In his 1768 exposition, *Conjugal Love*, Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) sketches the prospect of heavenly marriage, detailing an extended quest for monogamous union in the afterlife. Swedenborg theorizes that husbands and wives meet again after death to test the staying power of their earthly bonds. If they prove incompatible, they divorce and search for new, more suitable partners. In Swedenborg’s heaven, the unattached spirit chases the transfigurative force of conjugal love, a force so strong that it ultimately collapses sexual difference and produces intersexed angels made one body through divine coupling. As he rhapsodizes about celestial unities, Swedenborg lets fly an acerbic critique of earthbound marriage, cataloging an ambitious list of legitimate causes for separation, including lunacy, intemperance, intractability, deception, indiscretion, impropriety, venereal disease, and impotence (Swedenborg, *CL* 258–59). Although Swedenborg maintains that adultery is the only justifiable reason for civil dissolution, he acknowledges that mortal unions are often contentious, sorrowful, and unsatisfying.

Swedenborg’s conceptions of love and sex reverberate throughout nineteenth-century spiritualist understandings of marriage. Following Swedenborg, spiritualists “viewed conjugal love as an exalted ideal and appropriate sexual feelings as part of the natural order that drew affinities together”
The free love movement turned the Swedenborgian doctrine of celestial attraction into a moral barometer, so that without the sanction of conjugial feeling, sex within marriage was judged illicit. If low or libidinal impulses propelled a partnership, free lovers argued that husband and wife should live platonically or divorce. Like Swedenborg, spiritualists prioritized soulful couplings and spiritual affections, deriding the power imbalances, pecuniary exploitation, and sexual violations that corrupted earthly marriage.

Julia Ward Howe—poet, abolitionist, suffragist, and one of Margaret Fuller’s first biographers—records her reading of Swedenborg in *Reminiscences 1819–1899*. Howe lists *Conjugial Love* among “the writings which interested [her] most” and says she “was much fascinated by his theories of spiritual life” (Howe, *Rem* 189, 209). Gary Williams notes that “her letters show she was already something of an authority on his work by 1847” (Williams, “Speaking” xxxiii). For Howe, Swedenborg’s depiction of divisive couplings would have resonated with a painful, proximate reality. Julia’s marriage to Samuel Gridley Howe was tumultuous and strained from its beginning. According to Williams, Samuel’s abiding romantic attachment to Charles Sumner immediately triangulated the marriage. Julia’s domestic inexperience, her isolation in their Boston home, and Samuel’s immersion in his work fueled tensions between them. Moreover, Samuel was chronically ambivalent about Julia’s literary efforts and infuriated by the 1854 publication of *Passion-Flowers*. Early on, Samuel told his wife he dreamed of marrying again, “‘some young girl who would love him supremely’” and he took a mistress decades later (Williams, *HH* 174). In 1846, three years into the marriage, with two of her eventual six children just out of their infancy, Howe began writing the novel we now call *The Hermaphrodite*. Reading the text as an “encoded autobiography,” Williams argues that the closeted manuscript enabled Howe to process her volatile union (Williams, *HH* 100). Conceived as a first-person narrative, the novel chronicles the family history, education, and star-crossed romances of its intersexed protagonist, Laurence. Williams recognizes Swedenborgian influences on Howe’s construction of Laurence, suggesting that he might be “understood as an earthly incarnation of a Swedenborgian hermaphroditic angel” (Williams, “Speaking” xxxiv).

The manuscript stages Howe’s creative engagement with Swedenborg’s theories in other ways as well, especially in two interrelated love stories. Topically, this essay centers primarily on a section of the manuscript that details Laurence’s sojourn in Rome as the welcome guest of an aristocratic bachelor tutor, Berto, and his sisters, Briseida, Gigia, and Nina. In this interval, Laurence, masquerading as “Cecilia,” makes an ethnographic study of
Italian gender and grows increasingly fascinated with Berto’s youngest sister, Nina. Nina exists in a lovelorn trance, psychically traveling through unsettled territories with her exiled fiancé, Gaetano. One evening, just before Nina’s presumable death, Laurence (as “Cecilia”) reads a story titled “Ashes of an angel’s heart” aloud to Briseida and Gigia. In it, a woeful woman named Eva grieves compulsively outside the tomb of her dead lover, Rafael. Eva talks to his spirit and other ethereal emissaries until she and Rafael become one angel in heaven. The text carefully establishes a formative sorority between Eva and Nina: Briseida notes that Berto read Eva’s story to Nina “shortly before her separation from Gaetano” and suggests that the story’s investment in “the idea of eternal and indivisible union” contributes to her spellbound obsession with him (Howe, H 164). Thus, Howe deliberately counterpoints Nina and Eva’s romantic fixations and their numinous powers. According to Williams, the Nina–Eva story allowed Howe to “conceive a myth in which constancy is ultimately rewarded” (Williams, HH 105). For Valarie Ziegler, Eva’s story in particular depicts “the path of single-minded devotion as the road to redemption” and “transfiguration” (Ziegler 68).

Certainly, Nina and Eva love absent, inaccessible men, and certainly, they stand as icons of monogamous commitment. Yet Swedenborgian plotlines also enabled Howe to creatively explore thorny questions of power, mobility, desire, and embodiment in romantic relationships, and those issues drive my analysis of the text. More specifically, I argue that Howe enacts spiritualist dreams of paranormal communication and connection with the Nina–Eva story. Her plotting reflects a larger fascination with spiritualist technologies of intimacy (trance, telepathy, mediumship, correspondence, and transfiguration), allowing her to imagine itinerant and insubordinate female subjects. Essentially, Nina and Eva become spirit-human amalgams, exceeding corporeal confines to travel disembodied byways. In the process, their stories showcase incorporeal freedoms and strange fissures of identity. Yet the material female body—the evacuated body, the sick body, the starving body, the abandoned body, and the dead body—haunts Howe’s narrative. Through Nina and Eva, Howe grieves for the corporeal remnants that spiritualist technologies and physiologies leave behind.

To advance my argument—to make sense of the spiritualized bodies Howe imagines—I draw on critical studies of nineteenth-century spiritualism and theories of the posthuman, especially the work of Donna Haraway, Katharine Hayles, Elaine Graham, and Sherryl Vint. While historical and literary studies of Swedenborg and spiritualism situate my analysis in nineteenth-century contexts, posthumanism offers us a nuanced language
for investigating the techno-human hybrid that Howe imagines. Nineteenth-century spiritualism was indeed a technology: a mechanics articulated through a human medium. A number of scholars document the interstices between spiritualism and nineteenth-century technologies, including the principles of electricity, magnetism, physiology, medicine, telegraphy, and locomotion.5 Spiritualism inspired the invention of distinct motors and mechanisms: the “writing planchette”—a wooden apparatus designed to harness the body’s magnetic energy and translate messages from the spirit world; the “Super-Ray”—a machine for generating spiritualist wonders like levitation; the “New Motor”—a contraption (with its own soul) supposed to channel spiritual electricity; and “spirit photography”—photographic techniques that captured images of spirits and mystical fluids emanating from a medium’s body.6 Spiritualism also made a technology of the body itself. As Robert Cox documents, one medium channeled spirit wisdom through tremors in his left hand, tapping his fingers compulsively like a telegraph; another medium’s body served as an etching pad, with spirit-born words and images appearing as red lines inscribed into her flesh (Cox 20). Through such psychosomatic physics, spiritualism promised its practitioners paradoxically disembodied liberties and transcendent insights—the opportunity to defy mortal limitations, enter immaterial worlds, and commune with super intelligences. Similarly, Sherryl Vint notes that the posthuman often explores “the freedoms of disembodied subjectivity” in alternative or virtual realities; it revels in a body-as-prosthesis gestalt, a body experienced as “an infinitely malleable accessory”; it embraces dramas of human augmentation, modification, and transformation, extolling variations that trouble the distinction between the human and the nonhuman; and it envisions “differently embodied humans and perhaps super-intelligent ones” (Vint 23, 172). As William S. Haney summarizes, “Posthumanism is defined as a human-technology symbiosis” (Haney 2). It challenges “the immutability of boundaries” between species, tools, machines, and bodies (Graham, Representations 1). In short, posthumanism thinks the relationship between science and subjectivity, technology and the body, in succinct and salient terms. Nina and Eva represent a kindred investment in disembodied freedoms, virtual lives, and extrahuman aptitudes. Their textual and cultural presence reminds us that the posthuman subject has discursive precursors and antecedents.7 Elaine Graham notes that “the western imagination” (its religions, sciences, philosophies, and fictions) overflows “with fantastical . . . beings whose ambivalent or liminal status bears witness to a perennial fascination with both the outer limits of human identity and the ultimate potential of human creativity” (Graham, “Cyborgs” 421). Nina and Eva are an incarnation of that techno-
mythic fascination. As such, they reflect persistent questions about human bodies and boundaries.

