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Feeling the Spirit: Spiritualism, Literary Aesthetics, and the Reformation of the Senses in
Nineteenth-Century America

by

Tracy Lynn Fritz

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Samuel Otter, Chair
Professor Kristin Hanson
Professor Richard Cándida-Smith

Spring 2012

Feeling the Spirit: Spiritualism, Literary Aesthetics, and the Reformation of the Senses in
Nineteenth-Century America

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Abstract

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This dissertation attempts to explain how nineteenth-century American Spiritualist literature may have made readers feel like they were hearing voices, touching the dead, seeing celestial spaces, or enjoying other sensory proofs of the afterlife. Spiritualists believed that, while all human beings possessed faculties designed to perceive the dead, few of them knew it and, consequently, these special senses atrophied as a result of disuse. One of the main goals of the movement was to help people activate their dormant senses and develop their experiential potential. The purpose of this dissertation is to explore how the movement's literature may have functioned as an effective instrument of sensory education. To describe the affective potential of these texts, I draw on cognitive poetics, a constellation of contemporary theories and techniques that offer insight into how stylized language might produce particular psychological and physical responses. Attending to the possible mechanisms through which Spiritualist literature might appeal to bodies and minds, I argue that, though these texts have received little critical consideration, they offer timely examples of a sensual aesthetic to the growing number of scholars who are interested in the potential power of language to incite and shape sensory impressions.

Focusing on the Spiritualist trance poetry of Lizzie Doten, Sarah Gould, and Jennie Rennell, chapter one argues that the style of their texts may trigger an altered state of consciousness, a condition characterized by sensations of openness, fluidity, vulnerability, and heightened affect that reproduces the salient features of a supernatural auditory experience. I assert that, while nineteenth-century doctors and scientists warned that hearing disembodied voices was a symptom of disease, auditive mediums insisted that the perception of spirit speech was actually an indicator of good health and attempted to normalize these sensations by reproducing them in readers, who, in turn, might feel connected to each other on the basis of their shared bodily responses. This chapter also compares trance poetry to the poetry of Lydia Huntley Sigourney, one of the most popular sentimental writers of the period. It foregrounds the stylistic similarities between their two genres and considers the potential of sentimental poetry to incite collective experiences. Chapter two contends that séance reports maximize a reader's ability to infer weight, form, and texture so that the experience of reading about materialized spirit

bodies approximates the perceptual act of touching them. Regarded as emotional, sensual, and animalistic, touch has long been at the bottom of the Western sensorium; but, through their published testimony, Spiritualists, I claim, sought to cultivate and legitimize this denigrated form of bodily knowledge. In chapter three, I argue that the prominent Spiritualist, medium, and writer Thomas Lake Harris expands the possibilities of the vision epic, transforming it into a lesson on how to see. Considering Harris's *An Epic of the Starry Heaven* in relation to Joel's Barlow's *The Columbiad*, Emerson's philosophy of sight, and Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, I assert that Harris's poem encourages the reader to experience the act of seeing as both an emotionally-informed communal process and a powerful means of creating collective realities that exceed national and even planetary boundaries. If Spiritualist texts trigger simulations of contact with the dead, the writings of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, I argue, seem designed to deny the reader imaginary access to the other world. Chapter four describes what I call the aesthetics of desensualization in Phelps's *The Gates Ajar*, "Since I Died," "The Room's Width," and "The Presence." In conclusion, I argue that, by using cognitive poetics to analyze a collection of texts which seem to have been designed to make readers feel, my dissertation suggests both a methodology and a potentially productive area of study to scholars of nineteenth-century American literature who are beginning to explore how language might create the experiential basis for new forms of subjectivity and community.

To my husband, John Eric Fritz, whose patience, encouragement, and love made it possible for me to complete this project

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Introduction

In the “Declaration of Faith” that opens her book *Poems of Progress* (1871), Lizzie Doten, an auditive medium and major figure in nineteenth-century American Spiritualism, explains that the goal of the movement is to help Americans develop their experiential potential. “[I]n its very inception,” Spiritualism, she writes, “has commenced . . . directly at the root of necessary reform, viz., the purification and harmonious development of the human body.” The body was of vital importance to Spiritualists, because they believed that its powers of perception were being stifled by opponents of the movement who sought to “prescribe as a standard for all others the limitations of [their] own feeble consciousness.” Since they had never seen, heard, nor felt the presence of the dead, critics concluded that anyone who reported such experiences must be morally corrupt, physically diseased, or mentally ill. Spiritualists challenged this prevailing view by teaching that “mediumship”—the ability to perceive the dead and communicate with them—“is a *healthy, harmonious, and natural development of human nature*, and that communion with the spirit world is not interdicted, and no more impossible than any other attainment that lies in the direct line of natural law, human progress, and scientific investigation.” Mediums, Spiritualists argued, did not possess unique physical gifts. Rather, their sensitivity to otherworldly sounds, images, and impressions confirmed the truth of the movement’s main message: All human beings were equipped with faculties that could be trained to perceive spiritual stimuli. The claim that these latent senses might be activated and developed was, as Doten writes, “interwoven with all the spiritualistic literature,” and its inclusion in the introduction to her poems suggests that she, like other adherents, regarded the movement’s textual productions as effective instruments of sensory education.¹ This dissertation will attempt to explain how the rhetorical strategies used in Spiritualist texts may have made readers feel like they were hearing voices, touching spirits, or seeing celestial spaces.

The Spiritualist movement began in Hydesville, New York in 1848, when two young girls, Margaret and Kate Fox, claimed that spirits were communicating with them by banging on the walls and furniture of their family’s farmhouse. As the girls recited the alphabet, neighbors listened in astonishment to the loud taps that “spelled” words by sounding during the enunciation of particular letters. Newspapers carried the story beyond the rural town, and the Fox sisters traveled to New York City where they elicited mysterious knocks for important writers, politicians, and business men. Spirit rapping quickly became a national sensation and people from all over the country began reporting strange sounds emanating from their woodwork. Before long, the arduous process of decoding the knocks was replaced with more efficient forms of communication. Asserting that they possessed the ability to see, hear, or in some other way perceive the dead, thousands of Americans “discovered” that they were mediums and delivered what they claimed were spirit messages to audiences, ranging in size from small family circles to large lecture halls. Séances became popular, too, as people sat around their kitchen tables, waiting to be touched by materialized spirit hands.²

The idea that the living and the dead can communicate is ancient, but, by 1848, a dizzying array of changes had made Americans particularly receptive to Spiritualism’s main tenet. According to the historian Bret Carroll, Spiritualism “was a response to a multifaceted spiritual crisis that had developed by the late 1840s” in response to a variety

of trends, including the decline of Calvinism, the growing explanatory power of science, the proliferation of new technologies, the expansion of immigrant populations, and the death of the revolutionary generation. “These unsettling developments,” writes Carroll, “combined to produce spiritual malaise, discomfort, [and] discontent.” As they searched for “more satisfying forms of religious belief and expression,” many Americans found what they were looking for in Spiritualism.³ Moreover, if the climate of uncertainty made Spiritualism attractive, so, too, did the familiarity of its terms and basic doctrines which had been circulating in the culture for at least a decade. The movement drew on mesmerism, a popular pseudo-science that described the universe as a system bound together by invisible fluid, and was heavily influenced by the clairvoyant healer Andrew Jackson Davis, whose publications introduced many Americans to the ideas of Emanuel Swedenborg. An eighteenth-century Swedish scientist and scholar, Swedenborg insisted that he was in frequent contact with spirits and that he could, while in a trance state, visit heaven and hell. His notions about the role of spirits and the structure of the afterlife were disseminated through Davis’s work and became the theological foundation of Spiritualism. The seeds of Spiritualism were planted before the Fox sisters arrived on the national scene. When news of their experience appeared in the press, many Americans were intellectually prepared to understand the mysterious sounds as a form of communication with the other world. With an interpretive framework already in place, it did not take long for a movement with a relatively clear set of beliefs and practices to develop around the skyrocketing number of reported spirit manifestations.⁴ Spiritualism spread like wildfire. Writing in 1868, the medium and historian of the movement, Emma Hardinge, proudly stated that, two decades earlier, “the name of ‘Spiritualist’ was unknown on the American continent,” but now, “Spiritualism numbers one-fourth at least of the population of the United States in its ranks.”⁵ This percentage is undoubtedly inflated, but, based on estimated numbers of regularly-meeting séance circles, Carroll suggests that the size of the Spiritualist population was significant.⁶

The volume of poetry and prose generated by believers was, according to a critic from *The National Review*, so great that by 1857—the time of his writing—it had already constituted its own literary subset. He writes, “When first any belief, superstition, or general movement of the human mind is described in writing, the documents are of too vague, fragmentary, and partial a character to afford material for an estimate of that which they seek to represent.” “But,” he continues, “a time comes when we find that the facts, however often repeated, are substantially the same; and the theory, or belief, which binds these facts together assumes a rounded and definite form.” “Spiritualism,” he concludes, “has arrived at this point”:

a considerable number of persons not only believe in table-rapping, table-tipping, spectral hands, flying musical instruments, conversations held with, and revelations given by, spirits; but they solemnly record their belief, collect and print remarkable instances of such manifestations, and have reduced ‘spiritualism’ into a certain curious order and system.

Therefore, “[w]hatever we may think of what is called, however improperly, Spiritualism, we cannot deny that it possesses a literature.”⁷ That literature was widely disseminated through both the Spiritualist and the mainstream press. Articles about “celebrities” like the Fox sisters, poems purportedly from the dead, and descriptions of séances appeared in local newspapers and in the growing number of community-based Spiritualist

publications. According to Carroll, “Spiritualists of the 1850s established regional and local periodicals in Buffalo, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Detroit, Milwaukee, St. Louis, and New Orleans, not to mention the states of Maine, Vermont, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Arkansas, Georgia, and California.” Between 1848 and 1861, over eighty-one Spiritualist periodicals appeared, and some of them reached a national audience: “the *Telegraph*, the *Banner of Light*, and others emanating from such major centers of activity as New York and Boston, linked Spiritualists all over the nation, finding subscribers, correspondents, and contributors from the South and far West as well as the Northeast and Midwest.”⁸

Spiritualist literature focused on unusual sensory impressions like hearing, seeing, and touching the dead. If the movement’s writers recognized the potential power of linguistic representations to shape bodily experiences—and Doten’s “Declaration” suggests that they did—so, too did their opponents, who were deeply troubled by the proliferation of Spiritualist texts. “The Spiritualists,” writes H. Mattison, a medical doctor and opponent of the movement, “now number their ‘mediums’ by the thousands, and their disciples by the tens of thousands. They are making powerful efforts to disseminate their principles by means of lectures, books, and papers.” In his capacity as a medical doctor, Mattison, along with others in his profession, argued that reading Spiritualist literature caused sensory “hallucinations” that led, in turn, to mental illness and criminal behavior. Given the danger that these texts posed to public safety and health, the courts, he insisted, should take decisive action against them. “If it be right to suppress obscene books and prints, because their influence is pernicious, why not,” he asks, “suppress the papers and ghost-books that are . . . filling our asylums with the insane; driving many into murder and suicide; and scattering ‘firebrands, arrows, and death’ wherever they go.” The ability of Spiritualist literature to disorient readers and corrupt their sensations was, he believed, so strong that, unless the government stopped or limited its distribution, it threatened to transform America into a nation of raving lunatics.⁹

What opponents like Mattison found so disturbing about Spiritualist texts—their potential ability to incite sensory experiences—is, I argue, precisely what makes them so fascinating today. While Spiritualist texts have largely been neglected by literary critics, the movement’s literature, my dissertation suggests, has a lot to offer to the growing number of them who are interested in the power of language to incite and shape unconventional perceptions.¹⁰ The idea that texts can trigger bodily responses and that literary studies should attend more closely to reader-centered affects is perhaps most clearly and controversially articulated by literary theorist, Charles Altieri. Altieri contends that scholars try to make criticism seem more consequential by aligning it with ethical behavior and political action but that, in fact, the study of literature is most valuable when it attempts to identify what and explain how texts make readers feel. In a “reaction against” what he sees as the “dominant tendencies in my field of literary criticism,” he argues that “philosophical” and “sociological” approaches to literature have been “blinding” scholars “to phenomenological considerations,” causing them to “underrea[d] the specific modes of affective engagement presented by works of art.” Philosophical criticism is “so hungry for relevance that it . . . attribute[s] to the text some kind of moral wisdom or ethically enlightened attitude.” According to this view, literature is worth studying because it teaches readers how to be virtuous and gives them a principled way of evaluating themselves, their circumstances, and their conduct towards others. Political criticism, he observes, is also concerned with “right” behavior, though of

a less abstract kind. Critics of this persuasion, Altieri asserts, regard texts as a means of promoting identifications and actions that contest what they see as oppressive power structures. For them, literature is an archive of marginalized voices, a form of protest, and a call to resistance.¹¹

According to Altieri, political and philosophical methodologies have problems that could be avoided if critics adopted an “aesthetic” approach, which focuses on language’s affective potential. “I had always hated criticism that preferred context to text and insisted on situating works in relation to historical forces and sociological interests,” he writes. Political analyses, he believes, focus too closely on the circumstances surrounding a text’s production, while “most ‘ethical’ readings tend to produce abstract substitutes for the text” by foregrounding meanings that have been devised and imposed by the critic. Altieri stresses that neither approach pays sufficient attention to the linguistic specificities of the text itself. Another problem, he finds, is that these modes of criticism recognize only those forms of agency that eventuate in ethical and/or political expression. He warns that “we are coming to depend on concepts of agency that severely reduce the many channels of mental activity fundamental to subjective life, so that we end up honoring only a very limited range of values possible within affective experience.”¹² Privileging political activism over almost all other facets of human experience, critics make misguided pronouncements about literature’s ability to produce radical social change. “[A]rt is certainly diminished by engaging . . . in the hopeless hope that art can produce significant political resistance,” he writes, and “if we accept the idea that the measure of power is effectiveness in the political sphere,” then “art is in fact powerless.”¹³ But Altieri does not accept this definition of power. Literature’s true strength and what makes it worth studying is, he argues, not its ability to instigate political action (or, indeed, any action at all), but rather its ability to stimulate feelings and experiences that “constitute values and provide satisfactions in their own right”: that are, in other words, “ends in themselves.”¹⁴ Therefore, as literary critics, we should, he advises, move away from political and philosophical approaches to what he calls an “aesthetic” approach and “devote our teaching to leading students to know what is involved in feeling one’s body” “intensely” and “complexly.”¹⁵

If literary criticism were to reorient itself—as he suggests that it should—around language’s potential ability to make the body feel, then Spiritualist texts, as my dissertation demonstrates, might be ideal objects of study. The movement’s literature offers an excellent opportunity to explore the physical impact of language and, for that reason, it should hold a central place in literary criticism as re-imagined by Altieri. He, however, would probably disagree with this assessment. The “Victorian imaginary,” he writes, “desperately imposed self-congratulatory forms of identification on complex and disturbing feelings.” Using affective states as justifications for action or immediately aligning them with categories of identity, thereby leveling distinctive shades of feeling, nineteenth-century writers, he implies, regarded such experiences, not as inherently worthwhile, but rather as a means to an end. As a reaction to this reductive approach, modernism, he argues, attempted “to make the nondiscursive and nonepistemic dimensions of art wield the same level of cultural force as did scientific and utilitarian argument.” Modernist literature recognized, valued, and sought to stimulate impressions that had no clear purpose and that resisted being collapsed with simple moral “truths.” For writers of the early twentieth-century, these sensations did not need to be articulated

and pressed into action. That they could be experienced at all was enough.¹⁶ Yet, my dissertation suggests that, contrary to Altieri's view of nineteenth-century literature, Spiritualist poetry and prose may be able to produce a variety of powerful, though not necessarily purposive, reader-centered affects. And while these texts attempt to assign specific meanings to potential responses, they can never—and, indeed, no text can—completely control how readers will interpret and act upon their own sensations. If the focus of literary criticism were, as Altieri recommends, to shift from the sociological and philosophical to the aesthetic, then scholars would prioritize works, not on the basis of their political or moral agenda, but on the strength of their ability to organize reader's physical and emotional reactions. In this redesigned canon, nineteenth-century Spiritualist literature might figure more prominently than the twentieth-century works that he favors.

My dissertation not only suggests ideal objects of study, but also offers theories and vocabularies that can be used to identify and describe their affective potential. In this way, it attempts to address a problem that seems to underlie most literary criticism on literature and the body, a problem that is illustrated by Altieri when he confidently asserts that texts can act upon readers and shape their experiences. Literary productions, he writes, are “capable of soliciting and restructuring” readers’ “affective energies” in ways that “can realize and elaborate particular human powers”; texts are capable “of producing a concrete experience.”¹⁷ Thus, he thinks that, if we are going to study literature, we need a “theory” that can “show why responding to these particular words in this particular order makes present for the imagination certain qualities of experience that have the power to modify how our psyches are disposed toward a world beyond the text.”¹⁸ But he does not offer such a theory, and his close readings do not, as Eric Rothstein notes, convincingly explain how language produces the affects that he describes. In Altieri's arguments, Rothstein finds “a lack of empirical evidence about how, by whom, and how closely books get read and feelings felt”: his “bold claims about how artworks help us bring our being into being . . . are well worth attention and admiration, but from the evidence here, they aren't yet worth belief.”¹⁹ Though Altieri's work is explicitly about language and sensation, it tends to leave the physical and cognitive relationship between readers and texts unexamined. He argues that literature makes people feel. But without an account of how linguistic formations appeal to minds and bodies, he cannot explain how it does this.

It may be that one of the reasons why critics like Altieri avoid discussing the mechanisms through which language acts on readers is that they lack an adequate methodology. There is, as far as I know, no contemporary school of literature criticism that can accommodate a study of how the experiential and cultural components of—for example—hearing, touching, and seeing might be registered in and simulated through print. In an attempt to fill this gap, my dissertation integrates ideas from two emerging fields: cognitive poetics and the history of the senses. Cognitive poetics relies heavily on cognitive science and psychology. It is a constellation of diverse assumptions about how the mind processes literary texts and a collection of practical techniques for analyzing how stylized language produces reader-centered effects.²⁰ To negotiate the intersection between reader and text, critics working in the area of cognitive poetics use research on topics like cognitive deixis, possible world theory, and figure-ground perception, to name just a few. This range of possible approaches within cognitive poetics is an asset for my project. Representing diverse sensory experiences—auditory, tactile, visual, etc.—

Spiritualist texts may appeal to different cognitive processes and produce different affective responses. Cognitive poetics allows me to address these important distinctions because it offers a wide variety of explanatory tools. When studies in cognitive poetics appeared in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, the majority were produced by scholars from literature departments in Europe and Israel, and went virtually unnoticed by their American counterparts. However, over the last decade, literary critics in the United States have begun to take an interest in this work. Elaine Scarry's influential *Dreaming by the Book* (1999) brought cognitive poetics to the attention of many American literary critics. That same year, Mary Thomas Crane and Alan Richardson both reflected and contributed to critics' increasing awareness of cognitive poetics by presenting a review of the field's key works in *Mosaic*. The publishing house Routledge acknowledged and advanced this trend in literary criticism by releasing the companion texts, *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction* (2002) and *Cognitive Poetics in Practice* (2003), edited by Peter Stockwell and Joanna Gavins, respectively. Since 2003, journals like *American Literature* that, in the past, were venues only for formalist, historicist, and/or cultural readings of texts have recognized the "cognitive turn" in literary studies by featuring innovative work from critics like James Dawes.²¹ By applying some of the ideas and methods of cognitive poetics, my dissertation contributes to this rapidly growing field.

With its emphasis on reader-centered affects, cognitive poetics is, at its most basic, a reader-response theory. But an approach that centers on the reader is, Altieri argues, highly problematic. "Response theories," he asserts, "locate the distinguishing features of the affects in the ways that individual imaginations process the materials. But from my perspective this line of thinking subordinates the work to the empirical self and so deprives the work of powers to modify agents or to reveal to them significant affective states and configurations that were not part of the repertoires they brought to the work." Yet, the "the empirical self" seems indispensable to any study about language and experience because, after all, how can we talk about the ways in which texts "elaborate particular human powers" without talking about humans? Instead of "depriv[ing]" texts of the "powers to modify agents," response theories like cognitive poetics attempt to explain how texts and readers interact to produce the impressions that Altieri describes.²² And, though he accuses response theories of "collaps[ing] the text into the free working of the responding psyche,"²³ this danger is, as Rothstein clearly shows, most apparent in Altieri's own close-readings.²⁴ My dissertation attempts to show that, far from producing idiosyncratic interpretations and simplifying nuanced sensations, cognitive poetics can offer critics an approach for dealing with complex responses to language that benefits from the insights of linguists, psychologists, and neuroscientists whose work can contribute to our understanding of how literature might act upon the body and shape experience.

By themselves, however, these approaches are incomplete. A weakness of many cognitive poetic analyses of literature is that they do not account for how perception is shaped by social and cultural factors.²⁵ To avoid this problem, I will supplement cognitive poetics with insights gained from recent histories of the senses. Since Walter J. Ong's and Marshall McLuhan's pivotal studies on the rise of visualism in the West, historians have written extensively on the social construction of sight, documenting how it has been interpreted and deployed as an organizational principle in the realms of art, architecture, literature, science, economics, and government.²⁶ Yet, as studies on vision

proliferated, the role of the other senses was ignored. This changed in the 1990s with the “sensuous revolution,” when academics from a range of disciplines began to focus on how senses other than sight mediate experience and produce knowledge.²⁷ The dominance of vision in the western sensorium was denaturalized by anthropologists who described the alternative sensoriums of non-western societies. Within studies of the west, historians and sociologists traced the cultural construction of hearing, smell, touch, and taste, and revealed the relationships between these previously understudied senses to powerful religious, political, and gender ideologies.²⁸ In the last few years, the “sensuous revolution” has begun to transform interpretations of American history. Taken together, studies by David D. Hall, Richard Cullen Rath, Peter Charles Hoffer, Leigh Eric Schmidt, and Mark Smith provide a history of American perception that stretches from the colonial period to the nineteenth century. Their work will provide me with the historical background that I need to assess the cultural significance of Spiritualist sensory practices.²⁹

Bringing together cultural history and cognitive poetics, chapter one of my dissertation contends that the style of Spiritualist trance poetry may trigger an altered state of consciousness that reproduces the salient features of a supernatural auditory experience. While nineteenth-century doctors and scientists contended that hearing the voices of the dead was a symptom of moral, physical, and/or psychological illness, auditive mediums insisted that the perception of spirit speech was actually an indicator of good health and attempted to normalize these sensations by reproducing them in readers of their texts. To show how their texts might have accomplished this, I use the theories of Reuven Tsur, a pioneer in the field of cognitive poetics, who argues that particular linguistic formations may initiate a diffuse mode of perception.³⁰ If readers attained this state, then, I suggest, they may have interpreted it as the embodied experience of receiving otherworldly communications. Through poems with the potential to simulate the sensations of auricular revelation, Spiritualists, I argue, hoped to transform a collection of pathologized impressions into the basis for new, more fluid forms of subjectivity and community. The chapter also compares poems by Jennie Rennell, a trance poet, and Lydia Huntley Sigourney, one of the most popular sentimental poets of the period. It foregrounds the stylistic similarities between their two genres and considers the potential of sentimental poetry to incite collective experiences.

Chapter two argues that séance reports maximize a reader’s ability to infer weight, form, and texture so that the experience of reading about materialized spirit bodies approximates the perceptual act of touching them. To show how these texts might prompt a simulation of tactile experience, I draw on Scarry’s study of literature and perception *Dreaming by the Book*; James J. Gibson’s use of Gestalt psychology, and Stephen M. Kosslyn’s interpretation of introspective, behavioral, and neural data on mental imagery.³¹ The pseudo tactile impressions that Spiritualist testimonials may incite are situated in the context of American views on touch. While sensory and scientific conventions held that truth could only be attained through the eyes of an impartial observer, séance reports taught readers that touch, informed by passion, desire, and even aggression, was an ideal way of apprehending the world. Regarded as emotional, sensual, and animalistic, touch has long been at the bottom of the Western sensorium. But, through their published testimony, Spiritualists sought to cultivate and legitimize this denigrated form of bodily knowledge.

Chapter three contends that the prominent Spiritualist, medium, and writer Thomas Lake Harris expands the possibilities of the vision epic, transforming it into a lesson on how to see. I consider Harris's *An Epic of the Starry Heaven* in relation to Emerson's ideas about sight, and compare it to epics by Joel Barlow and Walt Whitman. Whether construed by Barlow as a rational means of classifying visual objects or by Emerson and Whitman as an expression of Romantic subjectivity, sight was, for these writers, a simple sensory fix to the problems of American history because—as their literary models of heroic seeing seem to demonstrate—the eye could collapse the complexities of national experience into a single, teleologically-unfolding vision. However, Harris, I argue, advanced an alternative way of seeing that combined the perspectives of both self and other. In an attempt to explain how his poem may inspire the fluid-self perceptions that supposedly accompany spiritual sight, I use Tsur's theory on the relationship between language and diffuse perception as well as Peter Stockwell's work on Surrealist writing techniques. A literary critic who specializes in cognitive poetics, Stockwell writes about the potentially disorienting effects of metaphors that yoke together unlike entities, forcing a clash between irreconcilable domains of knowledge.³² Using metaphors that are difficult to resolve as well as the linguistic formations described by Tsur, Harris' vision epic, I argue, may be able to simulate what it would feel like to experience sight as both an emotionally-informed communal process and a powerful means of creating collective realities that exceed national and even planetary boundaries.

If Spiritualist texts trigger experiences that mimic the sensations of hearing voices, feeling spirit bodies, and seeing celestial visions, the writings of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps seem designed to deny the reader imaginary access to the other world. Chapter four uses Text World Theory to describe what I call the aesthetics of desensualization in Phelps's *The Gates Ajar*, "Since I Died," "The Room's Width," and "The Presence." A school of thought that combines principles from cognitive linguistics and psychology, Text World Theory maintains that readers create and prioritize conceptual spaces in response to certain linguistic cues and that these dynamic mental maps make it possible for them to understand what they are reading.³³ Through a variety of rhetorical tactics, Phelps's works, I argue, train readers to place the possibility of spirit contact at the bottom of their conceptual hierarchies of likely scenarios, an arrangement that they repeatedly generate over the course of processing a text. Phelps, I contend, tries to turn this cognitive ordering into a habit so that the sensations which Spiritualists regarded as an integrated part of ordinary life would seem impossible in the context of the reader's reality.

As these chapter summaries indicate, my dissertation focuses on textually-induced sensations with an eye toward how such experiences might shape reader's interpersonal relationships and social affiliations. This would make me what Altieri calls a "political" critic. But I would include him in this group, too, because, despite his explicitly stated resistance to political approaches, he can not seem to talk about the affects for long without considering how they might prepare readers for engagement with the world. He claims that he "want[s] to use aesthetic models to foreground . . . experiences of affective states as ends in themselves, experiences quite at odds with the philosophical to treat affects primarily as means for generating actions and attitudes." However, by his own definition, "attitudes" seem to be an intrinsic part of "affects," and it's easy to see how, with a strong semantic component, these feelings might lead to "actions." "Affects," he

writes, “are immediate modes of sensual responsiveness to the world characterized by an accompanying imaginative dimension.” The process through which sensation and meaning (created by the imagination) are combined can be illustrated by the affect “pain.” According to Altieri, “Pain is usually a [bodily] sensation . . . But pain becomes an affect when it takes on a tinge of irritation with some particular situation that one wants to be otherwise or when it enters the domain of sadness by focusing on various kinds of loss.” Sensations of hurt become affects when they are linked to ideas that give them significance. Pain’s meaning derives from the perception that it is the result of unwanted circumstances and, as Altieri hints, it could readily become the motivation for behaviors that attempt to reverse the “loss” or change the “situation” that “one wants to be otherwise.” Meaningful sensory experiences might motivate readers to attend to their external environments. Therefore, critics who adopt an aesthetic approach to texts need not base their analyses on the assumption that readers are trapped within a subjective space of aimless urges and sensations. In contrast, “[s]tressing the affects,” he writes, “emphasizes modes of caring about the self *and* the world” (emphasis mine). “An aesthetic perspective invites us to ask what states, roles, identifications, and social bonds become possible by virtue of our efforts to dwell fully within” the “dispositions of energies and the modes of self-reflection” that texts can bring about. Guiding Altieri’s aesthetic approach, this question is also at the very heart of the “political” criticism that he opposes.³⁴

It is also at the center of my dissertation. While Spiritualist literature would be relevant to a depoliticized and affect-centered version of literary studies, it is also relevant to the field as it currently exists. This is because, while readers of Spiritualist works might enjoy their textually-induced sensations without feeling compelled to “do” anything about them, these texts, as my dissertation argues, do in fact attempt to dictate what the “imaginative dimension” of those sensations will be. On the basis of their semanticized experiences, readers are encouraged to make controversial identifications (as clairvoyants, auditive mediums, and objects of spirit touch, for example) and to forge imaginary ties with others who feel the same way. Though Spiritualist texts have not received much critical attention, they provide timely examples of how aesthetics might simulate embodied experiences of more open and fluid forms of subjectivity. Their techniques for inciting sensations of inter-connectedness and community might be studied by critics and appropriated by activists who believe that language can create the experiential basis for new kinds of political affiliation.

Chapter 1

“Oh, listen to the sound I hear!”: Spiritualist Trance Poetry and the Redefinition of Healthy Hearing¹

On a November day in 1862, a woman named Lizzie Doten stood entranced before the friends and family of the recently deceased Henry L. Kingman of North Bridgewater, Massachusetts. Staring beyond the mourners who had gathered for his funeral, she pleaded with the “Blest dwellers in the upper spheres” to “tell us” where “The soul of him we love has flown.”² She listened hard and, before long, reported that Kingman’s voice had reached her ears from beyond the grave:

Hark! For a voice of gentle tone
 The answer to our cry hath given
 Soft as Aeolian harpstrings blown,
 Responsive to the breath of even—
 ‘I have not sought a distant shore;
 Lo! I am with you—weep no more.’³

At the time of Doten’s performance, the religious movement known as Modern Spiritualism claimed millions of followers and exercised a powerful influence on American culture.⁴ One of the movement’s most controversial claims was that mediums possessed spiritual senses—highly sensitive “inner ears”—that allowed them to hear the dead as they sang of their pre-and-post mortem lives in lines of poetry.⁵ Of all the movement’s auditive mediums, Doten was perhaps the most renowned, and “Hope for the Sorrowing”—the poem that she delivered at Kingman’s funeral—later appeared in her widely-read volume of spirit verse, *Poems from the Inner Life* (1863). While nineteenth-century Americans may have been deeply moved by “Hope,” modern readers are more likely to be put off by its predictable form and saccharine sentiments. With its pathetic premise, dramatic address, and endless abstractions, it may seem too contrived to elicit any genuine bodily response. Yet, I will argue that “Hope for the Sorrowing” and other poems like it may have had the potential to elicit powerful sensations in readers, making them feel like they, too, were hearing voices.

“Hope for the Sorrowing” at once reflected and participated in a public debate about the proper uses of the ear. For doctors and scientists, the existence of trance poetry confirmed the idea that, of all the senses, the ear was the most defective and in need of reform. The ear, writes Leigh Eric Schmidt in his study of American auditory culture, was regarded by many eighteenth and nineteenth-century intellectuals as the primary organ of superstition, an echo-chamber that converted natural noises into celestial voices and generated false evidence in support of ridiculous religious beliefs. It was, he argues, a focal point for negative associations: “The ear was mystical; the ear was female; the ear was obedient, timid, exploitable, weak, and untrustworthy,” linked with “the passions, [and] credulity.” “Marked as a spiritual, emotional, and superstitious sense,” hearing “posed a potential danger to the clear-sightedness of reason” and was, therefore, “especially marked for reformation.” Contemplating its reinvention, “Natural Philosophers,” he claims, “dreamed of the exquisite purification of listening” and, in this environment, Spiritualism became the target of a powerful demystifying impulse.⁶ For

instance, the nineteenth-century American doctor William A. Hammond made it his “main object” to demonstrate that the perception of spirit voices was “readily explainable by well-known physiological, pathological, or physical laws” and to prove “that many assertions made in reference to them are fraudulent and false.”⁷

Critics like Hammond repeatedly pointed to what they believed were the untreated illnesses and corrupt morals of trance speakers and writers. They argued that mediums were liars: “the men and women—mostly women—who go about the country talking nonsense and calling it inspired are,” writes Hammond, “the veriest humbugs of the age” because “no one ha[s] ever spoken through the powers of a spirit other than his own.”⁸ His contemporary, Professor H. Mattison, agrees with this assessment. “[W]riting and speaking media,” he contends, “*know* very well that not a word of what they write and set forth into the world as messages from the dead, comes from any other source than their own intellects.”⁹ And honest trance poets—skeptics supposed that there might be a few—who genuinely believed that they heard angelic voices were either physically ill or mentally deranged. By claiming to have revealed the natural causes of supposedly supernatural voices, doctors and scientists restricted the kinds of sounds that could reasonably exist in the world, prescribed how those sounds should be heard, and imposed rigid limits on auditory experience that left no room for the possibility of listening to the dead.¹⁰

However, Spiritualists resisted these attempts to silence religious hearing and standardize auditory sensations. Arguing that spiritual hearing was a universal capability and that auricular revelation was a sign of health, they encouraged Americans to discover and exercise their inner ears.¹¹ To understand how Spiritualist poetry may have incited a physical and psychological experience that is structurally analogous to the experience of hearing voices, I will draw on the twentieth-century theories of Reuven Tsur. Tsur is a leading figure in cognitive poetics, a school of literary criticism that is grounded in linguistics, psychology, and cognitive science; and his groundbreaking work on the relationship between literature and perception is crucial to any discussion about how texts excite sensations. In *On the Shore of Nothingness* (2003), he studies how poets use conceptual language to “convey non-conceptual experiences, such as meditation, ecstasy, or mystic insight.” Words like “ecstasy” and “mysticism” are, he explains, “clear-cut concepts or mere tags” that are used to name religious experiences in which the boundaries of time and space, self and other are suspended. Because these experiences transgress boundaries and defy labels, linguistic representations of them often give the impression that there is an affective excess that resists representation and is lost in translation: “the semiotic features that constitute . . . some mystic experience can be paraphrased in conceptual language; what *cannot* be paraphrased is its diffuse structure, and the phenomenological quality of this diffuse structure.” Nevertheless, Tsur notices that “some religious poems are remarkably successful in conveying this conscious quality.” Isolating the features that these successful poems have in common, he contends that specific categories of words and linguistic formations give readers access to this indescribable condition by allowing them to feel it for themselves. The characteristics of what he calls “altered states of consciousness” are, I will argue, also the salient qualities of Spiritualist auditory experience.¹² For this reason, his findings are indispensable to my investigation of how trance poetry’s sensual aesthetic may affect readers.

In this chapter, I will show that, through a combination of cognitive and rhetorical techniques, trance poems may create subjects who feel what the medical establishment pathologized as the diseased and even dangerous sensations of auditive mediumship. Translating their religion's emphasis on time and space into words, these Spiritualist poets produce lyrics that are unusually dense with deictic and non-deictic spatial and temporal language. This kind of language, Tsur speculates, arouses right hemisphere orientation processing. Orientation processing makes it possible for us to situate ourselves in new environments, but, in the absence of visual information, it may also, according to Tsur, erode self-perceptions of boundedness, coherence, agency, and emotional control.¹³ This state, I will argue, corresponds phenomenologically with the self-described experiences of spiritual hearers. The poems deprive readers' brains of visual data by feeding them unstable, invisible and/or abstract inputs which, by diffusing an already diffuse mode of treating information, exaggerate its deconstructive effects on subjectivity.¹⁴ Furthermore, drawing from the work of literary critics who study the constitutive effects of language, I will suggest that the poems use rhetorical strategies to influence how readers interpret their physical and psychological responses to the text. Apostrophes and explicit instructions are used to convince readers that they already have active inner ears and to train them to equate the feeling of heightened orientation activity with the feeling of spiritual hearing. Defined by thematic and rhetorical features that can trigger radical changes in consciousness and determine how they are interpreted, trance poetry may generate what I call "ear-oriented" subjects, non-individuated constellations of affect, who experience themselves as passive, open, and interdependent. By spreading the perceptions of auditive mediumship, trance poetry attempts to unite readers on the basis of a shared sensory experience. It works to forge an expansive community of spiritual hearers, an association the size of which would attest to the normalcy of its defining sensory practice.¹⁵

Trance poets like Doten were central to the Spiritualist project of auditory reform. Of the three poets I will be studying in this chapter, she was the most prominent, considered by her contemporaries to be "one of the most popular and highly gifted lecturers in the ranks of Spiritualism."¹⁶ Throughout the 1850s, she wrote sentimental short stories for *The Lily of the Valley*, an annual gift book that showcased works by women writers. By the 1860s, she had become a vocal proponent of Spiritualism, and all of her writing from that point forward promulgated the principles of the movement. Following *Poems from the Inner Life* (1863), she produced another book of trance verse called *Poems of Progress* (1871) and traveled the lecture circuit presenting spirit communications to large audiences throughout New England.¹⁷ In addition to analyzing the trance productions of Doten, I will also examine works by Sarah Gould. Gould was a medium from Boston, who reported that the poems in her book, *Asphodels* (1856), were produced in cooperation with the dead. She also wrote (without claiming spiritual assistance) instructional essays for young women and edited short story collections like *Our Happy Home*.¹⁸ Doten and Gould lived in a city that was a hotbed of Spiritualism, and their poems were widely circulated by recognized publishers. In contrast, Jennie Rennell, the third poet whose work will be featured in this chapter, was relatively obscure. Instead of being backed by an influential Spiritualist or mainstream press, her compilation of trance verse *Chips, Lectures in rhyme; Poems, Messages, and Songs* (1890) appears to have been privately published. Several of the book's poems are

dedicated to friends in Berkeley and San Francisco, California, which suggests that Rennell lived in the Bay Area, a place that, despite some activity among believers, was still on the margins of the movement. In the introduction to *Chips*, she asserts that the verses were “written through my hand by unseen forces during the past year” and compiled on the advice of friends—living and dead—who encouraged her to “submit them to the consideration of the public.”¹⁹ While she may have been circulating these poems in manuscript form among close associates or delivering them verbally in private homes, it seems that *Chips* was the first truly public venue for her work. I have chosen to foreground Doten, Gould, and Rennell because, despite their differences in geography and fame, their poems share rhetorical strategies and subject matter; and these similarities demonstrate that trance poetry is a cohesive genre.

As a genre, trance poetry is strikingly similar to sentimental poetry. Widely read during the nineteenth century, sentimental poetry often described the emotional aftermath of a loved one’s death and the potentially destructive effects of loss on close family relationships. From theme to style, sentimental and trance poetry have a lot in common. However, while trance poems encouraged readers to hear the dead, sentimental poems furthered the agenda of doctors and scientists who sought to stifle spiritual hearing. Sentimental poets were not interested in the reform of American auditory culture. But they were interested, according to literary critic Mary Louise Kete, in using their texts to create communities based on bonds of affection.²⁰ The linguistic formations that populate trance poetry also appear, though with less regularity, in sentimental poetry, and may have made it possible for readers to feel connected in the way that Kete describes. Since the 1980s, critics have been attending to the aesthetic features of sentimental literature and discussing their potential functions.²¹ Identifying the linguistic strategies that trance and sentimental poetry share as well as describing their potential for inciting collective experience, this chapter also offers a contribution to those discussions.

The Emergence of Auditive Mediums and the Purpose of their Poetry

Beginning in 1848 with the notorious “Rochester Rappings,” Modern Spiritualism was founded on the idea that the dead could communicate with the living.²² While spirits’ messages sometimes appealed to the eye (beautiful visions), the skin (fleeting caresses), and even the nose (familiar fragrances), they seemed to be overwhelmingly aimed at the ear, often taking the form of banging, music, and voices.²³ As they listened closely to what they believed were the sounds of the dead, Spiritualists developed a comprehensive understanding of how hearing worked. Their ideas about this sense were informed by the works of Emanuel Swedenborg, an eighteenth-century Swedish scientist and mystic, who maintained that it had been “granted” to him “to be with angels and to talk with them person to person.”²⁴ Gathering information from these encounters, he wrote voluminously about the other world, and his volume *Heaven and Hell*—an account of things “*Heard and Seen*” became a best seller in the United States.²⁵ By the 1850s, Swedenborg was a familiar figure to most Americans and, as Bret E. Carroll writes, a “cultural icon” to Spiritualists, who had “combined his spirit-centered cosmic order and his practice of spirit communication to form the heart of their religion.”²⁶

Swedenborg’s conversations with the dead made him an expert on the mechanics of Spiritual hearing, and his discussions on this subject shaped the movement’s

understanding of how mediumship worked. Comparing internal and external audition, he writes that, while “Our speech with each other flows first into the air and comes to our organ of hearing and activates it by an outward route,” “the speech of an angel or spirit flows first into our thought and then by an inner route into our organ of hearing so that it activates it from within.” Because an internal voice “activates our hearing mechanism just as much” as an external one does, “it is just as audible.” Therefore, the only difference between listening to the living and listening to the dead is that what spirits say “is not audible to people who are nearby,” but “only to ourselves.” Warning that spirits often had malicious intentions toward their auditors, Swedenborg stressed that spiritual hearing was “dangerous” and that no one (with the exception of himself) should intentionally use their inner ears to receive impressions from the other world.²⁷ However, it struck Spiritualists as undemocratic that Swedenborg should be the only one to enjoy these sensations and so, ignoring his warnings on this point, they opened themselves to the possibilities of auditive mediumship.²⁸

“[A]uditive mediums,” explains Dr. William A. Hammond, a vehement critic of the movement, are people who “hear spirit voices” and “exhort” or “give utterance to [the] communications received.”²⁹ Appearing “in the early 1850s,” they were, as historian Anne Braude writes, “the missionaries of Spiritualism, and their far-reaching itinerancy aided the rapid spread of the movement.”³⁰ Often called “trance” mediums, they claimed to receive messages while in an altered state. For some, the onset of this state led to a complete loss of consciousness: their awareness waned as the dead took full possession of their minds and bodies. However, for many others, trance was a condition of heightened receptivity in which they, retaining at least some awareness of themselves as perceptive beings, could, as Doten puts it, “listen” “to the music of the upper spheres,” make out the “words” of “invisible teachers,” and “catch the thrill of the innumerable voices resounding through the universe.”³¹ These voices spoke to mediums in prose, but often in poetry. “[T]rance speakers,” says Slater Brown, “could discourse before an enraptured audience for hours on end” about religious, scientific, and political issues.³² However, as Mary Bednarowski notes, “While generous in their inspirations to writers [and speakers] of Spiritualist prose, the spirits of the dead were most active in the production of poetry.” According to believers, spirits “composed poetry in Spirit-Land and then inspired entranced mediums to deliver the poems to the world.”³³

Reaching a large audience of converts and skeptics, these works were disseminated through live performance, print publication, or some combination of the two. When trance speakers recited poems before private séance circles or public lecture halls, usually witnesses would write them down and submit them to the newspapers. However, inspiration often came to mediums when they were alone. In such instances, they would transcribe their interior voices, and then read aloud or publish the resulting text.³⁴ “[T]rance speakers received considerable attention in the press,” remarks Braude, and their verse appeared regularly in mainstream and Spiritualist publications. “By the end of the century, over a hundred periodicals had reported news of spiritual manifestations,” including poetic utterances. Some of these periodicals had wide circulation—for instance, “The *Banner of Light* claimed subscribers in every state and territory”—and almost all of them devoted a significant amount of space to trance poetry.³⁵

With its wide reach, trance poetry, auditive mediums hoped, would alter readers' perceptions and call forth new spiritual hearers. Spiritualists claimed that everyone—including skeptics—had inner ears and could learn how to use them. “[E]very soul,” declared the Spiritualist philosopher Andrew Jackson Davis, “is constructed upon identical principles, contains the same elements, and is capable of analogous manifestations. No man is gifted intrinsically above another.”³⁶ The Spiritualists J. E. Bruce and J. H. Dewey contended that “All human beings have mediumistic powers. These powers inhere among the natural functions of the brain.”³⁷ This meant, to use the words of the auditive medium John Shoebridge Williams, that, rather than being restricted “to those called mediums as a separate class of men and women,” the ability to discern the voices of the dead was “the privilege of all.”³⁸ Americans could realize this “privilege” and activate their dormant inner ears by reading trance poetry. In the introduction to *Poems from the Inner Life*, Doten explains that the purpose of the collection was not “to cause [a] commotion in the literary world,” but to reach “all those earnest and inquiring souls” who wish to enjoy “such experiences as I have described” and to let them know that “[t]here are invisible teachers around you.” The ability to hear these “teachers,” she assured them, could be learned:

We need only listen early and attentively, and we shall soon learn to keep in the grand march of Life to the music of the upper spheres. As a popular author has beautifully said, ‘Silence is vocal, if we listen well.’ . . . whosoever will, can listen to that harmony, till all special and particular discords shall die out from the ‘Inner Life,’ and the Heaven of the celestial intelligences shall blend with the ‘Heaven within,’ in perfect unison.³⁹

Representing the auditory experiences of one whose “special and particular discords” had already been swallowed by heavenly harmonies, Doten’s trance poems were, she believed, important educational aids. If aspiring mediums read these scripts of interior hearing, they could learn how to “listen well.”

Lizzie Doten’s “Hope for the Sorrowing”: Producing Ear-Oriented Subjects through the Simulation of Auditory Experience

Trance poems seem to have been designed to teach readers how to hear like auditive mediums. Though poets like Doten could not have known how their language might affect brain activity, their texts may have altered readers’ consciousness and allowed them to experience the sensations associated with hearing voices by prompting them to cognitively process deictic and orientative terms. Such terms abound in “Hope for the Sorrowing”:

Ye holy ministers of Love,
 Blest dwellers in the upper spheres,
 In vain we fix our gaze above,
 For we are blinded by our tears.
 O, tell us to what land unknown
 The soul of him we love has flown?

He left us when his manly heart
 With earnest hope was beating high;

Too soon it seemed for us to part;
 Too soon, alas! For him to die.
 We have the tenement of clay,
 But aye the soul has passed away.

Away, into the unknown dark,
 With fearless heart and steady hand,
 He calmly launched his fragile bark,
 To seek the spirits' Father Land,
 Say, has he reached some distant shore,
 To speak with us on earth no more?

We gaze into unmeasured space,
 And lift our tearful eyes above,
 To catch the gleaming of his face,
 Or one light whisper of his love,
 O God! O Angels! hear our cry,
 Nor let faith in darkness die!

Hark! For a voice of gentle tone
 The answer to our cry hath given
 Soft as Aeolian harpstrings blown,
 Responsive to the breath of even—
 "I have not sought a distant shore;
 Lo! I am with you—weep no more.

"Ay! Love is stronger far than death,
 And wins the victory o'er the Grave;
 Dependent on no mortal breath,
 Its mission is to guide and save.
 Above the wrecks of Death and Time,
 It triumphs, changeless and sublime.

"Still shall my love its vigils keep,
 True as the needle to the pole,
 For Death is not a dreamless sleep,
 Nor is the Grave man's final goal.
 The larger growth,—the life divine,—
 All that I hoped or wished, are mine."

Blest spirit! We will weep no more,
 But lay our selfishness to rest;
 The Providence, which we adore,
 Has ordered all things for the best.
 Life's battle fought, the victory won,
 To nobler toils pass on! pass on!⁴⁰

Doten's poem features numerous deictic terms. The word "deixis" comes from the Greek verb for "pointing" or "showing" and, indeed, the function of deictic language is to direct the addressee's attention toward features of the context in which speech (or writing) is produced.⁴¹ Examples of deictic language, writes the linguist Stephen C. Levinson, include "demonstratives, first and second person pronouns, tense, [and] specific time and place adverbs," but the category of "deixis" is also, as David Crystal notes, quite broad, including all of "those features of language which refer directly to the personal, temporal, or locational characteristics of the situation within which an utterance takes place."⁴² Organized around the source of speech, deixis is, to use Elaine Semino's words, "fundamentally egocentric."⁴³ For example, adverbs like "away," "across," "here," and "there" gesture toward the location of an entity by implicitly referring back to the position of the speaker, while adverbs like "now," "yesterday," and "recently" specify points in time by situating them in relation to the time of the speaker's utterance.⁴⁴ The English verbs "come" and "go" also serve a deictic function because, as Levinson notes, they "make a distinction between the direction of motion relative to participants in the speech event."⁴⁵ Space and time can be delineated by non-deictic orientative terms as well. Prepositions like "in," "on," and "between" are non-deictic when they position an entity in relation to something other than the speaker.⁴⁶ This occurs in the sentence, "The cat jumped *over* the table." Tsur's understanding of deictic and orientative language reflects the descriptions given above. He defines deixis as "the pointing or specifying function of some words (as definite articles and demonstrative pronouns), tenses and a variety of other grammatical and lexical features whose denotations change from one discourse to another." Words of this class, he writes, "instruct the reader to construct from the verbal material a situation in which such denotations are relevant."⁴⁷ As his close-readings demonstrate, Tsur also recognizes that readers depend upon prepositions and other non-deictic orientative language to mentally sketch the temporal and spatial structures of represented worlds.

In "Hope for the Sorrowing," Doten relies heavily on both deictic and non-deictic orientative language to negotiate Kingman's transition from "now" to "then" and from "here" to "there." She stays focused on his movements, returning again and again to speculations about the temporal and spatial coordinates of his soul as it moves between different realms and states of existence. The prevalence of this language is significant because, if Tsur is correct, it has the potential to trigger right brain orientation processing. Tsur's discussion of right hemisphere activity is based in large part on the research of Robert Ornstein, a highly regarded writer on the subject of the brain and consciousness as well as a former teacher and researcher at the Langley Porter Neuropsychiatric Institute at the University of California, San Francisco. Drawing on Ornstein's work, he explains that right brain orientation processing is triggered whenever we are in "an unfamiliar space, time, or atmosphere" and that it is a "diffuse, holistic [and] simultaneous" mode that "lump[s] together a variety of sensory inputs," collapsing them into "a stream of fluctuating, undifferentiated, ever-changing information." Swiftly simplifying and integrating large amounts of complex data, it makes it possible for us to adapt quickly to new situations. But it also alters how we perceive them: we overlook their "stable objects, facts, and logic," and notice instead their "overall atmosphere." Allowing us to perceive the external world as a space of dynamic, non-linear relations, orientation processing,

Tsur speculates, may also have a similar effect on how we experience literature. Neurological experiments suggest that linguistic descriptions of spatial arrangements are processed by the same right brain mechanisms that process “real” or externally generated stimuli.⁴⁸ In light of this research, Tsur hypothesizes that, when we come across deixis in a text, the left brain “transfer[s] a part of the processing of the message to the right brain” where “the application of orientation mechanisms” to the language’s “clear-cut concepts” causes their differences and organizational structures to disintegrate. If this destructuring occurs, then the textual inputs would become an output that readers would experience, less like a linear accumulation of ideas, and more like a “global, diffuse, atmosphere.”⁴⁹

This diffuseness of perception is normal and occurs whenever we try to locate ourselves in a new spatial or temporal situation. However, the diffuseness might be drastically increased, Tsur hypothesizes, if deictic and non-deictic spatial and temporal expressions were paired, not with concrete nouns—a more canonical formation—but with abstract nouns. Citing the work of ecological psychologists, Tsur explains that, as one orients oneself in space, the right brain collects information from the “optical array,” where “one can see one’s own position and one’s own movements, as well as the layout of the environment.” When “the self-specifying reference points in the visual array are destroyed” and “the orientation area is forced to operate on little or no neural input,” the already dispersed output of orientation processing becomes even more dispersed than usual. Extrapolating from this idea, he argues that the linguistic equivalent of a blank “optical array” is a textual delineation of space that relies on abstract nouns. He posits that, in such representations, spatial and temporal language “activates the orientation mechanism; but, instead of stable objects, it acts upon abstractions, or at least entities and qualities that are deprived of stable characteristic visual shapes.” It then transforms these abstractions into a scattered, optically empty output that “weakens the ability [of the reader] to construct a clear picture of the data.” While processing the stark visual information supplied by concrete nouns, the right brain still generates an output that is blurry enough to take the edge off of a clear understanding of a text’s concepts. However, when abstract nouns magnify the diffuseness of orientation processing, further complicating the formation of mental representations of the text, the “softness” of the reader’s perception can be much more pronounced.⁵⁰

In addition to affecting how the reader experiences the text, orientation processing in the absence of visual information may also shape how he experiences himself during the act of reading. Tsur speculates that at least three aspects of self-perception may be affected. The first is how the perceiver determines his bodily limitations. According to the authors of a study which used electroencephalograms to map the brain activity of meditating monks, the “left orientation area is responsible for creating the mental sensation of a limited, physically defined body, while the right orientation area is associated with generating the sense of spatial coordinates that provides the matrix in which the body can be oriented.”⁵¹ Based on this research, Tsur argues that, when deprived of clear visual inputs, “the diffuse information-processing mode originating in the right hemisphere may help to blur . . . the mental sensation of a well-defined physical body” that is created by the left. In other words, the right brain creates the grid in which the mental image of the body is positioned, but it may also, he suggests, blur the contours that distinguish the image from the grid, causing the body to blend slightly with the space around it. Weakening the line between self and other, objectless orientation processing

may give rise to feelings of openness and intersubjectivity. Secondly, it could potentially support sensations of passivity. A form of “Holistic processing” that prevents “stimulus” from being “anatomized and analyzed,” this mode may already make it difficult for perceivers to construct a detailed representation of the information that they receive. And this challenge would be significantly greater if their right brains were acting on little or no visual information. Without a clear picture of their situation, they may lose confidence in their ability to intervene deliberately in the world and manipulate it in accordance with their intentions. Thirdly, orientation processing may prime perceivers to be unusually aware of and affected by their surroundings. “Changes in the individual’s sense of stability and control” have, Tsur writes, been “identified” by Gestalt psychologists “as elements that constitute high attentiveness for emotional stimulation.” Diffuse output and “diffuse elements” are known to “stimulate certain areas of the hypothalamus, which activate sympathetic and parasympathetic activities related to states of affect, emotion and moods.” Moreover, emotion, like orientation, “is typically right hemisphere brain activity,” and the two work together to negotiate new spatial and temporal situations.⁵²

Transforming how perceivers know themselves and the world, visually-deprived right hemisphere orientation processing, Tsur argues, underlies “altered states of consciousness.”⁵³ Altered consciousness is characterized by the adoption of what the psychologist Auke Tellegen calls an “experiential set”:

By experiential set is meant a state of receptivity or openness to undergo whatever experiential events, sensory or imaginal, that may occur, with tendency to dwell on, rather than go beyond, the experiences themselves and the objects they represent. In this set, experiences have a quality of effortlessness, as if they happened by themselves, and in that sense, of involuntariness.⁵⁴

According to Tsur, the activation of orientation mechanisms in the absence of visual information may be “the trigger that sets off this ‘quality of effortlessness’ and ‘involuntariness’, that effects the ‘switch’” from ordinary consciousness “to the experiential set.”⁵⁵

If the combination of spatial/temporal language with abstract nouns affects self-perception in the ways that Tsur describes, then the “switch” from ordinary to altered consciousness may be achieved by reading Doten’s poem. “Hope for the Sorrowing” may be especially adept at arousing orientation processing and emptying the optical array because, as I noted before, it is motivated by a “where” question: “to what land unknown” has the dead man’s spirit “flown”? His movement “Away, into the unknown dark,” has led survivors to wonder if he has “reached some distant shore, / To speak with us on earth no more.”⁵⁶ While the “dark” is a place defined by its lack of visual characteristics, “land” is too generic and expansive to picture clearly in the mind’s eye, and neither noun is particularized by the adjective “unknown.” Delineating his passage from a familiar space to an uncharted one, these “where” questions position prepositions around information voids, thereby confronting readers with the cognitively demanding task of imagining his coordinates relative to an absence.

Though the question propelling the poem justifies the articulation of numerous visually-empty speculations and expressions of uncertainty, its answer is never really in doubt—the medium and her audience know that his soul has gone to heaven, and the poem says as much. However, though the text names his destination, “heaven” by itself

does not provide the right brain with fine-grained visual inputs and, as in other Spiritualist verse, the adjectives that modify it never add to—and, in many cases, actually subtract from—the limited visual information that it does have. For instance, the speaker pleads with those who reside “in the upper spheres.” Representing pure form, sphere entails neither color, nor surface detail. The text further attenuates its already weak visual force by multiplying it (“spheres”) and modifying the pluralized form with an abstract spatial quality (“upper”). Another name for heaven that appears in the poem is “spirits’ Father Land” or, translating the opening euphemistic phrase, “God Land.” Compounded with God, an infinite being who exceeds all categories of thought and overwhelms the imagination, the once concrete noun “land” loses touch with its qualities of tangibility and visibility. References to other obscure or vacant places also evacuate the reader’s optical array, establishing the cognitive conditions for lowly differentiated consciousness. Setting off orientation activity, the prepositions “in,” “to,” and “into” are followed by “darkness,” “nobler toils,” and “unmeasured space,” respectively. In lines like “we fix our gaze above,” “We . . . lift our tearful eyes above,” and “the soul has passed away,” adverbs describe actions that gesture toward nothing and nowhere.⁵⁷

While the language considered thus far occurs in the part of the poem that represents the anxieties of the living, many other sensory triggers can be found in the message that the medium delivers from Kingston. An unseen spiritual speaker, he evokes a spatial situation that is populated with invisible and intangible actors and objects. “Love,” the agent in these lines, is an abstraction “changeless and sublime” that is “o’er,” “Above,” and—though the relationship is stated only to be negated—“on” other abstractions—“the Grave,” human effort (“mortal breath”), “Death and Time,” respectively.⁵⁸ If readers are unable to form a clear mental representation of what Doten and Kingston describe, they may experience, to borrow Tsur’s language, “an immediate sense of disorientation” and become aware of a “softer less precise definition of the boundaries of the self.”⁵⁹ Shifted to the orientation area of the right brain and then dissolved by this region’s processes into an amorphous mass of information, the poems’ language inputs could evoke a general atmosphere in which the boundaries of the body are blurred, and the self is vulnerable to feelings from within and forces from without.

With the potential to initiate brain activities that promote sensations of flexibility, receptivity, and sensitivity, Doten’s “Hope for the Sorrowing” may facilitate experiences of selfhood that are structurally and qualitatively similar to those described by auditive mediums. Media scholars have written extensively about the characteristics of ear-and-eye-oriented forms of subjectivity.⁶⁰ According to Edmund Carpenter and Marshall McLuhan, the experience of audition makes notions about the inviolability of the self difficult to sustain. While the eye is detached from what it sees and supports the subject/object distinction on which the rational ideal of independence relies, the ear, they contend, is penetrated by numerous, overlapping, ever-expanding sound waves which blur the lines between hearer and heard. As these waves breach the borders of the body, the perceiver becomes an integrated, highly permeable part of the “auditory space,” an expanse defined as ““a field of simultaneous relations without center or periphery,”” a “sphere without fixed boundaries” that is “dynamic, [and] always in flux.”⁶¹ In addition to attenuating impressions of subjective and bodily coherence, hearing, media studies scholars maintain, also undermines sensations of personal power and efficacy. We can pick and choose what we want to see by directing our eyes and turning our necks, but we

cannot reject sounds by closing our ears, nor banish entire regions of the auditory field by simply attending away.⁶² Finally, sounds are thought to “speak . . . directly to emotion.” Visual objects supposedly leave the spectator physically and emotionally untouched, thereby supporting a position characterized by calm disinterest and “rational” thought, but sounds, they claim, penetrate deep within the self to elicit powerful feelings and prejudices. Summarizing the attitudes and effects of Western visual culture, Carpenter and McLuhan remark that “Truth, we think, must be observed by the ‘eye,’ then judged by the ‘I.’”⁶³ However, if the “eye” fosters an “I” who is independent, active, and objective, the ear cultivates one who exceeds the unified mode of being that this pronoun suggests.

Some of the qualities that media scholars assign to ear-oriented subjectivity may have long been incorporated into the American model of selfhood. As recent work in the history of the senses has shown, the ability to correctly interpret the meaning of sounds was a crucial skill in colonial America, and attentiveness to the heard-world did not diminish in the nineteenth-century, though this period is generally associated with a growing emphasis on vision.⁶⁴ This connection is made for good reason. The expanding distribution of cheap print, the strengthening of the enlightenment link between seeing and the discernment of fact, and the invention of new visual forms of entertainment contributed to the creation of an increasingly ocularcentric culture. Yet, despite the celebration of spectacle, auditory experience was still crucial to how Americans understood themselves, their environment, and even their relationship to God. Indeed, from the colonial period onward, religion—perhaps more than any other cultural force—has played a central role in America’s rich auditory history, motivating the production of sounds and the cultivation of new hearing habits. Schmidt writes that, “[i]n eighteenth-century Britain and North America, the devout—Quakers, Baptists, Moravians, Methodists, evangelical Congregationalists and Presbyterians, among them—heard with an acuteness that was often overwhelming.”⁶⁵ And in the nineteenth century, “one thing was clear: god was hardly falling silent.” According to Schmidt, “the ongoing presences of the oracular, the angelic, and the tongue speaking” made “antebellum American religion” a noisy affair. Many denominations, including Methodists, Mormons, Shakers, and Adventists, had elaborate auditory cultures, but, among these groups, Swedenborg’s followers were perhaps the most striking. “[T]heir influence, along with that of their seer, was,” he observes, “diffuse” and “[t]hey formed an important representative capsule of a wider religious culture of immediate revelation.” Furthermore, “[n]o group on the American scene had a more complicated sensorium or a more developed understanding of the spiritual senses”—especially spiritual hearing.⁶⁶ Because of Spiritualists’ influence and exemplarity, their auditory experiences may offer insight into the broader question of how religious hearing shaped subjectivity in nineteenth-century America.

