Cover Image: "The Medium Eva C. With a Materialization on Her Head and a Luminous Apparition Between Her Hands," by Albert von Schrenck-Notzing, 1912, Archives of the German Institute for Frontier Areas of Psychology and Mental Health.

The spirits are non-linear entities, ungoverned by the dictates of space and time. Flighty creatures, wisps of electrically charged, invisible vapor, even the ones who feel a sense of responsibility to their historical roles rarely show up on time, stay long enough to respond adequately to questions, or answer consistently. Those I summon here may be unreliable. Historians are sometimes frustrated spiritual mediums.

Spawned in 1848 by the Fox sisters, teenagers growing up in rural New York, spiritual mediumship swiftly expanded, becoming a prominent and remarkably durable phenomenon in America. It shaped a dialog about faith and science in the second half of the 19th century that continued well into the 20th. The Fox girls could scarcely have anticipated the lasting effects of what started as an innocuous game. The two younger Foxes transmitted messages from disembodied interlocutors: "Mr. Splitfoot," the first, was a nickname they gave to a murdered local peddler. He communicated via a code of loud taps, knocks and cracking sounds emanating from around the room — signals, the girls claimed, from a soul yearning for contact with the living, which they in turn interpreted for stunned and enraptured observers. With the promotional assistance of their older sister, they quickly became the most celebrated spirit mediums of their day, attracting the devotion of public figures like Horace Greely, William Cullen Bryant, and James Fenimore Cooper; demonstrations of their talent attracted throngs of followers in the 1850s. They soon had competition: other mediums announced and displayed their variations of transmitted dispatches from another realm, and an influential, although not exactly coherent, movement took shape.

If discourse with the dead — and sometimes even the soon-to-be-alive — fed and was fed by a sentimental culture of Victorian mourning, it was also a product of spiritual hunger arising in the face of secularism. Modern Spiritualism's rapid spread was a reaction to mounting fears about deep cultural transformation: materialism, industrialism, commerce, and the growing dominance of commodity exchange. At the same time, mediumistic abilities were readily allied to the methods and practices of materialist science. Almost immediately after announcing their prowess as mediums, the Fox sisters provoked skepticism and demands for proof of either their good faith or charlatanry. Patent examiner Dr. Charles Grafton Page dedicated his expertise to revealing a physical source or device

for producing the audible knocks they translated. In 1853, he published *Psychomancy*, an entire book on the topic, but despite his extensive attempts to reproduce their results, he could not. Public testing became standard practice for any medium seeking to show beyond the shadow of a doubt that their gifts were real. After examining mediums, many physicians, alienists, physiologists, engineers, technicians — scientists in possession of modern forms of knowledge — became devoted believers.

But the shadowy ghost of doubt was always there: in fact, it was the shadow that drew crowds, who hoped with equal fervor to see mediums proven true or false. Whether practiced by legitimate believers whose abilities were confirmed by scientific examination, or quacks hoping to cash in on a fad, mediumistic demonstrations and séances liberally blended stagecraft and sincerity. They occupied a cultural space midway between theater, scientific exposition, and religious ritual.

Although they strenuously denied producing such noises voluntarily, in 1888, the Fox sisters finally revealed their secret: they made the taps and knocks by flexing and popping their double-jointed toes. Yet, despite what might seem like potent evidence of perfidy, this confession merely raised more, and more compelling questions. Harry Houdini, whose own experience as a magician and showman with a degree of scientific acumen inspired a dedication to exposing flimflam, commented upon the mysterious acoustic properties of the body's cracking noises, but used language bound to confuse: "Sound waves are deflected just as light waves are reflected by the intervention of a proper medium and under certain conditions it is a difficult thing to locate their source," he observed. The equally famous novelist Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, not one to underrate the value of scientific proof, defended the women, claiming that determined, ethereal forces suppressed their consciousnesses and transformed their bodies into the perfect medium of transmission. They became passive conduits for the desire of spirits to make themselves known in the modern world — flesh-and-bone telegraph devices.

Other seekers for the truth of spirit-presence allowed that although the Fox sisters were frauds, other mediums might not be, since some modern technologies offered potent evidence that spirits were real. Spirit photographs, ranging widely in quality and sincerity, fed a booming demand for

pictorial records of immaterial forces. Some employed almost laughably hokey stage effects, while others still have the power to haunt. The latter are poignant testaments of the desire to assuage the pain of loss. The authenticity of spirit photographs sparked the 1869 trial of popular New York photographer William H. Mumler, one of the century's most closely followed court battles. Mumler, perhaps best known for his image of devoted spiritualist believer Mary Todd Lincoln comforted by an apparition of the dead President, was accused of defrauding his devoted fans and clients, passing off staged images as proof of genuine spiritual contact. In the highly publicized case, P. T. Barnum — noted expert on chicanery and gullibility — testified to the cravenness of Mumler's devious deceits. Indeed, although the photographer was acquitted of fraud, photography's ability to distort, blur, obscure, or lie, was revealed in the trial, which shaped the course of its development as an aesthetic medium.