Technologies of Mobility and Intimacy

Swedenborg and the spiritualists who followed him spoke the language of other worlds and believed that they received staggering posthumous confidences. A Swedish scientist turned mystic and theologian, until his late fifties Swedenborg’s work focused on physics, chemistry, biology, geology, physiology, and mathematics. In 1743, he heard the voices of angels and began to penetrate the mysteries of life after death, producing an extensive catalog of theo-philosophical writings. “I have . . . been granted almost constant converse with spirits and angels for a good many years now,” Swedenborg said (Swedenborg, UH 53). As a result, Swedenborg claimed a graphic and expansive knowledge of the afterlife. He charted the structure of heaven; described the clothes, houses, and bodies of its inhabitants; guided novitiate spirits; and debated the province of the soul with the undead. Educated as a scientist, Swedenborg sought empirical evidence of the soul’s immortality, aiming “to make spirit comprehensible to the external senses.” His scientific investigation of the ethereal effaced “the distinction between spirit and matter” and opened the human mind to an exhilarating torrent of celestial wisdom (Cox 12). By the 1840s, Swedenborg’s inductions—his geography of heaven, his study of spirit matter, and his concept of spirit mediation—suffused spiritualist discourses.

In posthuman terms, Swedenborgian cosmologies reiterate the ideals and aspirations of “technochantment,” a theoretical stance that invests scientific progress with a sacred and sublime significance. In Designer Evolution, for example, Simon Young passionately advocates for a posthuman “belief in overcoming human limitation through reason, science, and technology.” Although Young acknowledges that this ideology does not affirm “the existence of supernatural phenomena (such as God, heaven and hell, soul and spirit),” he allows that it might be considered a “religion”—or a “devotional adherence to [certain] beliefs, values, and practices”—and he insists that “Superbiology” and technology will eventually connect us all to “an evolving global brain” or “cybermind” (Young 15, 22, 44). Technochantment sees cyberspace as a place of redemption and phoenix-like potential. As Graham summarizes, proponents of “technochantment” view technology as an “opportunity to construct the celestial habitats that previously only existed in the imagination,” and they define digital technology as “a portal into a
sacred realm,” one that enables us to access “a group mind never before experienced” (Graham, *Representations* 170). For Spiritualists, the trance was likewise a technological byway to divine worlds and an immense intelligence. In trance-states, Swedenborg toured celestial palaces and spoke with philosophical and biblical icons (including Aristotle and Jesus). In 1847, Andrew Jackson Davis—an iconic Spiritualist prophet and healer—claimed Galen and Swedenborg as his guides, detailing trance-enabled encounters with the dead pedagogues. Medium Isaac Post disseminated the posthumous messages of an impressive range of historical actors and thinkers, including Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, George Fox, William Penn, and Margaret Fuller. Post had such resolute faith in the pervasive impact of Spiritualist intelligence that he declared: “let no man claim that he has made great improvements in the arts and sciences unassisted by spirit friends” (Post xiii). Fueled by “technochanted” aspirations, Spiritualists developed increasingly sophisticated mechanisms of celestial communication. Spirits sounded out words and sentences with successive raps (from one to twenty-six) that corresponded to letters of the alphabet or tapped affirmatively as people called out letters of the alphabet (Goldsmith 31). Inventive gadgets, like alphabet wheels and planchettes, further enhanced spiritual revelation. The planchette, for example, was “a heart-shaped piece of wood mounted on three casters.” Animated by magnetic forces that coursed through fingers resting lightly on its surface, the planchette could point to letters on a scripted alphabet and spell out words, or it could write out whole missives with a pencil inserted into its frame (Braude 24). By the 1850s, the wonders of “automatic writing” turned the body into a spirit’s writing instrument. Post, one of the century’s most prolific writing mediums, said that when a spirit controls a transcription “the hand writes what the mind does not dictate” (Post xii). With posthuman portents, Spiritualists imagined a world nurtured and transformed by psychic technologies, innovations, and information.

As we shall see, Howe’s manuscript emphasizes the *relational* implications of spirit communication. Holistically, the Nina–Eva story evinces a palpable fascination with spiritual communication and the technologies of intimacy and mobility it promised. With kindred mystical aptitudes, Eva and Nina exhibit an extraordinary ability to commune with the dead or physically absent. Nina’s character manifests a magnetic capacity for constant contact with her exiled fiancé, Gaetano, and Eva’s character exhibits a spirit-medium’s faculties for connecting with her dead beloved and other celestial envoys. Howe’s depiction of sentient femininity reflects nineteenth-century technologies of paranormal association and the latent desires that churned through them. With Nina’s somnambulism, Howe turns mesmerism into a vehicle
of psychic travel, chronicling a dream of expansive movement and mobility. With Eva’s mediumship, Howe turns preternatural speech into a love language, enacting a fantasy of unobstructed communication. In the process, the novel explores the mechanics of spiritual locomotion and techno-human fusion.

Eva possesses a spirit-medium’s capacity for intuitive understanding and psychic translation of a romantic counterpart. Although her dead lover, Rafael, communicates in the incomprehensible “language of another world,” Eva understands him (Howe, H 166). In an otherworldly idiom, Rafael affirms his love for Eva and tells her that a series of spirits will seek her out, but she should heed only the “angel of consolation” (Howe, H 166). As the story unfolds, Eva communicates fluently with diverse spirit life, and she sustains a death-defying connection to Rafael: she can hear him, translate him, speak to him. Her mystical acumen mirrors Swedenborg’s own relationships with the afterlife. Swedenborg said he talked with the celestal order “in their own language,” growing fluent in a lexicon of “light and shade,” emotional “shifts,” and pictorial displays (Swedenborg, UH 53, 51). As Swedenborg represents it, the language of spirits is highly specialized and nonverbal. The more sophisticated spirits (angels) spoke to him “by ideas alone”—by “representing from internal sight”—so that thought was both seen and felt (quoted in Toksvig 227). Thus, angelic communication was incredibly immediate, inward, and psychically tangible. As Leigh Eric Schmidt remarks, the language of angels surged with a spontaneous, subrational completeness: “There were no gaps, no slippages, no broken signs, no arbitrary conventions” (Schmidt 210). Consequently, extrasensory dialogue represented a revolutionary mode of human association, transforming the way an interpersonal other was perceived, sensed, and understood. Sheri Weinstein suggests that “spiritualism offered an economy of human relationships and knowledge that was deliberately oriented toward intuition” (Weinstein 126). Eva’s spiritual literacies, then, privilege invisible intimacies, felt knowledges, and an instinctive grasp of otherworldly messages.

Described as “magnetic” and “clairvoyant,” Nina’s paranormal relational skills operate on a more earthly and spatial scale (Howe, H 158, 159). “I have made the whole journey with him,” she confides to her brother (Howe, H 139). “[D]o you not see our bark canoe, and the Canadian guides? at night, we draw the canoe on shore, light our fire, and sleep there—early in the morning, we rise and pursue our way” (Howe, H 139). Though an ocean stretches between them, Nina adventures with her beloved, seeing what he sees, experiencing what he experiences. Thus, she magnetically delivers on her prophetic pledge to give Gaetano constant, soulful companionship.¹⁰ Ali-
son Winter’s history of Victorian mesmerism notes that like Nina, magnetized persons “displayed amazing new feats of perception and cognition.” Like Nina, they exhibited an incredible aptitude for interconnection and intimacy: in symbiotic rapport with a mesmerist, a patient could “speak his thoughts, taste the food in his mouth, move her limbs in a physical echo of his.” And like Nina, the magnetic subject had an expansive perceptual field: in deeper stages of the sleep, individuals could see “events occurring in the future, inside the body, in distant lands, and even in the heavens” (Winter 3). Clairvoyant aptitudes liberated the medium from the body so that they “could explore at will any location, no matter how distant or hidden” (Crabtree 174). As a result, mesmerized subjects described events far removed from their social location and testified to an out-of-body presence in other geographies.

In Swedenborg’s vocabulary, Nina achieves an earthly form of “adjunction” or “spiritual cohabitation” (Swedenborg, CL 178). Swedenborg postulated that “the souls and minds of men are not in space as their bodies are,” and that “affinities of love” determine distance and presence in the spiritual world (Swedenborg, CL 177). Thus, two minds and souls could become one even if bodies remained apart. Nina’s presence in Gaetano’s world—the proximity between them despite bodily separation—reflects the spatial logic of conjugal bonds. Distances in conjugal milieus were emotional and intellectual, determined by sympathy and antipathy, not material circumstances. Hence, conjugal love enables Nina to adjoin with her lover Gaetano and live with him in a phantasmal mode. Swedenborg called this merger “adjunction,” arguing that it was a form of “spiritual cohabitation” maintained by conjugal “who tenderly love each other, however distant they are in body” (Swedenborg, CL 178). For Swedenborg, conjugal love created a metaphysical joint household, a psychic or spiritual occupation of the other. Spiritualist thought adopted a similar emphasis on discarnate unities. As Cox explains, mystical channels facilitated an “all-encompassing reciprocity of selves”—one that obliterated geographic or physical space. “In connecting spirits freed of the physical body,” Cox summarizes, “[spiritualism] promoted an intense fusion,” closing distances between subjects with the velocity of a thought or impulse (Cox 88). Hence, Spiritualism promised transcendent and immediate intimacies.