A close examination of their auditory culture suggests that the subject valued in Spiritualist theology and produced through auditive mediumship is remarkably similar to the sensitive, receptive, and amorphous model of the self that media scholars associate with hearing. Schmidt observes that “[n]o more basic distinction existed in the Swedenborgian sensorium than this one, between the rational, inquisitive eye and the emotive, obedient ear.”⁶⁷ Indeed, throughout Swedenborg’s theological works, he equates sight with intellect and agency, and hearing with submission and feeling: “to ‘see with the eyes’ is to understand; to ‘hear with the ears’ is to perceive with affection, consequently

to obey.”⁶⁸ “It is worth noting,” writes Swedenborg, “that angels of the third heaven [the highest heaven] are perfected in wisdom through hearing rather than through seeing” and their reliance on this sense has implications for how they think and behave. While lower angels see “divine truths” as images and “try to calculate whether [they are] true,” the highly evolved beings of the third sphere hear them and “simply say, ‘Yes, yes.’” They “never try to figure out divine truths, much less argue whether some particular truth is true or not”; nor do they “reason whether a thing is so, but believe it to be so because it is said by others to be so.”⁶⁹

Like their angelic counterparts, Spiritualist mediums were emptied out and opened up through the act of listening, transformed by their auditory orientations into receptacles for a heavenly influx. Illustrating this vacuity, Doten claims that she is uncertain of “How far [she has] ever written, independent of these higher influences” and describes herself as a “harp” whose strings are set in motion by the voices of others: “My brain was fashioned, and my nervous system finely strung so that I should inevitably catch the thrill of innumerable voices resounding through the universe.”⁷⁰ Similarly, Rennell calls herself “the compiler” of *Chips* “instead of the author” because she “cannot consciously lay claim to the authorship of one line.” Nor can she lay claim to herself. Insisting that she is “weak” while they are “strong,” her spirit “controls” demand that she “Ask advice, and follow it / In each act, in all [she] say[s].” She must “not try to walk alone,” they warn, because she “cannot stand” on her own.⁷¹ Exemplifying an extreme version of the ear-oriented subjectivity described by media scholars, Spiritualist auditive mediums experienced themselves, not as unified centers of consciousness, originating individual thoughts and actions, but as composites, collections in which their personal tones and intentions were overpowered by those of countless unseen intelligences.

Though the experience of altered consciousness and the auditive medium’s ear-oriented subjectivity are structurally analogous, these similarities alone may not be enough for readers of Doten’s “Hope for the Sorrowing” to take the perceptual effects of orientation processing for the sensations of spiritual hearing. The poem, however, endorses this interpretation through apostrophe. Apostrophe, writes Barbara Johnson, is the “direct address of an abstract, dead, or inanimate being by a first person speaker. . . . The absent, dead, or inanimate entity addressed is thereby made present, animate, and anthropomorphic.”⁷² In other words, the language of the speaker does not represent a pre-existing entity but, instead, creates that entity in the very act of speaking to it. According to Kete, the constitutive function of apostrophe is exploited in the nineteenth-century sentimental lyric, where it is used by the “the speaker . . . to subject the reader to a didactic process through which the lessons known, or learned by the persona of the poem, are experientially shared by the persona of the reader.” Its “goal seems to be to create an analogy between the speaker’s description of his or her own state of being and the reader’s.”⁷³ While this form of address is used in sentimental poetry to reproduce the behaviors, values, and affective intensities of various kinds of speakers (virtuous girls, sympathetic friends, dutiful wives, restrained mourners, etc.), its function is reduced in trance poetry to the discursive production of auditive mediums. It assumes that, if the speaker’s consciousness is infiltrated and dispersed by celestial speech, then the reader’s must be too.

Doten uses first-person pronouns to call into being an audience that feels as she does. Representing the concerns of those attending Kingman’s funeral and reading the

poem, Doten asks the spirits to “tell us” where “The soul of him we love has flown.” Here, the pronouns “us” and “we” suggest that the question is being posed by everyone and assumes that belief in the possibility of an audible answer from the other world is collectively held. This rhetorical move, along with the sadness of the event that the poem memorializes, stifles dissent from those who may not believe in the reality of spirit communication and includes them in the ranks of those who do. Furthermore, Doten posits addressees who cannot rely on their eyes. Though “We gaze into unmeasured space, / And lift our tearful eyes above, / To catch the gleaming of his [Kingman’s] face,” it is, she concludes, “In vain . . . For we are blinded by our tears.”⁷⁴ Deprived of their sight, the medium and the audience for whom she speaks switch perceptual modes from seeing to hearing and, instead of assertively looking for spirits in the sky, wait passively for the dead to act on their ears. By casting readers as blind listeners who believe that the dead can speak to the living, “Hope for the Sorrowing” provides an auditory framework through which they can understand the sensations of holistic processing.

First person pronouns perform the same function in other trance poems. For instance, in “The Rainbow Bridge,” Doten’s use of “we” presumes that her readers possess the ability to hear the dead: “we ask if over that shining way / They shall nevermore return” and, in response, “We hear them call, and their voices sweet / Float down . . . We hear them call, and the soul replies.”⁷⁵ Gould, too, attributes spiritual sensations to her readers, confidently stating that “[W]e catch the low tone / Of a Voice that is clear.”⁷⁶ Addressed in this way, readers learn to situate the feeling of right brain mentation in the context of auditory stimulation.

Another way in which “Hope for the Sorrowing” encourages an auditory interpretation of diffuse processing is by subjecting readers to questions and commands that standardize sensation. When Doten hears Kingman’s voice, she directs readers to listen—“Hark! for a voice of gentle tone / The answer to our cry hath given”—and then quotes what his spirit says, thereby supplying them with the content of what she assumes is a shared auditory experience.⁷⁷ This two-part rhetorical structure seems to be one of the genre’s defining traits. But while it appears in “Hope for the Sorrowing,” nowhere is it more clearly and frequently used than in Gould’s poetry. In numerous texts, the medium speaker becomes aware of a sound and demands that her readers turn their attention to it: “Oh, listen to the sound I hear!”; “Oh list; for methinks, I can catch some word”; “List for a moment, gentle friends, and hear”; “Oh, then listen, closely listen!”⁷⁸ Next, she specifies what it is that they perceive: “A conquering, a victorious strain!”; a “chorus” with the words “Love! Love!”; an inspiring message ““that earth beholds a better day””; or “Voices in the noon of night,” respectively.⁷⁹ Establishing experiential equality between the speaker and the addressee, this sequence, present in “Hope for the Sorrowing” and exemplified in Gould’s poems, creates a situation in which readers are encouraged to identify their muted perceptions with the influx of angelic voices.

Demonstrating some of trance poetry’s signature cognitive and rhetorical techniques, “Hope for the Sorrowing” was not only a record of Kingman’s posthumous message to the world, but also a set of instructions for how to hear like the auditive medium who delivered it. While the poems’ numerous spatio-temporal/abstract language combinations may excite sensations of limitlessness, passivity, and heightened emotional sensitivity, its pronouns, questions, and commands teach readers to equate these qualities of altered consciousness with the salient phenomenological features of Spiritualist

auditory experience. In short, the poem may have been capable of calling into being ear-oriented subjects who at once felt and believed that they heard voices.

Spiritual Hearing and Competing Definitions of Health

The prospect of such a transformation inspired hope in Spiritualists, who insisted that ear-oriented subjectivity maximized human potential. The powerlessness and polyphony of this model of selfhood was, they argued, the condition of possibility for expressions of what society mistakenly regarded as “individual genius.” Reflecting on William Shakespeare, Doten asserts that, “although he himself was a mighty mind, yet still he spoke wiser than he knew, being moved upon by those superior powers who choose men for their mouthpieces, and oblige them to speak startling words into the dull ear of the times.”⁸⁰ In a chain of speaking and listening, spirits whispered in Shakespeare’s inner ears and he, reporting the message, roused the world. Like Doten, the Spiritualist publisher S. B. Brittan argues that the inner ear is a channel for great works of art. “Coleridge,” he writes, “awoke with the recital of the poem [“Christabel”] ringing in his ear,” and Mozart’s statement about “*hearing*” music in his head “seems to warrant the inference that his grand musical compositions emanated from the Spirit-world.”⁸¹ The accomplishments of Shakespeare, Coleridge, Mozart and others were not monuments to individual intelligence, talent, and ambition, but testaments to the power of mindlessness and vacuity. Experiencing bodily sensations similar to those of the world’s most respected figures, Spiritualist mediums were grateful for their extreme dependence, believing that the dead’s imposition on their ears and manipulation of their tongues was a blessing. They knew that the dynamics of interior hearing dispossessed them of themselves and produced a state of being that was at odds with American individualism. Nevertheless, they welcomed the spirit voices that governed them, certain that they served their highest purpose when listening to and speaking for others.

While Spiritualists aligned the posture of passive listening with mankind’s most noble achievements, critics regarded ear-oriented subjectivity as a precondition of self-destructive and anti-social behavior.⁸² Because of their weak wills and porous personality structures, auditive mediums, doctors believed, were open to the influence of malevolent spirits who directed them to commit violent acts. Substantiating this claim, Mattison tells of a man who “was instructed by the ‘spirits’ to take the life of his wife and children; and, but for the timely interposition of others, would have accomplished his purpose.” Interior hearers, he alleged, posed a threat, not only to the public, but also to themselves. Indeed, he devotes one section of his book to their “TENDENCY TO SUICIDE” and another to particular “CASES OF SELF DESTRUCTION.”⁸³ Slavishly following the dictates of the dead, mediums, he suggested, did not experience themselves as unified entities and, therefore, did not possess the instinct of self-preservation that led most perpetrators of suicide and murder at least to pause and reflect on the negative consequences of their actions. They felt no personal obligation to stay alive, protect their loved ones, or serve their communities, because the category of the “personal” did not accurately describe their experience of consciousness. For these reasons, it seemed to critics that the dispersed sense of self fostered by spiritual hearing was incommensurate with the needs of a society that valued reason and the rule of law.

It was also, they argued, incommensurate with a society that sought to protect the health of its members. Indeed, as their focus on instances of suicide and homicide indicates, doctors and scientists feared that hearing voices posed a threat to auditive mediums' physical and mental well-being. Discursively producing healthy hearing by identifying what it was not, opponents of the movement elaborated a medical and psychological framework through which to diagnose and safely contain auditory impressions that had no objective existence in the material world.⁸⁴ Illustrating this interpretive strategy, Hammond argued that, when mediums perceived things that were "not based on any sensorial impression—the trouble is in the brain." "An Excess or deficiency of blood circulating through this organ, or a morbid alteration of its quality, will," he argues, "often lead to hallucinations." The level of blood in the brain could fluctuate due to a temporary change of state brought on by alcohol, drugs, or intense emotion.⁸⁵ Once the excitement passed or the intoxicant ran its course, the hearer would revert to normal and the imagined sounds would disappear.

However, the perception of "spirit" voices, he warned, often indicated a more lasting and dangerous mental affliction. The "incoherent utterances" that audiences are "invited to consider [as] proofs of spiritual agency" are "[t]he symptoms of disordered nervous action." "Trance-speaking" is "a manifestation of hysteroid disease" and, as such, "is of decided pathological interest."⁸⁶ Similarly, Mattison maintains, "There may be writing and speaking media' who are so hallucinated as to *think* and *believe* that their hands or tongues are used by spirits of the dead, for the purpose of writing and speaking, but all such 'impressions' are like the whims and fancies of a maniac."⁸⁷ Those who defend auditive mediums may be just as sick—possibly "subject to illusions, hallucinations, or delusions."⁸⁸ With their mental tranquility disturbed by noise from the otherworld, Spiritualists, Mattison contended, were increasingly crowding the country's asylums. Among the inmates of six institutions, he finds "ninety of our fellow beings, bereft of reason by this terrible scourge." This figure, he assures his readers, is conservative and does not accurately reflect the extent of the crisis: "as only a small portion of the insane in this country even go to any asylum," it's safe to assume that "the number made insane by spirit-rapping throughout the whole country is far greater than this."⁸⁹ Issuing medically sanctioned assertions like those above, doctors and scientists instructed Americans to view interior hearing, not as a normal and spiritually meaningful use of the senses, but as a symptom of abnormal changes in the nerves and brain—a sign of the auditor's descent into madness.

Opponents of the movement were, to use Brittan's words, "attempt[ing] to dispose of all modern spiritual experiences" by interpreting them "as the product of existing nervous derangement, or of some temporary cerebral excitement."⁹⁰ Despite efforts to pathologize their auditory practices, adherents argued that hearing voices was a sign of a sound body and mind, a cure for physical and mental maladies. In the preface to *Poems of Progress*, Doten argues that ability to "catch the vibrations" of spirit voices "is not an *abnormal* condition, but *perfectly legitimate* to certain states of inner consciousness." "That we should be aware of this higher life" is, Doten asserts, "perfectly *natural*. Indeed, it would be strange . . . if we were not."⁹¹ Believers declared that the sick had been healed by exercising their spirit ears. For example, according to his editor, the trance poet Nathan White used to be "in feeble health, afflicted with bleeding at the lungs, and other symptoms of pulmonary disease," but, "Under Spirit-Influence, his health has been

completely restored, and his voice, previously weak, rendered strong and loud—as those can testify who have been stunned by his ‘war-whoop,’ when thus influenced by his favorite spirit ‘Powhattan.’”⁹² Moreover, the movement’s press publicized a study by the convert Dr. Eugene Crowell that disputed the correlation between the spread of Spiritualist auditory practices and the rise of asylum populations. According to Crowell, “while there are 87 asylums[,] there are only 76 insane Spiritualists who tenant them, not one to each institution” as had been reported by a critic. Moreover, “seventy-six insane from Spiritualism at the present time, out of a total of 30,000 inmates of our asylums, are within a fraction 1 in 395, and one quarter of one percent, out of the whole number in the asylums.” The incidence of insanity in other religions was much higher.⁹³ Instead of filling the asylums, interior hearing, Spiritualists argued, could make such institutions superfluous by eradicating mental illness. Substantiating this assertion, Crowell consulted the dead in his dealings with the deranged and, marveling at the positive results, speculated on the future of spirit communication in the management of madness: “It would be somewhat remarkable,” he writes, “If Spiritualism, after so long and patiently bearing the glib and false accusation that it leads to insanity, should be the means of liberating a large portion of the inmates of our asylums.”⁹⁴

As these conflicting claims suggest, at the center of the dispute between Spiritualists and skeptics was the definition of “health.” Doctors’ assertions about the dangers of hearing voices and the public’s willingness to accept them suggested to adherents that neither group knew what constituted normal perception. The problem, according to Brittan, was that the boundaries of normal human experience were being drawn by those with stunted faculties—the truly sick. Taking it for granted that their abnormally restricted sensoriums are universally shared, the spiritually deaf become “self-constituted judges of others as well as of themselves” and “assume the right to decide who is crazy and who is devilish.” As a result of their influence, “the ordinary and familiar operations of the human mind are generally accepted as the measure and standard of its normal activity and capacity.” “[I]t is virtually assumed that only those who creep on the earth exhibit a healthy activity and normal development,” while anyone who “has a disposition to ascend into the ethereal realms, or is gifted with a power to unlock the secrets of Nature and unveil the mysteries of the Heavens . . . is at once presumed to be physically and mentally diseased.” Under a regime that recognizes some senses but not others, people must (figuratively speaking) maim themselves in order to be “healthy” and those who, refusing to disavow parts of their bodies, actualize their full sensory potential are considered deviant and punished, confined to hospitals and subjected to unwanted therapies.⁹⁵

Seeking to change prevailing definitions of mental and physical fitness, Spiritualists exhorted Americans to expand their notions of normal hearing. Doten urged readers to rebel against those who would limit their perceptions. Defending auditive mediumship, she demands, “who shall dare place a limit to the possibilities of that consciousness, of which so little is definitely known? Or why should any man prescribe, as a standard for all others, the limitations of his own feeble consciousness.”⁹⁶ Brittan presents his audience with a series of questions and invites them to interrogate popular preconceptions about what a sound mind can and cannot do:

[I]s the mind most potent when the whole man is sick? And are its highest objects obtained when its laws are infringed and subverted? Must it

become delirious to solve the problems which mock the calm and orderly exercise of its powers? Is it the prerogative of the mind to dive and not to soar? And are only madmen commissioned to unfold celestial harmonies and to bring the kingdom of peace on earth? No; it is not so. It requires no argument to satisfy the rational mind that the highest achievements of which man's nature is capable will be realized when he acts consistently with the laws of his being. The mind can only exhibit its greatest power when left to its normal action, for then there is no resistance, but all its energies cooperate and tend to the same result. We must not abruptly conclude that the ordinary operations of mind, as illustrated in the common pursuits of men, are altogether consistent with the laws of its constitution, merely because they are most familiar to us. . . . And if we can not rationally accept the familiar operations of the mind as indicating the measure and the mood of its legitimate exercise and normal capabilities away goes the stupid and degrading assumptions that its noblest gifts are dependent on some corporeal derangement rather than on God, and its own immortal faculties as exercised in the realm of spiritual and divine activities.⁹⁷

Brittan defamiliarizes sensory conventions, making them seem patently absurd and completely arbitrary. It is irrational, he expostulates, to believe that the “sick” enjoy celestial sensations while the “healthy” must resign themselves to much cruder, earthly impressions. He stresses that these designations need to be reversed: A person should be regarded as “well” only when his mortal and immortal faculties are fully engaged, facilitating an equal and simultaneous awareness of both the material and spiritual realms. As a writer for the *American Spiritual Magazine* puts it, “Spiritualism is the normal state of man” and “Just as people progress in spiritual power they become normal.”⁹⁸ In short, Spiritualists believed that, until the spiritually deaf began making “progress” toward healthy hearing, it was they—and not auditive mediums—who were mentally ill. Trance poetry, they hoped, would change prevailing attitudes toward spiritual hearing by reproducing the experience of auditive mediumship in readers and acting as an antidote to the “diseased” perceptions of the movement’s critics.

Jennie Rennell and Lydia Huntley Sigourney: The Relationship between Trance and Sentimental Poetry

Trance poetry was part of a heated debate over the very nature of “normal” sensory experience. It sought to revolutionize auditory culture by changing what Americans heard and how they heard it. And yet trance poetry is strikingly similar to sentimental poetry, a popular genre that was associated, not with the radical reformation of mainstream auditory practices, but with the representation of saccharine feelings and the valorization of middle-class family life. In this section, I will examine the thematic and aesthetic relationship between these two genres by looking at texts from Jennie Rennell, a little-known trance poet from the San Francisco Bay Area, and Lydia Huntley Sigourney, one of the most celebrated poets in antebellum America. Sigourney lived in Connecticut and was running a school for young women when she began contributing sentimental poems and short stories to a variety of newspapers and magazines. Known as

the ‘sweet singer of Hartford,’ she was an incredibly prolific writer who built up an enormous readership and gained the respect of the publishing industry.⁹⁹ In contrast, Rennell privately published one book of poetry and, before that, it seems that the audience for her work was limited primarily to friends and family. If Sigourney’s fame was national, hers was local. Yet, despite the obvious differences between these women, I want to put their poems in conversation because they exemplify the style and subject matter of their respective genres. A comparison of Rennell’s and Sigourney’s works suggests that, while sentimental poetry features many of the same linguistic formations as trance poetry, its more conservative theology seriously limits their numbers. And if these formations bring on a state of lowly differentiated consciousness, sentimental poetry prevents readers from interpreting it as the onset of auditive mediumship by teaching them that spirit communication can only occur in heaven. Indeed, while sentimental poetry acknowledges bereft readers’ desires to listen for whispered messages from beyond the grave, it urges readers to repress them. Thus, this close relative of trance poetry may have actually furthered the work of Spiritualism’s opponents, who sought to exclude the perception of spirit voices from the definition of healthy hearing.

Rennell’s and Sigourney’s poems, like the genres they represent, share the theme of death. In Rennell’s case, such an emphasis seems inevitable—as an auditive medium, she believes that her poetry originates from beyond the grave. Yet, while Sigourney does not make this claim, her works also fixate on mortality. In *Sentimental Collaboration: Mourning and Middle-Class Identity in Nineteenth-Century America* (1999), Mary Louise Kete writes that the “fundamental subjects of sentiment are homes and families under the condition of loss.” Americans, she claims, were anxious about the threat posed to families by high mortality rates. Addressing these concerns, “much of the popular poetry of the years just before the war expressed a belief in the need to establish and maintain connection to one another and to God in the face of loss.”¹⁰⁰ Participating in this literary trend, Sigourney, like many other sentimental writers, focused on sickness and death. According to literary critic Max Cavitch, readers regarded her as “a muse of memory, one whose public and prolific sympathies with the bereaved seem to render her an ideal agent of their own conflicted memorial longings.”¹⁰¹ Consequently, she “was barraged with letters imploring her to compose verses on this or that person’s death,” and her poems for the dead—children in particular—“number in the many dozens.”

Trance and sentimental poetry may share the theme of death, but they represent very different perspectives with regard to the vocal capacities of the dead and the possibilities for communication. When Spiritualism emerged, most American Protestants subscribed to a cessationist view of history. That is, they generally believed that the age of miracles had ended in the first century and that, since that time, God and his angels had neither intervened in worldly affairs nor spoken to men.¹⁰² Refusing to live in silence, Spiritualists claimed that this interpretation of history lacked biblical support and defied commonsense. “In no revelation,” says one believer, “is it taught that communication between mortals and immortals has been, or will be denied the pure in spirit. Nor has any revelation taught, nor does human reason teach that an intercourse once enjoyed, may not at all times and forever, be enjoyed under similar circumstances and conditions.”¹⁰³ God and his agents, asserts a writer for the *American Spiritual Magazine*, are as vocal as ever: “David heard ‘the voice’” on the battlefield and “I know several who are now-a-days so guided.” In the same way that spirit voices advised biblical figures, “voices” are the

“means [by] which personal and general knowledge is conveyed to us.”¹⁰⁴ Questioning the faith of mainstream Protestants who were purposely deaf to the modern message, trance poets, in contrast to writers of sentimental poetry, claimed that openness to celestial voices was the mark of a true Christian and saw themselves as the heirs of biblical figures who received or believed in auricular revelation.

These differing attitudes toward auricular revelation are reflected in the thematic and formal features of trance and sentimental poems. Perhaps the biggest difference between these genres has to do with the role of the speaker. As we saw in Doten’s “Hope for the Sorrowing,” the speaker can be an auditive medium who claims to hear and relate messages from the dead.¹⁰⁵ But there are also numerous poems in which spirits efface the identity of the medium, assume the role of speaker, and address readers directly.¹⁰⁶ For example, in “Glimmer of Dawn,” Rennell is replaced by a spirit who, dismayed by mankind’s slow progress, announces himself with the condescending lines, “Oh, ye children! oh, ye babes! / Think not you have learned to walk.”¹⁰⁷ While trance poets insisted that they were channeling the voices of the dead, sentimental writers like Sigourney made no such claims, and their disavowal of this stance is reflected in the three kinds of speakers that we find in their texts. First, as in many sentimental poems, the speakers in Sigourney’s lyrics are often mourners who derive comfort from remembering their loved ones’ histories and describing the circumstances surrounding their deaths. This is the discourse situation in “Miss Jane Penelope Whiting,” in which the speaker recalls her friend’s “unfolding prime” and “childhood bright and fair.” The second kind of speaker is one who addresses the dead directly: “Sweet Sister! is it so?”; “Friend! I shrink to say / Farewell to thee”; “Ah! Can that funeral knell be thine?”¹⁰⁸ These appeals seem to be purely rhetorical as the speakers neither expect nor receive a response. And, finally, when the speakers in Sigourney’s poems are not coping with their own losses, they are comforting others, advising them—as does the speaker in “To Bereaved Parents”—to remember that their loved ones have gone to a better place “where no dark sin is cherished.”¹⁰⁹ As these examples suggest, sentimental poems like Sigourney’s conform to the Protestant cessationist version of history because they represent the earthbound view of mourners who, left behind in a silent world of sorrow, can only imagine what it would be like to hear their loved ones’ voices. Trance poems, on the other hand, attempt to prove that the heavens are as voluble as ever by representing (or, at least, claiming to represent) the voices of those who have died, gone to heaven, and returned to tell the tale.

Whether mediums, mourners, or comforters of the bereaved, speakers in trance and sentimental poetry agree that, upon death, the soul of the deceased moves from one realm to another. And, consequently, they both rely heavily on orientational language to describe its temporal transition from “now” to “then” and its spatial shift from “here” to “there.” This overlap in language can be illustrated by comparing Rennell’s “Learn the Truth” and Sigourney’s “In the Garden was a Sepulchre.” According to Rennell, “Learn the Truth” was dictated by a spirit named “Bliss,” who, voicing the collective wisdom of the dead, sought to bring the truths of Spiritualism to the living.

List! ye people while we tell,
Of the treasures that abound,
Which we neither buy nor sell,
But broadcast do scatter round;

Every day they're in your way—
 You should grasp them while you may.

.....
 Learn the method of communion,
 With the friends who've gone before,
 Think upon the sweet reunion,
 With those who've reached the other shore;
 Not forever have they left you,
 Nor of hope have they bereft you.

Not until the 'resurrection,'
 Need you wait to meet the friends,
 Who by ties of strong affection,
 With your soul their beings blend;
 Not an hour, and not a day,
 Once you've learned the needful way

Oh, ye people! Cease your moanings;
 For the friends who've gone before;
 Leave off all the signs and groaning,
 Open wide the spirit-door—
 Let the loved ones come and cheer you,
 They are ever very near you.

They are grieved and saddened, too,
 That you do not understand
 What they try to say and do,
 Try to speak, or clasp your hand,
 Try with all their power to show
 That they're with you here below.

Oh, ye people! Heed us well,
 Give attention to our voice;
 'Tis a truth that we would tell.
 'Twould make weary hearts rejoice;
 Your loved ones are not distant far
 Time nor space is now no bar.

.....
 Learn of them the way to master,
 All the secrets of the tomb,
 If you would avoid disaster,
 For the night will bring sad gloom,
 If in ignorance you wander
 To this shore—long time you'll ponder

Weary hours will pass away,

E'er you gain the realms of light,
 Progress now, the while you may—
 Bide not in the shades of night,
 Take the dear spirits for your guides,
 They'll bring you safe unto this side.

.....
 Strive to obtain the assurance sweet,
 (Though time and patience it may require),
 To be assured that you may meet,
 With those you love; your soul's desire
 Shall be attained, when you shall know,
 That you only commence your way below.

That through the endless roll of years,
 Through worlds and realms of glories new,
 You may progress, and have no fears,
 Of backward steps the journey through;
 But ever march toward that heaven,
 That to the faithful shall be given.¹¹⁰

Like poems by Doten and other auditive mediums, "Learn the Truth" deploys kinetic metaphors to describe death. Bliss figures it as a passage over water when he commands Rennell and her readers to stop mourning "For the friends who've gone before" and "Learn the method of communion, . . . With those who've reached the other shore." Similarly, Bliss asserts that death "Tis only a step and you're over the brink / Of the stream that separates the two lands."¹¹¹ Sigourney's speaker also describes death as a kind of journey:

Mourn not ye, whose babe hath found
 Purer skies and firmer ground,
 Flowers of bright perennial hue,
 Free from thorns and fresh with dew,
 Founts, that tempests never stir,
 Gardens without sepulchre.

Mourn not ye, whose babe hath sped,
 From this region of the dead,
 To yon winged seraph-band,
 Golden lute and glorious land,
 Where no tempter's subtle art
 Clouds the brow or wounds the heart.

Knowledge in that clime doth grow
 Free from weeds of toil and woe,
 Peace whose olive never fades,
 Love Undimmed by sorrow's shades,
 Joys, which mortals may not share,
 Mourn not ye, whose babe is there.¹¹²

Like the mobile spirits described in trance poetry, this child speeds “from” earth “to” heaven. In other poems by Sigourney, the dead “ascen[d]” to their “Father’s courts,” “rise / To that celestial shore,” or “G[o] to the Better Land.”¹¹³ Indeed, whether it is racing through space or traveling across an ocean, death is routinely represented in both trance and sentimental poetry as an action that shifts the positions of the dead, changing their spatio-temporal location in ways that can only be reported through deictic and non-deictic spatial and temporal expressions. The use of such terms may divert cognitive processing of the poems’ language from the left hemisphere to the right, where their compact textual inputs would be transformed into amorphous streams of information that could soften readers’ sense of physical and emotional control.

Rennell’s and Sigourney’s poems seem to amplify the effects of orientation processing by grouping deictic and orientative terms with abstract nouns. Padding his message with “thing-free” words and phrases, Bliss philosophizes about “Time,” “space,” and “the shades of night.”¹¹⁴ Such optically empty nouns are ubiquitous in the genre of trance poetry where auditive mediums regularly refer to heaven as “the grand hereafter,” “the calm above,” “the higher life,” the “Creation’s loftiest hight,” the “hights of Bliss,” and “the summer hights of love.”¹¹⁵ But this phraseology is not unique. Heaven is also a vague place for sentimental writers. It is difficult to picture a “clime” where, as Sigourney writes, abstractions like “Knowledge,” “Peace,” “Love,” and “Jo[y]” “gro[w].” Whether suggesting a general condition (“life”), a feeling or psychological state (“calm,” “Bliss,” “love,” “Peace,” “Joy”), a spatial concept (“space,” “hight”), a temporal concept (“Time,” “hereafter”), a degree (“shades”), or an imperceptible possession (“Knowledge”), the phrases used by Rennell and Sigourney denote referents that are shapeless, intangible, invisible and—for these reasons—nearly impossible to imagine. Nouns that refer to entities of incomprehensible magnitude pose a similar challenge to the mind’s eye. On the one hand, like concrete nouns, they signify “spatio-temporally continuous particular[s],” or “objects that are continuous in space, and if you go away and come back they stay unchanged.”¹¹⁶ On the other hand, like the referents of abstract nouns, the “particular[s]” they denote are “thing-free,” “gestalt-free,” and/or “excee[d] the capacity of the imagination to comprehend or encompass its whole representation in a single intuition.”¹¹⁷ Straddling the line between abstract and concrete, words such as “heaven,” “realms,” “worlds,” “shore,” and “side” deny readers of Rennell’s poem easily imaginable points of orientation. This liminal position is also occupied by other terms common to trance poetry, including “earth,” “sphere,” “land” (as in “the better land” or “the Summer-land”), “country” (“the happy country”), “plains” (the “celestial plains”) “abode” (“the blest abode”), and “soil” (the “Paradiesan soil”).¹¹⁸ Almost all of these words and phrases appear in sentimental poetry, too. In the text reproduced above, Sigourney refers to the “glorious land” and “Purer skies,” while in other poems, she writes of the “bless’d world,” the “cloud-wrapp’d sphere,” the “home of joy,” and the “realms of cloudless day.”¹¹⁹ Potentially intensifying the subtle effects of orientation processing on self-perception, inputs with little or no visual information may make it possible for readers of trance and sentimental poetry to achieve a state of lowly differentiated consciousness.

Maintaining the empty optical array on which the sensations of lowly differentiated consciousness depend, the adjectives and adjective phrases in trance and sentimental poetry undercut readers’ powers of visualization by deleting the few

discernible features that they possess.¹²⁰ Though readers may not be able to construct a sensible impression of them in their entirety, the referents of “realms,” “worlds,” and “land” are, in most cases, solid and visible. These semantic features disappear, however, when the nouns are modified by the language of intangible substances, energies, and/or emotions. This occurs in Sigourney’s phrase “glorious land” as well as in Rennell’s “realms of light” and “worlds and realms of glories new.” In other trance and sentimental poems, “shore,” “spheres,” and “realms” take on attributes like “spirit,” “ether,” “cloud,” “air” or “day.”¹²¹ Furthermore, if a noun implies finitude (and, therefore, an imaginable form), it is frequently qualified by an adjective that negates the possibility of limitation. For example, the finite becomes infinite when Bliss applies the adjective “endless” to the phrase “roll of years.”¹²² The same effect is achieved by other trance poets when they say that the soul is drawn “Onward, to the shoreless ocean / Of eternity” and that “Unbounded space is its dwelling-place.”¹²³ Though heaven is an important point of orientation for readers of “Learn the Truth” and “In the Garden was a Sepulchre”—it is, after all, where the longed for dead have gone—the speakers in these poems say virtually nothing about it. In fact, they deploy overtly negative adjective phrases that lighten heaven’s visual load by focusing on what does not happen there. In several of Rennell’s poems, Bliss states that heaven is “where no gold doth rust, / Where daylight never dies”; where “The trials and hardships of earth...are nought”; “Where we are free from every band / That held us in bondage here on earth”; where there is “no grief, nor pain”; and where our “cares and fears” are “ended.”¹²⁴ In a series of similar negative formulations, Sigourney describes heaven as the place “Where no tempter’s subtle art” can reach; where “Knowledge” is acquired without “toil or woe”; “Peace” “never fades”; “Love” is “undimmed by sorrow’s shades”; and the “Joys” are unknown to “mortals.” Rejecting all of the characteristics that would indicate a resemblance between heaven and earth, Rennell’s and Sigourney’s poems transform the other world into a semantic black hole and provide no positive, concrete content to fill it.

When Rennell and Sigourney use adverbs and adjectives that suggest infinitude, formlessness, weightlessness, and/or invisibility, they negate the concrete traits of their nouns, thereby rendering them completely abstract. Yet, in many of their poems, there are no nouns to modify because adverbs and adjectives indicate a position without a context, a direction without a destination. Examples of this in “Learn the Truth” include: “the friends who’ve gone before”; “they’re with you here below”; “Your loved ones are not distant far”; “Weary hours will pass away”; and “you only commence your way below.”¹²⁵ While such formulations do not appear in “In the Garden was a Sepulchre,” they occur in other poems by Sigourney in which the dead “pas[s] away,” are borne “away,” or simply go “forth.”¹²⁶ If spatio-temporal/abstract language combinations support the corrosive effects of holistic perception on ordinary consciousness by feeding the brain diffuse inputs, then spatio-temporal language in the absence of a noun amplifies these effects by starving the brain and providing no inputs at all. With an active right brain and a vacant visual array, readers of both trance and sentimental poetry may be cognitively prepared to experience the self-dispersal of altered consciousness.

Up to this point, I have been focusing on the similarities between sentimental and trance poetry, but there are also significant differences. While a sentimental poet like Sigourney might refer to a loved one’s final flight, using it as a point of departure for a more sustained meditation on love, mortality, or Christian virtues, auditive mediums like

Rennell not only describe the spirit's ascension but also stress its return, and the linguistic representation of this movement drastically increases the number of spatio-temporal/abstract language combinations that a trance poem might have. In contrast to most mainstream Protestant denominations, Spiritualists maintained that, once the recently deceased settled into their heavenly homes, they returned to earth to help those whom they had left behind. "Your loved ones," Bliss assures readers, "are not distant far," but "with you here below." Those who have been "transplanted from earth to the skies" will, he asserts in another poem, "find all their heaven in coming again, / Back to the[ir] earth friends." So instead of relating one transition—the movement from earth to heaven—as sentimental poems like Sigourney's do, "Learn the Truth" refers to at least two—the movement from earth to heaven and back again. It practically doubles the amount of represented motion and, by extension, the level of deictic and non-deictic spatial and temporal references. Moreover, Spiritualists believed that the visiting dead incessantly circled their living loved ones. If trance poets were going to elaborate on these encounters, then they (or the spirits whom they claimed were speaking through them) had to describe a variety of spatial relationships. The dead, Bliss tells readers, "are ever very near you." Elsewhere, in lines packed with prepositions, he explains that "We who've passed to spirit shore" "cluster near you," "hover round" "you," "pour" "our love upon you," stand "By your side [and] bend o'er your chair."¹²⁷ Imagining how the dead return to earth and position themselves in relation to the living, readers of "Learn the Truth" might respond to the text as they would to shifting spatial situations in the real world by converting discrete inputs into amorphous outputs. As these outputs soften their sense of separateness, subdue their impressions of personal power, and amplify their capacity for affect, they may experience a perceptual affinity with the auditive medium who delivers the poem. Such changes in consciousness seem more likely to occur as a result of reading trance rather than sentimental poetry, because the linguistic representation of Spiritualism's defining doctrine results in countless textual "triggers."

Cues for diffuse processing also proliferate in trance poetry's treatment of progress. Spiritualists maintained that pre-and-post mortem souls progress both mentally by gaining access to increasingly advanced levels of knowledge and geographically by first ascending to heaven and then continuing on to ever higher spheres.¹²⁸ People could accelerate their evolution by accepting the truths of Spiritualism or slow it by rejecting them. In "Learn the Truth," Bliss outlines these options, warning Rennell and her readers,

If in ignorance you wander
To this shore—long time you'll ponder

Weary hours will pass away,
E'er you gain the realms of light
Progress now, the while you may—
Bide not in the shades of night,
Take the dear spirits for your guides,
They'll bring you safe unto this side.¹²⁹

In lines propelled by spatial and temporal terms, he advises them not to waste time, stay in place, or fall behind, but instead to move ahead to the other side. Once they get there, "Tis all progression with never a pause." "[T]hrough the endless roll of years, / Through

worlds and realms of glories new,” the dead, Bliss claims “may progress, and have no fears, / Of backward steps the journey through; / But ever march toward . . . heaven.”¹³⁰

In their concern with personal and collective growth, Spiritualists were not alone, because progress was a persistent theme in the literature of the period. Reflecting this optimistic strain in nineteenth-century American culture, sentimental poems also refer to the bright prospects of the dead. For example, in a tribute entitled “Miss Jane Penelope Whiting,” Sigourney reminds mourners that, while they might be suffering, the deceased woman is enjoying “the uncomputed bliss / Of never-ending gain.” Likewise, for the departed sister described in another poem, all “toils and ills / . . . are past—for knowledge without pain, / . . . Doth fill [her] spirit,” and she may “lean / On His unchanging throne” forever.¹³¹ Unlike trance poetry, however, sentimental poetry tends to concentrate more on the period of illness before death or on the suffering of those who are left behind rather than on the spatial negotiations that spirits must make in order to move through the afterlife. Indeed, as these quotes suggest, the dead progress, not by continuous travel, but by standing still with Christ. It may be that sentimental poets decoupled spiritual improvement and literal movement because, as mainstream Protestants, they were not as confident about the geography of the afterlife as Spiritualists claimed to be. Because of their religion’s basis in Swedenborgian theology, Spiritualists were well acquainted with the idea of a multi-tiered heaven; and, informed by auricular revelation, they believed that they had some idea of what it might be like to move among its many levels. Their desire to articulate this knowledge had linguistic implications. When trance poems like “Learn the Truth” describe spirits’ eternal advancement—how they soar onward and upward forever—instances of spatio-temporal language, like the spaces, durations, and movements to which they refer, also seem endless. Continually prompting readers to process the language of progress in a way that sentimental poetry does not, trance poetry seems better suited to support prolonged periods of right brain mentation.

As a supposed product of spirit communication, trance poetry elaborates on subjects like spirit return and post-mortem progress that are beyond the scope of most sentimental poetry. Distinguishing themselves thematically from sentimental poems, trance poems also set themselves apart linguistically, because the articulation of Spiritualist doctrines results in more spatio-temporal/abstract language combinations. The prevalence of these formulations suggests that trance poetry would be more successful than sentimental poetry at inciting extended and intense periods of right brain mentation. Still, it is possible that the latter may, even with fewer linguistic triggers, be able to stimulate an altered state of consciousness. And this is why the most significant difference between the two genres has to do with the contexts in which these sensations are incited. Sentimental poems trigger them while fixating on the absence of the loved one’s voice and the depressing silence of the present, while trance poems attempt to stimulate them while describing the prevalence of angelic whispers and insisting on the need for aural vigilance. If readers feel the onset of altered consciousness when they are reading a poem about the experience, mechanics, and meaning of hearing voices, then they may conflate their state of consciousness with that of an auditive medium. Sentimental poems, on the other hand, actively work to discourage such an interpretation.

Instead of leaving readers free to construe the sensations or orientation processing however they like (as a sign of fatigue, sickness, non-Spiritualist religious experience, etc.), trance poems like Rennell’s use second-person direct address in an attempt to

control how they understand their impressions. In “Hope for the Sorrowing,” Doten uses first-person address to include readers in her experience of Kingman’s voice. The implication is that, if they hear what she hears, then they, too, must be auditive mediums. In “Learn the Truth,” different language promotes the same conclusion. Set apart from Bliss by the pronoun “you,” readers may not share his experience, but they are in a position to recognize his address and, in this way, admit its reality. He insists that they hear what he, as representative of the dead, has to say: “List! Ye people while we tell, / Of the treasures that abound”; “Oh, ye people! Heed us well, / Give attention to our voice.” He tells them to “Learn the method of communication” and “Open wide the spirit door.” If they understand his demands, then they are already doing what he asks—acknowledging his voice. This coercive rhetorical situation encourages readers to identify as auditive mediums, and creates a context in which the ego-dissolving effects of holistic processing are framed as the sensations of spiritual hearing. Moreover, leading questions supply readers with reasons for why they feel the way that they do. While, in “An Address on Spirit Return,” Bliss asks, “Hear you not loved voices whispering / Tender words into your ear?” in “The Advantages of Knowledge,” he insists that “now . . . You hear the loved one’s voices / You feel their presence nigh.”¹³² Rennell’s texts assign specific meanings to the qualities of altered consciousness. If readers feel unusually passive, open, and emotional it is because they perceive the “presence” of the dead and “hear” their “loved voices whispering.”

Another way in which “Learn the Truth” coerces readers into collapsing the sensations of altered consciousness with the affective dynamics of ear-oriented subjectivity is by insulting and shaming them. Accusing readers of hurting the family and friends whom they cannot hear, the poem pressures them to listen harder and notice any sensations that might correspond to interior audition: “They are grieved and saddened / That you do not understand / What they try to say” when they “Try to speak.” In “Still With You,” Bliss asks, “How can you close your senses— / To the loved ones—so abused?”¹³³ Furthermore, Rennell’s poetry questions the morals of the spiritually deaf. Bliss offers them this advice in “The Necessity of Pure Lives:

Cleanse heart and mind of passions
 Degrading, low or vile,
 Purify your characters,
 And keep your bosom mild,
 Live temperately and moderate,
 In every thing you do,
 And then the friends you call for
 May come and talk with you.¹³⁴

If readers are not already receiving messages from the other world, then, he suggests, they must be ruled by extreme emotions and living a dissipated life of excess. Or it may be that, as products of orthodox religion and conventional auditory discipline, they are simply too “dense” to register the dead’s address:

But though we cry aloud,
 They hear not the refrain.
 ’Tis ignorance of truth
 That holds them still in thrall;
 The teachings of their youth

Are against them; when we call
 Their ears are closed of reason,
 Their minds are in a daze.¹³⁵

Bliss's language always presupposes readers who live modestly, are well-informed, and love their families. Insofar as these projections accurately describe and/or define readers, they will be uneasy over any suggestions that their lifestyle is decadent, their education is lacking, and their sense of familial duty is seriously in doubt. If, according to these texts, the only sure way to prove accusations wrong is to hear voices, then the incentive to notice the self-dissolving effects of orientation processing and to construe them as the characteristics of auditive mediumship is quite high.

Sentimental poetry, on the other hand, directs readers away from an auditory interpretation of their sensations by insisting that it is impossible for them to hear the voices of the dead while they are still alive. In espousing this mainstream Protestant idea, they also implicitly support the agenda of doctors and scientists, who sought to discredit auditive mediums and eradicate spiritual hearing. For Sigourney, death is associated, not with the emergence of perceptible spirit voices, but with the extinction of sound: It is when "The Spoiler set[s] / His seal of silence" on the lips of the deceased and "silent anguish" settles on the home.¹³⁶ While the dead have voices in the afterlife, the living must die before they can hear them. Articulating this realization, the speaker in "Mary Shipman Deming" says,

The youngest birdling of our nest,
 Her song from us hath fled;
 Yet mingles with a purer strain
 That floats above our head.

We gaze,—her wings we may not see:
 We listen—all in vain:
 But when this wintry life is o'er,
 We'll hear her voice again.¹³⁷

Similarly, in "Henrietta Selden Colt," a bereaved mother notes that, while she cannot hear her dead children in the present, "I'll hear ye, darlings, when I rise / To that celestial shore."¹³⁸ Spiritual hearing is always deferred to the afterlife where, as most mainstream Protestants believed, conversations among family and friends would resume. In the meantime, it does not matter how badly the living long to hear the dead because, according to sentimental poets like Sigourney, they have no other choice but to wait. If readers were to experience altered consciousness in the context of poems like these, they probably would not interpret it as mediumistic state because the texts insist that spirit communication is impossible. Delivering this message across the country through newspapers and magazines, sentimental poetry might be thought of as the popular literary branch of the scientific community's campaign against spiritual hearing.

But this does not mean that, in sentimental poetry, the effects of exaggerated orientation processing have no meaning. According to Kete, sentimental poems made it possible for the Americans who read and exchanged them to create and maintain a collaborative sense of self; that is, a self generated through a "web of affectionate bonds" among family and friends. While death threatened to dissolve these bonds, and thus to destroy the collaborative self, the goal of sentimental poetry was, she claims, to preserve

them. One of the ways in which it does this is through the representation of heavenly reunions. If close associates had to be separated in this world, at least they could be reunited in the next. In sentimental poetry, “Heaven” is depicted as “a place where one will be in close community with one’s friends, where one will participate . . . in the shared project of continued existence.” Moreover, by writing sentimental verses and giving them as gifts, Americans not only declared their dependence on others, but also expanded the associations through which their collaborative identities were formed. These texts were, Kete argues, a crucial part of a “system of exchange in which evidence of one’s affection”—like a poem, for example—“is given in such a way as to elicit not only a return donation of affection but also a continued circulation of affection among an increasing circle of associations.” “The circulation” of sentimental poems, then, “is not only restorative” of relationships between the living and the dead, but also “constitutive” of relationships among the living “since it . . . provides a strategy for the creation of both a ground of common interest and the ties of association necessary for a community, large or small, to function.”¹³⁹ If sentimental poetry creates community by circulating affections, then the open and emotional form of subjectivity that is fostered by spatio-temporal/abstract language combinations may support the genre’s objectives. By multiplying these linguistic formations, Spiritualist poetry foregrounds the rhetorical strategies that sentimental poetry may have used to cultivate the affectively-charged inter-subjective experiences on which the “collaborative self” depends. In this way, studying the literary productions of auditive mediums gives us insight into the workings of the period’s most popular form of poetry.

Sarah Gould’s “The New Revelation”: Creating Community through Shared Sensory Experience

If sentimental poets sought to create communities based on affection, auditive mediums wanted to unite Americans through something more controversial—the shared experience of hearing voices. That significant numbers of Americans would be pressured into mediumship terrified opponents of the movement, who feared that the ranks of the physically and mentally ill would swell.¹⁴⁰ However, with spirit communication limited to a relatively small group of individual mediums, large-scale communities of spiritual hearers were precisely what the movement wanted. Spiritualists planned first to create a nation and finally a planet of people receptive to celestial sounds. According to Swedenborg, global auditive mediumship had existed during “the Golden Age,” when “The earliest humans on our planet enjoyed” a close “union with heaven’s angels.” The “angels talked with them . . . and in them heaven and this world were a single whole.” However, “after those times, people moved step by step away from heaven.” As “their deeper levels were closed”—“the levels that open into heaven”—and “their outer levels were open to the world,” they lost their ability to hear spiritually.¹⁴¹ Spiritualists trusted that the Golden Age described by Swedenborg would come again and that it would begin in America. According to Carroll, “American Spiritualists understood their nation as the place where democratic mediumship would first be realized, thus putting their own twist on the cultural premise that the United States had a special religious identity, mission, and destiny.”¹⁴² That the era of widespread spiritual hearing would commence in the United States was an idea articulated in many of the movement’s journals. “[W]e are

approaching the new era, which is the millennium,” prophesies a writer for the *American Spiritual Magazine*, and “it is to commence in America.” Soon after speaking to the people of the United States, God, he continues, “will speak peace to all nations and governments.”¹⁴³ The universality of spiritual hearing would usher in “a new order of society in the earth,” a society in which—as Doten puts it—there is “One bond of love, and one home above, / And one faith . . . to all.”¹⁴⁴

Trance poetry, they hoped, would be instrumental in fostering this unity. Recognizing their poetry’s ability to reform readers’ perceptual relationships to themselves and to others, auditive mediums delivered texts that had the potential to engineer not only personal, but also inter-subjective experiences. A good example of this is Sarah Gould’s “The New Revelation,” a poem that combines the theme of sensory reformation with the cues for altered consciousness to constitute ear-oriented subjects and communities:

From highest Heaven a spirit voice, to-night,
Speaks to my soul, in accents fine and clear,
List for a moment, gentle friends, and hear
The tones come, fluttering as the boreal light;
And now I catch the burden of the theme.
“Rejoice, that earth beholds a better day,
And Heaven is opened through a surer way
Than flitting shadows, and imperfect dream!
Ye hear the whispers of the Angel-band,
With God himself ye hold communion high,
And feel the consecration of his hand,
The inspiration of his cloudless eye!
Oh, be ye faithful, ye who are believing,
Perfect your spirits for more full receiving.”¹⁴⁵

Gould directs her “gentle friends” to hear what she hears, and then supplies them with the content of their shared auditory experience. This content—a message from the dead which she quotes—works to realize her assertions both by assuring readers that they already “hear the whispers of the Angel-band” and by claiming that their “full receiving” of spiritual sound is contingent upon their levels of faith, belief, and perfection. What makes “The New Revelation” a call for collective experience is that, whether declarative or conditional, the poem’s lines are directed at an aggregation of people. Using broad forms of address like “gentle friends” and “ye” (a plural form of you), it normalizes an auditory interpretation of altered consciousness by calling into being, not a deranged individual with abnormal auditory impressions, but a community of common feeling.¹⁴⁶ Other trance poems operate in the same way. For instance, when readers with heightened orientation activity imagine themselves among Kingman’s mourners or the “people” addressed by Bliss, they may feel connected, not only with Doten and Rennell, respectively, but also with each other.¹⁴⁷ They may experience a sense of solidarity with spiritual hearers (recognized mediums and unknown readers) that is founded, not on common assent to abstract doctrine, but on shared bodily sensations.

Indeed, while expectations and ultimatums cast readers of “The New Revelation” as a collection of ear-witnesses to a new era, spatio-temporal/abstract language formations may incite bodily evidence that they belong to this group. Opening with

general coordinates in space (“From highest Heaven”) and time (“to-night”), the poem has the potential at once to activate the cognitive mechanisms responsible for relating consciousness to its environment and to complicate their work by filling that environment with little more than sound and spirit. In an undefined location, the medium’s “soul” perceives an invisible “spirit voice” which emanates from “Heaven.” She specifies points in time (“a moment,” “now”), not because they mark the appearance of observable objects and events, but because they correspond to the sounding of elusive “tones” and to the “theme” or idea that they express. Using a spatial metaphor, spirits note that “Heaven is opened through a surer way” that is more substantial than “shadows” and “dream[s].” Yet, in a series of displacements from concrete to abstract, visible to invisible, readers discover that this “surer way” consists, not of seeing the “Angel-band,” feeling the touch of god’s “hand,” or looking into his “eye,” but of hearing the angel’s “whispers,” experiencing the hand’s “consecration,” and benefiting from the eye’s “inspiration.”¹⁴⁸

Gould’s “The New Revelation” brings optically empty nouns together with spatial-temporal allusions in a narrative of communal spiritual hearing. If the poem’s spatio-temporal/abstraction language arrangements arouse mental impressions of passivity, openness, and heightened emotion, its plot encodes this altered state of consciousness with a particular meaning, converting it into an embodied confirmation of what the speaker assumes: that the reader is a member of a sensory avant-garde, an association of ear-oriented subjects who, listening to the realignment of heaven and earth, are lucky enough to receive some of the earliest messages in what will be a new age of spirit communication.

This chapter has identified and studied the workings of a poetic genre that attempted to accomplish nothing less than the transformation of American auditory experience. Aural inspiration from angelic voices was central to Spiritualist theology and practice, but it offended the sensibilities of the scientific and medical communities because it challenged enlightenment definitions of healthy perception. Opposing the diagnosis of spiritual hearing as a manifestation of physical degeneration and mental illness, Spiritualists argued that receiving impressions on the inner ear was a normal, natural, and positive capability of human beings. This sense was often underdeveloped but could, they emphasized, be consciously cultivated through a variety of technologies including trance poetry. Exemplified by the productions of mediums like Doten, Gould, and Rennell, trance poems participate in an aesthetics of aurality that may have made readers feel like they were hearing voices. These texts function on three levels: thematic, rhetorical, and cognitive. Thematically, the poems take spiritual hearing as their primary subject, thereby making the public aware of its existence and teaching them about how it works. Rhetorically, through the use of direct address, the poems evoke a sensitive addressee with finely tuned ears, invite this constructed subject to identify with the persona of the medium, and convince this imagined reader that, like the medium, she, too, hears voices. The pressure to hear these voices is further intensified by negative inferences about the characters of those who do not. While these thematic and rhetorical moves allow the reader intellectually to understand the concept of spiritual hearing, they cannot by themselves transform an auditory experience that is represented by words on a page into one that is actually felt by the reader. This is where trance poetry’s cognitive strategies come into play. The texts feature high concentrations of spatio-temporal terms and abstract nouns and, taken together, this language has the potential to incite sensations

that are structurally similar to spiritual hearing. As this description suggests, the cognitive and rhetorical components of the poems reinforce each other: if, as a result of spatio-temporal/abstract language combinations, readers experience the onset of altered consciousness, they are pressured by the texts' use of direct address to equate their state with that of an auditive medium.

Potentially impacting how readers feel, Spiritualist trance poetry offers insight into an issue that interests present-day literary critics: how might aesthetics stimulate the shared sensory experiences on which communities are built? Doten's, Rennell's, and Gould's poems demonstrate at least one possibility. While the poems make available sensory triggers—spatio-temporal/abstract language combinations—that may be actualized by readers at different times and in different places, they also incorporate readers' individual experiences into a communal narrative by positing the existence of a large listening audience. The comparison between Rennell's and Sigourney's poems indicates that sentimental verse may use the same cognitive and rhetorical strategies to create feelings of connection among the bereaved. However, it also suggests how the effects of visually-deprived orientation processing and the perceptions of shared experience which they inspire can be interpreted and mobilized in very different ways. If sentimental poetry teaches readers to understand altered consciousness as a feeling of openness born of loss and a crucial step in the resumption of life after the death of a loved one, trance poetry encourages readers to interpret it as something much more subversive. Spiritualists hoped that trance poems would give rise to a large population whose perceptions would resist the dominant culture's increasing fascination with sight, regulation of the body, and secularization of experience. Potentially recreating in readers the scattered subjective experiences of auditive mediums, trance poems sought to make the sensations of a small, socially marginalized, and supposedly insane group of people the basis for a much larger association.

Chapter 2

“[T]he evidence is within every man’s reach”: Séance Accounts and the Attainment of Tactile Knowledge¹

In 1860, Estelle Livermore, the wife of a wealthy retired banker from New York, died after suffering from a serious illness. Devastated by the loss, her husband Charles was persuaded by a friend to visit the famous medium Kate Fox, and “the result” of their meeting, claims the Spiritualist writer Epes Sargent, “was an entire change” in the skeptical banker’s “views concerning life and death.”² According to Sargent, who chronicled Livermore’s experiences, the séances with Fox “commenced in February, 1861, extended over a period of five years, and were more than three hundred in number.”³ Livermore kept track of the sittings in a “spiritual diary.” The following excerpt is typical:

October 20, 1861.—This manifestation was a powerful one, showing the whole figure of my wife, but not her face. . . . I asked to be touched; when she advanced, laid her arm across my forehead, and permitted me to kiss it. I found it as large and as real in weight as a living arm. At first it felt cold, then grew gradually warm. . . . The manifestation was concluded by her writing a card, *resting it upon my shoulder*, caressing me upon the head and temple, and kissing me for good-night.⁴

Livermore gathers information through his skin and draws conclusions based on what he feels. His behavior suggests that touch is a preferred means of accessing and evaluating information, a notion so old that it is ingrained in the English language. Attending to the etymological roots of verbs that refer to “mental processes,” historian of the senses Constance Classen finds that while some of these terms incorporate visual meanings, most of them have a tactile basis. “The predominance of tactile imagery in words dealing with intellectual functions,” writes Classen, “indicates that thought is, or was, experienced primarily in terms of touch. Thinking was therefore less like looking than like weighing or grinding, and knowing was less like seeing than like holding.” Indeed, the tactile bases of words like “brood,” “grasp,” “mull,” “ponder,” and “ruminate” imply that knowledge is the result of physical contact and even friction: “There is,” Classen notes, more “tension involved in,” for example, “grasping or weighing a subject than in looking it over.”⁵ And heightened levels of affect, too. The interchangeability of the phrases “to touch” and “to feel” reminds us that touch has long been regarded as the most emotional (and, therefore, uncontrollable and even animalistic) sense. Moreover, the alignment of touch with intimacy and interconnectedness is affirmed by the saying “let’s keep in touch.”⁶ Yet, despite the continued use of such phrases, tactile approaches to the acquisition of knowledge were already outdated by the time of Livermore’s report. Following what Classen refers to as “the rise of visualism” during the Enlightenment, sight was associated with objectivity and independence, while touch was dismissed as too subjective and relational for the purposes of serious inquiry.⁷ This is why Livermore’s text is so fascinating. In it, he demonstrates to his readers that, contrary to contemporary sensory values, touch is still a legitimate way of understanding the world. With the surfaces of his body, he receives evidence of his wife’s continued existence. And though

his impressions are personal, emotional, and even sexual—qualities that, for his contemporaries, would preclude them from being accepted as “facts”—he finds them to be powerfully convincing.

However, the tactile practices and values represented in Livermore’s account conflicted with those of mainstream American society and drew fire from critics of Spiritualism. According to Classen, touch “is not just a private act” with a natural, immutable signification, but instead “a fundamental medium for the expression, experience and contestation of social values and hierarchies.” The function of touch and the meanings associated with it changed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when “the perceived intellectual and aesthetic value of the sense . . . declined.” “[W]hile the cultural importance of sight increased,” “touch,” she asserts, “was no longer understood to provide any important information about the world. The important thing was to *see*.”⁸ Articulating these assumptions, opponents of Spiritualism claimed that tactile manifestations appealed to man’s animal nature and that the knowledge generated during dark séances was too subjective to be taken seriously. They not only dismissed touch as a legitimate means of understanding the world, but also cautioned that, by touching and being touched, the Spiritualist’s sense of self could be transformed in socially unacceptable ways. Witnesses had to be open to indiscriminate probing by unseen hands and ready to be manipulated into any position, no matter how uncomfortable or unseemly. The manifestations required participants to surrender control of their bodies and seemed to foster an interior disposition that threatened culturally celebrated traits like rationality, agency, and independence.

Questioning the ocularcentric sensorium and atomistic form of subjectivity championed by their opponents, Spiritualists argued that genuine knowledge could best be had by giving up the personal coherence and control associated with the possession of a point of view and becoming instead a collection of tactile planes impressed upon by spirit forces. The hugs, kisses, and caresses that witnesses received in the domestic space of the parlor were as valid and factual as any objective information discovered in the sterile environment of the lab. Moreover, while both scientists and séance participants sought truth, they approached it differently. “Let him [the skeptic],” wrote an adherent, “understand at once, that if he desires to acquire a knowledge of Spiritualism and its phenomena, he must lay aside his presumptuous self-sufficiency, and come to the enquiry humbly and ‘as a little child.’”⁹ If scientists were supercilious and controlling, Spiritualists defended the “humb[e]” interior disposition that a haptic orientation created and positioned it as a positive alternative to what they perceived as American’s aggressive individualism.

Spiritualist writers claimed that thousands of Americans had already laid aside their “presumptuous self-sufficiency” and become helpless in the grasp of spirit hands while thousands more were ready to follow suit. A contributor to the *American Spiritual Magazine* remarks, “There are many like Thomas, who wish to place their hands in the wounds of Jesus before they will believe.”¹⁰ Their desire for tactile experience could be easily satisfied, according to the prominent Spiritualist Judge John Worth Edmonds, because “the evidence is within every man’s reach . . . the means are fortunately at hand to determine. I repeat, they are within every man’s reach.”¹¹

Indeed, if Americans wanted to hold hands with the deceased, they could either reach blindly into the darkness of the séance room or reach for the printed testimony of

those who had already done so. I began this chapter with an excerpt from Livermore's testimony because, as Epes notes, his diary "include[s] nearly all the most important phenomena which have been experienced in connection with these modern manifestations" and is recognized as "The first carefully prepared account that we have in modern times of the repeated appearance of a materialized spirit form."¹² For these reasons, it was liberally excerpted and published by writers and editors both for and against the Spiritualist movement.¹³ However, Livermore's experiences were not unique and his reports were not the only ones in circulation. Séance participants flooded the literary market place with detailed descriptions of spirit touch, publishing them in Spiritualist and mainstream newspapers, magazines, and books.¹⁴ Along with Livermore's writings, these texts, I will argue, cultivated imaginary tactile sensations to massage away the effects of a visual culture and bend readers' bodies and minds toward a haptic orientation informed by Spiritualist sensory values.

To make this case, I will draw from Elaine Scarry's *Dreaming by the Book* (1999). In this study of literature and perception, Scarry concedes that "solidity is difficult to reproduce in the imagination because it entails touch, the sense whose operation is most remote to us in imagining." Nevertheless, writers can, she contends, imbue the products of our imagination with tactile qualities by describing "the material conditions"—that is, the relationships between surfaces and objects—that in, the real world, would allow us to infer characteristics like three-dimensionality, constancy, and density."¹⁵ These conditions are, I will argue, repeatedly evoked in séance reports. Leading would-be séance participants to reproduce the perceptual strategies that actual witnesses used to make sense of their surroundings, these texts prompt readers to perform what Scarry calls a "mimesis of touch" by inferring the salient qualities of tactile experience from a small number of very basic visual cues. I will also show that these textual cues for tactile impressions are embedded in narratives that challenge the prevailing meanings of touch. Thus, while conventional wisdom held that truth was attained through the dispassionate view of an autonomous, rational observer, Spiritualist testimony trained readers intellectually to comprehend and almost physically to feel that truth was tactile knowledge—the heady mix of tender sentiments, powerful passions, sexual desires, and violent urges that is aroused and expressed through skin-to-skin contact.

