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Spiritualism and Science: Reflections on the First Decade of the Spirit Rappings

BEGINNING IN 1850, SPIRITUALISM BECAME A RAGE IN THIS COUNTRY AND spread quickly to the countries of Europe.¹ Americans eagerly sifted the reputations of a growing roster of professional mediums and crowded into their séance rooms in astonishing numbers. Ardent believers in spirit communication never failed to catch a word of encouragement from a departed, and dearly beloved, relative. Many other investigators, well aware of repeated disclosures of fraud, treated mediums with considerable skepticism; yet the great bulk of evidence which hinted at some concrete evidence of immortality stimulated their curiosity and drew them time and again into darkened parlors to await the spirits.

The number of prominent people who appeared at spiritualist circles in the 1850s is impressive. Many of the abolitionist leaders believed in spirit voices as strongly as they did the wickedness of slaveholding. William Lloyd Garrison, Joshua R. Giddings, Benjamin Wade, Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Parker Pillsbury all embraced spiritualism.² Harriet Beecher Stowe and her husband Calvin followed with great interest the many reports which circulated about the proliferating variety of spirit manifestations. So to one degree or another, did Rufus W. Griswold,

¹Prof. Sydney Ahlstrom of Yale University has helped immeasurably in clarifying the issues of this article. I am also indebted to the American Philosophical Society for their support of my book-length project on American spiritualism and psychical research.

²Material on the spiritualist activities of abolitionist leaders is scattered and widespread. Garrison's first statement on the subject can be found in *Liberator*, Mar. 3, 1854. Higginson printed several of his speeches on the subject: *The Results of Spiritualism* (New York: S. T. Munson, 1859) and *The Rationale of Spiritualism* (New York: T. J. Ellinwood, 1859). Several autobiographies by spiritualists contain information on the ties of abolitionists to the movement: Warren Chase, *The Life-line of the Lone One* (Boston: Bella Marsh, 1858) and *Forty Years on the Spiritual Rostrum* (Boston: Colby and Rich, 1888); also Giles B. Stebbins, *Upward Steps of Seventy Years* (New York: John W. Lovell, 1890).

Horace Greeley, William Cullen Bryant, Nathaniel P. Willis, James Fenimore Cooper, David Ames Wells, William Torrey Harris and John Roeb-ling.³ George Bancroft was so impressed with the mediumship of Daniel Douglas Home that he put the attractive young man on display as after dinner fare for the visiting Thackeray.⁴

Scarcely another cultural phenomenon affected more people or excited more interest in the ten years before the Civil War and, for that matter, the subsequent decades of the 19th century. Theodore Parker repeatedly expressed his doubts about spiritualist claims. However, mindful of the widespread and literate attention focused on the movement, he admitted that "in 1856, it seems more likely that spiritualism would become the religion of America than in 156 that Christianity would be the religion of the Roman Empire, or in 756 that Mohammedanism would be that of the Arabian population." Its evidence, he continued, was more plentiful than that of "any historic form of religion, hitherto."⁵

George Templeton Strong, a prominent New York City lawyer, was disturbed by the popularity of the movement. While like many other critics of spiritualist claims he attended a number of s ances and could not explain many things he witnessed, he found the acceptance of a spiritualist explanation by many educated and otherwise levelheaded people inexplicable. He confided his perplexity to his famous diary:

What would I have said six years ago to anybody who predicted that before the enlightened nineteenth century was ended hundreds of thousands of people in this country would believe themselves able to communicate daily with the ghosts of their grandfathers?—that ex-judges of the Supreme Court, senators, clergymen, professors of physical sciences, should be lecturing and writing books on the new treasures of all this, and that others among the steadiest and most conservative of my acquaintance should acknowledge that they look on the subject with distrust and dread, as a visible manifestation of diabolic agency?⁶

Despite the public interest which spiritualism generated, historians have never taken a very serious interest in the movement. The consensus

³The New York *Tribune*, June 8, 1850, reported on a now famous seance attended by Bryant, Willis, Cooper, Greeley and Bancroft. Wells, an Agassiz student who edited *The Annual of Scientific Discovery*, signed a statement supporting D. D. Home's mediumship. For Harris' interest in spiritualism see Kurt F. Leidecker, *Yankee Teacher: The Life of William Torrey Harris* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1946), p. 56. On Roebing consult Alan Trachtenberg, *Brooklyn Bridge, Fact and Symbol* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965), p. 60.

⁴Katherine H. Porter, *Through a Glass Darkly, Spiritualism in the Browning Circle* (Lawrence: Univ. of Kansas Press, 1958), pp. 113–14; Russel B. Nye, *George Bancroft, Brahmin Rebel* (New York: Knopf, 1944), p. 188.

⁵John Weiss, ed., *Life and Correspondence of Theodore Parker* (London: Longman, Green, 1863), I, 428.

⁶Allan Nevins and Milton H. Thomas, eds., *The Diary of George Templeton Strong* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), II, 244–45.

of sensible scholarship has reduced spiritualism to a symptom of a restless, troubled society and has placed it in the same category as Mormonism, Shakerism, Millerism and Grahamism—antebellum movements which Alice Felt Tyler viewed as the unstable product of “Freedom’s Ferment.” Geoffrey K. Nelson, in a recent study, linked the growth of spiritualism to unsettling social conditions which prevailed in America at mid-century; specifically, a high degree of social mobility, a sudden influx of immigrants with different cultural experiences, and an accelerating rate of industrialization.⁷ Communion with spirits offered comfort to people whirled about in a decade when science and technology undermined traditional social patterns, and, at the same time, made almost anything seem believable. The professional medium appeared in America at about the moment Thoreau heard a locomotive whistle penetrate the woods around Walden Pond.

Spiritualism did begin in a section of western New York which had produced in the early 19th century perhaps more than its share of deviant behavior. It is equally true that séances attracted many elderly people who stood fearfully at the end of life, lacking the mental acuity to detect trickery, as well as countless numbers of bereaved parents and lovers whose desire to be consoled outran their common sense.⁸ And, most certainly, mediums provided welcome entertainment in small American towns where an audience would gather to see anything billed as out of the ordinary.

None of this, however, entirely explains the reception of spiritualism among men who were not easily fooled and the degree to which it raised passions among partisans and critics for half a century. Historians have not found it easy to reconcile the flowering of an interest in spirits in an age supposedly increasingly dominated by empirical and scientific thought and have left the matter to stand as a paradox. Meanwhile biographers of “respectable” Americans have shown consistent embarrassment in discovering their subjects in a darkened room waiting expectantly for a table to rise off the floor or a dew-dropped bouquet of lilies to fall in their lap. An aberration? An uncharacteristic capitulation to the irrational in this one area? A lapse of taste? Any of these explanations which suggest examples of what Leon Festinger has called cognitive dissonance often miss the point.⁹

⁷Alice Felt Tyler, *Freedom’s Ferment* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1944); Geoffrey K. Nelson, *Spiritualism and Society* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969).

⁸Just after the death of a son and a year before he and his wife began attending séances, Horace Greeley wrote to his author friend Bayard Taylor who was also a spiritualist investigator: “The world looks very dark to me. . . . I do not hope that it will ever again wear the old line of gladness.” Letter of Aug. 16, 1849. Horace Greeley Collection, New York Historical Society.

⁹For a use of Festinger, see Edwin Boring’s introduction to C. E. M. Hansel, *ESP, A Scientific Evaluation* (New York: Scribner’s, 1966), pp. xiii–xxi.

In the 20th century psychology has taught us a good bit about shared psychopathology and has given us some understanding of how sensible people may enter a séance room and become victims of hallucination. There are extensive writings on mediumistic trances in the literature of abnormal psychology. Nevertheless it is not at all clear, as some psychologists have urged, that 19th century spiritualism represented a revival in modern dress of older occult interests, including witchcraft. By that account of things spiritualism and 19th century science can be comfortably seen as growing from antithetical mentalities; spiritualism satisfied man's craving for mystification and grew as a reaction to the encroachments of scientific naturalism.¹⁰

The historical record is complicated. Spiritualism has in the course of the years found many allies among genuine occultists, persons who through secret and ancient rites have sought in elaborately ritualized procedures to fathom the universal mysteries of order and cosmic oneness which lie hidden from most men. One thinks immediately of Madame Blavatsky, who launched the Theosophical Society in 1870, as well as a number of modern literary figures from William Butler Yeats to Malcolm Lowry.¹¹ In addition a number of Christian mystics have occasionally become interested in spiritualism. As will appear, many American Swedenborgians enthusiastically publicized the new mediums in the 1850s.

