

Spirit Visions

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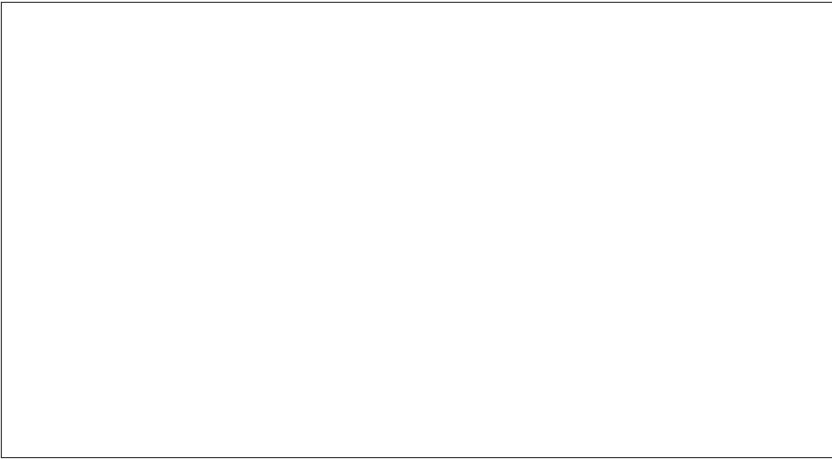


Figure 1. Fata Morgana, Sicily, engraved by Guglielmo Fortuyn, 1773.
(British Library, London)

The Jesuit polymath Athanasius Kircher reports a vision of Fata Morgana in the second part of his magnum opus, *The Great Art of Light and Shadow*, published in 1646, where he reprints a letter from a fellow Jesuit in Sicily, raptly describing a manifestation, on August 15, 1643, of the spectacular enchantments of Fata Morgana:

On the morning of the feast of the Assumption of the Most Blessed Virgin, standing alone at my window, I saw so many things, and so many novelties that I shall never be sated or tired to think on them again. It seems to me that the most holy Madonna made appear . . . a trace of Paradise that day The sea that bathes Sicily swelled up and became ten miles in length all round, like the crests of a black mountain, and the [sea] of Calabria flattened out and appeared in a moment the clearest crystal, transparent as a mirror . . . and in this mirror there suddenly appeared, in chiaroscuro, a line of more than 10,000 columns of equal width and height, all equidistant from one another . . . then a moment later, the columns halved their height and arched over like certain aqueducts in Rome, or the somersaults of Salome.⁴

Kircher was above all a scientist; he turned his back deliberately on Fata Morgana as magic or miracle and sternly reminded his colleague

⁴ Athanasius Kircher, *The Great Art of Light and Shadow* (Rome, 1646), book X, pars II, p. 704.

that, feast of the Assumption or not, the glimpse of paradise he had seen was a trick of the light. Kircher went on to denounce “necromancers” who are quick to seize “such marvels, produced without any work, as the mockery of demons.” Following in the steps of the Italian humanists, he would have no other miracle outside scripture, except the natural, created world. Leon Battista Alberti had personified Nature as the supreme artist (“Natura pictrix”) who takes pleasure in making pictures in her own works: on a large scale—faces in rocks, in clouds—and, on a small scale, the skull in the death’s head hawkmoth was a favorite example.

Kircher himself collected, for his private museum in Rome, stones and fossils that bore the marks of letters until he had completed the alphabet, as well as adventitious images of the Madonna and child, the crucifixion, and so forth⁵—when the name of Allah is found inscribed in the heart of an aubergine, as happened in Bradford, England, recently, or a tomato, as has also been found, we find ourselves back on highly respectable, hermetic territory.

More than a hundred years later, in 1758, yet another member of the Society of Jesus in Sicily was investigating the illusion of Fata Morgana, and he was still exercised by popular superstition:

Until now, in a century of so little culture, the spectacle was a matter of great horror to the common people⁶

Father Domenico Giardina’s evocation of the Fata Morgana is both more analytical than his predecessor’s and far more extravagantly rococo: “Nature unveils these ‘grandi e maravigliosi treatri [*sic*]’ [great and marvellous entertainments] without the enormous defects with which art is filled,” he writes.⁷ Nature here is not only a supreme artist, but knows how to combine Albertian laws of architectural harmony and proportion with a Raphaelesque playfulness in capricious decoration.

⁵ Kircher’s eclectic accumulation of God’s wonders in his private museum was recorded in a magnificent illustrated catalogue: Francisco Mariae Ruspolo, *Musaeum Kircheranium* (Rome, 1709).

⁶ “Fin quì lo spettacolo fu alla bassa gente, ed in un secolo sì poco colto, una gran materia d’orrore”: Giardina, *Discorso*, p. 122.

⁷ The vision includes “a city all floating in the air, and so measureless and so splendid, so adorned with magnificent buildings, all of which was found on a base of a luminous crystal, never beheld before”; this then transformed itself into a forest, and a garden, where the “most capricious figures in the world” were arranged, followed by enormous armies in full battle array, mounted men, prospects of flocks, mountains, half-ruined towns, all disposed “according to the canons of a perfect perspective”: Giardina, *Discorso*, pp. 118–34.

Some ascribe the wonder to enchantments, others to a divine miracle, he goes on, but he himself offers a chemical analysis of the minerals and salts in the region—talc, selenite, antimony, glass—which rise up in hot weather in vapors from the sea to form clouds, which then condense in the cooler upper air to become a *mobile specchio*, a moving, polyhedral mirror.⁸ He emphasizes the effects of fire and brimstone, which create the illusion of columns, arches, pyramids, and pinnacles in infinite recession and distinguishes these from what he calls *l'iride fregiata*, the festooned rainbow. Giardina relates the spectacle to the aurora borealis, or Northern Lights. But the rainbow also offers an orthodox metaphor for insubstantial presence that inspires, for example, Dante's ingenious invocation of the aethereal nature of ghosts. In *Purgatorio* 25, Virgil carefully expounds the Thomist view of the immortal soul, and to describe the condition of the shades of the departed, he draws on metaphors of elements in play, of rays refracted through vapors and imbuing them with color, and then of flames forming shapes as they move:

e come l'aere, quand'è ben piorno,
 per l'altrui raggio che 'n se si reflette,
 di diversi color diventa adorno;
 così l'aere vicin quivi si mette
 in quella forma che in lui suggella
 virtualmente l'alma che ristette;
 e simigliante poi alla fiammella
 che segue il foco la 'unque si muta,
 segue lo spirto sua forma novella.
 Però che quindi ha poscia sua paruta
 è chiamata ombra⁹

Ingeniously conjured from effects of light, insubstantial and incorporeal, yet endowed with presence and sense, Dante's prismatic wraiths approximate to the enchantments of the Fata Morgana. And this condition of the soul that Dante describes eerily foreshadows the insubstantial state of a photograph, or, more particularly, of a slide projection as in the magic lantern show: light and color hanging in the air, flames dancing, without body, but visible—Fata Morgana.

⁸Ibid., pp. 133–34.

⁹*Purgatorio* 25, lines 94–101. Translated by John D. Sinclair, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri* (London, 1958), p. 329: "and as the air, when it is full of rain, becomes adorned with various colors through another's beams that are reflected in it, so the neighboring air sets itself into that form which the soul that stopped there stamps upon it by its power, and then like the flame that follows the fire wherever it shifts, its new form follows the spirit. Since it has by this its semblance henceforth, it is called a shade"

2. SIGNS AND WONDERS

The visionary tendency of Judaeo-Christianity probes the heavens to discern therein the workings of divine providence, and Fata Morgana can be connected to other signs and wonders of a meteorological nature in the Bible—the rainbow after the flood, the pillar of cloud through the desert, the shekinah hovering over the Ark of the Covenant, the writing on the wall at Balshazzar's Feast, the darkness at noon, the cloud enveloping Christ's body at his ascension.

More particularly, in the Second Book of Maccabees, for example, in the midst of the heroic resistance of the Jews to Roman oppression, during the battle that took place in 164 B.C.:

As the fighting grew hot, the enemy saw in the sky five magnificent figures riding horses with golden bridles, who placed themselves at the head of the Jews, formed a circle around Maccabaeus, and kept him invulnerable under the protection of their armour. They launched arrows and thunderbolts at the enemy, who, confused and blinded, broke up in complete disorder.¹⁰

The field where Judas Maccabaeus triumphed against the odds was famously echoed in crusader history, when visions of Saints George, Demetrios, and Mercury appeared to the besieged at Antioch during the First Crusade. Many later episodes include a phantom army seen fighting in the sky above Verviers in Belgium in June 1815, a little before the Battle of Waterloo took place nearby, and, most famously of all, "The Angels of Mons," who mustered in the clouds overhead to support the Tommies in the trenches in World War I, wrapped them in cloud to give them shelter, and even inflicted inexplicable *arrow* wounds on the Germans. The stories spread rapidly, by word of mouth, and thereafter through press reports, psychic journals, purported eyewitness memoirs, and films, including Cecil B. de Mille's *Joan the Woman*, which opens with a scene set in the fields of Flanders, with angelic warriors, including Joan of Arc, overhead.¹¹ Legends of celestial apparitions persist to this day: in one of the most recent instances, the Virgin Mary was found

¹⁰ II Maccabees 10: 29–31. Later in the campaign, during the subsequent bitter siege, another divine horseman appears in the sky, "arrayed in white, brandishing his golden weapons," and again, this heavenly ally leads the Jews to victory, against the host of the enemy with his thousands of warriors, some of them mounted on elephants: II Maccabees 11: 8–12.

¹¹ The legends were sparked by a short story written by the popular occultist Arthur Machen in the *London Evening News* in August 1914. He followed this, the same year, with a

in a “spontaneous photograph” taken circa 1985 of the sky above the Monte Gargano, the shrine of Padre Pio.

The term “Fata Morgana” came to be applied to spectral illusions more generally, to hallucinations and eidetic images, fantasies formed in and by the mind’s eye. Thomas Carlyle said of the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge that he “preferred to create lyrical fatamorganes for himself on his hither side.”¹² Later, the word is used again with the explicit sense of ominous portent in the original, faery metaphor, the artist and writer Alfred Kubin, for example, even using it for the horror of the Nazi era.¹³

In this first lecture, I explore how a mirage (Fata Morgana) casts clouds as veils or gauzes—as “airy films”¹⁴—on which phantom wonders appear, and how the pursuit of fantasy, in meditating on fluid, evanescent, arbitrary forms, presents an important strand in the story of the Imagination. The interaction between the signs and wonders of scripture and mythology and technical processes and contrivances, from the magic lantern to the phantasmagorias of late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century entertainment, to today’s cinematic special effects and virtual reality, is highly dynamic, and certainly cannot be assumed to be altogether fortuitous. But the very word “film” builds on the physical similarities of vapor and the medium of the movies.

Clouds are interfused with anagogic ideas of the highest heaven, the aether; they mark out the space of the world above, creating pontoons and bridges between the two spheres, human and divine; they are vectors of otherworldly beings from heavenly realms; they pun, with dream wordplay, on the nature of spirits. Clouds, vapor, smoke, foam, steam, and their spirituous, sublimed counterparts among airy, misty, gaseous substances have served to make manifest the invisible, supernatural, imponderable, and ineffable according to the promptings of belief and fantasy. Clouds and cloudiness offer a magical passkey to the labyrinth of unknowable mysteries, outer and inner. And they operate all unconsciously, sometimes at the most patent levels, as a perennial visual and verbal expression for inner space.

volume called *The Bowmen and Other Legends of the War* (London, 1915): see his introduction, followed by the story itself, *ibid.*, pp. 1–38.

¹² Thomas Carlyle, *Sterling* 1.viii.78; *Oxford English Dictionary*.

¹³ Alfred Kubin, *The Other Side*, trans. Denver Lindley (London, 1969).

¹⁴ [Attrib. C. Taylor] *Landscape Magazine* (1793): 84–87; I am grateful to Anne Lyles of the Tate Gallery, London, for bringing this description to my attention.

For example, even in a popular form, the comic strip, the British cartoonist Posy (Simmonds) uses various frames to indicate different inner visions of her heroine Gemma Boverly: internal cursing (“uuh . . . Patrick . . . bastard! . . .”) and insomniac phantoms; fantasies of domestic bliss (hiding with a baby in a rural idyll); or dreams of romantic ravishing by her lost love. Significantly, these last are contained within a thought bubble, a fleecy cloud shape with scattered flakes. This cartoonist’s device remains the most direct, conventional way of conveying to the reader that these are the products of the heroine’s inner eye.

Whiteness, vaporousness, filminess, insubstantiality: spirits are literally a *cloudy* matter. The imagery of the “animula vagula blandula . . . pallidula . . . nudula [Dear little fleeting pleasing little soul . . . pale little . . . naked little thing],” in the Emperor Hadrian’s image, endures with variations, through Thomist theology to fairy legends.¹⁵ *Corpus sed non caro* (body but not flesh): so did Saint Augustine define the substance of angels, and this impossible conjunction can be extended to convey departed souls and spirits. In representations, light, as both radiance and weightlessness, buoys the spiritual or aetheric body, incorporated but not enfleshed, and renders it at once palpable and insubstantial.

Nebulousness has served to meet a need for expressing the bourne beyond which matter still materializes, but not as body, or, if within its bourne, the forms and shapes it takes. In his last, despairing entreaty, Christopher Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus turns from one power to another to escape the fires of hell. When he begs his birth stars to come to his aid, he stirs a strange brew of cloudy vapors to describe how his soul might be hidden and saved:

Now draw up Faustus, like a foggy mist,
 Into the entrails of yon lab’ring clouds,
 That, when you vomit forth into the air,
 My limbs may issue from your smoky mouths,
 So that my soul may but ascend to heaven!¹⁶

This compacted meteorological vision casts dying Faustus as a vapor, drawn up by the heat of the stars to be swallowed up by clouds figured as women’s wombs. These stars are also endowed with mouths that can

¹⁵ *The Penguin Book of Latin Verse*, trans. Frederick Brittain (Harmondsworth, 1962), p. 61.

¹⁶ Christopher Marlowe, *Dr. Faustus*, ed. A. H. Sleight (Cambridge, 1961), Sc. 14, lines 92–96 (emphasis added).

both breathe and spew; Faustus seems to be begging to be turned into a fine rain that might issue from the clouds, but be too misty, too light, to fall to earth so might rather rise, like high cirrus to the upper heaven. The contortions of the image sequence reflect dramatically the agonizing of the doomed magus only half an hour before his death.

In a lighter vein, John Dryden and William Davenant's intriguing and much performed revision of *The Tempest*, *The Enchanted Island*, written in 1669, also evokes the soul through metaphors of breath and condensation, as in this exchange between two of its beguiling *ingénus*:

Dorinda: But I much wonder what it is to dye.
 Hippolito: Sure 'tis to dream, a kind of breathless sleep.
 When once the Soul's gone out.
 Dorinda: What is the Soul?
 Hippolito: A small blew thing that runs about within us.
 Dorinda: Then I have seen it in a frosty morning run
 Smoaking from my mouth.
 Hippolito: But if my soul had gone, it should have walk'd upon
 A Cloud just over you, and peep'd . . .¹⁷

It is not only Christian souls or the angels of orthodoxy whose nature lends itself to nebulous metaphor. The Reverend Robert Kirk, a Scottish antiquarian and divine, described the nature of Fairies, in his intimate guide to the supernatural, *The Secret Common-Wealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies*, of around 1692. They were

intelligent Studious Spirits, and light changable bodies (lyke those called Astrall) somewhat of the nature of a condens'd cloud, and best seen in twilight. These bodies be so plyable thorough the subtilty of the spirits, that agitate them, that they can make them appear and disappear at pleasure. Some have bodies or vehicles so spungious, thin . . . that they are fed by only sucking into some fine spirituous liquors . . .¹⁸

In the seventeenth century, clouds are widely accepted, in both visual and poetic works, as the departed soul's appropriate vehicle.

¹⁷ John Dryden with William Davenant, *The Enchanted Island*, in *The Works of John Dryden* (Berkeley and London, 1970), vol. 10, Act V, Sc. ii, lines 16–25.

¹⁸ R. Kirk, *The Secret Common-Wealth & A Short Treatise of Charms & Spells*, ed. Stewart Sanderson (London, 1976), pp. 49–50. Kirk was stolen by the fairies, or so it was widely reported and later recorded by Sir Walter Scott.

The story I am going to tell in these two lectures will proceed along two complementary paths: first, oracular cloud effects such as *Fata Morgana* are dynamically related to the development of optical instruments, from the magic lantern, called *camera obscura*, to the movie camera, and they have influenced the scope and character of visual media. As I hope to show, the wonders of the rainbow, mirages, and other cosmic effects of weather and climate provide the vehicles for communicating spectral nature and presence and have interacted with innovatory, technical means of expression and influenced their development.

Joel Snyder has argued, in an important essay,¹⁹ that optical devices were invented and modified in order to deliver images that fitted Albertian and Vitruvian ideals; this quest culminated in the photographic camera, which did not and does not function as a trusty replicator of human visual experience or beheld, experiential reality. Extending Snyder's view into the realm of fantasy, I am going to propose here that optical and other technical means were also developed to reproduce mental or eidetic images, that these came arrayed in metaphorical vesture that served to communicate the conditions of supernatural other worlds and their creatures. They succeeded by obeying axioms embedded in religious iconography, in mythological visual narratives, and in speculation about the function and character of the Imagination and of the senses, especially the visualizing faculties. Models of mind, as proposed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by a range of philosophers and mystics, drew the terrain for picturing visions that did not present themselves to the eyes of the body.

My second principal line of argument focuses on the historical character of signs: even something as cloudy as a cloud has a changing story to tell within the history of signs and of the language of value, so I will be trying to convey how wonder and the sublime themselves have shape-shifted. Clouds have acted as a predominant metaphoric vehicle for spirit, but, like all figures in a semiotic vocabulary, they are intertwined with temporal context, with epistemologic, scientific, and social developments, which can extend, or narrow, their meaning. Thus a Coleridgean commitment to the powers of Imagination will lead, along one line of psychological development, to the Rorschach test,²⁰ while

¹⁹ Joel Snyder, "Picturing Vision," *Critical Quarterly* 6 (1980): 499–526.

²⁰ In the mid-nineteenth century, Justinus Kerner proposed that ink blots could be used to prompt psychological revelations; Herman Rorschach then developed the theme with a series of ten test cards to serve as stimuli: the Rorschach test entails precisely finding mean-

analysis of the aether will precipitate, in turn of the century seances, the phenomenon of ectoplasm.

3. "VERY LIKE A WHALE . . ."

The game of descrying shapes in the skies, faces in the clouds, and images in stones, according to the complementary vagaries of individual reverie, should be distinguished from the effects of weather, the causes of rainbows, the so-called Brocken spectre, St. Elmo's fire, will-o'-the-wisps, foxfire, ignis fatuus, and other Fata Morganas. But their very names, endowing phenomena with supernatural origins, reveal how it is in practice difficult to keep the experiences distinct, how subjective dreaming alters the experience of the natural event. As Nature abhors a vacuum, so does the mind resist meaninglessness, accord stories to haphazard incident, invent reasons and origins, mythical etiologies; the amorphous, the inchoate, the formless have beckoned irresistibly to the shaping powers of thought and fantasy.

Reflecting on "the image made by chance," H. W. Janson distinguished between two ways of seeing: the first, as famously invoked by Alberti, describes the artist discovering, within the stone or other material, the body inscribed there by nature—a procedure Michelangelo's *Slaves* most powerfully and eloquently embody.²¹ Janson associates this approach with mimesis, because the sculptor is trying to deliver something believed to be already there: the figure in the marble, the faces in the rock. Gutzon Borglum, the sculptor of Mount Rushmore, would study rocks for days and nights, sleeping in the mountains until the image formed; he also borrowed Native American interpretations of landmarks, peaks, and other features. It could be said that his mammoth monuments represent the terminus and the nadir of this method.²² But

ings where there is nothing except random marks, and it applied the results for medical diagnosis of character. See Bruno Klopfer and Douglas McGlashan Kelley, *The Rorschach Technique: A Manual for a Projective Method of Personality Diagnosis* (Yonkers-on-Hudson, 1942).

²¹ "The 'Image Made by Chance' in Renaissance Thought," in *De Artibus Opuscula*, vol. 40, *Essays in Honor of Erwin Panofsky*, ed. Millard Meiss (New York, 1961), pp. 254–68.

