiritualism, its legitimacy stood tall. As the editor of *The Spiritual Magazine* remarked in 1867, Spiritualism was built on a rising tide of knowledge that included human magnetism, clairvoyance, healing, prophetic utterances, predictions, dreams, and visions made credible through careful studies. “We have shown how to destroy superstition by enlarging the boundaries of scientific investigation, and by reducing even ghosts to a system of analysis and induction.” Equally important, British decorum kept Spiritualism from “publicly running riot as it has done in America . . . and from converting itself into a sect, or into a new religion.” Instead, Spiritualism was the life and essence of all religions and a common cause to all faiths.⁶²

Britain’s spiritual movement grew from small local spirit-circles to more formal associations that remained largely unstructured and highly federated. This included the Burns Progressive Library and Spiritual

Institute (1863), the Association of Progressive Spiritualists of Great Britain (1865), and numerous journals.⁶³ Efforts as early as 1855 were undertaken to bring together the groups in the Keighley and Yorkshire regions. In 1865, there was an unsuccessful attempt to form a national organization known as the British Association of Progressive Spiritualists which survived only three years. In 1872, the National Association of Spiritualists formed, but it died in 1882. The first successful national organization, the Spiritualists National Federation, formed in 1891 and was later reconstituted as the Spiritualists' National Union (SNU) in 1901.

The SNU was a federation of independent and highly democratic churches enrolled regionally through District Councils. Its only controlling element was the "Seven Principles" to which member churches assented but were permitted to interpret independent of any individual, group, council, or defining dogma.

1. The Fatherhood of God.
2. The Brotherhood of Man.
3. The Communion of Spirits and the Ministry of Angels.
4. The Continuous Existence of the Human Soul.
5. Personal Responsibility.
6. Compensation and Retribution Hereafter for all the Good & Evil Deeds done on Earth.
7. Eternal Progress Open to every Human Soul.

The Greater World Christian Spiritualists Association was an organization founded in 1931 as the Greater

World Christian Spiritualist League which, in turn, grew out of the spiritualist group known as the Zodiac Circle and the mediumship of Winifred Moyes who claimed to receive messages from a Christ figure who identified himself as Zodiac. The Association's teachings include: (1) belief in one God, who is Love; (2) the leadership of Christ; (3) that God manifests Himself through the power of the Holy Spirit; (4) the survival of the human soul and its individuality after physical death; (5) Communion with God, with his angelic ministers, and with the soul's functioning in conditions other than the Earth life; (6) that all forms of life intermingle, are interdependent, and evolve until perfection is attained; (7) the perfect justice of the divine laws governing all life; and (8) that sins can only be rectified by the sinner through the redemptive power of Jesus Christ, by repentance and service to others.⁶⁴

Neither the National Union nor the Greater World Christian Spiritualist League was exclusive as any number of local churches operated without any federated association. The SNU reflected a wide array of beliefs and practices. By contrast, the Greater World Christian Spiritualist League held to a more unified set of Christian beliefs and was governed by a self-appointed oligarchy. Still, it remained a federation whose central body carried little power.⁶⁵

Numerous churches chose to remain separate from the two national organizations and kept no lists of their members. Examples were the Assemblies of the London Spiritualist Alliance; Brisbane Psychological Society; South London Spiritualists' Society;

King's Cross Spiritualistic Church; London Spiritualist Federation; and the Hampshire Psychical Society. In addition, there were spiritualists who belonged to spirit-circles but no formal church society. In view of this, arriving at any accurate self-assessment remains difficult.⁶⁶

8

RETROSPECTIVE

Over its history, modern Spiritualism has manifested itself in three distinct types. The first are the *Independent Spiritualists* who draw their inspiration out of the great books, giving no preference to any one religion over another. Except for the use of prayers, hymns, sermons, and a few minor rituals, there is little about them that conforms to Christianity since they reject the virgin birth, miracles, the bodily resurrection of Christ, vicarious atonement, and salvation by grace, or through faith. For them, there exists a vast spirit-world invisible to the human eye whose traces can be found in the mystic writings of ancient texts and holy places, in the perceived mental progress of religion and ethics, in the fertile pen of poets, and in the descriptive accounts of the Deity. Historically, Spiritualism began when myths provided an explanation for humanity's place in the universe and was able to sustain those beliefs with testimonies, anecdotes, and experts. Their spirit-world is a place where all

men, women, and children are transported after death irrespective of beliefs, and whose activities focus on both the spiritual and civil reformation of earth.