This chapter participates in a growing discussion about touch. In recent years, scholars from a wide variety of disciplines have begun to explore the epistemological work and social significance of this previously understudied sense. Since the late 80s and early 90s, touch has been a topic of interest for some of France's most celebrated philosophers. For example, according to Luce Irigaray, the differences between male and female genitalia mean that touch is necessarily gendered, and it is only by acknowledging these sexual differences that physical contact can give rise to ethical thought. Derrida, on the other hand, denies that touch is even possible and "deconstructs" the notion, basic to the Western philosophical tradition and seemingly supported by the vocabulary of his friend Jean-Luc Nancy, that touch is a sense of presence, offering immediate contact with oneself and others. He argues, instead, that we never actually make contact when we touch ourselves or someone else because touch is always already interrupted; its exercise premised on distance and division.¹⁶ The problem with such philosophical treatments of touch is that, containing numerous counter-intuitive assertions (touching is not really

touching?) which are often derived from nothing more than word-play, they do not tell us much about how touch is experienced by real people in the world.

Countering the decontextualization and ahistoricity of touch in philosophy, recent work in history and anthropology locate it in particular socio-temporal settings. While Laura Gowing, Elizabeth D. Harvey, and Marjorie O' Rourke Boyle have attempted to map the meanings of touch in seventeenth-century England, scholars like Kathryn Geurts, Wang Ping, and Susan J. Rasmussen have situated it in non-Western contexts, describing the tactile cultures of specific populations in places like Ghana, China, and Niger, respectively.¹⁷ The roles of skin-to-skin contact in colonization, gender identity, and disability culture are examined in Classen's *The Book of Touch*, a diverse collection of essays which, in its depth and breadth, signals the trend toward tactile studies. Increasingly, concerns about touch are also informing interpretations of literature. Representations of touch in texts by early modern writers, twentieth century poets, WWI soldiers, and contemporary British novelists have received attention from literary critics whose approaches to touch range from the philosophical (influenced by Derrida and Irigaray, among others) to the historical.¹⁸ This chapter contributes to this growing body of work in two ways. Firstly, it focuses on textual representations of tactile practices in mid-nineteenth-century America, a time and place that have not—at least to my knowledge—been included in previous literary studies of touch. It also fills a gap in historical studies of American sensory experience which, thus far, have dealt only with the colonial period and with nineteenth-century auditory culture.¹⁹ Supplementing such studies, this chapter gives us a fuller picture of the American sensorium. And secondly, while literary criticism has tended to focus on tactile themes, metaphors, and imagery, this chapter concentrates on how carefully crafted depictions of touch have the potential to produce reader-centered effects.

If interior hearing made Spiritualism one of the most aural religions on the American scene, its defining ritual, the séance circle, made it one of the most tactile. A séance might be attended by anywhere from two to thirty people. Participants came from all economic classes, though séances attended by the more wealthy and educated members of society had a better chance of appearing in print. Admission to a circle could be gained in different ways. For example, a family member might claim to have developed the ability literally to bring forth the dead. While some mediums could only channel verbal messages from the departed, others—indeed, the most sought after—could also facilitate the production of spirit forms; in their presence, the dead would, they contended, literally materialize and touch the living. With a spiritually gifted family member presiding over the ritual, households would sporadically sit together in order to commune physically with otherworldly visitors. Another way of gaining entrance to a circle was by being asked. Some of the more famous mediums of the day held regularly scheduled circles to which socially prominent individuals were invited. Whether public or private, séances took place in the domestic space of the medium's home, where participants would sit close together around the dining room table and hold hands. Such proximity and physical contact created a sense of intimacy which was heightened by the darkness of the room. Mediums insisted that, in order for spirits to materialize, the lights had to be put out. Once this was done and everyone was in position, attendees might sing a song, say a prayer, or silently meditate in order to increase the feeling of group

harmony and to create the calm atmosphere that was thought to be a necessary condition for manifestations.²⁰

At this point—if the spirits were in the mood—the touching would begin. The notion that the dead were substantial enough to exert pressure on other beings found some theological support in Emanuel Swedenborg’s conception of the spirit body. Spirits, writes the Swedish mystic, are not “minds without form,” “mere thoughts,” or “something airy with something alive within it,” but are, in fact, “completely human. They have faces, eyes, ears, chests, arms, hands, and feet. They see each other, hear each other, and talk to each other.”²¹ Like Swedenborg, Spiritualists believed that, far from being the transparent and insubstantial ghosts of lore, spirits were tangible, durable, and capable of exerting pressure on the world around them. However, departing from their icon, who held that spirits and their bodies stayed in heaven, Spiritualists believed that the dead could manifest “*living material bodies*” with “*real and tangible physical organizations*” here on earth (italics original).²² “[T]heir power over matter,” an adherent explains, “is such as to enable them under favourable conditions, to materialize their forms, or parts of them, the production of hands and arms being of very common occurrence. These hands are, for the time, real, palpable, material hands, and possess the qualities and properties of living, human hands . . . They are formed momentarily and dissipated as quickly.”²³ The conditions of the dark séance made it possible for spirit hands to coalesce and manipulate the bodies of the living. “The touching,” notes one Spiritualist, “is frequent during the séance; the hands apparently being large and small, hard and soft, masculine and feminine. We have been shaken by the hand, and the touching, in a word, as varied from a velvet-like pressure to a sound thrashing, leaving black and blue marks all over the body.”²⁴ When the lights were out, the dead, claims another convert, “caus[e] distinct touches to be felt by the mortal living, grasping and shaking their hands; and giving many other sensible demonstrations of their existence.” Such tactile experiences were “[a]mong the more prominent” “phenomenal facts” of the faith.²⁵

Spiritualists who had experienced the phenomenon first-hand were eager to share their impressions with the public, and their written testimony saturated the literary marketplace. Those who frequented the séances of Daniel Dunglas Home, a medium in whose presence the most remarkable tactile manifestations occurred, tended to be “formidably literate” and, “[i]n extraordinary almost stunned detail, they recorded the phenomena witnessed.”²⁶ Their accounts were then disseminated by the Spiritualist and mainstream press. Publishing houses like A. J. Davis and Partridge & Brittain produced magazines and books that were filled with exhaustive descriptions of séances held by Home, the Fox sisters, and countless lesser-known materializing mediums. Secular newspapers also kept these representations before the public. According to the literary historians Russell M. and Clare R. Goldfarb, “Journalists reported séances and spirit communications almost daily.” *The New York Daily Tribune*, for example, “devoted space to the Fox sisters” and also “covered séances and meetings, and printed letters” by skeptics and believers alike.²⁷

Séance reports competed with other first-person accounts of unusual or astonishing bodily experiences. “By the middle of the nineteenth century, sensation,” writes Ann Fabian, “drove publication,” and narratives of personal experience written by criminals, beggars, slaves, and, after the Civil War, soldiers crowded the literary

landscape. “The articulation of experience,” she asserts, “follows rules,” and many of these writers used “social and rhetorical devices designed to signal to readers that the story they held was a true one.” These conventions guided the production of Spiritualist testimony, as well. Like the stories that Fabian describes, *séance* accounts were prefaced with statements from “authorities” and other individuals of high social standing who vouched for the texts’ truth. Yet, while the tales of criminals, beggars, and slaves “had to be ratified by those with more evident social or cultural power,” *séance* accounts were validated by the *séance* participants themselves, witnesses who—if the texts appeared in print—were typically white, male, wealthy, and well-educated. Though they might have written with rhetorical flourish, they, like the underprivileged writers with whom they shared the genre, employed relatively simple language, favoring concise descriptions of basic physical impressions such as pain, warmth, cold, etc. over theorizing or literary flights of fancy. The length of Spiritualists’ straightforward testimonials varied. Writers might describe the major manifestations of a circle in a short paragraph, spend pages poring over every detail of a single sitting, or string together numerous dated accounts of different *séances* they had attended. But whether short or long, *séance* reports included the same kind of specific information as the narratives studied by Fabian and for the same reasons. “[D]etailed recitations,” she explains, functioned as “signs of the authenticity” of a narrative, because “[e]ven if the moral content of a confession could not be verified, surrounding detail could.” This also applies to *séance* reports which often included the address of the home where the circle took place, the names of those involved (or at least some of them), the precise time when the sitting began, and the estimated onset time as well as duration of certain manifestations. These details diminished the sense of anonymity that print culture can create and made it easier for *séance* participants to reach out to their audience on a personal level. Spiritualists attempted to arouse readers’ emotions by relating their surprised, fearful, or affectionate reactions to the phenomena which they experienced.²⁸

Such portrayals of feeling and physicality had a complex relationship to the public sphere as defined by Jurgen Habermas and contextualized in the early republic by Michael Warner. In the “public discourse” of eighteenth-century America, “the negation of persons” was, writes Warner, “a condition of legitimation”; and it was “available only to those participants whose social role allow[ed] such self-abnegation (that is, to persons defined by whiteness, maleness, and capital).” “Virtue” was “defined by the negation of other traits of personhood” including the most fundamental characteristic of all which is embodiment.²⁹ This “principle of negativity” was still in effect in the nineteenth-century. According to John J. Kucich, the editors of national magazines were “striking in their invisibility” and “addressed the readership . . . as a nonpartisan, rational, and genteel American public that harked back to the disembodied public spirits who filled the papers of the eighteenth century above pseudonyms like ‘Cato’ and ‘Publius.’”³⁰ The nineteenth-century public sphere was altered by tales from the poor and oppressed because these texts foregrounded the body. Speaking of slave narratives, Karen Sanchez-Eppler contends, if “the position of author gains its privilege, precisely because the text produced occludes the specific physical body of the person who produced it,” then the narratives generated by underprivileged authors “Inver[t] this pattern” by “rhetorically creat[ing] an authorial body.” That is, “Rather than attempt to assert the incorporeality of authorship, testimonial writing inscribes the author’s bodily existence and experience.”³¹ By placing

their bodies at the center of their reports, Spiritualists suggested that facts are not objective truths delivered through the “anonymous, disembodied, and rational realm of elite print culture,” but are instead the affectively charged tactile impressions that result from intimate contact with others (living and dead) in the close atmosphere of a darkened parlor.³²

Of course, shaped by an ocularcentric culture, many Spiritualists—at least early in their involvement with the movement—doubted that any facts could be discovered by waiting in the dark for mysterious forms to bump into them. However, repeatedly subjected to the sensory logic of the séance, they began to challenge the notion that light facilitates learning. In fact, light, they argued, actually destroyed what it illuminated, “dispel[ling] the elements of materialization just as the warm rays of the spring sun melt the snows in winter.”³³ Instead of revealing new objects, sight actually made them disappear. The dead urged participants to “avert their eyes” from materialized bodies “so as not to concentrate their magnetism so powerfully upon” the fragile forms.³⁴ Looking “seemed to disturb the aura, and prevent powerful manifestations.”³⁵ At the beginning of his investigation into the phenomena, Napoleon Bonaparte Wolfe reproduced mainstream epistemological assumptions, claiming that he “had no confidence in any thing claiming to be spirit manifestations, enacted in the dark. The dark circle enveloped the mind in doubt and mystery. It could offer no convincing proof to my understanding like the information of the eye.” “‘What communion hath light with darkness,’ that we should ignore the use of the most important one of the five senses?” he asked. Yet, after attending several séances, his views changed. If once he had maintained that light offered direct access to truth, now he was convinced that its rays illuminated distracting trifles and inundated perceivers with bold visual stimuli which squandered their attention. “[P]ersons who are very fastidious in their taste for dress, are sadly at a discount” in the “dark circle” because “[d]arkness affords no facilities for concealment” and, therefore, “[t]heir gewgaws fail to divert the attention” away from their true characters. It had other advantages, as well. When blackness rendered witnesses’ eyes ineffectual, their other senses compensated for the loss by becoming more acute. For example, “upon several occasions,” Wolfe “extended [his] hand forward, and moved it quietly from side to side. There was no noise, but simply gentle waves of air, and yet this was appreciable, and excited inquiry” among those in the circle.³⁶ The environment transformed their bodies into impressionable tactile plans that could discern even slight changes in air circulation. Re-sensitizing the skin and fostering a state of hyper-awareness, darkness did not detract from witnesses’ experiences, but instead made them richer by foregrounding an often overlooked dimension of bodily knowledge.

The interpretation of darkness promulgated by séances was hotly contested by opponents of Spiritualism. While “[n]o one possesses an absolute perfection of sensation, and thus things are never . . . felt exactly as they exist,” “[i]n the dark,” warned Dr. William A. Hammond, a fierce critic of the movement, “the liability to self-deception is very much increased.” When the lights in the séance room are extinguished, “it is exceedingly easy to induce sensorial confusion and thus to impose upon the intellect.”³⁷ Participants could not say with certainty what it was that touched them because, with the curtains closed, it was easy, as a contributor to the humorous magazine *Punch* put it, to mistake “a bit of wax or wood, displayed by the mere aid of lazy tongs” for the flesh of roving “spirit hands.” Light could expose such errors of attribution and, for this reason,

materializing mediums shrunk from it. “[K]nowing well what clumsy machinery they work with,” they “live in constant dread of its detection, and by working in the dark they take precautions not to let the faintest ray of light upon it.”³⁸ Mediums conducted séances in the dark to prevent sitters from testing the truth of what they felt by comparing it with what they saw. Through arguments like these, critics associated darkness and touch with ignorance and fraud while naturalizing conventional connections between knowledge, light, and, by extension, sight.

Like the rituals they represent, séance reports encourage readers to re-examine conventional correlations between knowledge and vision by suggesting that insights occur in situations where seeing is physically impossible. While critics of Spiritualism identified learning with well-lit spaces, Livermore repeatedly reminds his audience that all of the “facts” he records were produced and experienced in complete darkness. Séances start when participants “extinguis[h] the light,” and it is always “[s]oon after the darkening of the room” that the spirits materialize and the touching begins. By negating agency, passive constructions never let readers forget that their narrator literally has no perspective: “to my great astonishment and delight, an arm was placed around my neck, and a real palpable kiss was implanted on my lips, through something like fine muslin.”³⁹ A head was laid upon mine, the hair falling luxuriantly down my face. The kiss was frequently repeated.”⁴⁰ Though he infers that it is Estelle who “place[s]” the “arm,” “implant[s]” the “kiss,” and rests her head, he does not name her as the agent of these actions because he cannot see her. Unable to detect his wife’s approach, the presence of her body seems sudden, and the application of pressure surprising. Like Livermore, other witnesses set the scene of the séance by foregrounding the blackness of the room. For example, Robert Dale Owen, a prominent political figure and proponent of Spiritualism, notes that his sittings with Leah Fox (of the famous Fox sisters) took place late in the evenings, in rooms with “no fire,” and that the participants “fastened the inside blinds of both windows, so as to exclude all light from the street.” Organized around his contact with a mysterious female form, the reports underscore his inability to see by simultaneously positing and negating details about the woman’s appearance. “I saw no figure,” “I saw no features; nor did I see the arms moving,” he writes.⁴¹ Owen and Livermore neither ask for a light nor express frustration during moments of failed vision, but instead identify darkness as the condition of possibility for their most meaningful discoveries.

Articulating Spiritualism’s position in a public debate about the conditions in which learning occurs, séance reports demonstrate that a dark room is a space of surprise and possibility. They also argue that, in a situation where vision is impaired, touch, historically regarded as the “lowest” of the faculties, is of the utmost importance. To communicate this change in the hierarchy of the senses, writers describe the experience of being touched. But they also report on the limited visual impressions that they receive in the darkness—the few figures and motions that they are able to discern by the light of the moon, the soft glow of a candle, or the faint illumination of a “spirit.” And they record how they interpret this information, describing what, based on the signs, must be going on in the room. Urging Wolfe to present his reports in a published study, a spirit woman says, “The people are starving for this kind of testimony, which *demonstrates to their senses* the actuality of the spirit world” (emphasis mine).⁴² This, I want to suggest,

is precisely what Wolfe's testimony, like that of Livermore and countless other Spiritualists, attempts to do.

In thinking about how Spiritualist testimony might appeal to the reader's sense of touch, Scarry's *Reading by the Book*—a study of how mental images, evoked by literary descriptions, can “acquire the vivacity of perceptual objects”—is crucial because it explores how texts prompt readers to perform a “mimesis” of tactile perception. Scarry approaches the relationship between literature and sensory experience “in a way [that is] uniquely relevant to touch” and asks “How is the ‘solidity’ of an imagined object achieved?”⁴³ To answer this question, she draws on the work of cognitive psychologists who demonstrate that we use visual cues to infer an object's three-dimensionality, constancy, and weightiness. In their study of visual perception, Hans Wallach and D. N. O'Connell note that psychologists have long struggled with “The problem of how three-dimensional form is perceived in spite of the fact that pertinent stimulation consists only in two-dimensional retinal images.”⁴⁴ One of the most widely-accepted explanations was offered in the early twentieth-century by Gestalt psychologists. Gestaltists argue that, taking into account properties like motion, brilliance, and size, the brain will automatically separate some stimuli into figures and the rest into backgrounds, thus organizing the visual field into prominent objects in front of recessive surfaces.⁴⁵

Describing how such configurations give rise to perceptions depth or three-dimensionality, K. Koffka, in the classic text *Principles of Gestalt Psychology* (1935), asserts that, when we see a small diamond inside of a larger oblong, we know “that the larger figure does not cease to be where the smaller is, that it stretches behind or underneath the smaller.” We intuitively understand that, if the diamond and a section of the oblong appear to be occupying the same space, then they “must be at different distances” from each other—“our oblong” cannot be on the same plane as the diamond, but must instead be “*behind* the small figure.” Thus, the figure/ground relationship, Koffka concludes, “always involves, in however low a degree, a third dimension of space.”⁴⁶ As Koffka's remarks suggest, the superimposition of the diamond over the oblong tells us not only that the small shape has depth, but also that the larger one endures through time. Further developing this observation, James J. Gibson asks readers to consider what we see when a “picture frame on the wall falls to the floor”: “As the object moves through the air it progressively covers and uncovers the physical texture of the wall behind it”; “there occurs a *wiping-out* at the leading border, [and] an *unwiping* at the trailing border.” This phenomenon, which Gibson refers to as “kinetic-occlusion,” “specifies the existence of an edge in the world, and the depth at the edge, but it does even more. *It also specifies the existence of one surface behind another, that is, the continued existence of a hidden surface.*” Though there is an apparent “rupture of the continuity of [the wall's] texture, a sort of topological breakage” caused by the falling picture, we neither assume that the surface which slides beneath the frame has ceased to exist, nor that the surface which appears in the frame's wake has just been created. Rather, we discern that the stretches of wall which are progressively concealed and revealed by the moving picture are connected and that they have been there all along. Kinetic occlusion gives rise to the perception that hidden objects or surfaces persist, and, based on this impression, we make inferences about their density.⁴⁷ Gibson writes, “The surfaces” and “substances of the environment differ in the degree to which they persist, some resisting dissolution, disintegration, or vaporization more than others.”⁴⁸ Because

things that withstand destructive processes tend to be more rigid and weighty, we suppose that objects or surfaces which remain constant through kinetic occlusion are probably substantial. By seeing objects and surfaces in relationship to each other, we are able to infer if they are three-dimensional, enduring, and heavy. Therefore, by seeing them, we can infer what it would be like to touch them.

A séance is really a series of occlusions, both kinetic and static (when the figure blocks the ground without moving). Participants who were touched by spirit materializations did not need to infer the tactile qualities of these mysterious forms because they could actually *feel* them. However, in their written reports, witnesses described not only how these interactions felt but also, based on their tactile impressions and limited visual input, how they probably looked. For example, if a sitter felt something solid move down his arm and saw a small, opaque shape occluding portions of his skin, he might conclude that a spirit hand had caressed him and record this interpretation in his account of the event. Similarly, while a participant could not report what those across the séance table felt, he could, once his eyes had adjusted to the darkness, detect and describe the intersection of bodies as spirits passed before or behind other witnesses. So whether they saw bodies moving across themselves or other witnesses, séance participants described, often in great detail, these figure/ground relationships to their readers. I want to suggest that these representations of occlusions and the actual occlusions themselves work in the same way: both facilitate the perception of a spirit's form, constancy, and density.

Scarry's work is useful in thinking about how séance reports simulate tactile experience because she argues that we apply Gibson's rules of visual perception, not only to the objects that we see outside of ourselves, but also to those that we envision in our minds. Qualities like form, constancy, and density can be, she admits, hard to imagine because the imagination, as its name suggests, is geared toward image-making and is almost "exclusively visual." Fortunately, the diminished sensuality of our imagined worlds has, she argues, "a striking exception in the verbal arts," where writers can tell us how our "mental image[s] . . . can be coaxed into solidity: "by the peculiar gravitational rules of the imagination, two or more images that are each independently weightless can nevertheless confer weight on one another; just as by the geometry of the imagination two or more images, each independently two-dimensional, can nevertheless confer three-dimensionality on one another."⁴⁹ As mental representations of objects intersect in the imagination, they imbue each other with tactile qualities, and this process of mutual materialization supports the reader's impression that he has been discovering these qualities with his own hands.

Scarry's argument is premised on the notion that we have mental images, and research in cognitive psychology strongly suggests that we do. In *The Case for Mental Imagery* (2006), Stephen M. Kosslyn, William L. Thompson, and Giorgio Ganis define a "mental image" as a "depictive representation" that appears when "the stimulus is not actually being perceived," but that "preserve[s] the perceptible properties of the stimulus," including "all aspects of shape and the relations between shape and other perceptual qualities (such as color and texture), as well as the spatial relations among each point." That such images give rise to "the experience of 'seeing with the mind's eye'" is, they argue, proved by introspective evidence as well as by behavioral and neural data. Many people report that they have mental images. "The study of phenomenology

is,” Kosslyn writes, “a legitimate enterprise” and, while “introspections are not adequate in and of themselves to attest to the functional role of depictive representations (i.e., mental images) in cognition,” “the experience of depictive imagery is undeniable.” Behavioral studies tell us about the properties of these images, suggesting that, though they are two-dimensional, they “embody space” and can be intentionally moved or manipulated. If mental depictions can reproduce the proportions and spatial relationships of a form, then it should take us longer mentally to “look across” larger imagined objects than smaller ones—just as it would if we were viewing them in the external world. And, as Kosslyn observes, it does: “a large body of literature now indicates that the time to scan across an imaged object typically increases linearly with the distance scanned.” Moreover, in the same way that it takes more time to make out the tiny features of a small picture than it would to, say, see them in a billboard, “reporting details from smaller [mental] images . . . requires more time than reporting details from larger images.” Studies also show that we can move and alter the objects in our minds. According to Kosslyn, “images can be transformed if one anticipates what one would see if one were physically to manipulate the object.” In addition to visualizing the results of our own imaginary manipulations, we can also “anticipate what [we] would see if an external force were to manipulate an object (e.g., by rotating it).” It takes time to modify real objects, so it makes sense that “The farther one must rotate an image, the more time is required.”⁵⁰

And, finally, the notion that we have mental images which “give rise to the subjective experience of perception” is supported by recent neuroscience data. When we see an object in the external world, a physical representation of it appears in “the topographically organized” areas of the cerebral cortex, which are collectively known as the “visual buffer.”⁵¹ The picture that emerges here closely corresponds to the stimulus. As Kosslyn writes, “the relationship between an external visual stimulus and the activation it engenders” on the visual buffer “is not arbitrary: points that are relatively close in space in the external world are represented by activation in nearby portions of those areas, and points that are relatively far in space are represented by activation in relatively separated portions within each of these areas.” And, indeed, an experiment on a monkey has shown that such patterns of activation can be seen when the brain is removed; they are “literally depictive from the point of view of external human observers.” In short, “the visual buffer, in essence, is the canvas upon which images are painted.” This does not mean that mental images of objects are perfect reflections of the objects themselves—Kosslyn notes that, “[i]f we were to treat the cortex like a piece of paper, we would conclude that the depiction is distorted, with the central part amplified.” However, outputs from the cortex are interpreted by other structures in the brain that “compensate for the distortions in the actual (physical) representation—and thus the result is that the topographic areas function to depict shape accurately.” When talking about whether or not we have mental images, it is important to understand the mechanisms underlying sight because there is “strong evidence that visual mental imagery draws on very much the same neural system as visual perception.” If the objects that we see in the external world are depicted on the visual buffer, then, Kosslyn hypothesizes, the objects that we see in our minds also appear there. The only difference is that, “in the case of mental imagery these representations are based on information retrieved or formed from memory, not on immediate sensory stimulation.” His hypothesis

is supported by “[p]osition emission tomography” and “functional magnetic resonance imaging” which have demonstrated that, when we have mental images, the visual buffer is active. “If these areas are activated when one visualizes, and disruption of these areas impairs the ability to visualize, this is,” writes Kosslyn, “strong evidence that the representations underlying visual mental images . . . depict information.” Taken together with introspective experiences and behavioral studies, this empirical data seems to confirm Scarry’s assumption about the ocularcentric nature of the imagination. It strengthens her claim that we can create and manipulate mental images for the purpose of simulating tactile experiences.⁵²

When texts describe objects intersecting, and readers recreate these scenes in their minds, they perform what she calls a “mimesis” of touch. According to Scarry, during “a mimesis of perception,” “what . . . comes to be imitated is not only the sensory outcome (the way something looks or sounds or feels beneath the hands) but the actual structure of production that gave rise to the perception; that is, the material conditions that made it look, sound, or feel the way it did.”⁵³ Mimicking the sense of touch means duplicating instances of kinetic occlusion and interpreting the signs of tactile traits, a hermeneutic task that, research suggests, can be carried out on both real and imagined images. “If images are sensory patterns that have been organized and stored, the question of how knowledge can be derived from images is,” writes Kosslyn, “on the same footing as the question of how knowledge is derived from ongoing sensory activity during perception. Knowledge obviously is derived from perceptual representations, and there seems to be no reason why it should not also be gleaned in similar ways from mental images.”⁵⁴ While Gibson asserts that kinetic occlusion among objects in the external world provides the visual cues that we need to infer tactile qualities, Scarry argues that kinetic occlusion can also take place among objects in our minds and that our mental images of figure/ground relationships can display visual indicators of form, persistence, and weight.⁵⁵ Literary descriptions that invite readers to imagine one object passing across another function like a “set of instructions” for “reproduc[ing] the way solidity is visually inferred in the perceptible world.”⁵⁶

In this way, a séance report is a “set of instructions” for how to infer touch, a script that readers can follow to acquire what feels like an embodied knowledge of the materialized dead. Performing this pedagogical function, Livermore’s account focuses, in great detail, on how Estelle uses fabric to veil and unveil her body, presenting herself to her husband through a kind of strip tease:

The figure of a female passed around the table, and, approaching us, touched me. The gauzy substance was shaped as though covering a human head, and seemed as if drawn down tight at the neck . . . and then, re-approaching, the gauze, which had changed in form, was grasped by a naturally-formed female hand; and unfolding, revealed to me, with a thrill of indescribable happiness, *the upper half of the face of my wife*.⁵⁷

The mimesis of touch is particularly successful here because, instead of imagining an object that is solid and opaque like a hand, the reader visualizes a material that is fine and translucent like delicate fabric. While “The passing of a solid over a solid . . . reproduces the material antecedents of persistence,” it does not, Scarry avers, draw upon the imagination’s “special expertise in producing two-dimensional gauzy images.” “Some physical objects,” she explains, “have features that more closely approximate the

phenomenology of imaginary objects than do others.” So, for example, in the imagination, “gauze,” a “wall,” a “chair,” and “a friend’s face” all “have the Sartrean features of thinness and transparency,” but, in the real world, “gauze itself is (unlike faces, walls, chairs) transparent and without density.” Because physical gauze shares many qualities with its mental representation, it “can be more easily imitated in the mind than can thick or substantial phenomenon.”⁵⁸ There is some empirical evidence to support this assertion. According to Kosslyn, “Mental images are fleeting, ethereal entities,” and the more components that an image has, “the more time the initial ones have to fade before the image is complete.” Moreover, “studies have shown that mental images generated from long-term memory”—and many of the images that we create while reading are likely drawn from past experiences—“do not activate the topographically organized visual cortex . . . as strongly as do external precepts.” For this reason, “we would expect them to fade more quickly—they were ‘faded’ to begin with.”⁵⁹ If Scarry’s claim is correct, then texts that depict “[t]he glide of the transparent over the surface of something underneath” make the underlying entity seem more tangible than it would if it were traversed by something more solid, like a book or a brick. By prompting readers to imagine gauze gliding over Estelle’s head, neck, and hands, Livermore’s account “tak[es] what the imagination is best at (dry, thin two-dimensionality)” and uses it to generate three-dimensional, enduring, and weighty body parts.⁶⁰ Instances of kinetic occlusion with fabric occur throughout his reports. For example, one evening, his wife appeared “exquisitely robed in white, and enveloped in blue gossamer. A white ribbon, tied or knotted in the centre, passed across her waist; and a large and perfect *bow-knot* of white silk ribbon was attached to her breast diagonally.” We also see it in the passage which opens this chapter: “She stood before us enveloped in gossamer, her arm and hand as perfect as in life, the arm bare from the shoulder, with the exception of the gossamer, which was so transparent that it was more beautiful for being thus dressed.”⁶¹ The readers’ perception of her body as palpable may be due to the effortlessness with which her gossamer and ribbons can be visualized. Mental images of these flimsy materials form half of a figure/ground relationship that suggests the roundedness and density of her waist and arms.

While invoking an object’s weight and three-dimensionality, literary depictions of fabric, Scarry argues, also allow readers to infer its movements and texture. Motion and touch are inextricably linked, as the historian of the senses, David Chidester, observes. He writes, “the sense of touch is engaged in handling the environment, acquiring sensory information by moving and manipulating objects.”⁶² Tactile information is also received when objects act upon us, impressing our skin with their temperature, consistency, weight, and dimensions. Facilitating the mental production of texture and motion, writers of sensual texts, Scarry argues, often envelop their characters in cloth in order to “make the image more labile by calling attention to its malleability.” This practice, she claims, was perfected by Flaubert in *Madame Bovary*. When Flaubert “wants cloth’s elastic property to transfer” to bodies, he either covers them with or places them in close proximity to blankets, dresses, scarves, or other forms of fabric. He helps us imagine “the heaving of the opera singer’s chest by reminding us of the stretchability of openwork lace,” and “when Charles’ first wife ‘twine[s]’ her ‘long thin arms’ around her husband’s neck,” Flaubert draws our attention to the fact that they have just come out “‘from under her bedclothes.’” In each of these cases, “we make the moving picture only after our

minds glance across an inherently supple piece of cloth . . . as though to feel directly the flexing stuff of mental imaging before starting to compose a precisely specified motion.”⁶³

However, as Ellen Spolsky notes in her critique of *Reading by the Book*, if cloth makes it easier to imagine action, then it may have more to do with our visual memories of it fluttering than with the flexibility of our mental images. She writes that, “given the light weight of the fabrics [that Scarry describes], any stored memory of a curtain” or “a scarf may itself already represent it in motion.” Spolsky’s assertion is supported by Kosslyn’s description of how visual memory works. “[V]isual information,” he writes, “is stored in a way that allows the system to reconstruct the shape.” So suppose that we have already seen or imagined a flexing and folding piece of fabric. If we perceive or visualize fabric a second time, then our new image of it will be (at least partially) an old one, made up from our past experience. Once we have retrieved this “stored representation,” we also have “access to the information associated with” it, including its name, category, properties, and so on.⁶⁴ Thus, imagined cloth may exhibit the property of mobility (which we can then transfer to other imaged objects) because it is reproducing the behavior of cloth that we have perceived in the external world and reminding us of what we know about it (i.e. that it moves). Whether it has to do with visual memory or with “the flexing stuff of mental imaging,” representations of fabric seem to animate more torpid imagined entities, thereby enhancing the tactility of the reading experience.

The same cognitive processes that transform the language of *Madame Bovary* into pliable forms are activated by Livermore’s account in which fabric creates the impression that the banker and his wife are capable of flexing, stretching, and tactilely interacting. “The question of the dress of the spirits has been often discussed” among séance participants, notes Sargent, and “Livermore’s observations in respect to costume . . . appear to have been careful and minute.” Indeed, he seems to fixate on the texture of Estelle’s garments. In one entry, he writes that he “noticed her dress, which seemed tight-fitting, of a substance like delicate white flannel,” while in another, he remarks that her “spirit-robe[’s]” “manifestation of texture was exquisitely beautiful.” “[T]ransparent and gossamer,” the gown was “drawn across [his] head, as palpable as though of material substance.” Readers transfer the properties of the flannel and gossamer to Estelle’s body and Livermore’s head, allowing her to walk and him to manipulate his face in response to her touch. A similar migration of traits is prompted by the following report: “A manifestation of great power and ‘solid form.’ A veiled figure robed in white stood by us; and, opening the drapery which enveloped the head, we” realized that the “lower part of [Estelle’s] face was covered with gossamer.” In a pucker made possible by the traveling lability of these materials, she then “kissed” her husband. Contact between Livermore and Estelle is almost always mediated by fabric. When “[s]omething like a handkerchief of transparent gossamer” is presented, he discerns “as perfect a female hand as was ever created” underneath it: “I advanced my own hand, when the spirit-hand was placed in it, grasping mine; and we again grasped hands with all the fervor of long-parted friends.” The pliability of the ethereal cloth shifts to his wife’s hand, making it limber enough to grip his. In another example, a light, wispy sheet at once separates and unites their lips: “a real palpable kiss was implanted on my lips, through something like fine muslin.” Her “kiss” feels real to both her husband and the reader because of the material through which it occurs.

Livermore seems to focus on flowers for the same reason that he does on cloth. Catering to the imagination's visual orientation, flowers are easy to picture and provide striking signs of tactile properties. As Scarry remarks, "The gossamer quality of many flowers"—"the thinness and transparency of the petals (which let one see the sunlight through them or see the shape of an overlapping petal coming from behind)"—"gives them a kinship with the filmy substancelessness of mental images." Consequently, a flower, even more than a handkerchief, "lends itself to being imagined, to being captured mentally in nearly the same degree of extraordinary vivacity it has in the perceptual world." Yet, while they may be similar in nature to mental images, flowers also possess unique qualities that make them a crucial component in any simulation of physical contact. Listing these features, Scarry writes that "the ease of imagining" flowers is "attributable to *their* size and the size of our heads, *their* shape and the shape of our eyes, *their* intense localization and the radius of our compositional powers." With regard to size, she refers to "experiments" conducted by Kosslyn which suggest "that imaginary mimesis follows the spatial constraints of actual perception." For example, "When people in one experiment were asked to imagine animals of ten different sizes, the larger animals were consistently placed farther away than the smaller ones." "An imagined elephant," she explains, "is placed farther away from the imaginer's face than an imagined rabbit, just as in visual perception an actual elephant must be placed farther away from us so that we can see its entire surface." Because imagined flowers—like real ones—are small, they "appear immediately in the small bowl of space in front of one's eyes." Thus, they are "the perfect size for imagining." Another reason why flowers are easy to see in our minds is because they do not overtax our powers of visualization. As Scarry points out, research in cognitive psychology suggests that "'there is only a limited amount of energy or 'processing capacity' with which to construct images,' with the result that a smaller image will also be a more 'filled-in image.'" If "[t]he labor of construction has a certain radius," the flower fits into it perfectly. It "brings the work of imagining into the compass of our compositional powers."⁶⁵

Because the imagined perception of flowers rivals the actual perception of them, Livermore's representations of plants and buds evoke clear visual markers of tactile experience. "About fifteen minutes after extinguishing the light," Estelle materializes and appears to her husband, whose description of the encounter is filled with floral cues: "In her bosom was a white rose, green leaves and other smaller flowers.... Her hand, real in form and color, was affectionately extended to me, and caressed me with a touch so full of tenderness and love that I could not restrain my tears." Readers superimpose two-dimensional images of already diaphanous "rose[s]," "leaves," and "flowers" onto Estelle's chest, a move that, facilitating a visual comparison between the delicate foliage and her body, makes it easier to imagine the greater depth and density of the latter. Thin, supple, and flexible like cloth, visualized flowers and plants are also perfect vehicles for representing movement, and movement is the primary means of demonstrating (and discovering) texture. The flowers' flexibility allows Estelle to "exten[d]" her hand to her husband and "cares[s]" him, while he in turn is animated by "the stem and leaves" of a "sprig of roses" which he grasped in his "fingers, and . . . carefully examined." As he studies the blossoms with his fingers, petals repeatedly conceal and reveal his imaginary hand, imbuing it with materiality in two ways: firstly, through kinetic occlusion, their movements indicate that his hand is as three-dimensional as its real-world counterpart;

and, secondly, through a transfer of texture, they enliven it so that it can engage in tactile manipulations. Moreover, instead of kissing her husband, Estelle frequently places flowers between his lips. “[A] rose,” Livermore writes, “was placed in my mouth, so that I took its leaves between my lips. They were delicate as natural rose-leaves, and cold; and there was a peculiar freshness about them; but, very little fragrance.” On another occasion, he “discovered what seemed a piece of dried grass projecting from her lips about three inches. This was then placed in my hand and in my mouth. I closed my teeth upon it, finding it a real substance.”⁶⁶ Roses and grass lend their flexibility to Livermore’s lips, which are then limber enough to wrap around their leaves and blades, respectively. But, as the transfer of the grass from Estelle’s mouth to his makes explicit, they are also stand-ins for her own lips. If Scarry is correct that plant matter is a perfect vehicle for communicating texture and motion, then the roses and grass suggest the tactile qualities of her lips more readily than her mouth alone might do.

Wispy and seemingly two-dimensional like fabric and flowers, Estelle’s hair is also a perfect object for the imagination because, readily appearing in readers’ minds, it establishes the visual conditions necessary for a mimesis of touch. Livermore commits to paper seemingly insignificant gestures involving his wife’s hair, telling readers, for example, that she raised her “little finger, and moved it characteristically; and while we were looking at that, she let her hair fall loosely down her back.”⁶⁷ The cascading hair functions like a picture passing over a wall; that is, “it progressively covers and uncovers the physical texture . . . behind it,” and this “wiping-out” and subsequent “unwiping” exhibits her head’s depth and staying power.⁶⁸ While the hair’s movement imbues Estelle’s body with these properties, its elasticity (demonstrated by its unfurling) travels backward to animate her finger. Hair, motion, and touch are linked again in this description of another close encounter: “Hands were placed upon my forehead, a head placed upon mine, the hair . . . falling down my face into my hand. I grasped it.”⁶⁹ As their bodies take on the silky-smoothness of the strands, the reader’s mental representations of the pair begin to seem less like pictures that appeal to the eye and more like bendable bodies which press upon the skin.

Certainly, the rhetorical strategies described above are not specific to Livermore’s reports; Scarry tracks their deployment in the *Odyssey*, *Madame Bovary*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Anna Karenina*, among other works. What sets séance reports apart is the frequency with which such techniques are used and the importance of their role within the narrative. While the texts studied by Scarry exploit the principles of kinetic occlusion and feature representations of rarified materials, they do so periodically over the course of hundreds of pages. In contrast, Spiritualist testimonials are often only a few paragraphs and, consequently, tactile cues occur one after another, almost without interruption. Another difference is that of scope. Scarry’s texts describe vistas, depict dialogue, delineate characters’ interior lives, and represent aspects of human experience that are not necessarily tangible. The purview of a typical séance report is limited to the insides of an almost completely dark room. Narrators write of the simple, yet dimly seen, movements of spirit forms and describe other séance participants who, for the most part, sit perfectly still as they wait to feel the slightest pressure on their skin. Sometimes there is conversation, but narrators rarely report on it except to say that it occurs. In effect, if other texts occasionally stimulate fleeting impressions or skin-to-skin contact, séance reports always aim to activate a sustained mimesis of touch. Arguably the most tactilely

intensive genre of literature, they are short, densely packed catalogues of sensory triggers that, when actualized, simulate the feeling of an extended physical encounter with the dead.

These encounters do not occur in a vacuum. Imaginary tactile sensations have no inherent meaning, but like their real world counterparts derive significance from the context in which they are incited. This context, as the following excerpt from Livermore's testimony demonstrates, was often emotionally charged. Recalling how his wife grasped his hand, he writes that

The expression of love and tenderness thus given cannot be described; for it was a reality which lasted through nearly half an hour. I examined carefully the spirit-hand, squeezed it, felt the knuckles, joints, and nails, and kissed it . . . I took each finger separately in my hand, and could discern no difference between it and a human hand, except in temperature; the spirit-hand being cold at first, and growing warm . . . At last "good-night" was spelled out, by the spirit-hand tapping upon mine, and then for a parting benediction, giving it a hearty shake. Nothing in all of these manifestations has been more real to me, or given me greater pleasure, than thus receiving the kindly grasp of a hand dearer to me than life.

Though Livermore had caught glimpses of Estelle and heard echoes of her voice, he suggests that, more than these visual and auditory impressions, the sensation of her hand in his constitutes indisputable proof of her continued presence. The touch is convincing because it is imbued with "love" and "tenderness;" and the test of its reality seems to be that, when he feels it, he can "not restrain [his] tears."⁷⁰ As these remarks suggest, the written nature of Livermore's testimony allows him to think about and expand upon his mental and emotional reactions to being touched, something that he would not have been able to do while it was happening. His internal responses could not be seen during the actual séance, nor could they be heard because, with the exception of posing a few questions to the dead, sitters were encouraged to be quiet. More than the séances themselves, séance reports were good at coding tactile sensations with subjective meaning, and this is precisely what Livermore's text does. By equating factuality with the emotional affect of skin-to-skin contact, his report challenges the notion that seeing is believing.

Observing the connection that Livermore makes between fact and feeling, a contributor to the late nineteenth-century journal, *The Psychological Review*, considers how his reports engage epistemological questions. "Mr. Livermore," he writes, "had no doubt as to the identity of his wife. 'The recognition,' he says, 'was complete.'" His knowledge of her identity is absolute, not because the evidence withstands vigorous intellectual scrutiny, but because it arouses an intense affective response: "It is, as in so many cases when identity is proven, a matter of the heart first and of the head after; an appeal to an instinct of affection such as leads the mother to know her son, spite of all the changes that time may have wrought in his external appearance." While looking at the materialized spirit and following the logic of visual signs might have distracted Livermore from the truth of its identity, touching its body gives rise to an overwhelming sense of certitude and "satisfaction" which "is not to be weighed and measured by any standard that can be applied generally to all cases."⁷¹ The writer suggests that the account renegotiates the meaning of a fact, moving it from something quantifiable and objectively

seen to something unquestionable, and viscerally felt. In accordance with Spiritualist sensory values, Livermore understands his tactile impressions as emotionally-charged, irrationally yet instinctively recognized truths. And the reader, who feels vicariously through him, is coerced into following his example and confirming his interpretation. Spiritualists admitted that tactile sensations were subjective and emotional, but this, they argued, did not disqualify them as evidence. Rather than downplaying witnesses' emotional investments in the manifestations, séance reports emphasized them, suggesting that it was this affective commitment that made the phenomena incontrovertible. Séances took place in the home, a domestic space traditionally regarded as the domain of women; and, in this setting, steeped with sentimental associations, spirit touch frequently elicited feelings of nostalgia for close family ties and grief over bonds severed by death. For instance, a witness recounts having her "left shoulder . . . strongly touched" by the hand of her dead child. "[O]n turning my head a spirit-hand," she continues, "held out to me a box taken from a table at the other end of the room. I received it with emotion and as a precious gift; and the sweet hand that gave it was placed on my shoulder with a loving pressure."⁷² As her response indicates, memories of the dead informed participants' interpretations of physical contact so that, instead perceiving spirit hands as alien, intrusive, and even dangerous, sitters assumed that they "were touched and patted . . . by loved hands whose touch [they] knew."⁷³ Articulating this belief, a Spiritualist writes, "It is not uncommon . . . for the spirit of my wife to come in form, and spell out messages upon my shoulder, with repeated kisses and tokens of love so palpable that I could not if I would avoid realising her presence."⁷⁴ Another sitter was moved when her spirit brother "gave a most touching [in both senses of the term] manifestation. He blessed her by making the sign of the cross on her forehead."⁷⁵ Witnesses did not view spirit touch objectively and describe it in clinical terms as the application by anonymous agents of an abstract force, but instead interpreted it as "loving pressure" from "sweet hand[s]"—intimate gestures of care and blessing from deceased family and friends.⁷⁶ That these caresses aroused tender sentiments did not, séance reports claimed, invalidate them as "hard facts," but instead made them more impressive.

Exemplified by Livermore's writing, séance reports incited (imaginary) tactile sensations, situated them in a context of loving interaction, and cited their intense emotional valence as the source of their credibility. However, it was precisely because of this affectivity that critics of Spiritualism discredited information acquired through physical contact. If the space required for the exercise of vision suggests that the seer is uncoerced by the seen, the closeness entailed by touch establishes a relationship in which the perceiver and the perceived impinge upon and influence each other, thereby undermining science's dream of objectivity by generating knowledge that is more explicitly inter-relational, shaped by opinion, emotion, and desire. Alluding to this "problem," skeptics argued that séance accounts were unreliable because Spiritualists' tactile impressions were idiosyncratic and, consequently, unverifiable. If a materialized spirit stood in the middle of a lighted room, everyone present would be able to see it. However, as Hammond writes, when a medium "feels the presence of spirits by a vague impression, a kind of light touch on the surface of the body," this "evidence—if such it can be called—is entirely subjective; a sensation, the existence of which is only realized by the subject."⁷⁷ Because of the singularity of tactile experience, its meaning can be deformed by the personal preoccupations of the perceiver. A writer for *The Quarterly*

Review makes this point in a scathing evaluation of Daniel Dunglas Home's autobiography. He singles out the following statement from a séance participant for special criticism. According to the participant, "A strong hand came, stated to be that of my grandfather. I asked, how am I to know that this is my grandfather? The hand moved from my forehead to my temple, over my eyebrow and eye, and then passed down over my face, the fingers patting me in the most gentle manner possible. And another time, at my request, hands patted my forehead."⁷⁸ The reviewer sarcastically calls this passage "Signs and tokens to know a grandfather by" to make the point that "the patting" is not a successful sign because it has no meaning for anyone but this individual. Neither intrinsic to the pressure itself nor arrived at through community consensus, the significance of the touching is determined solely by the witness, and it is unclear how he arrived at his interpretation. The writer isolates these lines of so-called "spiritual logic" to show that tactile knowledge has no logic at all because it is governed by emotion instead of reason.⁷⁹

However, if fact and emotion were antithetical, then scientists, Spiritualists countered, had no more access to truth than they did. Though they claimed objectivity, their bias was obvious. "How unreasonable, then, is it," asks one convert, to attempt to ignore, as many do, unmistakable palpable facts in Spiritualism, because they are not done to order. Assuredly, the man who allows his prejudice to interpose, who stands out on the pride-of-intellect plane, and refuses to imitate the humility of the great Newton in the pursuit of truth, misses a golden opportunity, by neglecting Spiritualism, of increasing his knowledge, and, as I believe, his future happiness.⁸⁰

While skeptics saw believers' willingness to sit in the dark as a sign of their gullibility, Spiritualists interpreted their demand for light and incessant need to see as evidence of partiality and pride. Only irrational people insisted on seeing the hands that touched them. Jonathan Koons, an Ohio farmer whose séances drew people from all over the country, refused requests to illuminate his famous "spirit room" during tactile manifestations. Exasperated by his narrow-minded visitors, he asks, "Now, what more can I do to satisfy the unreasonable demands of unreasonable men, unless I close the manifestations against them altogether."⁸¹ For Spiritualists, being "reasonable" meant recognizing the legitimacy of phenomena that occurred in the dark and valuing the necessarily subjective lessons that touch had to teach.

Séance reports championed touch as a crucial means of engaging the world at a time when the undifferentiated nature of tactile experience made it irreconcilable with prevailing definitions of knowledge. According to nineteenth-century American teaching manuals, knowledge was produced by the separation and classification of sensory stimuli. "The existence of knowledge in the mind," holds the educator N. A. Calkins, "begins when resemblances and differences in objects are perceived. Knowledge increases in proportion to the increased ability for distinguishing resemblances and differences, and the capacity to classify and associate objects, experiences, and facts that resemble each other." It is "*By means of observation, comparison, and classification of experience and facts*" that "*knowledge is attained*" (emphasis his).⁸² For this reason, students' senses should be trained to convey highly differentiated impressions, a course of action prescribed by H. I. Smith, who writes: "In cultivating and training the senses, our object should be . . . [t]hat each sense may perceive acutely and correctly."⁸³

Séance reports proposed a very different object. If mainstream teaching manuals asserted that knowledge could be acquired through “observation” and “classification,” an account written by the Spiritualist Robert Dale Owen recommended that it be attained by touching the object of interest and tolerating the imprecision of the feedback. The text, which describes a sitting with Leah Underhill, a Fox sister and famous medium, instructs readers to perform a mimesis of touch and demonstrates how at once to learn from and to enjoy the exercise of a sense that confounds categorization. Appearing in two popular studies of Spiritualism—Owen’s *The Debatable Land between this World and the Next* and Underhill’s *The Missing Link in Modern Spiritualism*⁸⁴—the following excerpt portrays an “evening session” that he had in 1860 with Leah, her husband Daniel, and her nephew Charles.

After a time there was spelled “Darken;” then “Join hands.” We obeyed. . . . After a few minutes, there appeared a luminous body of an irregularly circular form, about four inches in diameter, floating between us and the door which was back of Mrs. Underhill. . . . Then, after an interval, the light, rustling sound seemed to indicate the approach of some one. . . . The highest light seemed to be on the spot corresponding to the forehead. But I saw no features; nor did I see the arms moving. Very soon I was gently touched on the head, then on the shoulders, then laid hold of, as with both hands of some one standing behind me. . . . While it was close to Charles it appeared to me as if a white handkerchief or some article of the like texture were thrown over a hand or some similar support. I saw no figure. When it rose behind Charles, as if to leave him when he cried out, I could perceive what resembled a hand grasping some illuminated substance, the outline of the hand appearing as a shadow across the illuminated ground. . . . After a time I saw the figure pass behind Mrs. Underhill and remain, for a few minutes, near her husband; then it returned to me, appearing on my left side. I saw the outline of a head and face, but still, as before, covered with a veil which concealed the features. I perceived, however, what I had not observed before, what seemed tresses of dark hair dropping over the face; and the outline of an arm raised one of these tresses, and then dropped it again, several times, as if to attract my attention. Behind was the vague outline of a figure, but less distinct than during the previous sitting. Then the figure passed behind me. I was leaning over the table, so that Mr. Underhill might not have so far to stretch, in order to reach my hands. I felt a kiss on my shoulder, then there was the feeling of two hands laid each on one shoulder and I was drawn very gently back till my shoulders, above the chair back, were pressed against what seemed a material form. Almost at the same moment my hand was kissed. . . . From that very moment the manifestations entirely ceased. . . . and scarcely a minute or two elapsed ere it was spelled out, “Light the gas.”⁸⁵

In the darkness of the séance room, a few self-illuminating manifestations stand-out. Brightness, observes the cognitive poetics scholar, Peter Stockwell, specifies which “part of a visual field or textural field . . . is going to be seen as the figure.” Illumination “confer[s] prominence on the figure that differentiates it from the ground” and makes it

easier for perceivers to track with either their eyes or their imaginations.⁸⁶ Scarry also remarks upon this phenomenon. “What is extraordinary,” she writes, “is the ease with which a point of light can be moved in one’s mind, and the fact that by pairing this easily moved object with a solid object—a person or horse say—we are able to move the latter mentally.”⁸⁷ This technique, which she calls “radiant ignition,” is used in Owen’s account to support the production of imaginary tactile sensations. It is because the “body” is “luminous” that readers can readily picture it “floating between us and the door,” alternately concealed and revealed by Leah’s body while concealing and revealing the wall before which it passes. A perfect example of “kinetic occlusion,” this imagined crossing is a visual clue from which readers can infer that the body occupies space and endures through time. Moreover, the “shadow across the illuminated ground” indicates that “the hand grasping the illuminated substance” is dense enough to block light. Instead of attenuating the claim that séance reports constitute a tactile genre, representations of eerily glowing manifestations actually support it because they seem calculated to enhance the reader’s vicarious experience of the sitter’s physical encounters.

This simulated physical encounter is sustained by the report’s countless other tactile cues. Had Owen fixated on the woman as she floated alone in the open space of the room without relation to any person object, the reader’s mental representation of the scene would have been vague and fleeting. However, describing instead how her “two hands” touched his “shoulders,” pulling them back against her “material form,” he evokes spatial arrangements that attribute three-dimensionality and weight to her imaginary body, transforming it from an intangible idea presented on the page to an almost palpable reality. Furthermore, the way in which she plays with her hair “attract[s]” not only his attention, but also that of the reader. “[S]everal times,” she “raised” and “dropped” her tresses “over [her] face” as if to prove the continuity of her physical being; though her visage is temporarily hidden, it still exists, and can re-emerge from behind the curtain of hair because it is solid and enduring. The softness of her hair migrates to her face which also derives texture from the veil that covers it. By obscuring her features, this fabric foregrounds the texture of her body at the expense of its appearance.

While recreating the sensation of being handled by a materialized spirit, Owen’s text also attempts to recreate the meaning of the experience by reinforcing the notion that touch is vague and imprecise. This idea has a long history. According to Carla Mazzio, “The five senses were classically defined by specific organs.” Yet [w]hereas eyes, ears, nose, and tongue symbolize the modes of sensory perception they enable, touch is more difficult to represent, localize, and demonstrate” because it is exercised through the skin, an “organ” which spreads across “the whole body.” Not only is touch difficult to locate, but the information that it provides can neither be measured nor labeled. “Quantitatively speaking, a ‘touch,’” she observes, “is a relatively insubstantial unit: not even a piece, or a part, but rather a point so small as to almost resist quantification.” This, she argues, posed a problem for fifteenth and sixteenth-century thinkers: “If touch resists quantification, how could it possibly measure up to the standards of ‘rational’ inquiry that emerged during the Renaissance,” a “period [that] is commonly thought to have been . . . marked by a heightened emphasis on ‘visualization’ and a new ‘passion for measurement.’”⁸⁸ Characterized by a similar “passion” for precision, nineteenth-century intellectuals were also uncomfortable with the vagaries of touch. In an annotated edition of Thomas Reid’s *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, the Common Sense

philosopher William Hamilton is troubled by the diverse, often contradictory, nature of tactile impressions and questions the descriptive value of the word “touch”: it is “generally agreed,” he writes, “that under touch or feeling in the strictest signification of the term—are comprised perceptions which are, at least, as well entitled to be opposed in species as those of taste and smell.”⁸⁹ The range of sensations included under the rubric “touch” is so wide that it empties the category of all meaning and, therefore, hinders the production of knowledge which, as the contemporary educator N. A. Calkins reminds us, depends upon the neat “classification of experience and facts.”⁹⁰

Owen’s séance report seems to perpetuate this long-standing interpretation of touch by teaching readers to experience and understand their textually-induced simulations of sensations as diffuse and even inaccurate. Foregrounding the decentralization of touch and the difficulty of describing amorphous impressions, he identifies the various parts of his body that came into contact with the spirit woman and, though areas as dissimilar as the head, hand, and shoulder respond to pressure differently, he reduces their feedback to indistinct “feeling[s].” He conveys the slippery nature of touch by decoupling cause and effect: “I felt a kiss on my shoulder” and “then there was the feeling of two hands laid each on one shoulder.” Unable to confirm positively that lips and hands applied the force which he perceives, Owen can only claim that it “felt” that way. In a similarly vague formulation, he is “pressed against what *seemed* a material form” (emphasis mine). The text’s metaphorical mode of description suggests that tactile information may be misleading. For example, he claims that he was “laid hold of *as* with both hands” (emphasis mine). Rather than confidently asserting what it was that grabbed him, he weakly posits what it was like or what it may have been. This round-about way of reporting emphasizes that impressions on the skin neither indicate their source nor offer immediate access to reality. Looking back on his first séance with Leah Underhill, a sitting similar to the one excerpted above, he notes that the spirit “agencies” were “friendly” and the “demonstrations were gentle.” “[W]hen that dimly-illuminated Presence first bent over me, with scarcely six-inches intervening between its veiled face and mine—its hands placed on my head, its lips touching my shoulder,” “I,” Owen writes, “undoubtedly felt . . . awe and intense interest.”⁹¹ While the information that he receives through his sense of touch is open to multiple interpretations, he seems not only to tolerate the ambiguity of tactile experience, but even to enjoy it. His séance report reproduces the conventional idea that tactile impressions are diffuse and imprecise, but suggests that, rather than presenting a problem, these qualities are positive attributes of a much maligned sense.

Séance reports like Owen’s attempted to counteract the influence of mainstream educators who were working to enlist touch in the production of knowledge by refining its impressions and making it more like sight. “[G]reat care,” writes the educator H. I. Smith, “should be taken to sharpen this sense; to practice it in observing, in its own peculiar organ, the hand.” Such “methodical treatment of this lower sense” was necessary “to preserve the freedom of the soul in the development and use of the higher senses”—particularly vision. In other words, discouraging the use of sight, a sense that was indisputably crucial to the acquisition of knowledge, the vagaries of tactile experience could overwhelm young people and arrest their intellectual progress. To prevent this, touch had to become an auxiliary of vision, and exercises were designed to make the skin as exacting as the eye. For example, Smith recommends that students’ learn how to:

recognize different coins by examining them between their fingers; they should begin with the coarsest coins, and gradually proceed to finer ones. In the same manner, let them estimate the number of leaves in a book; recognize and describe plants by the touch; and subsequently teach them to become conscious of the presence of a hand or other object held at some distance before the face. They may also be accustomed to recognize persons by examining their faces with the fingers, or other objects submitted to the touch. At the same time, they may be made to perform various operations with their fingers while their eyes are bound up; for example, guide the hand, and let them specify what they write; or let them write, and perform various other manual operations in the dark.⁹²

Like Smith, Calkins also offered lessons on how “To distinguish Objects” and “Persons by Touch.” Though tactile impressions were difficult to separate, identify, and describe, young people could learn to divide and conquer this chaotic field of perception by naming all of its nuances. Adjectives like “*sticky*,” “*slippery*,” “*brittle*,” “*tough*,” “*porous*,” “*elastic*,” “*flexible*,” “*pliable*,” “*fluid*,” and “*solid*” would impose order on their skin’s confused responses (italics his).⁹³ Educators tried to reform students’ senses of touch by subjecting their bodies to physical drills and their elusive experiences to precise language. Their goal was to transform dull tactile impressions into high resolution information that could contribute to the pursuit of knowledge by confirming and supplementing the findings of the eye.

Attempts to tame touch were, Spiritualist writers contended, misguided because they were based on a narrow, ocularcentric definition of knowledge that excluded diffuse information, strong emotion, and gut instinct. Sargent claims that tactile manifestations introduced “new facts” that were “so subtle and evasive, so baffling and extraordinary,” that the physicist “can classify [them] under no law known to his code; facts for which there is no place in any of the pigeon-holes of his laboratory, and which flatly contradict, or threaten to contradict, some of the laws he has looked on as inviolable.”⁹⁴ Also ridiculing the drive to organize feeling, Wolfe argued that spirit touch could not be quantified “with the aid of your square, compass, steelyards, and crucibles.” “You can not,” he continues in an exasperated tone, “define love with mathematics. You can not wrap up all creation in formulated problems.”⁹⁵ Scientific categories failed to encompass the fluid and affectively charged information of a single caress, and Spiritualist writers expressed frustration with those who, unable to cope with the messiness of touch, would attempt to convert tactile experience into a clearly legible format.

Deploying lesson props for different purposes, dark séances parodied teachers’ attempts to discipline touch. Calkins writes that children learning “to distinguish the qualities of *rough* and *smooth*” should be made to manipulate articles like “silk, cotton, and woollen cloth, brown paper, writing-paper, rough and smooth pieces of wood, pieces of stone, metals, etc.” With their hands alone, they should be able to identify “marbles, tops, kni[ves], buttons, cents, pencils, key[s], pieces of cloth, and paper.”⁹⁶ If exercises like these required several small items, so, too, did dark séances. Spirits played with objects that they found secreted in sitters’ clothes, stored in the house, or purposely laid out for their amusement. According to one report, materialized “hands” “handled pocket-books, knives, a match-safe, knotted and untied handkerchiefs, and did a number of other strange things, literally under [sitters’] noses.” Moreover, they used props to touch

participants. A witness recounts how spirit “fingers . . . festooned with strings of pearls,” drew their treasure “gently over the back of [his hand], once or twice.”⁹⁷ Finally, they used them to create tactile connections among the participants themselves. The Spiritualist John Jones describes a séance during which a bell was carried from one participant to another. First, “Mr. W. felt something touch his knee, he put down his hand, and the bell was placed in his hand.” He “placed his hand on his knee, the bell was taken out of it, and passed to my son Edmund,” who, after receiving it in his palm, “put it on the floor” from whence “it was then taken up and carried round the table in front of the knees of the sitters.”⁹⁸ In short, the dark séance turned the classroom exercise on its head. While educators used objects to separate and fix fluid tactile sensations, spirits deployed them to create multiple and fleeting moments of physical contact.

In addition to being disorderly, the tactile impressions received during dark séances and represented in Spiritualist testimony had strong sexual valences. To improve the cultural perception of touch and establish it as a legitimate way of relating to the world, Spiritualists might have broken its long-standing links to physical passion and re-inscribed it as an asexual faculty. But they did not. On the contrary, unabashedly depicting sexual contact between the living and the dead, their texts created the conditions necessary for the inference of tactile qualities while teaching readers that it was precisely touch’s power to arouse them physically that made it an ideal sense for the discovery of truth. Some situations are more conducive to kinetic occlusion than others. For example, during sexual activity, bodies continually press against and pass over each other’s surfaces. Scarry makes this observation while discussing *Swann’s Way*:

Jealousy works to vivify the beloved precisely because it entails brushing one mental image (Albertine) against another mental image (lesbian lover). It is probably to solidify missing persons that the psychological state of jealousy is so often voluntarily introduced by both real life and fictional daydreamers . . . But once jealousy is placed with the framework of imagining, we see that it accidentally occasions a strategy of vivification that could, if we only recognized it, be just as easily reproduced by less painful forms of tactile contact between images (such as brushing an imaginary shadow across an imaginary wall in back of the chair in which the imagined friend is sitting).⁹⁹

Motivated by the details of the report and not by jealousy, readers of Livermore’s account picture the banker and his wife as they physically explore each other. The text focuses on instances of bodily juxtaposition: Estelle’s hand touching his head and shoulders, her arms sliding around his neck, his lips passing over her skin. Presenting these crossings to the reader’s imagination, it orchestrates scenes of kinetic occlusion which foreground the palpability of their forms and the pressure brought to bear through their movements. Though the contributor to *The Psychological Review* may have sought to suppress it with a mother/son comparison, the erotic charge of Livermore’s experience is almost tangible. He cites caresses and kisses as the most powerful kinds of proof, implying that we apprehend truths, not through neutral detachment, but through pleasurable contact.