²² Cf. Robert J. Dean, *Living Granite: The Story of Borglum and the Mount Rushmore Memorial* (New York, 1949), p. 32: Borglum's abortive sculpture of General Lee was inspired by "studying the formation of the rocks, watching the effects of light and shadow on the face of the cliff at various times of day. And on the third day, toward evening, when there was a pale young moon in the sky, he seemed to see the shades of a gray Confederate host, with Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and Jefferson Davis, stealing across the great expanse of rock in gigantic proportions . . ." This memorial was never finished, but Borglum carried the idea on with him to Mount Rushmore.

a book of photographs, recently published in England, continues this primitivist and esoteric tradition, discerning secret faces in the ancient megalithic circles and avenues of stones at Avebury in Wiltshire.²³ The author and photographer Terence Meaden does not rule out the possibility that these might be among the very earliest intentional figurative carvings.

The second way of making images organizes them through the power of *fantasia*: seeing shapes in clouds, on rocks, that Nature has not put there. The most patent and most ancient evidence of this arbitrary and mythopoeic faculty lies far beyond the province of art, in the enduring and wonderful ancient fantasies of starmaps, which link up the random scattering of the skies into pictures and stories—the constellations, the Zodiac.

Janson concludes that today “we have [thus] at last resolved the ancient Greek dichotomy of *mimesis* and *fantasia* by assigning each of them to its own separate domain.” I would like to modulate this stark contrast, by exploring how mimetic picturing itself depends on a language of signs that is rooted in the work of the imagination with analogy, metaphor, and associations. In the struggle to represent the unseen, to figure spirit, men and women considered they were mimetists, turning the lens of empiricism on hidden forms, deciphering existing and inherent secrets and codes; however, as I hope to show, their *fantasia* led them, and it in turn was shaped by diverse, buried codes as well.

Reading what the contemporary American poet Charles Edward Eaton has called the sky’s “secret album of nephographs”²⁴ has a very ancient history indeed: on the one hand, Aristophanes mocks it gleefully and mercilessly in *The Clouds*, a satire on philosophy’s arbitrariness and vagueness. But on the other, taking a cue from Lucretius, Leonardo da Vinci finds in the contemplation of formlessness a crucial stimulus. In two entries in his Notebooks (later appearing in the edited *Treatise on Painting* in around 1550) Leonardo advocated the scrying of stains on walls, or the ashes of a fire, or mottled and grainy stones, or mud, or clouds—the list drifts through “like things” that are formless and, he writes later, “*confused*,” inscrutable in themselves for they are intrinsically meaningless. They will, however, offer the subjective fantasy “una nuova invenzione di speculazione [a new invention of speculation]” by

²³ Terence Meaden, *The Secrets of the Avebury Stones, Britain’s Greatest Megalithic Temple* (London, 1999).

²⁴ Charles Edward Eaton, “Cloud Pictures,” *Sewanee Review* 92, no. 4 (1984): 534.

which “if you consider them well, you will find really marvellous ideas.”²⁵ Elsewhere, Leonardo cites Sandro Botticelli as an advocate of following the prompts and biddings of *fantasia*: “Our Botticelli said, that such study [of landscape] was vain, because by merely throwing a sponge full of diverse colors at a wall, it left a stain on that wall, where a fine landscape was seen.”²⁶ The Paduan philosopher Pietro Pomponazzi (1462–1524) openly yoked the power of dreaming with meteorological and optical illusions: “If one admits that apparitions can be produced in dreams, one must give credence to the possibility that they can also be produced in the atmosphere.”²⁷

Shakespeare invokes this type of daydreaming both in *Anthony and Cleopatra* (“Sometime we see a cloud that’s dragonish . . .”) and in *Hamlet* when Hamlet ribs Polonius, exposing the old courtier’s slipperiness and duplicity:

Hamlet: Do you see yonder cloud that’s almost in shape of a camel?
 Polonius: By th’mass, and ’tis like a camel indeed.
 Hamlet: Methinks it is like a weasel.
 Polonius: It is back’d like a weasel.
 Hamlet: Or like a whale?
 Polonius: Very like a whale.²⁸

In *The Tempest*, Prospero’s art—his “insubstantial pageant”—not only harks back to Faustus’s conjurings, but also hints at Fata Morgana effects that may reflect contemporary stagecraft.²⁹ It is worth noting that Shakespeare, who was sparing with stage directions, twice specifies the pixilating paradox that Ariel, that airy spirit, “enters, invisible.”

Ideas of conjuration and magical illusion were intertwined with conceptions of mental or eidetic images, produced in the mind’s eye by fantasy.

²⁵ Leonardo da Vinci, *Treatise on Painting*, ed. and trans. Philip McMahon (Princeton, 1956), vol. 1, pp. 50–51.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

²⁷ Pietro Pomponazzi, “Des causes des merveilles de la Nature ou des Enchantements,” quoted in Jurgis Baltrusaitis, *Le Miroir, essai sur une légende scientifique; révélations, science-fiction et fallacies* (Paris, 1978), p. 63.

²⁸ *Hamlet*, Act III, Sc. 2.

²⁹ and, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
 The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
 The solemn temples, the great globe itself . . .

4. THE EYE OF THE IMAGINATION

Robert Fludd was an Oxford esoteric philosopher and one of the leading Rosicrucians; he published his thoughts about human consciousness and its relationship to the macrocosm of divine creation in his spell-binding book *Utriusque Cosmi* (Of the Other World) in 1617–21, a decade after *The Tempest*. The magnificent illustrations (figure 2) were probably devised by the author in collaboration with the great engraver-printer Theodore de Bry.

In the beautiful plate entitled “Vision of the Triple Soul in the Body,” Fludd has disposed the faculties in haloes around the profile of a man with suitably enlarged and sensitive external organs: a luminous single eye, a prominent ear, a hand raised to display the fingertips, swollen sensual lips. The senses radiate into a series of concentric circles, and these are hyphenated to a constellation of *animae*, or souls, inside the cranium: on the left is the sensitive soul, of which the circumference is interlaced with the imaginative soul. Another bridge or hyphen leads upward from this to another planetary system, the world of the Imagination (*Mundus imaginabilis*), where, in good Neoplatonist fashion, all is shadow—the rings of this system, the *Umbra Terrae*, or shadow of the World, are all shadows of the elements. Fludd writes, “[This] soul [is] called the imaginative soul, or fantasy or imagination itself; since it beholds not the true pictures of corporeal or sensory things, but their likenesses and as it were, their shadows.”³⁰

One of the most remarkable illustrations places an eye over the exact position of the imaginative soul in the earlier diagram. The *oculus imaginationis*, or eye of the Imagination (figure 3), radiates a tableau of images: a tower (of Babel?), a guardian angel showing the way, an obelisk, a two-masted ship on a high sea, and the Last Judgment with Christ in glory on a rainbow among trumpeting angels while the dead rise with supplicating hands.

These images belong to various orders of representation, based on memory or Imagination, but it is clear that the inner eye in Fludd’s Neoplatonist conception does not receive images: it projects them onto

Shall dissolve,
And like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind.
(*The Tempest*, Act IV, Sc. 1)

³⁰Robert Fludd, *Utriusque Cosmi*, 2 vols. (Oppenheim, 1617–21), vol. 2, p. 218.

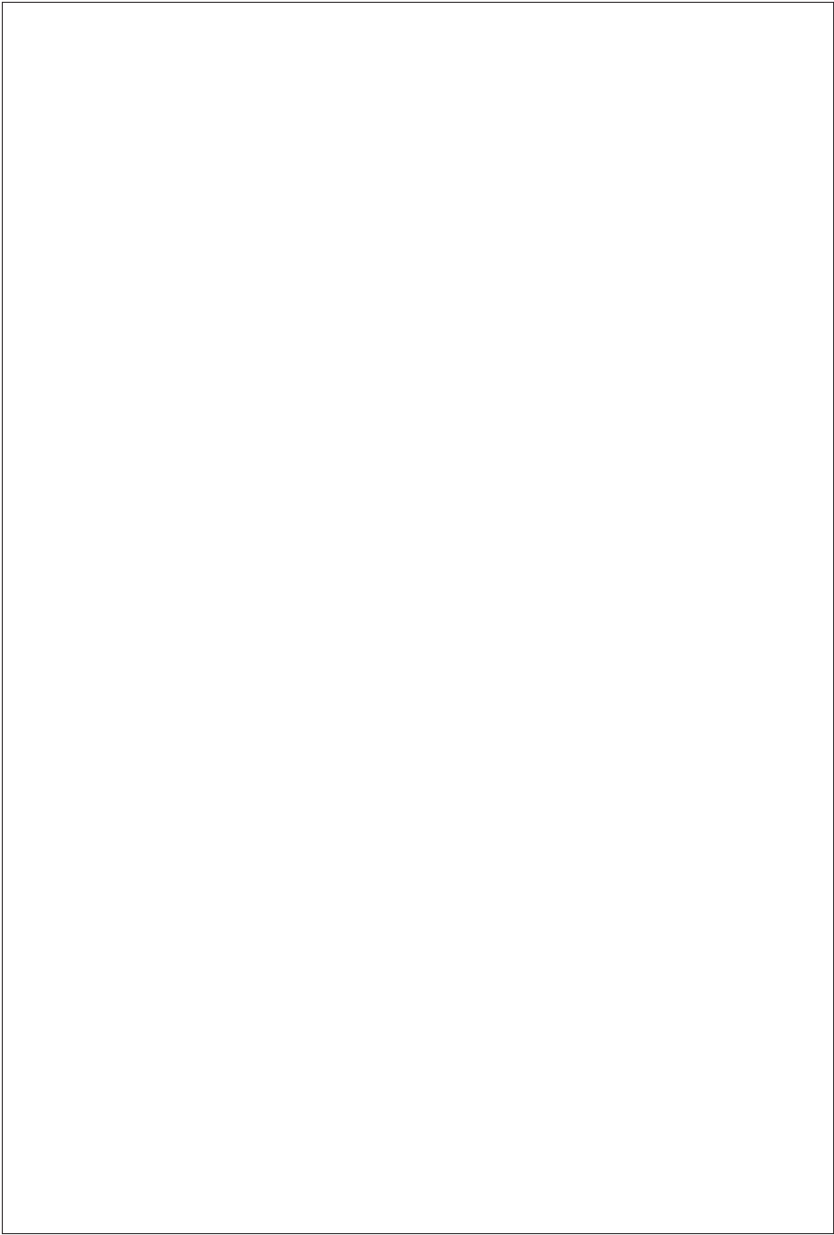


Figure 2. “Vision of the Triple Soul in the Body,” from Robert Fludd, *Utriusque Cosmi*, 1617–21. (London Library, London)

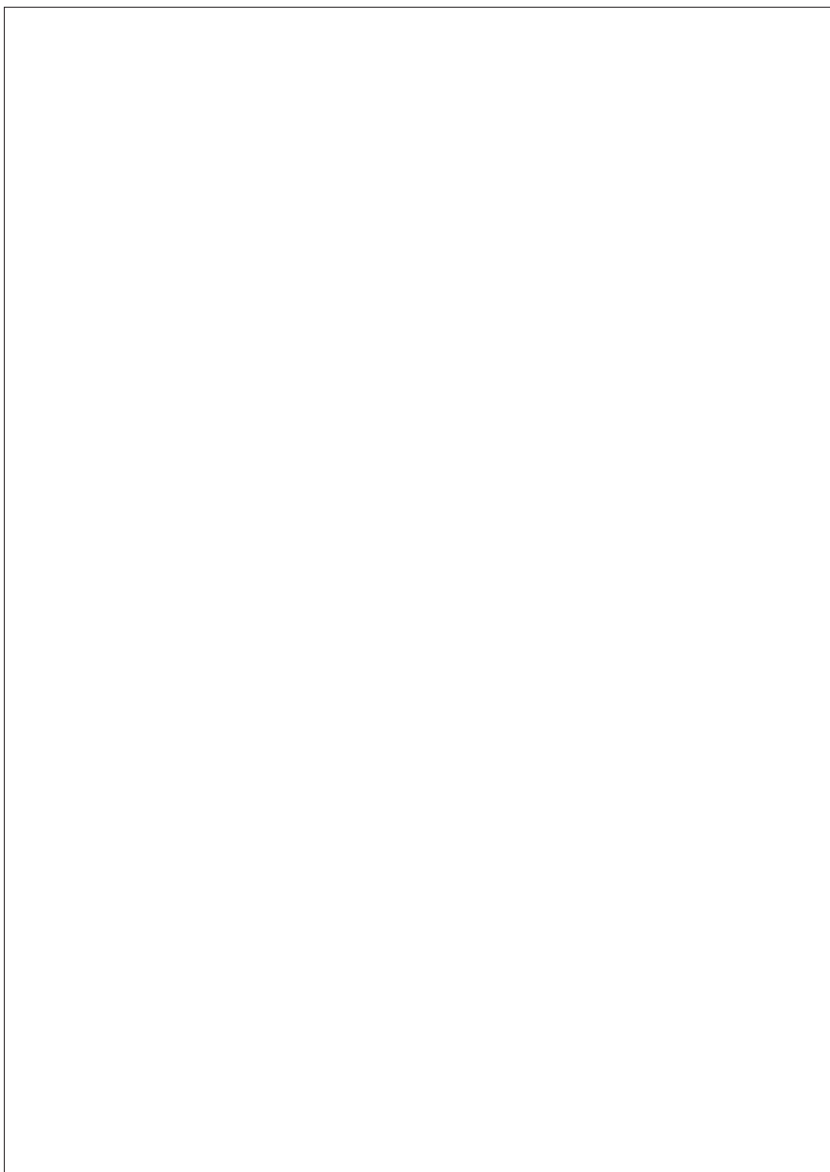


Figure 3. “The Eye of the Imagination,” from Robert Fludd, *Utriusque Cosmi*.
(London Library, London)

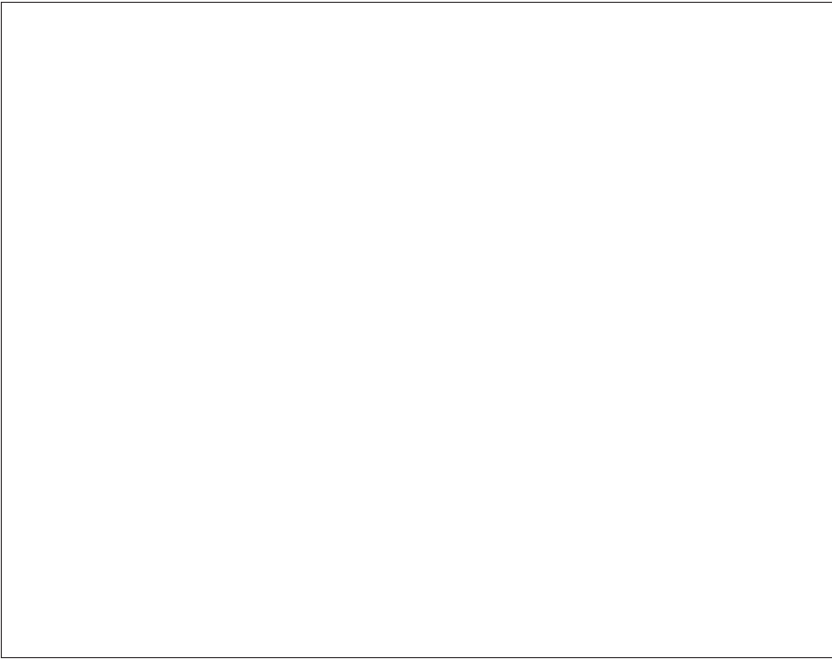


Figure 4. A magic lantern, called camera obscura, from Athanasius Kircher, *Ars Magna Lucis et Umbrae* (Rome, 1646). (Bill Douglas Centre, University of Exeter)

a screen that lies beyond the back of the head, floating in a space that does not exist except in fantasy.

Athanasius Kircher, a generation younger than Fludd, knew his work, and its direct influence can be felt in *The Great Art of Light and Shadow* (Rome, 1646). The illustrations of the magic lantern are the earliest extant of this device, and for a long time Kircher was credited with inventing it. He does not claim to have done so, but he describes his pioneering experiments, when he prepared glass slides with salts and chemicals for the shows he gave in the Jesuit College in Rome.³¹ The engraving in *Ars Magna* (figure 4) contains certain elementary errors that make it certain that Kircher himself did not oversee the artist at work: for example, the painted slides would need to be upside down in the projector in order to appear right side up on the wall, as illustrated clearly elsewhere in the book, in one of the first edition's many optical diagrams.

³¹The initial invention of the instrument is now attributed to a contemporary of his, the brilliant Dutch horologist and astronomer Christian Huygens.

But illustrations of the magic lantern's prototypes have a significant feature in common: the subjects in the images projected cannot be seen with the eye of the body, except in representations by artists. The subjects in these examples of visual phenomena are fantastic, and they give that certain frisson of the grotesque, designed to excite fear as well as pleasure. These are images that *ipso facto* connote the visions of the mind's eye, and in order to do so they draw on a supernatural lexicon. They depict hallucinations. It is hardly an accident that a naked soul in the flames of hell or purgatory appeared burning on the slide projected onto the wall or that Death was shown as an animated skeleton with the scythe of the reaper and the hourglass of Father Time. An engraving published in Leiden in 1720–21 also included an illustration of an early slide projector, and, despite the learned and scientific title of the mathematical treatise in which it appears, it showed a huge, magnificent devil leering on the wall. The device was thought to reproduce the mind's capacity to fabricate what the eyes of the body cannot see.

Athanasius Kircher's seances were attended, in the Jesuit College in Rome, by cardinals and grandees who gathered to witness "what was known, in jest," writes his fellow Jesuit Giardina later, "as the enchantments of the reverend father . . ." ³² But the later Jesuit's uneasiness is well grounded, for Kircher significantly chose to project supernatural images, and in this he comes perilously close to the goety, or black magic, denounced by the Inquisition in his own day. One Inquisitor, writing in 1641 (i.e., during Kircher's heyday), gives a full inventory of the disruption and mayhem that the rebel angels create. In the midst of a terrifying and overheated litany of evil and catastrophe, the Inquisitor instances metamorphoses of animal and human bodies. But these are not changed in their substance, "sed aliam ex vaporibus extrinsecus circumponendo . . . [but only by *investing them in another aspect, composed of extrinsic vapors* . . .]." ³³

Cloudy vapors figure strongly in his account of the phantasmic powers of Imagination. Kircher explores the dominant metaphor of a screen and then two dependent metaphors: first, the blackened surface of a mirror, and, second, the smoky and boiling vapors in the brain of a person afflicted with melancholy. He borrowed the image of the mirror

³²Giardina, *Discorso*, p. 140.

³³Cesare Carena, *Tractatus De Officio Sanctissimae Inquisitionis* (Cremona, 1641), pp. 217–18, quoted in Maurice Slawinski, "Marino, le streghe, il cardinale," kindly lent by the author, forthcoming in *Italian Studies*.

from optics and the image of the inchoate and turbulent spirits from explanations of cosmic origin in hermetic physics, as represented in Fludd's work; it is not clear how metaphorically he intends their application to the mind.

These means of the imaginative soul (the play of shadows, the opaque surface of a mirror, and vaporous swirling clouds—for producing and rendering fantasy) return as palpable, physical instruments of projection in the first cinematic public entertainment, the phantasmagoria. Its subject matter was spectral illusion, morbid, frequently macabre, supernatural, fit to inspire terror and dread, those qualities of the sublime, and it enjoyed terrific popularity from the end of the eighteenth century, in Paris just after the Terror, until the invention of true moving cinema displaced it. The association between diabolical phantoms and spectral phenomena influenced the content and material of optical illusions and shaped the characteristic uses and development of those varied and wonderful technological devices that have been used to represent the supernatural, to make present what eludes the senses and to make visible the invisible.

Etienne-Gaspard Robertson was the brilliant innovator in this proto-cinema: he thought of blacking out the background, and coating the gauze with wax to give it greater translucency, and putting the projector on rollers (figure 5). Audiences accepted an unspoken, unexamined equivalence between the ghosts, skeletons, bleeding nuns, and ghouls that a burning lamp, flickering smoke, a series of mirrors and lenses, and a painted transparency can project and the invisible screen on which the mind casts its own envisionings, be they fantasized or recalled through memory. This equivalence recurs in the development of optical languages that culminate in the conventions of contemporary media from cinematic voice-overs, flashbacks, and dream sequences.³⁴ Robertson also projected onto smoke. In one slide, for example, the eerie head of Danton, recently guillotined, rose flickeringly, like his shade.

