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## Strange Science

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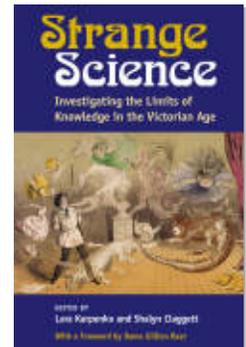
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## Psychical Research and the Fantastic Science of Spirits

*L. Anne Delgado*



In her 1918 review of American critic Dorothy Scarborough's *The Supernatural in Modern Literature*, Virginia Woolf observed that "the great increase of the psychical ghost story in late years to which Miss Scarborough bears witness, testifies to the fact that our sense of our own ghostliness has much quickened."<sup>1</sup> Woolf was commenting upon a literary trend that had taken shape during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and was inspired by the exhaustive investigations of the unseen world conducted by the British Society for Psychical Research (SPR), an organization established in 1882, nearly forty years prior to her review. Woolf's observation is interesting in that it illustrates the degree to which the ghost and the Victorian ghost story had been reformed, and perhaps rehabilitated, by the field of psychical research. Indeed, the psychical ghost story would not have manifested at all had it not been for the SPR's concentrated attempt to account for the new ghost's odd habits, and this new ghost was a curious entity. In contrast to the uncanny tendencies of the old ghost—with its tangle of chains and tenebrous nature—the SPR's ghost cut a more substantial figure. Assembled from a fat catalog of ghostly encounters that the Society solicited from the Victorian public, the SPR's ghost was ultimately a manifestation shaped by statistical data. For the late Victorians, and through the efforts of the SPR, this ghost

became real in a way that seemed unprecedented, and its intrusions were meticulously documented. Like Woolf, who describes a quickened sense of ghostliness at the dawn of the new century, the Victorians' sense of ghostliness had been revived by both the spiritualist movement and the development of psychical research. In contrast to Woolf's, and perhaps Henry James's, specters—entities that reflected ambiguous iterations of the self—the psychical and spiritualist ghost was expected to perform in such a way that its performances could be documented. While the spiritualists relied upon these performances as a means of sustaining faith, psychical researchers interpreted reports of spectral patterns of performance as evidence that might sustain their new science of spirits. Their task was a daunting one. Not only had spiritualism reshaped the ways in which the ghost performed, but an extensive literary history also dictated the ways in which this ghost might behave. In their attempts to wrest the idea of the ghost from the realm of faith and fantasy, the SPR sought to transform it into an entity that could be measured, analyzed, and cataloged. However, as this chapter illustrates, the SPR's ghost radically revealed the degree to which the ghost, and the nature of ghostly encounters, was bound by literary precedents, particularly as it emerged in the 1886 *Phantasms of the Living*, a groundbreaking investigation of telepathy and spectral phenomena.<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter, I use the term “psychical ghost” to refer to spectral entities as they were defined by the SPR in their attempts to reorient Victorian understandings of the phantasmal. On the one hand, the term captures the antithetical aims of such research: it illustrates the tension between the psychical, or natural, world and the ghostly, or supernatural, world that dogged the Society in its attempts to articulate a spectral theory. On the other hand, the term is situated within a continuum of ideas that rarely strays from its fantastic origins. Since the Society's study had been built upon anecdotal accounts of ghostly encounters drawn from the Victorian public, the nature of these “true stories” often mirrored ghostly encounters described in popular fiction. In this sense, the psychical ghost embodied the paradoxical and distinctly Victorian reverence for empirical data and spectral fantasy. The term further accounts for the wholly fantastic conception of the ghost that—as Virginia Woolf's comment illustrates—continued to haunt the psychical researcher's new science of spirits.

Several critics have examined the ideas that informed and identified the transformation of the ghost, particularly as it emerged in the nineteenth century. In this chapter, I hope to push this particular field of

inquiry into new territory. In his *Ghost-Seers, Detectives, and Spiritualists: Theories of Vision in Victorian Literature and Science* (2010), Srdjan Smajic examines the ways in which fictional representations of the nineteenth-century ghost revealed the unsteady nature of both human perception and the knowledge that perception itself produces.<sup>3</sup> These limitations are certainly evident in SPR's *Phantasms of the Living*. However, as this chapter suggests, the ways in which the SPR utilized witness accounts of the ghost in establishing a new body of knowledge reveal the transitional nature of the psychical ghost, particularly as it emerged in *Phantasms of the Living*. In *The Invention of Telepathy* (2002) Roger Luckhurst refers to this text as one "whose title announced that the telepathic theory of hallucinated figures from agent to percipient discarded the spirits of the dead on which Spiritualism relied."<sup>4</sup> In contrast to the SPR's repudiation of the ghost and Luckhurst's characterization of psychical research as a field of study that seemed to escape the mire of spiritualism through the "invention of telepathy," I argue that such research actually reflected popular conceptions of the unseen world. While the idea of telepathy structured the Society's theories, the cases themselves are not necessarily relegated to telepathy. Furthermore, examination of the SPR's ghost qua veridical hallucination also places it within a context that is not, as Shane McCorristine argues in his excellent *Spectres of the Self: Thinking about Ghosts and Ghost-Seeing in England, 1750–1920*, merely a "modern conception of the ghost as reflective of the haunted nature of the self."<sup>5</sup> Instead, the psychical ghost marks an important transitional stage in Victorian understandings of the ghost. Thus, I argue that the larval specter that we encounter in *Phantasms of the Living* is in the midst of transforming from a literary entity into a scientific one. The subsequent development of this entity, particularly after the critical scorn and public curiosity that the study attracted, led to its fragmentation: on the one hand it was reabsorbed by the literary tradition, and on the other hand it became a metaphor for the modern self.