For these spiritualists, the rappings mark a transition from understanding death as a predominantly religious phenomenon not knowing with any assurance whether God has elected an individual for salvation, to death as part of a natural process separate from any religion-bound eschatology. It provides an otherworldly existence free from the punitive God of the Judeo-Christian tradition and satisfies the desire for immortality without the burden of eternal judgment. Communication by way of mediums provides a brief but much needed opportunity for the bereaved to learn that their loved one is happy and well. Some even develop a pathological dependency on their mediums, insisting on a continuance of communication for years. Motives include feelings of guilt, attachment, and neglect. Skeptics and outright opponents cry delusion, insanity, irreligion, immorality, and infidelity, but supporters insist that what they believe is a new science of the occult.

Dr. William Cleveland, author of *The Religion of Modern Spiritualism and Its Phenomenon, compared with the Christian Religion and its Miracles* (1896), provided the most comprehensive understanding of the independent spiritualists. The manifestations, he explained, were evident when at least three to five individuals organized into harmonious spirit-circles. "The vaults of heaven are filled with a magnetic kind of ether that gathers around these circles and can be felt

by all who are sensitive.” While the nature and potency of this magnetism might never be fully understood, spirits could contact individuals within these circles, creating an uninterrupted communication for messages sent and received. “When a circle is formed, a telegraphic line is ready to send and receive messages from the world of spirits that has surrounded earth since the days of Jesus and the apostles.” When all was revealed, it would show that between the spirit-world and earth, thousands of telegraphic communications connected through medium-operators bringing all manner of manifestations—i.e., table-tipping, slate-writing, picture-taking, trance-speaking, portrait painting, trumpet-speaking, materializations, and etherealizations, healing, psychometric readings, etc. Rightly understood, spirits communicated with the living through mediums, hastening the day of the millennium when all mankind would proclaim themselves brothers and sisters.¹

Unlike Christianity, independent spiritualists worship the God of nature, not the triune God. For them, creed-bound religion is forever false. Jesus, who never claimed to be anything other than a man, had been defiled by theologians with their foolish creeds and doctrines. The only currency that draws the attention of the angels who walk daily on the earth, some seen, others not, is good works, not prayers. For spiritualists, there is no individual God, no local heaven or hell, but instead, “a vast world where all men, women and children go, and inhabit houses and have homes similar to ours.” Once a man, Jesus is now a spirit who dwells

among the angels. He has the same faculties of other men, but more developed, especially his clairvoyant, healing, and psychometric skills. Had his words not been manipulated by the Christian churches, the world would be much further advanced in its morals. "To worship Jesus as a god . . . is simply outlandish and there is no law in the province of nature that will affirm it," insisted Cleveland. Similarly, it is wrong to talk of Jesus having the power to save sinners from hell. Jesus did not teach that he could save sinners; rather, everyone is responsible for saving himself. Jesus was never a God; he existed only as a reformer whose capacity was deflected by the whims of Christian theology.²

The independent spiritualists do not view the devil as a bad spirit. His mission "was more to scare than to harm his fellow man." As a fallen angel, he has shown himself to be good. Indeed, the devil was quite respectable in sheltering children who Christians had been sending him for centuries. The hell that Christians wrote about is a place "gotten up for their own convenience," but no longer relevant. The people have learned enough to understand that the spirit-world is open to direct communication due to the work of angels and mediums. "With a daily communion with the saints in the spirit world, we will receive instructions for our future guidance," wrote Cleveland.³

Resurrection comes the moment the spirit leaves the body. Death is a "blessing" inherited by all of humankind; through it, each soul begins an eternal journey. Earthly life is but a probationary life; the real life is enjoyed only when one enters the spirit-world.

The life of the individual is forever unfolding, changing, and purifying. The human soul grows in divine truth by the performance of good acts, and when it reaches its highest development, it joins with other souls of the same growth and then unites with the “Deific centre.” The spirit-world is not a “lounging place” but one whose inhabitants are continually active. In it, there is unity of purpose, of old spirits passing to a higher life to make room for younger spirits who take their place. The spirit-world is a place where the whole of the human family gathers to partake of the divine soul. It is where the human body after death acquires a new body, more refined and more spiritual.⁴

Finally, the independent spiritualists view themselves as members of a broad and tolerant association of laypeople who, without clergy or formalized services, and with an indifference to specific creeds, participate in a broad range of practices designed to communicate with the dead. They represent a form of radical individualism whose members seek a personal ecstatic experience as well as mental and physical healing in a largely unstructured environment. Concerned principally with the needs of its members, they form a largely democratic structure that provide support and encouragement without unnecessary rules and structure.