If photography offered one kind of scientific legitimation of spiritualism — however spurious — and professional testing another, spiritual mediums also called upon a third source of modern authority: they rarely acted alone. Giving their bodies over to contact with unseen entities, they customarily required an intermediary in the form of a guide, operator, or control: a willing participant who possessed knowledge of the mind's arcane powers. Hypnotists or mesmerists, often but not always professional "men of science," produced deep, passive trance states in their living subjects. Adherents believed complete suppression of the autonomous will was necessary for the medium to function as a site of interchange.

Mesmerists claimed to manipulate the body's "animal magnetism," a term conjoining the vaporous intangibility of the "anima" with the mysterious attractive and repulsive power of magnets. But when animated under the direction of a mesmerist, the ethers, vapors, energies, or electrical currents of the spirit/soul drew in, fluttered, circulated about the space of a room, and entered into the medium's willing, if inert, corporeal body. This flesh, the "animal" part of humanity, was ultimately revealed by a transmitting medium to be little more than a sack of living meat, a sublunary conduit for the flow of what made humans truly human: the esoteric energies of a more celestial and eternal realm. Yet, while the fluidic ether of spirits was profoundly strange — "real" but intangible unless clothed in the physical substance of the medium's borrowed anatomy —

it was also pure. Divested of bodily desires or demands, spirits were human souls freed from any debasing urges. Like mathematical concepts or chemical formulae, these ethereal entities existed in a realm beyond mortality and equally beyond variable, changeable, human morality: a consciousness beyond corruption or limits.

Mediums readily put their consciousness aside in the midst of forces flowing through them, enabling physical manifestation. Whether conceptualized as vaporous, or fluidic, or as currents of electricity, spiritual ether was amorphous but coalescent, formless yet amenable to any form, like paint, clay, or wax — an as-yet-inert and yielding artistic material. Within the vehicle of their living flesh but activated by an alien agent, mediums behaved like puppets or dolls. Their limbs contorted, their faces changed, they grew tall or shrank, they spoke in foreign tongues and tones. To see, hear, and feel these spine-tingling effects was the only conclusive proof that many observers, even likely skeptics, needed. Their own strong physical, sensory reactions were reminders that their bodies, too, were a mere medium for the soul. They would also, someday, find themselves released from the fleshy matter in which they were bound, freed to join the unfathomable.

Emerging as movement, sound, voices, or flickers of light, physical evidence of spiritual activation was facilitated by technological inventions such as lamps, spinning balls, Ouija boards, planchettes, or spiritual telephones. All of these devices nonetheless required the intermediary of a corporeal, human body. Mediumistic practices embraced contradictions: they were both new and timeless, frightening yet comforting, public yet intimate. This newfound congress between living beings and the timeless, ideal, and incorporeal spirit-energies seemed to bridge other modern dualities: the chasm separating science from superstition, proof from speculation, and rationally grounded hope from irrational fantasy or wishful thinking. While contact with the spirits could never be proven beyond doubt by science, the physical embodiment mediums gave to forces exceeding the material, terrestrial world's confines emerged as a compelling, secularized faith.

Though Modern Spiritualism was a new movement, it had precursors. Emmanuel Swedenborg, 18th-century Swedish scientist, philosopher,

theologian, and mystic, provided philosophical justifications for the reality of spirits. His doctrine of correspondences offered a way to reconcile modern contradiction, since he maintained that for every material entity an incorporeal counterpart existed beyond temporal and spatial limits. The correspondence between the two, whether by resemblance or other analogical thinking, was the medium of exchange by which fundamental and eternal equivalence could be measured. His popular books and beliefs established a marketplace of sorts, a site of perpetual exchange between immaterial and material states and conditions, albeit one that he clothed in the language of faith. Later adherents of Swedenborg, like Madame Helena Blavatsky, co-founder of the Theosophical Society, perpetuated his theologies, making her mediumistic abilities an integral part of an entirely new faith.

Modern Spiritualism also strove to distinguish itself from "primitive" superstition, folklore, witchcraft, and even from traditional religion. Demonic possession — a preoccupation more endemic in prior centuries, now incompatible with 19th-century scientific approaches to the soul — had been yet another way that the body had "proven" itself to be a flimsy, easily permeable vessel. In the more modern variation, a medium's submission to spirits was like the unseen infiltration of disease; just as sickness could overtake bodies, so too could ethereal forces, either for good or ill. Under scientific oversight, certain aspects of spiritual mediumship could be evaluated like any other reported physical condition, yet mediums transacted their business in rationality's shady hinterlands, where distinctions were murky.

Although the Fox sisters were discredited and died in poverty after their reputation was ruined, the broader movement that took shape following their early performances continued. Modern Spiritualism was ecumenical, non-dogmatic, loosely Christian but not exclusively so, and its followers numbered in the millions by the end of the century. Particularly attractive to women, Spiritualism offered sanctioned opportunities to demonstrate agency as spiritual leaders, orators, and healers. Born in 1840 with a caul on her face — a sign of her special gifts — Cora Lodencia Veronica Scott Hatch Tappan Richmond became one of the most popular 19th-century Spiritualists and mediums. Exceptionally well-read and articulate, she toured the United States throughout the latter half of the 19th

century, operated by a sequence of husbands, who mesmerized her to produce the passive state favorable for the transmission of directives from the magnetic, electric, fluidic ether.

