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Ghosts, Spirits, and Scholars: The Origins of Modern Spiritualism

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Starting in 1850, through most of the nineteenth century, thousands of Americans of every class were enraptured, entertained, and mesmerized by drawing-room seances in which the spirits of the dead were reputedly conjured up to answer, primarily through audible raps, any question put to them. As R. Laurence Moore puts it, "Scarcely another cultural phenomenon affected as many people or stimulated as much interest as did spiritualism in the ten years before the Civil War and, for that matter, through the subsequent decades of the nineteenth century." There are not nearly as many believers in Modern Spiritualism today as there were at its peak in the 1850s, but the Spiritualist seance has entered the vernacular. The intent seekers holding hands around a table in a darkened room, the exotic medium summoning the spirit, and the only half-expected response are by now all quite familiar.

The history and development of Modern Spiritualism have been well documented and thoroughly analyzed. The movement had its origin in traditional ghost beliefs, but evolved within the first few months into quite a different set of beliefs. This evolution is reported in virtually every history of Spiritualism, but I have found none that take the analytical step of commenting on this evolution; that is to say, they all describe the transformation, but none identify it as a transformation, thus leaving an interesting gap in the scholarship on Modern Spiritualism. I hope to shed light on two traditions, then: Spiritualism and scholarship on Spiritualism.
The First Raps

One remarkable aspect of Modern Spiritualism is the fact that its precise date of origin is well known and the events of that fateful night were thoroughly documented. The first communicative raps were heard in the farmhouse of one John D. Fox in the town of Hydesville, New York, on March 31, 1848. Shortly after the events, no later than April 12, 1848, one E. E. Lewis, Esq., took depositions from Mr. Fox, Mrs. Fox, and several of their neighbors. While no copies of this pamphlet seem to have survived, in 1850 D. M. Dewey drew heavily on it for his own *History of the Strange Sounds,* and several other Spiritualists quote from Lewis’s pamphlet as well. I have collected the data below from the earliest sources available; in every case, these data are reported in more than one source.

Unfortunately, the transition between the first manifestations in the spring of 1848 and the eventual first public demonstration of John Fox’s daughters’ new-found paranormal abilities, which took place on November 14, 1849, does not seem to have been described so exhaustively. From the evidence that I have been able to amass, it seems that a fundamental change had taken place by the time of this demonstration.

“In December of 1847, one John D. Fox, a farmer by occupation and a Methodist by religious conviction, moved with his family into a small, crude farmhouse in Hydesville,” a small hamlet on the outskirts of Newark, in the township of Arcadia, about thirty miles from Rochester, New York. The Foxes had had seven children, six of whom were living in 1848; however, only the youngest two, Margaretta (Margaret) and Catherine (Katie) were living with their parents at the time. An older married sister, Leah Fish, was living in Rochester. Leah was probably born in 1814, making her about thirty-four at the time of the first rappings. The ages of Margaret and Katie are variously reported, but Mrs. Fox’s sworn deposition, dated April 11, 1848, puts Katie’s age at “about twelve years old” and Margaret’s at fifteen.

According to Mrs. Fox’s statement, which was countersigned and affirmed by Mr. Fox, the noises were first heard about a fortnight before her deposition, or sometime in the last week of March. Since these events are central to my point, Mrs. Fox’s deposition deserves extensive quotation:

It sounded like some one knocking in the east bedroom, on the floor. Sometimes it sounded as if a chair moved on the floor; we could hardly tell where it was. This was in the evening, just after we had gone to bed. The whole family slept in the room together, and all heard the noise. There were four of our family, and sometimes five. The first night we heard the rapping we all got up, lit a candle, and searched all over the house. The noise continued while we were hunting, and was
heard near the same place all the time. It was not very loud, yet it produced a jar of the bedsteads and chairs, that could be felt by placing our hands on the chairs, or while we were in bed. It was a feeling of tremulous motion, more than a sudden jar. It seemed if we could hear it jar while we were standing on the floor. It continued this night until we went to sleep. I did not go to sleep until nearly twelve o’clock. The noise continued to be heard every night. 12

