



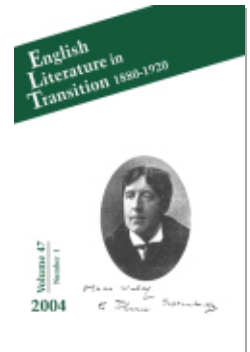
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The Invention of Telepathy

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Book Reviews

The Invention of Telepathy

Roger Luckhurst. *The Invention of Telepathy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. ix + 324 pp. \$49.95

ROGER LUCKHURST'S *The Invention of Telepathy* aims to provide an unbiased account of the origin and early career of the concept of telepathy. Frederic Myers coined the term telepathy in 1882 to cover "all cases of impressions received at a distance without the operation of the recognised sense organs." Luckhurst begins his history of telepathy by setting its development in context with the rise of scientific rationalism in the 1870s. He examines the role of the "X Club," a "group of nine scientific workers, formed for the possibility of 'concerted action' in the name of 'science, pure and free, untrammelled by religious dogmas.'" He notes that the club, which included figures such as T. H. Huxley, William Spottiswoode and John Lubbock, had by 1873 become "the most powerful and influential scientific coterie in England."

Scientific enterprise was not, however, without its difficulties, and it is here that Luckhurst begins to tease out the intellectual tensions that existed in attitudes towards scientific endeavour at the end of the nineteenth century. He takes as his starting point the case of William Crookes who, after patenting techniques in water purification and sewage treatment, moved into experimentation on spiritualist phenomena. Crookes came to the conclusion that there was a new force in operation in cases of spiritual activity which he called the Psychic Force. Despite the strong arguments made by Crookes to support the validity of his work, it was disparaged and blocked by some elements within the Royal Society. Crookes found the publication of his results deferred and then rejected by the Society and the notice of its rejection reached the periodical press before it reached him. In addition, an anonymous reviewer (William Carpenter) abused Crookes as "totally destitute" and "utterly untrustworthy." Ironically, Crookes would receive a gold medal from the Royal Society only four years after this scandal for his radiometer, a piece of research derived at least in part from his work on Psychic Force.

After establishing the context for the debates surrounding spiritualism in the 1870s, Luckhurst turns his attention to the various explana-

tions posited for telepathic transfers of information. One of the most interesting case studies that he examines is that of the American entertainer Washington Irving Bishop who visited Britain in 1881. Bishop, who was famous for locating objects by thought-reading, argued that his powers had nothing to do with the supernatural and were in fact the result of acute muscular sensitivity. This gave room to the theory that Bishop's shows were no more than exhibitions of "muscle reading" where Bishop was guided to his object by the physiological changes of the person who had hidden it. Questions arose though about how he could have this peculiar sensitivity to changes in physiology and consequently a whole new series of arguments were made about whether this in fact meant Bishop did have special powers after all. These kind of arguments have recently resurfaced with regard to popular mind readers like Derren Brown and David Blaine. The question of whether they are able to name the card a person is thinking of because they have supernatural abilities or because they have learned to watch for clues in the demeanour of their subject is still open to conjecture. The same questions arise even now therefore about the difference between psychological illusionism and telepathic communication.

After exploring the multi-disciplinary facets of telepathy and its coinage, Luckhurst moves on to consider the place of telepathy in mass print culture and its expressions in fiction of the late-nineteenth century. Luckhurst examines first the involvement of one of the most notorious journalists of the period, W. T. Stead, in the promotion of psychical research. Like all Stead's interests, his interest in telepathy was an absorbing one which he did not keep to himself. Indeed Stead alleged that he sold 100,000 copies of his pamphlet, *Real Ghost Stories*, which accompanied the Christmas issue of his periodical, the *Review of Reviews* for 1891. Stead's advocacy of telepathy, like his support for other causes such as Home Rule for Ireland, the age of consent and the divorce laws, was whole-hearted. His particular interest lay in automatic writing and he described the human body memorably as a "bifurcated telephone" through which he could communicate with the world beyond the material.