### *The Science of Spirit and Spectral Taxonomies*

The Society, established in 1882 by the philosopher and Cambridge scholar Henry Sidgwick, was organized around the scientific study of supernatural phenomena and developed in tandem with heterodox spiritualities of the period like spiritualism and theosophy.<sup>6</sup> While the emergence of the SPR may seem somewhat unrelated to the surge in

heterodox spiritual activity in the last decades of the century, the Society was inspired by a similar dissatisfaction with the limitations of orthodox theologies. In his biography of Henry Sidgwick, Bart Schultz writes that “it was the battering dealt his Anglican beliefs during his years of ‘storm and stress,’ when he came to struggle so with the entire issue of the evidence for miraculous happenings, that pushed him to accord a truly cosmic significance to [the paranormal].”<sup>7</sup> On the opposite side of religious orthodoxy sat the specter of materialism. F. W. H. Myers, a former student of Sidgwick’s and founding member of the SPR, poetically characterized materialism as “a dull pain borne with joyless doggedness, [that] sometimes flashed into a horror of reality that made the world spin before one’s eyes,—a shock of nightmare-panic amid the glaring dreariness of the day.”<sup>8</sup> In an effort to mitigate the horrors of materialism, Sidgwick’s group, composed primarily of upper-middle-class gentlemen, devoted its time and labor to developing a science of the spirit. Members of the Society included eminent Victorians with diverse political sympathies and interests. The future prime minister and conservative politician Arthur Balfour was a member. Other members included the British poet Alfred Tennyson; Charles Dodgson, otherwise known as Lewis Carroll; the physicists Oliver Lodge and William Barrett; and the chemist William Crookes. These researchers developed a field of inquiry that had far-reaching impact upon late Victorian and Edwardian culture and letters.<sup>9</sup>

In 1883, one year after the SPR was formed, the organization’s Literary Committee—a group tasked “with the collection and collation of . . . materials”<sup>10</sup>—began work on *Phantasms of the Living*, a volume that was to become a compendium of what Myers termed “supernormal” events, or phenomena “which are beyond what usually happens” and exhibit “the action of laws higher, in a psychical aspect, than are discerned in action in everyday life.”<sup>11</sup> In addition to enumerating various cases of supernormal phenomena, the researchers brought the ghost up to date, recasting it as a “veridical hallucination,” a “truth-telling” manifestation that “correspond[ed] to some action which [was] going on in some other place or on some other plane of being,” as opposed to “meaningless fictions of an over-stimulated eye or brain.”<sup>12</sup> The labor that went into producing this fourteen-hundred-page investigation was unevenly divided among Myers, Frank Podmore, one of the founders of the socialist Fabian Society as well as one of the SPR’s early skeptics, and Edmund Gurney, the Society’s honorary secretary—as man whose charm and intellectual spirit was said to have inspired George Eliot’s

fictional hero Daniel Deronda.<sup>13</sup> Gurney's income allowed him to channel all of his energies into psychical research, and he conducted interviews, accumulated data, and compiled the case histories that laid the foundation of this investigation. Gurney threw himself into his labors, often working ceaselessly amid a sea of raw data that included firsthand accounts of thought transference, spontaneous telepathy, and what he called "borderland" cases in which the witness, or percipient, experienced telepathic communication in the moments between sleeping and waking. The bulk of these accounts arrived in the form of letters from a public eager to share personal stories of paranormal experience and in response to requests Gurney published in papers like the *Standard*, the *Pall Mall Gazette*, the *Daily News*, and the *Liverpool Mercury*.<sup>14</sup> As far as the researchers were concerned, the collection and collation of the material was deliberate, methodical, and conducted in the "'dry light' of a dispassionate search for truth."<sup>15</sup> In their pursuit of the truth, the investigators introduced what appeared to be a methodological approach that was guided by a scientific spirit. In testing the reality of thought transference, for example, researchers placed a screen between two subjects—one of them hypnotized—and observed the reactions of the hypnotized subject to stimuli experienced by his nonentranced partner. As for their attempts to verify the existence of other types of psychic phenomena, the researchers collected, corroborated, and interpreted volumes of news stories as well as historical and personal accounts concerning, among other things, deathbed hallucinations and prophetic dreams. The researchers adopted these ostensibly empirical methods of research in order to legitimize their theories of the unseen world. What made the Society's approach to such phenomena scientific was their attempt to organize these phenomena into taxonomic categories. Phantasms were identified by their modes of transmission, which included "visual" and "auditory" cases, sane hallucinations, and telepathic dreams.