However, in noting these important and obvious connections, we risk misunderstanding spiritualism's relation to dominant cultural values in the 19th century. Any interpretation of spiritualism's impact must begin with what has appeared to many an anomaly. Spiritualism became a self-conscious movement precisely by disassociating itself from any occult tradition and appealing, not to the inward illumination of mystic experience, but to the observable and verifiable objects of empirical science. There was little new in the spirit manifestations of the 1850s except this militant stance which proved exactly the right formula to capture the attention of an age which believed that the universe operated as an orderly machine. Leading spiritualists for most of the 19th century held a childlike faith in empirical science as an exclusive approach to knowledge and probably

¹⁰ Hugo Münsterberg, "Psychology and Mysticism," *Atlantic Monthly*, 83 (Jan. 1899), 67-85; Charles K. Mills, "Occultism with Particular Reference to Some Phases of Spiritism," *American Journal of the Medical Sciences*, 157 (July 1921), 115; Joseph Jastrow, "The Modern Occult," *Fact and Fable in Psychology* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1900).

¹¹ John Senior, *The Way Down and Out: the Occult in Symbolist Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1959); Perle Epstein, *The Private Labyrinth of Malcolm Lowry: Under the Volcano, and the Cabbala* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969); George Wilson Knight, *Neglected Powers; Essays on Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Literature* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971); James Webb, *The Flight from Reason* (London: Macdonald, 1971).

benefited more than any other group from the great popular interest in science awakened in that century. No others worked as hard to borrow its prestige. A movement which eschewed all interest in the marvelous and sought to erase supernatural as a category of human thought begs more of an explanation than the label "superstitious" can provide.

Histories of "Modern Spiritualism" usually date the movement from March 31, 1848, when Margaret and Kate Fox professed to discover an intelligent force behind the unexplained rappings which, since the end of 1847, had disturbed their family's small cottage in Hydesville, New York.¹² The fraudulence, whether conscious or unconscious, of the mediumship of the Fox girls has been demonstrated time and again.¹³ Moreover, their momentous discovery took an unaccountably long time to get any recognition. One small pamphlet was published almost immediately, but local newspapers did not follow the reports. Not until many months elapsed did the girls find a suitable press agent in E. W. Capron who in November of 1849 staged a public exhibition of the rappings in Rochester. Admission was a quarter. The sisters (there were three by this time; an older sister had swiftly developed mediumistic powers) spent most of the summer of 1850 at Barnum's Hotel in New York City, and only after Horace Greeley's New York *Tribune* had given favorable notice to the séances which they conducted there, did they to any degree emerge as leading figures of a new profession.¹⁴

The spirits had had to wait over two years for recognition of their first marvelous work, and once mediumship appeared to be a paying proposition a host of men and women stepped forward who claimed priority over the Fox girls. Spirit communication hardly offered itself as a new idea in 1848, and though many partisans claimed that the Hydesville spirits had made a major breakthrough in technique and were able thereafter to communicate with more ease and with a greater variety of manifestations,

¹²The earliest accounts of the Hydesville events are: *A Report of the Mysterious Noises Heard in the House of Mr. John D. Fox, in Hydesville, Arcadia, Wayne County, Authenticated by the Certificates, and Confirmed by the Statements of the Citizens of the Place and Vicinity* (Canandaigua, N. Y.: E. E. Lewis, 1848); Eliab W. Capron and Henry D. Barron, *Explanation and History of the Mysterious Communion with Spirits Comprehending the Rise and Progress of the Mysterious Noises in Western New York, Generally Received as Spiritual Communications* (Auburn, N. Y.: Finn and Rockwell, 1850); and D. M. Dewey, *History of the Strange Sounds of Rappings, Heard in Rochester and Western New York* (Rochester: Dewey, 1850).

¹³Earl Wesley Fornell, *The Unhappy Medium: Spiritualism and the Life of Margaret Fox* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1964) is an unreliable biography, but it does recount the charges against the Fox girls. Adelbert Cronise collected a number of inaccessible details about the sisters in "The Beginnings of Modern Spiritualism In and Near Rochester," *Rochester Historical Society Publications Fund Series*, 5 (1926), 1-22.

¹⁴*Tribune*, June 5, 1850; *Weekly Tribune*, Aug. 17, 1850.

a substantial literature about spirit voices and apparitions had long been around in Europe and America and was well known in the first part of the 19th century.¹⁵ Ghosts were nothing new in the world, and one can without difficulty find historical precedent for all the spirit manifestations of the 1850s.

In addition, before the advent of the Fox sisters, the American public had grown accustomed to many phenomena later associated with spiritualism through well-publicized displays of animal magnetism and mesmerism. Anton Mesmer had tried to convince the French Academy in the late 18th century that the instilling of a superfine, hitherto unidentified, fluid by a healer (using his hands or some substance rich in the fluid) into his patient could produce remarkable cures. With many variations mesmerism became for the first fifty years of the 19th century a widely demonstrated procedure in Europe and America.¹⁶ The press carried reports about extraordinary cases of extrasensory vision and clairvoyance; mesmerized young men and women, it was claimed, often could identify objects held before them though their eyes were tightly blindfolded. Some subjects even perceived events happening at a great distance or could look back into the past and forward into the future. Some mesmerized persons attributed their powers to the inspiration of guardian spirits, but whatever the hypothesis advanced, the publicity surrounding these displays focused public attention on possible new dimensions of mental awareness.¹⁷

In the United States in the 1840s mesmerism ran into the vogue of Emanuel Swedenborg. The Swedish theologian and scientist, who died in 1772, had acquired a number of American admirers including Emerson and Henry James. The Church of the New Jerusalem, which espoused Swedenborg as a prophet and accepted his detailed revelation of Heaven and Hell, had a growing American membership.

The most famous offspring of this unpromising union between Mesmer's disciples and those of Swedenborg was surely Andrew Jackson Davis. After a sickly and nervous boyhood Davis passed through several apprenticeships before discovering that, when mesmerized, he could visualize the interior organs of ailing persons and diagnose their illness. In 1845, when Davis was nineteen, he began dictating a huge volume of divine revelations which he received in a mesmerized state. William Fishbough, a

¹⁵Of particular importance were two German works: Johann Heinrich Jung-Stilling, *Theory of Pneumatology, in Reply to the Question, What Ought to be Believed or Disbelieved Concerning Presentiments, Visions, and Apparitions, According to Nature, Reason, and Scripture* (translated into English in 1834) and Justinus Kerner, *The Seeress of Prevorst* (translated in 1845).

¹⁶On the origins of mesmerism, see Robert Darnton, *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1968).

¹⁷Slater Brown, *The Heyday of Spiritualism* (New York: Hawthorn, 1970), pp. 1-64.

Universalist minister, acted as recorder. The book, which was completed and published in 1847, received favorable notices in many quarters. George Ripley and Parke Godwin both praised it.¹⁸

George Bush, a professor of Hebrew language and literature at New York University and a Swedenborgian, examined Davis at length. Davis, he certified, dictated in Hebrew, Arabic and Sanskrit, languages he could not possibly know; and Bush regarded this first book of the "Poughkeepsie Seer," as he wrote to the poet Sarah Helen Whitman, "as the most astonishing prodigy the world has ever seen next to Swedenborg's oracles." Swedenborg remained for Bush "seven heavens above Davis," but Davis who was "very handsome and most fascinating from the simplicity of his manner and a certain guileless grace" was destined to be a "world's wonder." Davis, Bush conceded, possibly received messages from Swedenborg himself.¹⁹

Davis understandably became identified with the spiritualist movement of the 1850s. Most of the men who championed Davis and wrote for *The Univercoelum*, a journal with which Davis was affiliated, were Swedenborgians and had no initial trouble in combining that faith with acceptance of the kind of spirit communication then spreading over the United States. This group included Thomas Lake Harris, the mystic poet and religious teacher; Robert Carter, an editor and author; Thomas Holley Chivers, another poet and Poe's close friend; Luther R. Marsh, a New York lawyer engaged in various reform movements; and S. B. Brittan, an editor who became one of the chief publishers of spiritualist material.