As Terry Castle points out so inspiringly in *The Female Thermometer*, the uncanny took a turn away from external, supernatural, and mysteri-

³⁴Early cinema drifted, as if naturally, to depicting the inner world of Imagination. Think of the pioneer Georges Méliès, who filmed a journey to the moon as well as the frolics of fairies, or great silent movies such as Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919) and F. W. Murnau's vampire film *Nosferatu* (1921).

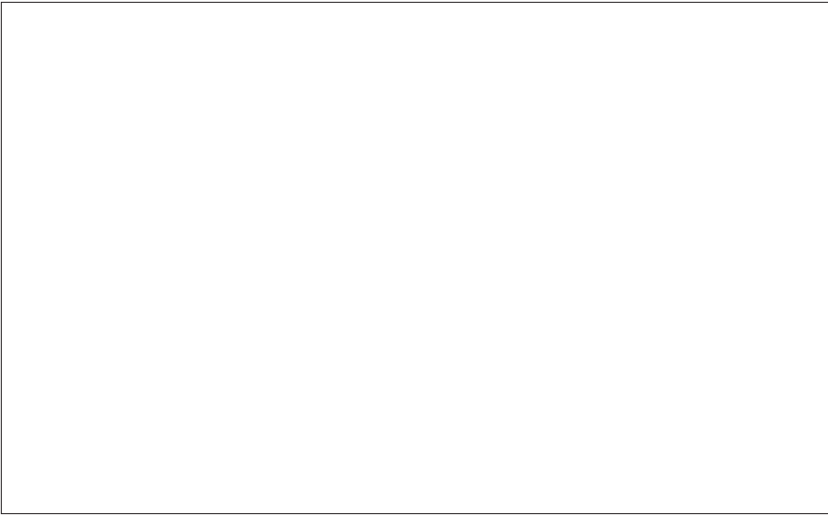


Figure 5. The phantasmagoria of Etienne-Gaspard Robertson, Paris, 1790s, in a contemporary engraving. From John Barnes, "The History of the Magic Lantern," *New Magic Lantern Journal* 1/1, no. 3/2 (1984): 29. It also appears in Laurent Mannoni's *Le Grand Art de la lumière et de l'ombre* (Paris, 1994). (Bill Douglas Centre, University of Exeter)

ous causes of dread and terror, earthed to a common religious faith, and began to inhabit instead unstable, internal hallucinations, seething with personal, idiosyncratic monsters extruded from the overheated brain by the force of vehement Imagination, or, as Goya would write on the opening *Capricho*, with monsters generated by the dream of reason. Even supposedly natural wonders, which became a favorite theme with magic lanternists, take on a fantastic appearance. Icy vistas, with heaped snowbanks and aurora borealis (figure 6), as painted by a London firm in the second half of the nineteenth century, partake, I think, of the character of *Fata Morgana*.³⁵

The sublime spectral cinema of meteorology, evoked in different works of early Romanticism, disquietingly and even thrillingly disturbs the grounds on which the question of a phenomenon's internal or external nature can be decided. The undecided, debatable relationship of the visionary to the vision, of witness to portent, of the scryer to the encrypted message or the scrying mirror, still vexes arguments about

³⁵ "Icebergs," ca. 1860, and "Aurora Borealis," ca. 1900, Carpenter and Wesley, London, in the Whipple Museum, University of Cambridge.

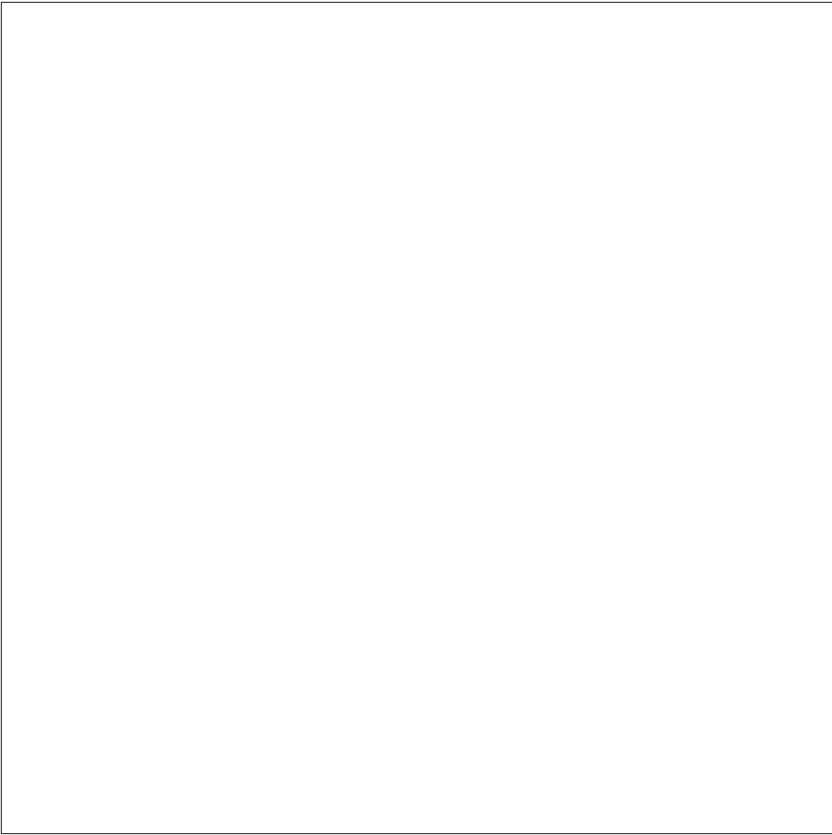


Figure 6. Icebergs, from magic lantern slides, made by Carpenter & Wesley, London, mid-nineteenth century. (Whipple Museum, University of Cambridge)

memory and fantasy, with regard to phantasmagoric revelations of childhood ordeals, for example. This unsettled problem is grounded in the anxiety about diabolical origins and gained extension, depths, and strength from images of doubles, shadow selves, spirit enchantments, summonings, and hallucinations in early Romantic writings of the celebrated, heroic, and haunted poets, Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Victor Hugo, and Alfred de Musset, but also, very markedly, in the work of lesser-known writers like Thomas Lovell Beddoes and James Hogg. The book I am going to concentrate on here is James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, written in 1824.

5. HALOES OF GLORY

James Hogg communicates a metaphysical thriller of a plot in a language wrought from the stinging rhythms and rhetoric of Low Church liturgy, compounded by the ghastly, eerie fairy lore of the Highlands and a Coleridgean intensity of fantasy. His hectic and macabre novel splits and doubles itself, its themes, and its characters. Two texts, one following the other, are written from two different points of view; narrating the same terrible story, they contradict each other here and there, forming an asymmetrical diptych, all the more compelling for its discordancy and conflicts. These two versions stage the fatal enmity of two brothers, George, who is fair of face and sanguine of temper, and Robert, saturnine, fanatical, and malignant, brought up in a blazing, antinomian extreme conviction that the “justified sinner” who has been saved can do no wrong. In his pride, Robert acquires—attracts? generates?—a mysterious mentor and benefactor who encourages him to believe in his irrecusable salvation and goads him and cajoles him into an ever deeper and more violent hatred of his brother. Hogg bores deep into the theme of paired opposites, who, while distinct as well as repellent to each other, may be at the same time symbiotically interdependent (like north and south, black and white). George finds himself continually accompanied by his brother:

Yet he had never sat or stood many minutes till there was the self-same being, always in the same position with regard to himself, as regularly as the shadow is cast from the substance, or the ray of light from the opposing denser medium.³⁶

The optics in these similes will recur. Meanwhile Robert, too, is being shadowed, by his Mephistophelean mentor.

Hogg stages one of the novel’s climactic struggles between the two brothers in the open, elevated ground of Arthur’s Seat, near Edinburgh, on a radiant morning. The scene, with its phantasmagoric epiphanies, its violent, near fatal encounter, and its hallucinatory multiplication of the *doppelgänger* figure, fuses modern dilemmas about the stability of the self with visual metaphors of meteorological wonders and optical

³⁶James Hogg, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, ed. John Carey (Oxford, 1999), p. 36.

illusion. An analogous wonder to the *Fata Morgana* here unfolds as natural prodigy and spectral fantasy at once, an objective epiphany of the sublime and an interior nightmare wrought by personal devils.

George has ascended onto the brilliant illuminated summit partly to evade the constant unwelcome attendance of his brother:

As he approached the swire at the head of the dell, — . . . he beheld, to his astonishment, a bright halo in the cloud of haze, that rose in a semi-circle over his head like a pale rainbow. He was struck motionless at the view of the lovely vision; for it so chanced that he had never seen the same appearance before, though common at early morn. But he soon perceived the cause of the phenomenon, and that it proceeded from the rays of the sun from a pure unclouded morning sky striking upon this dense vapour which refracted them.³⁷

He continues to draw nearer, and the delicious morning vision changes:

Gracious Heaven! What an apparition was there presented to his view! He saw, delineated in the cloud, the shoulders, arms, and features of a human being of the most dreadful aspect. The face was the face of his brother, but dilated to twenty times the natural size. Its dark eyes gleamed on him through the mist . . .

George conceived it to be a spirit. He could conceive it to be nothing else; and he took it for some horrid demon by which he was haunted, that had assumed the features of his brother in every lineament, but in taking on itself human form, had miscalculated dreadfully on the size, and presented itself thus to him in a blown-up, dilated frame of embodied air, exhaled from the caverns of death or the regions of devouring fire.³⁸

When it comes nearer, George flings himself upon it, only to find that it is “a *real* body of flesh and blood,” his fearsome brother Robert, who cries “Murder.” Then, “. . . being confounded between the shadow and the substance, [George] knew not what he was doing or what he had done. . . .” He assaults the demon shape—an act that will land him with a charge of attempted murder and precipitate the tortuous and terrible sequence of events that leads to his death.³⁹

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 39–40.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 41–42.

³⁹ In the second half of the novel, Robert’s first-person account of his misdeeds, he also describes the violent encounter in the clouds: he goes there, at the urging of his evil genius, to kill his brother. He too there suffers visions: a woman in white appears to him out of the mist and upbraids him for his evil intentions, but Robert’s “prince” and “counselor” re-materializes on the instant and, in archaic, lofty tones, orders his minion not to be so faint-hearted, but to throw his wretch of a brother from the pinnacle into “the foldings of the cloud.”

James Hogg footnotes his protagonist's vision on the mountain, saying that "this terrestrial phenomenon of the early morn cannot be better delineated than by the name given of it by the shepherd boys, 'The little wee ghost of the rainbow.'" But Hogg was very likely familiar with magic lantern spectacles that were popularly touring the country then: Phillip de Philipstahl, known as Philidor, staged his phantasmagorias in Edinburgh in 1802, raising many ghosts, spectres, bleeding nuns, and the like to the terror of his audiences.⁴⁰ He had also sought out a so-called Brocken spectre, as a certain mountain phenomenon was known: it "appeared to my affrighted imagination as the enemy of mankind."⁴¹ But *The Confessions* does not share the rationalist stance of the galanty men, who liked to claim that they spooked the public merely to show how vain such fears were. Hogg's vision occurs early in the novel and embodies the character of the book, for it is not possible to know what George experienced exactly, what he sees, who is possessed, who is haunted.

Hogg knew Coleridge's work well, and his halo of glory interestingly reclaims the phenomenon for a more profound psychological uncanny than the older poet's use of it. Coleridge, on a walking tour of Germany with some friends in 1799, made a pilgrimage to the Harz Mountains to catch a glimpse of this famed conjunction between clouds, sky, and shadow that casts a huge phantom figure across the cloudfloor. Coleridge and his friends were twice disappointed in their quest to see the spectre, though at the second attempt they were "repayed by the sight of a Wild Boar with an immense Cluster of Glow-worms round his Tail & Rump."⁴²

Robert goes, but at the crucial moment fails to push George over the edge; we have his word for it that his soul rebelled. Throughout his account, he portrays himself as the puppet of his princely counselor, his understanding clouded, his nature distorted by the unceasing shadowing and possession of his "adviser." It is a fervid, intemperate, memorable rendition of the idea of an inner voice at odds with the self, speaking the unutterable.

His evil genius has the necromantic capacity to change his shape: either he takes on the semblance of his victims, impersonating Robert in the execution of numerous further crimes, or he propels Robert to commit evil in a somnambulist state:

Either I had a second self, who transacted business in my likeness, or else my body was at times possessed by a spirit over which it had no controul [*sic*], and of whose actions my own soul was wholly unconscious. This was an anomaly not to be accounted for by any philosophy of mine. . . . To be in a state of consciousness and unconsciousness, at the same time, in the same body and same spirit, was impossible. (*ibid.*, p. 182)

⁴⁰ Valentina Bold, *The Magic Lantern: Hogg and Science*, in *Studies in Hogg and His World*, no. 7 (Stirling, 1996), pp. 5–17.

⁴¹ *Chambers' Edinburgh Journal*, September 28, 1833, pp. 273–74 (quoted by John Carey, "Introduction," in Hogg, *Confessions*, p. xviii).

⁴² Richard Holmes, *Early Visions* (London, 1989), pp. 229–31, 236.

In spite of this disappointment, Coleridge later explored the phenomenon in a love poem, “Constancy to an Ideal Object.” The diabolical phantom of medieval German legend reappears here completely transformed into an image for the split consciousness of the yearning lover, who transfigures the “image with a glory round its head,” into an extended metaphor for a lover’s vivid fantasy, in his mind’s eye, of his beloved’s presence.

The poet addresses his own thought, which is all so taken up with his love object in her absence and questions its status: *can a mental image have material presence?* “And art thou nothing?” he asks. And then answers himself:

Such thou art, as when
The woodman winding westward up the glen
At wintry dawn, where o’er the sheep-track’s maze
The viewless snow-mist weaves a glist’ning haze,
Sees full before him, gliding without tread,
An image with a glory round its head;
The enamoured rustic worships its fair hues,
Nor knows he makes the shadow, he pursues!⁴³

In this Orphic key, Coleridge summons a phantom Eurydice from the Fata Morgana illusion. “Constancy to an Ideal Object” ironizes, in its very title, the contrast between the persistent obsessive attachment of the mind to its fantasies and the insubstantial character of their objects, and dramatizes, with rapt poignancy, the split consciousness of the lover who knows he himself creates the presence of the love object he pursues. Unlike Hogg, who leaves in doubt the source of his two protagonists’ supernatural visions, Coleridge explicitly invokes the explicable, meteorological wonder in order to communicate the happier state of the rustic who does not know that the vision has no substance, except as the shadow side of his own state; the *doppelgänger* seals the loneliness of the Romantic lovelorn poet, then pining for his beloved Sara Hutchinson, too self-aware not to acknowledge that the boons her image summoned for him—security and home, warmth and love—exist only as longings projected in air, as rainbows that have indeed been unwoven.

⁴³ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Poems*, ed. John Beer (London, 1993), pp. 311–12 (emphasis added); footnoted “This Phenomenon which the Author has himself experienced, and of which the reader may find a description on one of the earlier volumes of the Manchester Philosophical Transactions, is applied figuratively in . . . *Aids to Reflection* (1825).”

The conflict between a meaningful uncanny portent, as in James Hogg's great novel, and desolate Coleridgean subjective perception expands and takes in a new direction the earlier quarrel between Biblical divine design and natural artistry and chance; the oscillating nuances of the difference continue to vibrate in the nineteenth century, in the spiritualists' efforts, and stir uncomfortably in the struggles of Victorians over the question of the paranormal.⁴⁴

It is a commonplace to point out that inquiry paradoxically took a positivist bent in the era of high Romanticism; that Nature was then being laid out on the operating table and the dissecting block and parceled up into the specimen case. What is pertinent here is the desire to make the sky legible as well, to interpret the iconotexts of the clouds, to marshal even the vaporous, inchoate chaos of cloudscapes into reasonable order. This desire burgeons into two principal endeavors in the Romantic period: first, the early scientific and analytical voyages into the upper air, through the clouds and beyond, were accompanied by ground-breaking inquiries into the nature of clouds; second, these explorings were themselves accompanied by different, subjective trials to uncover meaning within inchoate and indeterminate mutability through the faculty of Imagination. This last attempt is nevertheless braided with the first, characteristic Enlightenment quest, and does not proceed in opposition to it.

6. CLOUD STUDIES

The variety and structure of clouds first came under scientific scrutiny almost at the same time as Coleridge was seeking the Brocken spectre. While Benjamin Franklin was probing the powers of lightning and electricity, other scientists—biologists, astronomers, physicists—sailed up up up into the new territories of the upper air in Montgolfier balloons and wondered at the sublime view of cloudscapes. Luke Howard named the varieties of cloud, for the very first time, in an article in 1802–3; Goethe was inspired by this work to hymn the heavens in scientific mode.

⁴⁴Henry Sidgwick extended the argument's reach into theology, particularly in relation to a theory of miracles. "As for spirit-rapping," wrote Sidgwick in 1873, "I am in exactly the same mind towards it as towards religion. I believe there is something in it, don't know what, have tried hard to discover, and find that I always paralyse the phenomena. My taste is strongly affected by the obvious humbug mixed with it, which at the same time my reason does not overestimate." Quoted in C. D. Broad, "Henry Sidgwick and Psychological Research," *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, part 156: 136.

Of an earlier generation, and in a quieter mood, the Russian-born English watercolor artist and draughtsman Alexander Cozens, born in 1717, painted from observation, *en plein air*, the particularities of cumulus and stormclouds and of moonlight and the sun's rays on their volumes.

Clouds were significant elements in the fluid incoherence of natural forms and Cozens, in the mid-1770s and 1780s, was struggling to trap them into a system, numbered, annotated, and set out in a grid for the benefit of his pupils.⁴⁵ But Cozens took his study of mutability and formlessness in a remarkable direction: he adapted the ancient scrutiny of clouds and other random patternings, as in Leonardo's precept, to form what he called *A New Method for Assisting the Invention of Drawing Original Compositions of Landscape* (1784–85).⁴⁶

Very meticulously, Cozens outlined the use of “blots” (figure 7) as a way of enhancing Imagination and memory, and he made an instinctive identification of this practice with finding shapes in clouds, quoting on the title page Shakespeare's passage from *Anthony and Cleopatra*. He advised: “Possess your mind strongly with a subject,” and then “with the swiftest hand make all possible variety of shapes & strokes upon your paper,” letting the hand move unpremeditated and unguided and unconscious. He furthermore suggested crumpling the paper, in order to create more accidental marks.

Cozens writes that he stumbled across this odd, Zen-like practice when he pulled an old, “soiled” scrap of paper from a pile to demonstrate something for a student and found that the marks it bore helped to crystalize his ideas. When reminded of Leonardo, Cozens said he had not known of his comments but was delighted with this corroboration, for his ideas aroused a great deal of ridicule, Aristophanes-style.⁴⁷ “This theory is in fact,” he wrote, “*the art of seeing properly* . . .”⁴⁸

Alexander Cozens advocated combining objective reproduction of the observed natural randomness, aethereal flux, and the adventitious

⁴⁵ Cozens had private pupils, including William Beckford, and was drawing master at Eton College.

⁴⁶ See A. P. Oppé, *Alexander and John Robert Cozens inc. A. Cozens, A New Method for Assisting the Invention of Drawing Original Compositions of Landscape* (1784–85) (London, 1952); Hubert Damisch, *La Théorie du nuage* (Paris, 1972), pp. 255–56.

⁴⁷ It does not seem possible that Cozens had somehow come across Chinese watercolor theory of cloud paintings and dream stones, though his new Method resembles it in many respects; see Damisch, *Théorie*, pp. 277–311; Roger Caillois, *Roger Caillois, The Writing of Stones*, trans. Barbara Bray, introduction by Marguerite Yourcenar [*L'écriture des pierres*, 1970] (Charlottesville, 1985).

⁴⁸ Oppé, *Cozens*, p. 173.



Figure 7. Alexander Cozens, blot painting, from *A New Method* (London, 1784–85). (Tate Gallery, London)

camouflage mottling of light and shade with an extraordinary attempt to probe such forms' potential for personal expression. The Platonic predicament of mortals in the cave, receiving experience in partial, fragmentary, and deceptive form of flickering shadows was already resisted by both Botticelli and Leonardo when they placed heroic humanist confidence in the powers of Imagination to winkle meaning from the most inauspicious hiding places. Cozens, with his quasi-scientific tables—William Beckford, who was his friend, patron, and pupil, commented that Cozens was “almost as full of Systems as the Universe”⁴⁹—attempts to flatten this work of *fantasia* into a simple tool, a kind of spinning jenny or Davy lamp of landscape painting.