By contrast, *Christian Spiritualists* believe in prayer, the power of faith, and salvation through Jesus Christ. They adopt rituals from both Catholicism and Protestantism, including confession, communion, and belief in magic, demons, and witchcraft. Christian

Spiritualism is both intellectual and mystical. The combined work of mediums and angels are preparing the world for the Second Coming which promises the dawning of new era with higher morals and expectations, and with Jesus as its principal teacher.⁵ According to J. M. Peebles, M.D., Spiritualism is not the same as spiritism or materialism but “a science, a philosophy and a religion,” harmonizing with Christianity and helping Christians become more Christ-like.⁶

While the *Banner of Light* and the *Religio-Philosophical Journal* were the leading weekly newspapers for the independent spiritualists, the *American Spiritual Magazine*, published in Memphis by the Rev. Samuel Watson presented the views of Christian Spiritualism. Its full masthead stated: “A Monthly Journal devoted to Spiritualism, its History, Phenomena, Philosophy and Teachings from a Christian Standpoint.” Cyrus Jeffries, one of the journal’s more popular contributors, wrote of his belief that humanity should be more like Christ; that after the death, the good spirits were allowed to appear on earth; that angels were ready and willing to communicate with good people; that spirits “are ever crowding around us for our own safety and our good;” that Christ had given humans power over bad spirits; and that the spirit-world was a nonmaterial universe for spiritual improvement.⁷

Not only did the Victorians and Edwardians treat Spiritualism as a religion that did not require dogmas or creeds, they also treated it as a science that accepted rappings, slate-writing, voices, and other communications in darkened parlors as the equivalent

to evidence obtained in a laboratory experiment.⁸ Those believers who are *Scientific Spiritualists* tend to focus on understanding the forces and laws that underlie the manifestations and identify themselves as agnostics, pantheists, and even atheists. Included among them were the physicists Sir William Crookes and Sir Oliver Lodge; Professor Frederick William Myers who co-founded the Society for Psychical Research in 1882; Professor Enrico Morselli of Genoa University who authored *Psychology and Spiritism* (1908); Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso; and Alfred Russel Wallace. For them, Spiritualism was a science that would eventually cease to be a religion, much like alchemy which lost its identity in chemistry, and astrology which gave way to astronomy. It embraced a theistic and teleological conception of science and a revised view of human nature that incorporated intelligent intervention into the evolutionary process.⁹ Its epistemological roadmap to the land of the spirits incorporates scientific and technical terms along with a scientific attitude. While it has drawn on metaphors from electricity, magnetism, and the telegraph, it failed to prove that its pseudo sciences were valid.

The justifications for Spiritualism come in numerous forms.

1. Robert Hare's spirit-scope used to detect fraud by a medium during a séance.
2. Information acquired through firsthand experience of educated/professional leaders

- in science, art, literature, etc. who served on committees of investigation.
3. Prominent people who embraced spirit manifestations.
 4. The number of incidents directly observed.
 5. The Theosophical Society which formed in 1875.
 6. Membership in the Church of the New Jerusalem and Swedenborg's detailed revelations of the heavens.
 7. Christian mystics who were affected by 'illumination.'
 8. Acceptance of empirical science as an approach to knowledge.
 9. Spirit manifestations which can be traced back many centuries.
 10. Reports of animal magnetism and mesmerism.
 11. The popularity of Andrew Jackson Davis and Joseph Rodes Buchanan and their identification with the spiritualist movement.
 12. General acceptance of natural theology whose arguments are based on reason and observed facts distinct from divine revelation.
 13. General belief in the harmony of science and theology.
 14. Instances of spirits who were summoned to answer factual questions before investigating committees.
 15. Distinctions made by critics between spirit communication and the séance with its manifestations.

16. Willingness among spiritualists to champion empirical experiments.
17. Growing skepticism regarding philosophical materialism or the belief that matter is fundamental substance in nature, including mental states and consciousness.
18. General insistence that there is some form of spiritual existence beyond the physical death of the body.
19. Individuals who are anti-spiritualists but remain believers in some form of 'second sight' or clairvoyance.
20. Recognition of the mind's indeterminant powers.
21. Repetition of experiments that determine consistency in phenomena.