The articles in *The Univercoelum* filtered Swedenborg through various expressions of American Transcendentalism. Like the Transcendentalists, Davis and his associates looked for divinity within man and believed that each individual could intuit within his own soul the wisdom of God. Speaking of inwardly perceived truth, Thomas Lake Harris wrote: "A man will not believe that he has a spirit, that he is a Spirit till he feels it moving in majesty, the Divinity within To believe in God is but to believe that that spiritual which we feel flowing into ourselves, flows from an Infinite Existing Source."²⁰

From Emerson and Swedenborg, Harmonial Philosophy borrowed a high regard for Nature, a sense of its majesty and an acceptance of Nature as the truest Scripture. Man must attempt, according to S. B. Brittan, "to

¹⁸Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Principles of Nature, Her Divine Revelations, and a Voice to Mankind* (New York: S. S. Lyon and W. Fishbough, 1847). Reviews in *Harbinger*, Sept. 11, Oct. 2, 1847.

¹⁹Letter of Sept. 15, 1847, Sarah Helen Whitman Collection, Brown Univ. Library.

²⁰"Knowledge through Obedience," *Univercoelum and Spiritual Philosopher*, 2 (Aug. 12, 1848), 168.

interpret the mystic manuscripts wherein Deity has written his great thoughts—the revelations in the earth, and seas, and skies, and above all in the human soul.”²¹ Davis described his own vivid feeling for Nature: “By a process of inter-penetration, as I now term it, I was placed in rapport with Nature! The spirit of Nature and my spirit had instantly and for the first time formed—what seemed to me to be—a kind of psychological or sympathetic acquaintance—the foundation of a high and eternal communion.”²² These men believed in the harmony of science and theology—a natural theology where natural law was guaranteed by an immanent presence which sustained and supported order.

Still, while many of these ideas carried over into spiritualist literature of the 1850s (spiritualist publications proclaimed the universal harmony of nature, and few spirit messages which purported to tell of life in the higher spheres departed significantly from the descriptions given by Swedenborg), spiritualism did in that decade become an identifiable movement with a name of its own. Many Swedenborgians entered the movement enthusiastically. But so did many Unitarians, Universalists and freethinkers. The spiritualists borrowed rhetoric from phrenologists, mesmerists and Transcendentalists. But, despite the confusion of taking from so many sources, they declared as their common purpose a determination to make the sudden upsurge of spirit manifestations a matter of empirical scientific investigation. Through an appeal to what they felt was objective data, they found coherence and hoped for respectability.

There does exist a problem in speaking of spiritualism as a movement, especially as the century wore on. It had no institutional basis which adequately defined it. Except for the Society for the Diffusion of Spiritual Knowledge, a few state and regional societies, and locally organized spiritualist churches which drew from relatively low social strata, there was nothing to join. The emphasis remained on free investigation, rather than institutional loyalty or public commitment. Estimates of the number of Americans who passionately followed spiritualist literature in the 1850s ranged from under a million to the eleven million of one alarmed Catholic; the latter figure would have made one out of three Americans a believer in spirits. Only a minority of Americans who pursued the spirit manifestations with interest belonged to any organization dedicated to their production, a fact which applies with special force to the educated. Had the issues not come together in the way discussed here, spiritualism would have found no center and there would have been nothing at all resembling a movement.

²¹“To Our Patrons,” *Univercoelum*, 2 (June 3, 1848).

²²*The Magic Staff: An Autobiography of Andrew Jackson Davis* (New York: J. S. Brown, 1857).

The Fox sisters, as it happened, did bear an accidental responsibility for the new directions of the spiritualist impulse in the decade of the 1850s. The impressive rappings produced in their presence suggested that spirit messages could be subjected to an objective test verifiable by a group of impartial witnesses, not a new idea in the 1850s, but one which now found a receptive audience. One did not have to trust the word of Andrew Jackson Davis that spirits inspired his utterances. Spirits now stood available to answer test questions put to them by an investigating audience. Sounding their raps all over the room, the summoned spirits answered simple factual queries put to them by the members of a circle about the number and ages of the witnesses' children, about the deaths of various relatives, and other personal matters.

The variety of manifestations increased steadily. Aside from making rapped replies to questions, spirits relied on automatic writing, slate writing and control of the medium's voice to get their messages through. Or they could skip the messages altogether and merely cause tables or bodies to rise off the floor. Sometimes spirit messages filled volumes as had been the case in the revelations imparted to Davis.²³ Normally they were much shorter and straightforward. Mediumship became more democratic as it became a source of profit. Spirits relied less on sanctified vessels to serve as their agents, and the vocation of the medium welcomed many of dubious personal reputation. Spirits in the 1850s discovered that they had to tailor their manifestations to the demand for public demonstrations. Séances were almost always designed to give the audience a full sense of participation. The medium amidst ringing bells and flying objects played a passive role, acting only as a vehicle through which spirits worked certain physical effects. Whether or not the medium entered a trance, he typically saw or heard nothing beyond what everyone present could witness for himself. Raucous spirit concerts (complete with trumpet, accordion and assorted percussion) such as those heard at Koonses' Spirit Room in Athens County, Ohio, were certainly less elevating than inspired and private trance utterances (though a critic who has read some of the latter might question this), but the former could be performed before a crowd. Rambunctious spirits had an advantage over gentle saints in that their tricks were more easily seen and heard.

One can get some idea of the sort of manifestations which proved most

²³Many of these volumes, needless to say, remain unpublished. John Shoebridge Williams, for example, filled fifteen large tomes now deposited in the Wisconsin State Historical Society. Williams entered into a "spiritual marriage" with his deceased daughter (who inspired most of the writing) after a divorce from his wife. These volumes, by the way, and some others of their type, show a good mixture of the spiritualist themes under discussion in this article and traditional occult doctrines.

impressive to regular séance attenders in the early years of spiritualism from a letter which William Lloyd Garrison wrote in 1867. At one séance, conducted by a twelve year old girl, he witnessed:

Bells ringing over the heads of the circle, floating in the air, and dropping upon the table; a spirit hand seen to extinguish the light; spirit hands touching the hands or garments of all present; pocket books taken out of pockets, the money abstracted, and then returned; watches removed in the same manner; the contents of one table conveyed by an invisible power from one end of the parlor to another; the bosoms of ladies partially unbuttoned, and articles thrust therein and taken therefrom; powerful rappings on the table and floor; . . . a basket, containing artificial oranges and lemons, emptied, and its contents distributed around the circle, and the basket successfully put upon the head of every one present in a grotesque manner; striking and tickling of persons by spirit hands—etc., etc.²⁴

Some early critics of the spiritualist movement regarded the average séance as anything but spiritual. Spiritualists, these critics charged, ordered the heavens down to earth and never encouraged their own souls to soar any higher than the furniture flying around the room. Men like Andrew Jackson Davis and Thomas Lake Harris eventually repudiated the movement (although they continued to believe in spirit communication) and would have agreed with later commentators that the new movement should have called itself “spiritist” to distinguish itself from all philosophies of a genuinely spiritual nature. “Modern Spiritualism,” said Davis in expressing his disgust, “is summed up in the one word ‘manifestation.’ ”²⁵ The democracy of the movement bothered Harris. Mediumship, he felt, should be practiced only by consecrated vessels such as himself. Also spiritualism as it had developed gave all of its attention to the spirits of departed men and had lost interest in “the spirit of Christ, which descends to be immanent in the heart.”²⁶

Swedenborg’s Church of the New Jerusalem refused an alliance with spiritualism for roughly the same reasons as Harris. In séances one spoke only to dead human beings, never with nonhuman spirits. No medium pretended a direct infusion of divine intelligence. Of more importance, Swedenborg had warned against spirit intercourse because of the deception practiced by evil demons. Spiritualism overlooked completely the fact that

²⁴Letter to Frank J. Garrison, Jan. 18, 1867, Boston Public Library.

²⁵*Beyond the Valley: A Sequel to ‘The Magic Staff’; An Autobiography of Andrew Jackson Davis* (Boston: Colby and Rich, 1855), p. 145.

²⁶“Modern Spiritualism, Its Truths and its Errors; A Sermon Preached in the Marplebone Institute, London, January 15, 1860.” Harris’ relations with the spiritualists may be followed in Herbert W. Schneider and George Lawton, *A Prophet and a Pilgrim* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1942).

a true and proper faith had to precede the experience which had been opened to Swedenborg.²⁷ Otherwise, spirit communication might lead, as secular critics charged, to insanity and suicide.²⁸ Congenitally unaware of the terror lurking in the universe, spiritualists refused to entertain such a cautious attitude about the spirit world. Spiritualism also failed to arouse sympathetic attention in two other sects which might seemingly have been interested in its claims, the Quakers and the Shakers.