In an effort to establish a science of spirits, and in a telling attempt to reorient the ways in which Victorians saw the ghost, the SPR preemptively sought to distinguish these apparitions from fictional ones. The Committee on Haunted Houses, which included Frank Podmore and Hensleigh Wedgwood, Charles Darwin's cousin, submitted the following statement in 1884 in their second report:

In the magazine ghost stories, which appear in such numbers every Christmas, the ghost is a fearsome being, dressed in a sweeping sheet or shroud, carrying a lighted candle, and squeaking dreadful words

from fleshless lips. It enters at the stroke of midnight, through the sliding panel, just by the blood stain on the floor, which no effort ever could remove. Or it may be only a clinking of chains, a tread as of armed men, heard whilst the candles burn blue, and the dogs howl. These are the ghosts of fiction, and we do not deny that now and then we receive, apparently on good authority, accounts of apparitions which are stated to exhibit some features of a sensational type. Such cases, however are very rare, and must for the present be dismissed as exceptional.<sup>16</sup>

The committee further separated the ghosts of fiction from the psychical ghost by emphasizing the “casual and objectless nature” of the latter.<sup>17</sup> Ten years later, the folklorist, novelist, and future president of the SPR Andrew Lang further confirmed the committee’s characterization of the psychical phantom, noting that it “never speaks. It has no message to convey, or, if it has a message, it does not convey it.”<sup>18</sup> For Lang and the above-noted researchers, the psychical ghost was an entity that lacked narrative purpose and, in this respect, had very little in common with the fictional ghost.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the phantasms that Gurney and his co-researchers endeavored to define were not ghosts at all but telepathic projections of the living. Even the phantasms of the dead, or what the researchers referred to as “crisis apparitions,” were manifestations of telepathic rapport between the witness and the decedent. Furthermore, the researchers considered such manifestations valid only if they occurred within twelve hours of the decedent’s passing. This window of performance ostensibly allowed the researchers to separate such “phantasms of the living” from fictional and spiritualist “phantasms of the dead.”

However, in spite of the SPR’s attempts to redefine spectral phenomena as evidence of telepathic rapport, their phantasms were neither entirely purposeless nor bound by the new rules of psychical research. Instead, stories of these encounters, in many ways, reflected the desires of their witnesses and bore a striking resemblance to both the “true ghost story” and the fictional ghost, the former a species found in the works of mid-Victorian writers like Catherine Crowe, about whom I’ll say more later, and the latter a type defined by the much more elastic parameters of fiction. In gathering evidence for the existence of veridical hallucinations, Gurney, Myers, and Podmore relied upon specific, recurrent narratives to establish the truth about the supposedly real, but problematically invisible, world. The accounts accumulated by these researchers, perhaps as a testament to their veracity, included minute and irrelevant

details that mirrored unsensational Victorian lives. Nevertheless, while the narratives compiled and published by the psychical researchers were not purported to be creative endeavors, they were curiously similar in content to fictional ghostly encounters. In one story from a letter submitted to the committee on June 29, 1884, a woman describes her childhood encounter with what she believes to be the ghost of her brother, “an officer in the 16th Lancers, then quartered in Madras.” According to her account, the ghost leaned over to kiss her, then made “signs to me not to speak.”<sup>20</sup> Initially overjoyed by her brother’s surprise return from India, she becomes disappointed when she learns that he hasn’t returned home. The family is later informed of his death from “jungle fever,” and the percipient, calculating the day of her brother’s death and his spectral appearance, writes, “[I] put two and two together . . . and found that, as I then and now firmly believe, my favorite brother came to me at the hour of his death.”<sup>21</sup> In corroborating her own story—she checks her “childish diary” with the military record of her brother’s death—the woman establishes “evidence” that supports her account of her brother’s spectral return.

In another story, a woman, who, in view of her “position of responsibility,” asked to remain anonymous, described seeing what appeared to be the ghost of her absent husband scurrying to her bedside and then disappearing. The woman notes that the room was lit and that, although she was in bed, she had not yet fallen asleep. The woman’s husband had been in Australia for some time and had “been an invalid for years.”<sup>22</sup> Despite his illness, however, the woman tells the researchers that she had received no word of his condition worsening. A short time after seeing this apparition, what the percipient came to regard as a vision, she hears of his death and, like the woman in the preceding story, discovers that the time of the vision corresponds to the approximate time of her husband’s death. The woman’s story follows a pattern of revelation and corroboration, narrative patterns that resemble those found in the fictional ghost stories of writers like Mrs. Henry Wood and Rhoda Broughton. The authenticity of such encounters depends upon the almost incidental manifestation of the ghost. The spectral experience, however, is validated through the inclusion of temporal information—times and dates of the encounter coupled with times and dates of the decedent’s passing—and corresponding accounts. It was this corroborative data that formed the foundation of the SPR’s evidence, a foundation that would eventually undermine the scientific viability of the psychical ghost. For example, in one of the cases Gurney included, a Reverend J. A. Macdonald describes the apparitional encounter of one of his parishioners:

During the last illness of Mr. William Jackson, of Otley . . . the little son of his daughter sickened and died. Wishing not unnecessarily to disquiet the good man, this sad event was withheld from him. He was full of holy joy, and recognised the presence in his chamber of a number of his relatives who had departed this life in the triumph of faith. He pointed them out in succession—this is so-and-so, and there such another. In the course of this proceeding he suddenly started with surprise, for he discovered his grandson also among the heavenly company.<sup>23</sup>

This faith-affirming story may have been enough for the reverend. However, it was not enough for Gurney, who asked MacDonald for material evidence that might confirm the authenticity of the encounter. MacDonald wrote back and told Gurney that although Mr. Jackson's daughter sent him a written account of this vision, he "destroyed her letter, never dreaming of a Society for Psychical Research."<sup>24</sup> Throughout *Phantasms*, the researchers referred to letters, such as MacDonald's, that might have confirmed apparitional or telepathic phenomena had they been saved. This dearth of evidence became a focal point for many of the book's critics. The summer after *Phantasms of the Living* appeared, lawyer and church historian A. Taylor Innes responded with a "cross-examination of certain phantoms"<sup>25</sup> in the pages of the *Nineteenth Century*. Innes argued that the problem with the study was in its lack of material evidence. Gurney later rebuffed Innes's critique, claiming that the stories themselves were ultimately more significant than the missing data. However, without material corroboration, the narratives failed to confirm anything other than their own existence as stories. As a compilation of "true" ghost stories, however, the SPR's *Phantasms of the Living* would eventually reveal its true potential. Indeed, the chilling element of what came to be known as the psychical ghost story was sharpened by the fact that it had been verified by psychical research.