However, if Livermore is in contact with his wife, Owen is physically intimate with a woman he has never met. The spirit who touches his head and kisses his shoulder is known to the Underhills, but a stranger to him: “Emily—that was the girl’s name—had been Mrs. Underhill’s favorite sister, long mourned over.”¹⁰⁰ If Emily were alive and

outside of the séance room, it would have been morally and socially unacceptable for her to grope Owen in public or in private. Yet, his testimony suggests that this kind of transgressive touch was precisely what séance participants hoped to experience. The extra-marital intimacy between Owen and Emily occurred in the presence of the Underhills who (for lack of a better phrase) looked on it with respect and awe. The text teaches readers that, in addition to exceeding semantic strictures, diffuse tactile impressions also blur social boundaries, expanding the definition of acceptable sexual behavior and transforming extra-marital intimacy into a respectable educational practice. Representing flowers, fabric, hair, and kinetic occlusion in a context that links socially prohibited sexual relationships with the pursuit of truth and knowledge, Owen's report incites tactile impressions in his readers and indoctrinates them with alternative sensory values.

Séance accounts confronted readers with a radically altered code of tactile engagement. While the sexual pleasure of spirit touch could be contained within the bonds of marriage (as Livermore's report shows), more often it was not. In Owen's description of casual intimacy and in countless other Spiritualist testimonials, we see witnesses blindly negotiating creative erotic relationships with new, often, unknown, partners. If, as Classen argues, "[t]he new etiquette of touch arising in modernity emphasized the importance of keeping one's hands to oneself," the etiquette of the séance taught Spiritualists to keep their hands on others—to touch and be touched.¹⁰¹ H. D. Jenchen, a participant in Home's séances, demonstrates his comfort with open tactile interaction when he describes without embarrassment or jealousy how his wife achieved something like an orgasm at the materialized hands of a strange spirit:

Spirit hands touched several of us on our hands and knees . . . We then observed the form of a hand under the shawl Mrs. Jencken had drawn across her knees. . . . her knee was then grasped, and we distinctly heard the tapping, kneading sound of shampooing a patient. . . . Her hand was then seized by, as she described it, a soft, warm hand, rubbed and stretched out with sufficient force to leave a red mark on her hand and wrist. She further said, that she felt as if an electric stream had passed through her, causing every limb to glow.¹⁰²

Men were also fondled. In a letter to a Buffalo newspaper, S. Albro reports that, during a sitting with the Fox sisters, he "felt a palpable pressure against the inside of [his] leg, and a pinch of [his] ankle."¹⁰³ But the dead were not the only ones who transgressed conventional tactile boundaries. Spiritualists neither withdrew nor took offense when living people with whom they were barely acquainted touched them or asked to be touched in ways that, outside of the séance room, would have been deemed inappropriate. For example, as protection against charges of fraud, mediums spread their legs and placed their feet on those of the nearest sitters who, due to the prescribed alternating seating pattern, were usually of the opposite sex.¹⁰⁴ Describing this practice, Albro writes that he and another participant, Dr. Scott, "were seated, by arrangement, on the right and left of these two ladies [the mediums], and they were requested to put their feet on ours, and to keep them there, which they did."¹⁰⁵ The living played footsies. "[T]hinking it might be possible that the foot of some one of the company might undesignedly be in contact with our own, we," explains the Spiritualist Robert Hare, "cautiously felt around to ascertain if this were the case."¹⁰⁶ Moreover, when women exclaimed that their garments were

grabbed by unseen hands, men tested their assertions by feeling the taut fabric stretching across their hips and legs. According to Albro, “[t]he lady-medium who sat next to Dr. Scott had her dress pulled and held fast, and she invited the doctor to try and see if he could release it. He made a strong effort.”¹⁰⁷ Even incestuous touch was normalized. No one seemed surprised when a woman’s dead father put his “large and powerful hands” on “her knees” and then sat “in her lap.” Engaging in erotic play with (living and dead) relatives, acquaintances, and strangers, Spiritualist writers represented sexual touch, not as an activity reserved for monogamous couples, but as something to be experienced with others in a group. Leah Underhill once loudly complained to the spirits ““Everyone is touched but me. Can’t you come to me,””¹⁰⁸ As this statement suggests, the notion that intimate physical contact should take place between two people in the privacy of their bedroom was defamiliarized in séance accounts to the point that such exclusivity seemed almost unnatural.

While reports like Owen’s attempted to reform readers’ sense of touch by reconciling sexualized contact with prevailing definitions of truth and knowledge, skeptics’ newspaper articles, short stories, and topical novels suggested that the tactile freedoms of the séance were irredeemably crude. Troubled by Spiritualists’ efforts to convert erotic tactile play into a respectable social or religious ceremony, Anthony Trollope remarked, “[W]hen . . . dead young women come and tickle my knee under a big table, I find the manifestations to be unworthy of the previous grand ceremony of death.”¹⁰⁹ William Dean Howells represented such tickling as gross violations of tactile etiquette. In his work on Howells’s novel *The Undiscovered Country*, Howard Kerr offers the following insight: “in the sobbing and giggling excitement with which his Mrs. Merrifield and the other ladies responded to the invisible but material kisses and embraces of masculine spirits counterfeited in the dark by Mrs. Le Roy,” there is “a dramatic rather than editorial demonstration of repressed sexuality emerging as spiritual longing.”¹¹⁰ Though Kerr describes the scene as non-editorial, Howells’s interpretation seems clear enough. Taking place in a shabby house, in a run-down neighborhood, in the presence of a fraudulent medium, the inappropriate fondling and the sitters’ obvious arousal is supposed to be regarded by readers as sordid and embarrassing. Similarly, a writer for *Eclectic Magazine* disparages spirit touch as an indiscriminate and juvenile expression of sexuality when, describing the events of a recent sitting, he reports, “The spirits were . . . very active . . . tickling knees, male and female.”¹¹¹ Despite believers’ pretensions, séances were nothing more than a front for licentious behavior, an excuse for taking sexual liberties with strangers and acquaintances. They were, as a character in W. E. Aytoun’s short story “Rapping the Question” explains, ““an excellent apology for a little harmless flirtation, seeing that each fresh magnetic impulse is accompanied with a gentle squeeze.””¹¹² The unrestrained and often anonymous touching detailed in séance reports seemed to support the frequently leveled accusation that Spiritualism spread the doctrines of free love and destroyed marriages.¹¹³ Contemporary writers who opposed or were at least suspicious of Spiritualism feared that, by normalizing promiscuous groping, texts like Owen’s would erode conservative sexual mores and destabilize socially-sanctioned relationships.

Just as Owen arouses and normalizes the pleasures of socially unacceptable sexual behavior, so too Wolfe disciplines readers’ sense of touch by training them to experience old tactile values in new ways. His text reaffirms the traditional view that touch is

feminine and infantile, but re-inscribes these socially denigrated qualities as the basis of its evidential value. An investigator of Spiritualist phenomena for over twenty-five years, he sat regularly with a materializing medium from Cincinnati, Ohio, named Mrs. Hollis, and it was in her presence that he met the “little spirit-child, ‘Anna Hancock.’” One evening, Anna

cut, fashioned, and made, in a dark circle, a beautiful rosette, out of material which was taken into the dark room for the purpose; and, after its completion, pinned it nicely on the lapel of my coat, frequently touching my face with her little delicate fingers while doing so. In making this rosette, it was necessary to thread a needle with silk, and to stitch the fabric in a pitch-dark room. This child subsequently made a nice little doll-baby from materials placed in the room, which has excited the admiration and wonder of many ladies. She also made a regalia of rosettes, and hung them about my neck.

Imagined in the context of a “pitch-dark room,” the visual details that he offers support the inference of tactile properties.¹¹⁴ Anna’s dynamic spatial relationship to his “face” and “coat” creates the impression that she is solid, while her proximity to the rosette fabric and silk thread facilitates the migration of their texture to her skin. All of the elements necessary for the mimesis of touch are present in this passage and wait only for the reader to actualize their potential.

Once they do, their textually-induced sensations are given meaning by the youth and gender of the spirit, the nature of her activities, and the reaction of the participants. A female child engaged in the intensely tactile and traditionally feminine occupation of sewing produces a symbol of immaturity (“a nice little doll-baby”) that appeals to the emotions of the “ladies.” The associations forged by the text are not new. In the West, touch, as Classen demonstrates, has long been seen as “essentially feminine in nature: nurturing, seductive, dissolute in its merging of self and other.” Indeed, the connection is so strong that “the blind (regardless of sex) are symbolic females: confined to the home, immersed in the world of the body rather than the intellect, and dependent on guidance from their ‘enlightened’ ‘superiors.’”¹¹⁵ Revising this tradition, Wolfe preserves touch’s alignment with physicality, femininity, and childhood, but insists that these associations do not make it an inferior or incomplete sense. On the contrary, the feeling of physical contact satisfies the perceiver completely. “[T]he sense of touch,” he writes, “sometimes leaves the imprint of spirit-fingers on your arm, which is sufficient to carry conviction.” “[T]hey have,” he continues, “uncommon [T] power in that way.”¹¹⁶ Attempting to reproduce Wolfe’s tactile experience in the reader, the text also attempts to impart his belief that embodied knowledge is beyond dispute.

While gendered as feminine and associated with childhood, touch was not always tender. In 1850, the Reverend C. Hammond was physically attacked during a dark séance, and the letter that he wrote describing the incident was published in at least four contemporary collections of Spiritualist testimony.¹¹⁷ According to his account, the groping began gently enough: “A transparent hand, resembling a shadow, presented itself before my face. I felt fingers taking hold of a lock of hair on the left side of my head, causing an inclination of several inches; then a cold hand was drawn over my face; three gentle raps on my left knee.” However, the sensations quickly turned painful:

I felt . . . my right limb forcibly pulled, against strong resistance, under the table; a violent shaking, as though two hands were applied to my shoulders; myself and chair uplifted and moved back a few inches, and several slaps, as with a hand, on the side of my head, which were repeated on each one of the company, more rapidly than I could count.

In a series of kinetic occlusions, unseen hands pass over Hammond's face, yank his leg, jostle his body, and strike his head. Evoking mental images of intersecting forms, the assault imbues the victim and his assailants with tactile properties like solidity and three-dimensionality. The solidified spirits also accrue texture by grasping Hammond's hair, wielding cardboard, and manipulating paper: "During these manifestations, a piece of pasteboard was swung with such velocity before us as to throw a strong current of air in our face; a paper curtain attached to one of the windows was rolled up and unrolled twice."¹¹⁸ When readers are asked to imagine paper, their attention, Scarry hypothesizes, is drawn to "the paperlike quality of images and [to] the manual operations specific to paper, some of which overlap with those related to cloth (folding, creasing) and some of which stand alone (shaking, rattling)."¹¹⁹ In the violent scene that Hammond describes, the capacity of the "pasteboard" to flex and the "paper curtain" to roll extends to the spirits' hands, allowing them to curl as they slap and shake him. While the text cues readers to infer the feeling of these blows, it also provides them with an interpretation of the abuse, a template to guide them as they make sense of the experience. Hammond feels neither angry nor indignant about the way in which he is handled, but instead regards the intense pressure upon his body as proof that the manifestations are real: "That any of the company could have performed these things, . . . would require a greater stretch of credulity on my part than it would to believe it was the work of spirits."¹²⁰ Embedding sensory triggers in implicit and explicit reflections on the nature and value of tactile violence, the text subjects readers to the imaginary force of a spirit's materialized fist while teaching them to understand pain as a sign of authenticity.

Séance reports instilled readers with an appreciation of pain by repeatedly exposing them to tactile violence. Rather than trying to impress critics with the civility and sophistication of spirit touch, witnesses wrote candidly about the ferocity of the dead. "[T]he touching," writes one sitter, "has varied from a velvet-like pressure to a sound thrashing, leaving black and blue marks all over the body."¹²¹ Wolfe also recalls being bruised during a dark séance: "[J]ust as I extinguished the light, at the beginning of the circle, my arm was grasped with such a 'grip' that the imprints of [the spirit's] huge, muscular fingers were ecchymosed under the cuticle for a week after."¹²² Believers freely admitted that the dead used them like rag dolls, dragging and battering their bodies. In *Modern American Spiritualism*, a comprehensive history of the movement and collection of testimonials, Emma Hardinge chronicles the experiences of a medium named Frederick Willis, who "had on several occasions been drawn under the table bodily by the spirits and rather roughly handled."¹²³ Nor did Spiritualist writers recoil from relating attacks on women and children. Without anger or embarrassment, a contributor to *The Spiritualist Magazine* describes how his "daughter's wrist was once injured by spirit-power dashing her hand against the hard surface of a mahogany table. The hands of other sitters, both ladies and gentlemen, were similarly moved and knocked about."¹²⁴ According to Classen, there is a "customary Western emphasis on the brute physicality of touch. The sense of touch, like the body in general, has been positioned in opposition to

the intellect, and assumed to be merely the subject of mindless pleasures and pains.”¹²⁵ As the examples above demonstrate, *séance* reports not only maintain the historical and cultural connection between touch and “brute physicality,” but also seem to strengthen and celebrate it. Constantly prompting readers to create and endure simulations of spirit aggression, these texts train them to be comfortable with discomfort, to perceive pain, not as a generally rare and unpleasant sensation, but instead as a regular part of their experiential repertoire. Tactile violence serves a crucial epistemological function. Collapsing the binary described by Classen, *séance* accounts suggest that, instead of opposing the “intellect,” impressions on the skin—particularly those received through rough treatment—are an embodied way of knowing truth from fiction.

Aligned with the body and its “mindless pains and pleasures,” a tactile orientation was regarded by Spiritualists’ contemporaries as both the cause and expression of racial inferiority. *Séance* reports radically re-organized white sensory practices and prejudices by teaching readers to respect and submit to the unpredictable demonstrations of a supposedly primitive perceptual mode. Not all of the visitors to Mrs. Hollis’s sittings were as gentle as Anna Hancock. Wolfe discovers this when he and his fellow *séance* participants “fail to throw a red blanket over the chair of the medium” and, as a result of this oversight, incur the wrath of a Native American spirit named “Ski.”

This blanket the old chief claimed as his personal property, and its absence gave great offense to “Ski,” who still retains his love and admiration for a “red article” . . . He loved the red blanket. There was no excuse for not putting it in its wonted place, but carelessness. This put him in ill-humor, and a rampage was the consequence. In the room was a chest of drawers and a wardrobe, both of which were filled with sheets, pillow-slips, unseasonable clothing, table-linen, and other store-away things. He started on a hunt for his blanket. He commenced ransacking the bureau at the top drawer, and ending with the bottom. Things flew through the room like frightened pigeons, here and there and every-where, until the drawers were empty. He next went for the wardrobe, and gave it such an overhauling as it never had before, and will hardly ever get again. At last, almost on the very bottom of the shelf was found the much-prized article—the red blanket . . . “Ski” was mad—mad as a “March hare”—and not to be trifled with in that way . . . He had given us a splendid display of his power and wrath.

While the passage provides no description of Ski’s appearance, making it difficult for readers to imagine what (if anything) he looks like, the blanket and flying fabric supply the angry actor with tactile characteristics. As these properties bleed into the empty representational space where the chief should be, he becomes an invisible, yet palpable, textural force that exerts pressure both in the *séance* room and on the reader. Ski embodies touch, and his behavior educates witnesses and readers about what this sense means. Portraying him as a simplistic Indian who throws a tantrum because he cannot find his blanket, the text suggests that the pursuit of tactile comforts and pleasures is irrational, childish, and barbaric. Wolfe, however, does not condemn Ski’s behavior, but instead blames himself and the other participants for being “careless[s]” and not following the dictatorial spirit’s orders. Rather than rebuking him, he seems to revere him, calling his manifestations “a splendid display of power and wrath.”¹²⁶ The Native

American spirit is a primitive yet superior force to which Wolfe and the others are content to submit.

Séance reports, critics feared, threatened to halt (or even reverse) white progress by cultivating a haptic orientation that belonged, not to evolved white men and women, but to racial others stuck in an earlier stage of evolution. In the nineteenth century, “sight,” Classen argues, “was being positioned at the top of the scale of human and social evolution,” exalted “as the height of civilized, adult perception,” while touch was being “denigrat[ed] . . . as the sensory recourse of primitives.”¹²⁷ In accordance with this trend, educators like Smith advised parents and teachers, “If you leave all to nature” and do not train your senses, then “the impressions, vague and confused, would confuse the mind itself, and surrender it to mere sensual excitement. And then man becomes more beastly than the beast.”¹²⁸ Children would devolve into something less than human if they were allowed to enjoy the imprecise sensations of touch. Spiritualists over-exercised this sense and, therefore, had already experienced the change. Discussing the case of a woman who maintained that she had been tapped by a materialized hand, Hammond aligns her desire for spirit touch with a retrogressive impulse that more advanced races had outgrown. Claims such as hers, he writes, “have existed at all times of the world’s history, and even at the present day form part of the religious system of certain barbarous and semi-barbarous nations.”¹²⁹ Dark séances and the reports to which they gave rise replicated the sensory practices and values of “barbarous nations” in the civilized world, thereby destabilizing the racial categories that opponents of Spiritualism fought to keep intact.

Illustrating this perceived threat to racial purity and white superiority, they wrote satire in which dead black men touched white witnesses or living ones outsmarted them. In *The Undiscovered Country*, Howells suggests that the physicality of Mrs. Le Roy’s séance debases those who participate, reducing them to the level of the clumsy slave who materializes in their presence. As Mrs. Merrifield, Mr. Hatch and the others waited,

A large black hand showed itself distinctly against the white ground formed by the handkerchiefs. It was hailed with a burst of ecstasy from all those who seemed to be frequenters of these séances, and it wagged an awkward salutation at the company. . . . A half dozen [rings] were passed to him, and he contrived, with some trouble, to slip them on the fingers of the hand, which continually moved itself, in spite of many caressing demands from the ladies (with whom Jim was apparently a favorite spectre) that he would hold still, and Hatch’s repeated admonition that he should moderate his transports.¹³⁰

Specifying that the hand belongs to a bumbling black spirit, Howells racializes the sense of touch, implying that it is the degraded perceptual mode of a primitive people. The white witnesses who are eager for physical contact are just as crude as “Jim” and may even be worse, according to an anonymous contributor to the humorous magazine *Punch*. His satirical poem, “A Sable Skeptic,” insinuates that, with their blind faith in the truth of tactile experience, Spiritualists demonstrate less intelligence than the artless black narrator. While others may mistake the surface of a charlatan’s machinery for the skin of a human hand, the speaker knows better than to trust the often faulty testimony of touch: “De spirit-hand it next appear, / And how dey work de ting is clear, / Of was or wood de hand is made.” When Spiritualists “dowse de gas” and identify “a human figger” passing before the window, he suspends judgment, refusing to confirm the existence of something

that he cannot clearly see: “But what de figger really be / ’Tis difficult in de dark to see!” Equating truth, light, and sight, he pledges to “take a *spirit-lamp*” to the next séance and “so / Some light upon de subject throw!”¹³¹ If spiritualists are committed to a haptic orientation that even “A Sable Skeptic” can see through, then, *Punch*’s writer hints, they function on a lower sensory level than society’s most marginalized members.

Opponents of Spiritualism tried to discourage Americans from adopting the movement’s sensory practices by likening séance participants to African Americans and other so-called primitive people with tactile tendencies. However, the movement’s writers fought back by arguing that it was in fact their opponents who represented an earlier phase of human development. In a tactile-intensive world governed by a new standard of fact, those who had developed the habits and internalized the beliefs of an ocularcentric regime would be out of touch. Increasingly regarded as idiots instead of intellectuals, the present arbiters of truth would, Spiritualists asserted, eventually become extinct. A contributor to *The Spiritualist Magazine* writes that “the multitude of the confirmed sceptics of this age must die out as old men die out, and give place to fresh and more open life.” In light of this truth, he offers Spiritualists the following advice:

Instead of feeling any resentment, therefore, at the stolid dogmatism, at the sullen hostility of the anti-spiritual press and the sceptical philosophers, let us recollect that they are but a fossilized generation, and that we can no more infuse life into them than we can into the Saurian tribes, or the conchiferous remains of our mountains. Who can feel resentment against an ancient oyster or cockel set in a limestone rock? Let us study them as curiosities.¹³²

While critics suggested that séance participants’ reliance on touch made them uncritical anachronisms, Spiritualists held that those who rejected tactile information were the true primitives and would eventually disappear as people learned to trust what they felt.

Trust is a crucial component of Spiritualist tactile experience. Demonstrating a submissive disposition which was construed by critics as evidence of their ignorance and degradation, séance participants cultivated empty minds and pliable bodies. Those who were accustomed to forming and executing their own intentions learned to clear their heads and come to grips with letting go. Reflecting on their experiences, they observed that merely hoping for tactile manifestations was enough to stop them from happening. For example, a writer for *The Galaxy* who attended a séance with Daniel Dunglas Home had a “great desire” to hold hands with a spirit, but was told by the medium, “You must not fix your mind too intently on it, for that very intensity disturbs the influences, and hinders the spirits from acting.”¹³³ Similarly, Wolfe noticed that “the will to assist [the spirits] seems to produce the opposite effect intended, disabling rather than aiding the efforts of the spirits.” From this, he concluded that “To be in the best condition is to be passive; let come what will, receive it quietly, and as gratefully as possible.”¹³⁴ Spiritualist publications warned would-be sitters that they could not “*prescribe* what shall occur” but, instead, had to “allo[w] the spirits to present themselves as they thought proper, never attempting to exercise any control over them.”¹³⁵ While American culture held up active and enterprising citizens as models of selfhood, séance reports suggested that “the attitude we should assume is one of quietly *waiting* with reverent expectancy.”¹³⁶

Moments of tactile contact and disengagement sculpt subjects whose passivity challenged the American idealization of self-determination. Adjusting their behavior in reaction to the absence of tactile manifestations, witnesses realized that the dead were more likely to touch them if they were sitting still. Therefore, they controlled their urges to reach out and trained their bodies to be motionless. “[S]o long as I remained quiet and permitted the little angel to do as it wished to, without disturbing the conditions requisite to enable it to come so near me,” it would, Leah Underhill discovered, continue to “[a]y] its little hands on mine.”¹³⁷ Séance participants underwent psychic and bodily transformations not only when touch was withheld but also when it was applied. For instance, identifying vision as the primary sense of active individuals, spirits interfered with normal eye function. When Wolfe asks the dead why they “influence the [medium’s] optic nerve . . . so that no impressions of the eye are transmitted to the sensorium,” they respond, “It is necessary that the medium be perfectly calm while we materialize the arms and hands. If she could see, she would not maintain this passive condition.”¹³⁸ Instilling the sensory habits of a passive personality structure through more violent manipulations, they physically twisted the living into submissive positions that made it impossible for them to see. The British businessman Benjamin Coleman documented this form of bodily discipline in *Spiritualism in America*. “Hands, he writes, “were placed upon either shoulder, turning me a little to the right, then upon my head, pushing it down till my forehead was near the table. Three taps upon my head indicated that the position was satisfactory, and I remained passive. The intention was, evidently, to prevent my too earnest gaze.”¹³⁹ The reports described how spirits immobilized witnesses’ bodies, underscoring the role of tactile impressions in creating and confirming self-perceptions of powerlessness. Even the socially prominent Judge John Edmonds was impressed with a sense of his own helplessness:

My person was repeatedly touched, and a chair pulled out from under me. I felt on one of my arms what seemed to be the grip of an iron hand. I felt distinctly the thumb and fingers, the palm of the hand, and the ball of the thumb; and it held me fast by a power which I struggled to escape from in vain . . . I was as powerless in that grip as a fly would be in the grasp of my hand. And it continued with me until I had tried every means I could devise to get rid of it, and not until I thoroughly felt how powerless I was, did it leave me.¹⁴⁰

Dead hands squeeze the stubborn sitter until the notion of individual autonomy that motivated his resistance is completely crushed. Readers’ dreams of independence may also have given way under pressure if, as Scarry suggests, following a text’s instructions for the inference of tactile experience feels like submitting to an external force.

While the linguistic representation of kinetic occlusion and flimsy materials (flowers, fabric, paper etc.) allows readers to perform a mimesis of touch, it also suppresses their sense of control, thereby reproducing the active/passive dichotomy that structures physical encounters with the dead. Delineating the relationship between the reader’s consciousness of agency and the realism of his imagined perceptions, Scarry observes that “[o]ur freely practiced imaginative acts bear less resemblance to our freely practiced perceptual acts than do our constrained imaginative acts occurring under authorial direction.” In other words, when readers are cognizant of their ability to create objects and encounters mentally, their simulated sensations are weak and unpersuasive.

Yet, while “awareness of the voluntary . . . interferes with the mimesis of perception,” feelings of helplessness facilitate it: “Artists themselves provide strong evidence that successful image-making entails suppressing awareness of volition, since they have, over many centuries, reported the ease of writing under the dictation, the direction, or the instruction of a muse.” The reason why our imaginings seem more life-like when they are guided by an external force is because perception has a “sense of ‘givenness.’” That is, perceptual objects seem to exist independently of us, and whether or not we perceive them seems to have little to do with personal choice. “This sense of ‘givenness,’” Scarry speculates, “is descriptive not only of perceptual objects but of imaginary-objects-specified-by-instruction and hence arriving, as it were, from some outside source.” Texts give us “procedures” for how to infer sensory experience, and these “procedures themselves have an instructional character that duplicates the ‘givenness’ of perception.” Writers need not explicitly issue orders to “imagine this” or “visualize that” because “each descriptive sentence in a novel or poem is,” Scarry argues, “implicitly preceded by these erased imperatives (and that erasure no doubt magnifies our sense of the object’s ‘givenness’).”¹⁴¹

If Scarry’s hypothesis is correct, then all descriptive literature would, at least to some degree, make readers feel powerless in relation to their own mental creations. What sets séance reports apart, however, is repetition. The givenness of materialized spirit bodies is intensified as readers respond to the same textual triggers over and over again. According to Scarry, we become more adept at imagining sensory experience when we engage in “recomposition,” a process that “has many different forms”: “It may be that a writer explicitly asks us to suppose imagining something before asking us actually to imagine it. Or we may be asked to imagine something and then to remember imagining it, in the course of which we must recompose it.” As a result of these repetitions, the mental muscles required to imagine an experience are strengthened and the inferred sensations “become more vivid.”¹⁴² If readers continually perform a sensory script, then eventually that script will seem to perform itself and, with the givenness of their real-world counterparts, the imagined objects that it evokes will impinge upon them regardless of their desires. Séance reports are remarkable for their repetitiveness, which manifests itself in a variety of ways. First, it was common during séances for spirits to execute a series of similar feats. For this reason, one can find numerous instances of kinetic occlusion and/or descriptions of flowers, fabric, hair, or paper within a single report. Writers often evoked an image once and then instructed readers to recompose it again and again. This technique is illustrated by Livermore who, after describing how “a white veil . . . was withdrawn” from his wife’s face, remarks that “the manifestatio[n] was repeated several times, as if to leave no doubt in our minds.” Her “whole mass of hair,” he continues, “was whisked in our faces many times” and her “kiss was frequently repeated.”¹⁴³ In a second form of repetition, a séance account might, like Hammond’s testimony, be reprinted in several newspapers, magazines, and books.¹⁴⁴ Thirdly, like the rituals that they record, séance reports closely adhere to a common formula. This means that there is repetition not only within individual texts, but also among them. And finally, compounding all of these redundancies, Spiritualist testimony was everywhere, collected in books published by mainstream and Spiritualist presses, and splashed across the pages of newspapers ranging from *The Spiritual Telegraph* and *The Banner of Light* to *The New York Times* and the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*.¹⁴⁵ Because of their repetitiveness and wide circulation,

séance reports have the potential to be powerful instruments in the transformation of a reader's senses and subjectivity. A first reading of an account might arouse tactile sensations that are obviously imaginary—that is, dull and consciously produced. But, if Scarry's claim is correct, then subsequent and repeated performances can incite impressions that are much more lifelike. Moreover, while a reader must actively cooperate with a séance account to transform his mental images into palpable bodies, frequent encounters with the rhetorical strategies that enable this conversion can make him feel like he is at the mercy of his own cognitive creations: spirit forms that were once purposely conjured up might begin to appear and act of their own accord (or so it might seem), subjecting his body to touch which is sweet, sexual, and/or savage. Séance accounts diminish a reader's agency by dictating what he will visualize and, in this sense, they are like "instructions." When these instructions are read again and again in newspapers, periodicals, and books, they can at once enhance the realism of a reader's imagined tactile experience and cultivate an attitude of submissiveness. This, in turn, can strengthen his identification with passive séance participants.

While séance reports cultivated this passive disposition, setting it up as a model of thought and feeling for readers to emulate, critics pathologized it, arguing that the spirit agents to whom witnesses subjected themselves had no external reality and that the pressure which they claimed to feel was nothing more than the projection of their own delusive subjectivity. According to the medical and psychiatric literature of the time, tactile hallucinations were common in those suffering from physical and/or mental disorders. For example, in *Des Hallucinations* (1845), a French study that was translated and published in the United States in 1853, Alexandre Brierre de Boismont writes, "It is certain that rheumatic, neuralgic, and internal pains give rise to illusions of touch" and these false impressions, he continues, "will frequently lead the insane person to think he has been struck."¹⁴⁶ Diseases of the body and brain cause people not only to feel objects that are not there, but also to misperceive those that are. Etienne Esquirol states in *Des Malades Mentales*, an English edition of which appeared in America in 1845, that "When inflammation, or some other lesion takes place in the meninges of the brain, . . . [patients] judge incorrectly of the form, extent, solidity and weight of bodies."¹⁴⁷ Applying similar diagnoses to Spiritualists who claimed to have been touched by the dead, Hammond suggested that their perceptions were the result of excessive concentration or an over-stimulated imagination. "[U]ndoubtedly, most of the 'vague impressions' and sensations of 'light touches'" which Spiritualists believe "indicate the presence of spirits, are," he confidently states, "the effects produced upon various parts of the body by concentrated attention." Eager to feel the warmth of a loved one's touch, séance participants, he suggests, unwittingly made their hands, arms, legs, and feet feel flushed and tingly by fixing their focus on them for extended periods of time. While often a harmless example of mind over matter, Spiritualist tactile experience could also be a sign of something more significant. The sensations reported by witnesses could be, Hammond warns, merely symptoms of nervous derangement of some kind, often slight in character, but not infrequently of serious moment. In the former case they may generally be dissipated by a few doses of the bromide of potassium or half a dozen applications of galvanism; in the latter, they are often precursors of organic disturbances of the brain or spinal cord, leading to paralyse, epilepsy, or mental derangement.¹⁴⁸

Ultimately, it did not matter if Spiritualists' mysterious tactile impressions were completely self-generated or derived from actual external objects (stuffed cloves, wax hands, etc.). They were insane, not because they experienced such sensations, but because of how they interpreted them. "Illusions of the external senses," writes Esquirol, "are not rare with man in a state of health, and are frequent among the insane," but "reason immediately rectifies the errors of the former, while there is none to combat the illusions of the latter."¹⁴⁹ Spiritualists neither identified their impressions as hallucinations nor traced their origins to an excited imagination, hyper-attentiveness, disease, or fraud. Reason did not correct their tactile illusions because, critics implied, they had no reason.

Séance participants rejected the accusation that they were mentally ill. Of his friend Livermore, Dr. Gray, who also participated in the séances with Fox, writes that he "is a competent witness to the important facts he narrates, because he is not in any degree subject to the illusions and hallucinations which may be supposed to attach to the trance or ecstatic condition. . . . He is less liable to be misled by errors of his organs of sense than almost any man of my large circle of patients and acquaintances."¹⁵⁰ More radical than merely defending themselves, Spiritualists turned the tables on their critics by casting their inability to be convinced by "palpable evidence" as a mental and/or physical disorder. In an article entitled "Scepticism Most Commonly An Incurable Disease," a believer writes, "Some there may be amongst the skeptics . . . who may be curable, as there are people afflicted by cataract who may be operated on successfully," but most, he concludes, are destined to die with their disorder. He reverses the positions of Spiritualists and their opponents, suggesting that, unwilling to be handled by the dead, members of the educated elite were the real madmen. "[A] whole generation, proud of its classical and philosophical accomplishments" would "have to begin and learn anew of those whom they have treated as fools and fanatics."¹⁵¹

Whether or not critics were ready to "learn anew," Spiritualists used séance reports to teach them and the public at large new tactile values and practices. The touch of a materialized spirit hand, believers claimed, immediately satisfied the objections and subjugated the will of the perceiver by generating an embodied knowledge that was at once irrational and unshakeable. Through "palpable proof," wrote one convert, "men have become convinced by the hundreds and thousands even against their wills. In fact, most of us are Spiritualists to-day, by the oft-repeated force of evidence which we could not resist. We believe, because we must; we could not do otherwise."¹⁵² Yet, if "hundreds and thousands" had the privilege of feeling the dead first-hand and being subdued through their skin, many others could only be reached (literally and figuratively) through published reports. Because these texts were rigidly formulaic and widely circulated, they were the perfect vehicles for bringing the "oft-repeated force of evidence" to bear on readers' bodies. Indeed, arranging fabric, flowers, paper, and people in ways that maximized the inference of tactile experience, they coerced readers into reproducing the cognitive actions that—had they actually attended the séance—would have been involved in determining the form, weight, and texture of the dead. In this way, the accounts reformed their assumptions about what kinds of physical contact were not only possible but also culturally appropriate.

With their explicit emotional, sexual, and racial connotations, the sensory simulations induced by these reports violated social codes of acceptable touch. However, in an attempt to make these taboo perceptions a normal part of human sensory

experience, the texts triggered them in contexts where tearful reunions, childish games, erotic play, and physical abuse were coded as epistemologically legitimate ways of learning. Asking critics to expand their view of probable perceptions, one apologist for the movement asks, “When we hear persons say that they have received communications” from spirits and “felt their touch, etc., can we deny the fact because the same thing has not occurred in our experience?”¹⁵³ Many people did. Still, Spiritualists were convinced that they could overcome even the most stubborn insularity and universalize their tactile impressions through their writing. “[O]ut of the mouth, or by the pen of two or three witnesses every principle is established,” writes one adherent.¹⁵⁴ Proving the truth of this saying, accounts written by members of their marginalized faith would, they believed, redefine the nature and limits of sensory experience.

Chapter 3

Spiritualism and the American Vision Epic: Harris, Barlow, Emerson, Whitman, and the Education of the Eye

Nineteenth-century Americans were preoccupied with sight. “Interest in the process of seeing and in [the] artful manipulation of it seems to have been,” writes one literary historian, “a particular and popular concern” of the period.¹ And it concerned Spiritualists, too. While the movement’s writers sought to transform what they considered to be less culturally valued senses like hearing and touch, they were also evaluating the current condition and future possibilities of vision.² In “The Single and Evil Eye” (1859), the well-known medium, poet, and lecturer, Thomas Lake Harris, argues that critics of Spiritualism suffer from visual distortions and hallucinations:

The theological bigot . . . sees every truth inversely . . . His moral insanity inverts each perceptive faculty, and changes Truth in the semblance of a lie . . . He is in a state of delirium, and sees what is unreal,—a night where day is beautiful,—a discord where all is harmony,—a demon’s incarnation in the blessed human face. All within is, all without *seems* darkness, because he looks on Creation through an evil eye.³

Though Harris believed that his contemporaries were using the sense of sight incorrectly, he predicted that, in the very near future, they would learn to view the world in a whole new way. On November 24th, 1853, he was visiting friends when, according to the witness S. B. Brittan, “he was unexpectedly entranced by the agency of spirits.”⁴ These spirits, Harris claims, opened his interior eyes and allowed him to catch a glimpse of America’s glorious future. What he saw was a revolution in visual perception: “Free” people, who were “Nursed on the mother-breast of Liberty,” would possess “Pure poet-vision” and “prophet- sight.”⁵

For Harris, the purpose of *An Epic of the Starry Heaven* (1854), the book-length poem that he dictated while entranced, was to hasten the fulfillment of this prophecy by actively accelerating the transformation of American sight. Explicitly situated by its title in the most revered genre, his trance production would have been recognized by readers as an instrument of education. Nineteenth-century writers, cultural commentators, and even medical doctors, held that epics, more than other genres, were “affective models for a heroic culture” and “Man’s greatest medium for changing society’s attitudes.”⁶ Subscribing to this belief in the pedagogical function of epic, Harris contended that his words literally had the power to change people’s perceptions. Indeed, they had, he claimed, already opened his own spiritual eyes: as “the various forms of wisdom and beauty which the Poem describes were imaged, from their varied localities, upon” his spirit’s “sensorium,” “the roads,” observes one of his followers, “were . . . laid and the channels opened for the fuller celestial and Divine descents that had hereafter to ensue.”⁷ Delivering *An Epic* activated his interior sight, and reading the poem, he assured his audience, would produce the same result in them. Thus, in the preface, he explains how they can maximize the affective potential of the text: “Breathe gently, Reader; attune thy heart to pure and loving thoughts while perusing this spiritual utterance, for thus alone the interior life, which is the living soul thereof, shall find entrance into thine own interiors.”⁸

Teaching that “there is no dark, destructive law / Of malformation” that determines what people see, the poem, he hoped, would free Americans of old visual habits and help them to develop new ones.⁹

Harris’s epic to educate the eye was not created in a literary vacuum. Other American writers, working both before and contemporaneously with him, also experimented with the vision epic—a form that mediates a nation’s relationship to its past, present, and future, through the sense of sight—in order to teach new ways of seeing. During the early national period, Joel Barlow argued that the primary motivation and justification for literary writing was to foster the kinds of mental and perceptual abilities that would be most beneficial to the new republic: “And why should we write at all, if not to benefit mankind? The public mind, as well as the individual mind, receives its propensities; it is equally the creature of habit. Nations are educated, like a single child. They only require a longer time and a greater number of teachers.”¹⁰ Considering himself to be one of these teachers, he wrote *The Columbiad* (1807), a vision epic in which an angel teaches Christopher Columbus how to see the new world. Following Columbus’s disciplined gaze as it moves across the Americas, the text presents him to readers as a sensory role model. Decades later, Ralph Waldo Emerson was calling for a different one. In an 1855 journal entry, he writes that “An important defect in America” is “the absence of a general education of the eye.”¹¹ The process and purpose of seeing are persistent themes in Emerson’s writing, and he frequently expresses concern about the instability and insignificance of Americans’ visual impressions. In “Experience,” he remarks that, before our sleepy eyes, “All things swim and glitter. Our life is not so much threatened as our perception.”¹² But he was hopeful. Americans would eventually “come to look at the world with new eyes,” and poetry, written by a “genius in America, with tyrannous eye,” would be instrumental in this transformation.¹³ Though Emerson was not the poet for whom he called, his prose writings about sight helped to create the context from which Walt Whitman’s vision epic would emerge. Published in 1855, a year after Harris’s poem, *Leaves of Grass* has a goal that, at first glance, seems very similar to that of *An Epic*—to cultivate the reader’s sense of sight. “What the eyesight does to the rest he [the poet] does to the rest. Who knows the curious mystery of the eyesight?” asks Whitman in the “Preface.”¹⁴ *Leaves of Grass* is an exploration of this “mystery,” and it teaches the reader to do what the poet—who is here synonymous with “the eyesight”—does. As James Dougherty observes in *Walt Whitman and the Citizen’s Eye*, the “poem’s motive is to instruct the reader in the proper way of looking at the world.”¹⁵

Harris, Barlow, Emerson, and Whitman promote very different models of vision. Barlow’s and Whitman’s versions of sight are alienating in their objectivity, while Emerson’s is subjective to the point of being completely solipsistic. In contrast, Harris, I will argue, teaches readers to see in a way that is colored by who they are—that is, influenced by their beliefs and desires—and, yet, deeply informed by the experiences of others. What we see, he suggests, should always be the end result of a communal process. Moreover, combating the tendency, exhibited by Barlow and Whitman, to classify and control visual objects, his poem dismantles the kinds of organizational structures that, Emerson warns, lead to the reproduction of existing (and, often, unsatisfactory) social and cultural formations. Yet, ultimately, Harris attempts to reproduce in readers a way of seeing that is far more radical than anything proposed by Emerson. By deconstructing the concepts that readers need to shape their blurry mental images, he tries to habituate them

to a diffuse mode of consciousness in which bounded entities like the United States and the planet earth melt into an undifferentiated field of perception. While Barlow, Emerson, and Whitman fix their gaze mostly on their country and always on this world, Harris works to instill in readers a form of sight that entails the end of all national and planetary identifications.

This chapter refines and builds upon claims made by Catherine McAllister in her 1993 dissertation “The Poetic Vision of Thomas Lake Harris: ‘An epic of the Starry Heaven’.” According to McAllister, Harris “merges apparently opposing elements” like “Man/God, Earth/Heaven, Body/Spirit, [and] Man/Woman.” “In a world where dichotomous thought prevails, there is,” she writes, “a tendency for people to seek the comfort of the either-or, black-or-white distinction between things. We are not experienced in accepting concepts which urge toward dissolution or established logical patterns.” But Harris, she suggests, pushes us out of our comfort zone by urging upon us an “understanding” that “breaks conventional logical boundaries.” In this way, he is, McAllister posits, similar to canonical American writers like Emerson and Whitman who were also engaged in an “examination of boundaries.” While Emerson found that “man’s boundaries were not repressive, but rather had great breadth which should inspire man toward inner growth, [and] toward unity of spirit,” Whitman “stretched the traditional confines of the individual, expanding, reaching beyond all physical and social limitations in his immense imagination.” She concludes that Harris should be read alongside Emerson and Whitman, because all three of these writers were exploring “the breadth and reach of human experience.”¹⁶

My treatment of Harris differs from McAllister’s in three ways. First, I demonstrate that the binaries Harris attempts to collapse are, for him, the inevitable products of conventional visual practices. Because of how they see, Americans, he suggests, are unable to imagine and experience new forms of subjectivity, alternative national futures, and, ultimately, post-national modes of affiliation. To get at Harris’s views on social transformation and sight, I situate his epic in a tradition of American thought on vision and consider how his text participates in a debate about the proper uses of the eye. Emerson and Whitman were major figures in this debate. While McAllister briefly discusses their interest in transgressing boundaries and expanding “human potential,” I take a close look at their representations of vision, and consider whether or not their use of particular linguistic formations actually had the potential to alter reader’s perceptions. The attempt to describe how language might affect readers is the most significant distinction between my project and McAllister’s. “There are moments,” McAllister observes, when Harris’s poem “is so dense with an imagery both vivid and exotic that the reader may sense a wonder parallel to that envisioned by the Poet.” As “often occurs in reading good poetry,” readers of *An Epic* “are pushed, emotionally and logically, into a new mode of understanding.”¹⁷ But how exactly does the poem’s language “pus[h]” readers to this “new mode”? The argument that *An Epic* alters perception might be more convincingly made using the language and concepts of cognitive poetics.

For Harris, a permeable form of subjectivity—one that straddles the boundary of self and non-self—is the basis for spiritual sight, a sense that is exercised (for lack of a less active verb) by passively receiving images from the minds of others. If *An Epic* teaches readers to feel like a spiritual seer—and Harris believed that it did—then how

might it produce this sensation of openness? Reuven Tsur's work may be used to offer an explanation. As described in chapter one, Tsur claims that combinations of spatial terms and abstract nouns trigger a diffuse mode of information processing and exaggerate its effects on consciousness, thereby causing readers to feel unusually open to external influences.¹⁸ Trance poems with these linguistic formations have, I argue in that chapter, the potential to activate an altered state of consciousness that could be interpreted by readers as the felt experience of spiritual hearing. But, as I will argue here, when such feelings are experienced in the context of reading *An Epic*—a poem that purports to be a record of visual impressions—they would more likely be understood as the fluid self-perceptions that, according to Harris, accompany spiritual sight. In addition to dissolving the distinction between self and other, Spiritual sight, as described by Harris, breaks down the conceptual categories that perceivers use to make sense of what they see. To explain how *An Epic* might simulate the feeling of unstructured vision, I will draw on the work of Peter Stockwell, a scholar in cognitive poetics who studies the disorienting effects of surrealist writing. Surrealist metaphors are unsettling, Stockwell argues, because they force a radical restructuring of the source and target concepts on which they are based, thus defamiliarizing and even destroying what readers thought they knew.¹⁹ I will argue that Harris's metaphors push readers to alter and ultimately abandon conventional conceptual models. Without these concepts, readers may feel like they are perceiving an undifferentiated field of visual stimulation, an open space in which alternative forms of social organization might eventually emerge. Anticipating Tsur's and Stockwell's theories about how language and the brain interact, *An Epic* seems designed to activate certain cognitive processes in order to produce a mode of perception that makes room for the as yet unseen. Like the other Spiritualist texts considered in this dissertation, Harris's poem may demonstrate that linguistic choices not only influence how readers think, but also how they feel.

The Heroic Seer

Thomas Lake Harris was born in Buckinghamshire, England, in 1823. When he was five years old, his family moved to the United States and made their home in Utica, New York, where, soon afterwards, his mother died. His father remarried, but Harris had a difficult relationship with his stepmother and eventually moved out of the house. Though he was raised to be a Baptist, Harris—like many of his contemporaries—began to reexamine and reject strict Calvinist doctrines, while exploring more liberal Protestant denominations. After leaving home, he was taken in by a group of Universalists and, in 1844, became a Universalist minister. Harris discovered that many of the people to whom he preached did not believe in the survival of the soul and the existence of an afterlife. Faith, he thought, might be restored through proof, and he turned his attention to the only religion that seemed to offer such evidence—Spiritualism. He became friends with Andrew Jackson Davis, a famous Harmonialist and Spiritualist philosopher as well as a clairvoyant medium, and began editing Davis's magazine, the *Univercoelum*. After Davis began having an affair with a married woman and voicing views about sex and marriage which Harris considered immoral, the young minister broke off the friendship and began leading an independent congregation of Spiritualists and Swedenborgians in New York. Harris claimed that, during this period, he developed a variety of mediumistic abilities,

including clairvoyance, clairaudience, and spiritual healing. He hoped to put these skills to use in 1851 when he joined with James L. Scott and Ira S. Hitchcock to form Mountain Cove, a Spiritualist community in West Virginia. Supposedly receiving messages from celestial powers, Harris and Scott—who also claimed to be a medium—used these communications to lead the group. But the experiment ended in failure. “The community,” as historians Herbert W. Schneider and George Lawton note, “proved to be a fiasco, and its members lost all of their property.” After the disunion of Mountain Cove, Harris toured the South, where he gave lectures on Spiritualism, before returning to New York. And it was there, in the presence of the prominent Spiritualist publisher, S. B. Brittain, that he supposedly went into a trance, experienced an extended vision, and delivered the poem *An Epic of the Starry Heaven*.²⁰

Epics, writes J. K. Newman, are created “when the nation is taking stock of its historical, cultural, and religious heritage.”²¹ Americans had been doing this since the Revolution and, at mid-century, were still waiting for a poem that would convey the results of their national soul-searching. Writers of the republic were, according to John McWilliams, “convinced that the forces of history were transferring a heroic culture and its epic poet progressively westward, from Homer’s Greece, to Virgil’s Latium, to Milton’s England, and finally to an America whose epic genius was yet to appear.” And when it did, it “would be incontestable proof of cultural maturity; it would justify the sons’ rebellion against the fathers, clarify the superiority of the New world to the Old, and show the autonomy of a formerly colonial literature.” But, above all, the “primary purpose,” of an American epic was to discover “in the Republic’s recent past the seeds of future glory.” Because the stakes seemed so high, the style and subject matter appropriate to epic in the New World were hotly contested. While most agreed that “Homer was the first and greatest of poets,” they rejected the bard’s value system and the savage plotlines to which it gave rise. He set a bad example because, observes McWilliams, he “had declined to portray a just or harmonious universe, had dwelt upon the technique of slaughter, and had not questioned the duty of revenge.” If Homer’s barbarous fables seemed unsuitable for an enlightened American populace, so too did his model of heroism: “the conduct of Achilles and Odysseus seemed to embody everything from which they wished to escape.” Nor did American critics find much to admire in Dante’s medieval epic, the *Divine Comedy*. Though the first American edition of Henry Francis Cary’s English translation was released in 1822, the *Divine Comedy* was not widely read in the United States until the publication of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s version in 1867.²² And, prior to that time, many readers who were aware of Dante’s text did not think highly of it. Emerson, for example, found it to be “abnormal throughout,” filled with excessive and unjustified violence. Dante’s “fames and infamies,” he writes, “are so capriciously distributed,—what odd reasons for putting his men in inferno! . . . What pitiless minuteness of horrible details.” For these reasons, “I never read him, nor regret that I do not.”²³ While James Russell Lowell appreciated Dante’s epic—so much so that he eventually produced his own translation of it—he acknowledged that “Every kind of objection, aesthetic and other, may be, and has been, made to the *Divina Commedia*.” He summarized his contemporaries’ views of the text as follows: “It is narrow, it is bigoted, it is savage, it is theological, it is mediaeval, it is heretical, it is scholastic, it is obscure, it is pedantic, its Italian is not that of *la Crusca*, its ideas are not those of an enlightened eighteenth century, it is everything, in short, that a poem should not be.”²⁴ Uncomfortable

with the importation of classical and medieval models, writers and readers wondered who the hero of an American epic should be and questioned whether or not the thematic and stylistic features of foreign epics should be adapted to their national context or simply discarded.²⁵

It was in this climate of literary experimentation that *An Epic of the Starry Heaven* emerged. Altering the conventions of the classical epic, the poem replaces the warrior hero with a spiritual seer and the major external event (typically a battle or conquest) with the continuous opening and intensification of the clairvoyant's interior sense of sight. In defining heroic action as passive observation, Harris seems to have been influenced by the *Divine Comedy*. Indeed, Dante's influence is made explicit in the preface to *An Epic* in which Harris claims that the poem was "given through the agency of a circle of Medieval Spirits who inhabit a classic domain in an ultimate dependency of the Heaven of Spirits, which corresponds in many of its features to lower Italy" and where "[i]t is their delight . . . to weave Epic Poems." Dante, he tells the reader, is "greatly beloved among the inhabitants of that ethereal abode" and was permitted by the Lord "to induce" him "into *rapport* with the general sphere of their society" which, as a result, is "shadowed in the Poem."²⁶ Dante's *The Divine Comedy* is a dream vision in which the narrator relates what he sees as he moves through hell, purgatory, and heaven. Similarly, Harris's epic is organized around the visual experiences of a relatively inactive "hero."

An Epic begins with Harris in a depressed mood, brooding over his spiritual condition and lamenting what he perceives to be the social injustices of antebellum America. As a medium, he is accustomed to feeling "The tides of Heaven's great purpose . . . flow" into him, but, now, his "spirit groweth dark, / And cold and desolate." In this melancholy state, he thinks about the "mighty spirits in their prime," who are "Crushed by mankind into disastrous graves"; the "gentle" souls who, are "trodden down by crime"; and the "Spiritual Freemen," who are given "as slaves." "[B]eing," he concludes, is "but a Sorrow." At this point, he is interrupted by an angel who opens his spiritual eyes and carries him to a mount of vision—"the bright summit of Earth's Seventh Sphere"—from which he can survey the universe.²⁷ As spirit guides move him through space, he sees that each planet supports highly evolved human beings; has its own heaven; and is always progressing. While some, he notes, have already achieved perfection by collapsing with their respective celestial spheres, the Earth, he discovers, is still in the very early stages of its development. His mission and the purpose of his poem then is to let his contemporaries know that what he sees as the peaceful present of places like Mars, Jupiter, and Mercury lies in Earth's future, and to begin cultivating in readers the spiritual sense of sight that, he claims, the inhabitants of these planets already enjoy. Because Harris's sphere of heroic action is limited to seeing and describing his visual impressions, Catherine Amy McAllister has described him as a failed epic hero. The poem, she writes, "lacks the danger of obstacles which the epic character must face, and it lacks the suspense generated by the hindrances to the character's successful accomplishment of his or her task or quest."²⁸ Without these impediments, the speaker "does not have to creatively draw upon his resources to overcome adversity; he does not have to demonstrate traditional courage or heroism." Indeed, he does not have to do anything at all except, of course, see. And, for Harris, that is the point. Spiritual seeing is a courageous act and, as a clairvoyant, he is a true hero, a model worthy of emulation.

Yet, Harris was neither the first nor the last American poet to suggest that heroism consists of seeing rather than doing. The most famous—or, perhaps, infamous—heroic observer in the nation’s literature appears in Joel Barlow’s *The Columbiad*. In this early attempt at a American epic, the hero, Christopher Columbus, is languishing in a Spanish dungeon and questioning the value of his discoveries when, suddenly, Hesper, “the guardian Genius of the western continent,” appears, frees him from his shackles, and takes him to the top of a mountain from which he sees the history and future development of the United States.²⁹ For the most part, literary critics have regarded Barlow’s transformation of the epic hero from an athletic adventurer to a passive viewer as an unsuccessful experiment. “*The Columbiad*,” writes John Griffith, “has no single hero, on the order of Homer’s Odysseus or Virgil’s Aeneas, upon whose adventures the poet can focus (Columbus does not *do* anything in Barlow’s poem; he just watches).”³⁰ If all Columbus does is watch, then he is no hero at all, according to Roy Harvey Pearce. “The poem,” he writes, “unfolds in a series of visions in which Columbus cannot, of course, be made to take part. He cannot be a hero. He is from the outset utterly passive; he observes, is troubled, hopes for the best, and is reassured regularly by Hesper. He cannot *do* anything.”³¹ The reduction of heroism to the rather quiescent act of seeing bothers Griffith and Pearce, but it is also what makes Columbus as well as Barlow (who is the protagonist in his own epic) similar to the heroic poets described by Emerson and Whitman. For Emerson, the poet’s grand deeds are limited to looking and to sharing his vision with others: “He is the poet . . . who sees through the flowing vest the firm nature”; who “turns the world to glass, and shows us all things in their right series and procession. For through that better perception he stands one step nearer to things, and sees the flowing or the metamorphosis.”³² It might be easy to dismiss this purely perceptual form of heroism as a means of avoiding “real” action—the initiation of social change, for instance, but, as scholars have noted, such a response underestimates the importance of sight to Emerson. As David Jacobson writes in *Emerson’s Pragmatic Vision: The Dance of the Eye*, “to do, in Emerson, primarily means to see.”³³ Thus, Sherman Paul concludes, “It was enough” for him “to transform one’s own experience . . . It was enough . . . if one opened the eyes of others to new perceptions.”³⁴ From Emerson’s own remarks and from the statements of those who have studied him, it’s clear that he thought of heroism strictly in sensory terms and equated it with a form of vision. So, too, did Whitman. “The greatest poet,” he explains, “is a seer” who, understanding the amazing power of eyesight, knows that “A single glance of it mocks all the investigations of man and all the instruments and books of the earth and all reasoning.”³⁵ For Whitman, “heroism,” to quote McWilliam, “is revealed in perceptions rather than actions,” and that the job of the poet is “to release the visionary imagination of the listener.”³⁶

Three Models of Vision

Yet, while Harris, Barlow, Emerson, and Whitman construe heroism as seeing, they promote very different models of vision, each of which entails its own set of values. What sets their sensory paradigms apart is the level of rigidity in subject/object relations. Creating the impression that there is an impassible distance between the seer and the seen, Columbus’s sight allows him calmly to contemplate the images before him and to puzzle out their meanings. According to Griffith, the purpose of Barlow’s vision epic was

“to educate his readers along lines that he believed appropriate to the enlightened intellect of a republican—lines of scientific objectivity, cosmopolitanism, and lofty abstraction, the conventional hallmarks of the Enlightenment.” His “reason for dwelling so much on the image of the liberal hero is the traditional one of the didactic poet: his hero is proposed as the reader’s model, a ‘mythification’ of the qualities the poet wants to teach—rationalism, social concern, a scientific or empirical attitude.”³⁷ Columbus could instill these values in readers by teaching them how to view their surroundings. As he watches the development of the land, the rise of the United States, and the spread of liberal principles around the world, he frequently turns inward to think about what he is witnessing. Reflecting on the meaning of Hesper’s projections, “he is,” as Walter Sutton notes, “moved from melancholy withdrawal to interest, to doubt and questionings, and finally to exaltation as he comprehends the human progress toward perfection in which he has been a prime mover.”³⁸ The images are clearly outside of his body and so he is free to look away from them and to formulate judgments without undue influence. His mode of sight enforces the impression that he is separate from what he sees and this, in turn, provides the sensory grounds for the exercise of reason.

Muddying the clear line that Barlow draws between subject and object, Harris’s model of sight has more in common with those proposed by Emerson and Whitman. All three were influenced by late eighteenth-century philosophy, particularly German Idealism, and wrote in the Kantian tradition. Like Plato, Descartes, and countless other philosophers before him, Kant tried to determine if and how mind and matter interact, while confronting the even more fundamental question of whether or not, outside of the mind, matter even exists. To reconcile empiricism—the claim that knowledge comes from bodily sensation—with rationalism—the idea that knowledge comes from the mental exercise of reason—he argued that, while the external world is indeed real, the ways in which we know it are determined by mental constructs like time and space. Absorbing Kant’s ideas through the translations and interpretations of Coleridge and other British Romantics, nineteenth-century American writers also tried to bridge the Cartesian divide.³⁹

Emerson suspected that, rather than having a “substantial existence,” the world might be nothing more than an “apocalypse of the mind.” “In my utter impotence to test the authenticity of the report of my senses, to know whether the impressions they make on me correspond with outlying objects, what difference does it make,” he asks, “whether Orion is up there in heaven, or some god paints the image in the firmament of the soul?” Believing that “the sources of nature are in [man’s] own mind,” he argued that mind and nature must resemble each other. “Every appearance in nature corresponds,” he claims, “to some state of the mind,” so that the mind is like a “seal” and nature is its “print.” As this analogy demonstrates, the relationship is often described as one of visual identity: “the laws of moral nature answer to those of matter as face to face in a glass.”⁴⁰ And it is this recognition of shared features that defines Emersonian sight. When a perceiver exercises his sense of sight correctly, he realizes that the “Not Me” is a projection and emblem of the “I.” According to Paul, “In the post-Kantian universe of the self and the not-self,” Emerson “made the electric perception of correspondence the ‘miracle of experience,’ and demanded for all who would *live* that they take ‘such rightness of position, that the poles of the eye should coincide with the axis of the world.’” Vision is powerful because, by detecting similarities between the self and the world, it “reconciled”

such “facts of consciousness” as “[w]orldliness and other-worldliness, lower and higher, material and spiritual.”⁴¹ Indeed, it is the most important sense to Emerson because, by registering the oneness of these seemingly opposing concepts and the words that signify them, it gives the seer unlimited creative power. He writes, “As I am, so I see” and “[t]hus inevitably does the universe wear our color.” But when the “I” changes, the appearance or “color” of the universe changes too. By controlling his thoughts and feelings, a perceiver can see a world that answers point-for-point to his own inner vision, and this is precisely what Emerson urged the reader to do: “Every spirit builds itself a house, and beyond its house a world, and beyond its world a heaven. Know then that the world exists for you. For you is the phenomenon perfect. What we are, that only can we see . . . Build therefore your own world. As fast as you conform your life to the pure idea in your mind, that will unfold its great proportions.”⁴² In this bold command, he implies that the seer has, to quote Quentin Anderson’s influential critique of American Transcendentalist writers, *The Imperial Self*, “the power to dispose of the whole felt and imagined world as a woman arranges her skirt.”⁴³

While some critics have argued that Whitman’s model of vision is as one-sided as Emerson’s, others claim that it is actually more complex. Dougherty notes that Whitman, like Emerson, wanted “to reunite mind and world” and believed that eyesight, more than any other sense, could effect this reconciliation.⁴⁴ Yet, unlike Emerson, he had faith in the existence of an independent reality beyond the self. While he sometimes grappled with the “doubts of daytime and the doubts of nighttime”—the question of “Whether that which appears so is so”—he never completely succumbed to the belief that the “Not Me” is simply a function of the “I.”⁴⁵ Yet, just because he accepted the reality of the external world does not mean that he respected its separate existence, caution critics who accuse Whitman, along with Emerson of wielding an “Imperial” eye which assimilates everything before it. Exemplifying this kind of criticism, Anderson argues that his “generosity toward other existences was an impossibility. He could not make this concession to the plurality of things or to possibility. His chief imaginative task in the world was to envision it as an extension of himself.”⁴⁶ However, what Anderson calls Whitman’s “imaginative task,” Dougherty calls his nightmare. Whitman, he argues, feared being trapped within his own sensations, an isolating position that would make it impossible for him to connect with others. “None of the classic American writers,” he claims, “confronted with more anxiety the cultural consequences of reducing life to subjective ‘experience’ and private ‘consciousness.’” Regarding the sense of sight as a means of being “delivered from the isolation of the ‘I,’” he evoked popular, mechanically reproduced pictures of “bucolic scenes, seascapes, [and] famous Americans” that his readers could readily reproduce in their own minds and—through this textual transmission of images—forged a common ground made up of shared visual experience. As Dougherty writes, he “turned repeatedly to rhetorical evocations of a visual or pictorial world as a way of twinning his vision with that of his readers and so invoking a substantive reality in which both could believe.” Bridging the gap between Whitman and his readers, these images also gave them access to objects of representation. When “[c]atalogue yields to narrative” and “description[s] [are] governed not by the force of Whitman’s assimilative will, but by the rhythms of what he sees,” then “a space” opens “for reality to act on its own terms.” “The power of natural assertion” is replaced with “the experiential encounter of mind with realities other than itself.”⁴⁷ Hyatt Waggoner

makes a similar argument in *American Visionary Poetry*, where he contends that, as a true “visionary poet,” Whitman “neither imagines the values he celebrates nor believes them into being but attentively and creatively perceives, discovers, or uncovers them.” He “open[s] himself to the presence of what is, in all its ‘suchness,’” and allows it to “speak to him in its own terms.”⁴⁸

Rethinking sight in the wake of Barlow’s early vision epic, Emerson and Whitman, influenced more by romanticism than rationalism, sought to bring the seer and the seen together. However, their attempts to create reciprocal sensory relationships were only partially successful. As Anderson’s critique suggests, the extreme subjectivity of Emersonian vision seriously limits the impressionability of the seer: he may be able to “dispose” of the world as he sees fit, but the world cannot change him because it *is* him. The seer can neither affect nor be affected by a genuinely foreign entity because there is no room for “the other” to occupy. If we subscribe to Anderson’s reading, then it seems that Whitman has the same problem as his mentor. However, recent discussions of Whitman’s vision create a more complicated picture. Sight delivered him from Emerson’s solipsism and into the presence of solid reality, only to keep him separate from it. The mutual visualization of popular reproductions that Dougherty describes may allow both Whitman and his reader to recognize that they inhabit the same cultural space. But standing next to other people is not the same thing as touching them. Similarly, knowing that you have been exposed to the same pictures as other viewers is not the same thing as shaping their perceptions and having yours shaped in turn. Whatever “connection” vision creates between Whitman and his audience seems tenuous, and his union with objects is equally weak. While Waggoner claims that Whitman’s vision transcends terms like “subjective” and “objective,” his account of a poet who brings no personal information to bear on what he sees suggests that Whitman is advancing a model of vision in which seer and seen are autonomous, with neither one affecting the other. Supporting this interpretation, Whitman, in draft of the “Preface,” states that his sight neither alters objects’ shapes nor reduces their plurality to unity, but instead allows them to retain their own particular forms and positions. As his eyes take in “the unnamable variety and whelming splendor of the whole world,” they “kee[p] each [object] to its distinct isolation” and ensure that there is “no hubbub or confusion, or jam.”⁴⁹ He does not transform what he sees, but instead registers it “without increase or diminution”: “What I tell I tell for precisely what it is,” he writes, and “What I . . . portray shall go from my composition without a shred of my composition.”⁵⁰ Whitman’s attempt to see objectively was not lost on a writer from *The Crayon* in New York, who compared him to an increasingly popular visual technology that coolly recorded reality without influencing it. “[A]ccording to Walt Whitman’s theory, the great poet,” teases the journalist, “is he who performs the office of camera to the world, merely reflecting what he sees—art is merely reproduction.”⁵¹ While Whitman had faith that mind and nature could meet and interact through the mediation of the eye, his model of vision ultimately preserves the rigid subject/object relations that keep Columbus detached from his discovery.