Giles Stebbins, a man who was active in many antebellum reform movements and who did successfully combine Transcendentalism and Swedenborgianism with an enthusiastic espousal of spiritualism, summed up his dual faith in a sentence of his autobiography: "The transcendentalist would say immortality is a truth of the soul; the spiritualist would grant that, but would verify that truth by the testimony of the senses."²⁹ That balanced formula satisfied Stebbins and others, but insofar as the emphasis of spiritualism fell heavily on the latter half of his statement, often explicitly rejecting the former half, spiritualists made a substantial contribution to what John Higham has characterized as a retreat in the 1850s from a mental attitude embracing boundlessness.³⁰ Spiritualists may have sided with Emerson in rejecting a distinction between the natural and the supernatural. But in joining Emerson's attack on miracles, they laid aside the pantheism which had supported Emerson's religious naturalism. Spiritualists neglected his doctrine of inward illumination and confused natural with observable. Emerson regarded the whole spiritualist affair as trite. "No inspired mind," he said, "ever condescends to these evidences"; they comprised "the rat-hole of revelation."³¹

In the interest of science and to serve a population excited by scientific discovery, spiritualists proposed a religious faith which depended upon seeing and touching. Transforming a concern for man's inward spiritual nature into an empirical inquiry into the nature of spirits, they built a belief in an afterlife upon such physical signs as spirits from another realm could muster. What, after all, as one spiritualist inquired with a characteristic

²⁷*The Pythonism of the Present Day: The Response of the Ministers of the Massachusetts Association of the New Jerusalem to a Resolution of that Association Requesting their Consideration of What is Usually Known as Modern Spiritualism* (Boston: G. Phinney, 1858).

²⁸Almost all the literature prior to 1850 about spirit communication had been cautionary. Presentiments and clairvoyance had been associated with disease and abnormal mental states.

²⁹*Upward Steps of Seventy Years*, p. 262.

³⁰John Higham, *From Boundlessness to Consolidation: The Transformation of American Culture, 1848-1860* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: William L. Clements Library, 1969).

³¹Epes Sargent, *The Proof Palpable of Immortality* (Boston: Colby and Rich, 1876), p. 25. Moncure Conway, *Autobiography, Memories, and Experiences of Moncure Daniel Conway* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1904), I, 149.

lack of any sense of the sublime, was the difference between the "spiritual world" and the "world of spirits?"³²

Eliab W. Capron's and Henry D. Barron's early pamphlet on the Fox sisters renounced a wish "to feed the popular credulity, or to excite the wonder loving faculties of the ignorant and superstitious."³³ From that time on, most leading spiritualists, in their efforts to make spirit communication credible, never wavered from four principles: a rejection of supernaturalism, a firm belief in the inviolability of natural law, a reliance on external facts rather than on an inward state of mind, and a faith in the progressive development of knowledge. In so doing, they struck a responsive chord among many Americans who had rejected orthodox Christian theology and who believed that life posed a limited set of questions with rational, discoverable answers.

We could never settle on a typical spiritualist of the 1850s, but the case of John C. Edmonds does illustrate in more concrete form the attitude which partisans adopted. Edmonds was a respected lawyer who had been elevated by the Democratic Party to the New York Supreme Court. He had been, prior to holding that position, an able, intelligent leader in various reform movements, and nothing in his career suggested that he was anything other than what he thought himself: a clearheaded man who approached every task with deliberate rationality and an insistence on seeing evidence with his own eyes. The spiritualist press hailed him as their most important convert in the early 1850s, and he remained a prolific publicist of the movement until his death. In losing his place on the Supreme Court because of his activity in behalf of spiritualism (his enemies charged that he consulted spirits about his decisions), he also became the movement's first martyr.

Edmonds' conversion to spiritualism followed a common pattern. The death of a relative, in Edmonds' case his wife, led to his first visit to a séance, although, as Edmonds mentioned in his every account of the story, he went only at the insistence of a friend and expected to see nothing which he could not easily explain or expose as fraud. As a skeptic in daily affairs and an exponent of an open-minded Christianity, he could not, he felt, be fooled. Yet on that first occasion he saw things which puzzled him, and he went back. Several months of intensive investigation followed, during which he took extensive notes, dictated arrangements to facilitate careful observation and badgered everyone with "his obdurate skepticism." After long weeks, evidence accumulated to the point that he could not doubt the presence of spirits. Edmonds simply accepted, he thought, the only possible explanation of the plain facts before him.³⁴

³²*Spirit World*, July 26, 1851. LaRoy Sunderland edited this Boston journal.

³³*Explanation . . . of the Mysterious Communion with Spirits*, p. 6.

³⁴Introduction to John Edmonds and George T. Dexter, *Spiritualism* (New York: Partridge and Brittan, 1853-55).

The unconvinced will have difficulty reading the spirit messages which Edmonds collected (mostly from Swedenborg and Bacon to Edmonds; Edmonds quickly developed into a medium after his conversion) without entertaining doubts about the critical sharpness of his mind. Edmonds received these long spirit messages through visions and through automatic writing. In one of his visions Benjamin Franklin revealed, before a host of applauding spirits, how his discoveries in electricity had made possible the communication they now had with their still living relatives. In another, Newton confessed to Edmonds an error in his work on gravity which Edmonds had suspected for some time.³⁵

His visions, as Edmonds described them, were quite humdrum affairs. No trace of saintly rapture dulled his mind nor did he, like Davis and some other mediums, profess to enter a different level of consciousness and utter things which he could not later recall. Edmonds wrote that his visions never severed his contact with reality, and while having them, he conversed clearly on other topics and often interrupted the spirits to look after pressing business. "Let us ever bear in mind," Edmonds wrote, "that spiritual intercourse is not supernatural, but in compliance with fixed laws affecting the whole human family."³⁶ By his own lights, in whatever he did, he worshiped devoutly at the shrine of reason erected by Tom Paine who, not incidentally, became a favorite spirit voice.

Spiritualists, as they said many times, intended no attack on the mechanical order of the universe which science had constructed and which literate Americans took for granted in the mid-19th century. Indeed by urging science to recognize an extension of mechanical laws into unseeable worlds, they went most mechanists one better. Spiritualist journals ran over with mechanical images. The telegraph proved a favorite illustration of their contentions because, spiritualists thought, it illustrated the reduction of something once considered marvelous to a completely understandable occurrence and furnished an analogy of how spirit communication might take place. Spirits themselves demonstrated a mechanical aptitude by handing down inventions for riving shingles, milling and net weaving.³⁷

Spiritualists also acted as adamant champions of empiricism. They had no esoteric formulas or mysterious rites of initiation as did Rosicrucians or 19th century alchemists. Séances carried out under proper test conditions were merely public disclosures of fact. Claiming their adherence to Baconian procedures which had guided American science in the first half

³⁵Edmonds, "Personal Experience," *Shekinah*, 1 (New York, 1852), 265-71.

³⁶Edmonds, "False Prophesying," *Spiritual Tracts* (New York: Partridge and Brittan, 1858). Edmonds and Dexter, *Spiritualism*, I, Appendix F.

³⁷Emma Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism* (New York: the author, 1870), pp. 532-36.

of the 19th century, they professed to let their conclusions emerge naturally from the observed data. To them it appeared that scientists who scoffed at their labors violated empirical principles by ruling out their facts "not for the want of testimony in their favor, but because they presume, beforehand, that nature has no power to produce them."³⁸ Bacon in the 1850s sent many messages of consolation to spiritualist circles because of the hostility they encountered among professional scientists and reminded them of the persecution and eventual vindication of Galileo and Copernicus.

According to spiritualists, scientists ignored their claims only because the habits of the latter were infected with assumptions of philosophical materialism (sometimes referred to in spiritualist publications as French materialism). Against the belief that nothing existed in the universe but matter, spiritualists waged a steady, though confused, battle. They took up the struggle to prove the independent existence and endurance of spirit. Usually this goal boiled down to a wish to prove immortality or at least the certainty of some life beyond this one.

However, critics of the movement (and this would include critics like Davis and Harris who believed the spirit phenomena to be genuine) again stepped in and expressed doubt that merely talking about spirits represented a real victory over materialism. In major spiritualist publications like *The Banner of Light*, the rescued spirit looked suspiciously like the matter out of whose jaws it presumably had been wrested. It required little wit to ridicule a spirit realm whose inhabitants lived in elegant houses, ate enormous meals capped by fine cigars, and carefully put money away in savings accounts for a rainy day in heaven.