Howe’s plotting—the affinity between Nina’s mesmerism and Eva’s mediumship—reflects a productive interplay between the paranormal and nineteenth-century technologies of connection. Mesmerism and spiritualism emerged in a historical interval that saw the rapid proliferation of communication and transportation media: the railroad, the telegraph, and the daguerreotype. Weinstein posits an inextricable relationship between
mechanical innovations and American spiritualist “technologies” (spirit-rapping, writing planchettes, séances, magnetic trances, etc.). Collectively, both spiritual and industrial progress enabled “human beings to be transported in mystifying, immeasurable, and excitingly infinite ways.” As Weinstein recognizes, spiritualism and industrialism reorganized time and space. Psychic and industrial advances shortened distances and dismantled communication barriers (Weinstein 133). In 1852, Isaac Post postulated that a “spiritual telegraph” mediated communication between the living and the dead (Stuart 39).

This socio-industrial framework defined the human body itself as a technology—a conductor, a conduit, a byway, a carrier.

Provocatively, that corporeality resonates with posthuman notions of the body and human–machine symbiosis. As Katharine Hayles explains, “[T]he posthuman view configures [the] human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines” (Hayles 3). Similarly, Howe posits a human subject that can be seamlessly articulated with spiritual mechanisms: angels, telepathy, and trance.

To borrow select paradigms of cybernetic subjectivity, one could argue that Nina and Eva are human-technology hybrids: “spiritborgs” or “spiritnetic” organisms. Andy Clark sees the cyborg as a signifier for a more expansive “ability to enter into deep and complex relationships with nonbiological constructs, props, and aids,” arguing that techno-soma “mergers may be consummated without the intrusion of silicon and wire into flesh and blood, as anyone who has felt himself thinking via the act of writing already knows” (Clark 5). Nina and Eva invoke the technologized subjectivity Clark describes: a body open to diffuse alliances with technological paraphernalia. As such, they also represent the capacity for intimacy and translation that Donna Haraway extends to the cyborg. Like the cyborg, the spiritborg appears where boundaries are transgressed, signaling a “disturbingly and pleasurably tight coupling.” And like the cyborg, the spiritborg is a “communication devic[e]”—medium and messenger—a conduit of strange and powerful unities (Haraway 10, 35). As spiritnetic life forms, Nina and Eva are amalgams, hybrid beings that unsettle the distinctions between presence and absence, subject and object.

(Im)materialisms

Yet the disembodied utility of Howe’s heroines raises vexing issues. While Nina and Eva love in ways typically reserved for angels, their spiritualized ideality leaves the body in a state of abstention and neglect. Before Gaetano leaves, Nina assures him that “my soul goes forth with your soul, and wher-
ever you may be, I shall stand beside you’” (Howe, H 137). Lapsing into a catatonic, trance-like state, Nina’s interior self travels with Gaetano up the Mississippi River, through Louisiana, and north to Canada. As Nina psychically journeys with Gaetano, she manifests an unsettling disassociation with the body, growing indifferent to hunger cues and her immediate surroundings. Likened to a clay figurine, Nina abnegates residency in her physical self, living in a transatlantic elsewhere. She eats only when food is brought to her; she mechanically allows herself to be dressed and undressed, and she spends her days insensible on a couch or chair. As the narrative details, she becomes “strangely inanimate,” shows “no perception of external things,” and has “no thought beyond the dream life in which she dwells, with her phantom lover” (Howe, H 138, 140). Nina’s indifference to the body reifies her elsewhere-existence. She is awake and perfunctorily responsive—sitting, eating, breathing, and speaking—but she is not of or in the body. Similarly, while Eva keeps vigil by Rafael’s graveside, she also dissociates from the body. Singing, praying, and speaking to Rafael all night, she sees “no more the moon, the stars, or the grave” and “of herself she knew nothing until the first rays of sun recalled her to herself” (Howe, H 175). Nourished solely by wild honey, Eva refuses to leave the burial place for days. She acknowledges only angels and spirits, completely ignoring a whole series of embodied contacts: a group of religious pilgrims, an enamored prince, the king’s priests, his soldiers, and the king himself. Zealously focused on another reality, “she spake not, looked not, but ever sang, and prayed, and poured out her soul to Rafael and to God” (Howe, H 176). Eva assumes such immaterial proportions that her face exudes an “unearthly light” and the prince mistakes her for a spirit when he first sees her (Howe, H 175). Like Nina, Eva exhibits an amazing faculty for hypnotic, fanatical attachment to a displaced lover. And like Nina, she seems to live solely in the spirit—outside or beyond the body.

With unsettling implications, such characterizations reify the renunciations of the body that shadow the history of Western philosophy and a salient critique of posthumanism. According to Elizabeth Grosz, prevailing philosophic traditions render the body a subordinate term: not mind, not spirit, “[the body] is implicitly defined as unruly, disruptive, in need of direction and judgment, merely incidental.” Western thinking typically ghettoizes the body, sending it to the dingy corners of human subjectivity. Grosz succinctly identifies the foundational assumptions that pervade such judgments, arguing that dominant ideologies see the body “as an intrusion on or interference with the operation of mind, a brute givenness which requires overcoming, a connection with animality and nature that needs transcendence” (Grosz 3–4). In a Western philosophical mind-set, the body is baggage or impedi-
ment, dilemma or difficulty. Similarly, Sheryl Vint notes that the posthuman often “equate[s] self with only the mind” and reinscribes a “desire to transcend the limitations of the body through technology or genetic redesign” (Vint 11, 8). These paradigms can fuel gender-specific forms of oppression. Governing cultural discourses often reduce women to the body, reserving the more transcendent, purified realms of mind and spirit for men. That process denies femininity cultural legibility and liberty. As Vint puts it, “So long as the free individual is equivalent to the unmarked, non-embodied mind,” some subjects can claim neither freedom nor personhood (Vint 90). Historically, the body is troubled terrain for women. When Nina and Eva wrest being from the body, they arguably seize a patriarchal privilege, accessing a transcendence traditionally reserved for masculinity. But they also reify patriarchal dogma and a posthuman quagmire, as if the body is an expendable, subsidiary concern.

Swedenborg’s vision of human identity and evolution fortifies this philosophically fraught relationship to the corporeal self. Swedenborg saw an earthly human subject weighted and inhibited by the body. “As long as we live in this body,” he wrote, “we sense and perceive very little of the spiritual” (Swedenborg, UH 39). Gregory Johnson observes that Swedenborg lauded the rare individual who could decode the “influxes from the spirit world” and “gain the knowledge available to their spiritual selves” (Gregory Johnson 31). Swedenborg also argued that earthly citizens could not discern or sustain true conjugal love. Because we live “enveloped in a gross body, which dulls and absorbs” our insight—and because we think love “from the flesh, lasciviously”—conjugal partnership remains an exclusively celestial phenomenon (Swedenborg, CL 189). Swedenborg believed that the body numbed the ability to recognize and experience conjugal affinities. Nevertheless, Swedenborg allowed that the messier, dirtier facets of physical existence could be distilled or expunged from the self over a lifespan. As the individual weds itself to abstractions—love, reason, wisdom, goodness, understanding—s/he grows increasingly incorporeal. Swedenborg argued that although humankind gestates in the “corporeal” or the “natural,” we can become progressively more “rational” and “spiritual” (Swedenborg, CL 115). By extension, Swedenborg held that conjugal love also originates in bodily attractions and appetites, but it “successively becomes more and more pure, thus chaste” (Swedenborg, CL 158). Hence, Swedenborg distinguished spotless, sanitized conjugal love from “scurratory love,” an excessively embodied state synonymous with “lusts,” “wantonnesses,” “sensuous allurements,” “lascivious delights,” “the uncleanness of hell,” “excrements and mire,” “stenches and noisesome vapors” (Swedenborg, CL 421, 423). While Swedenborg’s angels have “sex” of
a sort, their couplings are clean and uncorrupted, suffused with boundless joy and charged with a mind-expanding impact. When Swedenborg relegates the body to lower orders of being, he fragments the human subject: mind and spirit function as ascendant terms and the body seethes in the self’s visceral depths.