In contrast, Harris draws on key Spiritualist concepts to do away with this detachment, making the disinterested perspective prized by Barlow and Whitman impossible to achieve. Promoting more genuinely reciprocal perceptual relationships, he demonstrates a model of sight in which visions generated by external sources are inserted into his mind, adding to his knowledge and molding his sense of self, while images

informed by his own desires and life experiences are projected outward onto the world, changing its landscape and people. Harris's understanding of how eyesight works is based on the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, the eighteenth-century Swedish mystic discussed in chapter one, whose "first-hand" accounts of heaven formed the backbone of Spiritualist theology and fascinated many Americans, including Emerson.⁵² Influenced by Swedenborg, Spiritualists rejected the Platonic idea of a split between spirit and matter and, instead thought of the relationship between God and man in terms of an emanation model. Explaining the principle of "divine influx," Swedenborg asserts that God's goodness "emanates from him through the Heavens in sequence into the world, and there comes to a close in things most remote."⁵³ These "things" include people. For clairvoyants—mediums who can see missing objects, lost loved ones, and faraway places, including heaven—God is a sun whose rays infuse them with his presence and fill them with pictures. Harris articulates this doctrine when he educates readers about spiritual vision. God, he assures them,

Can thrill the sainted bosoms of the just—
 Ope their interior sight, and make them see
 Himself descending to the inmost shrine
 Of mind and heart, in truth and love divine.

And this is what God has done for him. As soon as he ascends "the bright summit," the counterpart to Columbus's "Mount of Vision,"

The origin of Beauty, Love, and Truth--
 Of light, life, motion, and immortal youth--
 Of form, of music, sweetness, and delight,
 Flashes from God's own Image on my sight.⁵⁴

Scenes are "pictured on [his] brain" not only from God, but also from angels who, conceiving the images within themselves or receiving them through the divine influx, reflect them onto the minds of others.⁵⁵ Explaining this phenomenon, Swedenborg writes that "[t]here are people" in heaven "who believe that their thoughts and affections do not really reach out around them but are inside them, because they see what they are thinking as inside themselves and not as remote from themselves. They are sadly mistaken, though," because, in the other world, thought pictures radiate from each angel and are clearly visible to surrounding spirits.⁵⁶ Harris is affected by such projections on Mars, where a beautiful spirit wordlessly instructs him about her history by inserting pictures of her past into his head: "The story of her life I, pictured, see. / Within that scared inmost there is shrined / The image-form of God—the God of Love!" He also encounters an assembly of angels "unto [whom] tis given / In solemn state, apparent for a while, / To shine upon thy mind, imprinting there / Wisdom."⁵⁷ A separate but permeable seer, Harris never completely loses himself during these moments of imposed sight—that is, he never becomes a mere puppet of God or the angels. Yet, while he retains his identity, others take control of his sight to introduce him to their own stories and perspectives. His "individual" vision is the result of a communal process in which spirit instructors, flirtatious angels, and even random citizens of heaven can have input.

Harris's sight is intertwined with outside forces in a way that Emerson, despite his adoption of some Swedenborgian ideas, would have found intolerable. Though Emerson never read Swedenborg directly, he absorbed the Spiritualist icon's ideas through secondary sources and admired him enough to include him in *Representative Men*. He

used Swedenborg's doctrine of correspondences—the principle that material things stand for spiritual realities—to formulate his theory of how metaphor works and to think about how the self relates to the world. His descriptions of the “Oversoul” and the process of revelation have a lot in common with Swedenborg's notion of “divine influx,” the principle on which Harris's model of sight depends.⁵⁸ However, in his rearticulation of “divine influx,” Emerson transforms what was a relationship between self and other into a relationship between self and self. The divine flows into Harris's mind at points throughout the text, but he never suggests that he is the same being as the Lord or that the images he receives from above are reproductions of things which he has seen (or could see) on his own; they are not simply a larger portion of something that he already possesses. In contrast, Emerson posits a distinction between God and man only to undermine it. Early in the text, he writes, “I am constrained every moment to acknowledge a higher origin for events than the will I call mine. As with events, so it is with thoughts. ...I see that I am a pensioner; not a cause but a surprised spectator.” It is, he writes, “from some alien energy [that] the visions come.” But, far from being “alien,” this “energy” turns out to be the soul itself. “Let man then learn the revelation of all nature and all thought to his heart,” writes Emerson. And the revelation is this: “that the sources of nature are in his own mind” and that, “if he would know what the great God speaketh,” then “[h]e must greatly listen to himself.” And in listening to himself, he learns more about himself: “Revelation is the disclosure of the soul”; it provides “solutions [to] the soul's own questions.”⁵⁹

If this circularity reminds us of the circularity inherent in Emerson's model of sight, that is because, in the end, the Emersonian seer is God (and vice versa). Like the Emersonian seer who plays both sides of the Cartesian divide, the Oversoul is “the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object.”⁶⁰ A perceiver must at least have a loosely delineated sense of self before he can recognize (and be impressed by) outside entities. It is because Harris thinks of himself as fundamentally different from the divine that he is able to be stunned and changed by his intermittent access to the Lord's radically different perspective. However, for Emerson, God cannot insert images that are truly foreign into the seer's mind, because the seer is God and, as such, he determines (though perhaps not on a conscious level) the content of his own visions. In a closed circuit of perception where the self is both the starting and the ending point, it is impossible for a seer to receive visual input, not only from God, but also from other humans. Harris's visions incorporate a variety of images and tell different stories because they are transmitted to him by the spirits of ordinary people. Emerson, writes Bret E. Carroll, saw such intrusions into the mind as a kind of contamination and “a threat to ‘self-reliance.’” “Postulating a direct and intimate relationship between” the soul and God, he “repudiated Swedenborg's (and by implication the Spiritualists') vast hierarchy of intermediary spiritual beings. He was repelled by the idea, central to the Swedenborgian and Spiritualist ideologies, that “every thought comes into each mind by influence from a society of spirits that surround it.”⁶¹ In the same way that Emerson wanted purity of thought, he wanted purity of sight, and would have been appalled by the hybridity of Harris's visions.

As with Emersonian sight, Whitman's vision does not include anyone else's perspective but his own. The people described in *Leaves of Grass* do not decide which aspects of their lives they would like to share and then compel the poet to view select

images of them. In fact, they seem to have no power at all. Whether it is the prostitute's "pimpled neck" or the opium eater's "just-opened lips," Whitman chooses the often superficial or embarrassing details that he deems worthy of attention, and his gaze frequently seems motivated by a desire to shock, disgust, or arouse. For example, watching "the marriage of the trapper" to "a red girl," he notes that, "She had long eyelashes....her head was bare....her course straight / locks descended upon her voluptuous limbs and reached to her / feet." Though her body may be a focal point for him, she would probably be concentrating on something very different. We know how the situation appears from the poet's vantage point, but how about from hers? The way that his eyes fix upon and follow certain figures in the scene suggests that he would not be interested in visual input from her even if it were available. The movement of his gaze from the "One hand" which the husband "rested on his rifle" to "the other hand" which "held firmly the wrist of the red girl" reinforces her status as an object without a perspective by implying that she, like the gun, is a thing.⁶² Of course, as Anderson emphasizes, Whitman is not always outside of the people in the poem.⁶³ When he merges with them and sees through their eyes, his "I" completely displaces theirs so that, in his attempt to gain access to their view of the world, he ends up—as D. H. Lawrence vehemently argues—annihilating them.⁶⁴ And the sacrifice does not seem to be voluntary. The spirits who transmit visions to Harris do so willingly and joyfully—he does not have to track them down and force them to do it. In contrast, readers of Whitman get the impression that the potential objects of his merging impulse would resist it if they could. It is "[i]n vain" that the wildlife try to flee from him because, as he says, "I follow quickly." In a similarly menacing tone, he writes

Mechanics, southerners, new arrivals, sailors, mano'warsmen,
 merchantmen, coasters,
 All these I see . . . but nigher and farther the same I see;
 None shall escape me, and none shall wish to escape me.⁶⁵

Or so he would like to think. The spirits in *An Epic* do not need to escape from Harris's gaze because, to a large extent, they control it.

Sharing Harris's Vision: Seeing as Communal Process and Emotional Expression

As Harris's readers process the words of *An Epic*, they, too, may feel like they are losing control of their eyes. Intended to stimulate and cultivate readers' latent sense of spiritual sight, *An Epic* attempts to accomplish this goal by exposing them to combinations of spatial/temporal and abstract language. Such constructions occur when an assembly of spirits "shine" "[w]isdom" "upon [Harris's] mind" and say "Tell what thou seest as to thee tis shown." He complies in the following passages:

I am uplifted bodily; my brain
 Seems opened—filled with light—and closed again.
 Like a clairvoyant angel, I behold
 God—nature—spirit—splendors manifold
 Of archangelic and cherubic form.
 Into immortal wisdom I am born.
 I stand in thought upon a pinnacle;
 Visions of deathless love my being fill.

The snow-white atmosphere of angel-light
Impermeates my brain and purifies my sight.
With this purified sight, he sees that
Music and love are but life in motion—
Truth is the sky of the heart's deep ocean.
Rapture and mirth and joy of man
In the rounded bliss of our God began.
His visual impressions are loosely conjoined by conjunctions:
And the high revealments of Sages wise,
And the vision vast of the Prophet's eyes,
And the boundless joy that is everywhere
In the stars, and the suns, and the fields of air.⁶⁶

In these passages, Harris evokes a series of obscure spatial situations. “[U]plifted bodily” to no place in particular, he hangs suspended in a vacant sky. The intellectual transformation of being “born” “[i]nto wisdom” is figured as a change in location, an entry into abstraction; and the “pinnacle” upon which he stands is surrounded by nothing but a “snow-white atmosphere of angel-light.” He sees the beginnings of creation, not in a clearly defined point of origin, but in the mysterious “rounded bliss of God,” and finds “joy,” not in a limited set of circumstances, but in the seemingly infinite “stars,” “suns,” and “fields of air.”⁶⁷

These sweeping descriptions of heavenly landscapes and references to distant points in the universe may activate a holistic form of information processing that slightly erodes the reader's felt experience of bodily limitation, thereby creating space for the entrance of the other. As discussed in chapter one, prepositions and other words that delineate spatial arrangements have, according to Tsur, the potential to activate right hemisphere orientation centers—the parts of the brain that allow us to adjust to new circumstances quickly by simplifying and integrating large amounts of complex data. If Tsur is correct, then Harris's text would seem to be especially good at triggering these areas because it is crowded with spatial terms. When the poem prompts readers to sketch a mental map of his whereabouts and to locate themselves within its coordinates, it could incite cognitive processes that dissolve the differences between individual inputs, collapsing them into an amorphous stream of information. That the text's spatial language would activate these processes is not strange because, according to Tsur, all spatial language—if it prompts the reader to image the situation in question—has the potential to produce this effect. But what makes *An Epic's* passages linguistically interesting is that, while spatial terms are generally linked to concrete nouns (for example, “over the table,” “under the bridge,” “near the house,” etc.), Harris's text links them to abstract nouns, thereby further destabilizing the fluid output of orientation processing. “Spatial orientation elicits a diffuse mode of processing,” but, Tsur cautions, the “more detailed our visualization, the less diffuse it might become.” The reason for this is that “stable characteristic visual shapes” resist dissolution and homogenization. Yet, if instead of concrete nouns that evoke clear mental images, the reader's brain processes nouns that refer to ambiguous and/or invisible entities, then it might convert these loosely structured inputs into completely unstructured outputs.⁶⁸ Harris relates his vision using this second class of nouns: “God,” “nature,” “spirit,” “Music,” “love,” “life,” “Truth,” “Rapture,”

“mirth,” “joy,” “bliss,” “immortal wisdom,” “deathless love,” “snow-white atmosphere,” “angel-light,” “boundless joy,” and so on.

Tsur’s claim that abstraction intensifies the disorientating effects of orientation processing seems to find some support in McAllister’s experience of the text. Harris’s use of abstraction, she writes, “creates . . . difficulty in clear communication.” In addition to “structural flaws” like weak plot and character development which, she claims, make the poem inferior to other epics, “A difficulty exists . . . in comprehension of the specifics of portions of the tale; exposition is sometimes lacking when the reader needs it to clarify the actual place of the character or to explain certain theological points. There are no footnotes to elucidate, no citations to supplement our reading.” Yet, she finds that, when “the voice settles into a more conventional subject matter and restrained tone, drawing from the reader attention to the logical progression,” then “the reader feels in greater control of the material communicated, in contrast to the exciting but often uncertain sense of comprehension when reading of the less concrete matter.”⁶⁹ It seems that, broken down by the right brain into a disorganized, optically empty mass of data, Harris’s abstractions frustrate McAllister’s attempt to “see” what the text describes and exaggerate the effects of holistic processing on consciousness so that, rather than merely muting sharp impressions, it melts them into a collection of undifferentiated sensations.

If readers are unable to generate the imagery that is necessary to situate themselves in the landscape which Harris describes, then they may experience a feeling of openness and vulnerability. Compromising their sense of psychic and bodily integrity, these sensations could undermine the perceptual conditions upon which the exercise of reason (an activity that for Barlow is virtually synonymous with sight) depends. They may also foster a posture of receptivity to the unknown, something that neither Emerson’s nor Whitman’s versions of vision do. Tsur argues that, through the blurred output of right hemisphere mentation, a reader’s consciousness will register a represented landscape as an unpredictable, shifting set of relations; it will recognize the self as a permeable figure and others as accessible to the self or—since the boundaries are porous—vice versa.⁷⁰ In light of Tsur’s claims, it seems possible that, when Harris, as ordered by the assembly of spirits, “Tell[s] what [he] seest” and readers process his account, they may literally feel what it is like to be filled with and expanded by a divine inflow of hazy visual stimuli.⁷¹

When spatio-temporal/abstract language combinations appear in trance poems by auditive mediums like Lizzie Doten, Jennie Rennell, and Sarah Gould, they may, as discussed in chapter one, incite sensations of exaggerated orientation processing. Because trance poems are about the discernment of spirit voices, such feelings could be construed by the reader as embodied experiences of interior hearing. However, if altered consciousness occurs in the context of the above passages—passages in which Harris reports on what he sees—it would more likely be interpreted as part of a visual, rather than an auditory, event. Such an interpretation would be supported by the fact that the effects of heightened right-hemisphere mentation are almost identical to the feelings that Harris describes as he passively receives visions from the minds of others. Thus, in cognitively processing his poem, readers may be trained in a form of sight that does not allow them—as Columbus does—to stand back from a separate reality and gather distinct impressions upon which to base rational judgments. They may vicariously see in a way that, by creating “weak spots” in the psychic boundary separating self and other, not only

confounds reason, but also establishes the conditions of possibility for an encounter with outsiders.

With its references to points all over America and beyond, *Leaves of Grass* is certainly as “spacious” as *An Epic*. However, unlike the vague accounts of place found in Harris’s poem, the representation of location in Whitman’s text tends to be detailed, and the high level of specificity prevents the changes in consciousness which would simulate the experience of clairvoyance. The precision of Whitman’s imagery has been noted by numerous critics.⁷² Allen argues that the poet’s catalogues “are more than catalogues . . . for each image is sharply focused,” while Dougherty writes that in the “throb of [Whitman’s] hyperacute vision,” “the myriads of Not-Me stand before the I in their individuated presences.”⁷³ The nouns that evoke these distinctive entities are often preceded by spatial terms. For example, prepositions abound when Whitman is “afoot with [his] vision” in section 33 of “Song of Myself.” Among other things, he sees “Where the rattlesnake suns his flabby length on a rock” and “Where the alligator in his tough pimples sleeps by the bayou.” He sees “Over the sharp-peaked farmhouse with its scalloped scum and / slender shoots from the gutters” and “Where the cheese-cloth hangs in the kitchen, and andirons straddle / the hearth-slab, and cobwebs fall in festoons from the rafters.”⁷⁴ Joining prepositions and spatial adverbs with concrete nouns, Whitman uses more canonical linguistic formations than does Harris. Consequently, the spatial terms that begin the above lines may trigger orientation mechanisms, but the diffuseness of these processes is limited by the fine-grained visual data on which they work. From the angle of its roof, to the shape of its “scum” to the growth in its gutters, readers know enough about the farmhouse’s appearance to picture it clearly. Equally sharp, the depictions of the kitchen, the alligator, and the rattlesnake provide readers with strong visual inputs that can easily be translated into vivid mental images.

There are several reasons why Whitman chooses to pair spatial language not with abstractions that thwart readers’ efforts to map spaces mentally, but instead with concrete nouns that maximize their powers of visualization. First, as linguistic representations of what and how the poet sees, concrete nouns reflect his idea that, when used correctly, sight is a non-transformative sense, one that allows the perceiver to acknowledge objects for what they are without changing them (or being changed by them). Before his gaze, there is no confusion or ambiguity: “every spear of grass and the frames and spirits of men and women and all that concerns them” are “each distinct and in [their] place.” Preserving the clear boundaries of even the smallest things, he sees that “The moths and the fisheggs are in their places.” All visual objects “are simply to be taken as they are.”⁷⁵ Secondly, as this “rule” implies, Whitman wanted his catalogue entries to be like photographs. Imitating the camera’s ability “to record minutely, faithfully, and without selection,” he sees himself as “a photographer/poet and *Leaves* becomes an album (a catalogue) of photographic images.”⁷⁶ Manifesting his ideas about sight and reflecting his interest in photography, the high-resolution images presented in *Leaves* were also, Dougherty argues, an important part of Whitman’s plan to connect with the reader. He desperately wanted readers to be able to “see” what *Leaves* described because, according to Dougherty, he believed that “The way out of simply private feelings—the path between the I and the Not-Me, between I and You as fellow citizens—must pass along the route of language, a language invoking visual images in which poet and reader together repose their faith in the power of the eyesight to create a shared world.” To

ensure that this world is in fact “shared,” Whitman uses words that avoid overtaxing his readers’ powers of visualization. Thus, instead of asking them to extrapolate surreal environments from vague language, he prompts them through more concrete descriptions to imagine popular genre illustrations that they had probably already seen—possibly hanging in their own living rooms. If these familiar images make it easier for readers to see what Whitman sees, so, too, do the short narratives (of workers constructing a building; of a cop dispersing a crowd, etc.) that are interspersed throughout the catalogues.⁷⁷ Following characters as they complete a series of actions in a warehouse or a street, readers can limit these imaginary environments and infer how their spaces are articulated. With their heavy use of prepositions and other spatial terms, it seems that *An Epic* and *Leaves* would alter readers’ perceptions in the same way. But by repeatedly offsetting the diffuseness of orientation processing with highly differentiated visual inputs, Whitman’s text, in contrast to Harris’s, is more likely to produce readers who feel a sense of mastery over the scenes they survey.

However, Harris is not always passive, seeing only what God or surrounding spirits have “pictured on [his] brain.” He has visions of his own. Like a warmer, more emotional Emersonian seer, he can make his environment into a mirror of his own loves, hopes, and fears. “Heaven,” Harris learns, is “[w]here the heart’s inner loves” are “in form outrolled” and, indeed, a major theme of the text is that, when seen correctly, “All things” are “symbols and forms of love and truth within the breast.” On a large scale, the universe is, he observes, a reflection of God’s heart: “Suns, systems, galaxies, great spheres with wings” are objectifications of the Creator’s thoughts. And his “thoughts are things/ Outfashioned from [His] love, / Which go from [Him] and come to [Him] again.”⁷⁸ Like God, angels are encircled by visual representations of their interior states so that what they feel is also what they see. “As the states of the inner levels of angels’ love and wisdom change, so too,” writes Swedenborg, “do the states of the various things that surround them and are visible to their eyes; for the things that surround angels are given their appearance according to the things that are within them.”⁷⁹ Illustrating this claim, Harris’s angel guide sits in a “shrine” that “vibrates from her thought” and is surrounded by “doves” which are but “distant image-beamings” of “the loves within her breast.”⁸⁰ From her and other angel instructors, he learns how to see subjectively. “[C]oncenter all thy thought,” advises one spirit, “And thou shalt see it visibly / Before thine eyes outwrought.” The training seems to work:

I think of God! my thought becomes a zone
Of seven-fold light. All glorious, throned therein,
Shine pictures of immortal seraphim.

.....
Again I think. I form a sun
Of thought within my inmost mind;
Electric rays together run—
In outward space my thought I find.

.....
I think again: I think of one
Who loved me dearly long ago,
But vanished into worlds unknown,
While into dust her from was thrown,

Beneath the winter snow.

My inward thought becomes a shape:
Exterior form I see it take;
A form of matron beauty pale.⁸¹

While Harris is excited by his ability to see what he thinks literally, he notes that people on other planets have long been surrounded by the projections of their own imaginations. The inhabitants of Jupiter, for example,

Each being is in its own light arrayed,
And moves encompassed by a glory-sphere,
Wherein all radiant images appear,
Of suns, and moons, and stars, and spheral forms,
And flowers, and skies, and splendor-tinted morns.⁸²

The divine influx is shaped by the subjectivity of the Jupiterites, who then externalize it as a visual representation of a personal truth. Creating reality by ensphering perceivers in a bubble made of their own impressions, this form of vision, the poem contends, is far more advanced than that exercised by earthlings. To help them catch up, Harris must “Teach the great truth” that “Nature [is] but a picture-world, outwrought / To image forth in space the tones and numbers / Of loves and wisdoms that within [them] lie.”⁸³ The text teaches this lesson by inviting readers to cognitively process passages that portray their seemingly inevitable sensory development.

In the act of reading descriptions of what it will be like when they have mastered the skill of subjective vision, they practice seeing the world as a mirror of their interior lives and, through this exercise, learn how to approximate the visual model that the poem prescribes. When the reader is finally “dignified, ennobled, lifted high, / And reunited with Humanity”—that is, with the advanced beings who inhabit Jupiter and other planets—he will, Harris assures him, “Think through his heart, and through his bosom see.”⁸⁴ And the reader may actually feel like he is seeing through his “bosom” when Harris looks into the future and describes the visual practices of free people:

In the great feast of Freedom all men share,
Whose lives unfold in harmony with truth.
Joy, beauty, inspiration, deathless youth,
Pure poet-vision, prophet-sight, and skill
To shape inferior nature to their will,
And love so deep the soul may gaze into
A golden ocean blended with the blue,
And see therein an endless beauty-maze
Where the celestial sun reflected plays;
And gladness, like a rainbow that ascends,
And all the radiant being overbends.⁸⁵

Reproducing Harris’s vision in their imaginations, readers direct their mental gaze into a seemingly infinite blur of blended hues and search beneath the blue-gold surface for a maze made up of nothing more solid than “endless beauty.” They try to picture the intangible sunbeams that play in the labyrinth, the invisible “joy” that “ascends” into open space, and the virtually inconceivable “radiant being,” who “overbends” the scene.

As they imaginatively situate themselves in spatial situations that are populated by abstractions, their orientation mechanisms may be activated and, supplied with little-to-no neural input, generate a diffuse output that would make the world both in and outside of the text feel like a projection of their emotions. Right brain mentation seems to incite a heightened emotional state for several reasons, says Tsur. First, the fluid information that it generates reduces “the individual’s sense of stability and control,” and such changes “have been “identified as elements that constitute high attentiveness for emotional stimulation.” Secondly, “diffuse elements,” like those produced by holistic processing, “stimulate certain areas of the hypothalamus, which activate sympathetic and parasympathetic activities, related to states of affect, emotion and moods.” Finally, orientation mechanisms use emotion to accelerate their own operations. Like orientation, emotion “is typically right-hemisphere brain activity,” and the two often work together on the task of negotiating new spatial and temporal situations. Creating the cognitive grounds for an elevated emotional state and deploying emotion to construct a quick sketch of unfamiliar environments, right brain processing is entwined with feelings on multiple levels and is, therefore, a particularly affective processing mode. By triggering it, the passage above could incite the kind of vision that it describes. As readers process the text, they learn “To shape inferior nature to their will” by seeing it through the lens of their love.⁸⁶

Seeing America’s Future(s)

Training readers to see subjectively, Harris combats two ideas that are at the heart of Barlow’s, Emerson’s, and Whitman’s versions of vision: first, that representation is a bad thing; and, second, that it can be avoided. The people and places that Columbus observes from the mount of vision are (despite the temporal impossibility) actually present, occupying space and developing right before his eyes—he observes history in the making and not just a portrayal of it. This message obscures the fact that what he is watching is essentially a film, created and projected by Hesper, that may be offering an inaccurate or even completely fictional view of events. Disavowing the constructedness of what Columbus perceives, the poem suggests that seers have unmediated access to the seen. Emerson, too, denies that mediation plays a role in vision. Because the world which the Emersonian seer perceives is a manifestation of his own mind, he has direct access to the only thing that seems to exist—himself. Indeed, as Michelle Kohler argues, the subjectivity of his sight is so totalizing that it ceases to be “subjective” and becomes more like “scientific perception,” a way of seeing that “claims a mode of disembodiment, or transparency, that leads to objectivity.” When Emerson describes how “egotism vanishes” during the proper exercise of sight or claims that the poet “turns the world to glass,” “a metaphor for vision that renders both the seer and the world transparent,” he is advancing a model of vision that, like scientific perception, denies that sight is “situated [and] embodied,” “directional and perspectival rather than ubiquitous.”⁸⁷ Thus, while Emersonian vision begins and ends in the self, it is not characterized by any of the qualities that make us human. Commenting on its sterility, John Gatta writes, “If in theory Emerson’s definition of the soul gave full play to faculties like physical instinct and emotion,” in reality it put “a practical stress on cold, impersonal intellect at the expense of warm-blooded affection.”⁸⁸ Though the success of his poetry depends upon its

ability to evoke images of popular reproduction, Whitman also distrusts mediation and implies that it is possible to do without it. As Dougherty writes, “Whitman is inviting ‘you’ into a shared world through visual experiences that are not direct but indirect . . . through culturally mediated pictures.”⁸⁹ But Whitman obscures the role of representation by using a rhetoric of immediacy. He will allow nothing “to hang in the way between me and the rest like curtains. [He] will have nothing hang in the way, not the richest curtains.”⁹⁰ Striving to reproduce the specificity of the daguerreotype and of the “American paintings of the period,” which, as David Reynolds notes, “minimized the painterly and stylized on behalf of the direct, the accessible, [and] the transparent,” Whitman creates images that pretend to be the objects of representation.⁹¹

In contrast, Harris insists that truth is itself a representation, what he calls a “Transcendent Image.” Everything that he sees is, he emphasizes, a reflection of something else. For example, in the “high Sphere [where] all things originate,” he does not see original forms, but instead “Reflected thought-beams of Omniscience.” The Lord “is a shadow from the face of God, / In-formed in quivering light,” a picture “imaged o’er the dome / That spans the sun.”⁹² Angels are

as painted forms
 Mirrored within a burning concave lens—
 Daguerreotypes of Deity that shine
 As pictures in the palace-hall sublime
 Of Him who is. And space is but a mirror,
 And all its glories that endure forever
 The waking visions of the Infinite.⁹³

Harris uses the vocabulary of photography not, as Whitman does, to evoke transparency and immediacy, but instead to make the point that each seemingly self-evident thing which he sees is the result of a complex process of transposition and inversion. And these already altered pictures are, he notes, further distorted by his spiritual sight. Under water on the planet Mercury,

I awake
 Where the crystal morning-beam
 Plays upon a quiet lake.
 Overhead in air is seen
 Palace, temple, shrine, and spire—
 Many a deathless Angel-choir,
 Worlds of spirit-beauty clear,
 Mirrored through the atmosphere.

And the radiant visions glow
 In the tranquil wave below.
 For the waters correspond
 To the Soul, that sees beyond
 Outward veils, and in its breast,
 Picturing visions of the blest,
 Hath a deep interior sense—
 Inner life’s effulgent lense.⁹⁴

Seeing with spiritual sight is, Harris suggests, like looking up from the bottom of a lake and glimpsing on its wavy surface the reflections of images in the sky. In other words, it is highly mediated. The soul cannot see “the blest” directly, but can only “Pictur[e] visions” of them through the blinding barrier of an “effulgent lens.” He emphasizes the indirection of spiritual sight to make the point that mediation allows for a multiplicity of perspectives and that, for those who see correctly, reality is a collection of subjective visual experiences. To be sure, he believes that these experiences ultimately derive from one true God. However, warping the light of divine visual stimuli and sending it distorted back out into the world, spiritual seers can only observe and react to visual representations of either their own or someone else’s mental and emotional activity.

The views of Barlow, Emerson, Whitman, and Harris on the role of mediation in sight have implications for how they imagine America’s prospects. Rejecting the notion that sight is necessarily subjective (and not in the Emersonian sense), the first of the four poets seem to be making the larger claim that the United States has a single destiny and that, despite their differences, Americans cannot help but see the same future. In *The Columbiad*, visual objects are independent of their viewers. The image of Americans’ progress is not a flexible fantasy informed by Columbus’s emotions, but, instead, an objective reality that would unfold whether or not the old navigator were there to see it. Because Columbus the perceiver is decoupled from the perceived and the perceived is assumed to improve continuously, Barlow’s brand of sight supports his cherished belief that “progress is inevitable,” that “history [is] a single upward curve . . . lead[ing] to a temporal paradise.”⁹⁵ Emerson’s model of sight also dictates that there can only be one truth and, thus, one way to see things. He writes, “to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men,—that is genius. Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense; for the inmost in due time becomes the outmost, and our first thought is rendered back to us by the trumpets of the Last Judgment.” If one person’s perspective becomes “the universal sense” and is then manifested in the external world, then there can only be one national outcome. Thus, Emerson, speaking of the country’s future in “The Young Reformer,” assures his audience that “there is a sublime and friendly Destiny by which the human race is guided” and that “America . . . is the country of the Future.”⁹⁶ And contemplating the corrupt and diseased countenances in “Faces,” Whitman exults

The Lord advances, and yet advances:
Always the shadow in front . . . always the reached hand bringing
up the laggards.

Out of this face emerge banners and horses . . . O superb! . . . I
see what is coming,
I see the high pioneercaps . . . I see the staves of runners clearing
the way

Subscribing to the notion that there is a single reality teleologically unfolding, Whitman suggests that Americans of all stripes will inevitably see the apotheosis of their country. In the meantime, he “read[s] the promise and patiently wait[s].”⁹⁷

This conception of one national destiny is not compatible with Harris’s model of sight which celebrates the necessity of mediation and the subjectivity of perception. Because reality is, according to Harris, a diorama of countless externalized personal

truths, the United States has, he argues, not one, but many futures. Often, they conflict. For example, he watches “A youth and maiden” in Africa become “The Eve and Adam of a new / Immortal Race” that first redeems the continent and then the rest of the world.⁹⁸ Yet, in another vision, the “Golden Age” begins, not in Africa, but in the “mighty West,” where a

new-born race shall shine
Brightening through several high degrees
Till the wide world witnesses
Greece and Ind idealized—
Earthly Heaven realized.⁹⁹

“Paradise” also begins on “A white, electric Island in the seas / Of the Pacific” which is “tenanted by these / Transcendent forms,” “spirits pure and wise.”¹⁰⁰ In these versions of the future, the earth’s regeneration begins subtly as the divine influx elevates a particular group of people who then facilitate the uplift of everyone else. However, existing simultaneously with these gradual transformations are more disruptive alternatives. For instance, Harris pictures an aerial assault from an army of angels:

They shall encompass Earth; on every coast
Men shall look up to view the constellations,
And see the sky thronged with Angelic Nations,
And the blue atmosphere become like snow.
From rank to rank the silver trump shall blow,
And the great army opening its wide ranks—
Like a bright river that o’er flows its banks—
Shall intermingle with the sons of men.¹⁰¹

In a different future, the angels invade by boat: “spiritual fleets, / With radiant streaming flag and silver sail / . . . come to Earth” and “Immortal mariners” “land, all visible [and] in eager haste” to spread “Love and Wisdom . . . in the streets.” And still another possibility is that, rather than being attacked, people will see the angels’ “radiant, moving shapes outgleam[ing]” just above the surface of the Earth and, “Enamored of the Beauty Forms” “shall call to them,” begging them to descend.¹⁰²

As the sheer number of these scenarios suggests, Harris sees a different end depending on where he is and how he feels. According to the logic of spiritual vision, then, there are as many fates as there are clairvoyants, and no one fate is more real than another. The existence and fulfillment of a particular destiny is inextricably linked to the person who perceives it, and the narrative of that destiny changes to match developments in his condition. America has always been imagined as a land of hope, a place where anything can happen. Harris’s poem tries to make this true by training readers to see like him. It aims to expand the realm of possibilities drastically by facilitating the perception of countless new futures.

Training readers to use their emotional and empathic capacities in order to see the multiplicity of perspectives beyond a single dominant vision, Harris’s poem focuses on romantic relationships and communal childrearing, subjects that are typically overlooked in more conventional epics. Classical poets like Homer glorified war. And while Barlow insisted that depictions of carnage were unsuitable sources of inspiration for a civilized nation, he, too, was preoccupied with conquest, albeit in a less gory form: thus, in his poem, America dominates the world through commerce instead of combat.¹⁰³ For Harris,

however, the salient features of America's future look quite different. On Mars, where earth's future is, he claims, actualized in the present moment, he does not see bloody battle or commercial expansion, but "An Eden of Conjugal Affection." Wives "sin[g] the strains / Of Conjugal delight," while their husbands "si[t], calm-thoughted, splendor-eyed," gathering "inspiration" from their partners' songs.¹⁰⁴ By nineteenth century standards, the marriages that he describes seem particularly equitable, in accordance with the conjugal relationships that Swedenborg claims to have seen in heaven. "Any love of control of one over the other," Swedenborg writes, "utterly destroys marriage love and its heavenly pleasure, for as already noted, marriage love and its pleasure consist of the intent of one belonging to the other, and of this being mutual and reciprocal. A love of being in control in a marriage destroys this because the dominant partner simply wants his or her will to be in the other, and does not want to accept any element of the will of the other in return."¹⁰⁵ In the future that Harris sees, "Love reigns in all," leaving no role for business or the military to play. Moreover, he envisions relationships between men and women in which sexual pleasure seems to take precedence over the rearing of children. The couples in "An Eden of Conjugal Affection" are able to focus entirely on each other because children are relegated to "the Eastern Portion of the same Isle." While visiting this place, "Another scene is pictured on [Harris's] brain," and he watches as "children . . . / Are taken from their mothers" by angels who "bear / The happy infants higher, [and] higher" to the celestial sphere that encircles the planet. The angels baby-sit the children for a few hours while "their terrestrial mothers . . . fe[e]d, / Meanwhile upon ambrosial fruitage, spread / Before them by young Bridegrooms," who may or may not be their husbands.¹⁰⁶

Of course, sex is also prominent in the various editions of *Leaves*. But, whereas Harris's poem places erotic enjoyment over parental duties, *Leaves of Grass* does precisely the opposite. David Reynolds writes that, "Throughout his poetry, especially in the first three editions when he was heavily under the sway of the physiologists," Whitman "treated sex and the body in a physiological, artistic way as a contrast to what he saw as the cheapened, often perverse forms of sexual expression in popular culture." Whitman made a clear distinction between the poems and novels of the day, which he claimed represented "the simply erotic, the merely lascivious" and *Leaves of Grass*, which he believed exemplified "what is frank, free, [and] modern, in sexual behavior." As a literary articulation of the "scientific" view of sex espoused by physiologists like Orson Fowler, Russell Trall, and Augustus Kinsley Gardner, *Leaves* is, to use Whitman's words, a "song of procreation" that represents sex, not as an act involving intimacy and arousal, but as an unappealing "bath of birth."¹⁰⁷ Women are reduced to a kind of archetype—"the female"—and broken down into parts—"Hair, bosom, hips, bend of legs"—which cohere for no other purpose than to be impregnated.¹⁰⁸ They are, as D. H. Lawrence aptly says, "Muscles and wombs: functional creatures: no more."¹⁰⁹ If women have sex (or have it done "to" them) in order to fulfill their destinies as mothers, men seem to be motivated by a desire to populate the country. In what probably ranks as one of the least erotic descriptions of sex ever to appear in American poetry, Whitman writes in "Poem of Procreation" from the 1856 edition:

I pour the stuff to start sons and daughters fit for
 These States—I press with slow rude muscle,
 I brace myself effectually—I listen to no entreaties,

I dare not withdraw till I deposit what has so
long accumulated within me.

Through you I drain the pent-up rivers of myself,
In you I wrap a thousand onward years,
On you I graft the grafts of the best-beloved of
me and America,
The drops I distil upon you are drops of fierce
and athletic girls, and of new artists, musicians,
singers,
The babes I beget upon you are to beget babes in
their turn,
I shall demand perfect men and women out of my
love-spendings,
I shall expect them to interpenetrate with others,
as I and you interpenetrate now¹¹⁰

Reacting to passages such as this, a contemporary reviewer noted that they “belong in a handbook of physiology.” Similarly, another commentator likened them to “scientific examples, introduced as they might be in any legal, medical, or physiological book, for the purpose of instruction.”¹¹¹ Whitman’s epic may be more sexually graphic than Harris’s, but, as these comments indicate, it decouples sex from the desires and bodily delights that, for Harris, make the activity an end in and of itself.

Representations of non-procreative pleasures and alternative family arrangements are probably not what nineteenth-century readers would expect to find in an epic vision of their future, and Harris anticipates their criticism:

“Tis an ideal picture that we draw,”
Man on the Earth will say, when this he reads,
Turning celestial flowers to idle weeds.
“Nay, Friend! there is no dark, destructive law
Of malformation in that realm serene,
Whose image through this epic verse is seen.”¹¹²

And there need not be such a law on earth, either, because perception, as the poem tries to prove through its work on the reader, is malleable. While *An Epic*’s linguistic arrangements may mimic the feeling of spiritual sight by activating orientation processes, its narrative and thematic content—as illustrated in the passages above—may imbue those simulated visual sensations with meaning. Thus, impressions of heightened emotion and intersubjectivity are mapped onto affectively charged and loosely structured sexual and familial relations. The future is determined by how we picture it, Harris believed. By teaching readers to see America’s future through a reformed sense of sight, his poem, he hoped, would help bring into being more unconventional social and sexual realities.

Metaphor, the Collapse of Conceptual Boundaries, and the Simulation of Unstructured Vision

An important distinction needs to be made here: For Harris, this alternative reality would not be “American” because this word instantiates a concept that is used to classify

experience, something that his spiritual vision actively prevents. There is a difference between words and concepts. Concepts or “cognitive models,” writes Peter Stockwell, “are idealized generalized patterns which find their manifestation or actualization in a variety of linguistic expressions.” Thus, it is possible for different terms “to share underlying conceptual structures.” Words are the “surface realization[s]” of concepts, while concepts themselves make it possible for us to “organize our knowledge.”¹¹³ Instead of affirming concepts, Harris describes the sense of sight using language that either delays their use or completely dismantles them.

Readers may vicariously experience the sensation of seeing without the aid of organizational structures when they process the poem’s synaesthetic metaphors. While Columbus and Whitman always receive stimuli through sight or one of the other four individuated faculties of the Western sensorium, Harris erodes the limits that define vision as a discrete perceptual mode and, by doing so, destabilizes a basic category that other American vision epics had taken for granted. The expansion of vision to include non-visual sensations is discussed by Swedenborg, who notes that angel voices “appear visually . . . and thus to the interior sight, as shimmering light or a brilliant flame.”¹¹⁴ Like Swedenborg, Harris and other clairvoyants used their spiritual vision to process heavenly stimuli in radically synaesthetic ways. For example, when Harris is allowed “to see Love’s empress,” the Eve of Conjugal Love on the planet Mars, he “drink[s]” her “glowing sphere.” He also watches “clairvoyant” infants “whose light is melody” and fairy forms whose “robes” are “Tinted with all the harmonies of light.”¹¹⁵ Though he experiences synaesthesia throughout the poem, the divisions of his sensorium most clearly collapse during a visit to “an electro-spiritual region above the planet Jupiter,” where he seems to be completely freed from the constraints of ordinary vision:

I am borne, as an angel lifts a prayer
From a worshipping saint through the shining air.
I am made like a spirit in brain and heart;
Like a fiery arrow through space I dart;
And I see the glorious world below,
In the rich, red sunrise brighten and glow.

My thoughts are all vastness, my pulses thrill,
And I rise on the wings of the inner will.
Through the will and its power I rise and soar
And alight at last on a Middle Shore,
A sphere of aromas, gold, crimson, and green,
A world of Electrical Forms between
A world like heaven below, and on high
A heaven like a world, outrolled in the sky.
I stand on this intermediate sphere,
And with mediate senses feel, see, and hear.¹¹⁶

McAllister also notices depictions of synaesthesia in *An Epic*: “Thoughts expressed become visible, sounds take physical shape.” When we encounter such moments in the text, “We are,” she continues, “required, as readers, to accept this blurring of distinction between sound and sight.”¹¹⁷ But how do readers accept it and how does it feel? If Tsur’s claims about linguistic representations of synaesthesia are correct, Harris may not be the

only one who is physically and mentally affected by the scene—readers may be, too. Smell, taste, touch, and to a lesser extent hearing are, Tsur observes, less differentiated senses than sight. That is, they “can make fewer kinds of distinctions” and “can also less reliably distinguish between the various degrees of attributes present in a given domain.” Physical synaesthesia usually “imposes the dominance of less differentiated sensory domains upon the more differentiated ones,” thereby triggering “a regression to a state in which the various sensory domains are less differentiated from each other.” This state, he argues, can be simulated by reading linguistic representations of synaesthesia. “[S]peaking of the more differentiated sensory domain in terms of a less differentiated one is a powerful means of dedifferentiation” that can cause readers to experience “undifferentiated, pre-categorical sensory or emotional information.”¹¹⁸ Thus, as a reader “process[es] synaesthetic metaphor,” he or she is “turn[ed] from the observer to an experiencer of the cognitive shift.”¹¹⁹

This “shift” could be induced by the examples above. They prompt readers to think of visible entities (the “glowing sphere” of “Love’s empress,” the “light” emanating from infants, and the “tin[t]” of the fairy dresses) in terms of taste and hearing, respectively. By itself, color is difficult to picture because, abstracted from a concrete object, it lacks what Tsur calls a “visible characteristic shape.”¹²⁰ Consequently, the upward transfer from smell (“aromas”) to sight (“gold, crimson, and green”) renders an already indistinct image even more diffuse. The lowly differentiated sense of consciousness that language like this generates is intensified, Tsur argues, when the synaesthetic metaphor occurs in a description of “a ‘concrete situation,’ defined ‘here and now,’ in which the orientation mechanism may be supposed to function, processing information diffusely and readily integrating many inputs at once.”¹²¹ As readers cognitively negotiate Harris’s vocabulary of intersensory transfer, they also orient themselves in relation to the complex land-and-skyscape that he describes. With him, they move “through space,” look down on a “glorious world below,” and finally land on an “intermediate sphere” with Jupiter underneath them and the rest of the universe “on high.” Engaged in holistic processing while exposed to the confused terms of overlapping sensory domains, readers may feel as if they are, to borrow the words of religious scholar David Chidester, “defying ordinary, normalizing expectations about the world of perception” and “break[ing] through [the] structural limitations that organize experience.”¹²² Through passages like these, *An Epic* suggests that, if sight itself resists categorization, then perhaps the purpose of seeing should not be, as it is in other American vision poems, to determine the number of rivers and the borders of nations, but, instead, to erase both natural and manmade boundaries.

By teaching readers to tolerate and even enjoy visual ambiguity, his poem promotes a sense of sight that is less exploitative and utilitarian than that exercised by Columbus, whose eyes constantly facilitate the classification of land, resources, and people. In *The Columbiad*, Barlow personifies geographic formations as women who eagerly expose themselves to the old navigator’s gaze:

Slow glimmering into sight wide regions drew,
 And rose and brighten’d on the expanding view;
 Fair sweep the waves, the lessening ocean smiles,
 In misty radiance loom a thousand isles;
 Near and more near the long drawn coasts arise,

Bays stretch their arms and mountains lift the skies,
 The lakes unfolding point the streams their way,
 Slopes, ridges, plains their spreading skirts display.¹²³

All things are open to his inspection and, in fact, struggle to be seen more clearly. Taking in intimate details at a glance, his eyes are precise and powerful instruments of science and economics. While he expands the stores of knowledge by visually isolating and then labeling natural phenomenon, he also quickly recognizes materials and calculates how they might be used:

From sultry Mobile's gulf-indented shore
 To where Ontario hears his Laurence roar,
 Stretcht o'er the broadbackt hills in a long array,
 The tenfold Alleganies meet the day,
 And show, far sloping from the plains and streams,
 The forest azure streakt with orient beams.
 High moved the scene, Columbus gazed sublime,
 And thus in prospect hail'd the happy clime:
 Blest be the race my guardian guide shall lead
 To these wide vales with every bounty spread.
 What treasured stores the hills must here combine!
 Sleep still ye diamonds, and ye ores refine;
 Exalt your heads ye oaks, ye pines ascend,
 Till future navies bid your branches bend.¹²⁴

Sharp as a surgeon's knife, his sight cleanly separates things that can be monetized from those that cannot, and his gaze never falls upon anything that cannot be quickly identified.

Though Whitman is not motivated by the prospect of financial gain, his eyes also seem to circumscribe everything before them in a way that Harris's do not. This makes it difficult (if not impossible) for the poet to observe anything that is truly new. As noted earlier, textual representations of what he sees typically evoke images of people, places, and things that are distinctive and concrete. This may be because, for Whitman, the purpose of the eye is faithfully to register a "universe" where everything "is duly in order" and "every thing is in its place."¹²⁵ Or, it may be because his sense of sight generates the order which he then perceives. According to Nathanson, "the gaze," for Whitman, is an instrument of the "cultural code that structures him, and by means of which he names and defines himself." The light which makes sight possible "projects [an object's] outlines" and generates "the impermeable bounding surfaces that divide one body from another."¹²⁶ In other words, entities with preexisting and clearly defined shapes do not suddenly exceed their boundaries and merge with one another when the poet looks at them. On the contrary, his sense of sight, Nathanson suggests, seems to create individuation actively by imposing categories on a sea of undifferentiated visual information. Yet, whether projecting a finite number of forms onto a visual field or discovering these organizational structures and then leaving them unchanged, Whitman's vision seems to preclude the possibility of seeing anything that "breaks the mold" and exists outside of his conceptual boxes.

In its dissolution of boundaries and openness to the emergence of new visual objects, Harris's model of sight is actually more like Emerson's. The ability of the

Emersonian seer to look through or over conventional lines of demarcation depends upon his perpetual casting off of old and restrictive concepts. In “Circles,” Emerson writes that “There are no fixtures in nature” and that, reflecting the ever-changing mind, “The universe is fluid and volatile.” However, the mind and, by extension, the universe, he argues, becomes frozen when we commit to a single concept or system of ideas. He believes that ideas are directly responsible for the current configuration of society and culture: The “history and the state of the world at any one time” are “directly dependent on the intellectual classification then existing in the minds of men. The things which are dear to men at this hour are so on account of the ideas which have emerged on their mental horizons, and which cause the present order of things, as a tree bears its apples.” But, he contends, when this classificatory structure has been around for too long, the world becomes stiff and dead. It seems calcified and, like an impenetrable shell, stifles the perceivers who have created it. Describing this process, Emerson asserts, “it is the inert effort of each thought, having formed itself into a circular wave of circumstance,—as for instance an empire, rules of an art, a local usage, a religious rite,—to heap itself on that ridge and to solidify and hem in the life.” He warns that, when nature, as a result of old ideas, begins to suffer from “old age,” a variety of social ills emerge: “nature abhors the old, and old age seems the only disease; all others run into this one. We call it by many names—fever, intemperance, insanity, stupidity and crime; they are all forms of old age; they are rest, conservatism, appropriation, inertia; not newness, not the way onward.” Emerson insists that, if we want to bring about a new world in which such problems do not exist, then we need to transgress the limits of our governing concepts and begin to think new thoughts. “In the thought of to-morrow there is,” he promises, “a power to upheave all thy creed, all the creeds, all the literatures of the nations, and marshal thee to a heaven which no epic dream has yet depicted.” As new ideas come forth, we will see that “The facts which loomed so large in the fogs of yesterday,—property, climate, breeding, personal beauty and the like, have strangely changed their proportions. All that we reckoned settled shapes and rattles; and literatures, cities, climates, religions, leave their foundations and dance before our eyes.” The key, he emphasizes, is to keep them dancing forever, something that is only possible if we resist the tendency to regard current ideas as definitive and final. Exemplifying this iconoclastic attitude, he boasts, “I unsettle all things. No facts are to me sacred; none are profane; I simply experiment, an endless seeker with no Past at my back.”¹²⁷ As Albert J. Von Frank puts it in his commentary on “Circles,” Emerson’s message “is that to affirm life is to be a perpetual revolutionary, a consistent opponent of all agreements that anything is ever settled.”¹²⁸

This disruptive approach to settled ideas is, Jacobson argues in *Emerson’s Pragmatic Vision*, the condition of possibility for seeing correctly. In “Self Reliance,” Emerson describes the wisdom of a boy who “avoid[s] all pledges” and “observe[s]” his surroundings with an “unaffected, unbiased, unbridgeable, unaffrightened innocence.”¹²⁹ This boy, remarks Jacobson, exhibits “the self-reliant attitude” which is “opposed . . . to the kind of teleological endeavor that consists of the imposition of a priori categories on thought.” He demonstrates “an attitude of thought and action that, by dismissing theoretical and normative conventions, opens the space for authentic evaluations.” However, self-reliance is more than just thinking without the presence of encumbering conventions. It is also “the capacity to see,” as the boy does, “without shame, to observe

innocent of prior conditions.” By “looking absent informing categories of sight,” he can see what others cannot. This is because, for Emerson, “overcoming prior appearances . . . produces a clearing of the space in the eye’s circle, within which a new manifestation of nature appears.” “Self-reliance,” Jacobson concludes, “is rightly thought of then as the agency of a phenomenological destruction and presencing, the agency of overlooking or seeing beyond one’s current horizon” to see what has never been seen before.

To free visual objects from their familiar forms, the Emersonian seer must not only clear his mind, but also step back from what he sees in order to get a broader, less focused view. According to Jacobson, Emerson believed that, while categories of thought determine what we see, these powerful rubrics are also perpetuated by our tendency to limit our visual fields. Commenting on “Circles,” he writes:

If the eye gathers nature for the individual . . . then the horizon of the eye can as well become fixed and freeze the fluctuations of natural appearance, imposing a single limit on nature and thereby establishing a static structure of value according to which natural presence is determined and repeated in continuous re-presentations. Precisely such sedimentation and repetition of a particular order acts to create normative and theoretical values, retrospective constructs, that interpret and thus dominate our lived experience.¹³⁰

Emerson opposes constructs that habituate perceivers to the act of identifying and isolating visual objects because they severely circumscribe the eye’s horizon. This is the basis of his objection to the classificatory systems of science. “The classification of all natural science,” he contends, “is arbitrary” and “temporary.” Speaking of plants and shells, he writes, “We take them out of composition, and so lose their greatest beauty. The moon is an unsatisfactory sight if the eye be exclusively directed to it, and a shell retains but a small part of its beauty when examined separately. All of our classifications are introductory and very convenient, but must be looked on as temporary.”¹³¹ His problem with classifications is that they cultivate what Sherman Paul, borrowing a phrase from Ortega y Gasset, refers to as “proximate vision,” which is the capacity we use when, at close range, we select and focus on an object. This way of seeing is “atomic—dissociating, analyzing, [and] distinguishing.” Emerson, Paul asserts, “was aware of the selecting or accusative mode of perception . . . [and] found one of the difficulties of attaining insight by seeing, in the almost inescapable accusative perception of the natural eye.” However, he noticed that he could unfocus his eyes by looking at things from a distance. Through “the widening of [his] literal angle of vision,” Emerson experienced “the diffusion of his focus into a blur of relatedness” and gained the “power to dislimn and integrate objects.”¹³² Seen from afar, the world is an undifferentiated visual field that can be divided and shaped in accordance with the wishes of the perceiver. “[T]he animal eye,” Emerson writes, “sees, with wonderful accuracy, sharp outlines and colored surfaces.” But he suggests that when we see from a distance and without imposing prior categories on new visual data, then to “outline and surface are at once added grace and expression. These proceed from imagination and affection, and abate somewhat of the angular distinctness of objects.” During moments of truly “earnest vision, outlines and surfaces become transparent, and are no longer seen.”¹³³ Erasing the boundaries that we use to make sense of our surroundings, Emersonian sight returns the world to a state of

flux, a condition in which as yet undreamed of social and cultural formations might emerge.

Harris's sight also dismantles the categories we use to organize the world. For example, if readers think that they can identify something as basic as a tree—a reasonable assumption—then the following account of Jupiter's trees may compel them to think again:

There are trees of life on the earth below,
And each blossom opes with a thousand eyes,
And the eyes are blue and the lids like snow,
And the trees through their flowers look up to the skies.

There's a tree I behold which in Earth begins;
It has pulses of crimson in ivory limbs,
And its lance-like leaves are transformed, and bear
Flowers that are lights, and that shine through the air
Like faces of angels through clouds of fragrance;
And the leaves are tongues, and with musical cadence
They utter the secrets of life, and tell
Of inner virtues in flowers that dwell.
And birds that are thoughts that have taken wings
Dive down into snow-white water springs,

And gather electric shapes, and glide
Sparkling and singing upon the tide.¹³⁴

What makes Harris's vision of the tree so confusing is that, instead of being *like* a human, the tree is quite literally human—at least in part. Clear cut concepts, like those that are cued up by the words “human” and “inhuman,” create, according to Tsur, “cognitive stability” and “are indispensable for such elementary activities as to recognize twice a person or a place as the same person or place.”¹³⁵ While “[m]ost normal adults,” he notes, “delay categorization for fractions of seconds, so as to gather information required for making adequate judgments about reality,” readers of Harris's account, I want to suggest, are more likely to delay it indefinitely because of the strange hybrid that it describes.¹³⁶ In a discussion of the psychological effects of grotesque imagery, Gombrich writes that, whether “part plant, part human; part woman, part fish; part horse, [or] part goat,” “hybrid creatures” provoke “the reaction of exasperated helplessness” because “[t]here are no names in our language, no categories in our thought to come to grips with this elusive dream-like imagery in which ‘all things are mixed.’”¹³⁷ Expanding on this idea, Tsur argues that hybrid figures cause “a disruption of alternateness.” That is, rather than pushing the perceiver to “decide[e] unambiguously in favor of one or another” interpretation (“it is a tree” or “it is a human”)—they “leav[e] the observer in an intermediate state, in uncertainty, in a state of indecision” which “[m]any people find. . . difficult to bear.”¹³⁸ Clearly, there is no uncertainty involved in Columbus's purpose-driven mode of vision. Imposing clear categories on the landscape, he strips away all “unnecessary” visual information and immediately sees only what is scientifically or economically useful. Harris, on the other hand, suggests that, if you are using your sense of sight correctly, then you should be uncomfortable. By complicating the concepts of

tree, human, and inhuman, the poem allows readers to practice seeing the world as a field of lowly-differentiated phenomenon, and teaches them that the purpose of vision is not to divide and conquer, but to accept what is before you without any desire to manipulate or exploit it.

Harris could reduce the disorientation caused by category-crossing images like the human/tree hybrid by framing his impressions as flights of fancy presented in a literary work of fiction. But, instead, he increases the readers' sense of unease by insisting that *An Epic* is an unembellished account of an actual visual experience. This is very different from what we see in other American vision epics. Though Richard Maurice Bucke contended that parts of *Leaves of Grass* reflected a mystical experience which Whitman had in the early 1850s, Whitman himself never made this claim, and his long meditation on the role of the American poet in the "Preface" indicates that he regarded his poem more as a fresh instantiation of an old art form than as a straightforward description of true events. Appearing toward the end of *Leaves*, "A Boston Ballad" is a heavy-handed satire that features lively descriptions of America's founding fathers as reanimated corpses. Moreover, with its anthropomorphization of "Europe" and "Liberty," the poem "Europe: The 72d and 73d Years of These States" was clearly not intended to be a record of reality. In its use of personification, *Leaves* is like previous American vision epics which underscored their status as imaginative literature through the use of this device. It is ubiquitous in *The Columbiad* where "righteous Freedom," "Courageous Probity," "temperance calm," "Protected Industry," and "Glad Science," among many others, exhibit signs of personhood and engage in human activities.¹³⁹ Similarly, in "Columbia," Dwight personifies America as "The queen of the world and child of the skies," while in "The Rising Glory of America," Freneau and Brackenridge figure liberty, the political abstraction, as "Liberty," the "fair" lady who is pestered by foreign powers.¹⁴⁰ The actual existence of such beings would seriously upset readers' expectations about what can and cannot occur in the world, but reading about them does not radically restructure their cognitive models of how reality works, because the texts in which they appear do not claim to be literal representations of life. The audience knows that "Liberty," "America," and "Science" are not actual people whose interactions and personal dramas determine the course of history. These walking, talking abstractions are familiar examples of a common rhetorical figure—personification—and the presence of this device signals to them that what they are reading is fiction. In fictional worlds, anything can happen.¹⁴¹

However, while Whitman, Barlow, Dwight, Freneau, and Brackenridge expect the audience to regard their vision poems as imaginative literature, Harris insists that readers take his words literally. The literal approach that he demands causes an uncomfortable cognitive dissonance because it insists that readers revise their concepts of reality drastically in order to accommodate the existence of what he sees. S. B. Brittain, the poem's publisher, suspected that readers might try to contain the strangeness of Spiritualist visual experience by classifying the poem as an entertaining fantasy. To discourage this, he writes in the introduction that Harris's impressions had to be real because he became entranced "under rather unfavorable circumstances" and "had no definite conception of this work [the poem] up to the time when he commenced its delivery."¹⁴² If, despite this preface, readers try to interpret the lines as instances of poetic language, the text trips them up by literalizing familiar tropes. A good example of this is the collapse of "sun" and "Son." "Heaven's sun," Swedenborg writes, "is the Lord."

What makes this seemingly unremarkable statement more than just a common figure of speech is that, according to Swedenborg, the human form of the Lord is actually hanging in the heavenly sky, emanating light and heat: “As for the Lord’s actually appearing in heaven as the sun, this is something that I have not simply been told by angels but have also been allowed to see a number of times.”¹⁴³ Harris sees something similar. When a spirit asks ““Know ye that Angel standing on the sun?”” he realizes that the surface of the flaming star bears an image of a man.

That look—
The very look, the great, yet Crucified One,
.....
That look, whose light o’er darkened Calvary shone,
In-streams on me—I know it—know it well.
Not in man’s heart doth thy dear likeness dwell,

O Lord! alone. Tis imaged o’er the dome
That spans the sun,
.....
Thou Sun, rejoice! Ye goodly company
That round it throng, and fill with harmony
Of planetary life, the stellar space—
Ye too rejoice, run brightening on your race!
Not from the sun alone ye draw your light:
The great Creator’s image stands thereon,
Outpouring from your system’s inner height
Such floods of glory, that the horizon
Rolls back an evening splendor on the morning.
Cease, cease, oh, mortal man, the idle scorning
Of the high mystery¹⁴⁴

Resisting a metaphorical reading, the passage anticipates what Stockwell refers to as “[t]he surrealist technique of literalization.” He demonstrates how this technique works in a close reading of the first line of David Gascoyne’s “And the Seventh Dream is the Dream of Isis”: “there is an explosion of geraniums in the ballroom of the hotel.” “[S]ince any cognitive model of geraniums is unlikely to include an explosive feature, it is,” he remarks “most likely that ‘explosion’ is read metaphorically as a poetic representation of the impact of the colour of the flowers.” However, finding that this interpretation does not work in the context of the rest of the poem, he reads the line literally, amending his cognitive model of geraniums so that “these flowers are now explosive.” He concludes that “reading the discourse deviance literally—taking the surrealist image seriously—causes the framing world”—the world outside of the poem—“to be regarded irrationally.” A world in which geraniums explode is indeed strange, and the feeling that what we know about reality might be wrong “accounts,” he argues, “for the discomfort of surrealism.”¹⁴⁵

It also explains why Harris’s literalization of the sun/Son metaphor is so disorienting. If the expectations and interpretive strategies that readers typically bring to poetry cannot be applied to *An Epic*, then perhaps, as Brittain says, it is not a work of fiction. Blurring the line between fantasy and reality, the poem prompts readers to amend

their cognitive models for “sun” and “Jesus” so that they match the details of Harris’s surreal vision. Harris’s sensations alter basic concepts and categories beyond recognition and, therefore, he neither expects to recognize the objects of his perception, nor does he presume to know what they will do next. The text puts readers in a similar position of unknowing. Forcing them to reconfigure what they thought were basic and familiar areas of knowledge, *An Epic* lets them experience the feelings of surprise and uncertainty that, according to Harris, accompany spiritual sight.