Spiritualists had some difficulty clarifying their views about the nature of spirit. Immaterial substance, they all agreed, could not exist. The two words in that phrase, according to Thomas Gales Forster, a popular trance medium, contradicted each other.³⁹ The spirit teachers seemed to concur that soul and spirit should not be considered something discontinuous from matter, but rather a higher, perfected form of matter.⁴⁰ A Mr. Levi found spiritualism required only minor adjustments in his former materialistic outlook: "The whole universal creation, unimaginable even to

³⁸James Hackett Fowler, *New Testament 'Miracles' and Modern 'Miracles': The Comparative Amount of Evidence for Each* (Boston: Bella Marsh, 1856), p. 4.

³⁹*Banner of Light*, Aug. 20, 1857, p. 6.

⁴⁰Charlotte Fowler Wells, whose family publishing firm printed many phrenological and spiritualist tracts, compiled an interesting set of spirit teachings in late 1850 and early 1851; her 50-page manuscript is in the Cornell Univ. Regional History Collection. Defining soul as the perfection of matter (p. 7), the spirits dictated: "If the objection of materialism be urged, my answer is, of *what is soul formed*, or, if it has *no* formation, if it be *not* a *material* body how *can* it have an existence?"

our highest conceptions, is entirely, and without exception, composed of matter in thousands and tens of thousands of different shapes, figures, and forms, more or less refined, rarefied, and elevated."⁴¹ Spiritualism's war on materialism consisted totally in getting science to recognize the existence of a matter "too refined, subtil, and sublimated for our vision,"⁴² although its proponents involved themselves in a contradiction by insisting as well on the proposition, stated in its most naïve form, that seeing is believing.

In trying to convince science to apply its instruments of measurement to things which lay beyond earthly horizons, spiritualists wound up reinvesting spirits with all the qualities of matter. Spirit matter, which was the term they employed and which did not differ in concept from Thomas Hobbes' definition of spirit, "a physical body refined enough to escape the senses,"⁴³ somehow had to prove itself to the senses or go begging. There were those who interpreted this position as a capitulation to materialism. Wilhelm Wundt, the German psychologist who was himself accused of harboring materialistic views, reached a harsh conclusion after examining various mediumistic phenomena: "I see in Spiritualism . . . a sign of the materialism and barbarism of our time. From early times . . . materialism has had two forms; the one denies the spiritual, the other transforms it into matter." Modern spiritualism, according to Wundt, had fallen into the latter trap.⁴⁴

Wundt's charge and others like it did overlook one important point. When spiritualists of the 1850s accused the science of their day of materialism, they really had in mind something other than the doctrine that nothing exists except matter and its movements and modifications. They would have been hard pressed to find, using that definition, many materialists in the first half of the 19th century, especially among American scientists. The materialism they spoke of posed a more practical danger, for it grew, not from some formal philosophical denial of spirit, but from a lost interest in it.

Anything, spiritualists feared, which science would not investigate, would in the modern world become a matter of indifference. They sensed very well the implications of the great prestige which science had won by the mid-19th century and could not therefore remain satisfied with an understanding between science and theology whereby science, without denying God and the soul, merely ignored them.⁴⁵ That settlement was tantamount

⁴¹"The New York Conference," *Telegraph Papers*, 4 (Feb. 28, 1854), 216.

⁴²Capron and Barron, *Explanation . . . of the Mysterious Communion*, p. 35.

⁴³Robert Peel, *Mary Baker Eddy: The Years of Discovery* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p. 153.

⁴⁴"Letter to Prof. Hermann Ulrici," *Popular Science Monthly*, 15 (Sept. 1879), 593.

⁴⁵For the relations of scientists and theologians in America up to mid-century, consult George H. Daniels, *American Science in the Age of Jackson* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1968), esp. pp. 51-56, 191-200.

to the most thoroughgoing materialism, for what scientists took for the measurable world would in time define the limits of man's aspirations. To leave the great questions of life with metaphysical philosophy (speculative metaphysics) guaranteed their trivialization within a generation. To insist that there was a spirit world which was measurable, although invisible, proved no solution to this dilemma. But the spiritualists did not address themselves to an unreal problem, and they did insist that there were important things (call them spirit or matter) beyond our world of everyday concern which some later scientists, William James for example, approached with a more sophisticated philosophy.

The appeal of spiritualism in the 1850s comes into better perspective when some word is said about the opposition. Spiritualists both then and now have charged that the scientific community dismissed their overtures in a summary and indefensible way. That is not exactly true. The American Association for the Advancement of Science did firmly turn aside Robert Hare, a distinguished American chemist, in his attempts to present to their meetings his research in spiritualism; scientific journals refused to recognize the subject; even Congress could not be persuaded to launch a scientific investigation.⁴⁶ But scientists had legitimate reasons to stay away from mediums. Séances, whether held in the dark or in brilliantly lighted rooms, can never provide acceptable laboratory conditions. Mediums have gotten away with fraud in settings where all present have sworn to the strictness and absolute reliability of the test conditions.

Moreover, beginning with a trio of doctors from the University of Buffalo who attributed the rappings of the Fox sisters to crackings of their knee joints, a number of scientists in the 1850s did investigate spiritualist claims.⁴⁷ Michael Faraday, for example, performed several experiments with moving tables in hopes of discovering a new physical force. His investigation resulted in his adopting a hostile stance toward spiritualism, but he did not, as spiritualists charged, dismiss the reported phenomena as a priori impossibilities.⁴⁸

On the other hand, in the 1850s much of the vigorous opposition to spiritualism looks in retrospect very foolish. Important newspapers crusaded against the mediums, preachers denounced them and politicians ridiculed

⁴⁶For an account of the rebuff given another scientist who tried to present spiritualist evidence at a scientific convention in Springfield, Mass. see *Banner of Light*, Sept. 3, 1859. The "Spiritualist Memorial" to Congress, a petition with over 15,000 signatures requesting investigation, was quickly tabled in 1854, despite the fervent sponsorship of ex-Wisconsin Governor and U.S. Senator, Nathaniel Tallmadge.

⁴⁷*Discovery and Explanation of the Source of the Phenomena Generally Known as the Rochester Knockings* (Buffalo: George H. Derby, 1851).

⁴⁸For Faraday's views see his letter to the *Times*, June 30, 1853, p. 4; his report in *Athenaeum*, July 2, 1853, pp. 801-3; his letter to the *Times* Nov. 8, 1864, p. 7; and the letter of John Tyndall to the *Pall Mall Gazette*, 7 (May 9, 1868), 1750.

them with thunderous rhetoric. The *New York Times*, regularly from the 1850s to the end of the 19th century, condemned spiritualism for its "subversion of all respect and devotion to the only true faith."⁴⁹ Washington's *National Intelligencer* suggested legislation against the practice of holding séances after it became clear, so the paper bemoaned, that levity and contempt had proved ineffective weapons: "However absurd and despicable it may appear to men of sound reason and resolute conviction, it is spreading itself like a pestilence through our borders, carrying with it the madness of infidelity, of sensuous materialism if not actual atheism, and distracting the minds of the nervous, the feeble-witted, and the timid into actual insanity."⁵⁰ This was typical language.

The intensity of the opposition is somewhat surprising, especially since many opponents accepted the reported phenomena as real occurrences. If those in the anti-spiritualist camp had cried fraud with a unanimous voice and turned away, their attacks would have killed the movement. But like George Templeton Strong they witnessed puzzling things which needed explanation.⁵¹ Many persons who thought it nonsense to speak of spirits still accepted the fact that tables in some unaccountable manner rose off the floor. Many fervent anti-spiritualists were at the same time fervent believers in clairvoyance and second sight. Spiritualism was only one of several explanations of the manifestations associated with mediums, and it was not the most improbable entry.

In an address of 1853, the Reverend Charles Beecher, one of Lyman Beecher's many children, conceded both the genuineness of many of the reported manifestations and their spiritual origin. The Bible, as he pointed out, contained abundant testimony to the reality of spirit communication, and many other well-authenticated pages out of history indicated that spirit voices had not been silenced with the close of the biblical era. But God, having ordained certain channels of communication between Himself and His creatures, had strictly prohibited communication with spirits who wandered through space furthering the Devil's mission of deception and destruction. Clearly, according to Beecher, the spirits which had been so vocal in recent years were agents of Satan.⁵²

The idea of diabolic intervention was not original with Beecher, and he was only one among many to use it in the 1850s to inveigh against spiritualist practices.⁵³ Writers blamed these evil spirits for broken marriages,

⁴⁹Editorial, *New York Times*, June 12, 1852.