The posthuman raises equally knotty questions of corporeality. Katherine Hayles notes the posthuman tendency to efface the body, hearing Platonic echoes in its willingness to prioritize abstraction and minimize “the importance of material instantiation.” With “its emphasis on cognition rather than embodiment,” and its sense that the nexus of identity “lies in the mind, not the body,” the posthuman reignites an enduring philosophical fascination with the immaterial self. Hayles links the posthuman erasure of embodiment to theo-philosophical fantasies of unchecked freedom, transcendence, and immortality (Hayles 13, 5). Indeed, Graham sees “a resurgence of a kind of spirituality”—a revival of a Judeo-Christian emphasis on “detachment, omniscience, immutability, and incorporeality”—in posthuman visions of the future (Graham, “Post/Human” 23, 24). Vint likewise notes that an “abstraction from the body” persists in posthumanist thought, resulting in social distortions, disparities, and exclusions (Vint 11).

Arguably, Eva and Nina follow this evolutionary trajectory, growing increasingly idealized and omniscient as they move beyond the body. Reunited with Rafael in heaven, Eva realizes the monumental rewards of transfiguration: “the problems of life solved themselves before her eyes—the instincts of her heart explained themselves to her” (Howe, H 180). Altered in the afterlife, Eva realizes an apex of perception and understanding, penetrating the puzzles of her worldly existence. The narrative also celebrates Nina’s extrahuman acuities: she is described as “far-seeing and intelligent of soul” (Howe, H 158). Taken together, Nina and Eva see, move, and merge in exceptional ways, representing romanticized yet deeply problematic discarnate potentials.

Left uncomplicated, however, that characterization elides the materialism of both spiritualist and posthuman immaterialisms. Swedenborg proffered a “mechanical interpretation of life” and human consciousness, theorizing that thought itself was both motion and matter and that the soul had material, mechanic properties. For Swedenborg, the spiritual and the corporeal are different forms of matter. The soul, like the body, is a “spatially extended substance,” composed of a “spiritual fluid” (Benz 119, 129, 134). Moreover, Swedenborg likened the afterlife’s course of “spiritual purification” to chemical and biological processes: “defecation, rectification, castigation, cohabitation, acuition, decantation, [and] sublimation” (Swedenborg, CL 158). In the nine-
teenth century, Swedenborg’s emphasis on empirical knowledge and spiritual physiologies continued to inform spiritualist discourses. As Cox details, “Spiritualists eschewed the mystical in favor of the empirical and invested the spiritual world with a range of material, technological marvels” (Cox 87). Likewise, Weinstein notes that spiritualists “adopted a particularly materialist vocabulary to validate ethereality,” borrowing the scientific principles of electricity, physiology, and engineering (Weinstein 130). Though posthumanists do not speak of spirit bodies or soul matter, their conception of human consciousness is also corporeal: thought, awareness, and intelligence have material situations and implications. Posthumanism recognizes “an embodied or embedded intelligence,” an intelligence “spread throughout the body” (Haney 25). Thinkers like Hayles, Haraway, Graham, and Vint argue forcefully for a posthumanism that conscientiously attends to the situated, material body. Thus, spirit-centered retreats from the body do not necessarily mean that Nina and Eva are entirely disembodied.

Just as important, their female physiology does not mean they are entirely disempowered. Anne Braude explains, “Spiritualism made the delicate constitution and nervous excitability commonly attributed to femininity a virtue” (Braude 83). The anatomy of nineteenth-century womanhood brought the female medium into voice and power. As John J. Kucich affirms, gendered norms and ideals rendered women “exquisitely sensitive, preternaturally passive, the very apotheosis of spirituality.” Mediumship turned a womanly constitution into a vehicle of agency and subjectivity. For women, “the radical impact of spiritualism” lay in a “canny manipulation and exaggeration of nineteenth-century conventions of womanhood” (Kucich 11). Both Braude and Kucich credit the cultural connotations of female spiritualism with the extension of women’s rights, suffrage, and marital equality. Strict dichotomies between the material and the immaterial (freedom and constraint, power and subordination) cannot neatly or completely explain the spiritualist conception of the body and Howe’s creative relationship to it.

This tension resonates with larger interpretive conflicts in the study of nineteenth-century spiritualism and contemporary posthumanism. Both spiritualism and posthumanism percolate in cultural arenas that endow technology with the power to liberate or destroy the human subject. Advocates of posthuman progressions trumpet a “technologization” of the body that enriches human life, ends illness and affliction, and marshals “in the unlimited flourishing of human potential.” Such thinking heralds the “digital and biotechnological age as . . . a period of human empowerment and evolution—even divinization.” And yet as Graham details, technophobias and tyrannies also plague posthuman frameworks; for some, technology
alienates, fragments, and dehumanizes, eroding a psychosomatic province of self-determination (Graham, *Representations* 5–8). Kindred ambivalences dog scholarly understandings of spiritualist technologies. Emphasizing the synapses between spiritualist thought and antebellum reform movements (including abolition, temperance, free love, and proto-feminism), some critics see spiritualism as a technology of cultural revolution and change. Cox notes that for many scholars, spiritualism enacts “the popular mechanics of radical social resistance.” Other researchers, however, argue that “mediumship can be as limiting as it is liberating,” that spiritualism “may reinforce the ordinary relations of power,” and that it may be “both conservative and radical at the same time” (Cox 18–19). This paradoxical heterogeneity—the multiplicity of meanings that surge through the study of spiritualism and posthumanism—also constitutes a locus of scholarly inquiry. The ambiguities signal that these discourses might be privileged sites of incongruity, an arena where the intricacies of personal and cultural power—of the body and embodiment—can be substantively considered. For the moment, then, the questions become: What impact do spiritualist technologies have on subjectivity? What happens to identity and agency as the body interfaces with mechanisms that can alternately empower or eradicate the subject?

**Correspondences and Extended Embodiment**

Swedenborg’s bodies do not completely dematerialize: his angels have a corporeal form, his souls have substance, and his spirits have a material essence. Swedenborg saw something spiritually orienting in bodily structures; he said that spirits and angels retain “normal faces and bodies, organs and limbs,” because they are accustomed to the body and its senses (Swedenborg, *UH* 73). While spirits are no longer limited or constrained by the body, they remain substantial and visibly “human” in a corporeal sense. Nineteenth-century spiritualist Andrew Jackson Davis once witnessed the birth of the spiritual body, seeing an ethereal human form emerge from the head of a dying woman (Laderman 62). In addition, Swedenborg held that every natural entity (animals, plants, parts of the body, and so on) has a celestial and sacred complement, so that nothing is just itself. As Benz puts it, “every speck of dust preaches the mysteries of heaven,” and every part of the body pulses with similar spiritual significance. The material world is an epistemological reality and a “shadow” of the spiritual and the divine (Benz 352–53). Nineteenth-century spiritualists embraced Swedenborg’s “correspondential geography,” warming to the belief that every material entity had an ethereal,
ephemeral counterpart (Cox 12). In the process, the reach and range of body, mind, and spirit are reconfigured.

Posthumanism likewise reimagines traditionally static and fixed boundaries, especially the body’s borders. Implants, synthetic drugs, prosthetics, assisted reproduction, cloning, organ transplants, artificial life systems, digital media, high-tech instruments, and other innovations extend the body’s provinces and remap its limits. As Graham summarizes, “Technologies are not so much an . . . appendage to the human body, but are incorporated, assimilated into its very structures. The contours of human bodies are redrawn: they no longer end at the skin” (Graham, *Representations* 4). Similarly, Hayles explains, “The posthuman subject is a . . . material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction” (Hayles 3). And Vint writes, “technologies of body modification offer the chance to reshape bodies . . . subjects and the social world we make” (Vint 19). Posthumanism recognizes a formative, mutually authoring correspondence between the body and the technologies it adopts, integrates, or deploys. It sees a body changing, expanding, and contracting in consort with its technologized capacities and contexts. Howe’s depiction of Rafael’s beautiful corpse—and the “botanical Eva” that germinates from his chest—resonates with Swedenborgian laws of correspondence and this diffuse, radically interconnected posthuman materiality. More specifically, Eva’s story underscores the adhesive and transformative properties of a correspondent physicality, rendering it another “technology” of intimacy, mobility, and change. With Eva’s hybridity—with the intersections, symbioses, and mutations she embodies—Howe explores an embodied ontology of openness, flow, and gender-bending amalgamation.