The opening page of an album of his sketches shows two pages of proposed schemata for “Principles of Landskip” that make no concession to the picturesque;⁵⁰ they are diagrammatic, understated, spontaneous, and spare. Yet these abstract squiggles, tending ever more intensely to condensation and simplicity, have a simple provisional esthetic that is startlingly gripping for a contemporary viewer, uncannily proleptic of

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁵⁰ “Sundry Studies of Landscape Composition by Cozens the Elder,” British Museum 198.a.2.

modern composition. In Cozens's tiny drawings—each one about half an inch square—we can feel the urgency of “seeing properly”: he was observing empirically, training fantasy not to be deluded, using the scrying faculty for scientifically and esthetically harmonious purposes, so that rather than perceive castles in the air and phantom armies in the clouds as heavenly portents, fairy enchantments, or mental delusions, the artist becomes a master of vision and the disposer of its incoherent offerings, like drifts and assemblies of the clouds. Cozens, while traveling further than any of his contemporaries into methods of mental picturing, was also set against—even defending himself against—the unruly procession of images in phantasmagorias and other optical effects, such as the Hogg halo of glory.

7. “THE DOMAIN OF ARNHEIM”

The human eye's dilemma, in front of nature's incoherence, provoked Edgar Allan Poe to one of his most lingeringly peculiar fancies: his tale of 1847, “The Domain of Arnheim,”⁵¹ features a certain Mr. Ellison, a vastly wealthy esthete who then inherits an even more fabulous fortune. This American progenitor of Charles Baudelaire's dandy and J.-K. Huysmans's *Des Esseintes* deplores the flaws that spoil every view from whatever vantage point the spectator takes before Nature's pictures. But as he and the narrator expand on the errors and infelicities of “Natura pictrix,” Ellison reverses the point of view, and with a breathtaking, Borgesian leap suggests that the world might be disposed, composed, and pleasingly beheld by others beside humans; that Nature itself, as we experience it, might itself be a *Fata Morgana* of hidden patterns and harmonious order for some other, higher gaze. He suggests:

“There *may* be a class of beings, human once, but now invisible to humanity, to whom, from afar, our disorder may seem order—our unpicturesqueness picturesque; in a word, the earth-angels, for whose scrutiny more especially than our own, and for whose death-refined appreciation of the beautiful, may have been set in array by God the wide landscape-gardens of the hemispheres.”⁵²

Ellison's idea of earth-angels who have been refined by death projects

⁵¹ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Domain of Arnheim,” in *The Complete EAP Tales*, ed. Alix Perry (New York, 1981), pp. 546–56.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 550.

the signifying faculty beyond the human altogether and in so doing proposes a relationship between Art and Nature that differs entirely from Albertian mimesis or Leonardoesque *fantasia*.

Poe's omnipotent hero will not accept human limitations, however, and he dedicates himself to reorganizing Nature's scenery in order to adapt it for the human gaze, to please "the eyes which were to behold it on earth,"⁵³ and so he embarks on a Faustian performance of the picturesque.

The eerily still, enthralling tale sets out the possibility of gaining happiness through estheticism and willpower—it is not surprising that Baudelaire, who brilliantly translated Poe into French, exclaimed when he came across him that here was his very own *semblable*, his own double casting a mimick shadow across his writing from an America twenty years before. For "The Domain of Arnheim" ends with a dream voyage to an artificial paradise of Ellison's devising: a canoe takes the voyager gliding down a river and through a gorge, and the tale then climaxes in a truly entrancing finale:

Meantime the whole Paradise of Arnheim bursts upon the view. There is a gush of entrancing melody; there is an oppressive sense of strange sweet odor; —here is a dream-like intermingling to the eye of tall slender Eastern trees—bosky shrubberies—flocks of golden and crimson birds—lily-fringed lakes—meadows of violets, tulips, poppies, hyacinths and tuberoses—long intertangled lines of silver streamlets—and, upspringing confusedly from amid all, a mass of semi-Gothic, semi-Saracenic architecture, sustaining itself as if by a miracle in mid-air, glittering in the red sunlight with a hundred oriels, minarets, and pinnacles; and seeming the phantom handiwork, conjointly, of the Sylphs, of the Fairies, of the Genii, and of the Gnomes.⁵⁴

This is a Fata Morgana of a city, a castle in the air, for, significantly, Poe's poetry carries him beyond Mr. Ellison, the supreme landscape gardener, on to more aethereal makers—those genii and gnomes. The "Domain" was inspired, it is thought, by reports of Fonthill, Beckford's summer retreat, where Alexander Cozens had studied the shapes of clouds and reconfigured blots in more harmonious arrangements than he found in observation.

Edgar Allan Poe was the favorite writer of René Magritte, who knew

⁵³Ibid., p. 549.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 556.

him in the intense, jeweled translation by Baudelaire.⁵⁵ One of Poe's "histoires sérieuses," "The Domain of Arnheim" inspired, a hundred years after it was written, the title of three of the Belgian Surrealist's many paintings that densely conjugate clouds, mirrors, reflections, and optical illusions: Magritte refused explication, and it is beside the point to make sense of his puzzles, though not entirely redundant to unpick the many knots he ties in the eyestrings of ordinary perception. His clusters of images will not parse or come out with a solution, however, and I will come back to this intrinsic condition of enigma, for it represents the last condition of cloudiness I want to put to you.

What is it that we, the earthling spectators, see in Magritte's 1949 version of this picture, *The Domain of Arnheim* (figure 8)? Beyond the shattered windowpane, appears—perhaps—one of the *anges terrestres* or earth-angels, from Poe's class of invisible beings who hold the unseen pattern of Nature in their gaze. Here it takes the form of a metamorphic eagle-mountain, and its non-reversed image appears in the shattered pieces of the windowpane as if the pane were a two-way mirror. "The outside is brought inside in a devastating way," writes David Sylvester, the painting giving the impression of that claustrophobic moment of terror when a bird hurtles into a window.⁵⁶ But this impact cannot quite have happened in this manner, as the artist contrives his favorite confusion between reality and image, and the stone bird remains in and of the mountain. So it is Magritte who configures the mountain as a bird, in the same way as plains- or valley-dwellers give anthropomorphic or zoomorphic names to landmarks and peaks. Looking at the picture, we follow his lead. Adding to the puzzlement, these broken shards of mirror, as in other pictures by Magritte, retain the image that had appeared through the window to be an insubstantial reflection and give it painted materiality, a kind of actuality that establishes its illusory condition as belonging to a different perceptual universe, one that could exist from another, unseen category of perceptive beings. The brainteaser itself belongs to the *Domain of Arnheim* because it is not possible for us to know, or even to imagine, what might be the harmonious arrangements devised by Nature to please the earth-angels. Magritte responds to the Paris

⁵⁵ Edgar Allan Poe, *Histoires grotesques et sérieuses*, trans. Charles Baudelaire (Paris, 1966), pp. 151–71.

⁵⁶ David Sylvester, *Magritte*, exhibition catalogue, Tate Gallery (London, 1969), pp. 52–53, 87, 100; and idem, *Magritte* (London, 1992), p. 302.

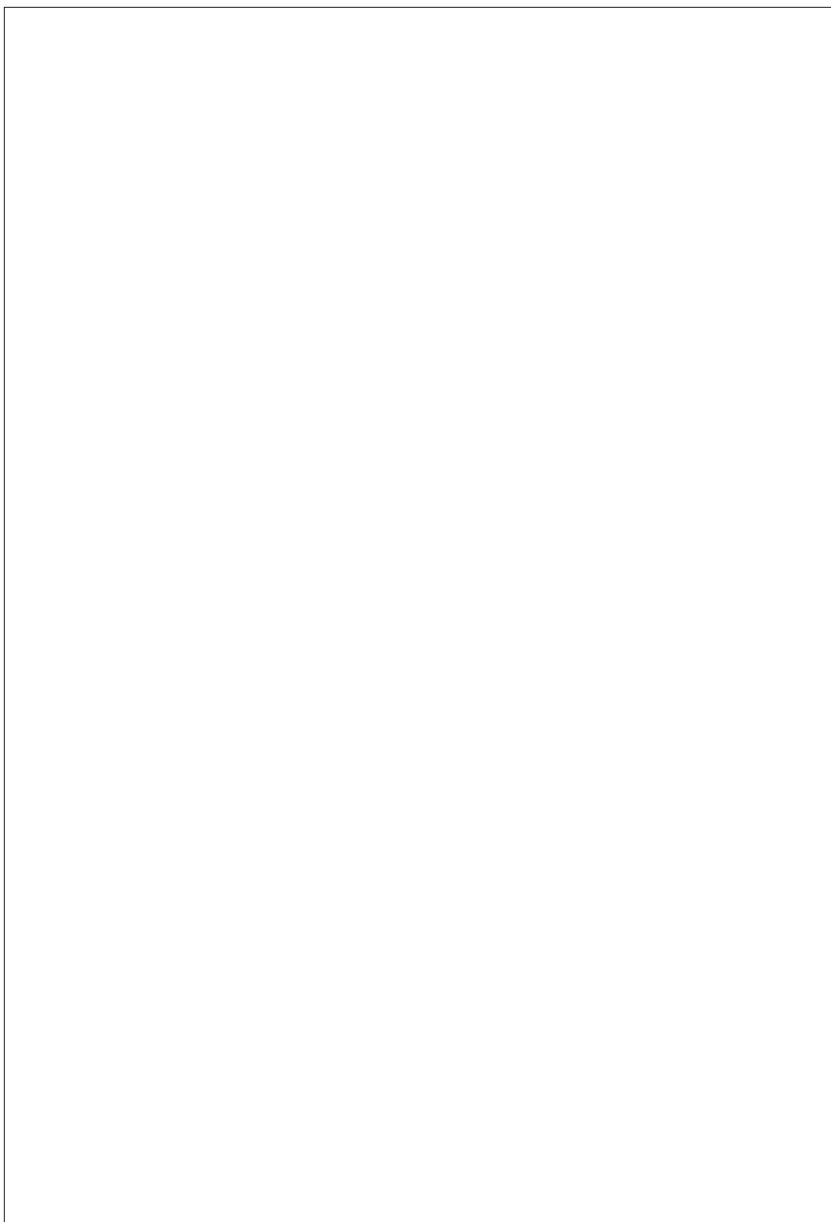


Figure 8. René Magritte, *The Domain of Arnheim* (1949). (Private Collection)

Surrealists' doctrinal trust in the unconscious's powers to pattern vision, writing, life, and destiny, by offering a dead end to interpretation.⁵⁷

Typical Magritte clouds float above this vision; fleecy white trooping cushions, against an uninflected azure sky, such conventionally idyllic aetheric heavens, bland and placid vehicles bringing *calme* and *volupté*, provide the signature motif in the music of the Magrittean uncanny. These "intrusive skies," in David Sylvester's phrase, appear nearly twenty years before the *Domain of Arnheim*, in an early picture (ca. 1929), which is tellingly entitled *The False Mirror*, showing a huge Cyclopean eye with the iris swimming with clouds around the disturbingly blind spot of the pupil. The clouds sail into view in such pictures as ciphers that encipher nothing: no phantom images lurk in their fluffy pillows, no Fata Morganas or haloes of glory fill their vacuity.

8. CONCLUSION

A seer who recomposes the languages of sign and vision that obtain at the human level postulates another form of subjectivity, a subject who is indeed outside our frame of reference. This seer or earth-angel is a cyborg *avant la lettre*—occupying an instrumental space analogous to that of the proliferating processes and instruments that were invented to probe the mysteries of the invisible, hidden worlds, both inner and outer.⁵⁸

Many devices of intricate ingenuity were developed in order to see further, to see more, to see into and through. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were the prodigious era of inventions, when media were developed that could magnify, eavesdrop, register, and record all kinds of signals that are imperceptible to ordinary faculties of human sense. The catalogue of sensory prostheses, including the earlier telescope and the microscope, finds its first recording angels in photography and phonography, and it includes methods still very much in use—

⁵⁷ Magritte painted other versions with the same title in 1938 and 1962, and a variation on the image, *L'Appel des cimes* (1943), with a painting of the bird-mountain on an easel in front of the window. See Sylvester, *Magritte* (1992), p. 298.

⁵⁸ As Carol Mavor has written, "We [also] try to imagine that we can see ourselves seeing (that we can see *inside*), in order to defeat the fact that vision is always outside of us and that we could never know how the other perceives us. . . . This unproblematicized (and mythical) approach to looking is sustained in order to carry the all-seeingness of the vision we desire—so that we can see what we want to see." Carol Mavor, *Pleasures Taken, Performances of Sexuality and Loss in Victorian Photography* (Durham and London, 1995), p. 82.

X-rays, ultrasound, computer-aided tomography (CAT scans), magnetic resonance imaging. Unseen forces that are not anchored in any individual human consciousness or applied idiosyncratically by any Leonardesque master or author, but belong as it were to the objective stratosphere, became the means of detecting the hitherto incomprehensible and hidden order and meaning of the invisible in the universe. Some of these forces have stood the scientific test: radio waves, gamma rays. But others that were ardently advocated and exploited—and wholly believed—have disappeared to the echoes of embarrassed titters: animal spirits, Odic (magnetic) light, “radiant matter,” and the Aether itself, with its emanation, ectoplasm.

The process is complex, two-way, and tightly raveled. First, the new methods of detection are intertwined with models of mind, including ideas of the subject and the subject’s agency, and the newly understood limits of individual vision and fantasy. The camera obscura, or magic lantern, mirrored the melancholic mind, and early magic lanternists projected through their novel media a refraction of imagined interior processes and their characteristic products. The technical means introduced to create mental pictures were not determined by them, nor did they shape them; their interaction depends rather on the necessary limits of Imagination itself, which cannot imagine itself outside its own boundaries. The Rorschach test, for example, invented in the late nineteenth century and introduced in 1921, adapted Leonardo’s ideas of Imagination and even Cozens’s blots to psychological purposes. Numerous techniques of unraveling Nature’s riddles and reconstituting its secret patterns to become intelligible show a riotous Imagination in play with curiosity, desire, and the longing for consolation. They are intertwined with a freshly imagined, Other subjectivity or Other consciousness, not divine, not perhaps omnipotent, but endowed with the aethereal intelligence of earth-angels and capable of discovering coherence and cogency where they appear to be missing.

Second, just as Kircher and later phantasmagorists evoked the invisible and hidden worlds of the supernatural and ghostly within fantasy—“invented the uncanny”—so Victorian scientists, followed by some eminent moderns, endeavored to apply their innovatory techniques to probing interior mysteries, to making legible the invisible. They wanted to bring out the unseen in an effort at rationality, and their efforts could be seen as a struggle to subdue the uncanny. If instrumentalized, the beyond-the-human faculties postulated in the

stratosphere would make available to our limited, fallible human senses those hitherto tough, recalcitrant mysteries of inner landscape, of soul and spirit; if understood and properly applied, they would at last descry the figure in the rock, the face in the cloud; they would decipher the aether, and materialize the impalpable. The enterprise, which would culminate in spiritualism's bizarre ectoplasmic phenomena, reveals the irreducible primacy of *fantasia* over *mimesis*, of Imagination over Empiricism.

II. ECTOPLASM: MATERIALIZING THE IMPALPABLE

I. CAPTURED ECTOPLASM

Under "Duncan Helen, Mrs." in the catalogue of the archives of the Society for Psychical Research, now kept in the Manuscript Reading Room of the University Library, Cambridge, there is this entry:

Sample of Ectoplasm. Material alleged to have been captured from Mrs Helen Duncan, materialising medium, at a seance in 1939.

I asked to see the "sample of ectoplasm." The librarian looked at me strangely; he said, "Are you sure? It's very nasty." My response was, "Would you prefer me to look at it somewhere else?" I thought there might be a desk of shame, where I could be supervised and other readers would not be disturbed. He said, "No, but be discreet."

There was nothing corporeal about the sample when it arrived, in the strict sense of human or animal tissue. Instead, inside the box, there was a folded heap of dressmakers' lining satin, the cheapest cloth, a synthetic fibre, and a yellowing white in hue. About four yards had been cut straight from the bolt, with no hems at either end and the selvedge left plain. It had been washed and ironed, but the creases where it had been crumpled were still marked; the pattern of these showed it had

I would like to thank the Master and Fellows of Trinity College, Cambridge, and especially the staff of the Wren Library for their help and support during the research for this lecture. I am also grateful to the Society for Psychical Research for permission to use their archive in the University Library, Cambridge.

I would also like to thank Esther da Costa Meyer, of Princeton University, for her rich and thoughtful response to these lectures. I hope to be able to develop some of the ideas that emerged the following day in the seminar with her and Terry Castle in my future book on this theme.

been tightly wadded. There were traces of old blood that the laundry had not erased. The volume of it was astonishing to me: I went over to the librarian and asked him if he had any scales.

Pliny experimented to discover whether bodies weighed more dead than alive and claimed to have found that corpses were heavier, once the light part—the spirit—had fled. Thomas Browne, continuing the long inquiry into the weight of the body after death, could not agree. He found that lesser animals rather became lighter when dead:

for exactly weighing and strangling a chicken in the Scales, upon an immediate ponderation, we could discover no sensible difference in weight, but suffering it to lye eight or ten howres, untill it grew perfectly cold, it weighed most sensibly lighter; the like we attempted, and verified in mice¹

But Browne's curiosity was not satisfied:

Now whereas some alledge that spirits are lighter substances, and naturally ascending do elevate and waft the body upward, whereof dead bodies being destitute contract a greater gravity; although we concede that spirits are light, comparatively unto the body, yet that they are absolutely so, or have no weight at all, wee cannot readily allow²

He then makes a distinction between spirit and soul that is important in the context of spiritualism and other nineteenth-century quests for invisible forces: “for since Philosophy affirmeth that spirits are middle substances between the soule and body, they must admit of some corporeity which supposeth weight or gravity.”³

The librarian agreed that it would be a good idea to weigh the sample; he suggested the postroom, where there would be scales. We put it on the tray; Mrs. Duncan's material weighed 236 grams (about 8 ounces)—less than I thought it would, for the satin felt slumpy and heavy to the touch. I had expected lighter, diaphanous stuff—muslin and cheesecloth were said to be mediums' preferred fabrics.

Helen Duncan was a Scottish medium (born in 1898, died in 1956) who specialized in materialization, the word used in Spiritualist circles

¹“Of the Popular and received tenets concerning Man, which examined, prove true or false,” in Thomas Browne, *Pseudoxia Epidemica*, ed. Robin Robbins (Oxford, 1981), p. 315.

²Ibid., p. 316.

³Ibid.

to describe a phenomenon that became common in seances from the 1870s onward: the appearance of objects and of bodies, or traces of objects—touches to the cheek or hands of the sitters, slaps or caresses or breezes as of something passing, sometimes fingerprints or other traces, sounds of bells ringing or aethereal music, apported flowers and other gifts from the spirits, and, above all, ectoplasmic manifestations. These took two predominant forms: luminous, veiled, phantom-like beings, or nameless, amorphous parts of such beings, called pseudo-pods—which issued from the mouth or the head or other entrance and exit points of the medium’s body.⁴

Helen Duncan was often photographed with her spirit control, known as “Peggy,” an ectoplasmic manifestation who regularly appeared during this medium’s seances (figure 1).

The move from a visual illusion, as in *Fata Morgana* or in spectral apparitions, from dematerialized bodies into a haptic experience of palpable matter, as in Helen Duncan’s sheet, will be sought and endlessly repeated in the Spiritualist seance. How the imponderable and aethereal could be made palpable, weighed and verified, by touch above all, but also by smell and hearing, occupied some of the best minds of the last century, as they postulated the possibility of paranormal phenomena.

Aristotle singled out the sense of touch in *De Anima* as the supreme mark of human intelligence:

in the other senses he [man] is behind many kinds of animal, but in touch he is much more discriminating than the other animals. This is why he is of all living creatures the most intelligent. Proof of this lies in the fact that among the human race men are well or poorly endowed with intelligence in proportion to their sense of touch, and no other sense⁵

This is a startling endorsement from a philosopher more usually associated with the sovereignty of vision, and it throws light on the primacy of touch in the verifying methods of the nineteenth century. Numerous scientific experimenters, including Spiritualists, were not to be satisfied

⁴ Franek Kluski, one of the rare male materializing mediums, specialized in ectoplasmic gloves and socks. See Gustave Geley, *L’Ectoplasmie et la clairvoyance: observations et expériences personnelles* (Paris, 1924), pp. 240–41, plates XXI, XXX.

⁵ Aristotle, *De Anima* II, ix, 20–25, trans. W. S. Hett (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1995; first published 1936), pp. 120–21.