⁵⁰"Impostures and Delusions," *National Intelligencer*, Apr. 25, 1853.

⁵¹Strong, *Diary*, II, 15-16, 93, 119, 125.

⁵²Charles Beecher, *A Review of the Spiritual Manifestations* (New York: Putnam, 1853).

⁵³Some pamphlets and books of the 1850s sustaining Beecher's argument include: John C. Bywater, *The Mystery Solved; or A Bible Exposé of the Spirit Rapping. Showing that they are not Caused by the Spirits of the Dead, but by Evil Demons or Devils* (Rochester,

ruined businesses, even the outbreak of the Civil War.⁵⁴ Protestant clergymen told their parishioners to stay away from séances, for if the manifestations were real, participation in a circle violated divine commandment. Horace Bushnell adopted this safe position, although he hastened to add that he had only indirect knowledge of what happened at a séance.⁵⁵ The Roman Catholic Church went further and issued a ban against consulting with mediums. Communicants of the Roman Church might take steps to protect themselves against trickery, but not against the peril of speaking with the Devil.

For obvious reasons many clergymen and laymen, no matter what Scripture said, thought Beecher and the others who took his line as benighted as the most enthusiastic spiritualist. Belief in bad spirits was just as superstitious as belief in good spirits and it seemed incredible to them that Beecher and the others should dip back into the 17th century to accuse mediums of witchcraft. Explanations, they thought, had to rest on known physical laws.

No force in nature appealed more to the popular mind in the mid-19th century than electricity. Professional scientists did not know exactly what it was despite the work of Franklin, Galvani, Coulomb, Ampère, Faraday and a galaxy of other distinguished researchers. Its effects remained curious enough to lend believability to a variety of theories, and scientists and occultists alike invoked its name to explain otherwise mysterious occurrences. When confronted with reports of lifted tables, mysteriously rung bells, clairvoyance, pencils moving independently on slates, and materializations of human forms, the American public in the mid-19th century listened sympathetically to theories which attributed all these strange happenings to electrical currents.

John Dods, who won a following for his writings on electrical psychology and animal magnetism and is remembered for his influence on Mary Baker

1852); William Ramsey, *Spiritualism, a Satanic Delusion, and a Sign of the Times* (Rochester: H. L. Hastings, 1857); The Rev. William Henry Corning, *The Infidelity of the Times as Connected with the Rappings and Mesmerists* (Boston: J. P. Jewett, 1854); William R. Gordon, *A Three-Fold Test of Modern Spiritualism* (New York: Scribner, 1856); J. W. Daniels, *Spiritualism versus Christianity or, Spiritualism Thoroughly Exposed* (New York: Auburn, Miller, 1856); Z. Campbell, *The Spiritual Telegraphic Opposition Line; or, Science and Divine Revelation against Spiritual Manifestations* (Springfield, Mass., 1853); Joseph F. Berg, *Abaddon, and Mahanaim; or, Daemons and Guardian Spirits* (Philadelphia: Higgins and Perkinpine, 1856); Charles Munger, *Ancient Sorcery as Revived in Modern Spiritualism Examined by the Divine Law and Testimony* (Boston: Deger, 1857); James Porter, *The Spirit Rappings, Mesmerism, Clairvoyance, Visions, Revelations, Startling Phenomena and Infidelity of the Rapping Fraternity Calmly Considered and Exposed* (Boston: George C. Rand, 1853); William M. Thayer, *Trial of the Spirits* (Boston: J. B. Chisholm, 1855).

⁵⁴A Citizen of Ohio (David Quinn), *Interior Causes of the War: The Nation Demonized and its President a Spirit-Rapper* (New York: M. Doolady, 1863).

⁵⁵*Nature and the Supernatural, as Together Constituting the One System of God* (New York: Scribner, 1858), pp. 124, 360.

Eddy,⁵⁶ was among the first writers to suggest electricity as an alternative explanation for those things attributed by spiritualists to unseen, intelligent agents. In a book which sought to strip the “mystery” off the spiritual phenomena he wrote: “The entire passivity of the voluntary powers of the mind and of the voluntary nerves is the cause of unduly charging the involuntary powers with too great an electro-nervous force, and the result is those singular manifestations that are so confidently attributed to the agency of spirits.”⁵⁷ That is about as near to the core of Dods’ argument as one can get; and however one might like to credit him for at least seeking answers in little-understood depths of the human mind, his book contained no nearly sufficient explanation of the phenomena he admitted as genuine.

A more widespread explanation of spiritualist phenomena came from a German source. In the mid-1840s Karl, Baron von Reichenbach, announced, after several years of research, the discovery of a new imponderable force. (Some scientists still referred at that time to electricity, heat, magnetism and light as imponderable fluids—that is, forces without weight or extension but with measurable properties and observable physical effects.) In some ways acting like electricity and magnetism and previously confused with them, it emanated from all objects to a greater or lesser degree and explained, according to Reichenbach, all the perplexing problems of animal magnetism and mesmerism. The German baron reported his discovery after noticing that certain sensitive persons felt physical sensations when a magnet was passed before them as if something in the magnet reached out and touched them. They could, he further found, see light streaming from the poles of a magnet in a darkened room. His final conclusions indicated that this force resided in all mass and could be perceived by anyone under the right conditions. He called it Odyle or Od. People usually referred to it as the Odic force.⁵⁸

Reichenbach’s work received scant attention from German scientists, but the cool reception did not preclude English editions, first in England, then in America. While American scientific journals ignored Reichenbach’s findings, Od managed to get tremendous amounts of publicity in the press and elsewhere. Discussions of Od immediately zeroed in on a possible connection between it and the spirit phenomena. In 1853, E. C. Rogers identified Od as the natural force behind everything previously traced to spirits.

⁵⁶Peel, *Mary Baker Eddy*, pp. 153–54.

⁵⁷John Bovee Dods, *Spirit Manifestations Examined and Explained, Judge Edmonds Refuted; or, An Exposition of the Involuntary Powers and Instincts of the Human Mind* (New York: DeWitt and Davenport, 1854), p. 29.

⁵⁸Karl, Baron von Reichenbach, *Researches of Magnetism, Electricity, Heat, Light, Crystallization, and Chemical Attraction, in their Relations to the Vital Force* (London: Taylor, Walton and Maberly, 1850).

To do so he had to invest Od with much livelier qualities than even the imaginative Reichenbach had supposed, but for all that, his book left noticeable gaps in explaining precisely how Od could account for everything from mind reading to the levitation of objects.⁵⁹

Yet Asa Mahan, a stubborn Presbyterian minister, militant abolitionist and the first president of Oberlin College, joined other respected Americans in accepting Rogers' conclusions. Mahan in fact took time from his theological publications to add two large books to the spiritualist controversy.⁶⁰ Abel Stevens, the editor of the *National Magazine* (a Methodist journal which competed with popular general periodicals), who had condemned Beecher's theory as "unfortunate and preposterous," leaped at this "scientific explanation" and expressed pleasure that the whole affair of spiritualism, which had severely damaged Christianity, had at least uncovered a "new scientific agent of untold interest."⁶¹ Such statements at one point led William Lloyd Garrison to write, after admitting to some discrepancies and absurdities in the spirit manifestations, "nothing do I find so puerile, or so preposterous, as the various theories which are stated to account for them, short of a spiritual origin."⁶²

Christianity, not science, prompted most of the opposition to spiritualism. That held true even among scientists. When Robert Hare, after closing a distinguished career at the University of Pennsylvania, began to mix research into spiritualism with his work in chemistry, soon announcing his conversion, an old and close associate expressed dismay. From New Haven, Benjamin Silliman, one of America's most respected scientists and the editor of its most prestigious scientific journal, sent Hare a small volume, *The Christ of History*. With it he enclosed a letter trying to dissuade Hare from his folly. He made a theological argument, defending the divine origin of the Scriptures. "I cannot desert my Saviour," Silliman wrote, "Him who spoke as never man spake, while he knew what was in man; who has paid my debt when I was bankrupt; and who sustained in my stead the penalties of a violated law;—I cannot desert him, and repose my confidence in the visions of so-called mediums."⁶³

Hare betrayed the mental infirmities of advanced age when he turned to spiritualism. He felt persecuted by former colleagues who made light of his

⁵⁹E. C. Rogers, *Philosophy of Mysterious Agents, Human and Mundane* (Boston: John P. Jewett, 1853).