Up to this point there is nothing particularly remarkable about the event; while mysterious knocks are unusual enough in any one family's household, poltergeists have been reported through history from all over the world. 13 However, on March 31, things got more interesting. I continue with Mrs. Fox's deposition:

On Friday night, we concluded to go to bed early, and not let it disturb us; if it came we thought [sic], we would not mind it, but try and get a good night's rest. My husband was here on all these occasions, heard the noise and helped search. It was very early when we went to bed on this night; hardly dark. We went to bed so early, because we had been broken so much of our rest that I was almost sick.

My husband had not gone to bed when we first heard the noise on this evening. I had just laid down. It commenced as usual. I knew it from all other noises I had ever heard in the house. The girls, who slept in the other bed in the room, heard the noise, and tried to make a similar noise by snapping their fingers. The youngest girl is about twelve years old; she is the one who made her hand go. As fast as she made the noise with her hands or fingers, the sound was followed up in the room. It did not sound any different at that time, only it made the same number of noises that the girl did. When she stopped, the sound itself stopped for a short time.

The other girl, who is in her 15th year, then spoke in sport and said, "Now do just as I do. Count one, two, three, four," &c., striking one hand in the other at the same time. The blows which she made were repeated as before. It appeared to answer her by repeating every blow that she made. She only did so once. She then began to be startled; and then I spoke and said to the noise, "count ten," and it made ten strokes or noises. Then I asked the ages of my different children successively, and it gave a number of raps, corresponding to the ages of my children.

I then asked if it was a human being that was making the noise? and if it was, to manifest it by the same noise. There was no noise. I then asked if it was a spirit? and if it was, to manifest it by two sounds. I heard two sounds as soon as the words were spoken. I then asked, if it was an injured spirit? to give me the sound, and I heard the rapping distinctly. I then asked if it was injured in this house? and it manifested it by the noise. If the person was living that injured it? and got the same answer. I then ascertained, by the same method that its remains were buried under the dwelling, and how old it was. When I asked how many years old it was? it rapped 31 times; that it was a male; that it had left a family of five children; that it had two sons and three daughters, all living. I asked if it left a wife? and it rapped. If its wife was then living? no rapping; if she was dead? and the rapping was distinctly heard; how long she had been dead? and it rapped twice. 14
By all accounts, the Foxes then sent for several of their neighbors, who quizzed the ghost in like manner. They determined that it was murdered in the bedroom about five years ago, and that the murder was committed by Mr. _____ [sic], on one Tuesday night, at twelve o’clock; that it was murdered by having its throat cut with a butcher knife; that the body did not remain in the room next day, but was taken down cellar, and that it was not buried until the next night; that it was not taken down through an outside door, but through the buttery, down the stairway; that it was buried ten feet below the surface of the ground.  

It was further discerned that the spirit was that of a peddler who had been murdered and robbed of five hundred dollars. Sometime during the investigation someone thought of asking the spirit to spell out its name. “A neighbor began to call off the letters of the alphabet, pausing after each letter for the intelligence initiating the raps to signify the correct ones by knocking. In this manner, the victim of the murder disclosed his name as Charles B. Rosma.”

Although various attempts were made to dig up the corpse, none had clear success. The digging in 1848 was stopped at three feet when the hole filled with water. Later that summer, when things had dried out a bit, David Fox (a married son) and some neighbors found some teeth and bones at five feet deep. There was alleged to be a skeleton found in the walls of the crumbling house in 1904, but there is no conclusive evidence that the bones found in either 1848 or 1904 were those of a human being. As Burton Gates Brown Jr. points out, “The facts [concerning whether evidence of the murder has been found] . . . leave room for serious doubt.”

Although communication with murdered persons is by no means an ordinary experience, every bit of this account fits into a traditional pattern widely reported in Western European and North American folklore. From a poltergeist (motif number F473.5) the rapper has developed into a ghost; the ghost is that of a murdered man haunting the spot where he was killed.