An Epic prompts the reexamination and expansion of existing cognitive models not only by literalizing metaphors, but also by deploying metaphors that are difficult, if not impossible, to resolve. Harris often likens one thing to another that is radically different, and this move makes both objects seem strange and unknowable.¹⁴⁶ Defamiliarizing the source and target of the simile, such comparisons make readers reluctant to picture and categorize even the most basic phenomenon clearly. His penchant for strained metaphors seems to be rooted in the Swedenborgian doctrine of correspondences. According to Swedenborg, “things . . . from the spiritual world are presented in the natural world in general representations; and insofar as they agree they are correspondences.”¹⁴⁷ Similarly, spiritual things in lower levels of heaven represent spiritual things in higher ones. In a kind of dual vision, angels, he writes, are able to see both signs and their referents at once: “They see divine realities in particular objects. They actually do see the objects, but the corresponding divine realities flow directly into their minds.”¹⁴⁸ However, the “object” and the “divine reality” often have no obvious or established connection. For example, “When the angels are speaking about the doctrinal things of charity and faith, then sometimes in the lower sphere, . . . there appears the form or pattern of a city or cities, with palaces therein exhibiting such skill in architecture as is amazing.” “[U]nderstanding” is represented by “horses”; “affections” by “animals”; and “intelligence and wisdom” by “representations of such things as are in the vegetable kingdom.” While the relationship between words and concepts is arbitrary, in most cases, the association between correspondences is not supposed to be. For Swedenborg, “animals” are, in some way, like affections. Yet, while a religious mystic might be able to discern the common properties of charity, faith, and beautifully architected cities, most of his readers probably cannot.¹⁴⁹

Though not necessarily finding the same correspondences as Swedenborg, Harris routinely insists on the similarity of seemingly dissimilar concepts. According to McAllister, Harris’s metaphors serve a clarifying function. He uses “similes and extended metaphors” in order to render “abstractions concrete.” And “[t]his figurative technique,” she asserts, “is particularly helpful” when “the reader must follow the narrator through the complexities of his privately-revealed universe.”¹⁵⁰ But rather than helping readers through an unusual imaginary situation by providing them with a familiar conceptual handle, the metaphors in *An Epic*, I would argue, generate conceptual instability and, therefore, an uncomfortable feeling of unknowing. For instance, as the “[s]ea of eternity rolls on [his] sight,” Harris asks himself, “What is a world?” His answer leaves readers struggling in search of connections:

Tis more and less by far
Than men have dreamed.
Each world’s a flame-wheeled car
On the grooved railway of the skies. A dome

Of sunny crystals flecked with silver foam,
 Spray from the Solar Ocean,
 Whereon it rocks with vibratory motion,
 A heart that throbs and quivers;
 A lily blooming on the crystal sea
 Of God's creative harmony;
 A drop of dew that shines
 On tree-like Nature's leafy top;
 A chariot
 Wherein the angel-hosts in glory ride;
 A rosy bower where wedded hearts abide¹⁵¹

In a conventional metaphor, we learn about the new concept, the target, by thinking of it in terms of a familiar concept, the source. But, here, the sources are not familiar. One does not encounter a "flame-wheeled car" or a giant "dome / Of sunny crystals" in everyday life and, therefore, one probably does not have ready-made cognitive models for them. Yet, though it is difficult to imagine these things, it is not hard to see how they might share features with the concept of "a world": In the same way that a car moves on a track, a world moves across the sky; and, if a rosy bower shelters couples in love, so, too, does a world. To transfer the properties of other sources, however, readers would have to radically restructure their cognitive model of the target.¹⁵² No longer a relatively unchanging sphere, slowly rotating in space, a world would be a sparkly semi-circle ("a dome / Of sunny crystals") that "throbs and quivers" like a heart and rests on top of nature like dew on a tree. As this bizarre notion suggests, Harris's definitions do not clarify what he sees, but instead obscure it by rendering the concept of "a world" either meaningless or so strange that it is impossible to picture. He mimics the motives behind conventional seeing (to know or classify) in order to dismantle the clear conceptual categories on which that mode of perception depends.

In these ways, Harris's poem seems to enact Emerson's own theory of correspondences. At the heart of this theory is Emerson's notion, discussed earlier, that "the whole of nature" reflects "the human mind" and that "man is an analogist" who "studies relations in all objects." In making this claim, he was heavily influenced by Swedenborg. "Among Emerson's representative men, Swedenborg," writes Paul, "was the seer (and mystic) who gave the name 'correspondence,'" which Emerson adopted, "to this metaphorical or symbolical extension of consciousness." However, while Harris seems to find Swedenborg's yoking together of words with dissimilar referents to be a useful strategy for breaking through conceptual limitations, Emerson overlooks this potentially productive conflict between incompatible terms and, instead, criticizes what Swedenborg suggests is the necessary and immutable connection between them. As Paul points out, Emerson "made fun of the rigid and dogmatic dictionary of spiritual symbols," joking in his journal that "a horse signifies carnal understanding; a tree, perception; the moon, faith; a cat means this; an ostrich that; an artichoke this other." As these humorous equivalences indicate, Emerson's trouble with "the mystic" is that he "nails a symbol to one sense, which was a true sense for a moment, but soon becomes old and false." "Swedenborg," he admits, may have been a visionary, but, for some reason, he could not see that "Metamorphosis is the law of the universe" and that "All forms are fluent." The fixed nature of Swedenborg's correspondences conflicted with his belief that "Sensible

objects . . . reflect the conscience,” and that, “in their boundless changes,” they have an unceasing reference to spiritual nature.” Because the mind and, by extension, the world, are always in flux, symbols, Emerson thought, must also be “fluxional . . . they must be held lightly, and be very willingly translated.”¹⁵³

Though Emerson has problems with Swedenborg’s doctrine of correspondences, he nevertheless discusses the construction and function of metaphor in a way that could be read as a description of Harris’s poetic practice. The source and target of a metaphor need not, Emerson asserts, have any readily discernible similarities: “Not only resemblances exist in things whose analogy is obvious, as when we detect the type of the human hand in the flipper of the fossil saurus, but also in objects wherein there is great superficial unlikeness.”¹⁵⁴ And he creates countless metaphors in which this is the case. For example, in his journal he writes:

The world is a Dancer; it is a Rosary; it is a Torrent; it is a Boat; a Mist; a Spider’s Snare; it is what you will . . . Swifter than light the world converts itself into the thing you name, and all things find their right place under this new and capricious classification. There is nothing small or mean to the soul. It derives as grand a joy from symbolizing the Godhead or his universe under the form of a moth or a gnat as of a Lord of Hosts. Must I call the heaven or the earth a maypole and country fair with booths, or an anthill, or an old coat, in order to give you the shock of pleasure which the imagination loves and the sense of spiritual greatness? Call it a blossom, a rod, a wreath of parsley, a tamarisk-crown, a cock, a sparrow . . .¹⁵⁵

Unless our concept of “the earth” already shares properties with our concepts for “an old coat,” “a maypole,” and “a country faire with booths”—a prospect which seems unlikely—then we need to restructure what (we think) we know about both the target and its sources in order to make these analogies work. The same holds true with the string of metaphors involving “the world.” Moreover, the assertion that the “world” is like a “Rosary,” “a Torrent,” “a Boat,” “a Mist,” and “a Spider’s Snare” suggests that these seemingly unrelated sources might have attributes in common. Yet, in order to apprehend the commonality of these concepts, we would have to add so many properties to them that they would no longer be recognizable. With metaphors like these, Emerson tries to incite a “shock of pleasure,” to bring about a new way of perceiving the world, because, as Paul shows, he believed that only “fresh perception . . . could prevent the solidification and limitation of formulation.”¹⁵⁶ According to Emerson, “the distinctions which we make . . . disappear when nature is used as a symbol,” and it is through the removal of these divisions that previously unseen objects can emerge and existing ones can be redesigned. This is why the poet is able to “unfix[e] the land and the sea . . . and dispos[e] them anew.” In its deletion of old categories, metaphor is liberating: “The metamorphosis,” writes Emerson, “excites in the beholder an emotion of joy. The use of symbols has a certain power of emancipation and exhilaration for all men.” And it was important to him that all people have this experience of freedom. As Paul demonstrates, Emerson had faith that, “as the product of vision,” metaphor had the potential to be “the apparatus of vision in others.” He hoped that, by reading metaphors, others “might leap into sight” and, like an Emersonian seer, observe an undifferentiated visual field waiting to be shaped. All that was needed was a poet to formulate these “correspondences,” but

Emerson did not believe that he was talented enough to do it. Thus, he writes, “I look in vain for the poet whom I describe.”¹⁵⁷

When it comes to the use of metaphors, Whitman does not seem to be this poet. Unlike Emerson and Harris who leave readers wondering how two things could possibly be alike, Whitman specifies precisely which properties transfer from the source to the target. A good example of this occurs when a child, “Fetch[ing] it to him with full hands,” asks, “What is the grass?”

How could I answer the child? . . .

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green
stuff woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the lord,
A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropped,
Bearing the owner’s name someway in the corners, that we may see
and remark, and say Whose?

Or I guess the grass is itself a child . . . the produced babe of the
vegetation.

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,
And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,
Growing among black folks as among white,
Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff.¹⁵⁸

If we do not immediately see how “grass” is like “the flag of [Whitman’s] disposition,” he helps us to understand by including the detail that it is “out of green stuff woven”: the flag’s properties of color (green), shape (a long isosceles triangle), and texture (supple and thin enough to be “woven”) are shared by the grass. Similarly, if it is not self-evident how grass could be “a child,” then the clause—“the produced babe of the vegetation”—spells out the analogical relationship: in the same way that a child is born of parents, grass is born of vegetation. The poet could tell us that the grass is “a uniform hieroglyphic” and then leave it at that. But, instead, he elaborates on how this is so: it grows everywhere and has the same meaning for everyone. And though the metaphor comparing grass to “the handkerchief of the lord” is more obscure than the others, we still have enough information to resolve it: grass and a handkerchief have textural properties in common, and nature, of which grass is a part, is conventionally regarded as a gift from God. Accompanied by fairly comprehensive explications, Whitman’s metaphors are less ambiguous than Harris’s and, therefore, pose less of an interpretative challenge to readers. Because Whitman clearly identifies the relevant source properties and foregrounds only those properties that are common to both source and target, readers do not need to restructure what they know about grass, flags, handkerchiefs, and children.

While Harris’s analogies explode concepts and encourage us to visualize information without the aid of such organizational structures, Whitman’s metaphors allow us and, indeed, seem to insist, that we keep our concepts intact. In light of this important difference, it seems that perhaps Harris and not Whitman is the true heir of Emerson.

By merging concepts, literalizing metaphors, and straining similes, Harris replaces the categorical sight, which is modeled in earlier American vision epics like *The Columbiad* and, later, in *Leaves*, with a fluid form of perception that actually deconstructs experience. One of the most significant categories that it dismantles is “nation.” Ultimately, Harris works to simulate the sensation of spiritual sight so that readers will see the United States in the same way that he does—which is to say, not at all. In the future, “The glowing tide / Of inspiration flows and life-impreses / Each National Existence” until “the Caucasian Race / The Indian shall embrace,” “the old lines of Gentile and of Jew / God’s father-hand efface,” and the “earth becomes one free and happy land.”¹⁵⁹ Though they both promote a conceptual vision, Harris is bolder than Emerson, who cannot seem to imagine a future without the United States of America. He describes America as a discrete and distinctive “country,” defined and anchored by the land of which it is made: “It is the country of the Future. From Washington, proverbially ‘the city of magnificent distances,’ through all its cities, states, and territories, it is a country of beginnings.” And, despite the solipsism inherent in his model of vision, he seems to regard the United States as an external entity: rather than being a projection of consciousness, America comes from outside of the self in order to act upon it: “I think we must regard the *land* as a commanding and increasing power on the citizen, the sanative and Americanizing influence.” “The continent we inhabit is,” he asserts, “to be physic and food for our mind, as well as our body. The land, with its tranquilizing, sanative influences, is to repair the errors of a scholastic and traditional education, and bring us into just relations with men and things.” America is, for him, a substantial and immutable fact, with the constancy and inflexibility of a farm field, an underground rock formation, or a forest: “Any relation to the land, the habit of tilling it, or mining it, or even hunting on it, generates the feeling of patriotism.”¹⁶⁰ Of course, like Harris, other poets experimented with the boundaries of American geography and identity. Barlow, for example, claims that the spread of American freedom and commerce will cause the dissolution of individual nations and the formation of one republican government to rule the world. Thus, in his poem, the United States goes from being a country to a planet. For Whitman, too, America’s boundaries expand to encompass the globe. He appeals to “The Americans of all nations” and praises the English because they are “the mother of the brood that must rule the earth with the new rule.” Though he spends some time “Speeding amid the seven satellites” and “with tailed meteors,” the trip is brief, and it is clear that he is interested, not so much in outer space, as in earth and America which, to him, are virtually synonymous.¹⁶¹

Yet, while Whitman’s and Barlow’s gazes are largely restricted to one planet, Harris’s is not. This interplanetary perspective is surprising because he likens himself to visionaries who fix their eyes on the land and sea:

Here, visible, the Future and the past
I calmly see, with insight pure and vast
Thus on the lower earth, terrestrial men
Upon the topmost peak of Darien
Behold the Atlantic and Pacific seas.
The ocean of the old and the new
Swept by the morning breeze,

And blended in one grand consummate view.¹⁶²

Yet, he situates his experience in the tradition of American epic vision in order to extend the range of heroic seeing. Opening his eyes and mind to the rest of the universe, he decenters America and, indeed, the entire planet:

Strangely it looks to me to see from far
 The planet Earth like any other star!
 Once its round sides seemed limitless; but now
 Its disc is like an apple on a bough.
 All size is relative, and God alone
 Knoweth the actual value of each one
 Of the bright globes that in the ether swim;
 And worlds, because of men, are dear to Him.¹⁶³

Harris drastically expands the scale of our imaginings and, for readers who are accustomed to thinking of themselves as Americans (or at the very least—as humans on the planet earth) this may inspire a sense of confusion, a state of disorientation that can only be heightened by his habit of referring to *every* planet as “earth.” When he has a vision of a utopian society, it is difficult to know if he is seeing our planet’s future or another planet’s present.

Furthermore, while the multiplication of earths makes nation-and-planet-centric thinking seem ridiculously small-minded, his vision of people living in other parts of the universe undermines not only the belief that Americans are exceptional, but more strikingly, the assumption that the human race on this planet is the center of all cultural, political, and religious dramas. “[T]he human race,” writes Swedenborg, “is not just from one earth but from countless planets.” In his book *Other Planets*, he claims that

The visible universe, the heaven spangled with so incomprehensibly many stars that are all suns, is in fact simply a means for the production of planets with people on them who can make up a heavenly kingdom. Given all this, rational people cannot help thinking that such a vast means toward such an end did not come into being for the sake of a human race on one earth. What would that be for a divine being, an infinite being, for whom thousands or tens of thousands of planets, all fully inhabited, would be so slight as to be practically nothing?¹⁶⁴

Harris also urges us to see our relative insignificance. “The space” that “man thinks devoid of life is,” actually “Thronged by the deathless spirits of the free,” and earthlings are but a small part of “a Family of vast humanities.”¹⁶⁵ The scale is so enormous that Americans, America, and Earth disappear or, at the very least, are relegated to the periphery of the reader’s imagination.

Subscribing to the cultural assumption that, of all literary genres, the epic is the most effective in changing readers’ beliefs and behaviors, Barlow, Harris, and Whitman wrote epic poems that advanced particular models of sight in order to teach Americans new visual habits. *An Epic* and *Leaves of Grass* are different from *The Columbiad* because, writing half a century after Barlow and heavily influenced by Romanticism, Harris and Whitman wanted to close the gap between seer and seen that is at the heart of the eighteenth-century poet’s objectifying and divisive version of sight. To use Whitman’s phrase, they wanted “to indicate the path between reality and [readers’] souls.”¹⁶⁶ Yet, despite his stated purpose, Whitman promotes a “realistic,” indeed, almost

camera-like way of seeing that ultimately reproduces the rigid subject/object relations which structure visual perception in Barlow's poem. Whitman is often regarded as the heir of Emerson. However, it seems that—at least when it comes to Emerson's theory of vision—a set of ideas upon which much of his philosophy depends—Harris is the poet who answered the philosopher's famous "call." Like Emerson, he does not try to erase the self from the act of seeing. As a human endeavor, seeing, he suggests, is necessarily subjective. But Emersonian vision is not without its problems. Lacking faith in the reality of external objects of perception, Emerson understands the world as a projection of his own mind and, for this reason, his model of sight has been seriously criticized, perhaps most notably by Anderson, for its complete solipsism. In contrast, Harris demonstrates what it is like to be a permeable perceiver—one whose visions are often determined by the experiences of others. In other words, what Emerson thinks of as a self-contained perceptual act becomes, for Harris, a communal process. Both Harris and Emerson seem to agree about the liberatory potential of concept-free vision: each suggests that perceivers whose sight is limited by pre-existing concepts will invariably reproduce the same visual objects, while those who see without the constraints of these organizational structures have the ability to reinvent the social and cultural order. However, Harris argues that our visual experience is shaped by the concepts of "nation" and "earth," two rubrics that Emerson is reluctant to dissolve. Taking the philosopher's iconoclasm to its logical conclusion, Harris refuses to recognize these powerful constructs and, in doing so, is able to see a world that is unmarked by national divisions and a planet that is no better than any other.

Typically regarded as eccentric, Harris's epic and Spiritualist writing in general tend to be studied in isolation from well-known works of nineteenth-century American literature. However, as this chapter has shown, Harris's text attempts to implement aspects of Emerson's philosophy, transforming rarified ideas about sight into felt experiences for readers, while Whitman's vision epic, which has been celebrated for its unrestrained look at the body, may actually perpetuate conventional modes of seeing. A close reading of *An Epic of the Starry Heaven* enriches our study of these canonical authors. But more importantly, it foregrounds the potential power of language to *change* readers. By using linguistic cues to reproduce his lowly differentiated visual impressions in readers' imaginations, Harris tries to transform readers from Americans, who are practical and purpose-driven, to citizens of the universe, who exist in a state of surprise, awe, and unknowing. *An Epic* is an instrument of targeted sensory discipline that aims to simulate the feeling of spiritual sight in order to end readers' national and planetary identifications.

Chapter 4

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and the Aesthetics of Desensualization: Conceptual Distance in *The Gates Ajar*, “Since I Died,” “The Room’s Width,” and “The Presence”

It is impossible to talk about Spiritualism and the senses without also discussing Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s *The Gates Ajar*.¹ This best-selling novel belongs to the tradition of “consolation literature,” an umbrella term for poems, biographies, prose fiction, and advice manuals that offered guidance and emotional support to bereaved Americans. These texts, which were popular from roughly 1830 to 1880, inspired mourners with idealized depictions of lost loved ones, spiritually instructive deathbed scenes, and hopeful conjectures about the possibility of a domesticated heaven. Published in 1868, only three years after the close of the Civil War, *The Gates Ajar* sought to comfort grieving readers by suggesting that, instead of eternally singing the praises of God in the cold, impersonal heaven of orthodox Protestantism, their deceased family members were more likely enjoying the sensual pleasures of a fully embodied afterlife.²

Critics argue that Phelps’s representations of this material afterlife—which have long been at the center of debates about the novel’s significance—encourage readers to feel as though the dead and their world are physically accessible to them. According to Lucy Frank, Phelps realized that heaven had to provide all of the physical gratifications of earth if it was going “to compensate for the losses people had suffered.” To make restitution for their pain, the novel offers them a simulated experience of “a heaven filled with consumer goods.” Virtual impressions of material rewards are incited in readers through sensuous language that seems to place the other world within their reach: “[t]he intimate, vivid detail of Winifred’s descriptions,” explains Frank, “made it [heaven] both tangible and accessible.”³ Moreover, critics claim that an appeal to the senses was especially crucial for the recovery of women, whose grief was only aggravated by the abstract doctrines of patriarchal religious institutions. Lisa Long’s reading of *Gates* exemplifies this feminist approach. Frightened by local church authorities who depict heaven “as the supreme abstraction,” Mary, the main character who has lost her brother Royal in the war, “lies in bed at night longing ‘for a touch, a sign, only something to break the silence into which he [Royal] has gone.’” Long argues that Mary’s desire for physical contact with her brother is satisfied by Winifred, her aunt from out of town, who “is able not only to identify ideological and emotional vacuums but also to embody them, articulate them, fill them with the sensation for which Mary yearns.” In the same way that “photography allowed the culture to create ‘a collective image of the war as a sensible event,’ ‘felt’ even by those who remained far from the battlefield,” Winifred’s words, Long concludes, brought the experience of heaven not only to Mary, but also to thousands of women who were unable to follow their deceased sons, husbands, and brothers.⁴ Still other critics read *Gates* as a colonialist text and assert that its purpose is to make readers feel physically acquainted with America’s newest territory. Treating heaven like Texas, *The Gates Ajar*, writes Ann Douglas, annexes the celestial realm to the land of the living, allowing it to be “known with an intimacy which only possession can bestow.”⁵ Indeed, whether they interpret it as a celebration of consumption, a means of addressing the particularities of gendered grief, or a reflection of American imperialism,

critics agree that Phelps's representation of heaven as a material place targets readers' senses, providing them with an almost physical knowledge of the other world and its inhabitants.

Because the novel seems to bridge the gap between heaven and earth, facilitating instances of imaginary physical contact between the living and the dead, critics almost always emphasize what they perceive to be Phelps's debt to Spiritualism. Yet, Phelps was quite clear about the fact that she was not a Spiritualist and had never received a communication—audible, visible, tangible or otherwise—from the dead. In her memoir *Chapters from a Life* (1900), she recalls how she spent her childhood longing for a sign that never came: “With what thrills of hope and fear I listened for thumps on the head of my bed, or watched anxiously to see my candlestick walk out into the air! But not a thump! Not a rap! Never a snap of the weakest proportions (not explicable by natural laws) has, from that day to this, visited my personal career.” Insinuating that those who believe in levitating furniture and supernatural noise are ignorant, Phelps asserts that, when “asked if I am a spiritualist,” “I am sometimes tempted to reply in grammar comprehensible to the writers of certain letters which I receive on the subject:—‘No; nor none of our folks!’”⁶ As her mockery suggests, Phelps identified as a Christian who, to quote Roxanne Harde, “holds in place the boundary between life and death,” and critics acknowledge this.⁷ For example, Nina Baym writes that, “unlike the Spiritualists whose belief rested on a material occurrence whose authenticity they accepted, Phelps argues not only for the particularities of her vision but for the requirement that it remain a matter of faith.” Yet, despite the disclaimer above, Baym aligns the novel so closely with Spiritualism that she entitled an edition of Phelps's *Gates* novels (*The Gate Ajar*, *Beyond the Gates*, and *The Gates Between*) *Three Spiritualist Novels*.⁸ Baym is not alone in reading *The Gates Ajar* as a Spiritualist text. Literary scholars repeatedly insist that the novel had a “clear debt to the Spiritualist practices and belief sweeping mid-century middle-class homes”; and that, “[i]n presenting such a detailed vision of an embodied heavenly existence, Phelps is clearly indebted to the spiritualist movement.”⁹

Yet, despite critics' claims to the contrary, *The Gates Ajar* is in fact an anti-Spiritualist text. If, as I have argued in previous chapters, Spiritualist literature is defined by rhetorical strategies that prompt simulations of sensory experiences, *Gates* actively attempts to distance and derealize such experiences. In order to show how the novel does this, I will be using Text World Theory, a school of thought that originated in the 1990s with the work of linguist Paul Werth. Combining principles from cognitive linguistics and cognitive psychology, Text World Theory, writes Werth, aims to answer the following question: “*how do we make sense of complex utterances when we receive them (as hearers or readers)?*” The answer, he claims, “is that we build up mental constructs called text worlds” (italics his).¹⁰ Elaborating on this notion, Joanna Gavins, a practitioner of Text World Theory, explains that when people communicate with each other through spoken or written language “they construct mental representations of the discourse in their minds, in which the language being produced can be conceptualized and understood.” These mental representations or text-worlds have an “experiential effect” on the reader, the intensity of which is determined by their position in the hierarchy that the reader uses to make sense of the discourse. “Whenever a text requires us to build more than one text-world, an assessment of each new text-world's status in relation to those which have preceded it becomes,” she writes, “an essential part of our processing of the

discourse.” Because “[n]ot all new text-worlds have an equal status in our minds,” “we perceive some text-worlds to be more familiar, more trustworthy, more reliable than others.”¹¹ Our perception of them can be contingent upon tense. Werth observes that, “shifting one step into what in the temporal system is the past . . . is simply how English expresses remoteness.” He illustrates this point with several examples, including the following sentence: “If Clinton chose a Republican Treasury Secretary, the stock market would stabilize.” Compared to the text-world which is created in response to the sentence’s present tense form—“If Clinton chooses a Republican Treasury Secretary, the stock will stabilize”—the imagined scenario which results from the past tense version may seem “psychologically remote” to readers who may conceptualize it “as being ‘far away’, ‘inaccessible,’ even ‘unreal.’” The “conceptual inaccessibility” of a text world “is symbolized not in terms of faraway places . . . but in terms of faraway times.”¹² The notion that some text-worlds seem further away and, therefore, less real than others is central to my claim about *Gates*. To develop what the novel describes imaginatively, the reader may need to generate a variety of mental constructs, and Text World Theory offers a convenient terminology with which to describe the relationships among these formations. Phelps’s characters speculate about the afterlife, inciting the reader to create mental worlds in which the living and the dead are close. But rather than making these scenarios seem more actual and concrete, the text, I will argue, actually derealizes them. It does this through past tense verbs and linguistic strategies that prompt the reader to place these imaginary spaces at a vast conceptual distance from his own reality. First appearing in *Gates*, this desensualizing aesthetic is further developed in Phelps’s later poetry and prose about death and the afterlife. It is particularly pronounced in “Since I Died” (1873), “The Room’s Width” (1879), and “The Presence” (1910), three texts I will also be considering in this chapter.¹³

Phelps seems to recognize that what makes Spiritualism so potentially dangerous to the sensory (and, thus, to the social) status quo is its understanding of human perception as malleable and, therefore, open to change. Countering this perceived threat, her writing teaches readers to rank a transformative interaction with the dead at the bottom of their conceptual hierarchy of possible experiences, thus making it an almost unthinkable occurrence in the context of their world. Yet, while the text-worlds created in response to her representations of heaven are pushed by readers to the margins of their conceptual maps, these worlds still have content that might inform how they think about their senses. In these remote conceptual spaces, the dead engage in sensory practices that create a consciousness of individuality while signaling their inclusion in a celestial middle-class. Thus, if Spiritualist literature incites sensory experiences that dissolve divisions, Phelps’s texts encourage readers to regard their senses as a means of creating barriers between people and social groups.

Text World Theory

The Gates Ajar is presented as the journal of Mary Cabot, a young woman whose brother Royal has been killed in the war. Opening with descriptions of her intense grief, the novel records the failure of Congregational Protestantism to comfort her: Though Mary longs to hear “something actual, something pleasant, about this place into which Roy has gone,” the local church authorities instead give her “glittering generalities, cold

commonplace, vagueness, unreality, a God and a future” which makes her “shive[r].”¹⁴ She seems inconsolable until her Aunt Winifred arrives and comforts her with a warmer, more humane version of the afterlife. Winifred speculates, that, instead of being a white space occupied by formless spirits, heaven is a lot like earth, a material place, inhabited by embodied individuals, who retain all of the memories and idiosyncrasies which defined them in life. This notion brings Mary a great deal of relief and she spends the remaining two thirds of the novel listening to Winifred as she spins theories about the landscape of heaven, the occupations of the dead, and the organization of celestial society. As this summary indicates, the plot of *The Gates Ajar* is very thin and, without external events to occupy the main characters, they spend almost all of their time creating and contemplating imaginary worlds.

How readers cognitively organize the multiple text-worlds that Winifred creates and why they experience some of these worlds as physically closer and more real than others are questions that can be answered through a Text World Theory analysis. Text World Theory splits a given discourse into three tiers: the discourse-world, the text-world, and the sub-world. The discourse-world, Gavins explains, “deals with the real-world context of a given discourse, and includes not only the participants and their immediate physical surroundings, but also the personal and cultural experience the participants make use of during the discourse process.” The discourse-world exists when participants engage in face-to-face conversation, but also when they communicate through written texts and are—as is the case with Phelps and her audience—spatially and temporally apart. As writers and readers communicate, each one—in a process that is strictly governed by the details of the text produced in the discourse-world—selectively draws from his store of knowledge in order to create the second level of the discourse, the text-world.¹⁵ The text-world is the world that the text describes or, as Werth puts it, “the situation *depicted* by the discourse.”¹⁶ Participants imagine this location and set of circumstances with the help of “world-building elements,” or the deictic and referential language that both sets the spatial and temporal parameters of the text-world and identifies the characters and objects inhabiting it. If world-building elements establish a kind of background or setting, then “function-advancing propositions” tell us what happens in that space; they describe the actions that characters perform, the transactions that take place, and the adventures that unfold.¹⁷ And finally, breaking free from the limitations of the text-world, sub-worlds constitute the last level of a discourse. A concise definition of sub-worlds is offered by Lisa Nahajec who describes them “as alternative conceptual spaces” that “depar[t] from the matrix text world in terms of time, location, characters, attitudes or in degrees of certainty.”¹⁸ When sub-worlds are created by discourse-world participants, they are what Werth calls “participant-accessible,” which means that, while they may “depart from the basic parameters defining the text world [that] they spring from,” the participant can still “draw inferences between the text world and the sub-world” as well as “chain references from one to the other.” In other words, the sub-world continues to be linked to the text-world and, therefore, the participant can assess the truth-value of its content in relation to that original space. However, “character-accessible” sub-worlds—those sub-worlds that are created by characters in the text-world—“have their own WB [world-building] elements” and, thus, are “viewed” by participants “as distinct from the text world.” Because “the text-world parameters are departed from under the responsibility of a character”—a complete being in his or her

own right with an existence that is separate from the author's—the departure is carried out in a way “which is unpredictable and irrecoverable from the point of view of a participant.” It is impossible for a participant to determine the relative truth-value of the propositions in a character-accessible sub-world.¹⁹ What is striking about *The Gates Ajar* is the large number and speculative nature of the conceptual spaces that are created by characters' propositions. For this reason, my analysis of the novel will focus almost exclusively on the relationship between the text-world and the sub-worlds called modal-worlds.

Linguists often rely on different terminology and classificatory models to describe and systematize sub-worlds, but, in this chapter, I will be using the language and organizational framework of Gavins. There are two reasons for this. First, her substitution of “world-switch” for “sub-world” allows me to describe the dynamic relationship between text-worlds and their sometimes in subordinate offspring more accurately. While Werth asserts “that any changes to the spatial or temporal parameters of the initial text-world would create a sub-world,” Gavins argues “that the prefix ‘sub’ is misleading . . . because it suggests that newly created worlds (which are often numerous and extensive in discourse) are always and necessarily subordinate in some way to the first text-world.” Yet, as readers well know, “rarely in literary fiction do the deictic parameters initially established in the opening lines of a text remain invariable for its duration.” Typically, there are several changes in time and place, and the original text world is completely left behind. Because the term “sub-world” does not accurately reflect how narratives repeatedly create, foreground, and then discontinue particular settings, she replaces it with “world-switch,” a term that does not necessarily imply hierarchy. The word “world-switch” (WS) eliminates unnecessary ambiguities in my discussion of Phelps's “fixed focalization” (FOC) narratives (i.e., narratives in which the initial text-world is immediately abandoned) and I will be using it throughout the chapter.²⁰

The second reason why I am using Gavins's version of Text World Theory is that her categorization of the sub-worlds created through modalized discourse is more precise than Werth's. According to Werth, sub-worlds are established not only through deixis, but also through modalized propositions. Gavins adopts a narrow definition of modality, defining it as “the term given to those aspects of language which express a speaker or writer's *attitude* to a particular subject.”²¹ That attitude is typically demonstrated through modal verbs (such as “can,” “could,” “may,” “might,” “must,” “shall,” “should,” “will,” “would”) and modal adverbs (like “possibly,” “probably,” “likely,” and “seemingly,” among others). Werth divides modality into two classes—attitudinal and epistemic. Propositions falling within these categories, he claims, trigger the formation of conceptual spaces that can be classified as either attitudinal or epistemic sub-worlds.²² Again taking issue with the term “sub-world,” Gavins also and more importantly argues that these two classes are too broad to be useful. Splitting modality into three categories, she offers the concepts of epistemic, deontic, and boulomaic modal-worlds “as more specific alternatives.”²³

Epistemic modality, she writes, “reflects a speaker's confidence, or lack of confidence in the truth of a particular proposition” and “covers a wide spectrum of belief, from absolute certainty at one end of the scale to complete lack of confidence at the other.” Verbs like “think,” “guess,” “doubt,” and “believe” can signal epistemic modality as can adverbs like “certainly,” “doubtfully,” and “possibly.” Statements that express

epistemic modality give rise in the readers mind to epistemic modal-worlds (EPS), which generally “includ[e] any articulation of personal belief or knowledge, the representation of the thoughts and beliefs of others, hypothetical constructions and conditionality.” While epistemic modality is concerned with knowledge, deontic modality communicates “our notions of duty” and can be used to convey a “speaker’s attitude to the degree of obligation attached to the performance of a particular action.” Auxiliary verbs like “can,” “must,” and “may” as well as adjectives like “necessary,” “forbidden,” and “permitted” can communicate deontic modality. Referring to a situation that is not yet actualized (obligations and demands are always future-oriented), a deontic statement generates a “deontic modal-world” (DEO), a new mental space, existing apart from the text-world, in which participants can imagine both the task and the speaker’s sense of responsibility in relationship to it. And finally, boulomaic modality is involved in the articulation “of wishes, desires, or fantasies” and is evidenced by verbs like “desire,” “want,” and “hope.” The language of boulomaic modality cues readers to create, outside of the text-world, a boulomaic modal-world (BOU) in which the currently unfulfilled desires of the speaker can be played out.²⁴

In my readings of Phelps’s texts, I take a broad view of modality which means that, while I try to discern a speaker’s attitude toward a proposition by looking at modal auxiliary verbs, I also, in the absence of such verbs, determine it through context. As Leo Hoyer notes, a modal often has many meanings, and it can be a challenge to tease them apart. “Probably the majority of scholars favour a monosemantic approach where a basic meaning for each modal is identified,” but “[t]he relatively abstract nature of the meanings [that] the modals are used to convey does not favour the precise identification of any such basic sense.” Thus, “[c]ontext,” he concludes, “also plays a role in determining the nature of what we might call the modal hue.”²⁵ When Phelps uses a modal, I place it in context to narrow down the number of possible interpretations. However, in many of her texts, speakers express a clear stance toward a subject without using any modal verbs at all. In these cases, I rely on context alone to assess whether the statement is epistemic, deontic, or boulomaic.

The Gates Ajar

In *The Gates Ajar*, Mary’s conversation with her aunt gives rise to modal-worlds that are far away from the text-world which they inhabit, and this proliferation of speculative situations creates conceptual distance between the reader and Winifred’s heaven. Winifred claims that Roy watches over his sister, but then positions the world in which he performs this action several removes from their own. Her notion of a guardian angel is different from that held by Spiritualists because she is firmly convinced that any form of contact between the living and the dead is impossible. “[I]f we could speak to them, or they to us, there would be no death, for there would be no separation” and, without death, she reasons, “[t]he last, the surest, in some cases the only test of loyalty to God, would thus be taken away.”²⁶ Still, she suggests to Mary that, even though Roy cannot speak to her (nor she to him), he still knows her thoughts and understands the struggles of her daily life.

“I suppose, nevertheless,” she said, “that Roy knows what you are doing and feeling as well as, perhaps better than, he knew it three months ago. So he can help you without harming you.”

I asked her, turning suddenly, how that could be, and yet heaven be heaven,—how he could see me suffer what I had suffered, could see me sometimes when I supposed none but God had seen me,—and sing on and be happy.

“You are not the first, Mary, and you will not be the last, to ask that question. I cannot answer it, and I never heard of any who could. I feel sure only of this,—that he would suffer far less to see you than to know nothing about you; and that God’s power of inventing happiness is not to be blocked by an obstacle like this. Perhaps Roy sees the end from the beginning, and can bear the sight of pain for the peace that he watches coming to meet you. I do not know.”²⁷

My reading of this passage will be illustrated by a series of diagrams. Often used in Text World Theory, diagrams transform the complex relationships among text and modal worlds into a spatial map, a conversion that makes the information easier to grasp. Visual aids are especially helpful in an analysis of *Gates* because, to actualize the content of the exchanges between Winifred and Mary imaginatively, readers must create and prioritize multiple conceptual spaces. Diagrams render the number and intricate organization of these spaces readily apparent so that, with a quick glance, we can immediately appreciate how this proliferation of modal worlds contributes to an ever increasing conceptual gap between the reader, Winifred, and the situations which she proposes.

In Figure 1, we can see the conceptual structure of the passage above. On the left side of the table is the text-world, the conceptual space in which Mary and Winifred are represented. When Winifred talks, her present-tense direct speech breaks with the past-tense of the narrative, altering the prevailing time-frame of the text-world and, thus, triggering a new conceptual space. Gavins calls this a “Direct Speech world-switch” (DS). Embedded in the space created by Winifred’s words, an epistemic modal-world comes into being through the phrase “I suppose, nevertheless.” It is significant that she uses epistemic modality to communicate her ideas about Roy because, as Gavins asserts, “[w]hile all modal-worlds contain situations which are in one way or another remote from their originating worlds, epistemic modal-worlds often have an added layer of unreality attached to them.” This is because “epistemic modality communicates the level of speaker-or writer-knowledge about the truth of a particular proposition.” When that “level” is low and epistemic modality expresses a speaker’s lack of conviction, the world that it generates may seem less substantial than worlds created through other modalities. “[W]e . . . conceptualize what is known definitely to us as spatially closer than that which is uncertain and completely unknown,” write Gavins. So while “truth and definiteness are normally” perceived as “tangible and concrete,” “uncertainty and falsehood are abstract and intangible.” As her choice of modal verb indicates, Winifred’s knowledge about Roy’s condition is far from certain and, thus, the circumstances she imagines seem particularly insubstantial. If she had said “I’m sure that” or communicated conviction through an equivalent phrase, then her speech would have produced an epistemic modal-world that would have been nearer to the text-world from which it sprang.²⁸ But instead of bringing the proposed situation nearer to her own reality by using “sure” or “certain,”

she distances it by using “suppose,” a weaker verb that appears in many of her statements throughout the text. Because “suppose” is a description of what Winifred is doing (she is engaged in the act of supposing) and not a confident affirmation of her idea’s veracity, the verb only emphasizes to the reader that the afterlife scenario which is about to be presented is such a weakly held idea that even its own creator feels compelled to position it conceptually beyond the margins of her own world. And if the creator conceives of it in this way, then the reader, who exists at an ontological remove from her, experiences it as especially remote.

While Winifred’s phrase “I suppose” takes us one conceptual space away from the Direct Speech world, the content of her supposition takes us yet another. A second epistemic modal-world emerges from the first as Winifred says what she thinks Roy knows: “I suppose, nevertheless, that Roy knows what you are doing and feeling.” Roy’s relationship to Winifred is like Winifred’s relationship to Phelps and to the other discourse-world participants: He is a separate entity on a different ontological level, whose thoughts and feelings are not open to verification by those who exist outside of his world. They are accessible only to him. Because he is not a character in the same conceptual space as Winifred, she cannot question him in order to confirm the truth of his statements. Thus, her speech gives rise to a world about which she can only make guesses. If, as Gavins says, “we . . . conceptualise what is known definitely to us as spatially closer than that which is uncertain or completely unknown,” then Winifred (and, by extension, the reader) conceptualize both the spirit body of Roy engaged in the act of knowing along with the content of his knowledge as spatially far away from their own realities. The scenario becomes even more abstract when it replayed in a different time. The third epistemic modal-world which unfolds from the second is also part of a temporal-world switch to the past: “he knew it [what Mary was “doing and feeling”] three months ago.” We think about time in the same way that we think about space. According to Gavins, “we conceptualise present time as physically close to our own deictic centre and future time as distant.”²⁹ Processing information that is already four levels removed from the text-world, readers may potentially perceive Roy and his past action of knowing as so physically divorced from their own situation as to be completely unimaginable. The paragraph ends with the formation of another modal-world in which Winifred expresses her attitude towards Roy’s abilities: “So he can help you without hurting you.” The concept of ability does not easily fit into Gavin’s three modal categories, so I will refer to the conceptual spaces created by ability-related propositions “ability modal-worlds” (ABL). Communicating the idea that Roy is able to act in the present time, the statement should be perceived as closer to the text and discourse-worlds. Yet, in processing it, readers can not help but be influenced by the low levels of epistemic commitment that are expressed in the previous propositions—after all, why would Winifred suddenly be so confident? Though technically the sentence “he can help you without hurting you” is complete unto itself, it still seems to fall under the umbrella of “I suppose” and, therefore, while it might have conveyed a high level of certainty in another context, in this one, it is far less convincing.

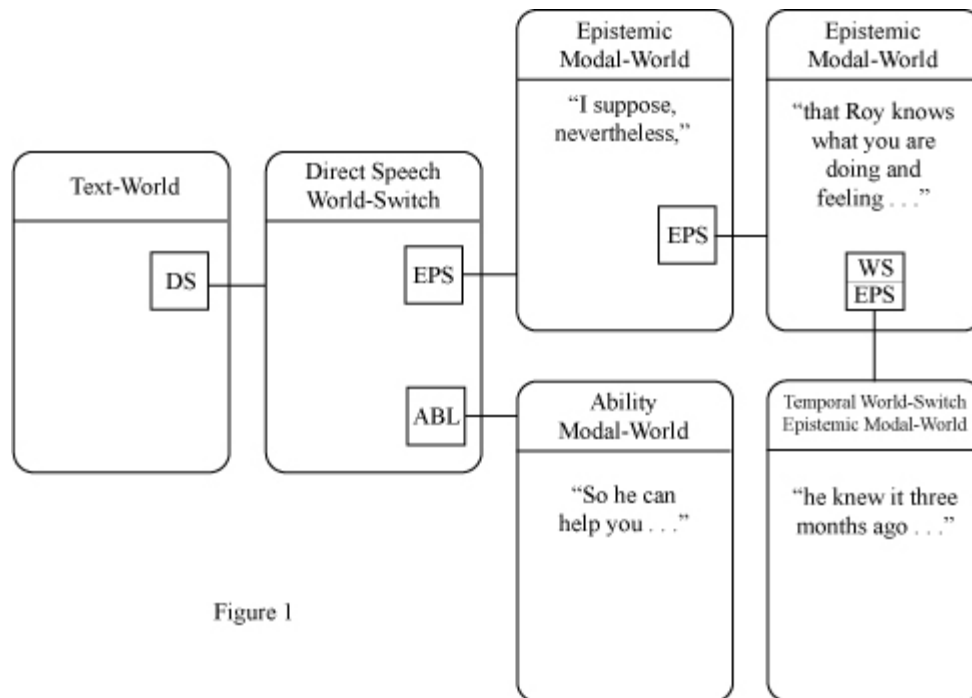


Figure 1

In response to Mary's questions, Winifred creates another similarly complex arrangement of modal-worlds. In this instance, however, she repeatedly foregrounds the limits of her knowledge, thereby undermining her credibility as a creator of potentially real scenarios. Her answer to Mary gives rise to a Direct Speech world-switch from which several modal-worlds, mostly epistemic, emerge (see Figure 2). One of them is triggered by the word "Perhaps": "Perhaps Roy sees the end from the beginning and can bear the sight of pain for the peace that he watches coming to meet you." The second part of this sentence, beginning with "can," causes an ability modal-world to branch off from the initial epistemic one. Both of these propositions are introduced with "Perhaps," a modal adverb that qualifies many of Winifred's assertions. For example, speaking with Mary about the nature of their "future bodies," she says, "Perhaps they will be so one with the soul that to will will be to do." When Mary wonders how they will entertain themselves in heaven, Winifred suggests that, "Perhaps we shall take journeys to Jupiter and to Saturn." Phrases like "I do not feel sure," which also appear frequently in her conversation, have roughly the same meaning as "Perhaps." Because they indicate a low level of commitment on the part of the speaker, the content of the proposed worlds is placed at an epistemic distance from both Winifred and the reader. To the reader, the mental spaces in which Roy "sees," "bears pain," and "watches" seem physically remote and, for that reason, the dead man's body and actions seem inaccessible and insubstantial. The derealization of Mary's dead brother is only accelerated when Winifred, creating another epistemic modal-world, follows her description of what Roy is doing with "I do not know." Indeed, throughout the text, Winifred's speech is characterized by this pattern of assertion and withdrawal: she puts forth propositions about the continued existence of the dead, only to follow them with statements that effectively neutralize both her and the reader's confidence in the reality of the situation described. For example, she openly admits that she "cannot answer" Mary's questions; and, later, summarizing her arguments

about Roy, she says “I believe that he wants to know, and that he knows, Mary; though, since the belief must rest on analogy and conjecture, you need not accept it as demonstrated mathematics.”³⁰ Again, whether or not we experience a modal-world as near or far, tangible or intangible, depends on our perception of the world-creator’s wisdom and constancy. As Gavins writes, “When we evaluate a particular world-creator as highly trustworthy, we conceptualize the text-worlds he or she creates as both proximal and material. The more doubt we have about the reliability of a given text-world, the further away . . . it will be positioned in our minds.”³¹ Because Winifred repeatedly emphasizes the limits of her knowledge and oscillates between confidence and complete uncertainty, the worlds that she creates are pushed to the margins of the reader’s mental representation of the text. On the periphery of this conceptual structure, scenarios in which the dead closely monitor the living and intervene (in some imperceptible way) are perceived as having absolutely no connection to the real-world.

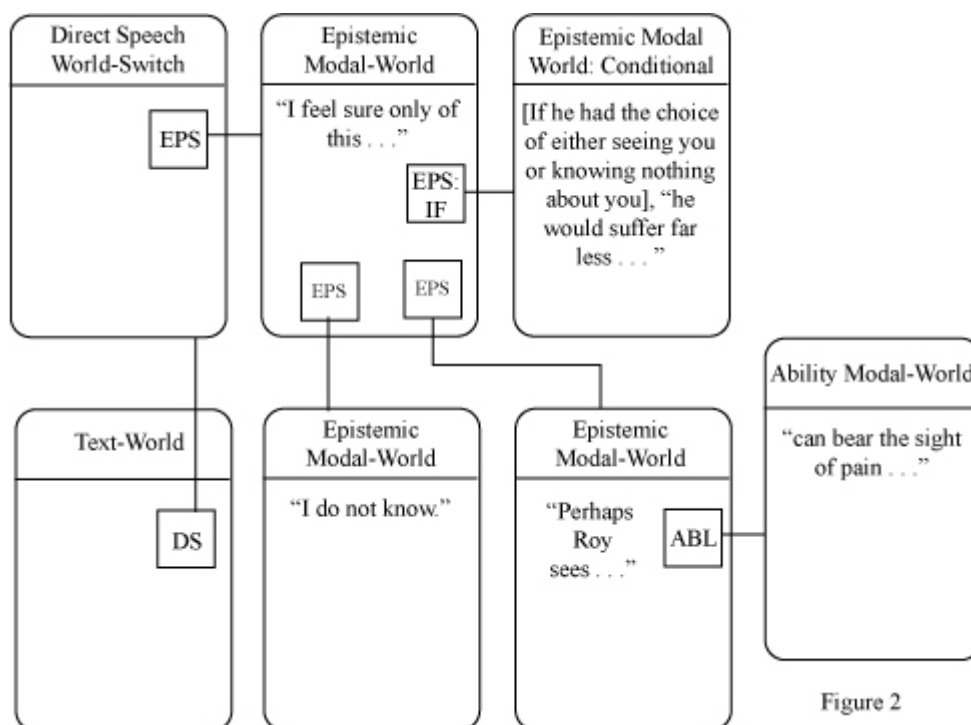


Figure 2

Despite all of her speculations, Winifred claims to know one thing for sure about Roy and his post-mortem relationship to Mary. But, as it turns out, even this certainty proves to be uncertain. Putting her niece’s questions aside, she says, “I feel sure only of this,—that he [Roy] would suffer far less to see you then to know nothing about you; and that God’s power of inventing happiness is not to be blocked by an obstacle like this.” Here, she introduces the proposition using “perception modality,” a sub-class of epistemic modality. Perception modality, write Gavins, “includes any expression of epistemic commitment”—like “*apparently*,” “*it seems*,” “*it was obvious*”—that “makes reference to some form of human perception.” Allowing a speaker “to support his

opinions with the strong suggestion that he has sensory evidence for their basis, adding to their perceived reliability in the discourse-world,” this modality “decreases the epistemic distance between the modal-world he creates and the discourse-world,” thereby prompting participants to perceive the modal-world as closer and more concrete. By referring to how she feels (“I feel sure only of this”), Winifred prepares us to construct a conceptual space closer to the text and discourse worlds. Thus it is surprising when her preface is followed not by a declarative statement, but by what seems to be a truncated conditional: “he would suffer far less to see you than to know nothing about you.” The conditional “would” seems to suggest that there is an unexpressed if-condition and, for that reason, I read it as follows: “I feel sure only of this,—that [*if he had the choice of either seeing you or knowing nothing about you or, alternately, if he could either see you or know nothing about you*] he would suffer far less to see you than to know nothing about you.” As this expansion of the sentence shows, a conditional is made up of two parts. The subordinate clause, known in linguistics as the “protasis,” “sets up a theoretical situation and marks it as remote from actuality,” while the main clause, the “apodosis,” “defines a situation which is consequent on the protasis.”³² In terms of Text World Theory, the protasis posits an epistemic modal-world that, as the “if” indicates, is currently nonfactual, while the apodosis is function-advancing and tells us what would happen in the modal-world if it were ever realized. The very structure of a conditional—a sentence form that appears to be favored by Winifred—shows us why her certainty is slightly ridiculous. It is unclear why Roy would ever be in a situation where he could choose between vision or ignorance. But if this very strange and artificial arrangement were to be actualized (and it is hard to see why it would be) then the consequence—and, of this, Winifred is “sure”—would be that Roy would suffer less. In other words, the one thing that Winifred is certain of is the outcome of a situation that, in all likelihood, will never occur.

Though the new conceptual space created by the conditional is already three removes from the text-world, Phelps’s choice of the verb “would” makes the sense of distance seem even greater. Again, as Werth notes, a world created with a past-tense verb form seems psychologically remote; that is, instead of being perceived as “‘close to the participants’ experience’, [and] hence ‘close-by’, ‘unremarkable’, ‘well-known,’” it seems “‘far away’, ‘inaccessible’, even ‘unreal.’” This happens by default in the protases of conditionals due to tense backshifting, a phenomenon that I will explore in greater depth later on. However, because the unexpressed protasis in Winifred’s truncated conditional could be phrased differently than the two options above, I will focus on the verb in the apodosis, instead. According to Werth, “the consequence clause” of a conditional “is not in the temporal system at all, since the sub-world defined by the *if*-clause is a hypothetical one. The verb form of the consequence clause, therefore, expresses probability and not temporality,” though the expression of probability is closely linked to tense. So, for example, “[i]f the situation is conceived of as lying in the immediate future, then the consequence clause will allow a confident prediction (couched in a present or future tense).” And, “[i]f the worlds, on the other hand, are more speculative or hypothetical, then the consequence clause will allow only some degree of probability” which can be communicated through the past tense. By using “is” or “will,” Phelps could have bridged the gap between the reader and Roy thus fostering, as Spiritualist texts do, a perception of closeness between the living and the dead. But

instead she uses “would”—“he would suffer far less to see you than to know nothing about you”—and this choice, which she makes throughout *Gates*, is significant because, as Werth notes, “the *would* form always represents a probability calculation with an overlay of pastness or remoteness.” In processing remote verbs, readers not only know that the dead are completely inaccessible, but they also feel the psychological and physical distance that makes any form of contact impossible.³³

The expressions that convey Winifred’s lack of confidence in her assertions have received an alternative reading from Gail K. Smith, who argues that they are part of the text’s “figurative rhetorical frame.” Taking issue with critics who base their “assessment of the novel” on what they perceive to be its “‘literalist’ discussions of heaven,” she contends that “Mrs. Forceythe’s method is simply to update St. John’s imagery, while stressing always . . . that it is imagery, not literal truths, she is proposing.”³⁴ Winifred is not describing what she thinks heaven really looks like, but is instead offering symbols that may in some mysterious way intimate the true nature of the afterlife. That she is using a symbolic approach, Smith claims, is evidenced by the language of uncertainty:

Over and over again Mrs. Forceythe begins with phrases like these: “I believe . . . though, since the belief must rest on analogy and conjecture, you need not accept it as demonstrated mathematics” (59-60); “I know no more than you, but you shall hear what I think” (76); “I fancy” (63); “It must be nearly all ‘suppose,’ . . . for we are nowhere definitely told” (79); “Here again I cling to my conjecture” (80); “I suppose” (83); “Perhaps” (84); “Eye hath not seen, but I have my fancies” (92); “as supposable as anything can be which is guess-work at the best” (94); “I reason from analogy about this, as we all do about other matters” (96); “With all my guessing and my studying and my dreaming over these things, I am only a child in the dark” (156).³⁵

It’s unclear why modalization would mean that Winifred is speaking in symbols—after all, one can, with equal levels of ease, express an attitude toward a proposition about figurative *or* literal reading. And many of Winifred’s modalized propositions clearly fit into the latter category. For instance, Winifred guesses that, in heaven, the dead “liv[e] under the conditions of organized society” and notes that, “[o]rganized society involves homes, not unlike the homes of this world.” This suggests that, when she says, “I hope to have a home of my own,” she is using “home,” not as a symbol for something else, but in the strict sense of the term: she wants an enclosed space—a house—where she and her family can live together.³⁶ Smith asserts that, while “critics have insisted on taking Phelps’s figures of speech literally,” the fact is that “in every place in which material attributes of heaven are mentioned, they are mentioned as part of some kind of speculative *simile*, either stated or implied.”³⁷ Yet, as the example above shows (and there are many others like it), this is not always the case. And even if it were, modalization would not constitute a form of evidence to support it. Winifred often conjures up highly detailed worlds, and she wants Mary not to twist her words into figures, but to take them at face value. Yet, as a Christian who believes that the “separation” of death is “the only test of loyalty to God,” she also does not want Mary to think that Roy is close enough to perceive.³⁸ Therefore, rather than interfering with a literal interpretation of Winifred’s heavenly scenarios, her modalized propositions set

these spaces apart from the real-world, making them seem beyond the reach of both Mary and the reader.

The possibility of spirit contact is derealized in another passage in which Winifred hedges her epistemic assertions even further by framing them as questions and chooses remote verb forms over their present or future tense counterparts. In a conversation with Mary, Winifred suggests that the dead are close to the living and can help them, albeit in imperceptible ways. As evidence of this assertion, she points to her belief that “God keeps us briskly at work in this world.” This leads to the following exchange:

“What more natural than that we shall spend our best energies as we spent them here,—in comforting, teaching, helping, saving people whose very souls we love better than our own? In fact, it would be very unnatural if we did not.”

“But I thought that God took care of us, and angels, like Gabriel and the rest, if I ever thought anything about it, which I am inclined to doubt.”

“‘God works by the use of means,’ as the preachers say. Why not use Roy as well as Gabriel? What archangel could understand and reach the peculiarities of your nature as he could? or, even if understanding, could so love and bear with you?’³⁹

Winifred creates multiple layers of epistemic distance between the real-world and the world in which she and Mary, after their deaths, will intervene in the lives of the living (see Figure 3). Rather than asserting a fact—“we shall spend our best energies as we spent them here”—she prefaces this declaration with language about its perceived “naturalness” or “rightness.” Though it does not involve a modal verb or adverb, the phrase “more natural” is still an expression of modality because it registers her degree of epistemic commitment to the proposition. That her confidence in it is relatively low is indicated by the sentence’s interrogative form. Winifred often asks questions in place of declarative statements. For example, rather than asserting that “organized society” must exist in heaven because it is the most “pleasant” “arrangement” possible, she says, “what other arrangement could be as pleasant or could be pleasant at all?”⁴⁰ Similarly, though she could have said, “There is nothing more natural than . . .” she instead asks, “What more natural than . . .” The question format invites agreement yet allows uncertainty and, therefore the resulting epistemic modal-world is positioned far from the text and discourse-worlds. It may seem like the question is purely rhetorical—like Winifred does not really want to illicit a response because she already knows how we will “spend our best energies.” But if the reader interprets her question as a rhetorical flourish suggesting complete confidence, then that perception is undermined when the initial direct-speech world-switch gives rise to another epistemic modal-world, triggered by the sentence “it would be very unnatural if we did not.” Here, Winifred takes the time to consider the alternative to her scenario, something she probably would not do if she viewed the prospect of spirit intervention as a fact or even a strong possibility.

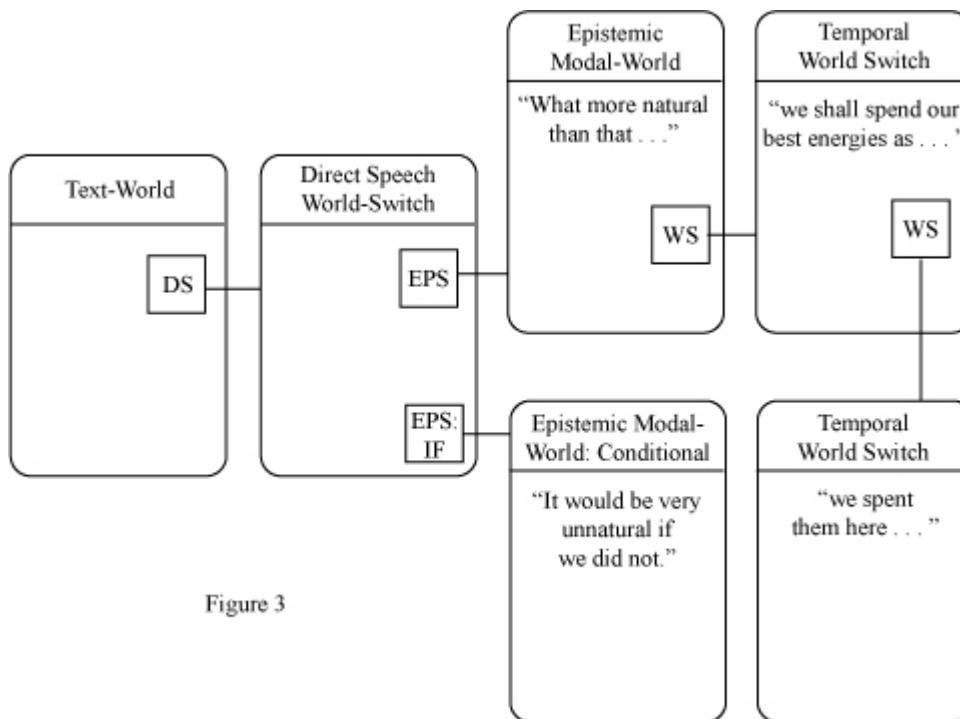


Figure 3

Turning her attention to Roy, Winifred exorcises his spirit from her own ontological realm by restricting information about him to distant epistemic modal-worlds (see Figure 4). One such world is created when she asks, “Why not use Roy as well as Gabriel.” Winifred is making a tentative inference based on her belief that “God works by the use of means” and, as an expression of her reasoning, the sentence is epistemic. Because it’s phrased as a question, it leaves room for uncertainty in a way that a declarative statement (“God can/could/may/might use Roy as well as Gabriel”) would not. Picking up on this potential ambivalence, the reader assigns this epistemic modal-world to the margins of the text’s mental representation and, thus, conceptualizes the possibility of Roy being chosen over Gabriel as remote from reality. As Winifred thinks about the possibility of Roy being chosen to watch Mary, she makes two statements about his qualifications for the job, each of which causes a new epistemic modal-world to emerge from the direct-speech world-switch: “What archangel could understand and reach the peculiarities of your nature as he could? or, even if understanding, could so love and bear with you?” Each of these questions could have been written as a declarative: “No archangel could understand and reach the peculiarities of your nature as he could,” and “No archangel could so love and bear with you.” But instead, Winifred blunts the force of her commitment to the propositions by using the interrogative, a move that distances her modal-worlds from the text and discourse-worlds. Thus, she is saying one thing, but her language is doing another: while she talks about Roy being close enough to “understand and reach” Mary, her language elicits the creation of conceptual spaces that make him seem further away than ever. This effect is compounded by her choice of the modal auxiliary “could.” In the context of the passage, the meaning of “could” seems to be either “tentative possibility” or “ability.”⁴¹ It may also be a combination of the two. But no matter which of these definitions applies, “could” might just as easily have taken

its present tense form, “can.” Phelps is keenly aware that past-tense forms convey a sense of remoteness and unreality. Her appreciation of the fact is voiced by Winifred during a brief conversation with Mary, who is pleased that her aunt has delayed a trip to Norwich so that they can spend the entire summer together. Mary writes,

I have been looking at Roy’s picture a long time, and wondering how he would like the new plan. I said something of the sort to her [Winifred].

“Why put any ‘would’ in that sentence?” she said, smiling. “It belongs in the present tense.”