Reflecting Swedenborg’s faith in an ethereal physicality and spirit–matter fusions, Rafael’s body resists decomposition and change, and it also catalyzes conspicuous fissures of identity. His gorgeous, unchanging corpse renders the connection between an earthly Rafael and a heavenly one concrete and enduring. “The face was lovely and calm, as in a dream of peace, but it was sealed, it would change no more. The dark locks lay lovingly upon the white forehead, but, had they been cast in bronze, they could not have been more immovable” (Howe, *H* 167). Even after death, Rafael’s body persists and remains recognizably Rafael. In other words, his body not only achieves its own immortality, it also sustains and preserves his identity. Provocatively, Rafael’s body becomes a locus of Eva’s selfhood as well. When the angel of consolation visits Eva, he tells her that a plant will grow out of Rafael’s chest “until it shall burst the tomb” and blossom (Howe, *H* 173). The angel charges Eva with the plant’s safekeeping, promising her a heavenly reunion with Rafael provided she
plucks the flower the instant it blooms. In response, Eva pledges her fidelity to the plant, nurturing it with tears, prayers, and song. When the plant finally fractures the crystal vault and a “starlike purple flower” opens at its top, Eva is “transfigured” (Howe, H 178). The instant she touches it, the plant shoots up to heaven, carrying an ethereal Eva with it, “while the lifeless form that had been Eva, sank upon the ground” (Howe, H 178). The plant, then, is an organic metonym for Eva’s earthly existence and her heavenly evolution. Its growth depends on Eva’s physical presence and embodied offerings (tears, chants, song), and Eva’s immortal life depends on the plant’s survival and progeny.

The correspondence between Eva and the plant reflects a fundamental law of a Swedenborgian universe. Swedenborg argued that “everything in the human body has a correspondence with something in heaven”; that distinct angelic populations “belong” to each region of the body; and that our bodies respond to heavenly surges and stimuli (Swedenborg, UH 40, 69, 71). As his philosophy re-members corporeality, Swedenborg posits a body without borders, a body that corresponds to organic and spiritual entities and forces. With such theorizing, Swedenborg embraces a porous and interconnected body, a subject constantly experiencing a “process of unconscious translation,” and a human entity “always in vital contact with others” in any phase of existence (Spalding 187). In such a configuration, bodies and boundaries exist, but the connection, transgression, and dissolution that Eva experiences are primal, formative dramas in the self’s journey.

Eva’s botanical counterpart also abounds with interpersonal and intersexed significance, corresponding to Eva’s conjugal bond with Rafael and the “one angel” it creates. When Howe imagines a botanical Eva budding from Rafael’s “bosom,” she places it at the corporeal center of affection, commitment, and belief (Howe, H 173). Swedenborg described the bosom as “a place of assembly” and “the seat” of conjugal love; he held that the full force of a conjugal love “flows into [the] bosom,” thus igniting the drive for “conjunction.” At the bosom, the “two ways” of each consort congregate (Swedenborg, CL 190). Thus, Howe situates the flora-Eva at the bodily hub of conjugal marriage, at the very core of its construction. The plant, then, gives their love material life, dimension, and impact. In addition, the more androgynous or intersexed dimensions of the plant’s bodily situation register Swedenborg’s faith in a dually sexed conjugal being. Swedenborg prized a divine androgy, an archetypal first human that “embraces both the male and female principle within himself.” Historically, such ideologies held that the Edenic human subject was intersexed—created in the image of a more perfect wholeness. Within this theological trajectory, the partition of
Chapter nine

the sexes occurred after the Fall, reinforcing humankind’s alienation from God’s “androgynous unity” (Benz 407). Although Swedenborg disavowed a hermaphroditic Alpha-human—believing instead that men and women were created sexually distinct—he idealized a celestial, intersexed totality. For Swedenborg, conjugal love (not genesis) fueled a sacred sexual fusion. So “that from two [men and women] may become as one man, or one flesh” (Swedenborg, CL 43). Swedenborg believed that the sincerest, most authentic form of love rendered us intersexed in heaven: “two married partners are not called two but one angel” (Swedenborg, CL 60). Tellingly, that unity had a bodily effect. “[T]his phenomenon,” Swedenborg counseled, “is felt in their flesh” (Swedenborg, CL 189). Swedenborg argued any union of “soul and mind with a married partner is felt in the body as one flesh” (Swedenborg, CL 190). With the plant, Eva and Rafael likewise become “one flesh” and Howe’s story dramatizes an incremental form of conjugal androgyny. When Eva is finally transfigured and taken to heaven in the arms of the plant, she and Rafael become Swedenborg’s one angel: “two forms locked in one fervent embrace, so that they seemed no longer two, but one” (Howe, H 181). Thus, Eva and Rafael fuse into a singular conjugal formation, embodying a marriage of mind, soul, and soma.

In gendered terms, spiritualism nurtured an abundant range of transmorphologies. Mediums regularly channeled “differently gendered bodies” and trance-speaking connoted a “purifying transfiguration and release from the earthly, gendered body” (McGarry 154). Moreover, spiritualism worked through a mechanics of gender parity and reciprocity. As Braude elucidates, guides to the practice recommended that séance circles include “equal numbers of men and women” or a balance of “masculine” and “feminine” participants. “Spiritualists used the language of electricity . . . to describe the relative positions of men and women in spirit communication. Women were ‘negative,’ and men were ‘positive’” (Braude 23). But a spirit medium’s gendered energy did not always correspond to biological sex. Spiritualists recognized that anatomy aside, individuals could exude a “feminine” (open, responsive, and emotive) or “masculine” (assertive, forceful, rational) charge. Hence, Molly McGarry concludes that spiritualism “reimag[ed] the corporeal,” “offer[ed] new forms of embodiment,” and “produced another way of being in the world” (McGarry 158, 154). Eva’s shifting subjectivity—earthly woman, spirit medium, plant-symbiote, conjugal angel—enacts a series of spiritualist metamorphoses. When a corresponding “Eva” emanates from Rafael’s body, the corpse takes on gender-bending, border-crossing, and species-twisting properties, becoming part-Rafael and part-Eva, part-male and part-female, part-plant and part-human, part-living and part-dead. Such
intersections reiterate Swedenborg’s interest in dissolution and interconnection: in a permeable subjectivity that exists in constitutive dialogue with organic and spiritual correlatives.

This gravitation to disintegration and reconstitution suffused nineteenth-century spiritualism and Howe’s conception of Eva’s subjectivity. As McGarry notes, “Crossing the boundary of life itself worked to unsettle a whole series of earthly boundaries”: age, sex, class, genus, corporeality, and humanness (McGarry 160–61). Spiritualist thinking renders the body a plastic term and extends the self an ability to morph and move beyond its corporeal or earthly confines. As a Swedenborgian subject, Eva is a perceiving, knowing being contained but not completely constrained by her physicality. Indeed, Swedenborgian correspondences create what Robert Pepperell might term a “radically extended” posthuman self: “an embodied being whose experience . . . is potentially boundless” (Pepperell 31). Frequently associated with the alien, the monstrous, the queer—with catachresis, paradox, and impossibility—that extended subjectivity challenges the “neat distinctions” that organize and classify identity. “Driven . . . by the double impossibility and prerequisite to become other and become itself,” Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston expound, “the posthuman body intrigues” (Halberstam and Livingston 11, 14). Eva “intrigues” in that sense, animated by technologies and associations that make her simultaneously other and self.

**Melancholic Bodies: Grief, Fear, and Monogamy**

For Howe, then, the “spiritnetic” body becomes a site of radical insubordination and provocative potential. Howe’s spiritualized bodies resist and confound intelligibility, categorization, and social placement. Townspeople call Eva a “witch” and assume her prayers are “evil incantations” (Howe, H 177). She faces religious, political, and military censure (in the form of priests, soldiers, and the king himself), and yet she defies “reason” and “threat” remaining steadfast and inscrutable by Rafael’s grave (Howe, H 177). Nina likewise befuddles efforts to explain her spiritualized condition:

> Whether she was cataleptic and insane, whether she was clairvoyante [sic], and if so, whether the facts open to her knowledge had their place in the material or the spiritual world, were all subjects of doubt and dissension among the more intelligent of Nina’s friends. The more ignorant supposed her possessed of a dumb devil, like some of the demoniacs of the New Testament. (Howe, H 158)
Judged mad, magnetic, and possessed, Nina bewilders attempts to diagnose, exorcise, and rechannel her. When Laurence tries to turn her revelatory talents to the enigmas of “the unseen world,” Nina refuses, saying “that she had no knowledge of these things,” and she asks that Laurence “relinquish the attempt to give a new direction to her powers” (Howe, H 159). Associated with the alien, the demonic, and the insane, Nina and Eva flummox taxonomies and teleologies. In corporeal respects, their characters push the edges of feasibility and viability.