### *Of Psychical Ghosts and Psychical Ghost Stories*

The ghosts that appear in Gurney's collection, perhaps as a measure of consolation to their witnesses, ultimately return to their homes. To a degree, the psychical ghost restores a sense of domestic and national order: husbands return to wives, sons return to mothers, and soldiers return to their homeland. Ultimately, these apparitions of the deceased, along with their physical bodies, are not abandoned, nor do they remain,

in spirit, abroad. Although the veridical hallucination refuses to explain itself, the narratives that such visitations inspire nevertheless reveal an inclination on the part of their authors to entertain fantasies that restore some logic to life. In this respect, the psychical ghost was not so different from the fictional ghost. Contrary to what the SPR's Committee on Haunted Houses had earlier claimed, the psychical ghost had a purpose.

These accounts were also influenced by folkloric conceptions of spectral encounters and bore some similarity to the ghosts found in earlier Victorian collections like the enormously popular *The Night-Side of Nature* (1848), British writer Catherine Crowe's popular study of ghosts, and the American spiritualist Robert Dale Owen's *Footfalls on the Boundary of Another World* (1860).<sup>26</sup> Crowe's work, a philosophical exploration of apparitions, included tales of materializing spirits who offered reassuring evidence of a lively spirit world. But the book also included seemingly purposeless ghosts that simply appeared to bewildered witnesses and disappeared seconds later. Like the "psychical" ghost, Crowe's specters manifested as "crisis apparitions." Shortly after the appearance of the ghost, witnesses soon heard news of their loved one's death. With the appearance of *Phantasms of the Living*, the fictional ghost had been transformed into a psychical one, and Gurney's "census" of veridical hallucinations converted ghostly encounters into evidential narratives. Nevertheless, such supernormal occurrences, although compiled in the detached manner of a sociological sampling, often read like Crowe's and Owen's "true" ghost stories, a genre unsurprisingly reanimated, after the publication of *Phantasms*, in later works like W. T. Stead's *Real Ghost Stories* (1891), Lang's *Book of Dreams and Ghosts* (1897), and the Irish author Elliott O'Donnell's *Byways of Ghostland* (1911).<sup>27</sup> The tales themselves, to say nothing of their popular and largely unrefined sources, however, seemed potentially damning as scientific artifacts. The grim nature of the subject of *Phantasms of the Living* led Oliver Lodge, coinventor of the wireless telegraph and Gurney's colleague in psychical research, to comment: "The book struck me as a meaningless collection of ghost-stories which he was classifying and arranging. . . . Attention to such gruesome tales seemed to me a futile occupation for a cultivated man."<sup>28</sup> In Lodge's opinion, Gurney's absorption in such ghost stories threatened to destroy the credibility of both the researcher and the study.<sup>29</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the SPR's attempts to transform the ghost into a subject of scientific study were at times met with some resistance if not outright hostility from Victorian journalists and critics. The aforementioned Andrew Lang, whose sympathy for the research conducted by the SPR

was often divided, argued that the ghost, once endowed with the pleasurable capacity to inspire fear, had now “degenerat[ed] into [a] scientific exercise.”<sup>30</sup> Shortly after the publication of *Phantasms of the Living*, a reviewer from the *Daily News* commented upon the length of the text and the labor with which the book taxed its reader: “Even in the present age of steam and electricity the human mind can scarcely master these twelve hundred pages in less than a year or thereabouts. [The authors] stave off the mere lover of ghost stories (with whom we confess our sympathy) by a long preliminary dissertation on telepathy of all kinds.”<sup>31</sup> Gurney, perhaps anticipating the disappointment of readers who expected a book full of ghost stories, describes the narratives themselves as “very unexciting—monotonous amid all their variety—as different from the *Mysteries of Udolpho* as from the dignified reports of a learned Society, and far more likely to provoke slumber . . . than to banish it.”<sup>32</sup>

The SPR’s ghost, at least for Lang and the reviewer from the *Daily News*, had been shorn of the common pleasures it had once afforded readers. In this sense, it would appear that the SPR’s methodical treatment of the ghost limited its fictional possibilities. Other reviewers of the work derided the construction of the psychical ghost as one that was built upon “the vaporings of hysterical monomaniacs or the cunningly devised fables of rogues.”<sup>33</sup> The SPR itself had been regarded with some suspicion. The *Saturday Review* often referred to the new organization as the “spookical Society,”<sup>34</sup> while a writer from the *Pall Mall Gazette* cautioned its readers that “belief in ghosts, in witchcraft, in second-sight, and all the rest of it is a continuous inheritance of our race from a very remote and savage period,” adding that the enterprise of psychical research might invite “dangerous trains of thought.”<sup>35</sup> The *Pall Mall Gazette*’s characterization of psychical research itself seems haunted by the possibility that such discussions might trigger dormant, atavistic tendencies among members of the reading public.