From Ghost to Spirit

At this point the history is that of a haunted house, not unlike the sort found in virtually every neighborhood in the United States; if things had not developed further, the episode in the Fox household would have been just another curiosity. House hauntings do not commonly lead to worldwide religious movements, but this one did. It was not simply because Rosma’s ghost provided proof of life after death; after all, Rosma only demonstrated that murdered people live on after death (E410, “The unquiet grave. Dead unable to
rest in peace”); this is small consolation to those of us who hope not to be murdered, especially when we consider that the unquiet dead are probably also unhappy. Further, even if Rosma had provided inspiring and optimistic news of the Other Side, Spiritualism could scarcely thrive if communication with the dead could only be undertaken at the spot of Rosma’s (or anyone else’s) murder and burial. Before Spiritualism could burst upon the world, the ghost had to be freed from tradition. If a ghost is the revenant of a person who met an unhappy end and haunts a certain spot for that reason, ghosts would not do; the ghost had to become a mobile spirit, free of earthly bonds, including the tragedy of its own death.

The evidence from Mrs. Fox’s deposition is clear about the characteristics of the first manifestations. The evidence gets a bit more speculative hereafter, having been pieced together at various times by various people and lacking, for the most part, firsthand accounts. It is not possible to follow the further developments in the detail given above in regard to the first rappings; however, the general outlines seem to be well established and adequate to my purpose.

According to Dewey, “when the sounds first began to attract attention, and during the investigation at Hydesville, they were heard in the presence of any member of the Fox family. They were also distinctly and repeatedly heard by persons who were examining the house when every member of that family was absent” [emphasis added]. That Rosma’s ghost would be willing to communicate with anyone, regardless of who was or was not in the house, fits with traditional notions about ghosts.

But then the next phase of the transformation took place: “It was not long, however, before the noises were made more freely in the presence of the two youngest girls.” This was the first sign that Katie and Margaret were “mediums,” and that mediums were needed to communicate with ghosts. A Spiritualist medium is particularly sensitive to the presence of spirits and serves as a conduit for communication between this world and the other side. Sometimes mediums also provide the physical channel for the messages, through trance-talking or through automatic writing, but the most spectacular mediums merely have to be present for the spirits to make noises of their own, much as a catalyst allows a chemical reaction to take place between two substances without actually entering into the reaction itself. Of course, the idea of communicating with the supernatural world through a human medium was not originated in 1848; Siberian shamans and ancient Hebrew prophets, among others, can both be considered mediums. However, the specific characteristics of a medium in the context of Modern Spiritualism were unique and original, as far as I have been able to determine, and as Spiritualism developed, this particular form of mediumship became formalized and spread rapidly.
Before long, the uproar in their house became too much for the Foxes—between the ghost's noise, which had already been costing them sleep, and the number of curious people invading their home, estimated to be as many as five hundred at times, they were driven out, hoping to leave the ghost behind. The family left the Hydesville farmhouse to move in with David Fox, two miles away. To their surprise, the noises were not confined to the burial spot; the raps followed them. Katie was sent to Rochester with Leah Fish, who had come to investigate the matter. "In Rochester there was such a performance on the first night that no one in the house was able to get to sleep until three or four a.m. Mrs. Fish, deciding that the house was haunted, moved into a new one never before occupied. It made no difference to the spirits and the disturbances continued as before." Mrs. Fish's removal to a previously unoccupied house as a means of escaping the noises indicates that she was still operating under traditional concepts.

By the time of the move to Rochester, the ghost had become a number of nameless spirits; it might have seemed that the Fox sisters themselves were haunted, or plagued by communicative poltergeists. Soon, however, the final revelation came. About a month after Katie Fox and Leah Fish arrived in Rochester, another attempt was made at reciting the alphabet so that the spirit could spell out a message. It told them, "We are all your dear friends and relatives, Jacob Smith." Jacob Smith was Mrs. Fish's grandfather.