As such, they represent subversive and novel possibilities. Not legally wed, their conjugal partnerships are extramarital, thriving outside the confines of judicial or religious sanction. Eva’s sustained connection to Rafael defies physical death, social censure, and the threat of divine correction: “Thy love was partly sensual, and partly selfish,” says a dark spirit, “and God will judge both thee and it” (Howe, H 171). Similarly, Nina’s attachment to Gaetano flouts natural laws, bodily separation, political exile, and her brother’s refusal to permit a speedy marriage. Analyzed through this trajectory, Nina and Eva seem unbound and ungovernable. They see, move, and merge in exceptional ways. Haraway’s understanding of the cyborg emphasizes the emancipatory kinetics of boundary-crossings and extrahuman amalgamation, reinforcing the seditious potential of Nina and Eva’s spiritnetic status. According to Haraway, the cyborg represents idealized and liberatory potentials. In mythical terms, the cyborg “is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities.” As a result, Haraway says, a cyborg world can be a resource in a sociopolitical struggle against domination (Haraway 12–13). Similarly, Nina and Eva signify a subjectivity that exceeds the skin—an identity of intersection and interconnection, of transgression and transformation. They are animated by technologies that render them pliant and oppositional. Thus, Howe imagines life forms that challenge natural laws and social convention.

But Nina and Eva suffer enormously to sustain their paranormal communions. Enrapt in her spiritual odyssey, Nina looks “bloodless” and radiates “an icy cold to the atmosphere around her” (Howe, H 140). Physicians determine that she suffers from a “disease . . . in the brain and nervous system” that cannot be treated, and she lives each day “in the same abnormal condition” (Howe, H 139). Eva persists in a state of unrelenting sorrow and physical deprivation (resolved that “‘[m]y tears shall be my meat day and night’”), and the climax of her story ends a “fearful martyrdom” (Howe, H 175, 178). Such textual details elicit unsettling subtexts and stir challenging questions: What does the spiritualized body actually experience? What costs do paranormal technologies and embodied correspondences exact? What are the
risks of an elsewhere existence? And what fears or anxieties lie beneath the discarnate devotion to a dead or absent lover?

Even as it embraces spiritualist technologies and physiologies, Howe’s fiction remains acutely concerned with their bodily remainders, with the problems of embodiment that Swedenborg’s metaphysics create. As Hayles explains it, embodiment never neatly or precisely aligns with “the body”: embodiment is always “enmeshed,” tangled in the specificities of “place, time, physiology, and culture.” While the body can disappear into its ideological construct, embodiment cannot—because embodiment is anchored to location and situation. When confronted with an “ideology of dematerialization,” Hayles urges us to examine the “embodied circumstances” that such an ideology might obscure (Hayles 193, 196–97). When we encounter a discursive context—literary or philosophical—where the body seems to recede or atrophy, Hayles asks us to consider the material realities and effects of that recession. And so does Julia Ward Howe.

United with Rafael and mentored by love, Eva stands as an icon of loyalty and faith. Beneath the surface of that characterization, however, lie pain, sacrifice, and fear. Processing her immediate earthly past, Eva recognizes that it was “‘necessary that I should give myself up to the one thought and idea of [Rafael], and abandon all that others deem good and beautiful on earth’” (Howe, H 179). That necessity smacks of monomania, loss, and earthly death. “Living for one in heaven, she had died to the world,” the narrative reads, “seeking a spiritual and immaterial good, she had learned to sacrifice, with less and less of pain, every material and sensual enjoyment” (Howe, H 180). As Williams notes, Eva earns redemption because she gives “her full emotional self to Rafael, distracted neither by another suitor nor by any inclination toward self-fulfillment” (Williams, HH 104). Eva’s graveside vigil inures her to hurt and bodily need. Howe’s romantic heroine represents a fanatical (albeit glorified) form of renunciation and denial. The empty body she leaves behind—“the lifeless form that had been Eva”—stands as the story’s most tangible symbol of a punishing repudiation (Howe, H 178). Eva’s immaterial quest costs her a mortal existence; her physical body cannot bear her metaphysical attachment to Rafael, and she must die to consummate her conjugal partnership.

In uniformly disturbing strokes, the story also suggests that Eva cannot afford to prize self-fulfillment or any form of gratification outside the bounds of her relationship. Not without losing Rafael. An “unkind spirit” reminds her that Rafael is “‘not bound to thee’”; in heaven “‘he is free to choose from those around him an angel higher in grace, and fairer in the beauty of holiness than thou’” (Howe, H 172). Swedenborg theorized that
heavenly sexual subjects—virgin, husband, wife, widow, widower, monk, celibate, eunuch—reassess their capacity for conjugal partnership in heaven. Even the most abstinent or unsexed individuals gain “the liberty of their desires.” Swedenborg’s sexual citizens are “released and allowed to go free” in a world that promises them perfect, symmetrical erotic synthesis (Swedenborg, CL 63). All romantic contracts are renegotiated in the Swedenborgian afterlife. Thus, Rafael may, in fact, recouple in the spiritual sphere.

In response, Eva’s story dramatizes intense anxieties about infidelity, sexual plurality, and abandonment. The prospect of Rafael’s heavenly romantic options debilitates Eva: “so deadly was the thought that Rafael might forget her,” she has difficulty seeing and breathing (Howe, H 172). Throughout the tale, other spiritual agents continually remind Eva of the inherent instability of their bond. Even the angel of consolation, the messenger who offers her the most comfort and ease, affirms the tenuousness of their love. “‘[T]here are many . . . ,’” he says, “‘who forget their love in heaven, and seek to themselves other mates on earth’” (Howe, H 174). The plant likewise represents the potent possibility of eternal loss and fracture: if anyone but Eva gathers the vital flower, she will “be placed in a heaven where Rafael is not” (Howe, H 173). Fear—as much as love and longing—motivates Eva’s tireless surveillance. Indeed, she promises never to leave the plant out of “‘fear of losing the blessed flower!’” (Howe, H 175). Thus, Eva carries an omnipresent dread: fear of loss, fear of betrayal, and fear of rejection.

Such apprehensions percolate through Swedenborg’s understanding of gender, a nomenclature that reifies erotic and emotional imbalances between the sexes. Swedenborg theorized that the essence of woman was volitional and affective: that women are “born loves,” defined by an inexhaustible “will” to conjoin (Swedenborg, CL 178). According to Swedenborg, “the inclination to unite the man to herself is constant and perpetual with the wife” because “love cannot do otherwise than love” (Swedenborg, CL 187). Man, in contrast, “is born to become understanding” and his inclination to marriage “is inconstant and alternating” (Swedenborg, CL 178). For Swedenborg, man is “only a recipient of love” and his openness to love fluctuates, influenced by shifts in mental “heat,” worldly obligations, and bodily “powers” (Swedenborg, CL 178, 179). Swedenborg argued that “with men there is nothing of conjugal love, nor even the love of the sex, but only with the wives and women” (Swedenborg, CL 180, 179). Swedenborg’s women are the vessels and vehicles of erotic devotion. So much so that when married partners meet each other after death, the “husbands rarely recognize their wives, but . . . wives readily recognize their husbands” (Swedenborg, CL 58). To illustrate the veracity of this supposition, Swedenborg shares a piece of spirit lore, explaining that the
men-spirits were once temporarily isolated from women in heaven, left in “an altogether strange state” (Swedenborg, CL 179). Separation from women made men forgetful of sexual difference, love, sex, and marriage. When the women came back, their men did not recognize them: “What is this? What is a woman?” they asked, “What is a wife?” (Swedenborg, CL 179). Conjugal awareness and gendered understanding returned only when the women began “to weep” (Swedenborg, CL 179). In this exemplary case study, the presence of women—and the bodily display of female grief—sustain both heterosexual and marital drives. Women not only possess the prerequisites to monogamy (desire, affection, fidelity), but without their constant care, monogamous gendered constructs collapse.

Hence, Eva’s perpetual sorrow and her nurturing proximity to Rafael’s body betray a fundamental instability. Beneath Eva’s transcendent aptitudes, beneath her “radically extended” corporeality, lies a body in bondage. When Eva seeks to further understand the forces that affix her to Rafael, he shows her a ship tossed by merciless seas, but “bound by a strong cord to an anchor sunken in the sand” (Howe, H 180). The story idealizes the cord as the god-given “anchor of the soul,” the “gracious power” that fastened Eva to Rafael. But as Eva herself observes, the ship does not “flee before the winds” nor “follow the current of the waves”: she cannot escape or ride the seas. Similarly, Swedenborg defined conjugal love as a fiercely and increasingly anchoring state: “those who are in love truly conjugal” become “more and more” one, yearning to “become one life” (Swedenborg, CL 189, 226). Conjugal partnerships grew ever more monogamous, singular, and unifying over time. In other words, their capacity to anchor their subjects enhanced as they endured. Only disingenuous forms of love left their partners in a perpetual state of “two”—a chronic “disunion”—and therefore vulnerable to a full range of marital “colds, separations, and divorces” (Swedenborg, CL 227, 246). Rafael dramatizes these ideas most pointedly when he presents the celestial Eva with an instructive portrait of the conjugal woman:

[Eva] looked and saw one who sat at the feet of her master, a man noble and beautiful to behold. And her eyes waited upon his look, her ear upon his bidding, her heart upon his love; and he poured into her lap her wages, which were of pure gold, and of the coinage of heaven. As he did so, she heard his voice, saying: “one thing only is needful.” (Howe, H 180)

The conjugal woman sits obediently at the feet of a benevolent master, engrossed in her lover’s needs and dependent on his attention. She earns erotic and heavenly favor through an obsessive focus on “one thing.” As
Rafael explains the image to Eva, he says “one love only is possible, and in that I was that love to thee, thou couldst only, in seeking other things, have lost it. Thank God, therefore, that thine eye was single” (Howe, H 180). Conjugal fulfillment depends on Eva's tunnel vision and resolute abnegation. Eva achieves a heavenly reunion with Rafael only because she refuses to see other realities or yearn for other bounties, and only because the singularity of her vision keeps Rafael tethered to her—mindful of their attachment and indifferent to other romantic options.