Figure 1. Helen Duncan and “Peggy,” her spirit control, England, ca. 1935.
(Harry Price Library, University of London)

with the risen Christ’s injunction to Mary Magdalene, “Noli me tangere”; they were Doubting Thomases one and all, and wanted to push their fingers into the wounds in the spirit body’s side, to palpate the stuff of the other side, to feel its temperature and texture. Touch becomes the guarantor of the paradoxical presence of spirit, as we shall see.

2. DIVINITY IN A CLOUD

When Correggio painted Io around 1532 in his sequence of *The Loves of Jupiter*, he showed her clasped close by the god in the form of a cloud (figure 2). The artist took his cue from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in which the poet writes that Jupiter wrapped the earth in darkness in order to conceal his actions, but that the ever vigilant Juno's suspicions were aroused, for she "wondered that floating clouds should give the appearance of night mists," and so glided down to earth and chased them away. But by then Jupiter had changed Io into a white heifer, the nymph's far more common appearance in paintings.⁶

Correggio's divine ravisher emerges from the soft indigo-grey massed mist as if he is consubstantial with cloud. His pointed, almost elfin face shimmers out of the miasma to kiss the nymph, and his right hand appears through a semi-transparent cocoon of cloud to embrace her; this Io does not flee a rapist, as she does in terror in Ovid's poem, but surrenders raptly to the enveloping fog, embracing its soft solidity with her left arm and curling toes. Correggio wonderfully communicates the haptic sense of Io's flesh brushed all over with some feather-light, shivery, close caresses.⁷

Jupiter was a god of all severe weathers: in the *Io*, he is clearly wrapped in a kind of storm cloud, and it is suggestive that Ovid associates rain, in the same first book of the *Metamorphoses*, with human genesis itself. At the time of creation, the sky is divided from the earth, with "the fiery aether" in the highest heaven, and the air where storms blow below it. When Prometheus creates the first human being, he takes earth, which

being such a new precipitate
Of the etheric heaven
Cradled in its dust unearthly crystals⁸

and mixes it with rainwater. In the light of these preceding verses in Ovid, Correggio's picture clearly casts the cloud's embrace as a dynamic fecundating principle; in this it rhymes with the painter's *Danae*, from the same sequence of mythological paintings of *The Loves of Jupiter*, which depicts the nymph receiving the god in her lap from another

⁶ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, book 1, lines 599–606.

⁷ David Ekserdjian, *Correggio* (Norwich and London, 1997), p. 284.

⁸ Ted Hughes, *Tales from Ovid* (London, 1997), p. 7.

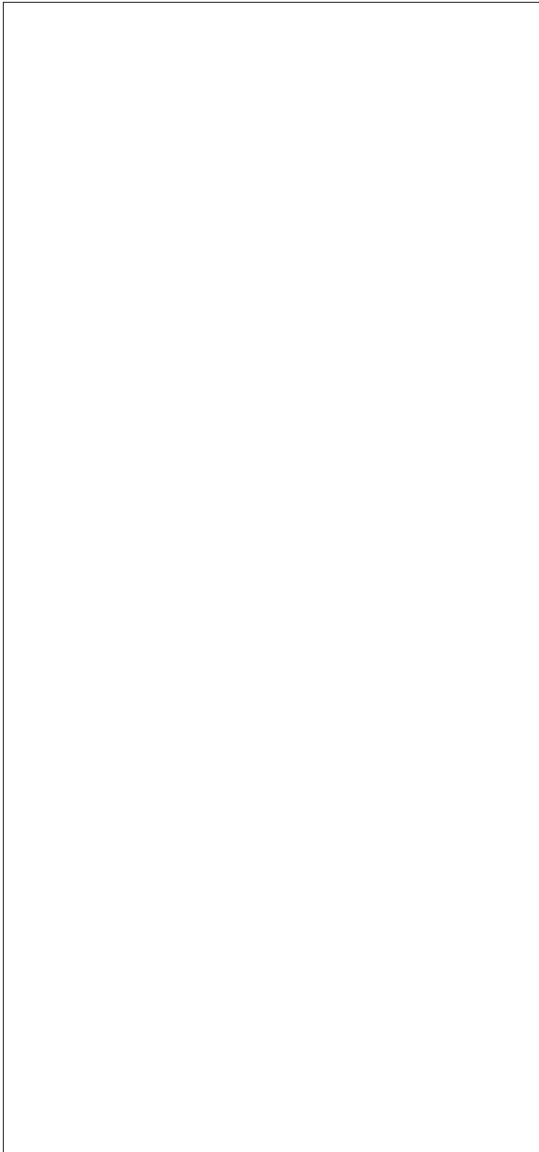


Figure 2. Correggio, *The Loves of Jupiter: Io*.
(Kunsthistorischemuseum, Vienna)

cloud, in this case amber-gold, more solid and compact, an itinerant rain cloud, just beginning to emit a few gold drops from the shower that will inseminate her.

In Greek sources, the child of Jupiter and Io was called Epaphus, a name related to the word for touch, because Io conceived at the *touch* of

the god.⁹ But this association of Io with tactility, to which Correggio may have responded, suggests several further variations on clouds and their meaning that I am going to explore. For while Fata Morgana casts clouds as films or screens on which the invisible and the spectral are captured, and this provides a metaphor for eidetic dream images, a complementary but divergent tradition finds clouds to be a vehicle of spirit and a metaphor for the paradisaical state, and deploys it, generously, extravagantly, and often unconsciously, as the most satisfying and convenient embodiment of an impossible conundrum: aethereal materiality. Billowing cumulus, fleecy altocumulus or louring thunderheads, and the more solid-seeming manifestations are presented through inadequate metaphors, visual and verbal, as apprehensible by other senses besides sight.

Ectoplasm's appearance borrows features from this tradition of making visible the invisible, of rendering material the immaterial. Ectoplasm also bodies forth the aetheric or astral body, an idea about the spiritual dimension of human personality that was expounded in Theosophical thought and twists and turns through the history of the occult.

The French art historian Henri Focillon, in his book *La Vie des formes*, first published in 1934, proposed a radical view: forms have a life of their own, and forms in art both derive from and generate other forms autonomously, according to their own internal principles, both organic and abstract. He argues that no amount of explanation of the historical, social, economic, or personal circumstances in which the Gothic develops will ever give you the *particular shape* of the Gothic arch. "The time that gives support to a work of art does not give definition either to its principle or to its specific form."¹⁰ He also insists that forms exist independently of signification, so that while the Gothic arch might symbolize aspiration, divinity, aethereal lightness, it does not intrinsically do so, and could attract other meanings. Focillon's argument strikingly offers a path out of a certain impasse in the study of signs and symbols; it frees them from the fixity inflicted by ideas of the collective unconscious, on the one hand, and, on the other, from the relativism of historicism that denies any intrinsic properties to bodies of any form. "[Form] prolongs and diffuses itself," he writes, "throughout our dreams and fancies: we regard it, as it were, as a kind of fissure through which

⁹See P. M. L. Forbes-Irving, *Metamorphosis in Greek Myths* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 212–15.

¹⁰Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*, trans. Charles B. Hogan and George Kubler (New York, 1989), p. 15.

crowds of images aspiring to birth may be introduced into some indefinite realm—a realm which is neither that of physical extent nor that of pure thought.”¹¹ Expressions of the subtle body—the form of spirit—pour through this fissure. Mixed in with the cluster of amorphous forms—with blots and smudges, clouds and vapors—the larval ghost, who takes its place worldwide in the conventional language of the supernatural, carries the weight of transhistorical associations. But such a ghost also arrives at definition and differences according to temporal circumstances—individual quests, mass fads. I shall unfold some of the work performed by clouds in this sphere, both as an enduring metaphorical form of disembodiment and as a sign forged and altered by external circumstances.

Renaissance nebulae appear as solid bodies; pillows, cushions, divans of cloud fill paradise. Correggio created exuberant, candyfloss seraglios in the *Assumption of the Virgin* in the dome of Parma cathedral, where angels and saints swim, frolick, recline and perch on reefs and banks of cumulus as if they were as buoyant as surf, and as docile as featherbeds. Cloudiness has palpable substance here; it is tactile, ductile, plastic—Aristotelian attributes of matter—in a strict sense; a variety of voluminous foam with its own dependable organic structure, it persuades us of the character of aethereality. Heaven tumescs with froth turned solid. Embodied in sensuous paint strong enough to support its emanations, amoretti gambol in and out of the flossy fleece, and are, like the painter’s Jupiter, apparently consubstantial with air and airiness.¹² In a study after Raphael, attributed to Parmigianino (figure 3), a knot of drapery is doing duty for cloud support for an angelic foot; it is possible to see the riddle of disembodied substance that artists were attempting to encompass. Experientially, the viewer is able to understand the angels’ and saints’ aethereal state precisely because they can recline so confidently on banks of mist; nor do they disappear into it, as humans do when fog envelops them.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 34–35.

¹² I am aware here that I diverge from Hubert Damisch, who explicitly theorizes Correggio as a pioneer painter of optical subjectivity, on account of his use of perspective, which posits a viewer’s vantage point below the tumultuous scene in the heavens. Damisch is taking his cue from Alois Riegl, who considered these frescoes by Correggio as a fulcrum in the movement effected by the baroque from the tactile or objective mode to the optical or subjective mode. But I feel that Riegl’s argument entails associating the tactile with the close-up, with the painting of surfaces (e.g., Giotto), rather than empathizing with the imagined substances of the bodies as rendered in paint. See Hubert Damisch, *La Théorie du nuage: Pour une histoire de la peinture* (Paris, 1972), pp. 20–21.

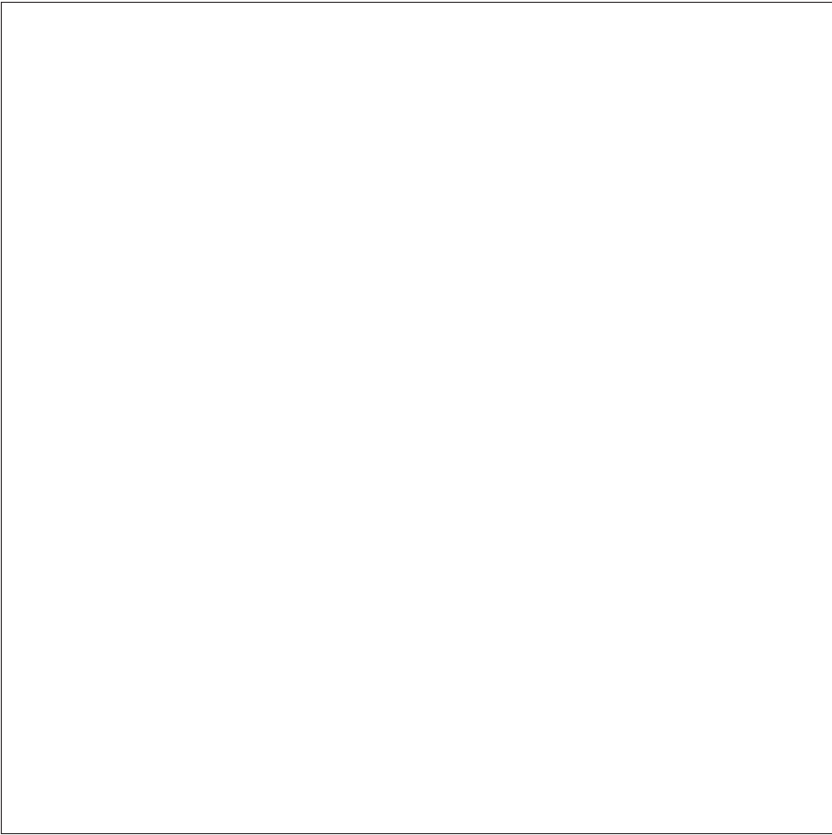


Figure 3. *Study of a Left Foot*, after Raphael (attributed to Parmigianino). (The Governing Body, Christ Church, Oxford)

Although Correggio takes clouds to extremes of blissful presence that they had hardly enjoyed before, he is painting in a recognizable dialect of Christian iconography, not coining a new language.

Invisibility and cloudiness form a pun or perhaps a rhyme: they both convey the condition of ineffability that the unknown and the supernatural inhabit. In the Bible, God hides in a mist on the summit of Mount Sinai. In Christian iconography, his disembodied nature takes the form of synecdoche: as a hand in glory—the glory expressed by a little white puff of cloud such as sails sometimes into view on a perfect summer's day, as in a mosaic from a conch in the portal of St. Mark's, Venice (1545), or as a floating torso, legless, with trunkless heads of putti surrounding him, in the stratosphere, as depicted by Giovanni Bellini in the *Baptism of Christ* in S. Corona, Vicenza.

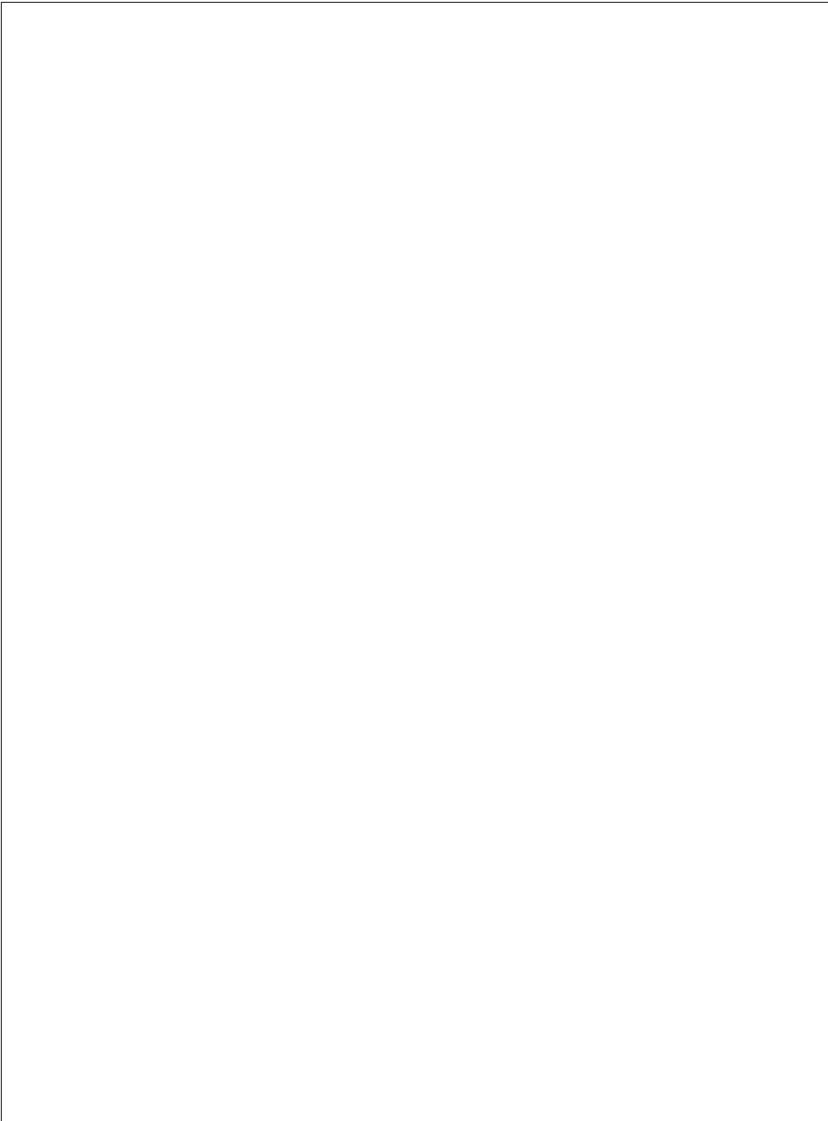


Figure 4. Bartolomeo Schedoni, *Coronation of the Virgin*. (Denis Mahon Collection, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge)

In Bartolomeo Schedoni's delicious *Coronation of the Virgin* (figure 4), the amoretto hug the giant whipped cream clouds and appear to bob and swim through their incandescent puffs, but do their bodies begin and end as bodies, or as this froth, this foam? Cherubim also emerge from and dissolve back into the glowing nimbus around Bartolomé Murillo's

Virgin and the Child in Glory, as if consubstantial—or perhaps one should say conaethereal—with light, air, and holy fire.

In such pneumatic extravaganzas—which point forward to the *Silver Clouds* of Andy Warhol as well as to the wobbly castles of children's playgrounds—clouds pun on the association of spirit and breath, *pneuma*; they also mark ascensions, providing saints with uplift. When Pier Francesco Mola painted St. Bruno in ecstasy, he communicated the saint's state by raising him off the ground on a small cloud; more lavishly, Nicolas Poussin caught up to a much higher stratum an enraptured Santa Rita of Cascia as she was swept by supernatural means to the convent her father had forbidden her to enter.

The Virgin Mary, when she appears to contemporary seers in Fatima, or in present day Croatia, still favors this mode of transport (figure 5). But it is worth noting that, as the twentieth century progressed, the nebulous spiritual sphere was washed whiter than white: for reasons I shall be coming to later, no religious image-maker today would paint the murky turmoil that buoys some ascending saints, or wraps inky Jupiter, or wreathes smoky haloes round the sphere of divinity in high Renaissance baroque art.

3. THE SMOKE OF SACRIFICE

Metonymic affinities between aether and clouds, between disembodied spirits and smoke, infuse the symbolism of sacrifice: in the Bible, and Judaic ritual, the offerings are accompanied by the burning of incense; the symbolic reenactment of Christ's death in the Catholic mass also takes place in a smoky atmosphere. Mary Douglas, the anthropologist, commenting on the regulations of sacrifices in the Temple detailed in Leviticus, has demonstrated that the barrier of cloud screening God from Moses's view on Sinai returns by design in the smokescreen of incense that conceals the Holy of Holies from view in the temple.¹³ However, incense itself only replicates symbolically the actual combustion of sacrifice: it was when God snuffed up the "sweet savour" of Noah's burnt offerings that he decided to leave off cursing and smiting humankind (Genesis 8:21). The holocaust of animals and cereals in the temple ritual

¹³Mary Douglas, *The Eucharist, Its Continuity with the Bread Sacrifice of Leviticus* (Durham, N.C., 1998). My thanks go to Professor Mary Douglas, of University College London, for lending me unpublished chapters from her book *Leviticus as Literature* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 66–86.

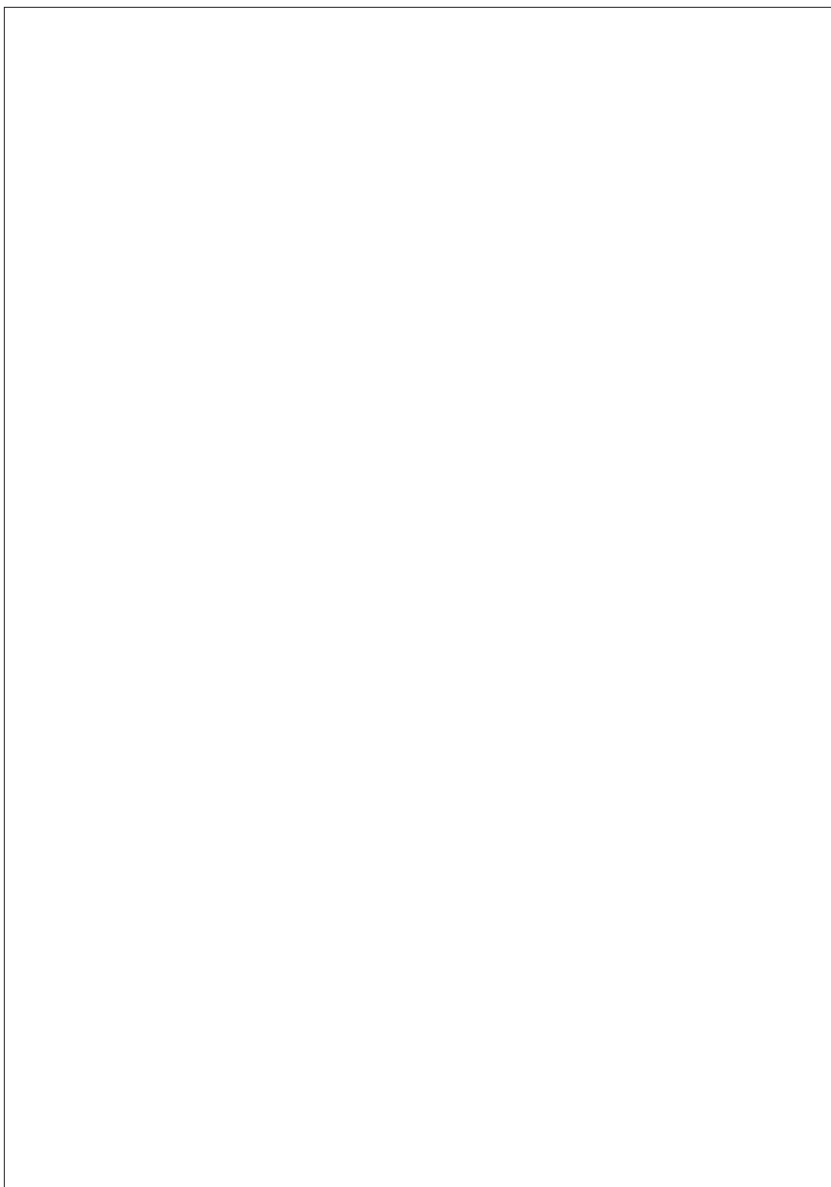


Figure 5. Our Lady of Fatima, shrine souvenir, purchased in Pittsburgh, ca. 1990. (Author's collection)

dematerializes their material bodies: they are turned to smoke, which then ascends to heaven, joining matter and aether through the medium of cloud. This language still underpins the iconography of Christian saints' translation to an unearthly state: the swelling clouds that carry up an Ignatius or Aloysius or Teresa, in paintings of apotheosis, annex the vocabulary of clouds to express a process of aetherealization. The clouds that wrap the holy and translated beings rise up like smoke from the altar, like incense from the thurible, communicating their ascension into heaven, their mutation from this element to another. They function as part of a sacred syntax, making visible within the limits of figuration a noncorporeal body that has become vaporized through salvation, sublimed from matter to air.