⁶⁰*Modern Mysteries Explained and Exposed* (Boston: Jewett, 1855); *The Phenomena of Spiritualism Scientifically Explained and Exposed* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1876).

⁶¹*National Magazine*, "The Spirit Rappings Again," July 1853, p. 86; "The Spirit Rappings," Aug. 1853, p. 184.

⁶²Letter to Lydia F. Child, Feb. 6, 1857, Boston Public Library.

⁶³George Fisher, *Life of Benjamin Silliman* (Philadelphia: Porter and Coates, 1866), II, 253–56.

conversations with Franklin, Washington and Jesus. Charles Partridge and Samuel B. Brittan, both enthusiastic spiritualists, who published Hare's writings about spirits, found Hare extremely difficult to handle and complained that his communications to the paper *The Spiritual Telegraph* neglected, of all things, the scientific aspects of spiritualism. Having in Hare an important convert from the scientific community, Brittan coaxed Hare in 1857 to consider spiritualism "so far as it may be convenient for you . . . in its relations to science and natural law—instead of mainly regarding its theological bearings."⁶⁴ Partridge agreed entirely; spiritualist readers preferred to take their stand "in the eternal now" and not "know anything that is not tangible to [their] natural senses or has been made so to the natural senses of somebody else." Partridge characterized himself to Hare: "I am a matter of fact man and have no sympathy with the popular pretentious [*sic*] philosophy which disregards facts."⁶⁵

However, no matter what mental vagaries may result when one makes it a "primary object of daily exertion for three years" to talk to the other side,⁶⁶ Hare made a sensible case against Silliman. In his reply to the Yale scientist Hare called attention to his own initial skepticism about the rappings and related phenomena. He had originally agreed with Faraday that electricity accounted for any movement of furniture at a séance.⁶⁷ He had remained a skeptic concerning religious doctrines all his life, and only irrefutable proofs had overcome lifelong biases and forced him to believe in voices from beyond. Silliman had on the other hand always clung to an orthodox faith, which Hare called "bigotry in disguise," and now used that faith to excuse himself from investigating reported facts. Hare thought it contradictory for Silliman to accuse him of being too skeptical with respect to Christianity and not skeptical enough when confronting the spirits. He tried to persuade Silliman that the single hope for Christianity lay in the verification of spiritualist evidence; arguments based on the "internal evidence" of Christianity could not survive in the 19th century.⁶⁸

There is no record of a reply from Silliman. He did not attempt to answer Hare's "facts," nor did he discuss the scientific propriety of Hare's research. Silliman had rested his argument on other grounds and apparently found no words to add.

Another famous confrontation in the 1850s between men of science and the spiritualists ended in a stalemate, with the moral victory, as judged by Theodore Parker, going to the latter.⁶⁹ In 1857 Henry Lawrence Eustis, a

⁶⁴Brittan to Hare, Jan. 30, 1857, Hare Papers, American Philosophical Society.

⁶⁵Partridge to Hare, Jan. 17, 1857, Hare Papers, American Philosophical Society.

⁶⁶There is a long rough draft of Hare's reply to Silliman among his papers at the APS.

⁶⁷Philadelphia *Inquirer*, July 27, 1853; New York *Times*, July 29, 1853.

⁶⁸Hare to Silliman, rough draft, APS.

⁶⁹*Life and Correspondence of Parker*, I, 331.

professor of engineering at Harvard, called Frederick Willis, a Harvard Divinity student, before the faculty to answer charges of fraud. Willis, Eustis asserted, had passed himself off as a medium, had conducted séances which Eustis and other Harvard faculty had attended, and had been caught cheating. Willis answered not guilty, but was expelled anyway. The incident by the way did not keep Eustis and his faculty colleagues away from future séances with other mediums.⁷⁰

The ousted Willis picked up some defenders. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the Unitarian minister and abolitionist (who also befriended John Brown) took Willis into his home and testified to the genuineness of his mediumship. During the summer the *Boston Courier*, a paper which Parker called the “wickedest” in New England,⁷¹ decided to capitalize on the controversy to boost circulation, hoping at the same time to make a public mockery out of spiritualist claims. It ran a contest, offering \$500 to any medium who could satisfy a committee of distinguished Harvard scientists that spirits communicated. Benjamin Peirce, Louis Agassiz, E. N. Horsford and Dr. B. A. Gould consented to serve as the impartial committee.⁷²

H. F. Gardner accepted the offer in behalf of spiritualism and arranged for the appearance of, among others, Kate Fox and the Davenport brothers. (The latter performed Houdini-like escapes with the aid of spirits.) The varying accounts of what happened did not agree on much except the poorness of the manifestations. Gardner’s side claimed plenty of raps, which they said baffled Agassiz, but they admitted to an overall disappointing show. They attributed the weak display to the overt hostility of the committee who had created an uncooperative atmosphere for spirit demonstrations.⁷³ The results before a friendlier group of reporters from the *Boston Post, Traveler and Journal*, whom Gardner summoned after the Harvard group walked out, proved very impressive.⁷⁴ Spiritualists never have settled the question as to whether spirits will communicate with a largely unbelieving group of observers. At the very least, according to Gardner, spirits insisted on receptive, open minds which, he felt, the Harvard scientists lacked to a high degree.

The *Courier* never intended anything more than an exposé of spiritualism

⁷⁰In Lester Ward, *Glimpses of the Cosmos* (New York: Putnam, 1913), I, 59–62, there is a reference to Eustis and some other Harvard professors. Ward as a young man was tremendously interested in spiritualism.

⁷¹*Life and Correspondence of Parker*, I, 332.

⁷²*Spiritualism Shown as It Is. Boston Courier Report of the Proceedings of Professed Spiritual Agents and Mediums in the Presence of Professors Peirce, Agassiz, Horsford, Dr. B. A. Gould* (Boston: Courier, 1859).

⁷³Gardner to Robert Hare, July 23, 1857, Hare Papers, APS.

⁷⁴Allen Putnam, *Agassiz and Spiritualism, Involving the Investigation of Harvard College Professors in 1857* (Boston: Colby and Rich, ca. 1874).

as a way of defending an orthodox proclamation of man's "legitimate relations with heaven."⁷⁵ What the Harvard scientists had in mind by participating in this investigation and giving of their time and prestige is not so clear. They never published a report of their findings, though they promised one. They did sign a joint statement which concluded: "It is the opinion of the committee, derived from observation, that any connection with spiritualistic circles, so called, corrupts the morals and degrades the intellect. They therefore deem it their solemn duty to warn the community against this contaminating influence, which surely tends to lessen the truth of man and the purity of women."⁷⁶

Gardner had arranged the proceedings working with Allen Putnam and Dr. Luther V. Bell. Bell was a respected doctor who for twenty years acted very effectively as superintendent of the McLean Hospital for the Insane. He believed that thought transference rather than spirits explained the information which mediums had imparted to astonished sitters at séances he had attended, but that view made him tremendously interested, as a psychologist, in further investigation. Nothing indicates that these men knowingly perpetrated fraud; they welcomed the *Courier* proposal as "an opportunity to investigate the phenomena upon scientific principles."⁷⁷ No matter what the committee decided, the rappings would have gained the status of a scientific debate—a status scientific organizations in America had been careful not to give them. To their dismay, they received from the Harvard group the same moral outrage which they had already heard so often from the pulpit. Opposition to spiritualism in the 1850s usually ended in support of the Bible and Christianity.

Orestes Brownson joined the Roman Catholic Church in 1844. When the spirits began to move across America, he followed his church in seeing the footprints of Satan. He did not on that account remain detached from the subject; in 1854 he published a novel, *The Spirit Rapper: An Autobiography*. The plot may be summarized as the hero's successful attempt to overcome his Faustian urge to know everything. The first part of the book follows his deep involvement in a conspiracy to overthrow Christianity along with the whole social order. Finding a strictly secular ideology lacking in mass appeal, he latches onto spiritualism as a suitable religion to further his revolutionary principles. Finally seeing spiritualism as Satanically-inspired, he pulls back. From Merton, who speaks for Brownson in the book, he learns that spirits are real despite the settled

⁷⁵*Spiritualism Shown as It Is*, p. 13.