Now the essential transformation was complete; some elaboration remained to be done, but the framework of Spiritualism was in place. The dead could communicate with the living through a medium, and having died a tragic death was not a prerequisite. Any spirit could be summoned from any sitting room. These were the qualities essential to making Spiritualism both comforting and compelling, for now people could be assured that their beloved departed were still "alive" and happy, and that the living had solid hope of eternal life. The assurance of a dead stranger is hardly reassuring, but when a spirit claims to be your infant son and correctly answers every test-question you put to it, and when the answers cannot possibly be known by the medium (as happened to the Rev. C. Hammond and in dozens of other similar instances)—when this is the case, belief in the afterlife seems to have been proven empirically.

It took some time for the Spiritualists to begin to interrogate the spirits systematically about the nature of life after death. A great deal of energy was spent trying to prove or disprove that the mediums were frauds, and many questions posed were only designed to confirm the identity of the particular spirit contacted—questions to which the questioner already knew the answer, such as, "How old were you when you died?"
In short, by the time of the Fox sisters' first public demonstration, the traditional qualities which had informed the first manifestations had given way to a set of characteristics that lent themselves to empirical, "scientific" testing; the mediums and the spirits could be tested, results could be compared, data could be verified, and hypotheses proved or disproved.

Within months, Spiritualism was spreading rapidly across the United States, and within years it had spread around the globe. Like Handsome Lake for the Seneca\(^28\) and Ellen Harmon White for the Seventh-Day Adventists,\(^29\) the Fox sisters were in the right place, with the right message, at the right time; they introduced spirit rappings to a world that was hungry for spirit rappings.

The Scholarly Response

I suspect that I have stated the obvious in describing the transformation from traditional ghost beliefs to the now-familiar Spiritualist seance. The question remains why no one has seen fit, as far as I have been able to tell, to make this obvious statement before now. It seems to me that the answer lies in a different understanding of the notion of origin. I have argued that Spiritualism originated in traditional ghost beliefs and evolved into something else. But the overwhelming number of commentators on Modern Spiritualism—believers, disbelievers, and objective scholars—have tended to see the origin of Spiritualism in the raps themselves. Believers, of course, contend that the raps were evidence of communication with spirits; detractors see the raps as evidence of human fraud (conscious or unconscious).

For almost a hundred years, virtually everything written on Spiritualism was a part of this debate. Commentators on Spiritualism from 1850 to about 1950 fall into two major camps and one minor camp: scoffers, believers, and "scientists." Interestingly, even the scientists tend to focus on the question of whether "the spirit phenomena are genuine or they are perpetrated by fraud."\(^30\)

One of the best-known scoffers was Harry Houdini, who spent a good part of his career medium-bashing.\(^31\) P. T. Barnum included Spiritualism as one of his "humbugs of the world."\(^32\) Likewise, it is clear that the response of much of the general public and of many writers was to wonder how Spiritualists could be so easily duped.

Even scholars with less interest in showmanship than Houdini and Barnum seem eager to dismiss Spiritualism as a mere fraud. The tendency is to demonstrate that the Fox sisters were frauds and, on the basis of this, to conclude that Spiritualism itself is a fraud.\(^33\) Of course, this ignores the salient fact that there were scores, perhaps hundreds, of other mediums in practice by the time the Foxes were discredited.\(^34\) Modern Spiritualism can only be fraudulent if
hundreds or thousands of mediums have perpetrated a tremendous, unbroken series of frauds over the last 150 years. Of course this is possible, but it is hardly proved by the assertion that the first two mediums were frauds.\textsuperscript{35}

The largest body of literature on Spiritualism is, naturally, by Spiritualists. Some of this literature\textsuperscript{36} is overtly concerned only with the beliefs of Spiritualism, but the beliefs are presented in a doctrinal manner, rather than an interpretive one. Most literature by Spiritualists, however, consists largely of anecdotes about the amazing events in the lives of particularly gifted mediums.\textsuperscript{37}

