

REVIEW ESSAY

Online Historical Materials about Psychic Phenomena

CARLOS S. ALVARADO

csa3m@virginia.edu

Readers of *Journal of Scientific Exploration* interested in the history of parapsychology and related matters will find many freely-available books and articles in Google Book Search (<http://books.google.com/>). I have presented lists of some of the relevant holdings of this database in a bibliography (Alvarado, 2007b). Here I will focus on examples of a few classic writings available in the collection.

There are many works in this digital library that precede late nineteenth-century psychical research. This includes works on mesmerism, such as several issues of the *Zoist*, a mesmeric journal edited by physician John Elliotson (Vols. 4–7, 1846–1850) (Figure 1). An example of a relevant book was lawyer J. C. Colquhoun's (1833) presentation to the British public of work conducted by the French Royal Academy of Sciences, in which it was stated that some specific effects seemed explainable only by magnetic action:

It agitates some, and soothes others. Most commonly, it occasions a momentary acceleration of the respiration and of the circulation . . . and on a small number of cases, that which the magnetizers call somnambulism We may conclude with certainty that . . . [somnambulism] exists, when it gives rise to the development of new faculties, which have long been designated by the names of *clairvoyance* . . . ; *intuition* . . . ; internal *prevision* (pp. 193–194)

Many other mesmerists defended the existence of a physical force as the agent behind a variety of manifestations. This is evident in physician James Esdaile's *Natural and Mesmeric Clairvoyance* (1852). According to Esdaile: "Man . . . in an abnormal state . . . like the electric fish . . . can . . . project his nervous fluid . . . by his will, beyond the surface of his body, and in the direction desired" (p. 234). In mesmeric phenomena, Esdaile believed, the nerves and the brain were "invaded and occupied by the active will-impelled nervous fluid of the agent" (p. 235).

But the collection also has skeptical works. Henin de Cuvillers (1821) criticized magnetizers for having asserted the existence of this force. Such a conclusion was arrived at "gratuitously, and on their own authority" (p. 134). This author

THE ZOIST:
 A JOURNAL
 OF
CEREBRAL PHYSIOLOGY & MESMERISM,
 AND
THEIR APPLICATIONS TO HUMAN WELFARE.

"This is Truth, though opposed to the Philosophy of Ages."—Gall.

VOL VII.

MARCH, 1849, TO JANUARY, 1850.



LONDON :

HIPPOLYTE BAILLIÈRE, PUBLISHER,
 219, REGENT STREET ;

PARIS : J. B. BAILLIÈRE, RUE DE L'ECOLE DU MEDICINE ;
 LEIPSIZ : T. O. WEIGEL.

M DCCC L.

Digitized by Google

Fig. 1. Title page of Zoist.

believed that the phenomena obtained by the magnetizers were produced by the imagination of their subjects. Incidentally, Henin de Cuvillers used the term "hypnotism" (pp. 33, 52) before James Braid proposed it in later years.

Another mesmeric publication was physician Joseph W. Haddock's *Somnolism & Psycheism* (1851). Haddock reported on the trances and clairvoyance of a woman named Emma. She was one of those mesmeric subjects who provided a transition between the mesmeric somnambules and the medium. As Haddock wrote: "Frequently during the spring and summer of 1848, Emma would, in the mesmeric state, speak of the scenery and nature of the spirit-world" (p. 181). Haddock also wrote that Emma seemed to be under the influence of a deceased lady he knew, and that spirits of the departed gave her all sorts of information. This aspect of the mesmeric movement was the focus of magnetizer and cabinet maker Louis Alphonse Cahagnet's *The Celestial Telegraph* (1851), in which he reported that his somnambulists saw spirits of the dead and obtained information from them.

German chemist and geologist Baron Carl Ludwig Reichenbach (1850) continued the tradition of unorthodox concepts of force, as can be seen in his discussion of the "Od" force in his *Physico-Physiological Researches on the Dynamics of Magnetism, Electricity, Heat, Light, Crystallization, and Chemism, and Their Relation to Vital Force* (1850). Others focused on ideas of the soul and apparitions, as did English writer Catherine Crowe in her widely read *The Night-Side of Nature* (1848/1850). Physician Johann Heinrich Jung-Stilling stated in his *Theory of Pneumatology* (1808/1834): "It is . . . an incontestible experimental truth, that the human soul can be detached in an infinite number and variety of degrees, even to entire separation from the body, and is able to act freely of itself, according to the degree of this detachment" (pp. 78–79).