Modern Spiritualism once enjoyed a degree of popularity within American and British society that few movements ever equaled, much less surpassed. Catapulted into the spotlight by the Hydesville rappings and justified as a religious faith, philosophy, and science, it asserted that spirits of dead humans can communicate with the living. Touted as the religion of the future, it promises that people are animals by accident; their true birthright is as a spirit. The soul of humanity is part of God. Despite its former popularity, however, Spiritualism has remained a difficult faith to sustain since it seems counterintuitive that the human soul would return to earth instead of seeking a higher consciousness. Nevertheless, at the intellectual level, it

suggests an openness to personal, social, and cosmic change—all embodied in the journey of discovery.

It is worth asking what happened to Spiritualism? Although it exists, albeit in much smaller numbers today, it is not the serious endeavor it once represented, drawing in professors like William James and Nobel laureates to investigate its claims. For the most part, it has been relegated to television shows like *One Step Beyond* (1959-61), *In Search Of* (1976-82), *Unsolved Mysteries* (1987-2002), *Ghostwatch* (1992), *Most Haunted* (2019), *Ghost Hunters* (2019-present), *Ghost Nation* (2019) and *Paranormal State* (2007-2011), among others. How Spiritualism came to be commodified into television entertainment is another story. However, to conclude *this* examination of Spiritualism, the novelist Hamlin Garland perhaps explained it best: “When in the quiet of my study I converse with invisibles who claim to be my discarnate friends and relatives, occupying some other dimension, I am almost persuaded of their reality. . . . But after they have ceased to whisper and I recall the illimitable vistas of the stars, these phantasms of my dead, like all other human beings, barbaric or civilized, are as grains of dust in a cosmic whirl-wind.”¹⁰

ENDNOTES

INTRODUCTION

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Chapter 1

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- 33 J. R. Buchanan, *Manual of Psychometry: The Dawn of a New Civilization* (4th edition: Boston: Frank H. Hodges, 1893 [1885]), 3-4. According to the *Standard Dictionary*, psychometry was defined in the following manner: "An alleged occult power said to be possessed by persons of divining by means of physical contact or sometimes by mere proximity the properties or character of a thing or things with which it has been associated, enabling them for instance to diagnose diseases by touch, read one's character by touching his photograph, or tell the history of a fossil or an antiquity by handling it." The *Century Dictionary* defined psychometry in a slightly different manner: "The power fancied to be possessed by some sensitive persons of catching impressions from contact which enables them to describe the properties of medicines, the vital forces of any part of the human constitution, the character, physiological condition, etc., of persons whose autographs or photographs are touched, and the scenes associated with any substance investigated." Quoted in Gustav Pagenstecher, "Past Events Seership: A Study in

- Psychometry," in *Proceedings of the American Society for Psychical Research*, XVI (1922), 16-17. No encyclopedia made mention of Buchanan's psychometric discovery until the publisher of *Johnson's Cyclopedia* introduced it against protests from its "learned corps of contributors." See J. R. Buchanan, *Manual of Psychometry: The Dawn of a New Civilization* (4th edition: Boston: Frank H. Hodges, 1893 [1885]), 127.
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- 51 "Gallery of Borderlanders," 235.
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Chapter 5

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Dynasties (1846); *New Platonism and Alchemy* (1869); *Perils of Premature Burial* (1871); *Plea for Collegiate Education of Women* (1874); *Vaccination a Medical Fallacy* (1875); *Prophetic Intuition and the Demon of Socrates* (1876); *Mind, Thought and Cerebration* (1880s); *The Soul* (1884); *Paul and Plato* (1885); *Later Platonists* (1887); *Philosophy and Ethics of the Zoroasters* (1894); *The Birth and Being of Things: Creation and Evolution* (1895); and *The Antecedent Life* (1896). He also translated, edited, or annotated *Theurgia, or, the Egyptian Mysteries* by Iamblichus and serialized in *The Platonist* (1884-88); Hodder M. Westropp's *Ancient Symbol Worship* (1875); Hyde Clarke and C. Staniland Wake's *Serpent and Seva Worship* (1875); Thomas Taylor's *Eleusinian and Bacchic Mysteries* (1891); R. P. Knight's *Symbolism of Ancient Art and Mythology* (1892); and Madam Helena Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled* (1877). His last work, a nine-hundred-page *History of Medicine* (1901) recounted the rise of reform medicine in the United States.

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Chapter 8

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