A Willing Suspension of Disbelief:
Victorian Reactions to the Spiritualist Phenomena

by Candace Gregory

"The First fact
We're taught is, there's a world beside this world,
With spirits, not mankind, for tenantry." <1>

It would not be terribly difficult for a modern critic to dismiss the spiritualist movement of the late nineteenth century as a "monstrous folly" (as one Victorian described it), or as an aberration in what is normally viewed as a serious and generally solemn period in the modern history of England. <2> Spiritualism was an attempt by the late Victorians to communicate with the spirits of the dead, hoping to prove continued existence after physical death and to gather some information on first hand experiences of it. There were certainly some elements of folly and naivete in the audience that willingly flocked to the presentations of the mediums, some of which were undoubtedly performers of the most unscrupulous kind. With equal certainty, there were contemporary Victorians that would have agreed with such a view. However, this attitude belittles the Victorian spiritualists in general, many of whom had very serious intentions and sincere motives. Additionally, the spiritualist phenomena incorporated many of the fascinating general aspects that could be found in any study of the Victorian culture; spiritualism is an excellent focal point from which the various dynamics inherent in the Victorian society can be examined and understood. These dynamics are so varied and often even conflicting in their manifestation in the spiritualist phenomena that it is difficult to define the movement's experiences with any degree of precision. Rather than study the logistics of the entire movement, it is perhaps much more enlightening to study one particular aspect of the movement and to show how the dynamics worked upon and in it.

One important question of the spiritualist movement is why it had such appeal, particularly among the well-educated upper and middle classes, and how that audience defended its appeal. As with the movement in general, the late Victorian audience that was attracted to spiritualism incorporated a variety of characteristics, affording an equal degree of difficulty in precise description. What is unquestionable is that the movement did have widespread popularity; one need only consider the great number of articles devoted to spiritualism in the popular Victorian periodicals. The popularity of spiritualism was found amongst all social classes; however, most of the rich supply of documentation on the spiritualist movement is written by and about the upper and middle classes. <3> One writer of the period commented that the "higher the class, the more fiercely did it [spiritualism] rage through it." <4> Furthermore, each of the separate classes were attracted to different aspects of the spiritualist movement.

Spiritualism entered English society in the middle of the nineteenth century, arriving from America via the migration of mediums in the 1850s. <5> The movement began officially in 1848 at the New York home of the Fox sisters, who gained fame as mediums through their apparently innate ability to summon spirits and to incite spirit messages and

communiqués through tapping. <6> The phenomena of "table turning and spirit-rapping" found an immediate popularity in England. <7> Through the human agent known as the "medium," the spirits communicated through raps, tappings, materializations of spirit forms, levitations of persons or objects, and anonymous lights that had no apparent source. <8> With some elements of society, spiritualism soon developed into a social pastime, particularly by the upper classes, who were accused by one admitted cynic of "having pretty well exhausted the pleasures of this world" and were seeking "any new amusement they can get out of any other world." <9> The image of a frivolous tea party seance can almost seem justifiable with such an attitude, narrow and biased though it may be.

There was, however, a more thoughtful and philosophical audience that was also attracted to spiritualism, as the professional and artistic elements of the middle class sought to integrate this newly found pastime of the wealthy with their general religious and spiritual concerns at the time. One could characterize the religious milieu of the late Victorian period as a dichotomy between Evangelicalism (and the emphasis it placed on faith and Christian belief) with the rationalist approach to spirituality brought on by the rising prestige of science and scientific principles. <10> The spiritualist phenomena settle easily into both spheres, with apologists and critics arguing both on the side of Evangelicalism and religious piety as well as from the scientific approach of data collecting and laboratory research. <11> The spiritualist phenomena was drawn from the distinct yet often intermingled worlds of social culture and theological or spiritual reflection; it used concepts evident to both areas and spanned the entire spectrum of Victorian society, collecting new converts (and skeptics) along the way. As with Victorian religion and society at large, spiritualism sought to successfully integrate the traditional spiritual beliefs with the new tenets and methods of science (and the new confidence inspired by science). One writer claimed that "authority, in the world of physical science is backed up by the knowledge that it can always be checked," as assertion that the modem religions of the nineteenth century and spiritualism hoped to be able to duplicate. <12>

Anyone with a basic understanding of the Victorian period will surely be aware that one of its greatest concerns was of morality, and that this permeated all of society in both direct and indirect ways. It was believed that it was "the moral culture which enables man to form and maintain civilized society." <13> The spiritualist movement was similarly infected by Evangelical moral concerns, and by the emphasis Victorians placed on the concept of respectability. The spiritualist movement both conformed to and rebelled against the Victorian concerns for moral respectability, and many of the various characters that comprised the movement's audience sought from it one or both of these contrasting reactions to conformity. Spiritualism rebelled against many of the Victorian moral precepts in the sense that the activity of the seances, and the summoning of spirits that took place there, occurred in a socially relaxed setting where many of the ordinary social restraints were dismissed. Seances were generally the providence of the upper and middle classes, as opposed to the lecture hall performances of some of the mediums and mesmerists (a separate phenomena similar to spiritualism) which attracted mostly working class participants. However, for the upper classes, seances provided a place and

an event in which normally unrespectable behavior was deemed appropriate. Lord Amberley recorded in an article entitled "Experiences of Spiritualism" that at one seance, the medium insisted "that the spirits required us [the participants] to sing." <14> Open emotionalism was also encouraged, and Amberley also recorded one such incident, in which typical Victorian sentiment is expressed in the conversation of a "Mrs. G." and her "son's spirit," a conversation that occurred "in an eager tone, with many epithets of endearments, 'my boy,' 'my darling,' etc." <15> "Mrs. G's" almost desperate attempts to communicate with her dead son also reflects the important Victorian tradition of strong family ties. The family unit provided a necessary source of emotional support to the people of the nineteenth century, confronted as they were by a rapidly and continually changing society. The hope that these ties could transcend death was an important component of Victorian attraction to spiritualism.