You can see this crucial and magical enterprise of linking this world to the world above, the corporeal to the incorporeal, in Poussin's *Assumption* (figure 6), a perfectly achieved expression of its theme even though the doctrine of the Virgin's incorruptible body, which was translated to heaven intact, contradicts the principles of purification and immolation by fire that sacrifice implies. The Virgin rises with dark smoke spiraling around her ascending body as if the sarcophagus were an altar and she were ascending wrapped in the smoke of sacrifice; putti support her airy flight in her swelling mantle, frolic in and out of the clouds, and direct her aloft through the gap opening up above her head.

In *Cinders*, an essay of 1984, Jacques Derrida develops eloquently the metaphorical division between ashes and smoke, those symbiotic doubles of sacrifice that are both emblematic of transitoriness, of the fugitive, and of mortality, but are also packed with oppositional distinctions from each other:

I have the impression now that the best paradigm of the trace [for him] is not, as certain people have believed . . . [he himself too, perhaps], the hunter's tracks, the furrow, the line in the sand, the wake in the sea, the love of the footstep for the footprint, but ash (that which remains without remaining from the holocaust, from the burned offering [*brûle-tout*], the incense of the fire [*de l'incendie l'encens*]).¹⁴

Derrida's focus rests on the ash that stays behind—the terrestrial and material residue, and he sends his readers to a sonnet by Stéphane

¹⁴Jacques Derrida, *Cinders*, trans. Ned Lukacher (Lincoln, Neb., 1984), p. 43.

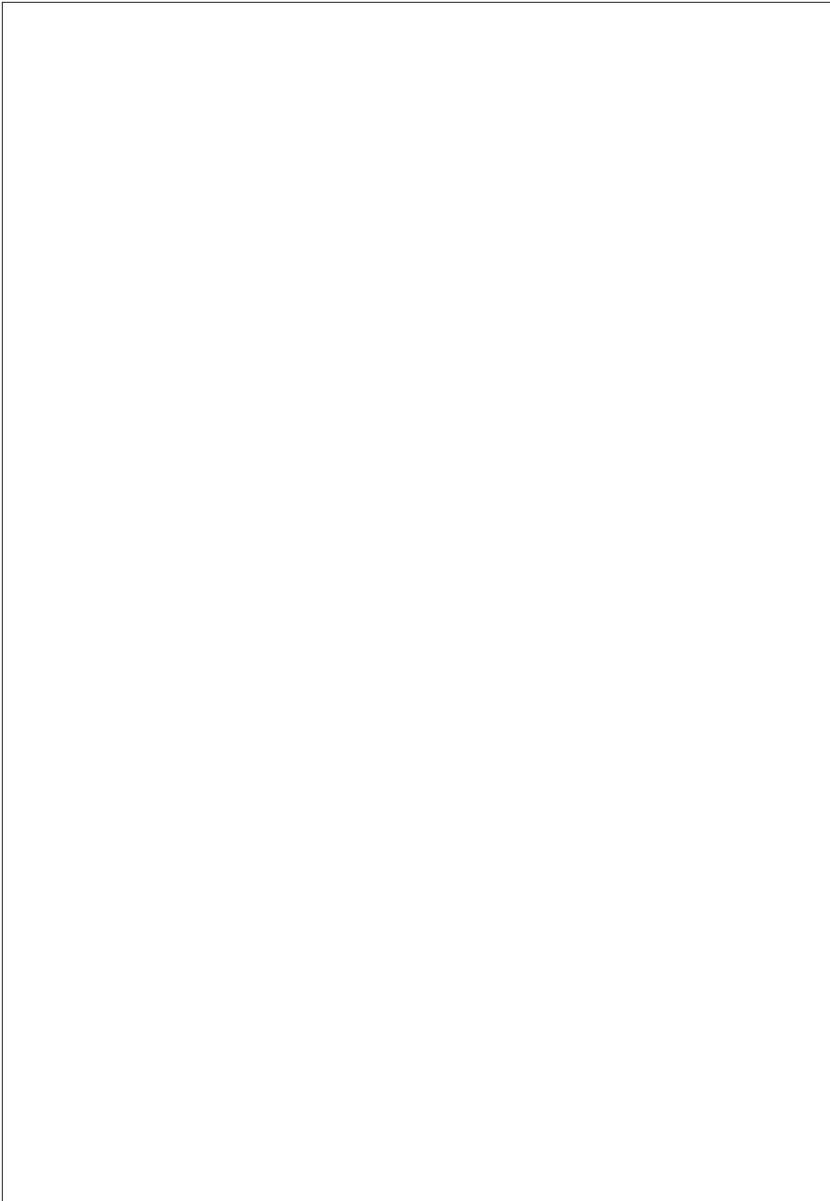


Figure 6. Nicolas Poussin, *The Assumption of the Virgin*. (Louvre, Paris)

Mallarmé, in which the poet plays on the ancient twinning of breath and soul in a thoroughly contemporary conceit—the smoking of a cigar (!). The poem opens with the lines

Toute l'âme résumée
 Quand lente nous l'expirons
 Dans plusieurs ronds de fumée . . .

{All the soul summed up,
 When slowly we breathe it out
 In several rings of smoke . . . }

Mallarmé elaborates: the soul leaves the body as the ash falls from the glowing end:

La cendre se sépare
 De son clair baiser de feu.

{The ash parts
 From its bright kiss of fire.}¹⁵

These doubles—soul/body, smoke/ash—are not in tension, but part of a process that hyphenates body and soul through the metamorphosis of substances, as in smoking, or, one could add, as in sacrifice. Derrida later exclaims, “What a difference between ash and smoke: smoke seems to lose itself, and better, without leaving a sensory residue, rises, takes the air, becomes subtle and sublimates itself. Ash falls, weary, heavy . . .”¹⁶ At the end of the poem, Mallarmé takes sides with smoke against ash, which he identifies with “le réel” (the real), and furthermore, which is, he writes, simply *vil*, that is, base, and the poem closes with a symbolist affirmation of nebulousness:

Le sens trop précis rature
 Ta vague littérature.

{Too precise a meaning erases
 Your mysterious literature.}¹⁷

¹⁵“Toute l'âme resumée,” from “Hommages et tombeaux,” in *Mallarmé*, ed. and trans. Anthony Hartley (Harmondsworth, 1965), p. 96.

¹⁶Derrida, *Cinders*, p. 73.

¹⁷Hartley, *Mallarmé*, p. 96.

4. THE AETHER

It is worth noticing that Mallarmé's smoke, as it aetherealizes its source, is necessarily heated, even fiery, chemically and physically distinct from breath. This difference was even more clearly marked in pre-modern physics than it is understood today in the age of passive smoking, and, counterintuitively perhaps, it informs the history of aether, with consequences that can help us to understand the imagery of spiritual spheres, its intrinsic limitations and its historical contingency.

In his *Ecstatic Journey* of 1656, for example, Athanasius Kircher describes his alter ego, one Theodidactus (Taught by God), being transported through the firmament by the angel Cosmiel. When they reach the upper air or aether, Theodidactus can no longer breathe, it is so rarefied—"subtle"—and when they reach Jupiter a powerful, fragrance wafts toward him, "sweeter than all amber and musk." It revives him wonderfully. The angel explains, "That is the healthy breath and outpouring of that sphere of Jove, a clear sign that we are now near its atmosphere."¹⁸ It resembled, perhaps, the atmosphere in the Holy of Holies, or in the chancel of a Catholic church.

Ten years later, the Jesuit wizard published his most beautifully illustrated volume of all, the *Mundus Subterraneus* (1665), a fantastical work about volcanoes and underground water courses and caverns (figure 7). There, the all-encompassing airy space beyond the earth, where he and the angel were transported, is designated *Etherium Spatium*—aetheric space. Significantly, though the verbal accounts describe emptiness, the engraver working for Kircher filled the space with charcoal-grey puffballs of clouds, for otherwise, in visual terms it might have looked blank, inert, and meaningless.

The theory of the aether is far too complicated and multifarious to review or sum up here, so I shall follow one strand, present in Kircher's writings, which perceived the aether as light-bearing, fiery. This conjunction of elements departs from the vaporous and moist rainmaking nature more normally ascribed to the stratosphere and its demarcating clouds. The greys and indigos and purples of metaphysical space, assumed by artists, adumbrate this character, suggesting that the aetheral element is fire, not water, and shifting its vapors toward smoke, not

¹⁸ Athanasius Kircher, *Itinerarium Exstaticum quo Mundo Opificium* (Rome, 1656), part 1, p. 205.



Figure 7. The hydraulic system of the earth, from Athanasius Kircher, *Mundus Subterraneus* (Amsterdam, 1665). (Wren Library, Trinity College, Cambridge)

mist. This will prove a step with potent consequences for the language of signs. The smoky affinities of the aether were inspired by a strand of classical physics, from Democritus, Heraclitus, Lucretius, through to the widely known Ovid: the last actually calls the upper air simply “ignis” or fire, a word that many translators expand to “fiery aether,” since otherwise the lines from the *Metamorphoses* become almost incomprehensible to present-day readers.¹⁹

It seems contrary to us now that any part of the air should be interpreted as fire, however radiant, however bright; that volcanoes, the earthly image of hell, should belong somehow in this discussion of the aether at all seems even odder, but Kircher’s cosmology, later in the century, links the principles in an intricate hydraulic and combustive cycle. His truly wonderful hypotheses were translated into English, in an

¹⁹“Over all these regions hangs the air, as much heavier than the fiery aether as it is lighter than earth or water.” Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, book 1, lines 52–53, trans. Mary M. Innes (Harmondsworth, 1973; first published 1955), p. 30.

abridged version, in 1669. The author quotes Ovid to support Kircher's cosmological equivalence of air and fire:

The Earth resolv'd is turned into streams;
 Water to Air; *the purer Air to flames.*
 From whence they back return; The fiery flakes
 Are turn'd to Air; The Air thickened takes
 The Liquid form of Water; that Earth makes.²⁰

"The luminiferous aether" was thought to be formed of invisible, imponderable, flimsy, springy, fiery light vapors. As such, it inspired persistent theorizing, including differing views from both Isaac Newton and René Descartes; for Newton, the aether was composed of "aethereal spirits, or vapours," and he proposed that it constituted the original protoplasm of the physical world, shaped by Nature.²¹ The legacy of exquisitely imaginative aetheric theories about subtle matter, the elements of the universe, and the nature of light and fire underlies the phenomena of the spiritualist experiments, as I hope to show when we come back to ectoplasm.

The fiery aether does not fade after the seventeenth century: Newton's reflection of 1675 was only published in 1744, with important reverberations.²² The artist Cornelius Varley imagined, as did many of his scientific peers, that clouds were formed by "atmospheric electricity." After observing rain gather over Snowdon, he wrote, "Here I believe I

²⁰ Athanasius Kircher, *The Vulcano's or, Burning and Fire-Vomiting Mountains, Famous in the World: With their Remarkables, Collected for the most part out of Kircher's Subterraneous World* (London, 1669), p. 55 (emphasis added). The writer clearly has some difficulty with Kircher's plan, viz his tracking back and forth over the material:

But how the said matters should conceive fire was above-said. As how indeed; scarcely from the Sun; not from the Thunder and Lightnings; not from any other efficient: but from the very subterraneous fire it self [*sic*], making its way unto them through hidden passages of the Rocks, which it burns. Or, if they be not immediately touched by actual Fire; then certainly from the Marine waves and billows, intruded by the force and impetuosity of the Winds, through the submarine gutters and chinks at the bottom of the Sea. For that it cannot be that from the vehement dashing of the billows in strait & narrow places, and the agitation of the spirits of combustible matter thereby, and the attrition & striking of the fat and Sulphureous Air, that they should not presently conceive Fire. (Ibid., p. 60)

²¹ G. N. Cantor, "The Theological Significance of Ethers," in *Conceptions of Ether Studies in the History of Ether Theories, 1740–1900*, ed. G. N. Cantor and M. J. S. Hodge (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 135–55.

²² As the historian Logie Barrow remarks, "Beginning in 1745 . . . all significant British electricians [i.e., physicists] postulated a special electrical matter identical with, or similar

saw and understood the gradual progress from a cloudless morning to universal rain here was a silent invisible [*sic*] flow of electricity to the mountains.”²³ William Blake’s *Song of Experience*, when the baby enters the world,

Helpless, naked, piping loud;
Like a fiend hid in a cloud²⁴

echoes contemporary meteorology and natural sciences.²⁵

Even the pioneering watcher of the skies, Luke Howard, the first meteorologist to devise a taxonomy for clouds, speculated that they were formed by electromagnetic attraction, as well as condensation, and that “rain is in almost every instance the result of the electrical action of clouds upon each other”²⁶ Howard first gave the names that still endure: cumulus, stratus, and cirrus (after the Latin for a curl of hair), and he scrutinized their mutations like a physiognomist, invoking “the countenance of the sky” and stating that “they are commonly as good visible indications of the operation of these causes [of the atmosphere] as is the countenance of the state of a person’s mind or body.”²⁷ The skies could be grasped; the formless itself could not elude the grasp of enlightenment science, itself the handmaiden to divine revelation.²⁸ Howard’s work reached Goethe in Germany the following year, and the old poet was moved to write a sequence of cloud poems as well as a paean to Howard and his work.²⁹ Howard himself was a devout Christian (a Methodist) and Goethe, the scientist-poet, accordingly exults in his demonstration that God’s handiwork and intelligibility can be woven

to, the springy, subtle, universal Newtonian aether.” Logie Barrow, *Independent Spirits, Spiritualism and English Plebeians, 1850–1910* (London, 1986), p. 73.

²³Quoted by Anne Lyles, “‘That Immense Canopy’: Studies of Sky and Cloud by British Artists c. 1770–1860,” MS kindly lent by the author, to be published in *Constable’s Clouds*, exhibition catalogue, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, April–July 2000.

²⁴William Blake, “Infant Sorrow,” in *Songs of Experience* (London, 1794), in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (New York, 1988), p. 28.

²⁵See Erasmus Darwin’s personification of clouds, in “The Botanic Garden,” *The Loves of the Plants* (Oxford and New York, 1991; first published 1789).

²⁶Luke Howard, “On the Modifications of Clouds, and on the Principles of Their Production, Suspension, and Destruction . . .” *Philosophical Magazine* 16 (1802): 97–107; 17 (1803): 5–11.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 16 (1802), p. 97.

²⁸ “[A]s a rule, they [clouds] show the effects of these causes with the same truth and clarity with which the physiognomy and the whole being of a person betray the feelings of his soul and the state of his health”: *Gilberts Annalen*, 1805, quoted by John Gage, “Clouds over Europe,” in *Constable’s Clouds*. I am most grateful to John Gage, University of Cambridge, for kindly lending me the article before publication.

²⁹See Karl Badt, *John Constable’s Clouds* (London, 1950), pp. 15–21.

At the end of the nineteenth century, when Mallarmé offers us his combustible soul as a smoke ring, and Hopkins his alchemical precipitate of dust, they were writing against a background of unprecedented ferment about exploring the invisible, and they reached, as it were naturally at that time, for metaphors taken from combustion, condensation, and other physical aetherealizing processes.

5. PLUMBING THE HEIGHTS

The air was growing ever more crowded, yielding up all manner of mysteries to new instruments devised to detect and inventory its components. But these findings continually interplayed with metaphysics and were brought to bear on psychic forces as well as physical forces. Mesmeric theories were woven into concepts of electricity; similarly, the discovery of X-rays in 1895, the identification of radio waves and the subsequent invention of the wireless, of telegraphy, of the telephone, produced a fevered—and delighted—search to penetrate the unseen: the channels of communication through the aether presented themselves *in potentia* as deliriously numberless; they became intertwined with the physical possibility of moving *objects* at a distance by finding some vehicle analogous to radio waves.³² It is difficult from our inured vantage point today to imagine how exciting, fascinating, and extreme seemed the possibilities that the new instruments opened up for their first users. The new media left the trace of their passage: indeed their activity became legible only through such traces through contact. Radio waves could not be grasped by the human senses, only the effects of the new methods of transmission: i.e., the marks of a needle quivering on a drum as the taps came through, the translated and disincarnate voices from the radio set. Visible verification surrendered its hegemony to other warranties of presence—acoustic and haptic.³³ Material impressions of the new media's work were in high demand. In the absence of

³²See Michael Roth, "Hysterical Remembering," *Modernism/Modernity* 3, no. 2 (1996): 1–30; Lawrence Rainey, "Taking Dictation: Collage Poetics, Pathology, and Politics," *Modernism/Modernity* 5, no. 2 (1998): 123–53; Roger Luckhurst, "(Touching on) Tele-Technology," in *Applying: To Derrida*, ed. John Brannigan, Ruth Robbins, and Julian Wolfreys (London, 1996), pp. 171–83; Steven Connor, "The Machine in the Ghost: Spiritualism, Technology, and the 'Direct Voice,'" in *Ghosts*, ed. Peter Buse and Andrew Stott (London, 1999), pp. 203–25.

³³Steven Connor emphasizes the aural desires, arguing that "an observational, calculative scientific culture organized around these questring powers of the eye began in the last

natural sensory means to verify the principle at work, a dependence on second-order technological proof of hidden energy arose, translating touch into sight, as in the photograph or the X-ray plate. The extension of the word “medium” itself, in the early 1850s, to someone with paranormal powers reveals the parallelism perceived between the vehicle—the aether—and its products. The new technologies offered a model for understanding that was extended to phenomena as yet beyond the reach of scientific empiricism. William James put his finger on the similarity of the scientific and spiritualist experiments, as perceived at the time, when he wrote that phenomena like automatic writing were “instruments of research, reagents like litmus paper or the galvanometer for revealing what would otherwise be hidden.”³⁴

The unseen was teeming, and not only with waves. Several different gases were detected in this period of scientific excitement. Gas, a word related to “chaos” and to the group that gives “ghost,” “ghastly,” and “geist,” or breath, as well, blows gustily through the metaphor of the sublime, with its passion for eruptions and turbulence. Hydrogen had been analyzed in 1700, oxygen in the mid-1800s; in 1810, Humphry Davy had isolated the deadly and suffocating gas chlorine and made his famous experiments with laughing gas. But in the 1890s, there came an astonishing flurry of new, invisible and virtually imperceptible inert gases: Sir William Ramsay and Lord Rayleigh discovered argon (1894), helium (1895)—lighter than air—and neon, xenon, and krypton in 1898.³⁵ Furthermore, these inert gases, termed “noble,” were placed at the top of the Periodic Table of the Elements above the volatile or combustible gases. They were thus aligned with the perceived eternity and

quarter of the nineteenth century to produce new forms of technology, especially communicative technology, which themselves promoted a reconfiguring of the sensorium in terms of the ear rather than the eye.” I am very grateful to Steven Connor for letting me see his unpublished paper “Voice, Technology and the Victorian Ear,” from the conference “Science and Culture 1780–1900,” Birkbeck College, London, September 1997, to be published in *A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (forthcoming).