An influential figure in American Spiritualism was Andrew Jackson Davis. The collection has several of his works, such as *The Great Harmonia* (1850), which has chapters about the authors reflections and clairvoyant revelations. One of the most interesting parts of the book is Davis' descriptions of his visual perceptions of the death of a lady:

Now the head of the body became suddenly enveloped in a fine—soft—mellow—luminous atmosphere . . . I saw the indistinct outlines of the *formation* of another head! . . . I saw . . . the harmonious development of the neck, the shoulders, the breast, and the entire spiritual organization . . . The spirit arose at right angles over the head or brain of the deserted body. But immediately previous to the final dissolution . . . I saw—playing energetically between the feet of the elevated spiritual body and the head of the prostrate physical body—a bright stream or current of vital electricity . . . And here I perceived . . . that a small portion of this vital electrical element returned to the deserted body . . . and that that portion . . . instantly diffused itself through the entire structure, and thus prevented immediate decomposition . . . And now I saw that she was in the possession of exterior and physical proportions . . . with those proportions which characterized her earthly organization . . . I continued to observe the movements of her new-born spirit. As soon as she became accustomed to the new elements which surrounded her, she descended from her elevated position, which was immediately over the body . . . and

directly passed out of the door of the bedroom . . . I saw her pass through the adjoining room, out of the door, and step from the house into the atmosphere! . . . Immediately upon her emergence from the house, *she was joined by two friendly spirits from the spiritual country.* (pp. 165-172)

Many of the books in the collection are about Spiritualism. This includes John W. Edmonds and George T. Dexter's *Spiritualism* (1853), which included supposed spirit communications from Bacon and Swedenborg. "All that purports to come from Bacon is always in the same handwriting; so it is with Sweedenborg [sic]. The handwriting of each is unlike the other, and though both are written by Dr. Dexter's hand, they are both unlike his" (p. 50). The book presents several communications about a variety of philosophical topics and about the spirit world. In France, mediumistic communications were organized into a doctrine by French educator Hippolyte Léon Denizard Rivail, who wrote under the pseudonym of Allan Kardec. In his *Philosophie Spiritualiste: Le Livre des Esprits* (1860), Kardec organized the teachings believed to come from the spirits in four sections: (1) First Causes (e.g., God, creation); (2) Spirit World or the Spirits (e.g., incarnation of spirits, return to corporal life); (3) Moral Laws (e.g., divine or natural law, law of progress); (4) Hope and Consolation (terrestrial sorrow and joy, future sorrow and joy).

Following on the idea of animal magnetism, some authors discussed concepts of force as explanations for the phenomena of Spiritualism. Edward Coit Rogers postulated in his widely cited *Philosophy of Mysterious Agents* (1853), the existence of a nervous force emanating from the body. He believed that this force could act without intelligence, like an automatic reflex action, or with intelligence, controlled by the unconscious high brain centers of such individuals as mediums. In *Des Tables Tournantes*, French politician and historian Count Agénor de Gasparin (1854) reported his studies of table-turning, and discussed explanations for the phenomena. He wrote:

If my brain, active as a Leyden jar, emits and directs a fluidic current through my nerves, if the other members of the [mediumistic] chain follow similarly, it is evident that it would not be long for us to form sort of an electric battery, by which the influence will be felt according to our thoughts; we will produce a rotation, we will produce, also at a distance, vigorous liftings. (Vol. 1, p. 514)

More conventional explanations were proposed by William B. Carpenter in his book *Mesmerism, Spiritualism, &c.* (1877). In his view, table-turning was caused by "the unconscious muscular action of the operators; while the answers which are brought out by its instrumentality may be shown to be the expressions, either . . . of ideas actually present to the mind of one or other of the performers; or . . . of past ideas which have left their traces in the brain, although they have dropped out of the conscious memory" (p. 100). Such ideas could become dominant, affecting some individuals with a predisposition to hallucinate. These persons, Carpenter wrote, had a "constitutional tendency . . . to be seized by some strange notion which takes entire possession of them" (p. 4).