The specters of infidelity and sexual apprehension also shadow Nina's fixation on Gaetano. Just before she promises him unwavering companionship, she warns him against any act of betrayal. “Do not then dare to be unfaithful to me,” she says (Howe, H 137). In light of that challenge, Nina's story, like Eva's, can be read as a parable of jealousy, insecurity, and romantic surveillance. Swedenborg insisted that jealousy was an integral component of the conjugal experience. He said jealousy was “the zeal” or “the fire” of conjugal love, and he saw the more compulsive, consuming dimensions of love as evidence of its sincerity (Swedenborg, CL 367). Jealousy registers the dual-sexed angel's “horrid fear” of fracture and separation (Swedenborg, CL 373). For Swedenborg, jealousy was a romantic inevitability because fear and grief are “inherent in conjugal love”: “fear lest it be divided, and grief lest it perish” (Swedenborg, CL 374). Associated with rupture and death, jealousy serves as an emotional avowal of an irresolvable and enduring instability. The threat of loss and division persist in the conjugal sphere, and thus, jealousy “is likewise a protection against adultery”—a “fire flaming against violation; and defending against it” (Swedenborg, CL 374). When Nina becomes Gaetano's “guardian angel”—a spiritual sentinel “intently watching and protecting the fortunes of a mortal beloved”—she exhibits a lover's covetous zeal (Howe, H 158). She also implicitly guards against an irrevocable separation, achieving the steady scrutiny and closeness necessary to sustain conjugal feeling and fidelity.

Indeed, within a Swedenborgian system, more than simply a partnership's survival is at stake in the Nina–Eva story. According to Swedenborg, a heavenly life and being depend on successful marriage and conjunction. In other words, Nina and Eva also protect their own fortunes with their fanatical watchfulness. To lose Rafael or Gaetano would leave them splintered, cut off from vital elements of self. Swedenborg held that the conjugal drive and the “love of sex” did not die with the body, and he considered marriage essential to entrance into the most privileged spheres of heaven. The celibate and the solitary—“those who choose a life outside of the conjugal”—are relegated to “the sides of heaven” and “they become sad and troubled” in
their isolation (Swedenborg, CL 164, 165). “In celibacy,” Swedenborg writes, “all things are wanting” (Swedenborg, CL 165). For women, Swedenborg’s conception of desire resonates with an especially concentrated significance. Caught in an unremitting state of desire “the wife is constantly thinking about the inclination of the man to herself” (Swedenborg, CL 183). Even in conjugal bliss, a woman’s “love continually employs its thoughts about conjoining the man to herself” (Swedenborg, CL 186). Swedenborg positioned womanhood within an obsessively cloying psychosomatic space. More pointedly, he declared that “chaste wives” want to be “bound more and more closely with their husbands” and that to turn from that desire “would be to recede from their very selves” (Swedenborg, CL 228). Swedenborg’s theories make steadfast loyalty and devotion synonymous with whole, authentic womanhood. As a result, Nina and Eva retreat from a spiritual adjunction at their own risk. Because the most viable Swedenborgian female self is a self-in-relation—a conjoined, dual being—breaking from a connubial union constitutes an act of self-harm. Of course, men are also entangled in Swedenborg’s marital dyads, but amalgamation infringes less on their autonomy and identity. Indeed, the husband’s self ultimately overscores his wife’s: “something of the husband is continually transcribed into the wife, and is inscribed upon her as her own” (Swedenborg, CL 186). In other words, women organize their identities around coupling with such comprehensive verve that “an image of the husband is formed in the wife,” and through that image, she “perceives, sees, and feels within herself the things that are in her husband, and thence as it were, herself in him” (Swedenborg, CL 186). Swedenborg’s women yearn so intensely for erotic union and ruminate so continuously on a husband’s answering desire that eventually they become more other than self.

Where Swedenborg rhapsodizes about woman’s other-centered penchants, Howe records that body’s pain and sorrow. Her fiction suggests that to embody an incessant and ever increasing desire is to embody an infinite emptiness. “‘We are wedded, oh yes!’” Nina says of her bond to Gaetano, “‘we have been wed for years, and I have no heart but to love him, no hands but to labour [sic] for him, and yet, look at these,’ and she held up her arms, ‘somehow they are always empty’” (Howe, H 142). Nina’s barren arms register the physical and psychic vacuum that womanhood occupies in a spiritualized gestalt, and her story exposes the violence and sorrow latent in the image. “What depth of woe was in those words,” Laurence asserts, “It was the voice of murdered nature crying upwards from the ground” (Howe, H 142). In Howe’s fictional world, when Berto asks Nina to endure sustained romantic alienation he commits an unintended crime against her nature, an assassination of her life force. “Love was so built in with the structure of her whole life
and being,” the narrative explains, “that the one could only perish with the other” (Howe, H 142). Drawing on Swedenborg’s anatomies, Howe depicts a heroine whose very essence is love. In Swedenborg’s terms, love is the “heat” of Nina’s existence or her “vital heat” (Swedenborg, CL 42). Yet unlike Swedenborg, Howe meticulously and perceptively chronicles the acute suffering that gender anatomy makes inevitable. Separated from Gaetano, Nina embodies stunted growth, thwarted conception, and pregnant death: she is “the maiden bud, frost nipt and doomed to die, but bearing painfully in itself the germ and the essence of the flower and the fruit” (Howe, H 142). With this image, Howe’s manuscript explores what it means to know incessant and insatiable desire. Swedenborg constructed a womanhood conceived in wanting; his women want the conjugal partner they have not found or more of the man they already possess. Thus, they live a perpetual state of grief, forever mourning absent or inconstant love “objects”: unknown soul mates, forgetful husbands, or the intimacies they have yet to realize. In that sense, they are blighted “maiden bud[s],” seeded with the unquenchable.

Cox acknowledges that spiritualism itself was intricately allied with the unquenchable—with a profusion of nineteenth-century desires and despairs. According to Cox, spiritualism registers pervasive cultural hungers: a hunger to collapse geographic and psychological distances with metaphysical travel; to recover the lost bodies of industry, capitalism, and death with spiritual reconnaissance; to solve the riddles of being; to build the world anew. And yet its progressive longings were “coupled Janus-like with the recognition that the future too often failed to materialize” so that “desire and its discontents were intertwined” (Cox 70). Howe’s novel gives voice to the “discontents” and their grievances, mourning the body left to a painful craving. As Laurence puts it, “to bear lifelong in one’s bosom a wild deep longing of Nature ungratified, that is perilous” (Howe, H 142). The danger lies in deprivation:

For then the infinite towards which we tend casts its shadow all too darkly upon us. The sense of it may sink to Melancholy, rise to Inspiration, or wander to madness, but in either case its glories will be fantastic, fatal, and its revelations will be as unlike to truth, as is the shedding of blood to the flowing of water. (142)

Howe sees something violent and terrible in the “shadow” of the “infinite.” The surging awareness of ungratified longing may be “fantastic,” but it is also “fatal.” Although Nina’s mind “turned inward upon itself, was fed with
pleasing dreams,” her body suffers acutely: “the poor flesh and blood would sometimes speak, impatient of dragging on along its dumb agony” (Howe, H 142). Nina might be “half angel” within a Swedenborgian gestalt, but as Howe’s fiction acknowledges, she is also “half corpse” (Howe, H 158).

The corpse stands as a palpable symbol of social alienation, violation, and recrimination. In nineteenth-century contexts, the haunting carcass—the shadowy subject on the margins of citizenship and representation—persists as “a powerful metaphor for the kinds of social, ethical, and political injustices that characterize and permeate U.S. history” (Bridget Bennett 14). Russ Castronovo’s theory of nineteenth-century American “necro citizenship” links the historical fascination with “séances, ghostly mediums, animal magnetism, and spirit-rappings” to an “ideal of citizenship supposedly free of material considerations.” Castronovo indicts a spiritualist democracy that extended the individual “the freedom to be unconscious of material inequality” and that allowed “trauma and disturbance to pass unnoticed” (Castronovo 104, 106, 112). Similarly, Howe’s narrative asks us to heed the traumas and disturbances of the abstracted body, and it is the material that haunts her specters.