There is also a small group who have representatives in both of the major camps, namely those who style themselves scientists. These scholars have tried to discuss the history of Spiritualism even-handedly, but they, too, focus on the question of where the knocks come from.\textsuperscript{38} In this respect the scientists enter the Spiritualists' project—the empirical proof of the existence of life after death. Of course, the Spiritualists prove that there \textit{is} life after death and most of the scientists, using the same evidence, conclude that sufficient proof has yet to come forth. There are a few scientists who have been converted to Spiritualism, notably Professor Robert Hare.\textsuperscript{39}

Writings on Spiritualism with a primary concern other than the ontological status of the raps did not appear in numbers until recently. In 1958, Katherine H. Porter published the first substantial analytical study of the culture of Spiritualism. Her work "examine[s] the little-known but significant impact of spiritualism on a few men and women of genius [including the Brownings, the Tennysons, Thackeray, and Dickens] in the heyday of the movement. . . . It does not attempt to appraise the belief in spiritualism itself but rather to get at the basis of its hold on these people, to discover by what roads they came to it, and what satisfaction they found in it."\textsuperscript{40} Other works that look at Spiritualism as a cultural phenomenon include Howard Kerr's 1972 \textit{Mediums, and Spirit-Rappers, and Roaring Radicals} and Russell M. Goldfarb and Clare R. Goldfarb’s 1978 \textit{Spiritualism and Nineteenth-Century Letters},\textsuperscript{41} which discuss the influence of Spiritualism on nineteenth-century American literature; Mary Farrell Bednarowski’s 1973 Ph.D. thesis, \textit{Nineteenth-Century American Spiritualism: An Attempt at a Scientific Religion}, Burton Gates Brown Jr.’s 1973 Ph.D. thesis, \textit{Spiritualism in Nineteenth-Century America}, and Geoffrey K. Nelson’s 1969 book, \textit{Spiritualism and Society}, which approach Spiritualism as a religion to be understood in its cultural context;\textsuperscript{42} Ann Braude’s 1989 \textit{Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women’s Rights in Nineteenth-Century America}\textsuperscript{43} and Alex Owen’s 1990 \textit{The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England},\textsuperscript{44} which look at the place of women in the Spiritualist movement (Braude in the United States, Owen in England); and Logie Barrow’s 1986 \textit{Independent
Spirits: Spiritualism and English Plebians, 1850–1910, which takes up the class issue.

One good explanation for the popularity of Modern Spiritualism is the modernist crisis in religion. As Mary Bednarowski demonstrates, the increasing influence of science in the United States in the nineteenth century was coupled with an increased anxiety about the status of religion. “The result of all this scholarship was a religious skepticism in nineteenth-century man [sic], a gradual inability to believe in either the divine origins of the universe or in the efficacy of adhering to an organized religion.”

In a similar vein, R. Laurence Moore argues that “over the past 175 years spiritualism and then psychical research have offered Americans a ‘reasonable’ solution to the problem of how to accommodate religious and scientific interests.” As Moore contends, a critical aspect of Spiritualism’s popularity in the United States stemmed from its obsession with empiricism.

Empiricism and the Scientific Impulse

Believers in Spiritualism might have been credulous and gullible, but from the very start they were also skeptical. The first time that Mrs. Fox spoke with Rosma’s ghost she not only asked it about itself, but she also demanded information from it to test its standing, to try to discover if indeed this was a ghost, and if so what the limits of its knowledge were. All of the other communicants with this ghost did likewise. The tests were not exhaustive, to be sure, and they were not performed in a rigorous fashion, with independent variables held constant and a single dependent variable tested, but the lack of scientific expertise does not belie the presence of a scientific intent.