The database includes several important psychical research works. One of them is chemist and physicist William Crookes' *Researches in the Phenomena of Spiritualism* (1874), in which he reported experiments of the action of the "psychic force" produced by medium D. D. Home, and observations of the materializations of Florence Cook. In a section of the book, Crookes' listed a variety of manifestations that he had observed. Among these were movement of objects, sounds, changes in the weight of objects, levitation of individuals, materializations, and direct writing.

Another classic is Théodore Flournoy's *Des Indes à la Planète Mars* (1900), in which he presented a psychological examination of Héléne Smith's (the pseudo name of Catherine Élise Müller) mediumistic romances (Figure 2). Such romances about life on planet Mars and in India, Flournoy believed, "are like the exaggeration of stories and semi-unconscious daydreams" (p. 413). The "brilliant subliminal creations" (p. 414) of Héléne Smith were seen as influenced both by her high suggestibility and by the influence of others in her mediumistic circle.

Other European contributions include Julian Ochorowicz's (1887/1891) *Mental Suggestion*. This work, comprised of three sections, each of which included a variety of chapters. The first section was about Ochorowicz's own experiments and observations. The second one covered the observations of others, and the third, theoretical matters. The collection also includes Colonel Albert de Rochas' *L'Extériorisation de la Sensibilité* (1895). In this book, a classic example of late nineteenth-century magnetic work, de Rochas discussed his use of magnetic passes to exteriorize the tactile sensations of his subjects beyond the periphery of their bodies in different layers. In one study, he used a sensitive observer (A), and a person he magnetized (B). He wrote:

If I, as magnetizer, act on this layer in any way, B feels the same [sensation] as if I acted on his skin, and he does not sense anything or almost anything if I act in any other place than on the layer; he does not feel much if he is acted upon by a person who is not in rapport with the magnetizer.

If I continue magnetization, A. sees forming around B. a series of equidistant layers separated by a space from 6 to 7 centimeters [of width] . . . and B. does not feel touches, [or] prickings, . . . the sensibility diminishes proportionally to its distance from the body. (p. 54)

The digital library also has several issues of the *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* (1884–1890, Vols. 2–6; 1894, Vol. 10; 1903–1907, Vols. 18–19). These issues includes influential early papers by Frederic W. H. Myers (1884, 1885) relating both telepathy and automatic writing to a secondary self. Automatic writing indicated for Myers the "manifestation of a secondary or inner self, which is, as it would seem, no mere fragment or reflection of the primary self, but an entity thus far, at least, independent that it can acquire knowledge which the primary self has no means of reaching" (1885, p. 28). The collection also includes Myers' *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* (1903), in which he further discussed his ideas about a subliminal self and

Des Indes

à la

Planète Mars

ÉTUDE SUR UN CAS
DE
SOMNAMBULISME AVEC GLOSSOLALIE

PAR

TH. FLOURNOY

Prof. de Psychologie à la Fac.^{II} des Sciences de l'Université de Genève

TROISIÈME ÉDITION
conforme à la 1^{re} édition

44 figures dans le texte

PARIS
F. ALCAN, ÉDITEUR
108, Boulevard St-Germain, 108

GENÈVE
Ch. EGGIMANN & C^{ie}, ÉDITEUR
9, Rue Calvin, 9

1900
H
Moser, Zet

Digitized by Google

Fig. 2. Title page of Flournoy's *Des Indes à la Planète Mars*.

considered such varied phenomena as creativity, dreams, hallucinations, hypnosis, mediumship, and telepathy. Myers argued that telepathy and telaesthesia (clairvoyance) were functions of the spirit, "survivals from the powers which that spirit once exercised in a transcendental world" (Vol. 2, p. 267). He believed that "so soon as man is steadily conceived as dwelling in this wider range of powers, his survival of death becomes an almost inevitable corollary" (Vol. 2, p. 274).

Other important studies from the *Proceedings* include the famous "Census of Hallucinations" (Sidgwick et al., 1894), which was a large-scale survey of hallucinatory experiences that included telepathic hallucinations. Some of the chapters of the report were: Form and Development of Hallucinations, Expectancy and Suggestion, Collective Hallucinations, and Phantasms of the Dead. The most important conclusion of the report was: "*Between deaths and apparitions of the dying person a connexion exists which is not due to chance alone. This we hold as a proved fact*" (p. 394).