“Then I am sure he likes it,” I answered,—“he likes it,” and I said the words over till I was ready to cry for rest in their sweet sound.⁴²

Winifred (and by extension Phelps) knows that to talk about Roy using “would,” the past-tense and remote form of “will,” is to allow the possibility that Roy’s spirit does not really exist or that, if it does, then it is too far away to know or “like” anything about earthly life. She also understands that, if the past tense distances and derealizes him, the present tense suggests confidence in his continued existence and makes him seem both temporally and spatially near. Winifred seems to recognize how the tense-system relates to conceptualization and, thus, it seems significant that she does not follow her own advice. Despite what she knows about the power of words to make the absent feel present, she insists on using language that banishes Roy to a distant ontological realm, a space so far removed from the real-world that he can be neither physically nor mentally involved in his sister’s life. This exchange between the women is singular. And it may be that, in the face of Mary’s overwhelming need to feel close to Roy, Winifred gives in to her niece’s grief and momentarily changes her rhetorical tactics to provide the kind of comfort that she needs. But, in general, Winifred sides with Protestantism over Spiritualism and keeps the divide between the living and the dead firmly in place. This is what she seems to be doing when she chooses “could” over “can.” Her use of a remote verb form might make sense in relation to Gabriel because she is making the case that the archangel is not watching over Mary. But she also uses it in reference to Roy, thereby making the world in which he is caring for his sister seem as insubstantial and unreal as the one in which Gabriel is thus employed.

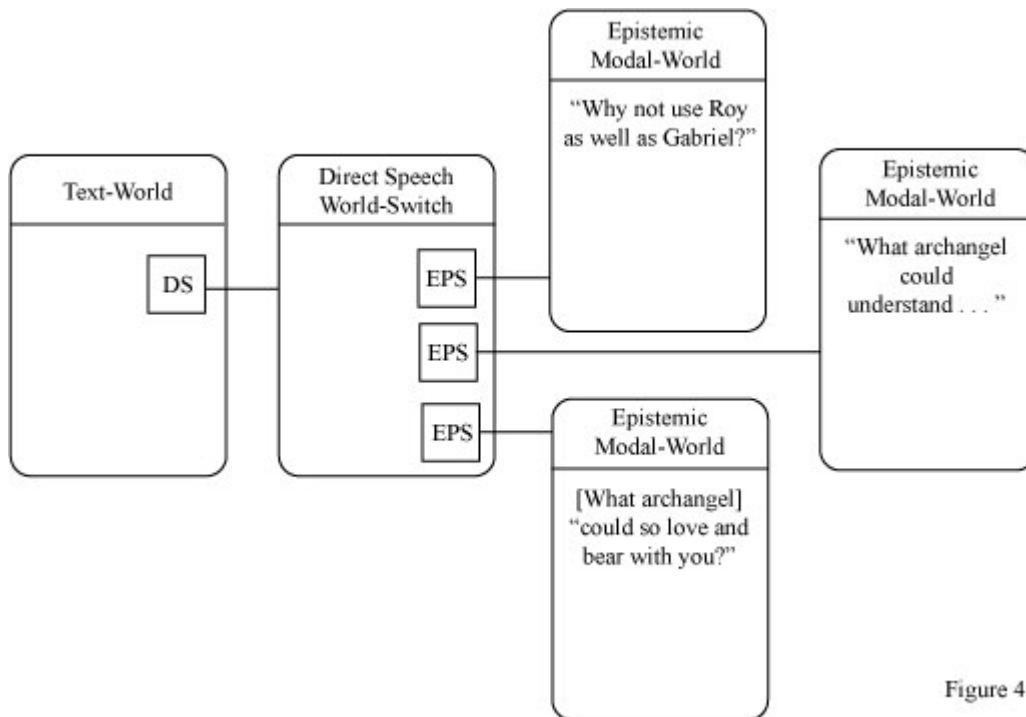


Figure 4

If a felt connection to the dead is forbidden, so too is a sense of proximity to their world. Fixating on Winifred's material heaven, critics argue that the detail and concreteness of her descriptions appeal to and even satisfy readers' senses. It is true that the text depicts heaven as a physical place. However, these accounts not only fail to stimulate the sensory imagination but they actually stifle it, because they play out in marginalized modal-worlds that are experienced by readers as existing far beyond the horizons of their perceptual capabilities. For Winifred, heaven *is* a lot like earth, but the space between the two worlds is absolutely insurmountable, and her language allows readers to feel this inaccessibility. When Mary says, "I wonder what it [heaven] is going to look like," Winifred repeatedly foregrounds the fact that her ideas on the subject are nothing more than pure speculation, and this admission affects how readers conceptualize her language: "Heaven? Eye hath not seen, but I have my fancies. I think I want some mountains, and very many trees." As Figure 5 shows, the direct-speech world-switch is followed by an epistemic modal-world ("I think") which, in turn, is followed by a boulomaic modal-world ("I want"). With only a moderate level of commitment to her own desire, Winifred places the world in which heaven has mountains and trees three conceptual levels away from the text-world, and this ontological distinction is strengthened by the qualifications of her statement. Such qualifications appear in almost all of her assertions about heaven, including the following: "I suppose that we shall read in heaven"; "Perhaps,—this is just my fancying,—perhaps there will be whole planets turned into galleries of art"; "perhaps the mysteries of sidereal systems will be spread out like a child's map before us."⁴³ Again, as Gavins notes, when an author or character discusses a subject about which he has no "credible knowledge, the text-worlds [he] creates in relation to this subject are similarly incredible and positioned at an extreme epistemic distance" in the reader's "mental representation of the discourse."⁴⁴ Reminded

by Winifred that no one has seen heaven and that her response is merely the product of her “fancies,” readers assign the heavenly worlds she creates to the periphery of their conceptual maps, a cognitive strategy that causes them to experience these scenarios as psychologically, temporally, and physically remote from their daily lives.

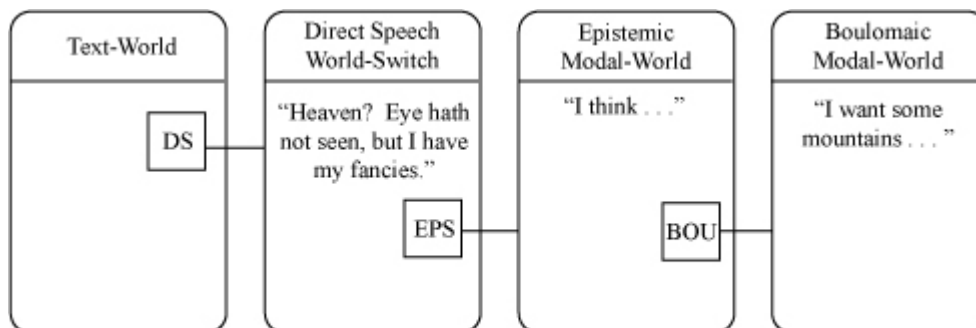


Figure 5

While Spiritualist literature sought to reform readers’ senses by simulating contact with heaven, *Gates* carries out Phelps’s Christian convictions by teaching readers to imagine heaven as a similar but entirely separate state. As Winifred continues to dream out loud, her language accustoms readers to the feeling that they are cut off from the other world:

“I should like, if I had my choice, to have day-lilies and carnations fresh under my windows all the time.”

“Under your windows?”

“Yes. I hope to have a home of my own....He must be there, too, you see,—I mean John....If we have trees and mountains and flowers and books,” she went on, smiling, “I don’t see why not have houses as well. Indeed they seem to me as supposable as anything can be which is guess-work at the best.”⁴⁵

As we can see in Figure 6, an epistemic modal-world, evoked by a conditional construction (“If I had my choice...”), comes from the initial direct-speech world-switch. Since Winifred is talking about a choice that she would have in the future when she is dead, the verb in the protasis should be backshifted to the present-tense. Tense backshifting, explains Werth, means “that the apparent present tense in a Conditional I *if*-clause is actually a remote future; the apparent past in Conditional II is actually a remote present, while the apparent past perfect in Conditional III is actually a remote past.” That speakers are always to some degree distanced from their protases makes sense since these clauses conjure up situations that are—at least at the time that the statement is made—unrealized. If a situation seems especially improbable, a speaker can convey an even greater sense of distance by backshifting more than one tense.⁴⁶ This is precisely what Winifred does when she chooses “had” over “have.” By backshifting twice and, in this way, adding an extra layer of pastness, she distances herself from the conviction that such a choice will really come to pass. And if she is unconvinced that this moment of decision will occur and that this scenario will be actualized, then the boulomaic modal-world which splits from the epistemic one is even more remote from reality. Though she

“should like . . . to have day-lilies and carnations,” the organization of her expression teaches readers to separate the imagined realization of such desires from anything that could happen in (or even be definitely known from) their level of existence. Winifred instills this lesson by modalizing almost all of her statements about heaven. For example, the direct-speech world-switch gives rise, not only to the chain of conceptual spaces described above, but also to another boulomaic modal-world (“I hope to have a home”). The assertion “He must be there, too” results in a deontic modal-world because Winifred defines heaven as a place where all of the dead’s wishes are fulfilled. Above all things, she would desire the presence of her husband and, therefore, according to the rules of celestial society, he “must” be there. Both of these worlds—the deontic and the boulomaic—are one step removed from the text-world.

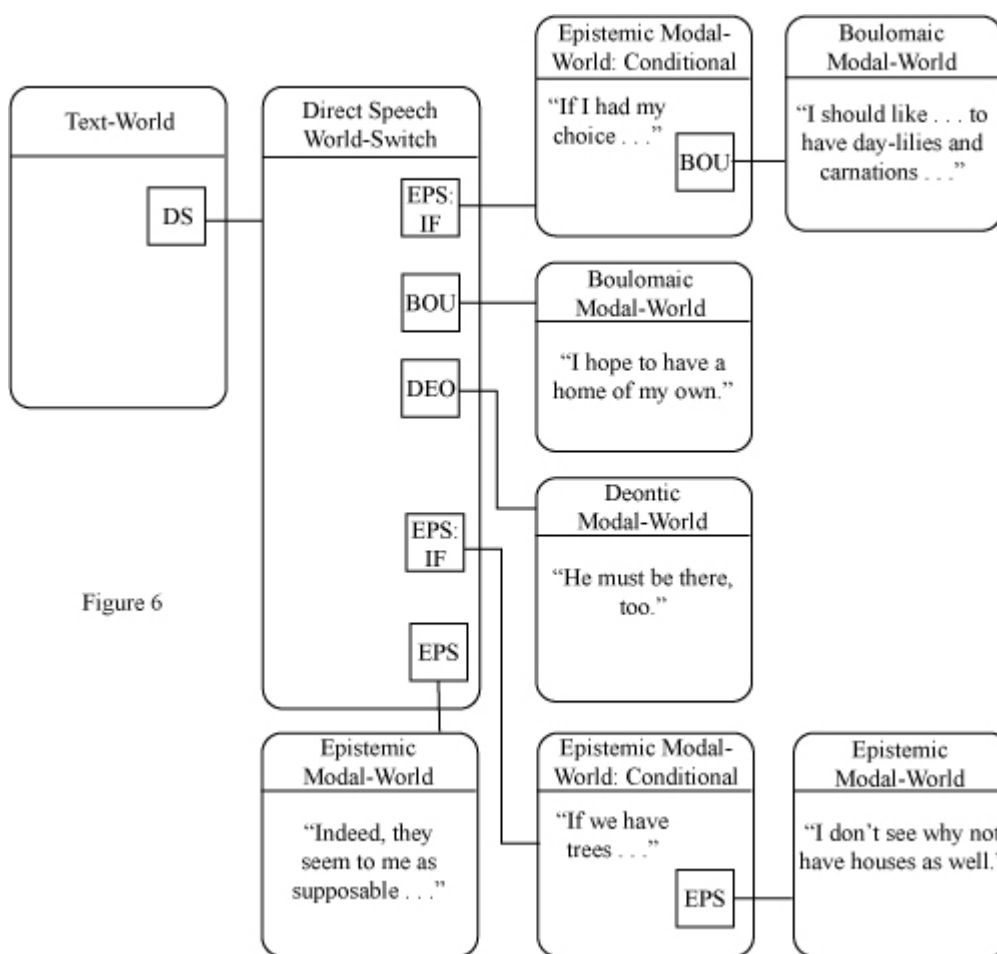


Figure 6

Phelps also uses epistemic conditionals (a variation from the traditional conditional) and negative adverbs further to diminish any sense of immediacy that Winifred’s descriptions of heaven might have. According to Barbara Dancygier and Eve Sweetser, “epistemic conditionals . . . follow the speaker’s reasoning process in a conditional manner.” In these constructions, “the speaker seems to be involved in drawing the conclusion as she speaks: this is neither a prediction about a conclusion to be

drawn nor a description of a general relation between premise and conclusion, but a performative act of reasoning aloud.”⁴⁷ Winifred seems to be “reasoning aloud” in the following sentence: “If we have trees and mountains and flowers and books . . . I don’t see why not have houses as well.” Readers can not have confidence in the correctness of her conclusions because they are based on a protasis that is actually a reformulation of the earlier epistemically distanced desire, “I think I want some mountains, and very many trees.” In the apodosis, the phrase “I don’t see” stresses that the imagined actualization of her as-yet unrealized longing is a precondition, not for the existence of houses in heaven, but for her thoughts on the possibility of their existence. By foregrounding Winifred’s thinking over the subject of her thought, this epistemic conditional emphasizes that the scenario she imagines is a purely mental construct, the eventual existence of which is guaranteed by nothing more convincing than inferences drawn from the imaginary satisfaction of a conceptually remote desire.

Moreover, Winifred’s commitment to these inferences is weak, as evidenced by her use of the adverb “not.” The statement “I don’t see why [we will/would] not have houses as well” is a less sanguine version of “I think that we will/would have houses as well.” Throughout the text, “not” is used in epistemic sentences that have more direct, more confident-sounding alternatives. This is illustrated when Winifred asserts, “A happy home is the happiest thing in the world. I do not see why it should not be in any world.” And, elsewhere, referring to “the little tendernesses of family ties,” she says “I cannot think that anything which has in it the elements of permanency is to be lost, but sin.” Unnecessary negations like these suggest that Winifred is withholding conviction and permitting uncertainty about the truth of her propositions. Any sense of dependability that the above epistemic conditional might convey—and it could not be much—is quickly undermined by the sentence which follows: “Indeed, they seem to me as supposable as anything can be which is guess-work at the best.” Here, the proposition that homes can be easily imagined (and, therefore, distanced from the text-world) is itself distanced from the text-world by the epistemic expression “they seem to me.”⁴⁸

“[E]ach different type of world,” Gavins reminds us, “will generate a different experiential effect for the discourse participants.”⁴⁹ Attempting to minimize the perceived sensory impact of her novel’s detailed heavenly scenarios, Phelps relies heavily on all of the linguistic strategies described above. *Gates* establishes a hierarchy of worlds in which those having to do with spirit communication or the afterlife are placed furthest away from the reality of the reader. In this way, the text turns the goal of Spiritualist literature on its head—instead of transforming spirits and heaven into legitimate objects of perception, it positions them beyond an ontological boundary which the senses cannot cross. In other words, through its desensualizing writing tactics, the novel cultivates the experience of absence.

“Since I Died”

First demonstrated in *The Gates Ajar*, Phelps’s aesthetic of desensualization becomes, as the diagrams will demonstrate, increasingly complex over time as she both elaborates on and multiplies her use of the strategies described above. This redoubling of her efforts to stifle the inference of spiritual sensory experience is evident in what is now perhaps one of her best-known works, “Since I Died” (1873), a short story in which the

narrator, a recently deceased woman, longs to communicate with a close female friend or possibly lover, who sits sad and silent in a shadowy room, completely blind to the spirit beside her. Hoping that the woman's senses will register her existence, the narrator ultimately accepts that it is impossible for the living to perceive the dead. Here, Phelps explores what Bennett calls "one of [her] favorite ideas": "separation" as "pictured from the other side, from the point of view of one who has died and cannot make his presence known to the living."⁵⁰ But more than just conveying the idea of separation, the text cultivates an embodied experience of it. "Since I Died" is a continuation of the project that Phelps began in her first novel—while *Gates* trains readers to feel physically and psychologically detached from the deceased, "Since I Died" emphasizes the inevitability of this sensory break by allowing them to experience it from the other side.

In, "Since I Died," Phelps restricts the reader's access to the narrator's beloved by using what Gavins calls "fixed focalization." In narratives with "fixed focalization," "the only world-building and function-advancing information made available to the reader is that which is filtered through the mind of a participating character." So while readers of *Gates* receive a great deal of information from Winifred, whose direct speech regularly breaks through the surface of Mary's narrative, readers of "Since I Died" have "only one route into the text-world"—the voice of the dead woman whose monologue makes up the story. According to Gavins, "the fixing of a particular narrative with the point of view of a participating character has the potential to affect the conceptual structure of the narrative." Because these "narratives represent only what one character believes to be the case," they "constitute an epistemic modal-world which," like all epistemic modal-worlds "is only character-accessible in nature." With the entire narrative played out in an epistemic modal-world, the text-world remains empty and is "relegated to a redundant position in the discourse from the very outset."⁵¹ Phelps's decision to cast "Since I Died" as a fixed focalization narrative was a strategic one as the form made it possible for her to align the reader's experience with that of the speaker: in the same way that the deceased speaker is unable to engage directly with the living woman whom she loves, the reader only knows the beloved through the limited perspective of the spirit who watches her. Relegated to the role of silent witness, the reader becomes an eavesdropper on the narrator's side of a strange borderland and, like her, has no access to the living.

As she looks at the unseeing mourner, the narrator uses incomplete conditionals to generate a remarkable seventeen epistemic modal-worlds in which the possibility of mutual recognition is at once acted out and separated from her own reality:

If the shadow of an eyelash stirred upon your cheek; if that gray line about your mouth should snap its tension at this quivering end; if the pallor of your profile warmed a little; if that tiny muscle on your forehead, just at the left eyebrow's curve, should start and twitch; if you would but grow a trifle restless, sitting there beneath my steady gaze; if you moved a finger of your folded hands; if you should turn and look behind your chair, or lift your face, half lingering and half longing, half loving and half loth, to ponder on the annoyed and thwarted cry which the wind is making, where I stand between it and yourself, against the half-closed window— Ah, there! You sigh and stir, I think. You lift your head. The little muscle is a captive still; the line about your mouth is tense and hard; the deepening hollow in your cheek has no warmer tint, I see, than the great

Doric column which the moonlight builds against the wall. I lean against it; I hold out my arms.

You lift your head and look me in the eye.

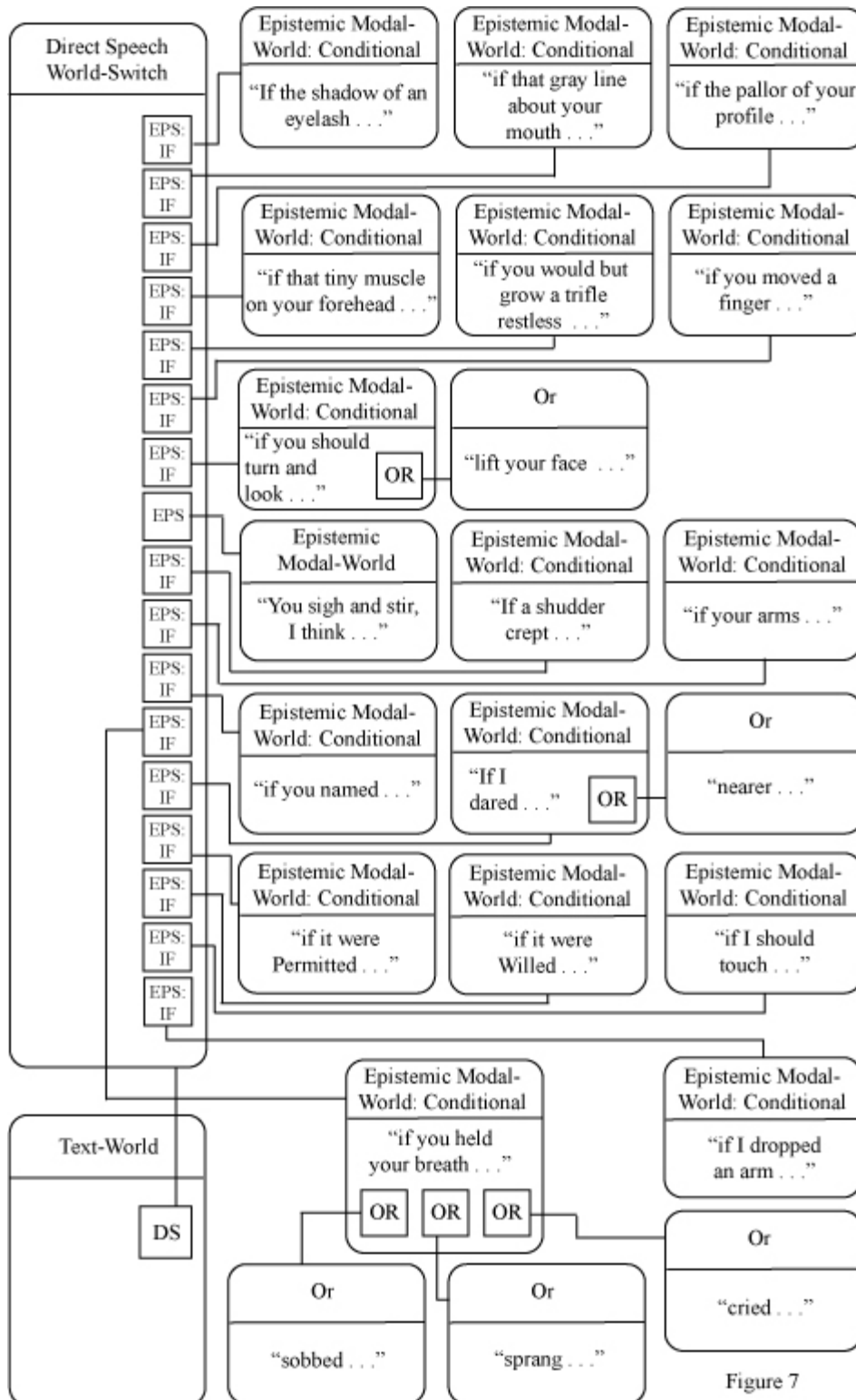
If a shudder crept across your figure; if your arms, laid out upon the table, leaped but once above your head; if you named my name; if you held your breath with terror, or sobbed aloud for love, or sprang, or cried—

But you only lift your head and look me in the eye.

If I dared step near, or nearer; if it were Permitted that I should cross the current of your living breath; if it were Willed that I should feel the leap of human blood within your veins; if I should touch your hands, your cheeks, your lips; if I as lightly as a snow-flake round your shoulder—

The fear which no heart has fathomed, the fate which no fancy has faced, the riddle which no soul has read, steps between your substance and my soul.⁵²

The profusion of conceptual spaces which are created in response to this passage is mapped in Figure 7. Embedded in the foundational epistemic modal-world which defines fixed focalization narratives, the seventeen new conceptual spaces created by these conditionals oblige readers, as Gavins says, to “make a double leap from the discourse-world: firstly beyond the text-world level, then again beyond the world of the act of narration.”⁵³ In other words, the narrator’s fantasies of being seen, heard, and felt by the living woman are already three removes from readers who, as a result of this ontological disjuncture, conceptualize them as hopelessly distant from their actual experience. This sense of unreality is heightened by the fact that the worlds are unfinished. “The *if*-clause is world-building” and, once this space is defined, it serves as “a kind of static conceptual background against which certain events and activities, known as *function-advancing* elements . . . may be played out.”⁵⁴ However, in the passage above, we have nothing but *if*-clauses, a long series of protases that posit the existence of worlds in which the living woman’s pallor, expression, and posture change, indicating that she has finally discerned a ghostly presence. To the narrator, the chance of this acknowledgement actually occurring is so remote that she can not even imagine what *function-advancing* “actions, events, states and processes” would follow if it were to be realized.⁵⁵ Would the women try to talk to each other or to touch? The absence of apodoses suggests that there is no point in speculating because the conditions laid out in the protases could never be met.



Establishing a hypothetical scenario and identifying it, through the conjunction “if,” as removed from the matrix text-world (which, in the case of “Since I Died,” is actually another epistemic modal-world), protases are already epistemically distant from the reader. However, Phelps pushes the sensory breakthroughs in the narrator’s if-clauses even further away from the discourse-world by using several remote verb forms. For example, six of the protases feature the modal verb “should,” “a past form” that, according to Dancygier and Sweetser, is “particularly susceptible to the expression of distancing.” When it is positioned in an if-clause, “should” “portrays the content of the protasis as only remotely possible” or even “extremely unlikely.”⁵⁶ That the narrator “should touch” her beloved’s “hands,” “cheeks,” and “lips” is a possibility to be entertained only in a modal-world near the bottom of the reader’s hierarchy of conceptual spaces. And the situations described in the following clauses have even lower priority: “if it were Permitted that I should cross the current of your living breath; if it were Willed that I should feel the leap of human blood within your veins.” Compounding the distance implied by “should,” the narrator uses the past subjunctive. Because the dead woman knows that what she wants is neither “Permitted” nor “Willed,” she chooses a verb form that draws attention to the nonfactuality of the worlds she creates.

Phelps’s attempts to derealize scenes of spirit contact become more aggressive as she embeds conditionals with remote verb forms into other sentences, resulting in convoluted constructions that simultaneously create and lament the experience of separation. Demonstrating this more complex style, the narrator says, “I will not wonder what would happen if my outline were defined upon it to your view. I will not think of that which could be, would be, if I struck across your vision, face to face.” In each sentence, she uses “will.” While this verb might be understood as deontic—as a duty, she “wills” herself neither to “wonder” nor to “think”—it is clearly future-oriented—she predicts what she will not be doing from the present time of her calculation to the moments immediately following it. Because of its future-orientation, it triggers a temporal world-switch away from the initial epistemic modal-world of the fixed focalization narrative to other worlds in which imminent events (or non-events) can be imagined (see Figure 8). But readers do not stay in these spaces—which are already two removes from the abandoned text-world—for long. Another layer of distance is added when, as a result of embedded if-clauses, the future worlds give rise to epistemic modal-worlds in which the living woman finally sees the spirit before her. While the scene of visual contact depicted in the protasis of the first sentence is dissociated from the reader’s experience by its position in an if-clause (which is three steps away from the text-world), it is also marked as far from reality by its subjunctive “were defined.” The apodosis in the second sentence generates a similar impression because it contains “could,” a modal verb that signifies “only tentative possibility.”⁵⁷ The narrator refuses to “wonder” or “think” about “what would happen” if the living woman were to suddenly see her, not only because there is no point in torturing herself with the thought of incredible scenarios, but also because the experience is so inconceivable that she quite literally cannot fathom what would follow from its actualization. Presumably more contact would ensue—after all, if they could see each other, then perhaps they could hear and touch each other, too. But through her silence, she denies such hypothetical sensations even a remote space in the reader’s mental representation of the text. Indeed, though she longs for the barrier between the living and the dead to fall, her sentences and the strings of modal-worlds

which they create reinforce its existence by teaching readers to feel a sense of psychological and physical detachment from scenes of spirit communication.

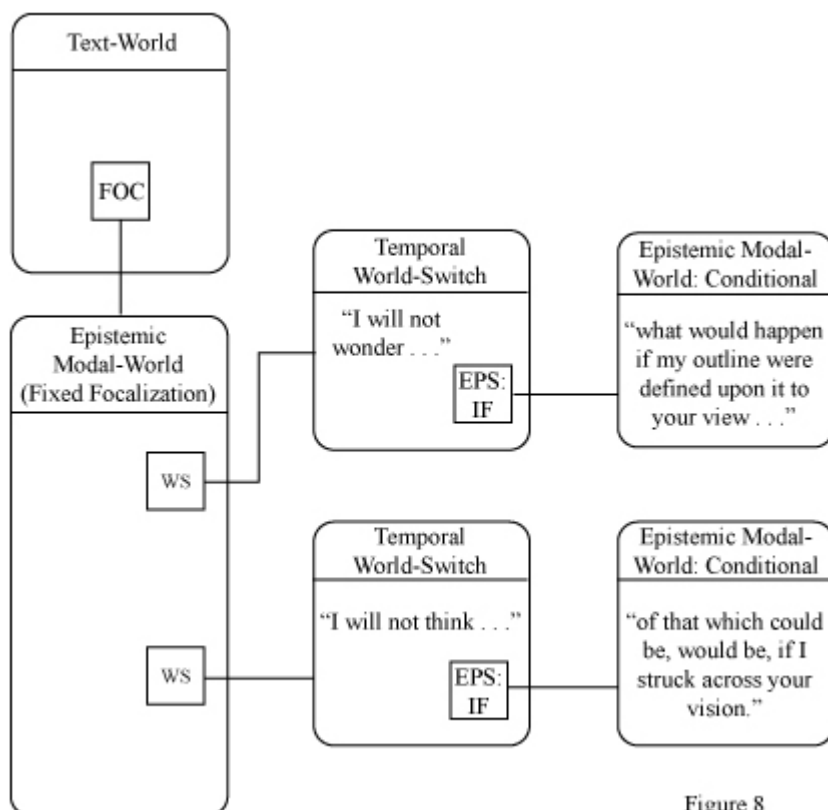


Figure 8

“Since I Died” has received attention from critics who, viewing the text through the lens of queer theory, claim that its idiosyncratic style reflects, to quote Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, “[t]he ‘impossibility’ of representing the lesbian relationship between two living women.”⁵⁸ Exemplifying this approach, Ralph J. Poole argues that the series of conditionals “mar[k] the unfulfilled and/or unfulfillable desire of the speaker, who waits for a sign of acknowledgement” and longs “to speak the unspeakable, passionate love to which death alone can give voice.”⁵⁹ Certainly, Phelps uses conditionals to suggest situations that must forever remain unrealized. However, for her, the category of the impossible is not restricted to same-sex love. As a Christian, she maintains that the existence of spirits has to be affirmed by faith, not by sensory impressions; and whenever she treats this theme—whether it be in stories about homo-or-hetero, sexual-or-asexual relationships—she uses the strategies found in “Since I Died.” The style’s transportability from *The Gates Ajar*, where it first appeared, to “Since I Died,” to the other poems and stories considered in this chapter, suggests that, while it is not tied to any particular sexual dynamic, it is inextricably bound to her belief that a Spiritualist sensory paradigm would not replace conventional contexts and modes of perception. And, indeed, her desensualizing aesthetic may actually spread this belief and its sensory implications by training readers to feel that they are completely cut off from the other world and its inhabitants.

“The Room’s Width”

Stimulating feelings of alienation seems to be the goal of Phelps’s poetry as well as her prose. A brief lesson on the impossibility of spiritual sensory experience, “The Room’s Width” combines almost all of the strategies described above in four short stanzas to cultivate the psychological and physical impression that an insurmountable distance prevents the dead from reaching out to the living (and vice versa):

I think if I should cross the room,
Far as fear;
Should stand beside you like a thought—
Touch you, Dear!

Like a fancy. To your sad heart
It would seem
That my vision passed and prayed you,
Or my dream.

Then you would look with lonely eyes—
Lift your head—
And you would stir, and sigh, and say—
“She is dead.”

Baffled by death and love, I lean
Through the gloom.
O Lord of life! am I forbid
To cross the room?⁶⁰

The “plot” of “The Room’s Width” is almost identical to that of “Since I Died”: the spirit of a dead woman yearns to communicate with a loved one who cannot perceive her presence. Once again, the reader is an invisible eavesdropper on the side of the deceased. “[I]n the discourse-world of a fictional-text, the projection of an enactor of a real-world entity (the reader) into a fictional domain presents,” writes Gavins, “a far greater challenge to our ontological reasoning.”⁶¹ In this case, the challenge is particularly serious because, even if the reader is mourning the loss of a woman, an identification with “you” would require him or her to play two irreconcilable roles—while the reader can “hear” what the spirit is saying by reading the text, the “lonely,” “sigh[ing]” “you” cannot, and it is this insensibility that is the subject of the poem. Also, the poem has fixed focalization because, with no other perspective represented, the reader must depend on the speaker for all world-building and function-advancing information.

This narrative style in conjunction with the proliferation of distanced modal-worlds allows the reader to share the felt experience of the speaker as she resigns herself to the inaccessibility of the living. The immediate supersession of the text-world by an epistemic modal-world—the foundation of the poem’s fixed focalization—creates conceptual distance which is visually represented in Figure 9. This distance is greatly increased as the initial epistemic modal-world gives rise to another epistemic modal-world, triggered by the phrase “I think.” And this world, in turn, is followed by three

more epistemic modal-worlds, established by three conditionals, in which the speaker considers what would happen “if [she] should cross the room,” “stand beside you like a thought,” and “Touch you, Dear!” These scenarios of closeness and physical contact between the living and the dead are three removes from the text-world; linguistically marked as nonfactual by their positions within if-clauses; and distanced by the verb “should,” a modal typically reserved for events that are “only remotely possible” or even “extremely unlikely.”⁶² Nevertheless, if these thoroughly derealized events were to occur, then the situation outlined in their shared apodosis might unfold. As function-advancing elements, most consequent clauses play out in the worlds created by their protases, but this one uses “perception modality” (“it would seem”) to generate a new epistemic modal-world off of the conceptual space produced by the if-clause.

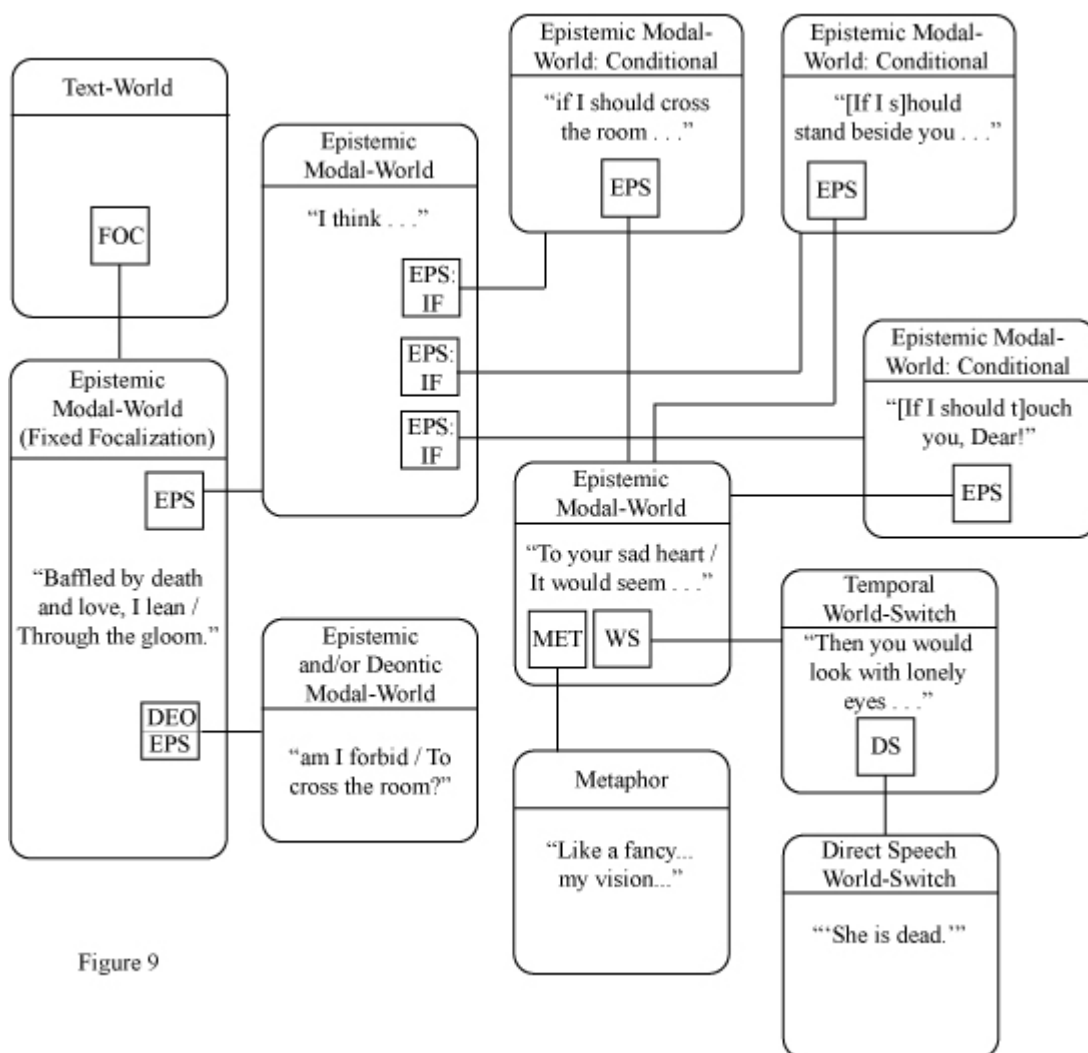


Figure 9

Already speaking, then, at four removes from the text-world, the narrator further separates herself (and the reader) from the living person by guessing how “it would seem” to his or her “sad heart” if the protasis were realized. Though the line is

ambiguous, it can be construed in this way: if the dead woman were to stand beside and touch her beloved (which, as we have already noted, is highly unlikely), then there is a tentative possibility (“would seem”) that this person would feel as though he or she were having a fantasy (“Like a fancy”) in which there is a vision or dream-like manifestation of the deceased. Again, indirect thought representation always creates epistemic distance between the scenario of someone thinking, the narrator who attributes the thought to the thinker, and the reader who relies on the narrator for all information. The spirit speaker in “The Room’s Width” can see the mourner, but she has no real way of determining what might be going on inside of this person’s head (or “heart”), and the reader must depend entirely on the already unverifiable impressions of the narrator to know anything at all. However, the epistemic modal-world established by the above apodosis is especially remote from the reality of the narrator and the reader because it combines the distance of indirect thought representation with temporal distance: the dead woman speculates, not about what her beloved feels in the present circumstances, but about what she might feel if—in the future—an extremely improbable scenario of mutual recognition were to occur. This already implausible experience is finally negated when the narrator initiates a temporal world-switch away from the epistemic modal-world of the apodosis to a new conceptual space: “Then you would look with lonely eyes— / Lift your head— / And you would stir, and sign, and say— / ‘She is dead.’” Positing another epistemic modal-world, the narrator predicts that, even if the mourner were to perceive her presence dimly, he or she would quickly dismiss the faint sensation and conclude that contact is impossible because “‘She is dead.’”

Turning her attention away from this multi-link chain of distant conceptual spaces, she returns to the initial epistemic modal-world and speaks the text’s only “factual” sentence: “I lean / Through the gloom.” Merely one remove from this base space, the poem ends with “am I forbid / to cross the room?,” a question which can be read as either deontic (“Is it the case that I am forbidden to cross the room?”) or epistemic (“is it possible that I am forbidden to cross the room?”). Either way, it is clear that, as the narrator begins to accept the impossibility of shared sensory experiences with her beloved, the worlds which she creates move closer to the reader’s discourse-world. That the living and the dead are separated is, for Phelps, a true proposition. Consequently, a world in which characters entertain this hypothesis as even a remote possibility is positioned nearer to reality than a world in which they consider scenarios of spirit contact.

“The Presence”

In *The Gates Ajar*, “Since I Died,” and “The Room’s Width,” the dead never manifest themselves to the living, and the texts train readers to accept this absence of sensation as a natural part of human experience. However, if Phelps’s accumulation of modal-worlds teaches readers to position the prospect of supernatural sights and sounds at an extreme distance from their own reality, then that lesson is—paradoxically enough—most pronounced in “The Presence,” a short story in which a dead man appears to his wife (or, at least, seems to). Told from the perspective of a widow who is pining for her husband, the story opens with the woman’s perceptions (and misperceptions) about the room in which she sits.

There it is again. No—no. the fire flared; or the screen jarred in the draught—I don't see where that draught comes from! Everything is close, and shut; even the door behind the portieres; I drew the curtains myself, because these long, low windows are so treacherous on winter nights. I think everything is colder to a person who sits alone in a room—I don't mean seems to be colder, but is actually so. I suppose human beings are like horses in a barn; several warm the place and are comfortable, but one will shiver. To-night I am cold to the soul.⁶³

This passage—and the text as a whole—dramatizes the contingency of knowledge. Everything that readers know about the room is shaped by the widow's perspective. And, as her hesitations (“No—no”), multiple explanations (“the fire flared; or the screen jarred”), and lack of knowledge (“I don't see...”) indicate, her perceptions are fallible. Because this is a fixed-focalization narrative, her observations are already one epistemic remove from the text-world. But when, in the space of a single paragraph, this initial epistemic modal-world opens onto three others (triggered by the phrases “I don't see,” “I think,” and “I suppose”), readers become acutely aware of the layered and most likely distorted impressions which block their access to the scene.

At first, such access is not necessary because, before the arrival of her husband's spirit, there is not anything going on in the room (or at least nothing that the narrator mentions) and, consequently, the story is made up almost entirely of her inner-thoughts. She thinks about what it would be like if he were suddenly to appear, but is careful to keep this possibility at a conceptual distance from herself and the reader:

There again! Surely, yes! No—ah-h, no. I don't know whether I am most sorry or most glad. If I should really see him I might die of fright, I think. And yet, I would sell my soul, my poor, pretty, exacting soul, that never has given a blessed thing worth having been created for, to this world—nor to him—alas, never even to him! Sell it? I would throw it away like rubbish on a river if I could know, if I could be perfectly sure, that he were in the room. And if I could know, “past all doubting, truly,” that he could understand how I feel now; if I could speak, and have any reason to believe that he could hear. But I haven't any—not any at all.⁶⁴

The mediating role of the narrator is quickly foregrounded by three epistemic utterances which result in four modal-worlds (see Figure 10). Through the phrases “Surely, yes!” and “No—ah-h, no,” the widow registers her attitude toward the proposition that “it” is “There again!” Also, the epistemic statement beginning with “I don't know” features the conjunction “or” which prompts the reader to create two mental spaces: one in which the speaker is “sorry” and another in which she is “glad.” Such spaces rapidly multiply as six conditional sentences branch off from the initial epistemic modal-world. In the first conditional, the modal verb “should” makes the prospect of “really see[ing] him” seem conceptually and, therefore, spatially distant from the reader's world. And this dematerialization of spirit communication is accelerated as, with each new conditional sentence, the narrator seems more willing to accept abstract knowledge in place of physical impressions. For example, in the second and third conditionals, she hopes not to perceive her husband with her bodily senses—a prospect which seems too outlandish—but merely to apprehend his presence with her mind. Yet, even this disembodied form of contact (if it can be called that at all) must, as the modal verb “could” and the subjunctive

“were” suggest, remain firmly in the realm of the nonfactual, on the margins of the reader’s mental representation of the text. While, in this pair of protases, the widow desires knowledge that refers to a physical situation—the location of her husband in the room—in the fourth conditional, she settles for the less material though equally improbable situation of knowing that he—wherever his body might be—knows her thoughts and feelings. In the fifth conditional, the narrator’s desire to believe that her husband can hear her voice is replaced with the less ambitious desire to have “any reason” to maintain such a belief. And, finally, she accepts that she has “not any [reason] at all.” Completely disavowing the possibility of a sensory connection to the dead, this last sentence is conceptualized by readers as closest to their world because it is the only one in which the narrator speaks to the facts of her situation in the present tense and without modalization.

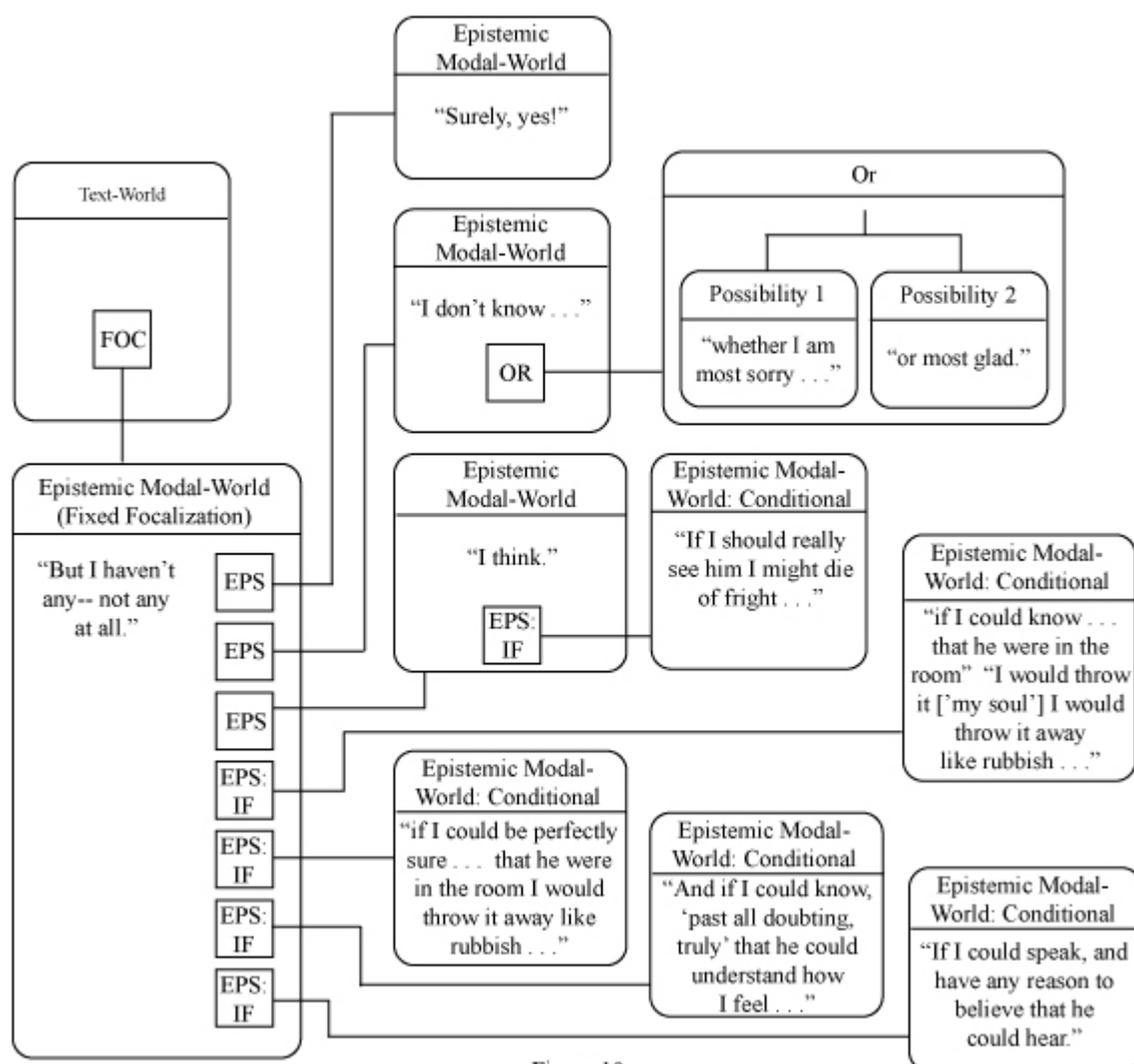


Figure 10

When the her husband finally appears before her in the text-world, the narrator keeps readers conceptually distant from this space by thinking about what he was like in

the past; refusing to believe that he's there in the present; and offering alternative visions of what a visit from him would be like. She reacts to his materialization with shock and disbelief:

Antone? Antone? Are you there, Antone? Is it you—after all? How still you are, how stony still! How vague you are, like a mist-man—you! Why, you were all man—if you did learn languages and study books—and had that dreadful patience; live, warm, real man, every nerve and muscle of you, everything you thought, and felt, and did—you were all real, Antone. . . . Impossible! This wreath of gray shadow cannot be you. I won't believe it. I won't insult you so. You would be the livest ghost that ever had died.⁶⁵

Even before their attention is redirected to remote modal-worlds, readers conceptualize Antone as spatially distant from themselves because, as is the case with all first person narratives, everything that they know about him comes from the narrator. Presented with neither his speech nor his thoughts, they have no direct experience of him and are, therefore, one epistemic remove from the room in which he appears. The initial epistemic modal-world which separates us from this space is then followed by a temporal world-switch to the time when he was still a “live, warm, real man.” After blocking access to her husband's present form by focusing on what he was like in the past, the narrator once again draws the reader's attention away from the first epistemic modal-world (which is as close as they can get to the text-world) by creating yet another epistemic modal-world in which she expresses her belief that the “wreath of gray shadow” “cannot be” him. Layers of distance are also created by the statements “I won't believe it” and “I won't insult you so” which establish modal-worlds having to do with knowledge and volition, respectively. A conditional sentence with a suppressed protasis concludes the passage: “[If you were here, y]ou would be the livest ghost that ever had died.” By speculating about what he would be like if he were to materialize, she distracts readers from the world in which this has already taken place.

Finally, the narrator accepts that the spirit of Antone is in front of her. But instead of interacting with him in the text-world and engaging in the here-and-now of her situation, she speaks at great length about her own thoughts and feelings, using the conjunctions “whether” and “or” to create countless possible worlds which seriously complicate readers' attempts to conceptualize her husband's materialization. The narrator sees her husband's appearance as a rare opportunity for her to express her regrets:

I am going to tell you because I've got to. I've got to do it, or else go mad myself. I don't know what I am speaking to, nor whether it will do the least good in the world—the dead world, or the live one—but speak I will, because I must. I don't know any ghost-language, only woman-language; I don't understand ghost-laws, only love-laws. Yes, and firefly-laws, and moth-laws. I don't know whether you are mist or matter, whether you are deaf or dumb, whether you are blind or whether you can see, whether you want me or don't want me—Oh, and I can't help it, I don't care. I only know you are my husband because you were my husband. Deaf or listening, blind or seeing, warm or cold, loving or not loving—Antone! Because I was your wife, because I am your wife—listen to me.⁶⁶

Figure 11 makes visually explicit this seemingly endless generation of conceptual spaces as well as their increasing distance from the text world and the world of the reader. We can see that, in talking about her need to talk, the narrator initiates two temporal world-switches to the future—"I am going to tell you" and "speak I will"—each of which is followed by a deontic modal-world—"I've got to" and "I must," respectively. Two other deontic modal-worlds, triggered by "I've got to do it" and "listen to me," branch directly off of the initial epistemic modal-world. Moreover, of the five epistemic modal-worlds that are created, three of them give rise to chains of alternative conceptual spaces: "I don't know what I am speaking to, nor whether it will do the least good in the world—the dead world, or the live one"; "I don't know whether you are mist or matter, whether you are deaf or dumb, whether you are blind or whether you can see, whether you want me or don't want me"; "I only know you are my husband because you were my husband. Deaf or listening, blind or seeing, warm or cold, loving or not loving—Antone!" In the first sentence, the phrase "I don't know" sets up an epistemic modal-world from which two future-oriented worlds emerge: one in which her speaking will do good and one in which it will not. Each of these spaces, in turn, gives rise to two more worlds: one in which the proposition applies to "the dead world" and one in which it applies to "the live one." The second sentence has a similar structure. After the phrase "I don't know" generates an epistemic modal-world, the conjunction "whether" appears four times, bringing forth two possible worlds with each repetition—a world in which Antone is "mist" and another one in which he is "matter"; a world in which he is "deaf" and another in which he is "dumb," and so on. In the last example, the narrator leaves the epistemic modal-world created by "I only know" for a world in the past, when "you were my husband." But because Antone was not dead then and, therefore, neither "deaf" nor "cold," the dualisms seem to refer to the present tense part of the previous sentence, which might be rephrased as follows: "I only know you are my husband whether you are deaf or listening, blind or seeing, warm or cold, loving or not loving." Thus, returning from her memory of the past, the narrator departs from the present-tense epistemic modal-world with four "or"s from which eight possible worlds descend. As this seemingly uncontrolled proliferation of conceptual spaces suggests, the narrator is willing to think about any world except for the one in which her husband exists and, consequently, readers, who are dependent on her for all information, have no access to him.

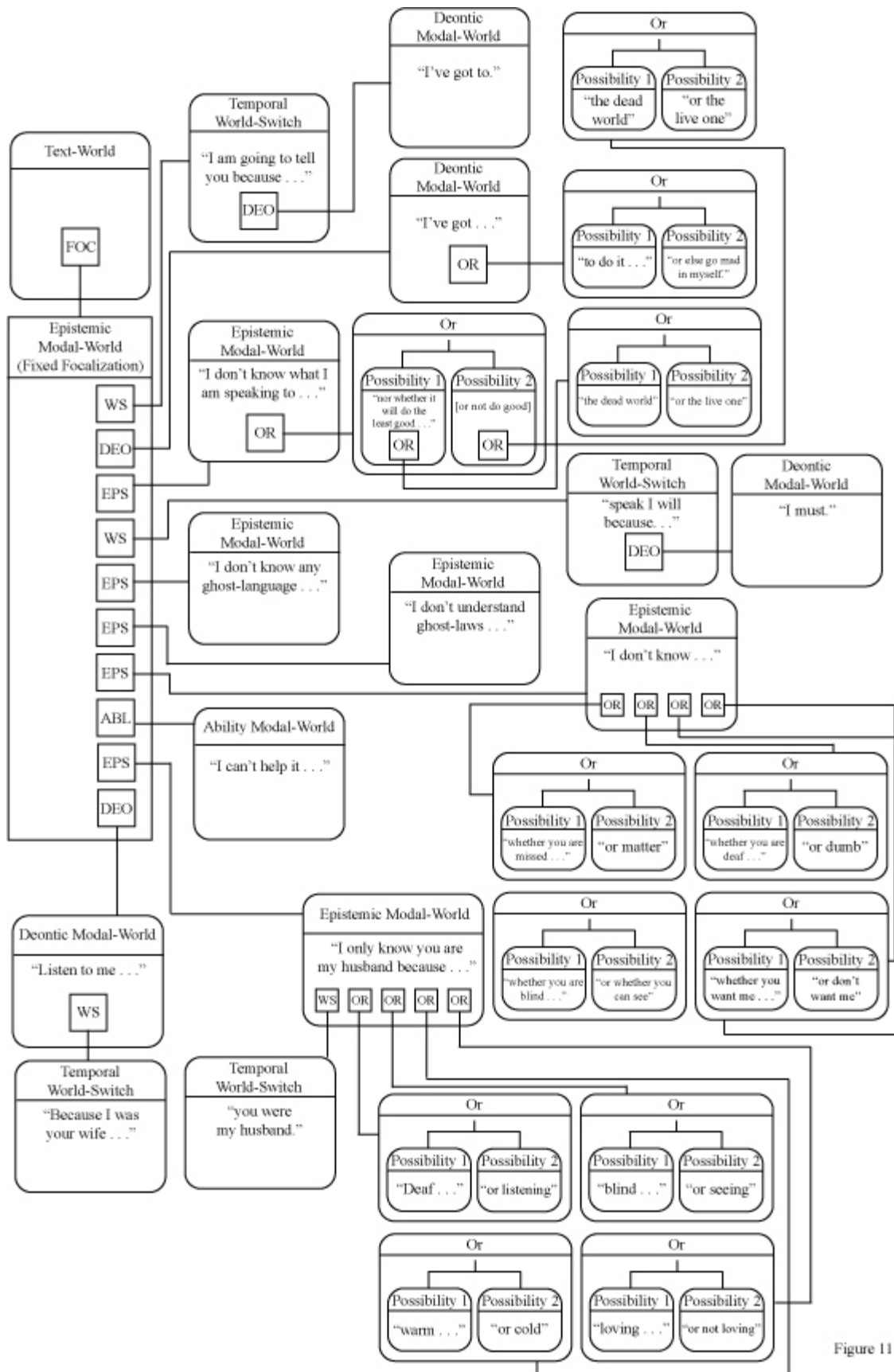


Figure 11

This is a pattern throughout the text. She avoids making present-tense observations about her husband's spirit by focusing instead on her own mental activity. This is clearly illustrated in the following passage where she explores how her attitude toward their marriage developed over time:

I never was fit for you, Antone, from the very beginning—never. But I *never knew* that till now. It was the way it is with girls who have been admired a good deal, and spoiled a little—I *suppose I thought* I was worth any trouble on the part of any man. *I really believed* it. *It never occurred to me* how much you were worth. *It did not seem to me* as if I had anything to do about it—about our married life. *I never once thought* that I should do a mortal thing to keep us happy, Antone! I left all that to you, just as I did business, and income, and newspapers, and writing books, and paying bills, and all those troublesome things. Antone, I left everything to you. I asked everything of you. I leaned on you like a heavy baby. I clutched at you like a person in the water when another person dives to save him from drowning. *I believe* I strangled you. Sometimes I have a dreadful thought. *I wonder* if I tired you out. *I think perhaps* I took your strength and weakened your pluck. When you had that accident, *it seems to me* you didn't try so hard to get well as you might. Antone! *It looks to me now* as if you didn't care enough. *How do I know* that wasn't my fault? There's a thought I have. It is a cold thought, and crawls across me, the way a snake crawls upon warm flesh. I cannot crush it nor throttle it. *This is the way it looks to me: Perhaps* I was so much to blame that I never even knew I was to blame. *Perhaps* I did you nothing but harm, and brought you nothing but evil. (italics mine)⁶⁷

This short passage creates nine epistemic modal-worlds and incites eight temporal world-switches to epistemic modal-worlds in the past. With each layer of distance from the text-world, readers find it harder both to conceptualize the materialization of Antone and to perceive spirit manifestations as something that could happen in their own reality. In this way, the text trains them to experience such occurrences as far away, ghostly, unreal.

Yet, despite the almost complete derealization of Antone, it seems that his spirit is still too close for Phelps's comfort. This is why fixed focalization is such a powerful tool in her desensualizing aesthetic. From the beginning of "The Presence," oscillations in the widow's impressions (has she heard her husband or not?) and feelings (if he were to appear, would she be happy or sad?) suggest that her narration of events may be unreliable: "There again! Surely, yes! No—ah-h, no. I don't know whether I am most sorry or most glad." However, if we want to construct any mental representation of the text, then we must rely on the information which she provides. Thus, we assume that Antone is in the text-world because she tells us—albeit through an epistemic modal-world which distances us from this initial space—that he is there. But when, in the final pages of the story, she is awakened by her husband, who is very much alive, we realize that his spirit was never in the text-world to begin with: "Didn't die? Are you sure you didn't die, after all? . . . You live, strong, warm, real man, you!" We discover that she was ill, a doctor administered medicine, and the entire story—from her sitting in an empty room, mourning her husband, to his materialization in front of the fire place—was

nothing more than a drug-induced dream. Still slightly bewildered, she concludes that the narcotics “blunted the pain of my body and sharpened the pain of my mind. And it took that form, Tony—just you, you . . . nobody else.”⁶⁸ According to Gavins, sudden twists like this compel the reader “to undertake what is known in Text World Theory as world-repair.” “[W]hen a mistake in world-building or function-advancing is detected by the reader or hearer, action,” she writes, “is normally taken to correct any inconsistencies or illogicalities which may have arisen in his or her conceptualisation of the discourse as a result.” In cases where there is a truly unexpected plot twist, “[t]he damage caused to the reader’s mental representation of the” text “may be so extensive . . . that world-replacement may be necessary.” This is what “The Presence” requires. Because the narrator’s awakening nullifies everything that came before, readers must engage not so much in the “repair of existing worlds” as in “their complete abandonment in favour of a new reading and new worlds.”⁶⁹ Phelps’s audience thinks that they are reading a story about the materialization of a woman’s dead husband, and their mental representations of the text reflect this belief. However, when they reach the last pages, they must quickly replace their old conceptual structure with a new one—one that represents the story of a woman who is intoxicated enough to think that spirit communication is actually possible. World-replacement is also necessary in Phelps’s *Beyond the Gates*, a novel in which a dead woman chronicles her time in heaven, describing in great detail its culture and social organization. In the end, however, readers discover that her entire experience of death and the other world was a dream, brought on by heavy narcotics. She wakes to find that “[t]he doctor is in the room; I hear him say that he shall change the medicine, and some one, I do not notice who, whispers that it is thirty hours since the stupor, from which I have aroused, began.”⁷⁰ If layers of epistemic distance do not create sufficient space between readers and improbable scenarios of spirit contact, then Phelps completes the derealization of these remote worlds by negating the entire story.

The Content of Distant Modal Worlds and the Reproduction of Conventional Sensory Practices

While copies of *The Gates Ajar* were selling at an astonishing rate, Spiritualism was on the decline. According to Nancy Schnog, “the novel attracted more than 100,000 buyers in its first few years of circulation and continued to draw readers for at least thirty years after its first reception” in 1868.⁷¹ Indeed, by 1900, it had, as John J. Kucich notes, sold “over two hundred thousand” copies “in the United States and abroad.”⁷² The novel’s popularity can also be gauged through the number of products to which it gave rise, including “clothing, cigars, funeral wreaths, and patent medicines.” Why did *The Gates Ajar*, a novel which many critics mistakenly call a Spiritualist text, set almost record-breaking sales figures, while Spiritualist writing never enjoyed such widespread appeal and was, by 1870, rapidly falling out of favor?

Gates was popular precisely because, unlike Spiritualist literature, it depicted a world in which the living and the dead were hopelessly separate. This separation is what causes Mary’s sadness. And it is the depiction of her unrestrained anguish that struck a chord with thousands of women readers. Typically, women in consolation novels control their grief by reminding themselves that their loved ones are merely “loans” from God, who can take them back whenever He wishes. God inflicts suffering, these women

believe, in order to correct their faults.⁷³ Yet, far from teaching Mary a lesson, Roy's death leaves her feeling angry with God, a reaction that, in the wake of the Civil War, seems to have been not uncommon. As one reviewer notes, "there are more Mary Cabots than one in this world."⁷⁴ Attempting to justify Mary's thoughts which border on the blasphemous, a writer for *The Congregational and Boston Recorder* "read[s] the narrative as a fragment taken out of somebody's real life, with all its imperfections, its blar-eyed views of truth, its skeptical surmises, its rebellious murmurings, its self-reproaches, its censorious judgments so natural to a wounded spirit."⁷⁵ Mary's rage and grief are a reaction to her belief that Roy will never return. While Spiritualist texts denied that the dead were really gone, *The Gates Ajar* acknowledged what many women knew to be true: their sons and husbands were not coming back. Recognizing that prevailing experience of death was one of absence instead of presence, the novel offers an unflinching representation of profound loss that resonated with countless mourners who, like Mary, found themselves alone. This seems to have been the primary reason for the text's popularity.