There have been plenty of reports of communication with the dead through history. What seems unique in the phenomenology of Modern Spiritualism is that the source of the communication, the channel, is obscure. Possessed mystics who speak for gods or spirits still use their own mouths and tongues, if not exactly their own voices; automatic writing requires perfectly mundane paper; the Ouija board depends on the planchette in contact with fleshly hands. But the Spiritualist raps seemed to come from nowhere, and both believers and scoffers agreed that this was the true source of their interest. Spiritualism did not become an occasion for a significant debate over the status
of life after death; the afterlife was largely accepted both by Spiritualists and their most vehement detractors. The issue was whether the spirit rappings constituted proof. Empiricism is such a central part of the American worldview that for a hundred years many interesting questions about Spiritualism as a cultural and social phenomenon could not be asked; the searchlight of empiricism left all other issues, such as the relationship between Spiritualism and women or class, and others mentioned above, in the shadows.

The empirical quality of Modern Spiritualism seems to have been the one aspect most focused on by everyone—its believers, its detractors, even its historians. Virtually all arguments about Spiritualism concerned the ontological status of the raps. Where did they come from? Were they the result of fraud, of disembodied spirits, or of psychic abilities of living mediums? Interestingly, both the traditions of belief and the “traditions of disbelief” clustered around Spiritualism agreed on the centrality of empirical evidence. While some Christians ground their religion in unadorned faith and others are converted by a profound but ultimately subjective experience, to the Spiritualists and to their detractors the one great truth was empirical evidence; religious authority did not reside in a charismatic leader or in a book or in a church, but in the continued proofs offered at seances. It seems clear that partially due to this shared interest in empiricism, scholarship on Spiritualism, up to the last few years, has basically been a debate about fraud. The traditional belief in place-bound ghosts lent credence to the new idea of mobile spirits who willingly communicated with the living through mediums, with knocks or raps functioning as empirical evidence; in other words, because of the knockings, “belief” moved from possible to probable to provable, and thus to “truth.”

It is common to think of “folk beliefs” as beliefs that are wrong, that are not supported by scientific evidence, or that are held by the unlearned. What I have tried to point out is that there is a subtler sense to the notion of folk belief: the sense in which the importance of empiricism in the American worldview is itself a folk belief. Belief in empiricism—experimental method relying upon human observation—is the application of a cultural assumption that is grounded in Western civilization and that is generally part of American worldview (which is not to argue, by the way, that other worldviews are not found in the United States); but empiricism, sounding “scientific,” implies veracity. Credulous and incredulous, learned and unlearned, believer and detractor, scholar, historian, scientist—every kind of American has taken for granted that what is most important about Spiritualism is, first and foremost, the source of the “mysterious noises.” Both Spiritualist enthusiasts and their detractors seem to have shared this folk belief, that empiricism provides irrefutable evidence of what is, and the evidence of our senses constitutes the ultimate authority. It
seems that in this regard both believers and unbelievers—at first glance, irreconcilable and fundamentally opposed camps—were engaged in the same enterprise.

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Endnotes

2. Throughout this paper, except in direct quotations, I capitalize the word Spiritualism and occasionally use the phrase Modern Spiritualism to make it clear that I am concerned specifically with one cultural movement, and not with spiritualism broadly construed.
My close scrutiny of the early days of Spiritualism was inspired by Robert P. Weller’s distinction between “ideologized” and “pragmatic” beliefs in *Unities and Diversities in Chinese Religion* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1987), 7ff. An ideologized system of beliefs is systematized and elaborated, and some attempt has been made to make it exhaustive and logically coherent. Pragmatic beliefs, on the other hand, deal with immediate and practical concerns; they are directed toward solving real and specific problems which are palpable at the moment when the belief or practice is exercised. Established churches create and maintain ideologized beliefs; individuals tend to deal more with pragmatic beliefs. I first sought to find how Spiritualism moved from being “pragmatic” to being “ideologized”; what I found was that Spiritualism has remained pragmatic all along, even as it has been elaborated. However, I would not have noticed Spiritualism’s debt to tradition if I had not had this theory in mind.

Brown, 35–36.

Brown, 36–37.