³⁴ William James, “Frederic Myers’s Service to Psychology” (1911), in *Essays in Psychological Research* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), p. 196; quoted by Rhodri Hayward, “Popular Mysticism and the Origins of the New Psychology, 1880–1910,” Ph.D. thesis (University of Lancaster, 1995–96), p. 133.

³⁵ The names Ramsay gave these gases are themselves revealing of the symbolic value attached to properties of air; argon is named after Argos, the many-eyed custodian appointed by Jupiter to watch over Io after he has changed her into a heifer. Does Ramsay’s train of thought suggest that this pervasive substance (1 percent of the atmosphere) wraps us in its unseen gaze? Helium, whose existence had been guessed at by Joseph Lockyer in 1868, is the lightest gas of all and was named after the Greek god of the sun, Helios. Xenon means strange, neon new, krypton secret.

unchangingness of divinity, as against base matter, with its propensity for transformation or decay (the Mallarméan combustion of tobacco and its ashy residue, “le réel . . . vil”).

From the 1840s onward, the visual illusions of *Fata Morgana* did not meet the standards of the new positivists in Spiritualist circles: tangible proofs were needed—real objects, actual matter. In Manchester, for example, a medium who called herself Mlle. E. d’Espérance materialized “apports”—the most exquisite plants, ferns, and fruits: a golden lily lasted a week, then “dissolved and disappeared.”³⁶

The medium Mrs. Guppy ate her productions—which one of her Spiritualist colleagues considered a mistake (“a great weakness”).³⁷ But it was photographs of course that became the most popular documentary proof of spirits’ real presence. Psychic images, in which spiritual bodies manifested themselves as ectoplasmic smudges, haloes, and phantoms, appeared to guarantee the truth-telling of seances.

It is no mere coincidence then, but an effect of a dynamic convergence of ideas, that the Society for Psychical Research was founded in 1888, in England, mainly by men associated with Trinity College, Cambridge, and its American counterpart was established in Boston, Massachusetts, a few years later. One of the tasks the members set themselves, with all the assiduity of high-minded Victorians, was to investigate the truth of the myriad paranormal and psychical phenomena that were literally making an impression in the world of material reality. Frederic Myers, poet, classicist, and one of the founders of the Society for Psychical Research, coined the word “telepathy” in 1882; the prefix was being used to form any number of compounds, some now incontrovertibly physical and others challenged by doubt: telephone, telegraph, telekinesis, teleportation. Television followed in 1925.

This enterprise—to weigh the imponderable, to measure the immeasurable—caught imaginations all over the world in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Their theories proved as inviting, as contested, and as ambiguously persuasive in their time as alchemy before them, and they have become as haloed in doubt today (a lesson in a certain necessary heuristic humility for our time, too). One of Franz Mesmer’s followers, Karl von Reichenbach in Germany, in 1844 proposed an analogous invisible and imponderable force to Mesmer’s earlier animal magnetism. He called it the *Od*, and declared it to be a different

³⁶E. d’Espérance, *Shadow Land or Light from the Other Side* (London, 1897).

³⁷Georgiana Houghton, *Chronicles of the Photographs of Spiritual Beings . . . Invisible to the Material Eye* (London, 1882), quoted by Connor, “The Machine in the Ghost,” p. 208.

form of light, one transmitted by magnetic force. By means of subjects he called “sensitives,” Reichenbach saw—and took photographs of—Odic lights and Odic smoke in darkened rooms, as they radiated from magnets that his collaborators held and energized. Their touch provided the crucial contact between the empirical realm and the aethereal. Interestingly, from the point of view of the Fata Morgana, he theorized that the Od was the principle that produced the aurora borealis, and he built a model of the earth—a *terrelle*—which demonstrated that the colored lights grew far more intense at the poles while “Odic smoke rose in abundance from the globe above the polar flames.”³⁸ Dancing balls of radiance and flaring haloes around gifted mediums became a feature of early spiritualism.³⁹

In Geneva, another “sensitive,” the somnambulist and trance medium known as Hélène Smith, was collaborating with the eminent psychiatric doctor Théodore Flournoy to summon several spirit controls, through whom she rediscovered manifold curious previous existences, one as Marie-Antoinette no less, and another as the daughter of an Arab sheik, who subsequently married a Hindu prince, who himself was reincarnated as a Martian overlord, Astané. His 1899 account of their seances and her prodigious feats went through edition after edition—it is a pioneer of New Age publishing—under the title *Des Indes à la planète Mars . . .*⁴⁰ Hélène Smith is probably the first amply recorded case of multiple personality; in trance, she was able to communicate in the Martian tongue, write Martian script, and sketch the scenery and the people she had known there. “Aucune verdure [no greenery],” commented Flournoy, as if relieved that there was no mistaking Mars. “Everything brick-red, purple and violet,” he appended to the black-and-white reproduction of the Mars countryside. Astané, who had a yellow complexion to match his native planet, traveled by means of flying-machine, a handheld flame-thrower something like a combination between a loud hailer and a child’s toy *girouette* or windmill; he merely held it in his right hand as he flew.⁴¹

³⁸ Baron Charles (Karl) von Reichenbach, *Physico-Physiological Researches on the Dynamics of Magnetism, Electricity, Heat, Light Crystallization, and Chemism [sic] in Their Relations to the Vital Force*, trans. John Ashburner, 2 vols. (London, 1850–), vol. 2, p. 573. Reichenbach also discovered paraffin and creosote.

³⁹ See Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 7.565–68; also Browning, *A Lovers’ Quarrel*, stanza 7. I am most grateful to Margaret Reynolds for pointing out these references.

⁴⁰ Théodore Flournoy, *Des Indes à la planète Mars: Etude sur un cas de Somnambulisme* (Geneva, 1899), ed. and trans. Sonu Shamdasani (Princeton, N.J., 1996); see Terry Castle, “Flournoy’s Complaint,” in *London Review of Books*, May 23, 1996, pp. 6–7.

⁴¹ Flournoy, *Des Indes*, p. 155.

In Paris, in the 1890s, Reichenbach's investigation of the Od or vital force inspired another enraptured experimenter, the doctor Hippolyte Baraduc, to tap psychic energies and record them in an exquisite series of *Epreuves* or Proofs (in the double sense of trial and confirmation).

His first book, published in Paris in 1896, appeared in 1913 in an English version, *The Human Soul: Its Movements, Its Lights, and the Iconography of the Fluidic Invisible*. It included an album of his remarkable photographs, which were taken, he wrote, without apparatus, by direct application of the sensitized plate to the electrically emitting sensitive mediums. It was this special force, the intelligent mode of the aether, that caused the emanations that were recorded in his photographs. "The vital force is intelligence in movement," he wrote, "rendering matter concrete."⁴² By infra-red light he made exposures of a young boy—in mourning for a dead pheasant (!)—and showed the Odic light of his sorrow lifting the curtain behind him; he laid the plate to the forehead or hand of his living patients to draw out, by electrical magnetism, the "nuée fluidique" (the fluidic mist); he also grasped the "Ame-Germe et son Corps fluidique" (The Seed-Soul and its fluidic body) of dead friends. He meticulously categorized the images under different rubrics, calling some "Psychicônes" (Physicons) and others "Nuées odiques" (Odic mists). He was certain he had captured, for the material world, the Somods, or Odic bodies of his subjects. The images are tiny, sometimes half an inch square, and several show only tiny streams of bubbles, like spray, or a pale wispy blur, or a starburst or cloud of light. It is interesting to compare these images with the astronomer Camille Flammarion's prints of astronomical nebulae, in his work *Astronomie populaire*, published in 1900.

In *L'Ame humaine*, Baraduc quotes from Zoroaster and Jacob Boehme, and he seems to have been in touch with Parisian occultists such as Eliphas-Lévi. By the time his second book appeared in 1904, Baraduc was openly interested in hermetic mysticism. But *Les Vibrations de la vitalité humaine* also focuses on images of states of mind, and includes an image of a meteor shower, the Odic impression of anger, as well as a magnificent mare's tail portraying "the aetheric vortex," which was taken, he tells us, by holding his right hand motionless over the photographic plate, in the dark one night "à la suite de tristesse [following (a time of) sorrow]" at 10 P.M., in February 1895. At a macro scale,

⁴²Hippolyte Baraduc, *The Human Soul: Its Movements, Its Lights, and the Iconography of the Fluidic Invisible* (London, 1913).

and a micro scale, the imagery of the luminiferous effects exercises its tenacious influence.

I have not enumerated these Faustian spells of the past to mock them; nor simply to entertain you, but to try to show how widespread—Western worldwide—was the quest to materialize the unseen and capture a hitherto imperceptible supernatural stratum to existence.

The suggestive emptiness of the upper sky continued to beckon into this century. Oliver Lodge, a physicist who made a major contribution to the understanding of radiotelegraphy with his experiments in wavelengths in 1888–98, thereby paving the way to Albert Einstein’s theory of relativity, published a book called *Ether & Reality* as late as 1925. One of the most staunch supporters of the Society for Psychical Research, Sir Oliver, as he became, gamely persevered in the Einsteinian world, with his theory of the Ether, a word that he always capitalizes. It was “the *tertium quid*, the essential intermediary” between mind and matter. Ether itself was not “what we ordinarily speak of as matter,” but nevertheless it was “a very substantial substance, far more substantial than any form of matter . . . [A] physical thing . . . the vehicle of both matter and spirit . . . it is manifestly the vehicle or substratum underlying electricity and magnetism and light and gravitation and cohesion . . .” He concluded, rapturously, “It is the primary instrument of Mind, the vehicle of Soul, the habitation of Spirit. Truly, it may be called the living garment of God.”⁴³

Oliver Lodge affirmed that one of the Ether’s functions was “to transmit vibrations from one piece of matter to another,” and he argued that because the Ether vibrated at a frequency different from that of matter it would reveal itself in certain, very carefully constructed experiments—fleeting, aethereally—in the form of ectoplasm.

6. THE SOCIETY FOR PSYCHICAL RESEARCH

In 1891 Oliver Lodge joined Henry Sidgwick, the Cambridge philosopher, and his wife Eleanor at the house of Charles Richet, future winner of the Nobel Prize for Medicine (1913), to investigate the truth of Eusapia Paladino, a middle-aged, illiterate southern Italian materializing medium who had won the approval of no less a forensic champion

⁴³ Oliver Lodge, *Ether & Reality* (London, 1925), p. 179.

than Cesare Lombroso. Paladino was one of the most accomplished producers of ectoplasm at the turn of the century, but her specialities also included table-turning, guitars playing by themselves and floating through the air, and “the conveyance of a vase full of jonquils . . . the highly increased perfume of the flowers’ bells ringing by themselves.”⁴⁴ The company was assembled to witness her powers.

The word “ectoplasm,” from the Greek *ektos* (outside) and *plasma* (something that can be formed or molded, as in “plastic”), enters the discourse of spiritualism in Germany and France in the 1880s.⁴⁵ Ectoplasm is shapeless, it is “informe,” a kind of primordial paste—and to show itself as this it annexes semiotic markers that designate intermediate spirit worlds.

The *Critical Dictionary*, edited and written by Georges Bataille and others in the late 1920s, included an entry on ectoplasm with characteristically mischievous mock learning: it defined it as

part of the human body, external to it, unstable, sometimes soft, occasionally hard, from time to time vaporous, variable in volume, visible only in semi-darkness, making an impression on photographic emulsion, presents to the sense of touch a humid and slippery sensation, leaving in the hand a residue which, when dry, has under microscopic examination the appearance of epithelial cells, without odour or definite taste, in other respects fleeting and transient, whether projected or otherwise, of uncertain temperature, fond of music.

It adds, knowingly, “Fish- and game-birds’ intestines, even inflated with a bicycle-pump, are not ectoplasms.”⁴⁶ It is cosmic goo: the joke shops of the New Age, picking up on the tradition, now sell “Space Mucus” in “Slime Eggs” that glow in the dark.

⁴⁴“Hesperus,” “Eusapia Paladino,” in *Light*, May 23, 1896, pp. 243–44.

⁴⁵It is worth noting that, in the late 1850s, when Robert Browning was composing his long dramatic monologue “‘Mr Sludge,’ the Medium,” he may have wanted his fraud’s name to hint at ectoplasmic sludge, but he does not introduce such phenomena specifically into his plausible villain’s weaselly rigmarole of self-justification, grievance, and malice. D. D. Home, who, after the Brownings attended a seance in Ealing in 1855, inspired the character of Mr. Sludge, did not produce ectoplasmic structures, but focused his energies on other prodigies: his most celebrated being his ability to levitate. He once flew out of one window and came in feet first and horizontal from another; Harry Houdini, who made a habit of exposing supernatural claims by reproducing them as conjuring tricks, countered with a promise to repeat the feat, but called off the event—to the delight, of course, of D. D. Home’s supporters. See Robert Browning, *The Complete Works*, ed. John C. Berkey, Allan C. Dooley, and Susan Dooley (Waco, Tex., and Athens, Ohio, 1996), vol. 6, pp. 285–351.

⁴⁶Jacques Brunius, “Ectoplasm,” in *Critical Dictionary*, ed. Georges Bataille, published as the *Encyclopaedia Da Costa* (1948), *Encyclopaedia Acephalica*, ed. Robert Lebel and Isabelle Waldberg (London, 1995), pp. 110–11.

Darkness was essential for the phenomena to appear: light, almost everyone agreed, was highly destructive to their organism. The great chemist William Crookes preferred moonlight, and reported excellent results by this pale illumination; the French doctor Gustave Geley hankered after the light emitted by certain animals, vegetables, and microbes, reporting wistfully that highly successful seances had been held in Brazil by the light of glow-worms, but that this was very difficult to realize in practice.⁴⁷ But, given a darkened room, and willing, supportive sitters, the “substance” might appear.

Paladino was not photographed in action as exhaustively as her contemporary, the medium Eva Carrière (figure 8). Eva C., as she was known, began extruding ectoplasms during seances conducted under the auspices of Juliette Bisson, a wealthy woman who promoted the seer’s powers through her friendship with a Bavarian doctor and minor aristocrat, Baron von Schrenk-Notzing. In 1890, in Germany, he published exhaustive minutes of the seances and the phenomena in a bizarre, alarming volume filled with photographs of the medium in trance, sufferings spasms as she produced a wide range of materializations. The book was translated into English in 1920 under the title *Phenomena of Materialisation*, and it made the type of seances featured internationally famous.

The word “ectoplasm” was borrowed across from biological usage: the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives as its first citation a quotation from 1883 that discloses vividly the operating metaphor: “Its [amoeba’s] jelly-like body becomes faintly parcelled out into an outer form (ectoplasm) and an inner soft (endoplasm) layer.”⁴⁸ It is “the substance from which spirits make themselves visible forms . . . alive, sensitive to touch and light . . . cold to the touch, slightly luminous and having a characteristic smell . . .”

In the 1920s, Dr. Gustave Geley asserts: “The colour white is the most frequent On touch . . . it can seem soft and a bit elastic when it spreads; hard, knotty or fibrous when it forms strings. The substance is mobile. At one moment it evolves slowly, rises, falls, wanders over the medium, her shoulders, her breast, her knees, with a creeping motion that recalls that of a reptile”⁴⁹ Sometimes faces and even bodies of the departed appeared, like Fata Morganas, in its webs.

After making its appearance, ectoplasm was reabsorbed into the

⁴⁷ Gustave Geley, *Ectoplasme*, p. 15.

⁴⁸ J. E. Ady, *Knowledge*, June 15, 1883, 355/2.

⁴⁹ Geley, *Ectoplasme*, p. 199.

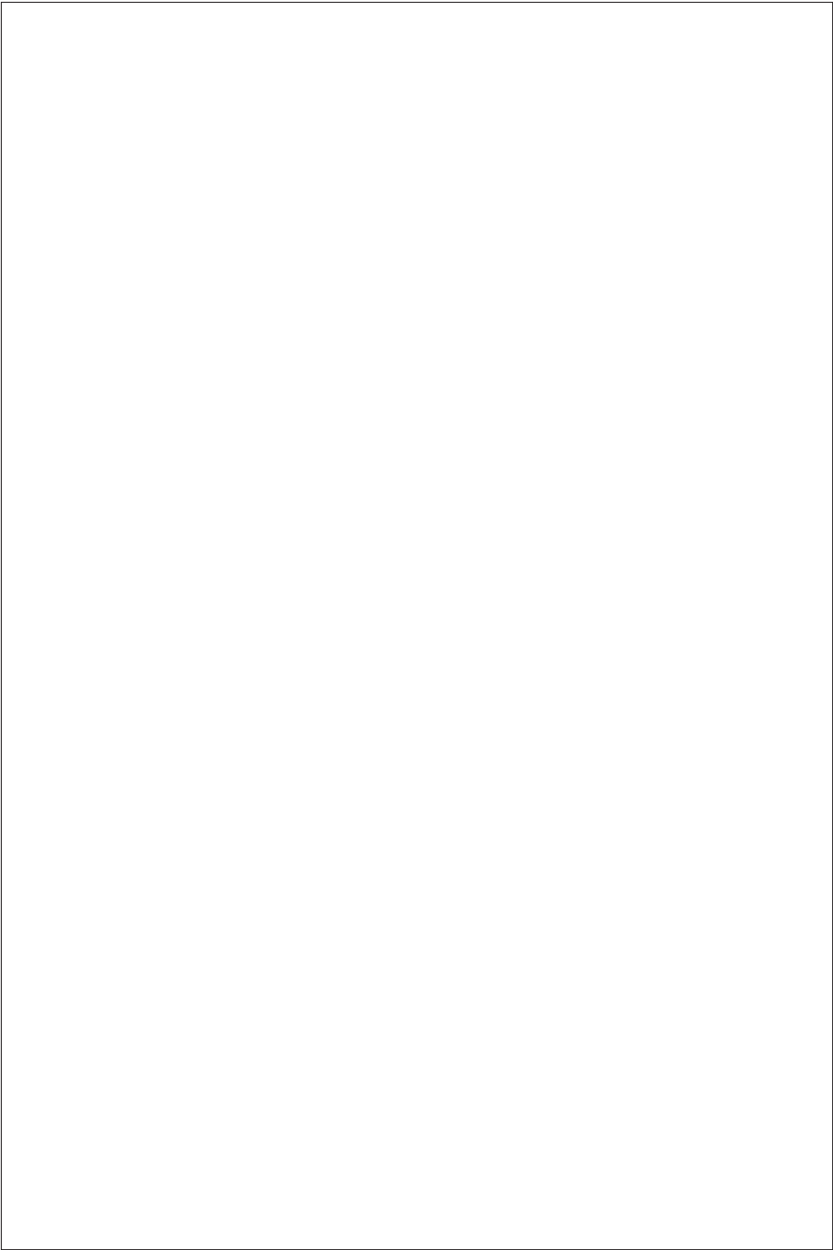


Figure 8. Photo of Eva C.[arrière], from Baron von Schrenk-Notzing, *Phenomena of Materialisation* (London, 1920). (Wren Library, Trinity College, Cambridge)

medium's body—unless it was rudely captured, as in the case of Helen Duncan.

When looking at these unformed forms, it is worth recalling that the word “larva,” used in English for the early stage of a caterpillar, meant “ghost” or “spectre” in Latin, but is also used by Horace to designate a mask, such as might frighten an observer, while the Latin verb *larvere* meant to bewitch or enchant. Ectoplasmic masks and limbs are indeed larval: they promise the emergence of forms, but do not deliver them. The term “pseudo-pods,” used for some of the “structures,” catches this relationship with the embryonic—and indeed with the abortion.

Henry Sidgwick was an unlikely subject for voyeurism or tomfoolery: with his wife Eleanor he was a pioneer campaigner for female higher education and co-founder of Newnham College, Cambridge. They were high-principled, liberal-minded, progressive, scrupulous and kindly Victorians. Yet Sidgwick, in the desolation after Darwin, left holy orders, and became the first president of the Society for Psychical Research in 1882.