Still, another factor in *Gates's* popularity may have been that, unlike trance communications and séance reports which sought to disrupt the experiential status-quo, Phelps's novel worked to preserve familiar sensory practices. Through what I have called its aesthetic of desensualization—a style that consists of using modalized propositions to create layers of conceptual distance—the text accustoms readers to the idea that the dead will never impinge upon their senses and disrupt their conventional patterns of perception. This message, I want to suggest, is also reinforced by Phelps's descriptions of heaven. The content of distant modal-worlds in *Gates* suggests that, even if contact were possible, it would not lead, as Spiritualists hoped, to a revolution in perception and society. This is because, in Phelps's representation of heaven, the dead use their senses in the same way that her target audience does—to construct and reinforce a middle-class identity.

Based on the notion that people are unique and autonomous beings, this form of identity is privileged by Phelps who, as critics have noted, is appalled by the idea that individuality is extinguished in heaven. Considering Dr. Bland's notion that, in the afterlife, "there will be no separate interests, no thoughts to conceal," Winifred asserts that she "would rather be annihilated than to spend eternity with heart laid bare,—the inner temple thrown open to be trampled on by every passing stranger!" Such ideas are chilling because they "would destroy individuality at one fell swoop":

We should be like a man walking down a room lined with mirrors, who sees himself reflected in all sizes, colors, shades, at all angles and in all proportions, according to the capacity of the mirror, till he seems no longer to belong to himself, but to be cut up into ellipses and octagons and prisms. How soon would he grow frantic in such companionship, and beg for a corner where he might hide and hush himself in the dark?

Fortunately, "the Bible," she promises Mary, "premises our individuality as a matter of course." And, as Phelps's texts demonstrate, the sensory experiences provided by heavenly commodities and entertainments continually reinforce it.⁷⁶ Lori Merish argues that, in *The Gates Ajar*, "heaven is depicted as a consumer dream-world where individuals live in private homes with flower boxes, drink iced tea, play the piano, and possess 'nicer objects' than are found in 'the shops in Boston.'" The spirits imagined by

Winifred enact what Merish calls an “individualistic conception of consumption” by using commodities to “express” their singular personalities.⁷⁷ However, before they can facilitate the expression of individuality, commodities must provide sensory impressions that allow perceivers to conceive of themselves as separate, bounded entities.

In Phelps’s texts, heavenly commodities create a solitary experience of consumption that at once creates and confirms the perception of an inviolable interiority. For instance, when Winifred’s daughter Faith speculates that, “P’r’aps,” after death, she’ll “have some strawberries,” “some ginger-snaps,” “some little gold apples,” “some little pink blocks,” and “a little red cloud to sail round in,” she does not seem interested in sharing these things with her friend, Molly Bland who, she says disparagingly, “don’t know much!” Rather, these things are for her private enjoyment. Similarly, Winifred tells Clo, a student in her Sunday school class, “if you will be a good girl, and go to heaven, I think you will have a piano there, and play just as much as you care to.”⁷⁸ She imagines that, for Clo, the pleasure of the piano will lie, not in sharing music with others, but in “play[ing]” for personal satisfaction. The role of sensory experience in the constitution of individual subjectivity is also clear in *Beyond the Gates* where a concert by the long-dead genius Beethoven inspires intense feelings of introspection. Mary writes, “When the oratorio has ended, and we glide out, each hushed as a hidden thought, to his own ways, I stay beneath a linden-tree to gather breath.” Attending a “Symphony of Color,” she develops a consciousness of individual agency as “Pleasures, which we could receive or dismiss at will, wandered by, and were assimilated by those extra senses which I have no means of describing.” The event teaches her “to accept sheer pleasure as an end in and of itself.”⁷⁹ According to Dillon, “sense activity registers a form of subjectivity”; it “is what gives us access to the category of subjectivity.”⁸⁰ Through “sense activity” incited by the consumption of products and entertainments, characters in *The Gates Ajar* and *Beyond the Gates* become aware of themselves as discrete centers of private feelings.

Spirits use their senses not only to confirm their status as individuals, but also to align themselves with the celestial middle-class. David Howe argues that “the sensuous contrasts that set one commodity off from another” are used to communicate “relations of solidarity” as well as “differences in social location.”⁸¹ Whether listening to classical music, playing the piano, or selecting objects to decorate private homes, the spirits in Winifred’s hypothetical heaven choose to engage in sensory experiences that clearly mark their “social location” as middle-class. The senses are also used to create class distinctions in *Beyond the Gates*. Before waking from her drug-induced dream, Mary “observed the greatest varieties of rank in the celestial kingdom”: “There were powers above me, and powers below; there were natural and harmonious social selections; there were laws and their officers; there was obedience and its dignity; there was influence and its authority; there were gifts and their distinctions.” The “passpor[t] to power,” she discovers, is “personal holiness,” and a spirit’s level of holiness is signified by both the size of his sensorium and the quality of his impressions. Because people possess varying degrees of goodness, “the growth of these celestial powers,” she notes, “was variable with individuals throughout the higher world.” For instance, the sophistication of her own senses set her apart from “uneducated people, and coarse people, who had yet to be trained to so many of the highest varieties of happiness.” And, like her (living) middle-class counterparts, she has a strong philanthropic impulse and believes that it is her duty to elevate the degraded perceptions of those below her. Moreover, her sophisticated

senses place her well above her readers, whom she regards as inferior and even uncivilized because of their limited perceptual capacities. Trying to “describ[e] to beings who possess but five senses and their corresponding imaginative culture, the habits or enjoyments consequent upon the development of ten senses or fifteen,” is, she writes, like trying to explain Christian concepts to an “African tribe” that has “six different words descriptive of murder; [but] none whatever expressive of love.” However, when compared with those of more advanced spirits, Mary’s senses seem rudimentary. During the *Symphony of Color*, combinations of hues “played upon optic nerves exquisitely trained to receive such effects,” but “[b]eing a new-comer, and still so unlearned,” she “could not understand” this art form “as many of the spectators did.” Similarly, though she was thrilled by her new-found ability to hear music emanating from heaven’s birds and brooks, she “surmised that they were some of the simplest of the wonders of this mythical world, which were entrusted to new-comers, as being first within the range of their capacities.”⁸² But Mary is only dreaming that she is in heaven. And when she awakes, the conceptual space that contains these sensory experiences is replaced by a new world in which she is sick and hallucinating.

In Phelps’s texts, worlds that are created in response to representations of the afterlife may, as I have argued throughout the chapter, be positioned at the bottom of a conceptual hierarchy, a location that would make them seem less actual and substantial than readers’ realities. But they are still there, imparting information and shaping how readers think about their senses. If readers learn anything from these remote spaces, it’s that the purpose of the senses is both to individuate the perceiver and to signal his inclusion in a particular social class. Phelps’s works may have been more popular than the productions of Spiritualist writers because they encouraged her target audience of middle-class readers to continue using their senses as they always had: to create barriers between self and not-self, one social group and another. In contrast, Spiritualist literature invited readers to think about and to exercise their perceptual faculties in new and potentially frightening ways. The purpose of the movement’s texts was to prepare readers to participate in a sensory revolution that would disrupt the existing social order by dissolving distinctions of all kinds. In the works considered here, Phelps denies the possible actualization of such a scenario by leaving it unrepresented, an omission that makes the Spiritualist dream of a new sensory paradigm seem less real than the most distant sub-world.

Conclusion

Criticized by doctors, scientists, and other cultural authorities, Spiritualism's espousal of unorthodox sensory practices, like listening to disembodied voices, touching spirits, and seeing the exterior projection of interior states, may have limited the movement's appeal. Its sharp decline in the 1870s, however, was also precipitated by its late adoption of a more mainstream, ocularcentric sensorium. Capitulating to the notion that seeing is believing, mediums added visible materializations to their repertoires and Spiritualist photographers declared that they could capture the dead on chemically-treated plates. In 1862, a Boston photographer by the name of William Mumler presented a self-portrait that showed the faint outline of a human form standing behind him and claimed that the mysterious shape was his dead cousin. This image quickly established him as America's first "spirit-photographer," and his studio became popular with famous Spiritualists like Mary Todd Lincoln who—in one of Mumler's most famous shots—appears to be in the arms of her recently assassinated husband. Believers like Mrs. Lincoln were convinced that the camera could transform seemingly absent loved ones into visible presences, but critics had doubts and suspected that the pictures were produced in one of two ways: either Mumler was photographing living models and superimposing their images onto the portraits of his clients or he was following the same process, but using stolen pictures of the deceased, instead. Mumler was tried for fraud in 1869 and, though he was not convicted, the episode destroyed his credibility and brought Spiritualism's other observable "facts" in for close scrutiny.¹

Visible materializations were also demystified. By the early 1870s, the "spirit cabinet" had become a common feature in séance rooms. Performing in parlors illuminated by candles and gas jets, mediums would enter these small closets and, moments later, what believers claimed were materialized spirits would emerge to address and embrace participants who (thanks to the lighting) could capture the figures on camera. The most famous spirit to come from a cabinet was Katie King. First photographed in London, King later appeared during a sitting in Philadelphia and asked to meet the well-known American Spiritualist Robert Dale Owen. Owen learned of the request and agreed to attend the circle. He "found this materialization credible," writes historian Ann Braude, "because the mediums, Mr. and Mrs. Nelson Holmes, remained outside the cabinet in full view during Katie's appearances and therefore could not be impersonating her." In an article intended for the *Atlantic Monthly*, Owen expressed his complete faith in the Holmes and in the evidential value of his own visual impressions which seemed to prove beyond a doubt that King was a materialized spirit. Soon after submitting this ringing endorsement, however, he learned that he had been tricked—Katie King seemed like a real live woman because, in fact, she was. "Once mediums began to traffic in materialization, fraud," Braude observes, "was much easier to prove and certainly required the mediums' conscious collusion. Incorrect messages could be attributed to the effect of a variety of psychological forces on an unconscious medium. But nothing could remove the guilt from a medium who donned a wig in a spirit closet."² It was too late for Owen to retract the article and, when it appeared, he was publicly humiliated. The Katie King episode inspired such hostility toward Spiritualism that the movement never fully recovered.³ By the mid-1870s, magicians, writes Howard Kerr,

“exhibited the techniques of fraudulent manifestations,” and “[m]ediums began to find themselves the frequent targets of newspaper exposés and legal harassment.” Having had its heyday in the 1850s and 60s, Spiritualism started, by the last quarter of the century, to devolve into “a minor quasi-religious cult.” Mediums and séance participants still produced literature describing their sensory encounters with the dead. However, while these texts found an audience among Spiritualists, they no longer excited the broader public. The movement would “continue in relative obscurity, without a great deal of popular appeal, until given a new impetus by the deaths of American and British soldiers in World War I.”⁴

The doctrines and rituals of Spiritualism seem to have little resonance today. However, the movement’s poetry and prose may be of interest to scholars of nineteenth-century American literature who—working to revive the historical linkages between aesthetics, sensation, and politics—are beginning to put questions about style, affect, and social organization at the center of their work.⁵ As noted in the introduction, the ascendancy of political and cultural approaches to literature, there has been a tendency to marginalize aesthetic concerns by associating them with New Critical beliefs in self-referential art and rarified academic debates about transhistorical beauty.⁶ But, as Terry Eagleton notes, the idea that aesthetics is divorced from lived experience is inaccurate because “[a]esthetics” was “born as a discourse of the body.”⁷ The word “aesthetic” originates from the Greek *αἰσθητικός* which means “of or relating to sense perception.”⁸ Maintaining this classical emphasis on materiality and the body, Alexander Baumgarten, the eighteenth-century German philosopher who defined aesthetics as a discipline within philosophy, described it as “the science of sensitive perception.”⁹ When Baumgarten delineates the field of aesthetics, “[i]t is,” Eagleton writes, “as though philosophy suddenly wakes up to the fact that there is a dense, swarming territory beyond its own mental enclave,” and “[t]hat territory is nothing less than the whole of our sensate life together—the business of affections and aversions, of how the world strikes the body on its sensory surfaces, of that which takes root in the gaze and the guts and all that arises from our most banal, biological insertion into the world.”¹⁰

This emphatically corporeal discourse addressed pressing political needs. It emerged at a time in Europe when absolutist powers were giving way to more liberal forms of government, which were built on the idea that citizens could, without the imposition of external laws, regulate their own behavior by attending to their feelings and sensations. It was ideally suited to the political problems of the time because it offered a logic through which liberty and limitation, freedom and coercion might be reconciled. According to philosophers of the aesthetic like Baumgarten and Kant, an individual’s response to artistic stimulation is not conditioned by concepts, but is instead a spontaneous, subjective expression of an autonomous self. This seemingly unique reaction links the perceiver to a community of others who are moved by the art object in the same way. Thus, the structure of aesthetic experience presented eighteenth-century philosophers, artists, and politicians with what seemed to be a useful paradox: people who consult their hearts and live in accordance with personal principles are more inclined to feel like everyone else and to adhere to the laws of society.¹¹

Remembering these historical connections between aesthetics, sensation, and social cohesion, literary critic Elizabeth Maddock Dillon argues that, in mediating the divide between the individual and the group, the aesthetics of nineteenth-century

American sentimental poetry united white, middle-class women in a community of taste. Dillon argues that sentimentalism and aesthetics are twin discourses: each one is centered on the body and attempts to produce sensation for the purpose of stimulating subjects into existence and drawing them together through shared sensory experiences:

[S]ense-activity matters to aesthetic theory because it registers a form of subjectivity: sense-activity is what gives us access to the category of subjectivity. Aesthetics aims at producing feeling subjects who, insofar as they feel, are able to understand their own subjectivity as free—personal, unconditioned, and creative. It is the subjective feeling of freedom and personhood that eighteenth-century aesthetic theory links to the ideal of human freedom and the (putatively) universal rights of man that are central to liberal political theory. In related terms, sentimentalism links the capacity of individuals to feel deeply (often, to suffer) to an essential, shared humanity.¹²

As is the case with a subject shaped by aesthetic theory, a subject interpellated by sentimentalism construes her sensations as confirmations of her uniqueness and autonomy. That these seemingly idiosyncratic impressions are actually widespread make it possible for her to identify with others and to form an association of “individuals.”

While Dillon looks at how sentimental poems bind an exclusive community of women, Paul Gilmore explores how other nineteenth-century texts attempted to use the affective power of language to create a network so radically inclusive that it could admit anyone with a sentient body. He argues that writers in the Romantic tradition like Elizabeth Peabody, Walt Whitman, Henry Thoreau, and Frederick Douglas among others believed that the “aesthetic moment” is a sensory experience that works like electricity. “Aesthetic experience” was, for them, “electric, for as electricity had been shown to pass mysteriously, almost immaterially, from one material body to other bodies, so the aesthetic experience (through language . . .) seemed also to temporarily dissolve the distinctions between self and other, mind and body.” These authors, he contends, thought that, by breaking down the boundaries of autonomous individuals and reproducing the same impressions in different people, aesthetics, like electricity, “creates a sense of shared humanity” and “fosters the imagination of a collectivity.” Gilmore acknowledges that aesthetics can be used to marginalize disempowered populations and that the associations forged through the appreciation of art have often been narrow: “aesthetics has been used to reinforce social, economic, and political distinctions by placing certain groups outside the universal humanity that aesthetic claims involve.” What makes the writers in his essay so important, he argues, is that, among them, aesthetic experience “is consistently imagined as open to any person with any kind of history, regardless of subject position.” It “creates a sense of shared humanity, defined not by economic or political interest, as with class or nation, but by the possession of a sensorial body.” Because the only requirement is a body capable of feeling, “[t]he aesthetic’s universalizing claims imply a kind of egalitarianism that might be translated to the political sphere, where it can offer a starting point for building coalitions and communities across the lines of race, class, and gender reified by identity politics.”¹³ Whether searching for a way beyond a divisive political landscape or explaining the creation of a culture among white, middle-class, women, the writings of Gilmore and Dillon perform crucial work because they remind us that “identity” and “association”

refer, not to abstractions, but to feelings of being and connection. More importantly, they suggest to us that nineteenth-century American literature may have played a key role in shaping such basic experiences.

Yet, while Gilmore and Dillon refer to the body, they continue to treat it as an abstract site of inscription, rather than as an organism with its own physiological requirements and imperatives. They do this by overlooking the question that is at the center of their arguments: how do these nineteenth-century texts actually “produce” sensations? This elision is illustrated by Gilmore who, rightly, contends that “consider[ing] aesthetic experience as recorded and inculcated by certain literary practices within specific historical situations” is “the next step in . . . cultural and historical approaches to the literary sphere.” This “step,” he implies, is being taken by his own work. But rather than offering an explanation of how language compels readers to experience the “aesthetic moment,” he concentrates on “how American romantics frequently invoke metaphors of and hypotheses about electricity to describe the aesthetic potential to transform the world.” In other words, he focuses on how they articulated their claims about aesthetics instead of presenting any linguistic strategies that they might have used to enact the truth of their assertions. After a careful study of their metaphors and of the history behind them, Gilmore concludes that “What remains largely implicit” in his essay “is an account of how the descriptions of aesthetic experience . . . might constitute or be translated into a kind of practice, creating more such experiences among audiences.”¹⁴ Yet, while his essay certainly implies the need for such an account, it does not indicate—even indirectly—what that account might be.

Like Gilmore, Dillon discusses the representation of aesthetic experiences rather than the linguistic features that might trigger them. She states that the bodily nature of sentimental literature “involves the capacity to bind a community through feeling,” but does not identify how they do this. Though she claims that sentimental poems are instrumental in the formation of coalitions, her true focus is on the ways in which these texts reveal the compromised nature of the seemingly pure and unconstrained sensations at the heart of aesthetic experience, an exposure that she hopes will make it possible for literary critics to finally transcend the binary that typically structures discussions of the aesthetic. According to Dillon, aesthetics “has tended to be viewed in contemporary criticism either as a form of ideology or as its opposite—the site of emancipation from ideology.” Scholars regard “aesthetic autonomy” as either genuinely liberated or “far from free” and “decisively linked to forms of social hegemony and coercion.” Registering this perceived split between liberty and restraint, sentimental poems depict the home as a place “determined by free will, love, and desire” and the public sphere as a space that is governed by “material need” and “compulsion.” Dillon contends that, though these texts represent the divide between the public and the private, they also suggest that the two realms are necessarily interrelated. Thus, the freedom of the home like the freedom of aesthetic autonomy is always, to some extent, constrained by history and politics. This vexed relationship between dependence and independence is an explicit theme that is also, she suggests, “written into sentimentalism itself.” Referring to the work of June Howard, she notes that “sentimentalism . . . is tied to a notion of excess. It involves a kind of emotion . . . that is recognizably cultivated, even constructed.” If the feeling expressed in sentimental poetry represents the spontaneity of individual experience, and the elaborate language through which it is articulated is analogous to the limitations of

society, then the overwrought style of these texts is, Dillon suggests, a metaphor for aesthetic experience.¹⁵ Yet, while this is an interesting observation, it does not address how the poems prompt bodily responses. Modeling an encounter between feeling and form, the symbolism of sentimental language may help readers understand on a conceptual level what an aesthetic experience is. However, there is no reason why it would cause them to feel on a psychological and physical level that their personal energies were being simultaneously expressed and inhibited.

My dissertation contributes to discussions about aesthetics, sensation, and nineteenth-century literature in two ways. First, it supports and strengthens the work of critics like Gilmore and Dillon by demonstrating that cognitive poetics can be a productive approach to the study of textually-induced experiences. Cognitive poetics is not a unified methodology, but rather a constellation of diverse claims about how the mind processes literary texts and a collection of practical techniques for analyzing how stylized language produces reader-centered affects.¹⁶ Using research on subjects like orientation processing, figure-ground perception, and mental imagery, my dissertation attempts to identify some of the mechanisms through which language might affect perception. In this way, it attends to the issues of causation that are elided in the arguments of Dillon and Gilmore as well as in the wider literary debate about language and the body.

In addition to modeling approaches that can be used to examine the relationship between language and reader-centered affects, my dissertation also foregrounds a neglected subset of literature that seems to have an unusually high concentration of sensory cues. Many of the rhetorical strategies that are used in Spiritualist trance poems also appear, though with less regularity, in sentimental poems like those examined by Dillon. These shared features may have made it possible for readers of sentimental poetry to experience an embodied connection between self and world that is similar to the one that she describes, albeit with less of an emphasis on self-perceptions of autonomy and more on feelings of fluidity and openness. Thus, by focusing on Spiritualist literary aesthetics, we may be able to gauge the potential of sentimentalism to stimulate (or inhibit) bodily responses and to forge alliances based on a common sensory experience. Furthermore, Spiritualist literature may broaden the perspective of critics like Gilmore who, focusing on texts by more familiar authors, may be unable to find the kinds of perceptually provocative linguistic formations that they seem to be seeking. Gilmore's study of Romantic authors concludes with a note of disappointment: "None of the writers I have glanced at fully constructed the vision of the aesthetic I have attempted to discern." Rather than triggering bodily responses through their words, they only "point in the direction of imagining an aesthetic moment experienced on a material, bodily level." I want to suggest that, where Gilmore's writers failed, Spiritualist writers may have succeeded. Participants in the movement believed that social reform depended on sensory reform and were convinced that language had the power to shape perception. Motivated by particular religious doctrines and by a theologically based desire to transform perception, they seem to have crafted their trance poems, séance reports, and vision epics with the purpose of producing lowly-differentiated sensations that might, they hoped, transform a conceptually carved-up world into an undivided perceptual field, a space of possibility from which less restrictive identities and more inclusive coalitions might emerge. "[A]esthetic experience," writes Gilmore, "could become a precondition to

greater political and social freedom and equality by imagining a universally shared terrain in place of the delimited ground of identity politics,” and, therefore, “any progressive cultural critique that dismisses the power of the aesthetic moment altogether abandons its latent possibilities.”¹⁷ My dissertation suggests that critics and activists might come closer to actualizing these possibilities by examining and, in the case of the latter, deploying the rhetorical strategies found in nineteenth-century American Spiritualist literature.

Notes

Introduction

¹ Lizzie Doten, "Declaration of Faith," in *Poems of Progress* (Boston: William White & Co., 1871), 5-10, 6-7.

² Slater Brown, *The Heyday of Spiritualism* (New York: Pocket Books, 1972); Howard Kerr, *Mediums, and Spirit-Rappers, and Roaring Radicals: Spiritualism in American Literature, 1850-1900* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972); Russell M. Goldfarb and Clare R. Goldfarb, *Spiritualism and Nineteenth-Century Letters* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1978); Daniel Cottom, *Abyss of Reason: Cultural Movements, Revelations and Betrayals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Bret E. Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

³ Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 2-3.

⁴ Kerr, *Mediums, and Spirit-Rappers*, 3-21; Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 16-34.

⁵ Emma Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism, a Twenty Years' Record of the Communion between Earth and the World of Spirits* (New York: Published by the Author, 1869), 13, 239.

⁶ Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 123-25.

⁷ "The Literature of Spirit-Rapping," *The National Review* 4, no. 7 (1857): 131-51, 131-32.

⁸ Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 159-60. For more on Spiritualism and the press, see Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 25, 26, 30, 75-76, 146; John J. Kucich, "Public Spirits: Spiritualism in American Periodicals," in *Ghostly Communion: Cross-Cultural Spiritualism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2004), 36-58.

⁹ Mattison, H., *Spirit-Rapping Unveiled! An Expose of the Origin, History, Theology and Philosophy of Certain Alleged Communications from the Spirit World, by Means Of "Spirit Rapping," "Medium Writing," "Physical Demonstrations," Etc.* (New York: J. C. Derby, 1855), 3-4, 165-66. See also William A. Hammond, *Spiritualism and Allied Causes and Conditions of Nervous Derangement* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1876).

¹⁰ Some studies of aesthetics and the body appeared in the 80s and 90s. See, for instance, Karen Sanchez-Eppler, "Bodily Bonds: The Intersecting Rhetorics of Feminism and Abolition," *Representations* no. 24 (1988): 28-59; Shirley Samuels, ed, *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Karen Sanchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Julia Stern, *The Plight of Feeling: Sympathy and Dissent in the Early American Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997). However, since 2000, interest in this area has intensified, and critics have produced several studies on literature and feeling. Books representing this trend include Michael Syrotinski and Ian Maclachlan, eds., *Sensual Reading: New Approaches to Reading and Its Relations to the Senses* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2001); Charles Altieri, *The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of the Affects* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, "Sentimental Aesthetics," *American Literature* 76, no. 3 (2004): 495-523; Paul Gilmore, "Romantic Electricity, or the Materiality of Aesthetics," *American Literature* 76, no. 3 (2004): 467-94; Ralf Hertel, *Making Sense: Sense Perception in the British Novel of the 1980s and 1990s* (New York: Rodopi, 2005); Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

¹⁰ The pronouncements in *Deleuze and American Literature: Affect and Virtuality in Faulkner, Wharton, Ellison, and McCarthy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), by Alan Bourassa exemplify many recent critical statements on the subject of literature and the body. In addition to saying that "language creates the human," Bourassa also asserts that "Literature is the intersection of language and the human" (1). That literature can inspire the shedding of real tears is taken for granted in Sanchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty*, and in Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler, eds. *Sentimental Men: Masculinity and the Politics of Affect in American Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

¹¹ Charles Altieri, "Taking Lyrics Literally: Teaching Poetry in a Prose Culture," *New Literary History* 32, no. 2 (2001): 259-81. Charles Altieri, *The Particulars of Rapture*, 1, 3, 2, 1, 1-36.

¹² Altieri, *The Particulars of Rapture*, 1, 2, 4.

- ¹³ Charles Altieri, "Ugly Feelings, Powerful Sensibilities [Review of Sianne Ngai's book *Ugly Feelings*]," *Contemporary Literature* 47, no. 1 (2006): 147, 145-146.
- ¹⁴ Altieri, *The Particulars of Rapture*, 30, 5.
- ¹⁵ Altieri, "Taking Lyrics Literally," 278.
- ¹⁶ Altieri, *The Particulars of Rapture*, 28, 33.
- ¹⁷ Altieri, *The Particulars of Rapture*, 26; Altieri, "Taking Lyrics Literally," 267.
- ¹⁸ Altieri, "Taking Lyrics Literally," 261.
- ¹⁹ Eric Rothstein, "Aesthetics of Deliberation, Aesthetics of Rapture [Review of Charles Altieri's book *The Particulars of Rapture*]," *Contemporary Literature* 46, no. 1 (2005): 150, 157.
- ²⁰ Peter Stockwell, *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002), 1-12; Joanna Gavins, *Cognitive Poetics in Practice* (London: Routledge), 1-12.
- ²¹ Elaine Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Mary Thomas Crane and Alan Richardson, "Literary Studies and Cognitive Science: Toward a New Interdisciplinarity," *Mosaic* no. 32 (1999): 123-40; James Dawes, "Fictional Feeling: Philosophy, Cognitive Science, and the American Gothic," *American Literature* 76, no. 3 (2004): 437-466.
- ²² Altieri, *The Particulars of Rapture*, 26.
- ²³ Altieri, "Taking Lyrics Literally," 277.
- ²⁴ For example, his response to Othello's murder of Desdemona and subsequent suicide seems anomalous in the context of modern reactions to the play. Speaking of these violent acts he writes, "It is difficult to imagine any more complete measure of love than one in which an agent both sacrifices the other and destroys himself in its name. And it is difficult to imagine a richer understanding of justice than one that so divides the self that its only recourse is self-destruction" (Altieri, *The Particulars of Rapture*, 22). That this disturbing view might be unique to Altieri is suggested by Rothstein, who writes that, in fact, it is "not so difficult if one reads frequent newspaper tales of jealous boyfriends, would-be boyfriends, husbands, and ex-husbands who do themselves in after they self-righteously shoot, stab, bludgeon, and drown women who reject them, or who they think reject them" (Rothstein, "Aesthetics of Deliberation," 157).
- ²⁵ While Stockwell and Gavins claim that cognitive poetic frameworks account for the influence of culture on the mental processes involved in reading, social context plays a very small role in any of the literary readings featured in their texts (Stockwell, *Cognitive Poetics*, 4, 5, 8; Gavins, *Cognitive Poetics in Practice*, 1-12).
- ²⁶ Walter J. Ong, *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967); Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977); Marshall McLuhan, "Inside the Five Sense Sensorium," in *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, ed. David Howes (Oxford: Berg, 2005); Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962).
- ²⁷ Howes, *Empire of the Senses*, 399.
- ²⁸ For studies on the cultural construction of these understudied senses, see Michael Bull and Les Back, eds., *The Auditory Culture Reader* (Oxford: Berg, 2003); Jim Drobnick, ed., *The Smell Culture Reader* (Oxford: Berg, 2006); Carolyn Korsmeyer, ed., *The Taste Culture Reader: Experiencing Food and Drink* (Oxford: Berg, 2005).
- ²⁹ David D. Hall, *Cultures of Print: Essays in the History of the Book* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996); Richard Cullen Rath, *How Early America Sounded* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003); Peter Charles Hoffer, *Sensory Worlds in Early America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Mark M. Smith, *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).
- ³⁰ Reuven Tsur, *On the Shore of Nothingness: A Study in Cognitive Poetics* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2003); Tsur, "Deixis and Abstractions: Adventures in Space and Time," in Gavins, *Cognitive Poetics in Practice*, 41-54.
- ³¹ Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book*; James J. Gibson, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966); Stephen M. Kosslyn, William L. Thompson, and Giorgio Ganis, *The Case for Mental Imagery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).
- ³² Stockwell, "Conceptual Metaphor," in *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction*, 105-119.

³³ Paul Werth, *Text Worlds: Representing Conceptual Space in Discourse* (Harlow, UK: Longman, 1999); Joanna Gavins, *Text World Theory: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

³⁴ Altieri, *The Particulars of Rapture*, 5, 2, 33, 5.

1. "Oh, listen to the sound I hear!": Spiritualist Trance Poetry and the Redefinition of Healthy Hearing

¹ Sarah Gould, "Prophetic Glimpses," in *Asphodels* (New York: Rudd & Carleton, 1860), 12.

² Lizzie Doten, "Hope for the Sorrowing," in *Poems from the Inner Life* (Boston: Colby & Rich, 1863), 54.

³ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁴ Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 1-9; Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 1-15; Cottom, *Abyss of Reason*, 3-21; Goldfarb and Goldfarb, *Spiritualism and Nineteenth-Century Letters*, 26-50; Kerr, *Mediums, and Spirit-Rappers*, 3-21, 108-20.

⁵ Mary Bednarowski, "Lizzie Doten: Literary Spiritualist" (doctoral dissertation, Duquesne University, 1969), 6; Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 82-90; Brown, *The Heyday of Spiritualism*, 224-44; Kerr, *Mediums, and Spirit-Rappers*, 18-21.

⁶ Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 7, 250-51, 7, 164-68, 4, 78-82, 101-24, 53-68.

⁷ Hammond, *Spiritualism and Allied Causes*, 363.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 138, 364.

⁹ Mattison, *Spirit-Rapping Unveiled!*, 76.

¹⁰ Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 3-4, 7, 78-82, 101-24, 53-68, 79-98, 203-07, 50.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 199-245; Lizzie Doten, "A Word to the World," in *Poems from the Inner Life* (Boston: Colby & Rich, 1863), v-xxviii; Doten, "Declaration of Faith," 6-8; S. B. Brittan, "Introduction," in *An Epic of the Starry Heaven*, by Thomas Lake Harris (New York: Partridge & Brittan, 1854), i-ii.

¹² Reuven Tsur, *On the Shore of Nothingness: A Study in Cognitive Poetics* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2003), 33-34, 105-06.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 92, 94-97, 102-03, 105-06, 124, 231.

¹⁴ Reuven Tsur, "Deixis and Abstractions: Adventures in Space and Time," in Gavins, *Cognitive Poetics in Practice*, 46; Tsur, *On the Shore of Nothingness*, 61, 92, 114, 21, 30-31, 236, 324-25.

¹⁵ Aside from Tsur's work, the only full-length study of poetry and altered consciousness that I know of is Edward Douglas Snyder, *Hypnotic Poetry: A Study of Trance-Inducing Technique in Certain Poems and Its Literary Significance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1930). Writing over eighty years ago, Snyder uses psychology that is now out of date. He does not offer an explanation of how the brain processes information, something that must be taken into account when studying how readers respond to language. For more on trance states, see Erika Bourguignon, *Religion, Altered States of Consciousness, and Social Change* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1973); Gilbert Rouget, *Music and Trance: A Theory of the Relations between Music and Possession* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); Dennis Wier, *Trance: From Magic to Technology* (Ann Arbor, MI: Trans Media, 1996); Judith O. Becker, *Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion, and Trancing* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); Bettina E. Schmidt and Lucy Huskinson, eds., *Spirit Possession and Trance: New Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (London: Continuum, 2010).

¹⁶ Harrison D. Barret, *The Life Work of Mrs. Cora L.V. Richmond* (Chicago: Hack and Anderson, 1895), 215.

¹⁷ Bednarowski, "Lizzie Doten: Literary Spiritualist", 12-14, 17-19, 21.

¹⁸ Sarah Gould, ed., *Our Happy Home; or, The Family Circle* (Boston: Bradley, Dayton & Co., 1856); Sarah Gould, ed., *A Golden Legacy to Daughters; or, Advice to Young Ladies* (Boston: Higgins, Bradley and Dayton, 1857).

¹⁹ Jennie Rennell, *Chips, "Lectures in Rhyme"; Poems, Messages and Songs* (privately published, 1890), v.

²⁰ Mary Louise Kete, *Sentimental Collaborations: Mourning and Middle-Class Identity in Nineteenth-Century America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

²¹ Robyn R. Warhol, *Gendered Interventions: Narrative Discourse in the Victorian Novel* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989); Philip Fisher, *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Joanne Dobson, "Reclaiming Sentimental Literature," *American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism, and Bibliography*, 62, no. 2 (1997); Shirley Samuels, ed., *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America*

- (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, "Sentimental Aesthetics," *American Literature* 76, no. 3 (2004): 495-523; Karen Sanchez-Eppler, "Bodily Bonds: The Intersecting Rhetorics of Feminism and Abolition," *Representations* 24 (1988): 28-59; Sanchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty*.
- ²² Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 1-9; Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 1-15; Cottom, *Abyss of Reason*, 3-21; Goldfarb and Goldfarb, *Spiritualism and Nineteenth-Century Letters*, 26-50; Kerr, *Mediums, and Spirit-Rappers*, 3-21, 108-20.
- ²³ Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 199-202.
- ²⁴ Emanuel Swedenborg, *Heaven and its Wonders and Hell, Drawn from Things Heard and Seen* (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2000), section 1, 89. Sections of the book are numbered, and theologians usually cite it by section. This work was first published in 1758, and first published in English in 1778.
- ²⁵ Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 206.
- ²⁶ Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 18-22.
- ²⁷ Swedenborg, *Heaven and its Wonders*, section 248, 211-12; section 249, 212-13.
- ²⁸ Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 23-24.
- ²⁹ Hammond, *Spiritualism and Allied Causes*, 50.
- ³⁰ Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 88-90.
- ³¹ Doten, "A Word to the World," vii, xxvi-xxviii.
- ³² Brown, *The Heyday of Spiritualism*, 238.
- ³³ Bednarowski, "Lizzie Doten: Literary Spiritualist," 6.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 6-7; Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 84-98. For Spiritualists who describe this process, see Jennie Rennell, "Preface," in *Chips*, v-vi; S. B. Brittan, "Appendix C," in *An Epic of the Starry Heaven*, 208-10.
- ³⁵ Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 92, 26, 29.
- ³⁶ Quoted in Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 54.
- ³⁷ J. E. Bruce and J. H. Dewey, "The New Movement in Spiritualism," *American Spiritual Magazine* 2, issue 11 (1876): 340.
- ³⁸ Quoted in Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 52.
- ³⁹ Doten, "A Word to the World," xxv-xxvi, xxvi.
- ⁴⁰ Doten, "Hope for the Sorrowing," 54-56.
- ⁴¹ John Lyons, "Reference, Sense, and Denotation," in *Semantics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 1:174-229; Steven C. Levinson, "Deixis," in *Pragmatics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 54-96; Elena Semino, "Deixis and Context Creation," in *Language and World Creation in Poems and Other Texts* (London: Longman, 1997), 31-51; Peter Matthews, "Deixis," in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 96.
- ⁴² Levinson, "Deixis," 54; David Crystal, "Deixis," in *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics* (Malden, MA, Blackwell, 2008), 133.
- ⁴³ Semino, "Deixis and Context Creation," 33.
- ⁴⁴ Levinson, "Deixis," 62, 63, 67; Matthews, "Deixis," 96; Semino, "Deixis and Context Creation," 34.
- ⁴⁵ Levinson, "Deixis," 83.
- ⁴⁶ Levinson, "Deixis," 79-82.
- ⁴⁷ Tsur, "Deixis and Abstractions," 41.
- ⁴⁸ Tsur, *On the Shore of Nothingness*, 93, 96, 238, 93-94, 93, 96.
- ⁴⁹ Tsur, "Deixis and Abstractions," 45, 41-45; Tsur, *On the Shore of Nothingness*, 124, 325, 102-24.
- ⁵⁰ Tsur, *On the Shore of Nothingness*, 154, 114, 160, 92, 130-31, 114, 160; Tsur, "Deixis and Abstractions," 46.
- ⁵¹ Andrew Newberg, Eugene D'Aquili, and Vince Rause, *Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2001), 28; Tsur, *On the Shore of Nothingness*, 94.
- ⁵² Tsur, *On the Shore of Nothingness*, 95, 97, 92, 96-97, 102-03, 92, 124.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 92, 105-06, 231.
- ⁵⁴ Auke Tellegen, "Practicing the Two Disciplines for Relaxation and Enlightenment: Comment on 'Role of the Feedback Signal in Electromyograph biofeedback: The Relevance of Attention' by Qualls and Sheehan." *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 2, no. 110 (1981): 222.
- ⁵⁵ Tsur, *On the Shore of Nothingness*, 106.
- ⁵⁶ Doten, "Hope for the Sorrowing," 54-55.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 54, 55, 55-56, 54-55.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 55-56.

⁵⁹ Tsur, *On the Shore of Nothingness*, 114, 160.

⁶⁰ Ong, *The Presence of the Word*; McLuhan, "Inside the Five Sense Sensorium"; McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*; Edmund Carpenter and Marshall McLuhan, "Acoustic Space," in *Explorations in Communication: An Anthology*, ed. Edmund Carpenter and Marshall McLuhan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960); Hertel, *Making Sense*; Don Ihde, "Auditory Imagination," in *The Auditory Culture Reader*, ed. Michael Bull and Les Back (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 61-66; Paul Filmer, "Songtime: Sound Culture, Rhythm and Sociality," in *The Auditory Culture Reader*, 91-112; Oliver Sacks, "The Mind's Eye: What the Blind See," in *Empire of the Senses*, ed. David Howes, 25-42.

⁶¹ McLuhan, "Inside the Five Sense Sensorium," 49; Carpenter and McLuhan, "Acoustic Space," 67-68; Ong, *The Presence of the Word*, 111-38, 61-69.

⁶² Carpenter and McLuhan, "Acoustic Space," 67-69; Ong, *The Presence of the Word*, 45, 128-30; David Chidester, *Word and Light: Seeing, Hearing, and Religious Discourse* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 2-14. Hertel, *Making Sense*, 78.

⁶³ Carpenter and McLuhan, "Acoustic Space," 69, 66.

⁶⁴ Colonial America was a noisy place and people relied on natural sounds to negotiate their world. They listened to local birds and insects in order to distinguish one region from another; and they understood the roar of thunder and the rumble of earthquakes as signs of God's displeasure. Manmade sounds were also significant. The ringing of bells and the firing of cannons could, depending on the pattern of the tones, indicate either the presence of danger or the beginning of an important civil and/or religious event (Rath, *How Early America Sounded*; Smith, *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America*, 8, 10). Attentive to inarticulate sounds, they were also keenly aware of human speech. Children became literate by listening to others read aloud at home and in public spaces, while adults conducted business through verbal exchanges and received information through government proclamations, religious sermons, and local gossip (Hall, *Cultures of Print*; Smith, *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America*, 8, 10). For more on the subject of orality and early American culture, see Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Richard E. Brown, *Knowledge Is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Christopher Grasso, *A Speaking Aristocracy: Transforming Public Discourse in Eighteenth-Century Connecticut* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Jane Neill Kamensky, *Governing the Tongue: The Politics of Speech in Early New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). The study of orality also extends to the mid-eighteenth-century when rhetoricians developed highly stylized forms of address that emphasized the speaker's "sincerity" and "emotional credibility" (Jay Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, & the Culture of Performance* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993]). Recent work on the antebellum period demonstrates that Americans heard a clear difference between northern and southern soundscapes and used this perceived clash to establish opposing sectional values and identities. Sound was a symptom and a catalyst of the conflicts that led to the Civil War (Smith, *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America*).

⁶⁵ For the Puritans, decisions about who was fit to preach were determined institutionally rather than experientially. In contrast, radical sectaries claimed that one became a minister, not through a long process of education and training, but through an immediate and internally audible call from God. Prayer was also an auditory experience, an intimate conversation in which evangelicals listened and claimed to hear the friendly voice of Christ responding to their heartfelt expressions of love, joy, and fear. And all of these emotions were voiced during prayer meetings and revivals when the devout created a cacophony of moans and screams that, to the ears of those in more restrained denominations, sounded demonic (Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 40, 38-77).

⁶⁶ Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 11, 10. For more on the role of spiritual perception in American religion, see George M. Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience: A Case Study of Thought and Theology in Nineteenth-Century America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970); George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003); Anne Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

- ⁶⁷ Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 217.
- ⁶⁸ Emanuel Swedenborg, *Arcana Coelestia* (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 1998), vol. 3, section 2542, 316-17; vol. 5, section 3869, 240-48; vol. 6, section 4653, 389-90.
- ⁶⁹ Swedenborg, *Heaven and its Wonders*, section 271, 227, section 270, 225, note e; Swedenborg, *Arcana Coelestia*, vol. 6, section 4653, 389-90.
- ⁷⁰ Doten, "A Word to the World," xvi, viii, xii.
- ⁷¹ Rennell, *Chips*, v, 46.
- ⁷² Barbara Johnson, "Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion," *Diacritics* 16 (1986): 30.
- ⁷³ Kete, *Sentimental Collaborations*, 41.
- ⁷⁴ Doten "Hope for the Sorrowing," 54, 54-55.
- ⁷⁵ Lizzie Doten, "The Rainbow Bridge," in *Poems of Progress*, 39-40.
- ⁷⁶ Sarah Gould, "Restoration," in *Asphodels*, 9.
- ⁷⁷ Doten, "Hope for the Sorrowing," 55.
- ⁷⁸ Gould, "Prophetic Glimpses," 12; Sarah Gould, "The Love Circle," in *Asphodels*, 40; Sarah Gould, "The New Revelation," in *Asphodels*, 156; Sarah Gould, "Ministrations," in *Asphodels*, 112.
- ⁷⁹ Gould, "Prophetic Glimpses," 12; Gould, "The Love Circle," 40; Gould, "The New Revelation," 157; Gould, "Ministrations," 112.
- ⁸⁰ Doten, "A Word to the World," xx.
- ⁸¹ Brittan, "Introduction," iii, vi.
- ⁸² Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 194.
- ⁸³ Mattison, *Spirit-Rapping Unveiled!*, 163-64, 162-63.
- ⁸⁴ Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 179-98.
- ⁸⁵ Hammond, *Spiritualism and Allied Causes*, 4-5.
- ⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 256, 138.
- ⁸⁷ Mattison, *Spirit-Rapping Unveiled!*, 76.
- ⁸⁸ Hammond, *Spiritualism and Allied Causes*, 363.
- ⁸⁹ Mattison, *Spirit-Rapping Unveiled!*, 160-61.
- ⁹⁰ Brittan, "Introduction," ii.
- ⁹¹ Doten, "Declaration of Faith," 7, 8.
- ⁹² C.D.S., "Introduction," in *Voices from Spirit-Land* (New York: Holman, Gray & Co., 1854), xi.
- ⁹³ Eugene Crowell, "Spiritualism Opposed to Insanity," *The Spiritual Magazine* 3, issue 208 (1877): 161-62.
- ⁹⁴ Eugene Crowell, "Interesting Experiments," *American Spiritual Magazine*, 2, issue 5 (1876): 138.
- ⁹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁹⁶ Doten, "Declaration of Faith," 7.
- ⁹⁷ Brittan, "Introduction," ii.
- ⁹⁸ "Spiritualism vs. Priestcraft," *American Spiritual Magazine* 2, issue 6 (1876): 184.
- ⁹⁹ Kete, *Sentimental Collaborations*, 105, 137.
- ¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 31-32.
- ¹⁰¹ Max Cavitch, *American Elegy: The Poetry of Mourning from the Puritans to Whitman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 146.
- ¹⁰² Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 231-32, 35, 37.
- ¹⁰³ C.D.S. "Introduction," v, vi.
- ¹⁰⁴ "What is a Miracle," *The Spiritual Magazine* 3:219-20.
- ¹⁰⁵ Examples of this kind of speaker can be found in Sarah Gould, "The Twin Angels," in *Asphodels*; Sarah Gould, "Clare and Lillie," in *Asphodels*; Gould, "The Love Circle"; Lizzie Doten, "The Spirit-Mother," in *Poems of Progress*.
- ¹⁰⁶ This occurs in Lizzie Doten, "I Still Live," in *Poems from the Inner Life*; Lizzie Doten, "The Spirit Teacher," in *Poems of Progress*; Lizzie Doten, "My Angel," in *Poems of Progress*.
- ¹⁰⁷ Rennell, *Chips*.
- ¹⁰⁸ Lydia Huntley Sigourney, "Miss Jane Penelope Whiting," in *Man of Uz and Other Poems* (Hartford, CT: Williams, Wiley & Waterman, 1862); Lydia Huntley Sigourney, "Death of a Sister while Absent at School," in *Poems* (Philadelphia: Key & Biddle, 1836); Lydia Huntley Sigourney, "To the Memory of a Young Lady," in *Poems*; Lydia Huntley Sigourney, "Funeral of a Neighbor," in *Pocahontas and Other Poems* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1841).

- ¹⁰⁹ Lydia Huntley Sigourney, "To Bereaved Parents," in *Poems*.
- ¹¹⁰ Jennie Rennell, "Learn the Truth," in *Chips*, 32-35.
- ¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 35; Jennie Rennell, "What is Death," in *Chips*, 26.
- ¹¹² Lydia Huntley Sigourney, "'In the Garden was a Sepulchre,'" in *Poems*.
- ¹¹³ Lydia Huntley Sigourney, "Death of a Friend," in *Pocahontas and Other Poems*; Lydia Huntley Sigourney, "Henrietta Selden Colt," in *Man of Uz and Other Poems*; Lydia Huntley Sigourney, "Miss Sara K. Taylor," in *Man of Uz and Other Poems*.
- ¹¹⁴ Tsur, *On the Shore of Nothingness*, 15, 17; Rennell, "Learn the Truth," 34.
- ¹¹⁵ Rennell, "What is Death," 25; Sarah Gould, "The Lifted Vail," in *Asphodels*, 46; Lizzie Doten, "The Wanderer's Welcome Home," in *Poems of Progress*, 170; Lizzie Doten, "The Soul's Destiny," in *Poems of Progress*, 206; Lizzie Doten, "The Inner Mystery," in *Poems of Progress*, 252; Doten, "My Angel," 135.
- ¹¹⁶ Tsur, "Deixis and Abstractions," 43.
- ¹¹⁷ Tsur, *On the Shore of Nothingness*, 137, 44-45.
- ¹¹⁸ Lizzie Doten, "Labor and Wait," in *Poems of Progress*, 175; Lizzie Doten, "'Birdie's' Spirit-Song," in *Poems from the Inner Life*, 73; Nathan White, "Shadows," in *Voices from Spirit-Land*, 252; Nathan White, "Awake, My Lute," in *Voices from Spirit-Land*, 249; Sarah Gould, "Tempest-Tossed," in *Asphodels*, 34; Sarah Gould, "Light in Darkness," in *Asphodels*, 45.
- ¹¹⁹ Sigourney, "Funeral of a Neighbor"; Lydia Huntley Sigourney, "Caleb Hazen Talcott," in *Man of Uz and Other Poems*; Lydia Huntley Sigourney, "Wentworth Alexander," in *Man of Uz and Other Poems*; Sigourney, "Death of a Friend".
- ¹²⁰ Tsur, *On the Shore of Nothingness*, 231-61.
- ¹²¹ Sigourney, "'In the Garden was a Sepulchre'"; Rennell, "Learn the Truth"; Jennie Rennell, "An Address on Spirit Return," in *Chips*; Sigourney, "Caleb Hazen Talcott"; Sarah Gould, "Invocation," in *Asphodels*; Sigourney, "Death of a Friend".
- ¹²² Rennell, "Learn the Truth".
- ¹²³ Sarah Gould, "The Bright River," in *Asphodels*, 67; Lizzie Doten, "Outward Bound," in *Poems of Progress*, 169.
- ¹²⁴ Jennie Rennell, "Ashes to Ashes," in *Chips*, 44; Jennie Rennell, "Sweet Tidings," in *Chips*, 57; Rennell, "What is Death", 25; Jennie Rennell, "Consolation," in *Chips*, 59; Jennie Rennell, "Why Should Mortals Mourn," in *Chips*, 96.
- ¹²⁵ Rennell, "Learn the Truth," 33-35.
- ¹²⁶ Sigourney, "Wentworth Alexander"; Sigourney, "Miss Jane Penelope Whiting"; Lydia Huntley Sigourney, "Mary Shipman Deming," in *Man of Uz and Other Poems*.
- ¹²⁷ Rennell, "Learn the Truth," 34; Rennell, "Sweet Tidings," 58; Rennell, "An Address on Spirit Return," 16-17, 19.
- ¹²⁸ Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 62-63, 74-79.
- ¹²⁹ Rennell, "Learn the Truth," 34.
- ¹³⁰ Rennell, "What is Death," 26; Rennell, "Learn the Truth," 35.
- ¹³¹ Sigourney, "Miss Jane Penelope Whiting"; Sigourney, "Death of a Sister while Absent at School".
- ¹³² Rennell, "Learn the Truth," 32-33; Rennell, "An Address on Spirit Return," 17; Jennie Rennell, "The Advantages of Knowledge," in *Chips*, 29.
- ¹³³ Rennell, "Learn the Truth," 34; Jennie Rennell, "Still With You," in *Chips*, 26.
- ¹³⁴ Jennie Rennell, "Necessity of Pure Lives," in *Chips*, 37.
- ¹³⁵ Jennie Rennell, "Spirit Power: Message to the Compiler," in *Chips*, 68-69.
- ¹³⁶ Lydia Huntley Sigourney, "Death of an Infant," in *Poems*; Sigourney, "Caleb Hazen Talcott".
- ¹³⁷ Sigourney, "Mary Shipman Deming".
- ¹³⁸ Sigourney, "Henrietta Selden Colt".
- ¹³⁹ Kete, *Sentimental Collaborations*, 55, 34, 53.
- ¹⁴⁰ Mattison, *Spirit-Rapping Unveiled!*, 162-64.
- ¹⁴¹ Swedenborg, *Heaven and its Wonders*, section 252, 214.
- ¹⁴² Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 39, 53.
- ¹⁴³ Chauncey Barnes, "Spiritual Centennial Convention," *American Spiritual Magazine* 2, issue 6 (1876): 184.
- ¹⁴⁴ Bruce and Dewey, "The New Movement in Spiritualism," 340; Lizzie Doten, "The Divine Idea," in *Poems of Progress*, 233.

¹⁴⁵ Gould, "The New Revelation," 156-57.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Rennell, "Learn the Truth," 32.

¹⁴⁸ Gould, "The New Revelation," 156-57.

2. "[T]he evidence is within every man's reach": *Séance Accounts and the Reformation of American Touch*

¹ John W. Edmonds and George T. Dexter, *Spiritualism* (New York: Partridge & Brittan, 1855), 2:49.

² Epes Sargent, *Planchette: Or, the Despair of Science* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1869), 57

³ Epes Sargent, *The Proof Palpable of Immortality* (Boston: Colby and Rich, 1876), 16.

⁴ Quoted in Sargent, *Planchette*, 66.

⁵ Constance Classen, *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and across Cultures* (London: Routledge, 1993), 51, 58.

⁶ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 17-21; Constance Classen, *The Color of Angels: Cosmology, Gender and the Aesthetic Imagination* (London: Routledge, 1998); Hertel, *Making Sense*, 174-75, 90.

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- ²⁷ Goldfarb and Goldfarb, *Spiritualism and Nineteenth-Century Letters*, 50, 33.
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- ³³ "Materialization," *American Spiritual Magazine*, 2, issue 9 (September 1876): 267.
- ³⁴ Quoted in Robert Hare, *Experimental Investigation of the Spirit Manifestations* (New York: Partridge & Brittan, 1856), 84.
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- ³⁶ Napoleon Bonaparte Wolfe, *Startling Facts in Modern Spiritualism*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Religio-Philosophical Publishing House, 1875), 124, 281-82.
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- ⁴³ Hans Wallach and D. N. O'Connell, "The Kinetic Depth Effect," in *Documents of Gestalt Psychology*, ed. Mary Henle (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), 126.
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¹⁴⁷ Etienne Esquirol, *Mental Maladies. A Treatise on Insanity*, translated by E. K. Hunt, M.D. (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1845), 119.

¹⁴⁸ Hammond, *Spiritualism and Allied Causes*, 118-20.

¹⁴⁹ Esquirol, *Mental Maladies*, 112, 116.

¹⁵⁰ Sargent, *Planchette*, 61.

¹⁵¹ "Scepticism Most Commonly an Incurable Disease," 473, 475.

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¹⁵³ R. K. W. "The Great Mystery of the Age," *The Spiritual Magazine* (August 1875): 333.

¹⁵⁴ J. Enmore Jones, "Spiritualism and Materialism," *The Spiritual Magazine* (April 1877): 168.

3. *Spiritualism and the American Vision Epic: Harris, Barlow, Emerson, Whitman, and the Education of the Eye*

¹ James Dougherty, *Walt Whitman and the Citizen's Eye* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 174.

² Sheri Weinstein, "Technologies of Vision: Spiritualism and Science in Nineteenth-Century America," in *Spectral America: Phantoms and the National Imagination*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 124-40. Weinstein observes that "spiritualism fostered new types of vision, new terms for vision and, overall, new conceptions of visuality" (125). However, her essay does not elaborate on these claims. Rather, it looks at how Spiritualists tried to make their assertions seem more credible by using the language of materialism to describe the disembodied dead. Drawing upon scientific and industrial discourses, believers, Weinstein argues, likened mediums to machines, spirits to electricity, and spirit communication to telegraphy and train travel.

³ Thomas Lake Harris, *The Single and Evil Eye: A Sermon* (New York: Printed for the Society [Independent Christian Congregation], 1859), 14.

⁴ Brittan, "Appendix C," 208.

⁵ Harris, *An Epic of the Starry Heaven*, 61-62.

⁶ John P. McWilliams, *The American Epic: Transforming a Genre, 1770-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 23, 56.

⁷ Thomas Lake Harris, "Preface," in *An Epic of the Starry Heaven*, xvi; Richard M'Cully, *The Brotherhood of the New Life and Thomas Lake Harris* (Glasgow: John Thomson, 1893), 16.

⁸ Harris, "Preface," xvi.

⁹ Harris, *An Epic of the Starry Heaven*, 50.

¹⁰ Joel Barlow, *The Columbiad: A Poem, with the Last Corrections of the Author*, ed. William Bottorff and Arthur L. Ford, *The Works of Joel Barlow*, vol. 2 (1825; repr. Gainesville, FL: Scholar's Facsimiles and Reprints, 1970), 850.

¹¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes, 10 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1909-1914), 8:550.

¹² Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, with a Biographical Introduction and Notes by Edward Waldo Emerson, and a General Index*, ed. by Edward Waldo Emerson, 12 vols. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1903-1904), 3:45.

¹³ Emerson, *Complete Works*, 1:75, 3:37.

¹⁴ Walt Whitman, "Preface," in *Leaves of Grass*, 1855 ed., ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York: Penguin, 1855) 9.

¹⁵ Dougherty, *Walt Whitman and the Citizen's Eye*, 70.

- ¹⁶ Catherine Amy McAllister, "The Poetic Vision of Thomas Lake Harris: 'An Epic of the Starry Heaven'" (doctoral dissertation, State University of New York, 1993), 128, 135, 144-46, 135-36.
- ¹⁷ McAllister, "The Poetic Vision of Thomas Lake Harris," 137, 122, 130.
- ¹⁸ Tsur, *On the Shore of Nothingness*; Tsur, "Deixis and Abstractions," 41-53.
- ¹⁹ Peter Stockwell, "Conceptual Metaphor," in *Cognitive Poetics*, 105-19.
- ²⁰ W. P. Swainson, *Thomas Lake Harris and His Occult Teaching* (London: William Rider & Son, 1922); Arthur Cuthbert, *The Life and World-Work of Thomas Lake Harris* (Glasgow: C. W. Pearce & Co., 1909); Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 152-76; McAllister, "The Poetic Vision of Thomas Lake Harris," 32-60.
- ²¹ J. K. Newman, "Epic," in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger, Terry V. F. Brogan, and Frank J. Warnke (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 362.
- ²² Werner Paul Friederich, *Dante's Fame Abroad, 1350-1850*, University of North Carolina Studies in Comparative Literature (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1950), 523-50.
- ²³ Emerson, *Journals*, 10:210.
- ²⁴ James Russell Lowell, "Dante," in *Dante in America: The First Two Centuries*, ed. A. Bartlett Giamatti (Binghamton, NY: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1983), 69-85.
- ²⁵ McWilliams, *The American Epic*, 16, 22.
- ²⁶ Harris, "Preface," xvi; McAllister, "The Poetic Vision of Thomas Lake Harris," 87. McAllister also notes that Harris was influenced by Dante.
- ²⁷ Harris, *An Epic of the Starry Heaven*, 25-26.
- ²⁸ McAllister, "The Poetic Vision of Thomas Lake Harris," 87.
- ²⁹ Barlow, *The Columbiad*, 412.
- ³⁰ John Griffith, "The Columbiad and Greenfield Hill: History, Poetry, and Ideology in the Late Eighteenth Century," *Early American Literature* 10 (1975): 239.
- ³¹ Roy Harvey Pearce, *The Continuity of American Poetry* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), 64.
- ³² Emerson, *Complete Works*, 3:37, 20.
- ³³ David Jacobson, *Emerson's Pragmatic Vision: The Dance of the Eye* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 37.
- ³⁴ Sherman Paul, *Emerson's Angle of Vision: Man and Nature in American Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), 174.
- ³⁵ Whitman, "Preface," 9-10.
- ³⁶ McWilliams, *The American Epic*, 218, 225.
- ³⁷ Griffith, "The Columbiad and Greenfield Hill," 241, 240.
- ³⁸ Walter Sutton, "Apocalyptic History and the American Epic: Cotton Mather and Joel Barlow," in *Toward a New American Literary History: Essays in Honor of Arlin Turner*, ed. Louis J. Budd, Edwin H. Cady, and Carl L. Anderson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1980), 77.
- ³⁹ Immanuel Kant, *The Basic Writings of Kant*, ed. Allen W. Wood (New York: The Modern Library, 2001). For more on the relationship between Kant, German Idealism, and 19-century-American writers, particularly Emerson, see Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); David van Leer, *Emerson's Epistemology: The Argument of the Essays* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Russell B. Goodman, *American Philosophy and the Romantic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
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- ⁴¹ Paul, *Emerson's Angle of Vision*, 70, 34-35.
- ⁴² Emerson, *Complete Works*, 3:79, 1:76.
- ⁴³ Quentin Anderson, *The Imperial Self: An Essay in American Literary and Cultural History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), 56.
- ⁴⁴ Dougherty, *Walt Whitman and the Citizen's Eye*, 10, 23.
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- ⁴⁶ Anderson, *The Imperial Self*, 116.
- ⁴⁷ Dougherty, *Walt Whitman and the Citizen's Eye*, 13, 16-17, 57, 21, 52-53.
- ⁴⁸ Hyatt H. Waggoner, *American Visionary Poetry*, 7, 12.

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- ⁵⁰ Whitman, "Preface," 13.
- ⁵¹ "Studies among the Leaves," *The Crayon* 3 (1856): 30-32.
- ⁵² Paul, *Emerson's Angle of Vision*, 3, 47, 59, 62-65, 110-11, 113, 206, 212.
- ⁵³ Swedenborg, *Heaven and Its Wonders*, section 107, 141.
- ⁵⁴ Harris, *An Epic of the Starry Heaven*, 46, 28.
- ⁵⁵ Harris, *An Epic of the Starry Heaven*, 47.
- ⁵⁶ Swedenborg, *Heaven and Its Wonders*, section 203, 189.
- ⁵⁷ Harris, *An Epic of the Starry Heaven*, 40, 57.
- ⁵⁸ Paul, *Emerson's Angle of Vision*, 3, 47, 59, 62-65, 110-11, 113, 206, 212.
- ⁵⁹ Emerson, *Complete Works*, 2:268, 294, 282.
- ⁶⁰ Emerson, *Complete Works*, 2:269.
- ⁶¹ Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 28.
- ⁶² Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 1855 ed., 39, 33.
- ⁶³ Anderson, *The Imperial Self*, 103, 106-07, 116-18.
- ⁶⁴ D. H. Lawrence, "Whitman," in *Studies in Classic American Literature*, ed. Ezra Greenspan, Lindeth Vasey, and John Worthen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 401-17.
- ⁶⁵ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 1855 ed., 55, 89.
- ⁶⁶ Harris, *An Epic of the Starry Heaven*, 57-60.
- ⁶⁷ According to Annie Finch, *The Ghost of Meter* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 374, dactylic feet can connote irrationality and the dissolution of boundaries. By using dactyls in the above stanzas—and in other passages describing spiritual sight—Harris may be rhythmically communicating the illogical and amorphous nature of Spiritualist visual experience.
- ⁶⁸ Tsur, *On the Shore of Nothingness*, 93-94, 96, 124, 238, 325, 115, 95, 115, 324-25, 334, 336, 60, 92, 114, 130-31.
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4. *Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and the Aesthetics of Desensualization: Conceptual Distance in The Gates Ajar, "Since I Died," "The Room's Width," and "The Presence"*

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Conclusion

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