But it was the *story* of ghosts in *Phantasms*, rather than the telepathic *theory* of ghosts, that the public most ardently desired. The appearance of the new psychical ghost was timely one, coinciding with the seasonal run of Christmas annuals and issues—what W. T. Stead termed the “ghost season.”<sup>36</sup> The *Daily News*, despite claiming that *Phantasms of the Living* only featured “very dull ghosts,” nevertheless reproduced some of the ghost stories for its readers.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, in an otherwise acerbic article that appeared on the heels of the book’s publication, George Bernard Shaw wrote, “There is no affecting to ignore the public cry of ‘Never mind whether the stories are true: let’s hear some of them,’”

and afterward reproduces four stories that are “most satisfactorily corroborated.”<sup>38</sup> Shaw further notes that eliciting “true” ghost stories from a public infatuated with fictional phantoms would inevitably attract witnesses who were “obscurely epileptic or hysterical persons, incorrigibly conceited and mendacious” and “strongly addicted to the miraculous.” Unlike the critics or the psychical researchers, the public had no need for corroboration or truth; it simply demanded the stories themselves.<sup>39</sup> Other publications were similarly inclined to pour this new psychical spirit into old bottles. Although the author of “Phantasms of the Living: A New Apology for Ghosts” initially derides the researchers and their methods, he nevertheless includes a sample of Gurney’s stories. Since the stories themselves were what readers really desired, the *Derby Mercury* reproduced cases from the book while barely introducing or critiquing the SPR’s material or its methods of research.<sup>40</sup> In spite of its numerous critics, psychical investigation and, more specifically, the psychical ghost, had aroused the public’s interest.

In his review of *Phantasms of the Living*, William James, largely confident that the phenomena Myers, Podmore, and Gurney compiled were legitimate, left open the possibility that they were not: “The next best rationalistic explanation of [the phenomena] is that they are fictions, willful or innocent; and that Messrs. Gurney, Myers, and Podmore are victims, partly of the tendency to hoax, but mainly of the false memories and mythopoetic instincts of mankind.” James anticipated that “Saturday reviewers will dispose of [*Phantasms of the Living*] in the simplest possible way, by treating the authors as born dupes.”<sup>41</sup> This was, for the most part, what happened. In an editorial review in the *Times*, the writer notes that “the undertaking is bold, but the method is not itself unsound,” further concluding: “We are not however prepared to affirm that the phenomena adduced in ‘Phantasms of the Living’ are as yet entitled to this amount of scientific recognition.”<sup>42</sup> The reviewer acknowledges the prodigious circulation of such supernatural stories, noting: “Their frequency and persistency may perhaps be regarded as affording a faint presumption in favour of their truth. But the presumption is after all a very faint one. Strict verification is from the nature of the case out of the question.” In his review of the book in *Longman’s Magazine*, Andrew Lang writes: “It is a most extraordinary and, to a contemplative mind, a most puzzling thing that one never can take Psychological Research seriously.”<sup>43</sup> Lang concedes that he believes there is “something in it.”<sup>44</sup> However, he is unable to wholeheartedly endorse the book as anything more than as

an accumulation of contemporary mythologies. And, in the absence of material evidence, mythology was all the researchers had.

Such doubts as to whether any account of the supernatural could be verified dogged many of the SPR's governing members. In a journal entry from 1887, one year after the publication of *Phantasms of the Living*, Henry Sidgwick, president of the SPR, privately conceded: "I have been facing the fact that I am drifting steadily to the conclusion . . . that we have not, and are never likely to have, empirical evidence of the existence of the individual after death."<sup>45</sup> Indeed, irrefutable proof seemed as elusive as the phantasms of Gurney's study. In his posthumously published autobiography, *Fragments of an Inner Life*, F. W. H. Myers laments the precarious nature of truth in paranormal investigation: "My own career has been a long struggle to seize and hold the actual truth amid illusion and fraud. I have been mocked with many a mirage, caught in many a Sargasso Sea."<sup>46</sup> But if the ensnaring and relentlessly obscure nature of paranormal research was disappointing to Myers, it may have been fatal for Edmund Gurney. Gurney died, some say by his own hand, two years later in a Brighton hotel.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, the book continued to attract support and criticism and would eventually inspire imitation.

### *True Ghost Stories: The Fictional Afterlife of the SPR*

In *The Invention of Telepathy*, Roger Luckhurst claims that the critique of the psychical ghost extended beyond debates that were active in the publications of the period. Luckhurst observes that the writer Vernon Lee sought to distinguish her own work from that of the psychical researchers, arguing that for Lee "psychical phantasms were resistant to 'picturesqueness'" and that "'ghosts in the scientific sense' literalized the ghostly associations of the past." Luckhurst further notes that "by 1911, M.R. James had prefaced his tales with a by-then conventional rejection of any 'scheme of psychical theory,' because 'technical terms . . . tend to put the mere ghost story . . . upon a quasi-scientific plane, and call into play faculties quite other than the imaginative.'"<sup>48</sup> Rejection of the "psychical phantasm" was, by the early twentieth century, fairly common among more highbrow authors who sought to elevate the status of the popular ghost story. However, writers, like Henry James, who rejected the "psychical phantasm" were nevertheless well aware of and, some have argued, inspired by the SPR's apparitions. However, there is counterevi-

dence that psychical research in general, and *Phantasms of the Living* in particular, dulled neither readers' fears of nor their fondness for the ghost, nor did it stunt the literary development of subsequent supernatural narratives. If we are to take our evidence from the popular press and the overwhelming response Gurney received from the public at large in his requests for ghost stories, it seems evident that the ghost did not simply disappear, but rather contributed to the formation of a new type literature as it continued to reflect public interest in the new psychical ghost and its new investigator.