⁷⁶Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, p. 187. Hardinge's volume contains a full defense of the spiritualists at this Cambridge confrontation.

⁷⁷Gardner to Hare, June 8, 1857, Hare Papers, APS.

opinion of most scientists. But one cannot walk among them without losing one's soul; man pushes into certain areas of knowledge to his peril.

The narrator of *The Spirit Rapper* stopped just short of self-destruction. The theme of the scientist who dared to know too much had considerable currency in mid-19th century America. Hawthorne and Poe used it in their stories. Traditional religious doctrine underlined it in explicit, unambiguous terms. The evil of spiritualism, according to the *Boston Courier*, lay in its reckless tampering with areas "beyond the plain revealed path of human duty."⁷⁸ In 1856 John P. Fairbanks, "a young man of amiable repute and irreproachable life" who was for a time an assistant editor of *The Scientific American*, leaped to his death. The *New York Times* blamed the suicide on the influence of spiritualism (Fairbanks had become an obsessed investigator), and warned readers not to "yield to the presumptuous curiosity that tries to peer across the gulf dividing us from God's undiscovered world."⁷⁹

Spiritualists, totally committed to the idea of progress, were unable to believe for a minute that man could lose his soul by advancing his knowledge. Science in their estimation erred because it dared too little. The majority of scientists in America agreed with James Dwight Dana, an American geologist, that no form of investigation could penetrate all mysteries, for "the ultimate nature of matter or life" is beyond investigation.⁸⁰ Spiritualists dissented vigorously. When Brownson's narrator in the opening of the story declared his rebellion against heaven, he spoke for the spiritualists: "I was resolved to push my scientific investigations to the furthest limits possible. I would, if I should be able, wrest from nature her last secret, and avail myself of all her mysterious forces—I am freeing the world from the monster superstition, and delivering the people from their gloomy fears and terrible apprehensions."⁸¹ Only our ignorance, according to Adin Ballou, the Universalist minister and spiritualist who founded the Hopedale community, kept the world in dread of "evil spirits, ghosts, goblins, and witches."⁸²

In the 1850s in America the war between science and religion had not been declared. Most scientists did not dream of one. But had a declaration been made, spiritualists would have thought immediately that they

⁷⁸*Spiritualism Shown as It Is*, p. 12.

⁷⁹"Fruits of Spiritualism," Dec. 2, 1856, p. 4. See also "Suicide of a Spiritualist," *New York Daily Tribune*, Dec. 1, 1856, p. 3; the *Tribune* had by this time lost its former sympathy for spiritualism and blamed Fairbanks' death on temporary insanity caused by his beliefs.

⁸⁰Daniels, *American Science in the Age of Jackson*, p. 56.

⁸¹*The Spirit-Rapper; an Autobiography* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1854), p. 125.

⁸²*An Exposition of Views Respecting the Modern Spirit Manifestations* (Liverpool: Edward Howell, 1853), pp. 57–58.

belonged in intent and method with science. They faced subsequent disappointment in finding that they had no comfortable place in either camp. But it would be churlish to fault them, however pedestrian their phrasing, for believing that the world had for too long been afraid of the dark.

American spiritualists in the decade of the 1850s strained human credulity no more than most of the embattled defenders of revealed religion. Moreover their versions of popular science had some plausibility. In what way, for example, did the hazily defined ether, which scientists used to fill space, differ from the spirit matter they believed in? Their view reached out to encompass what seem in retrospect to have been the most liberal, progressive and liberating intellectual currents of their generation.

However, they failed in many ways in the area where they most expected to succeed. In their craving for scientific respectability, they neglected philosophy. Had all their supposedly indisputable evidence proved true, they would have filled the world with spirits without illuminating at all a spiritual dimension in man. The heavenly messages conveyed nothing of substantive importance even to leading adherents of the movement; admittedly the ungrammatical sentences of great historical figures contradicted each other and commonly contained trivia.⁸³ Spiritualists merely wanted to prove that communication occurred, that some minor fact spelled out on Robert Hare's "spirit-scope," no matter what its intrinsic insignificance, could have come only from a spirit who had once lived on this earth. The stage was set for later spiritualists to make the embarrassingly antiseptic claim that the very triteness of the messages furnished the most convincing proof of the reality of the spiritual universe.⁸⁴ Here was a tortured logic which reduced the cosmos to the size of man at his worst. No amount of moralizing about the courage to confront truth could salvage that kind of damage to human imagination.

Spiritualists found no easy escape from the matter-of-fact attitude which, encouraged by the Scottish Common Sense school of philosophy, ran rampant in an expanding, and torn, commercial society. They preserved spirit only by extending the realm of matter and offered evidence which proved more dull than marvelous. Robert Dale Owen did experience a "strange, soul-stirring emotion" the first time he witnessed a

⁸³The New England Spiritualist Association adopted the following resolution in 1854: "Spirits do communicate with man—that is the creed. . . . All else that Spiritualists may believe and do, belongs to them as individuals, and not necessarily as Spiritualists." Thomas Wentworth Higginson wrote of this matter in the *Banner of Light*, June 25, 1857: "Undoubtedly the facts of Spiritualism are the most important yet launched upon the history of humanity. . . . But the philosophy of Spiritualism is not yet born, and the more boldly one talks about it, the less attention he usually deserves."

⁸⁴James H. Hyslop, a professor of philosophy at Columbia University and a pioneer in American psychical research, made this point in all his many books on the subject.

spiritualist phenomenon. But one suspects that Owen, an agnostic for many years, had lived for too long on a diet of the ordinary.⁸⁵ So too had many of his countrymen.

Hawthorne found it impossible to get interested, although the spirit demonstrations that he saw in 1858 did seem genuine:

But what astonishes me is the indifference with which I listen to these marvels. They throw old ghost-stories quite in the shade: they bring the whole world of spirits down amongst us, visibly and audibly; they are absolutely proved to be sober facts by evidence that would satisfy us of any other alleged realities, and yet I cannot force my mind to interest myself in them My inner soul does not in the least admit them; there is a mistake somewhere.⁸⁶

In any case it did not much seem to matter. Another bored auditor of the raps kept thinking of a line he had often heard at Woods' and Christy's Minstrels, "who's dat knockin' at de door?"⁸⁷ Spiritualism was at once a reaction to what it conceived of as materialistic science and the most absurd product of the assumptions we call positivism. That mixture resulted in an ambiguous legacy which never has been straightened out.

Spiritualism successfully framed a theory which provoked a large response among a population who liked its marvels packaged in machines or put into one of P. T. Barnum's cages. Its claims became believable in the same way electrical phenomena had become believable. While never quite achieving respectability, the spiritualists clearly attracted everyone's attention and had an impact upon respectable people. Important men of business, politics, the arts and journalism discussed the implications of their claims with dead earnestness. Many were persuaded that they had been offered valid evidence of a world beyond this one. Others began to inquire into the possible existence of yet unfathomed powers of the human mind. Even the opposition paid spiritualists the compliment of taking them seriously. Vigorous editorial opposition urged science to pay attention and come forward with an explanation.

Like many other Americans in the 1850s, spiritualists never stopped to ask if anything vital would be cast away in a world where people, having lost their capacity for reverence and awe, no longer felt those still moments of the soul when they struggled toward some incomprehensible Wonder and called it Holy. In Howells' novel *The Undiscovered Country*, a Shaker warned a visiting spiritualist guest within the community: "They are not

⁸⁵"How I Came to Study Spiritual Phenomena: A Chapter of Autobiography," *Atlantic Monthly*, 34 (Nov. 1874), 578-90.

⁸⁶*Passages from the French and Italian Notebooks* (Cambridge, Mass.: Riverside, 1883), p. 394.

⁸⁷A Searcher After Truth, *The Rappers or the Mysteries, Fallacies, and Absurdities of Spirit Rapping, Table-Tipping and Entrancement* (New York: H. Long, 1854), p. 266.

miracles if you follow them up to see them a second time. We must beware how we make the supernatural a commonplace.”⁸⁸ Spiritualists sought no more than the commonplace. Whatever else lay behind the yearnings of the Americans of the 1850s who labored to make spirit communication respectable, they were not waiting, as Lawrence Ferlinghetti said for a later generation “for lovers and weepers to lie down together again in a new rebirth of wonder.”⁸⁹

⁸⁸William Dean Howells, *The Undiscovered Country* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1880), p. 193.

⁸⁹From *A Coney Island of the Mind*.