Sidgwick and his close friend and former student F. W. H. Myers, from the 1850s onward, visited numerous mediums, with inconclusive results; rooted scepticism and unappeasable curiosity writhed in Sidgwick's energetic mind for four decades. Questers like Myers and the Sidgwicks were feeling out a scientific position toward some of the basic tenets of Christian theology, such as the existence of the individual soul and its immortality. In the course of his life's work, *The Survival of Human Personality after Bodily Death* (1915), Myers developed a secular, psychological theory of the subliminal self. This self enjoys continuity over time and place, unconsciously carrying memories that preserve its integrity over eternity; these can be awakened or recalled through mediums and other supernatural means. As Rhodri Hayward puts it: “Myers's subliminal self . . . operated as a kind of filter for the sacred, combining the extracarnate communication with the fragmentary memories and desires of the individual's own past The sacred was relocated within the field of memory.”⁵⁰

The two philosophers evinced no self-consciousness about their own motives. Astonishingly naive letters pass between them about whether the kisses they received in seances were given by materialized lips, for

⁵⁰ Hayward, “Popular Mysticism,” pp. 157, 186.

example. Nor does any of the surviving correspondence in the archives illuminate the *interior* life and thinking of the mediums themselves—women such as Eva Carrière, Eusapia Paladino, or, later, the Bostonian Margery Crandon—from their point of view.

The women did not write memoirs—unlike the sitters. Paladino could not read or write; Margery left one exchange of letters (with E. J. Dingwall) in the archives, where she complains about pains in her nose—hardly surprising when she was expelling so much stuff from her nostrils during the seances. Yet again, nobody connects her physical distress, which caused her to cancel quite often, with her ectoplasmic production. Her spirit control Walter once commented, it is recalled, “Pay no attention to her. Let her groan. She hasn’t any pain. Blow your nose, Kid. I’m like an octopus, I can attach myself anywhere and then put life into it. She must sit very tight. Don’t ask her how she feels.”⁵¹

The travelers into the unknown were precisely attracted by the mediums’ near-death states, in which they lost their self-possession. The trances, fits, numbness, and transports that the mediums experienced opened them up as channels for others. This psycho-sexual story, about unconscious gratifications, can be explored more fully; this approach can be woven, as Alex Owen has done in her fine study *The Darkened Room* (1989), into a historicist analysis of the conflict of power, of class and gender, between men and women, the learned and the uneducated, and, often, the native and the foreigner.

After exciting but ambiguous seances at Richet’s, the Sidgwicks invited Paladino to stay with them in Cambridge to continue the experiments.

Here are some examples of the minutes, now in the archives, written up the day after one of the seances by the scrupulous Alice Johnson, the secretary of the Society for Psychical Research.

Th. Aug 1/95

With Mr and Mrs M[yers] Prof. and Mrs. S.[idgwick] Mrs Verrall
Dr. Rogers, Mr. E. T. Dixon. A. J.[ohnson].

. . . .

7.30 Mr Myers lay down on the floor again so that he could see her knees.

⁵¹ *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, part 98, vol. 36 (November 1925): 44.

7.40 Eusapia begins to laugh; indicating the arrival of John King. [John King was her spirit guide] then moans & becomes quiet again. Dr Rogers remarks that her eyeballs are turned up.

8.14 Medium comes out of trance asks who is holding her legs & is told. Prof. Sidgwick comes out from under table.

8.20 trance returning: Prof Sidgwick goes in again.

....

8.30 *Mrs Myers said she saw something white. Mrs. Verrall also saw it.* [This has been crossed out; emphasis added.]

....

9.10 . . . Eusapia says she wishes her feet to be left alone, & Prof Sidgwick comes out from under the table. Mr Myers says 'my chair is being dragged from under me & I am being gently dug in the ribs' Here Prof. Sidgwick goes under the table again & holds Eusapia's feet . . .

9.12 Mr Myers says 'her head is on my shoulder.' Mrs Verrall says 'I saw a great white thing appear behind Mr Myers, perhaps the cushion.' . . . Mr Dixon grabbed at it & touched it; then it drew back. He said it felt like a hand or at all events something more solid than a cushion.⁵²

The Sidgwicks remained hopeful that Paladino was not a humbug, one of their favorite words, but unconvinced; Oliver Lodge stayed a believer—in Paladino, in life after death, in ectoplasmic apparitions, in psychic photographs—especially after losing a son and several friends' sons in World War I.

The craze for such experiences did not abate after numerous exposés of the mediums' claims. In the 1920s, Margery Crandon caused a furore in Boston, where she was married to a society gynecologist from Beacon Hill, Boston; he was more than twenty-five years her elder. Margery's brother Walter had died in a railway accident in 1911, and he became her "spirit control," the character who appeared at her seances, often whistling loudly, ribbing the participants and even taunting them. Among her most admired phenomena (figure 9) were Walter's thumbprints, which appeared in the course of a seance, imprinted onto dental wax: the spirit from the other side being substantial and heavy enough to leave his unique seal. But Margery/Psyche surpassed even this

⁵²MSS, notes, Society for Psychical Research archives, University Library, Cambridge.

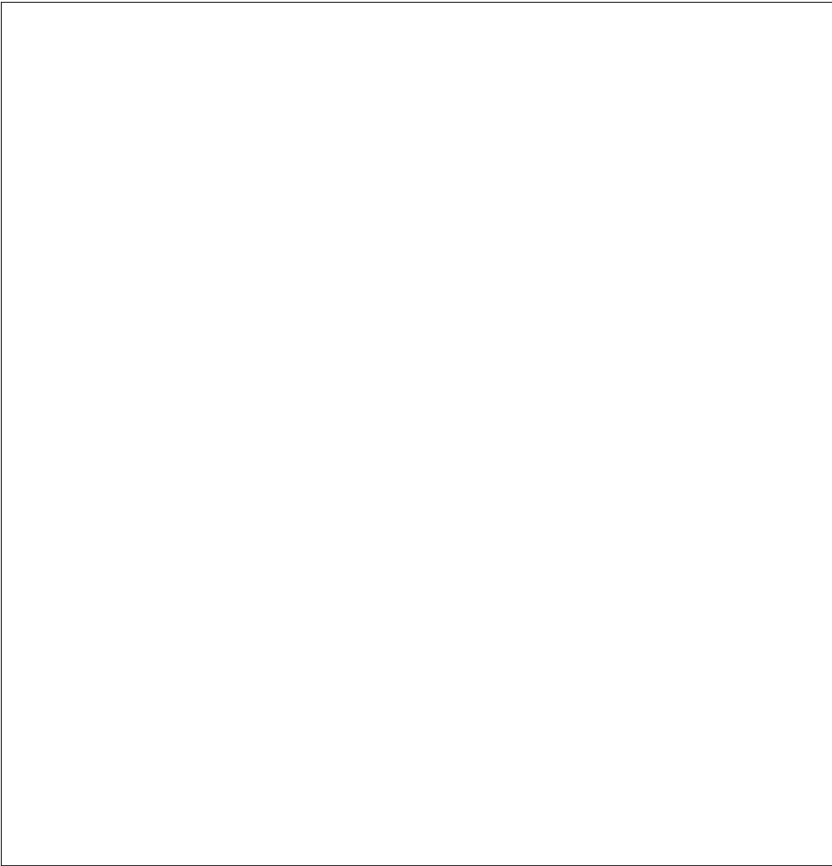


Figure 9. Margery Crandon producing ectoplasmic phenomena, London, ca. 1925. (Harry Price Library, University of London)

remarkable spirit signature, when Walter began to form teleplasmic hands and heads, and even, most significantly, promised to deliver an ectoplasmic fetus.

Lady (Florence) Barrett, who did the examination of Margery Crandon before the sitting, explained afterward that she considered that the ectoplasmic rods had been “formed by a kind of birth process.”⁵³ It has to be said as well that the notes to these “birth processes” make sordid and dismaying reading.

The symbolic range of ectoplasm as spirit made matter stretches from aethereal, phantasmic whiteness, exemplified by Helen Duncan’s

⁵³Letter from Mowbray, to London Spiritualist Alliance, June 13, 1947. Society for Psychical Research archives, University Library, Cambridge.

yards of white satin, to a state of emergent being, typified by the cold, formless lumps of some sort of tissue, as produced by Eva Carrière and Margery Crandon. These two poles correspond to two classes of phenomena that were conflated under the term: Myers defined them as first projections of the double—namely the spirit of a person—and secondly, precipitations of the *akas*—*akas* being a Hindu term borrowed by the Theosophists and designating the invisible energy that flows through and unites creation. However, once these two forms are distinguished, it is clear that ectoplasm uneasily converts two contradictory concepts of person and spirit's relation to person: the phantom makes manifest an individual who has died, as does the ectoplasmic mask. But the ectoplasmic effluvia and pseudo-pods that Carrière and Crandon also spewed do not body forth the mediums' own vital spirits, or even the spirit of their spirit controls; they are phantasmic templates on which the conjured spirit—the IPA or “incorporeal personal agent”—makes his or her mark, using touch to guarantee presence.

The very subject of ectoplasm now tends to provoke involuntary laughter, shivers, and, on closer look, real horror; the documentary images strike us now as foolish, crazy, embarrassing, prurient, repellent. That anyone could have believed that such phantoms, vomitings, and excreta were manifestations of spirit fills the contemporary observer with revulsion. That anyone could have participated in good faith at their performance and production seems highly unlikely. It seems to us now a highly peculiar and shameful chapter in the history of intellectual and spiritual inquiry.

7. PROFITABLE WASTE

Making spirits present through this nebulous stuff reproduces some of the characteristic features of sacrificial ritual. Some are obvious: the sitters forming the ring are vital to the event, and to the success of the event; they gather as a solemn, ritual congregation, bonded together to follow prescribed steps in making contact with spiritual powers. But other similarities are more confusing. The medium's role is multi-layered—it might appear that Paladino, Carrière, and Crandon take the place of the sibyl, priestess, or priest, since they act as conductors of spirit. However, this position in the seance is complicated by the lack of identification between them and the spirit control or IPA who appears

and then, sometimes, forms ectoplasmic phenomena that attest the coming of another being, a relation of one of the sitters or a famous figure from history. Mediums are habitually treated as mere instruments, through whom the participants access the supernatural: they themselves have the power to contact the uncanny, but this uncanny then is transmitted to the others. On account of this necessary, sibylline, but somehow disparaged, position of the medium, she seems to me to approach the place of the sacrificial victim, with the sitters as the hierophants, who, through a contact “high,” become mediums themselves.

But the ordeal, the self-abnegation and exposure of a medium such as Margery Crandon when producing ectoplasm, reverses the process of ritual sacrifice in one respect: animal tissue is not obliterated, offered to the powers above, destroyed by fire in order to be metamorphosed into the rising smoke of the holocaust on an altar, but is produced from insubstantial lights and breezes and wispy vapors to take form down below as living matter—temporarily. The medium is desecrated in an act of psychological abjection in order to recuperate from the other side lost flesh, consumed creatures, and offer proof of the existence of life after death: she turns smoke into live cinders, to borrow—and reverse—Mallarmé’s startling metaphor. She transforms the lost dead into the living. It becomes less surprising that so many classicists were involved in the quest for spirit. This perspective can help us to understand, I suggest, why wise, philanthropic, dignified thinkers—men and women of the calibre of the Sidgwicks and F. W. H. Myers, Margaret Verrall (who was a classicist) and her daughter Helen Salter, and Lady Barrett—were prepared to take part, day after day, in experiments that transgressed their society’s codes of social intercourse, gendered behavior, dignity and decorum.

The spiritualist seance does not replicate a blood offering to the gods—but it recasts sacrifice in the context of an industrial and scientific age, just as the medium, uttering messages from spirit controls, or marking gnomic phrases at the promptings of voices, harks back to the sibyl and Delphic oracles of which Myers had written, while also reproducing the action of modern, technical media. One can take this modernizing tendency further: a materializing medium like Eusapia Paladino or Margery Crandon acts as a producer; the forms she makes, sometimes nebulous, sometimes shapeless, convert the combustion of the sacrificial victim—the smoke from the altar—into a force of production, in mimicry of the steam engine and the steamhammer and the

factory chimney and the gas-fired boiler, where vapors no longer signify clouds of divine glory, but the energy of industrial output.

Sacrifice entails surrender of something valued in order to gain something even more strongly desired. Abraham is prepared to kill his only son, Isaac. The medium's physical self-abandonment and psychological self-effacement could have fulfilled this necessary condition for the success of the ritual. But a sacrifice can also involve a mere chicken—or some other lowly, less valued thing; then it takes on the primary role of transformation, of sublimating the humble vehicle into heaven-climbing fragrance and vapor. The selection of victim hallows it, however low, according to the symbolic axiom that transfigures the profane, base, vile, and real, into the sacred, into “immortal diamond.” The imagination operates in response to “the elementary subjective identity between types of excrement (sperm, menstrual blood, urine, fecal matter [and one might add here, ectoplasm]) and everything that can be seen as sacred, divine or marvellous.”⁵⁴ The grim and sordid proceedings of a seance summoned unseen forces and made them materially present—if temporarily—in the nebulous wraiths and figures of ectoplasm. It converted the medium's energy into something palpable by combining figures, like clouds and smoke, from the traditional language of the divine, by applying new instruments, such as the camera, to their interpretation, and by inserting them into the schedule of an industrial economy, which served to make of ectoplasm the valued residue of the sitters' joint labor. The inexplicable emptiness of space was refused, the dead were not consigned to waste, a new, paranormal form of excreta was transfigured, and the epitome of nebulosity was attributed to intricate, objective meaning: the production of ectoplasm constituted a profitable struggle with conditions of labor, and a triumph of knowledge.

What connects this enterprise with visions or illusory images, as discussed in my first lecture, is three-fold: first, the visual lexicon of nephography is instrumentalized by innovatory media; second, order and pattern are imposed on non-sense in order to avoid the unbearable scandal—for Christian humanism—of meaninglessness; third, and crucially, the conception of subject or self to which the idea of mediumship contributed is shown to be apt for occupation by another. Subjectivity is

⁵⁴ Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927–1939*, ed. and trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis, 1985), p. 94, quoted in *Formless: A User's Guide*, ed. Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss (New York, 1997), p. 51.

diffused, decentered, dislocated, and the long, Thomist, unbreakable pact between soul and body cracked—with immense consequences for psychology, for writing, and for visual modes of story telling. While Myers is almost forgotten and widely dismissed, his theory of the subliminal self has spread, appropriately, through other channels besides himself (including Sigmund Freud) to permeate popular ideas of the personality. The voice-over, stream of consciousness, collage, and cut-ups are only some of the methods practiced to capture this paranormal model of spirit, which imagines the individual dispersed in space, the unified viewpoint shattered, linear temporality confused, memories and fantasies intermingled, selves scattered through time and place, but united by an inextinguishable subliminal subjectivity.⁵⁵ Both cinematic and acoustic media convey and contribute to this new writing of the subject. As proclaimed in *The X-Files*, the truth is no longer within, but out there.

However, it is a profound paradox that, while Myers's metaphysics shadow forth the late psychological turn of this century, the astral language of spirit that he and his peers deployed has been denatured by the same decades' deepest experiences. Myers's and the Sidgwicks' yearnings for an immortal and metaphysical dimension to human life—not survival in others' memories, but survival itself, as a wraith, as a spirit—present us with the final, doomed twist in the religious wager that Darwin and Freud had closed down. As Adam Phillips writes in his book *Darwin's Worms*, “Darwin and Freud, in their quite different ways, are persuading us to become good losers It is as though, they suggest, we have added to the ordinary suffering of biological life the extraordinary suffering of our immortal longings, of our will to permanence.”⁵⁶ These late Victorians and their faithful remnant among Edwardians were not prepared to be losers. One of the recurrent events in the lives of all the members of the Society for Psychical Research is prize-winning: these men were stars at school, in college, and expected to master a world that would not offer them the kind of contest they had anticipated. They did indeed suffer from immortal longings, from a will to permanence. It is almost too apt, though it shows the punning agility of dreams, that for a time they even tried to turn spirit solid, to grasp a cloud, to capture the aether as ectoplasm.

⁵⁵ See Connor, “The Machine in the Ghost,” p. 208, where he quotes Walter Ong's *The Presence of the Word*: “Sound situates man in the middle of actuality and in simultaneity, whereas vision situates man in front of things and in sequentiality.” “Sound” here could be expanded to include touching—especially in the dark.

⁵⁶ Adam Phillips, *Darwin's Worms* (London, 1999), p. 127.

8. ENVOI

Helen Duncan's sample of cheap satin embodies the bankruptcy of a long chapter of spiritual questing. But it also reveals how far signs, under pressure from history, can move. As white cloth, her ectoplasm discloses the anxiety that surrounds murkiness and smoke: visions of the Virgin Mary today invariably depict her in unadulterated cotton wool. Titian or Tintoretto's swirling and laden clouds have been banished from the supernatural lexicon. Combustion announces only the fires of hell, warns of danger, of pollution and poison.

It is industrial progress that would eventually abolish for us, in the present, the baroque meanings of the gamboling cloud-babies, the underlit vortices of the empyrean, the radiant nimbuses that sheathe angels in rainbow vapors.⁵⁷ For the Victorian artist, smoke and steam could represent a secular and glorious combustion, energy harnessed in the here and now for mercantile and colonial purposes of the greatest power of the times.

But again, photography—that medium of *contact*, sensible to impression—makes a crucial difference to the cloud family of symbols to which ectoplasm belongs. Whereas in psychic images the camera obeyed the traditional tropes of the supernatural, in this case its contribution canceled the old order. The Crimean War was the first to be documented by photography, but Roger Fenton's famous images show a hushed and still desolation, for the camera speeds then were simply too slow to capture action or explosions as they were happening.

The first images of shellbursts, bomb-blasts, and billowing gusts of smoke (figure 10) in warfare seem to have been taken in World War I. They are military records, made in a spirit of discovery of new weapons, presented in the archive of the Imperial War Museum as evidence, historical and scientific. Black-and-white photographs show the effect of mines exploding, of shells' impact, of gas canisters spewing out their

⁵⁷There were earlier rumblings: at the end of an *Entertainment at Rutland House*, performed in 1656, Sir William Davenant wrote a Song:

London is smother'd with sulph'rous fires;
 Still she wears a black hood and cloak,
 Of sea-coal smoke,
 As if she mourned for brewers and dyers.

Chorus:

But she is cool'd and cleans'd by streams
 Of flowing and of ebbing Thames.

(*The Dramatic Works of Sir William D'Avenant* [Edinburgh and London, 1873], vol. 3, pp. 228–29.)



Figure 10. The bursting of a Livens bomb (containing poison gas), ca. 1917. (Imperial War Museum, London)

poisons, of rifle fire igniting: sometimes, roiling plumes of grey smog, or solid walls of smoke and debris, sometimes soft, miasmatic bodies of cloud floating above the ground, apparently the purest shade of white, all innocence and aethereality.

Poison gas filled the landscape of the trenches with light, spiraling heads of cumulus; infantry smokescreens raised tall, impenetrable barriers of cloud. The new horrors of chemical warfare proved parts of the invisible air materially present and undeniably tangible. The contamination of industrial emissions added to the new experience of air, to the newly identified, malignant character of smoke of the fiery aether.

Once upon a time Raphael painted the Madonna of Foligno upwafted by curling surf of blue-grey angel-clouds, Correggio depicted the ravishing approach of a god as a mass of blue-grey smoke, Titian invited us to believe in the Assumption of the Virgin taking place within and upon a roiling mass of shadowy cumulus, and Poussin caught Mary up to heaven on a roll and blast of thundercloud. Now we live as successors to the splitting of the atom and the nuclear-powered ascension of the mushroom cloud at the end of World War II and during the hydrogen bomb tests in the South Pacific.

Photographs of artillery and nuclear explosions produce a twisted effect on me as a spectator: the undeniable power and terror of the event

delivers a hit, a rush; the images impact viscerally, inspiring the wonder and awe that has been coupled with beauty in that psychological and esthetic zone diagnosed so eloquently by Edmund Burke. But morally it is hard—impossible—to admire this phantom of death, this foreshadowing of the megaweapons of our century. Yet this very complexity of response encapsulates a pervasive cultural dilemma, about the relations of pleasure and representation. These images open up another huge zone of questions, which must await another day. But assaying the pleasurable weights of different signs, such as clouds and cloudiness, learning their history and modifications over time, can at least help us to analyze the effect that such images of bombs and bombing have on us now. For as signs of possibility, clouds still float through our world: as the default setting of the computer screensaver, and in innumerable advertisements for future investments, insurances, fortunes. Clouds are still buoyed by ancient exhalations of ethereal paradises, divine power, immortal longings, futurity.

However, alongside the billowing plumes of cooling towers, the smog of car-choked cities, the oil-clogged plumage of seabirds, the growing asthmatic problems of children and older people, and the refusal to sign the test ban treaty, we need another constellation of metaphor to convey the unpolluted, uncontaminated zone of spirit. The language of the aether opened casements onto the realm of the unseen, but it depended on conditions and on aspirations that have since been stifled in a new kind of cloud: we breathe a different air now.