According to celebratory stories published in the Spiritualist journal *The Banner of Light*, she channeled magnificent powers. Directed by the assistance of a dead German physician, she performed complicated surgeries before amazed audiences. In her lecture-performances, she discoursed at length from within the depths of her trances, on topics suggested at random by the audience — esoteric philosophies, scientific principles and discoveries, and arcane points of historical detail — things presumably only spirits, or extremely well-educated professionals, could possibly know. She clothed the impressive intellectual content of her performances in dramatic process; in her mesmerized state she showed a deft capacity to move between different emotional and physical conditions. Her petite, pretty form underwent dynamic transition: from charming conscious presence, to strange vibrations and superhuman contortions, and then back to serenity, poise. Her entranced mind within its medium-sized body became a potent site of exchange between differential states as well as conventional gendered expectations: an embodied mediation of social change.

Thus, Cora L. V. S. H. T. Richmond was an outspoken advocate of Spiritualism, insisting on mediumship's scientific credibility. In 1899, recognizing vital parallels with emerging branches of the science of the mind, she urged any and all curious seekers to take the phenomenal demonstrations of Universal Intelligence seriously as a modern project: the combined "mental and spiritual powers of mankind … opens up a new realm even to the ordinary student of psychology," she asserted. Furthermore, just as "material science has proved the indestructibility of the atom," she wrote, "Spiritualism proves the immortality of the individual soul by bases, deductions and proofs as undeniable as the principles of mathematics."

As a new science, psychology itself occupied intermedial space, situated between philosophy and neurological physiology. Camillo Golgi & Santiago Ramon y Cajal shared a 1906 Nobel prize for their work examining the intricate web of nerves and neurons, demonstrating that the physical body, an integrated sensory network, was an organic machine. Their research

pointed the way towards realization of the wholesale integration of consciousness and flesh. But if they showed ever more convincingly that the mind was mobilized by impulses and sensations arising from the distributed sensorium, other studies of the mind undermined such certainty. The mind's greatest mysteries — revealed through phenomena like dreams, hallucinations, delusions, prophecies, automatic writing, telepathy, and mesmerism — suggested that the body, however ingenious its nervous configuration, was merely a fragile, fallible and ultimately temporary receptacle. It was a medium through which more durable if evanescent energies passed. Spirit mediums expressly tested, and often rejected, the integrity of the mind-body connection. Using psychological terminology newly familiar to readers, Richmond claimed "the conscious spirit, the ego, inheres in the soul, and is not … the result of contact with the human organism."

To psychologist William James, the dynamic consciousness of the spirit/soul was beautiful even in its formlessness, challenging the imposition of any hard limits to his science. James's 1890 essay for Scribner's Magazine, "The Hidden Self," published the same year as his authoritative, two-volume *Principles of Psychology*, introduced a broad cross-section of American readers to his expanding interest in the immaterial aspects of the psyche and the deep well of the unconscious mind. According to some, James put his reputation for scientific rigor on the line, but he regarded serious investigation of mediumistic phenomena as a necessary corollary to any investigation of sensation, perception, emotion, memory, and physiology. Leading the American Society for Psychic Research, he investigated reports of supernatural phenomena, and his own studies probed the expansive capabilities of the normal mind as well as its "exceptional mental states."

James, along with fellow psychologists including G. Stanley Hall, observed and meticulously tested Mrs. Leonora Piper, a renowned and prosperous Boston clairvoyant and medium, over the span of 20 years. Impressed by Mrs. Piper's charismatic ability to inspire sincere belief and by her facility for spiritual transactions, James evaluated the mind's affective powers alongside its most elusive mystical capacities. Defending faith itself in his 1896 essay "The Will to Believe," he wrote that both spiritualist followers and mediums possessed "a type of mind [that] takes hold of a range of

truths to which the other kind is stone blind." And towards the end of his life, after years of considered, careful thought, James concluded that true mediums possessed rare but authentic capabilities to commune with forces beyond quotidian experience. In his 1909 essay "Confidences of a Psychical Researcher," he confirmed that "those who have the fullest acquaintance of the phenomena admit that in good mediums there is a residuum of knowledge displayed that can only be called super-normal: the medium taps into some source of information not open to ordinary people."

James reassured his readers that scientific skepticism was wise, even as he endorsed mediumistic powers of mind, thus helping forge a construct of unconscious that bridged models of a spiritually and psychologically defined self. He granted the possibility that ghosts might inhabit the embodied machine. Though some might be skeptical of the methods, ambitions, and sincerity of spiritual mediums today, they provided devoted followers with hope and comfort in the face of tremendous social change. While a few of James's peers were dismayed by inadequate boundaries between the "proper" sphere of psychological science and informed speculation about mediums, the separation between these spheres wouldn't widen significantly until the second decades of the 20th century. Before then, to be a medium meant to embrace contradictions, to willingly put oneself in the thick of things, at the very heart of the economic, aesthetic, cultural and epistemological transformations altering the fabric of American society.

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