If *Phantasms of the Living* failed to convince Victorian readers and critics of the veracity of the truth-telling ghost, the book nevertheless inspired imitation and reanimated the "true ghost story" genre that had been popular during the mid-Victorian period. In 1890, Stead left his post as editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette* to establish the *Review of Reviews*.<sup>49</sup> Stead's journal also covered scientific debates in a manner that was designed to appeal to the lay reader. In the autumn of 1891, the following headline appeared in the review: "Wanted, a Census of Ghosts!" Stead, in an effort to reproduce and ostensibly supplement the research done by Gurney, Podmore, and Myers, began to establish an archive of phantoms of his own. In support of the conclusions reached by the researchers, Stead writes, "The Society has at least succeeded in establishing beyond all gainsaying—first, that apparitions really appear, and secondly, that they are at least as often apparitions of persons living at a distance from the place where the apparition is observed as they are apparitions of those who have died."<sup>50</sup> The bulk of Stead's efforts resulted in *Real Ghost Stories*, an extra published in time for the "ghost season" that allegedly sold the entire run of one hundred thousand copies.<sup>51</sup> By bringing the elevated aims of psychical research to a mass reading public, Stead managed to democratize, and perhaps exploit, this body of knowledge in much the same way that he had democratized scientific knowledge. These new ghost stories were part of Stead's effort to reclaim the ghost from the SPR, an organization he later described as being infected with "a fatal air of sniffiness, as if they were too superior persons to live on the same planet with ordinary folk—some of whom, unlike the Psychical Researchers, sometimes happen to have some psychical gifts of their own."<sup>52</sup> Stead capitalized upon what the researchers disavowed. He gave the ghost back to the "ordinary folk." But scientific trappings replaced the ghost's rattling chains.

After the publication of *Phantasms of the Living*, "psychical ghosts" and "psychical cases" appeared with some regularity in the literary journals

of the period.<sup>53</sup> The fictional Victorian ghost, now processed through the critical lens of psychical research, became a durable product of what Virginia Woolf described as the “sudden extension of [the] field of perception.”<sup>54</sup> Indeed, the degree to which psychical research had altered popular conceptions of the ghost is made manifest in literary critic Olivia Howard Dunbar’s 1905 article concerning the ghost story: “Never before, since spectral feet first crossed a man-made threshold, have ghosts been so squarely, openly, and enthusiastically believed in, so assiduously cultivated, as now. We have raised ghost-lore to the dusty dignity of a science.”<sup>55</sup> However, as I have illustrated in this chapter, the ghost showed itself to be an impossible subject for science. Instead the psychical ghost revived the fictional roots of the ghost story itself. What may have limited the psychical ghost’s potential as a scientific subject was what made it successful as a story. Nevertheless, this new specter had been significantly redefined by the investigations of the SPR, and this redefinition emerged in countless fictional tales of psychical detectives and ineradicable ghosts. But, as William James had anticipated, such ghosts endured through the “mythopoetic instincts of mankind,” issuing forth as tissue-thin substances of the self. These ghostly selves were the new specters of human experience. Indeed, in her reading of Henry James’s ghosts, Virginia Woolf notes that these new ghosts were not the chain-laden phantoms of the gothic novel but had “their origin within us.”<sup>56</sup> The ghost continues to endure, not as a subject of science, but as the story we tell of ourselves.

### Notes

1. Virginia Woolf, *Essays of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 2, 1912–1918, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Harcourt Press, 1986), 219. For more on Woolf’s response to, and interest in, psychical research and psychology, see George M. Johnson, “‘The Spirit of the Age’: Virginia Woolf’s Response to Second Wave Psychology,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 40, no. 2 (1994): 139–64.

2. Edmund Gurney, Frederic W. H. Myers, and Frank Podmore, *Phantasms of the Living*, 2 vols. (London: Trübner, 1886).

3. Srdjan Smajic, *Ghost-Seers, Detectives, and Spiritualists: Theories of Vision in Victorian Literature and Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Pamela Thurschwell mentions *Phantasms of the Living* in her *Literature, Technology and Magical Thinking, 1880–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), as does Marina Warner in *Phantasmagoria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). However, Warner misidentifies its date of publication (241). In her “Psychic Stories,” Lisa Brocklebank also refers to the text parenthetically, but focuses primarily upon reading and

F. W. H. Myers's theories of telepathy (*Victorian Studies* 48, no 2 [2006]: 233–39). For a readable and thoroughly entertaining introduction to the history of the SPR and *Phantasms of the Living*, see Deborah Blum's *Ghost Hunters: William James and the Hunt for Scientific Proof of Life after Death* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

4. Roger Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 72.

5. Shane McCorristine, *Specters of the Self: Thinking about Ghost and Ghost-Seeing in England, 1750–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 5.

6. Renée Haynes, *The Society for Psychical Research, 1882–1982: A History* (London: Macdonald, 1982), 12–13. The SPR was not the first Victorian organization to investigate supernatural phenomena. In 1869, two years after it was established, the London Dialectical Society began study of spiritualist phenomena. Like the SPR, the London Dialectical Society included prominent intellectuals within its ranks. Political activist Charles Bradlaugh and the naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace were both members. However, “Darwin’s Bulldog,” T. H. Huxley, and the skeptical philosopher George Henry Lewes notably refused when both were invited to join. In 1875, Edward William Cox established the Psychological Society. The spiritualist medium William Stainton Moses and C. C. Massey, a noted theosophist, were among its first members. This society’s investigations were not quite as rigorous as those conducted by the SPR. The organization nevertheless was among the first to attempt rational study of spirit world but eventually dissolved after Cox’s death in 1879.