Dewey, 15. The youth of the Fox sisters has not gone unremarked; for example, Charles A. Huguenin observes that “it was nine-year-old Elizabeth Parris, eleven-year-old Abigail Williams, twelve-year-old Ann Putnam, and their playmates who pointed accusing fingers at innocent souls in Salem Village as tools of Satan during the witchcraft mania in 1691–2” (Huguenin, “The Amazing Fox Sisters,” *New York Folklore Quarterly* 13, no. 4 [1957]: 275).

The fifth member might either be Mr. and Mrs. Fox’s son, David, who normally lived with his wife and children about two miles away, or Leah Fox Fish’s fifteen-year-old daughter Elizabeth Fish (Brown, 37).

Capron, 39. Dewey does not quote this part of the deposition, so I am forced to rely on Capron. The parts of the deposition which both Dewey and Capron quote match exactly, except in some small punctuation changes and the statement, “My husband had gone to bed” (Capron, 40) vs. “My husband had not gone to bed” (Dewey, 15, emphasis added).

Motif F473.5, “Poltergeist makes noises.” The motif numbers cited in this chapter are drawn from Stith Thompson’s *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* (5 vols., rev. and enl. ed., Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), an index of the narrative units of an astounding number of the folktales, legends, and myths of the world. Thompson sought to index the smallest narrative units capable of surviving in tradition; the motifs are unusual characters or striking incidents that occur in a number of different narratives. As far as this paper is concerned, the important thing about the motif index is that it provides evidence that a given concept or belief is traditional rather than innovative.

Dewey, 15–16.

Capron, 42.

Huguenin, 242.

Brown, 40.

Some of the motifs which were played out in 1848 were E402.1.5, “Invisible ghost makes rapping or knocking noise”; E334, “Non-malevolent ghost haunts scene of former misfortune, crime, or tragedy”; E334.2.1, “Ghost of murdered person haunts burial spot”; E411.10, “Persons who die violent or accidental deaths cannot rest in grave”; E231, “Return from dead to reveal murder”; and E231.1, “Ghost tells name of murderer.” All of these motifs also appear in
Ernest W. Baughman's *Type and Motif-Index of the Folktales of England and North America* (The Hague: Mouton, 1966), along with these interesting additions: E334.2.1(e), "Ghost of murdered peddler seen near burial spot" and E402.1.8(k), "Scrapping noise is made by ghost of murdered peddler." Peddlers have often been seen as suspicious characters; see Lewis E. Atherton, "Itinerant Merchandising in the Ante-bellum South," *Bulletin of the Business Historical Society* 19 (1945): 35–59 (my thanks to John Wolford for this reference).


21. This passive participation of the medium inevitably led to linking Spiritualism with Mesmerism; many later mediums had to be "magnetized" before the spirits would communicate through them (see Dewey, p. 21, for one example).

22. Brown, 41.

23. It has often been speculated that the original rappings were merely a prank pulled by Katie and Margaret, and that it was Leah—older, wiser, and more ambitious—who capitalized on the phenomena.

24. Brown, 43.

25. The telegraph was patented in 1840, and the first message was sent using Samuel F. B. Morse's code in 1844. The possibility of long-range communication via a series of taps was obviously of interest to Spiritualists, for "the most widely circulated spiritualist newspaper of the [1850s] was the *Spiritual Telegraph*" (Moore, 13). Perhaps Mrs. Fox's understanding of the telegraph inspired her to make the leap from hearing those first raps as mere noise to hearing them as a potential means of communication. But it is interesting that, as far as I have seen, mediums stuck to the cumbersome method of reciting the alphabet and waiting for the spirit to rap at the proper letter, rather than trying to use Morse code. One explanation is that Morse code is extremely difficult for living people to master (the dead seem to have been assumed to know everything). A skeptic's explanation might be that when the questioner recites the alphabet, at least halfway expecting a specific message to be spelled out (such as the name of her departed infant son), she gives subtle nonverbal cues when the expected letter is reached, thereby tipping the medium off on when to rap. This is known as the Clever Hans phenomenon—see Oskar Pfungst, *Clever Hans: The Horse of Mr. Von Osten*, ed. Robert Rosenthal, trans. Carl L. Rahn (1911; reprint, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965).