There are also articles in the *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* about medium Leonora E. Piper. This includes physicist Oliver Lodge's (1890) detailed skance reports, and psychologist and philosopher William James' (1890) discussion of his work with the medium. In the latter paper, James stated, "taking everything that I know of Mrs. P. into account, the result is to make me feel as absolutely certain as I am of any personal fact in the world that she knows things in her trances which she cannot possibly have heard in her waking state, and that the definitive philosophy of her trances is yet to be found" (pp. 658–659). Writing about Phinuit's statements, Mrs. Piper's spirit control, James stated:

These discourses, though given in Phinuit's own person, were very different in style from his more usual talk, and probably superior to anything that the medium could produce in the same line in her natural state. Phinuit himself, however, bears every appearance of being a fictitious being . . . he has never been able to understand my French; and the crumbs of information which he gives about his earthly career are . . . so few, vague, and unlikely sounding, as to suggest the romancing of one whose stock of materials for invention is excessively reduced. He is, however, . . . a definite human individual, with immense tact and patience, and great desire to please and be regarded as infallible The most remarkable thing about the Phinuit personality seems to me the extraordinary tenacity and minuteness of his memory. The medium has been visited by many hundreds of sitters, half of them, perhaps, being strangers who have come but once. To each Phinuit gives an hourful of disconnected fragments of talk about persons living, dead, or imaginary, and events past, future, or unreal. What normal waking memory could keep this chaotic mass of stuff together? Yet Phinuit does so; for the chances seem to be, that if a sitter should go back after years of interval, the medium, when once entranced, would recall the minutest incidents of the earlier interview, and begin by recapitulating much of what had then been said. (p. 655)

The collection also includes several French classics. One of them is French physiologist Charles Richet's paper (1884) "*La Suggestion Mentale et le Calcul des Probabilités*," in which were included statistical studies of mental suggestion

as well as other topics such as the experimental use of motor automatism and mental mediumship. Regarding mental mediumship, Richet believed that "all the intelligent manifestations attributed to the spirits are due to an individual that is unconscious and active at the same time" (p. 650). Relevant to this speculation, the collection also has Pierre Janet's well-known discussion of dissociation *L'Automatisme Psychologique* (1889). While the work is not about psychical research, it includes sections on the subject. The book is divided in two parts, one about complete automatism (including amnesia and changes of personality), and another about partial automatism (e.g., subconscious acts). The third chapter of the second part, designed to present examples of "psychological disaggregation" not covered in the rest of the book, has sections about spiritism and dissociation, and a comparison of mediumship and the hypnotized. Regarding the latter, Janet believed that both mediums and the hypnotized could show "disaggregation of personal perception and . . . the formation of several personalities that developed both successively as well as simultaneously" (p. 413).

We also have access to jurist and physician Joseph Maxwell's *Metapsychical Phenomena* (1903/1905). Maxwell did not believe in spirit agency and commented on the tendency of mental and physical mediums to show the phenomenon of personification, or the tendency to claim an outside agency. They "may personify God, the devil, angels, legendary personages, fairies, etc." (p. 64). This personification could be the collective function of the mediumistic circle. In contrast, in *After Death—What?* (1909), criminologist and psychiatrist Cesare Lombroso concluded that many of the mental and physical phenomena of mediumship were connected to spirit agency. In his view, mediums could not obtain information about material not present in the mind of the sitters nor in the present:

When that does take place, when without literary materials the medium writes a romance . . . ; when he communicates matters unknown to anybody; when he writes with the peculiar handwriting and in the style of the deceased (a style wholly unknown to all present); . . . these things happen because with the power of the medium there is associated another power, that has, even though transiently, those gifts that are denied to the living. (p. 355–356).

These are but a few examples of the materials this digital library has to offer (for other examples, see Alvarado, 2007b). This, and other online libraries and resources (e.g., Alvarado, 2007a), facilitate the modern historical study of psychic phenomena.

References

- Alvarado, C. S. (2007a). Psychical research in the *New York Times*. *Psypioneer*, 6, 64–67. (Available at: <http://www.woodlandway.org/PDF/PP3.3March07.pdf>. Accessed 29 July 2007.)
- Alvarado, C. S. (2007b). Bibliography of books and articles about mesmerism, Spiritualism, psychical research, and related topics in Google Book Search. *Psypioneer*, 3, 113–120. Online: <http://www.woodlandway.org/PDF/PP3.5May07.pdf>. Accessed 30 July 2007.