7. Bart Schultz, *Henry Sidgwick, Eye of the Universe: An Intellectual Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 276.

8. F. W. H. Myers, *Fragments of an Inner Life* (London: Society for Psychical Research, 1961), 14.

9. Haynes, *Society for Psychical Research*, 12–13.

10. Alan Gauld, *The Founders of Psychical Research* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), 153.

11. Gurney, Myers, and Podmore, *Phantasms of the Living*, 1:xlvi n. 1.

12. *Ibid.*, lxiii.

13. Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy*, 43.

14. Gurney also published requests in multiple issues of *Trewman’s Exeter Flying Post*, the *Hampshire Telegraph*, and the *Northern Echo*. In these requests, Gurney asked potential contributors whether or not they “when in good health and completely awake had a distinct impression of seeing or being touched by a human being, or of hearing a voice or sound which suggested a human presence, when no one was there” or if they had ever experienced “a dream of the death of some person known to you (about whom you were not anxious at the time), which dream you marked as an exceptionally vivid one, and of which the distressing impression lasted for as long as an hour after you rose in the morning.” “Yes or No,” *Standard*, December 17, 1883. The popular press did its share in helping Gurney in his task. In an article from December 17, 1883, a writer from the *Pall Mall Gazette* suggests that the reader “who is going down into the country for the holiday . . . [take] a ghost census of his fellow-passengers” and lightheartedly thanks the society for this “capital Christmas suggestion.” “Occasional Notes,” *Pall Mall Gazette*, December 17, 1883.

15. Gurney, Myers, and Podmore, *Phantasms of the Living*, 1:xliv.

16. “Second Report of the Committee on Haunted Houses,” *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, vol. 2 (London: Trübner, 1884), 139. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015013709335>.

17. Ibid., 140.
18. Andrew Lang, *Cock Lane and Common Sense* (London: Longmans, Green, 1894), 138.
19. The British novelist Mrs. H. D. Everett (Theo Douglas), an author who H. P. Lovecraft claimed “reache[d] singular heights of spiritual terror” in late Victorian and Edwardian fiction, casts the “true” ghost in similar terms. H. P. Lovecraft, “Supernatural Horror in Literature,” in *At the Mountains of Madness: The Definitive Edition*, ed. China Mieville (New York: Modern Library, 2005), 154. In her story “Anne’s Little Ghost,” the narrator notes that “the true ghost story never has any point and the faked one dare not leave it out. See H. D. Everett, *The Crimson Blind and Other Stories* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2006), 122.
20. Gurney, Myers, and Podmore, *Phantasms of the Living*, 1:435.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid., 2:462.
23. Ibid., 515.
24. Ibid.
25. A. Taylor Innes, “Where Are the Letters? A Cross-Examination of Certain Phantasms,” *Nineteenth Century* 126 (August 1887): 174.
26. Catherine Crowe, *The Night Side of Nature or Ghosts and Ghost Seers* (London: Newby, Mortimer, and Cavendish, 1848); Robert Dale Owen, *Footfalls on the Boundary of Another World with Narrative Illustrations* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1860).
27. W. T. Stead, ed., *Real Ghost Stories: A Record of Authentic Apparitions* (London: Publishing Office of the Review of Reviews, 1891); Andrew Lang, *The Book of Dreams and Ghosts* (London: Longmans, Green, 1897); Elliott O’Donnell, *Byways of Ghost Land* (London: W. Rider and Sons, 1911). Lang often cites *Phantasms of the Living* in his study and apparently used the book as a source text. He also includes this study as an example, along with Catherine Crowe’s *Night-Side of Nature*, of ghostly literature in his book *The Origin of Religion*.
28. Trevor H. Hall, *The Strange Case of Edmund Gurney* (London: Duckworth, 1964), 72.
29. In 1923, Lodge was asked to share his opinion of the modern ghost story for the British literary periodical *Bookman*. Lodge had lost his son in the war eight years earlier and had subsequently published *Raymond*, an enormously popular book that detailed the author’s communications with the dead. By this time Lodge had changed his mind about the veridical phantasm: “What the public is really interested in is the amount of underlying truth, and the meaning that may be involved, in supernormal experiences. To arrive at sound conclusions demands careful and continued and unbiased study; the concoction of imaginary narratives is useless to that end, and is not what the public really wants.” “Dreams, Ghosts and Fairies,” *Bookman* 65, no. 387 (December 1923): 146.
30. Andrew Lang, “Ghosts Up to Date,” *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* 155, no. 939 (January 1894): 47.
31. “No Vacancy: Some Very Dull Ghosts,” unsigned review of *Phantasms of the Living*, by Edmund Gurney, Frederic W. H. Myers, and Frank Podmore, *Daily News*, November 5, 1886.
32. Gurney, Myers, and Podmore, *Phantasms of the Living*, 1:186.
33. “Phantasms of the Living: A New Apology for Ghosts,” unsigned review of *Phantasms of the Living*, by Edmund Gurney, Frederic W. H. Myers, and Frank Podmore, *Leeds Mercury*, March 26, 1887.

34. “Spookical Research,” *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* 62, no. 1620 (November 1886): 648–51.