26. Brown, 44.


32. P. T. Barnum, *The Humbugs of the World* (New York: Carleton Publishers, 1866). I should also note that devoted Spiritualists readily admit to fraud when
it is demonstrated, but they also consistently point to seances and phenomena
which have not been shown to have a materialistic explanation as proof for their
beliefs.

33. See, for example, Huguenin, 1957; and Rossell Hope Robbins, "The Rochester

34. The Fox sisters were discredited, with varying degrees of success, at least three
times. In February 1851, three medical doctors claimed that the sisters produced
the raps by cracking their knees (Brown, 57–59); in April of the same year, Mrs.
Norman Culver, a relative by marriage to the Foxes, signed a sworn affidavit
claiming that the sisters had attempted to enlist her aid in producing spirit phe­
omena (Brown, 62–63); and in 1888, Reuben Briggs Davenport published *The
Death-Blow to Spiritualism* (1888; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1976), which
contains the confessions of both Katie and Margaret that they, and not spirits,
had created the first phenomena. The first two discreditings only served to pub­
licize Spiritualism; by the time of the last one, Spiritualism was past its prime and
there were enough mediums other than the Fox sisters by then that it could not
kill the movement. Even the last confession is open to question; by that time
both Margaret and Katie were poor and alcoholic, and Margaret later
recanted—see Earl Wesley Fornell, *The Unhappy Medium: Spiritualism and the

35. For the latest example of the Spiritualism-as-fraud approach, see Ruth Brandon,
*The Spiritualists: The Passion for the Occult in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Cen­
turies* (New York: Knopf, 1983). Compared to many scoffers, Brandon is not
scalding in her critique; she handles her subject with a good sense of humor,
though at the expense of Spiritualists. Earlier and more vituperative scoffers
include Davenport 1976 [1888]; and John Bovee Dods, *Spirit Manifestations
Examined and Explained: Judge Edmonds Refuted* (New York: DeWitt and Dav­
enport, 1854).

36. See, for example, Peggy Barnes, *The Fundamentals of Spiritualism* (Chesterfield,
IN: Psychic Observer Book Shop, n.d.).

37. See, for example, Maurice Barbanell, *This Is Spiritualism* (London: Spiritualist
Press, 1959); Britten, *Nineteenth Century Miracles: Spirits and Their Work in
Every Country of the Earth* (1884; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1976);
Capron, *Modern Spiritualism;* Arthur Conan Doyle, *The History of Spiritualism,

38. See particularly Frank Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism: A History and a Criticism,
*2 vols. (London: Methuen, 1902), cited as the "best available history of spiritual­
ism in general and of the early American years in particular" by Howard Kerr in
*Meditations, and Spiritualists, and Roaring Radicals: Spiritualism in American Lit­

39. Robert Hare, *Experimental Investigation of the Spirit Manifestations* (New York:
Partridge and Brittan, 1855).


41. Russell M. Goldfarb and Clare R. Goldfarb, *Spiritualism and Nineteenth-Century

42. Geoffrey K. Nelson, *Spiritualism and Society* (New York: Schocken Books,
1969). Bednarowski and Brown (each cited earlier) limit their consideration to
America, but Nelson also considers the spiritualist movement after it was imported to England. Nelson makes the point that in the middle of the nineteenth century, the United States in general and upstate New York in particular were characterized by rapid and massive social and geographic mobility. Nelson argues that this fluidity and instability brought about the rise of Modern Spiritualism, as well as the other new religions of the "burned over district." As Barre Toelken pointed out to me, this same mobility no doubt made the idea of mobile, transportable spirits appealing; we might have to leave our graveyards behind, but we can take our ancestors with us.


46. Bednarowski, 27.

47. Bednarowski, 20.


49. Of course, Modern Spiritualism was not the only popular fad in the nineteenth century to fill this need; consider Christian Science, Mesmerism, and Seventh-Day Adventism.