Posthumanism voices analogous cautions against the violence and abjection that a techno-science of transcendence perpetuates. As Graham recognizes, “Technologies are important vehicles for human creativity and redemption, but it is necessary to question the assumption that spiritual enlightenment comes at the cost of physicality and corporeality.” Ideologies that valorize a technologized, immaterial body can reify a punishing disdain for the lived, felt body. Graham underscores the fear at the core of technophilic desires, arguing that the “uncritical embrace of technological omnipotence, omniscience, and immortality betrays not so much a love of life as, paradoxically, a pathological fear of death, vulnerability and finitude” (Graham, Representations 219–20, 230). In addition, Hayles contends that an indiscriminate celebration of discarnate technologized subjectivity “fears, above all, dropping back into the ‘meat’ of the body” and the inertia it represents (Hayles 290). Graham and Hayles encourage us to be wary of the prolific relationship between fear and techno-scientific ideals.

With posthumanist overtones, Howe’s manuscript likewise questions a fear-driven pursuit of spiritnetic ascendancy and intimacy, one that starves or vacates the immanent, material body. Howe wrote The Hermaphrodite in the early years of her marriage, cloistered in a small house in Boston near the Perkins Institution for the Blind, where Samuel was director. With two of her eventual six children toddling at her feet, Julia was careworn and work worn:
I sleep with the baby, nurse her all night, get up, hurry through breakfast, take care of her . . ., then wash and dress her, put her to sleep, drag her out in the wagon, amuse Dudie, kiss, love, & scold her etc etc . . . I have not been ten minutes, this whole day, without holding one or other of the children, and it was not until six o’clock this evening, that I got a chance to clean my teeth . . . (quoted in Williams, *HH* 75–76)

Overburdened and alone, Howe struggled against postpartum exhaustion and lovelorn estrangement. In such circumstances, she wrote about women in spiritualized flight; women exiting the body through trance technologies; women living virtual lives far removed from domestic labor and marital discord. At one point, the narrative depicts Nina in a bona fide state of spiritual liberation, saying that her soul is “enfranchised and soaring free,” emancipated from “its human prison” (Howe, *H* 141). Such freedom must have been a heady prospect for a frustrated poet and a reluctant housewife. In letters to her sister, Howe sketched the anatomy of her despondency, describing herself in desolate, deadened terms: In 1846 she says, “I still live the same subdued, buried kind of life which I used to live when you were with me . . .”; later that year, she describes her marital state as a “dimness, nothingness, and living death” (quoted in Williams, *HH* 75, 77). Like Nina, Howe may have longed to escape her “human prison” and travel beyond kitchen, bedroom, and nursery, and yet she also understood that a “zombie” existence would be no life at all. As Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry suggest, the zombie manifests a “twofold terror”: the fear of losing consciousness, and the fear of the evacuated body (Lauro and Embry 89). Howe’s manuscript registers both horrors, interrogating spiritualist affinities that hollowed out the female body and abducted female consciousness. In the process, Howe proffers what Hayles might deem a more nuanced posthumanism, one “that embraces the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power,” one that recognizes “finitude as a condition of human being,” and one that refuses to efface what the spiritborg experiences when she loses her body (Hayles 5). Vint calls that an “embodied and ethical posthumanism” (Vint 183). While *The Hermaphrodite* revels in a spiritnetic capacity for intimacy, mobility, and transformation, it also re-members the spiritualized body, writing its pain and deprivation.

Notes

1. As Michael Stanley explains, “In adding an ‘i’ to the old legal term ‘conjugal,’
Swedenborg coined a new word—‘conjugial.’ This is the word that he uses to describe the quality of love that unites a couple as one in heart and mind and life” (Stanley 134).

2. Williams’s source here is an unfinished letter Howe wrote to her sister, Louisa, in July 1854. Unless otherwise noted, the letters Williams cites are part of the Samuel Gridley and Julia Ward Howe Papers at Houghton Library, Harvard University.

3. The novel’s investment in Swedenborgian ideas is not limited to the Nina–Eva plotline. In a pivotal chapter, for example, Howe sends her protagonist to a remote woodland cottage where he will read feverishly and quest for metaphysical truth. With a spiritualist interest in material and immaterial realities, Laurence studies the “visions of [Emmanuel] Swedenborg” (Howe, H 39) and feels attuned to “unseen influences” and a “superhuman authority” (Howe, H 44). He reads, prays, fasts, mortifies the flesh, and his body consciousness recedes until “the spirit was now lord absolute” (Howe, H 46). Ultimately, Laurence lapses into a spiritualized trance, communes with angels, sees the threshold of heaven, and awakens to the ministrations of Ronald, a sixteen-year-old boy who will become his student and almost-lover. While my study centers on Nina, Eva, and their Swedenborgian partnerships, this sequence foreshadows the enthralled-yet-dubious relationship with Spiritualism that the Nina–Eva story dramatizes, implicating Laurence’s trance in an “unnatural mode of life,” “madness,” and an “utterly defective” religion (Howe, H 48, 46, 44).

4. Mary H. Grant, while she does not address the Nina–Eva plotline explicitly, provides a brief summary and explication of the manuscript (Grant 121–25).


6. Braude 24; Weinstein 129; Goldsmith 129. For more on the history of spirit photography see Jolly.

7. I do not mean to imply an uncomplicated continuity between Swedenborg, spiritualism, and posthumanism. Carroll documents historical variances and ideological tensions within spiritualist interpretations of Swedenborg (Carroll 21–34). In addition, theories of the posthuman often interrogate an essential, enduring humanness that Swedenborg and nineteenth-century spiritualists assume. Thus, my study borrows selectively from posthuman conceptions of hybridity, including technologized bodies, extended corporealties, and discarnate mobilities.

8. Robert S. Cox credits Swedenborg with providing the “cosmic seeds” of American spiritualism (Cox 12). Spiritualists gravitated to Swedenborg’s faith in the plausibility of spirit mediation, the empirical basis of the soul’s immortality, and the formative “correspondences” between the sacred and the sensate world. For more on Swedenborg’s iconic presence in spiritualist constructs and beliefs, see Carroll, Spiritualism in Antebellum America 16–34 and Cox 10–16.

9. Jane Bennett uses the term “technochantment” to name the “animate forces, dynamic trajectories, intricate patterns, and protean ideas” manifest in the “magic of biotechnological hybrids.” According to Bennett, technochantment can “transfix our bodies, quicken our senses, and provoke our joyful and wary apprehension” (Jane Bennett 17–18).

10. As Adam Crabtree explains, the eighteenth-century physician, Franz Anton Mesmer, invented a diagnostic and therapeutic system he called “animal magnetism.” Mesmer believed that magnetic connections between a doctor and patient had curative properties. Mesmer’s student, the marquis de Puységur, discerned and elucidated the components of a trance state he termed “magnetic somnambulism” or “magnetic sleep” in 1784, defining
it as “a sleep-waking kind of consciousness,” a ‘rapport’ or special connection with the magnetizer, suggestibility, and amnesia in the waking state” (Crabtree 39).

11. Howe’s juxtaposition of magnetic and mystical intimacies in the Nina–Eva plotline reifies a more pervasive discursive affinity. Formative parallels between mesmerism and Swedenborg’s metaphysics were first articulated in 1789 when the Exegetic and Philanthropic Society of Stockholm argued that mesmerism enabled spirits to take possession of the human body or speak through a human subject (Crabtree 71). In 1844, the spirit of Swedenborg himself visited Andrew Jackson Davis—a prophet of modern spiritualism—during a magnetic trance. In 1847, George Bush’s Mesmer and Swedenborg defined mesmerism “as concrete, physical proof” of Swedenborgian ideas (Crabtree 229). Eventually, many pundits considered mesmerism a lesser phase of spiritualism (Cox 75).

12. When Swedenborg detailed different ways of seeing into netherworlds, he described a form of sight that was acutely real and yet paradoxically discarnate: a wakeful, sensate experience of being immersed in ethereal community (Jones and Fernyhough 21). In that state, Swedenborg said he was “‘separated from the body and in the spirit’”—a “spirit among spirits” (quoted in Toksvig 221, 222). Servants close to him testified that when Swedenborg was “‘in the spirit,’” he would occasionally retreat to bed for three to four days at a time, with only a basin of water beside him, and somehow emerge flush and strong (Toksvig 222).

13. Williams quotes a letter to Louisa here; the letter is undated, but likely written in November or December 1845.

14. The first citation is from a letter dated January 1847 (#449). The second is dated 15 February 1846 (#450).