35. “Psychical Research,” *Pall Mall Gazette*, October 21, 1882. The *Review’s* humorous coinage “spookical” reflects the attitude that many late Victorian critics bore toward the SPR’s investigations. For these critics, ghosts—whether crisis apparitions or veridical hallucinations—were ultimately little more than whimsical spirits that belonged in the Christmas annuals. Because the SPR endeavored to study “ghosts,” such critics regarded the society’s investigations with a mixture of disbelief and derision.

36. Because of a warehouse fire, Trübner and Co. were forced to delay the publication of *Phantasms of the Living* until 1886. However, the popular press reproduced the book’s cases from November 1885 to January 1886, thus satisfying a public readership accustomed to seasonal apparitions. See “Some of Mr. Gurney’s Ghost Stories,” *Pall Mall Gazette*, December 16, 1886; “A Ghost Sent to Prison . . .,” *Standard*, December 25, 1886; and “Some Modern Ghost Stories,” *Derby Mercury*, December 29, 1886.

37. “No Vacancy: Some Very Dull Ghosts,” *Daily News*, November 5, 1886.

38. George Bernard Shaw, *Bernard Shaw’s Book Reviews*, ed. Brian Tyson (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 2:224.

39. George Bernard Shaw received a copy of the book and in a November 1886 review flatly denied the plausibility of Gurney’s phantoms, stating that “the existence of a liar is more probable than the existence of a ghost” (*ibid.*, 219). As for the SPR’s witnesses, Shaw notes that “the great majority are so ignorantly convinced that seeing is believing, so little aware that the evidence of their senses requires highly skilled interpretation before it can exert weight in the balance of science, that they are the last person who can be depended upon to give a trustworthy account of what has actually passed in their presence” (219). Not all reviewers were as critical of *Phantasms of the Living* as Shaw and his colleagues. In his review of the book in the January 27, 1887, issue of *Nature*, the British psychologist C. Lloyd Morgan noted that “normal psychology has much to learn from experiments on supernormal and abnormal ‘subjects’” and concluded by suggesting that if Gurney’s and Myers’s work “throw[s] light upon “hidden mysteries, which are none the less realities, of the human mind, their labor will, in my opinion, not have been in vain.” “Supernormal Psychology,” *Nature*, January 1887, 292, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/coo.31924066894019>.

40. “Some Modern Ghost Stories,” *Derby Mercury*, December 29, 1886.

41. William James, review of *Phantasms of the Living* by Edmund Gurney, Frederic W. H. Myers, and Frank Podmore, *Science* 9, no. 205 (January 1887): 19, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1761001>.

42. “How Many Senses Have You?,” unsigned review of *Phantasms of the Living* by Edmund Gurney, Frederic W. H. Myers, and Frank Podmore, *Times*, October 30, 1886.

43. Andrew Lang, “At the Sign of the Ship,” review of *Phantasms of the Living* by Edmund Gurney, Frederic W. H. Myers, and Frank Podmore *Longman’s Magazine* 9, no. 51 (January 1887): 330.

44. *Ibid.*, 332.

45. Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 117.

46. Myers, *Fragments*, 40.

47. Colin Wilson argues that the fraudulent nature of paranormal investigation beyond *Phantasms of the Living* led Edmund Gurney to an early death, alleging: “Gur-

ney committed suicide in a Brighton hotel in 1888 when he discovered that certain trusted mediums were tricksters." *The Occult* (London: Watkins, 2004), 493. Trevor Hall, in his biography of Gurney, seems to concur with Wilson's verdict. Indeed the primary focus of Hall's book concerns the alleged deceit that two men, Douglas Blackburn and George Albert Smith, perpetrated on the Society during repeated demonstrations of thought-transference in the 1880s. In Hall's view, the revelation of this deceit impacted Gurney to a large degree since George Smith was also Gurney's friend and private secretary. But Hall also places the responsibility of Gurney's death at the feet of his colleagues Henry Sidgwick and F. W. H. Myers. Hall substantiates this claim by citing an observation made by a friend of the Gurneys, Lady Constance Battersea. In her book *Reminiscences*, Battersea notes that Edmund Gurney's mental condition was in decline during the time preceding his death. She also, rather dramatically, avers about Gurney that, "then being infected by the enthusiasm of his friends, Mr. Myers and Mr. Sidgwick, he gave himself unreservedly to the problems of psychical research, that perplexing and elusive subject, and devoted his time, his pen, and alas! his strength, to that which seemed always evading his grasp." *Reminiscences* (London: Macmillan, 1922), 40.

48. Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy*, 187.

49. J. O. Baylen, "W.T. Stead as Publisher and Editor of the 'Review of Reviews,'" *Victorian Periodicals Review* 12, no. 2 (1979): 70-71, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20081887>.

50. W. T. Stead, "Wanted, a Census of Ghosts!" *Review of Reviews* 4, no. 21 (September 1891): 257.

51. Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy*, 120.

52. W. T. Stead, ed., *Borderland: A Quarterly Review and Index*, vol. 2 (London: Mowbray House, 1895), 346, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015074624928>.

53. For example, see B. F. Cresswell's story "A Psychical Experiment," *Belgravia: A London Magazine* 64 (February 1888): 26; "A House of Horrors," *Belgravia* 95 (January 1898): 1; MBC, "A Western Mystery," *Belgravia* (June 1892): 158; and George Makgill, "A Case for the Psychical Society," *MacMillan's Magazine* 1, no. 6 (April 1906): 471.

54. Woolf, *Essays*, 219.

55. Olivia Howard Dunbar, "The Decay of the Ghost in Fiction," *Dial* 38 (1905): 378, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/inu.32000000678435>.

56. Woolf, *Essays*, 324.