Luckhurst's account of Stead's attempts to present telepathy to a mass audience is an interesting one. He weaves this aspect of Stead's career carefully into Stead's enthusiasm for new technologies such as typewriters and the telegraph and into his political interests such as the Boer War. He also explores Stead's links with women such as Annie Be-

sant and Ada Goodrich Freer who influenced his thinking about telepathy. It is valuable to have an insight into Stead's interests after his time as editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Much of the recent information about Stead has focused on the period pre-1889 and on his campaigns on the age of consent and Home Rule so it is useful to have clear information about Stead's later entanglements.

Luckhurst's descriptions of the impact of psychical research on late-nineteenth-century Gothic fiction also open up new areas of interest in familiar texts. He examines, for example, the response of psychical researcher and critic Frederic Myers to Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Myers, who approved mostly of Stevenson's novella, queried some of the details pertaining to the character of Hyde such as Hyde's motivation for the murder of Danvers Carew and Hyde's purchase of a picture for his Soho den. Luckhurst explores how Stevenson's novella engaged with "discourse networks about the psyche in the 1880s and 1890s." However, he fails to make much of an earlier and perhaps more valuable stimulus to *Jekyll and Hyde*, James Hogg's 1824 novel, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. Hogg's novel offers equally interesting readings about the notion of supernatural experience and like *Jekyll and Hyde* refuses to come to any resolution or final reductive explanation. The main character, Robert Wringhim, remains at the end of the novel as he was at the beginning, either "the greatest fool . . . on whom was stamped the form of humanity" or a "religious maniac." Hogg's range of explanations of Wringhim's experiences in the novel bring to mind the diversity of explanations of the telepathic abilities of Washington Irving Bishop but are clearly much earlier and related to a specifically Scottish religious context. Hogg's theories do though seem to bear out some of Luckhurst's earlier points about the multiplicity of views applied by the nineteenth century to these kinds of inexplicable events.

Luckhurst's book is an extremely valuable cultural, literary and scientific history of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. His understanding of the periodical culture of the *fin de siècle* is impressive as is his willingness to use periodicals as his major repository of source material. The book is highly detailed and peppered with a plethora of footnotes but still retains an essential readability. This is largely due to Luckhurst's timing. At moments in the text when the reader could become bogged down in empirical research and quotation, he provides quirky anecdotes which give a fine flavour of the period. His anecdotes

about Oscar Wilde's participation in a telepathic demonstration in 1884 and George Bernard Shaw's encounter with a ghost in a haunted house are particularly noteworthy. Luckhurst is careful to maintain a neutrality of tone throughout the book although he cannot resist jumping off the fence with his final sentence: "But no, in case you're asking, I don't believe in telepathy." In spite of this last minute clarification of his position, this book remains a fine, balanced account of the complexities surrounding telepathy and other psychical phenomena during the period.

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Literature, Criticism, & the Market

Paul Delaney. *Literature, Money and the Market: From Trollope to Amis*. New York: Palgrave, 2002. 243 pp. \$45.00

IT'S A FACT that English literature will remain chained to market institutions, that even genius will be commodified, that bestsellers will continue to be made by conglomerates in London and New York, and that even fashionable "post-colonial" writing has been determined by a commercialized and globalized literary market. And yet Paul Delaney ends his engaging study of the intersections of art and money on an encouraging note: "Literary diversity may be restricted to what is adaptable to the market, yet diversity may increase in absolute terms." English writing, he argues, is in a healthy state. Where diversity and breadth are lacking is in the current state of economic literary criticism, which for the most part still operates under the influence of Foucault on the one hand (literature is part of a dominating and impersonal discursive field) and Marxist New Historicists on the other (literature is inscribed with commodification). While he is indebted to New Historicism's insights into literature's involvement with predominant social, cultural, and economic practices, Delaney disagrees with cultural materialism's totalizing mindset, its "sterile re-tracing of the endless circulation of power through culture." It's not *all* about domination. Delaney wants to restore historical specificity and authorial subjectivity to economic criticism, and so throughout the book we are reminded that authors are also economic agents, with financial ambitions and private preoccupations that often shape and motivate their unique representations of business, class, and marriage.

His analyses of British writers from the 1870s to the end of the twentieth century are principally informed by the economics of Adam Smith and Richard Cobden, who looked to a free market as the best means to