- Cahagnet, L. A. (1851). *The Celestial Telegraph; or, Secrets of the Life to Come, Revealed through Magnetism*. 1st American ed. New York: J. S. Redfield.
- Carpenter, W. (1877). *Mesmerism, Spiritualism, &c.* New York: D. Appleton.
- Colquhoun, J. C. (1833). *Report of the Experiments on Animal Magnetism, Made by a Committee of the Medical Section of the French Royal Academy of Sciences*. Edinburgh: Robert Cadell.
- Crookes, W. (1874). *Researches in the Phenomena of Spiritualism*. London: J. Bums.
- Crowe, C. (1848/1850). *The Night-Side of Nature*. New York: J. S. Redfield. (Original work published in 1848.)
- Davis, A. J. (1850). *The Great Harmonia; Being a Philosophical Revelation of the Natural, Spiritual, and Celestial Universe*, Vol. 1. Boston: Benjamin B. Mussey.
- De Gasparin, Cte A. (1854). *Des Tables Tournantes* (two volumes). Paris: E. Dentu.
- De Rochas, A. (1895). *L'Extériorisation de la Sensibilité*, 2nd ed. Paris: Chamuel.
- Edmonds, J. W., & Dexter, G. T. (1853). *Spiritualism*, 4th ed. New York: Partridge & Brittan.
- Esdale, J. (1852). *Natural and Mesmeric Clairvoyance*. London: Hippolyte Baillière.
- Floumoy, T. (1900). *Des Indes a la Planète Mars*, 3rd ed. Paris: Félix Alcan.
- Haddock, J. W. (1851). *Somnolism & Psycheism*. London: James S. Hodson.
- Henin de Cuwillers, [E. F.] Baron. (1821). *Le Magnétisme Animal Retrouvé dans l'Antiquité*, 2nd ed. Paris: Barrois.
- James, W. (1890). A record of observations of certain phenomena of trance (5). Part III. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, 6, 651–659.
- Janet, P. (1889). *L'Automatisme Psychologique*. Paris: Félix Alcan.
- Jung-Stilling, J. H. (1808/1834). *Theory of Pneumatology* (S. Jackson, trans.). London: Longman, Rees, Orman, Brown, Green, and Longman. (Original work published in 1808.)
- Karde, A. (1860). *Philosophie Spiritualiste: Le Livre des Esprits*, 2nd ed. Paris: Didier.
- Lodge, O. (1890). A record of observations of certain phenomena of trance (2). Part I. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, 6, 443–557.
- Lombroso, C. (1909). *After Death—What? Spiritistic Phenomena and their Interpretation* (W. S. Kennedy, trans.). Boston: Small, Maynard.
- Maxwell, J. (1903/1905). *Metapsychical Phenomena* (L. I. Finch, trans.). New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons. (Original work published in 1903.)
- Myers, F. W. H. (1884). On a telepathic explanation of some so-called spiritualistic phenomena: Part I. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, 2, 217–237.
- Myers, F. W. H. (1885). Automatic writing.—11. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, 3, 1–63.
- Myers, F. W. H. (1903). *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* (two volumes). London: Longmans, Green.
- Ochorowicz, J. (1887/1891). *Mental Suggestion* (J. Fitzgerald, trans.). New York: Humbolt. (Original work published in 1887.)
- Reichenbach, C. [L.] von (1850). *Physico-Physiological Researches on the Dynamics of Magnetism, Electricity, Heat, Light, Crystallization, and Chemism, and Their Relation to Vital Force* (J. Ashbumer, trans.) London: Hippolyte Baillière. (From the German 2nd ed.)
- Richet, C. (1884). La suggestion mentale et le calcul des probabilités. *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger*, 18, 609–674.
- Rogers, E. C. (1853). *Philosophy of Mysterious Agents*. Boston: J.P. Jewett.
- Sidgwick, H., Johnson, A., Myers, F. W. H., Podmore, F., & Sidgwick, E. M. (1894). Report on the Census of Hallucinations. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, 10, 25–422.