The elements of singing, emotionalism, and the general air of frivolity that characterized many of these seances provided an outlet for the many suppressed emotions and energies that were held back in the tightly restrictive Victorian age. That this behavior occurred in such a semi-public setting as the social gatherings at which seances took place reveals the degree of public acceptance of the spiritualist tactics. What would be normally considered unrespectable activity to Victorians gained its own form of respectability, if only within its spiritualist setting. Furthermore, such behavior must have had some appeal for nonbelievers who recognized the potential in participating in the relaxed atmosphere of the seances and spiritualist gatherings. The mediums themselves encouraged this open behavior, both by direct command (as in Amberley's recollection) or by indirect imitation. Some of the most popular mediums and spiritualist leaders were also some of the most colorful characters of the period, such as Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, who, based on her experiences in Eastern religions rather than mainstream Victorian Evangelicalism, founded the Theosophical Society in 1881. <16> One of Blavatsky's contemporaries records that "her flounces" were often "full of cigarette ashes" and that her "remarks have the air not only of spontaneity and randomness but sometimes of an amusing indiscretion." <17>

Yet the appeal of such atypically Victorian behavior and personalities was not only the direct flaunting of oppressive social constraints, but rather the sense of individualism implied in the spiritualist activities. One can conceive of spiritualist appeal based on the implied individualism in the movement. The spiritualist activities were generally led by "the presence of some human being, whom we should nowadays call a medium." <18> Among the various social tensions operating in the Victorian period, one which greatly affected the spiritualist movement was the tension which occurred between the traditional amateur status of sciences and the increasing professionalism of the post-industrial age. As the era progressed, professionalism gained new status and respectability. <19> In some instances, spiritualism revitalized the nostalgic appeals of the formerly amateur professions; most mediums were considered to be "gifted with intuitive powers of discovering" rather than as possessing indoctrinated skills. <20> The individualistic appeal of the spiritualist movement is reflected in the amateur status of its participants. The very fact that most spiritualistic evidence was found in the "large mass of [personal] testimony that has been accumulated by a great number of amateurs" indicates the

interest in nonprofessional individualism. <21> Individualism and the spiritualist movement was also characterized by the large involvement of women, who through the position of mediums (who were mostly female) largely controlled the shaping of the movement, beginning with the Fox sisters and continuing with Madame Blavatsky. Along similar lines as the various reform movements of the late Victorian era, the spiritualist movement provided an arena for women to display their skills as social independence and leadership capabilities.

There were also negative connotations towards the openness of the social behavior of the seances and of the individualism it comprised. Opponents of the spiritualist movement could claim that the frivolity rebelled against normative societal standards and was therefore dangerous to social unity. One article from 1898 warns that there are "many subtle temptations" and "many persuasive influences" in the movement. <22> This writer also ponders the implications involved in the return of a member of a "lower order of beings who have died after a life of vice, ignorance and degradation" with the intention of inciting "deeper evil" in the living. <23> Generally, however, the greatest opposition to seance activity was that it was frivolous, where frivolity was associated with uselessness. Some Victorians could rationalize that the fun of seances was utilitarian in origin and therefore valuable; that it was a worthy pastime because it had a serious purpose and intent in the attempt to discover irrefutable proof of life after death. Seeking a means of communicating with departed spirits had social and practical value, or so some claimed. Most of the critics contended, however, that these aspects were intellectually trivial and useless. The writer George Eliot described "spirit communications" as appearing to her as "either degrading folly, imbecile in the estimate of evidence, or else as imprudent imposture." <24> Eliot goes on further to attack the mediums that inspired and carried on the movement as "low adventurers" who use "palpable trickeries." <25> In regard to David Dunglas Home, who, along with Madame Blavatsky, is the medium whose name is most known, Eliot states that he was "an objector moral disgust." <26> One writer characterized Home's uselessness in an article in *Fraser* magazine:

He [Home] has done no good, he has revealed no new truth, he has added literally nothing to the domain of useful knowledge; for the spirits he has called up have uniformly proved as dull, as prosaic, as ignorant and uninteresting [as he himself]. <27>

As with Eliot, this writer obviously found his rational mind offended by the poor showing of concrete evidence by the spiritualists, in addition to their "trivial" attitude toward their spiritual subject. Another article deplored the trivial attitudes of the summoned spirits themselves. The author objected to "that trashy talk which is in so marked a way the vernacular of the spirits" and which he feels implies "the suspicion of their [the spirits] being for the most part idiots." <28>

Some advocates of spiritualism took another tactic in defending their belief. By emphasizing the religious aspects they sought to defend spiritualism on the grounds that, for the most part, it was a morally acceptable phenomena. After all, they argued, what could be more acceptable than establishing proof of the soul's immortality, promised by God? The poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote often of her belief in spiritualism to her

brother, and many of these letters remain, despite the censorship tactics of her husband Robert who was very critical of spiritualist phenomena. She described some of the people from whom she received testimonials as "grave, reasoning" and simply "religious" in An effort to emphasize the moral purity of her beliefs. <29> She also defended spiritualism against attacks on its lack of intelligible reasoning, stating that she has "accumulated personal testimony . . . from men & women of good reputation & more than average intelligence" and that she concluded that "according to my reason" there are 11 great wonders on the earth" and that they are knowable through spiritualism. <30> Elizabeth Barrett Browning even criticized those mediums who merely "moved tables again & again" without eliciting the "intelligence which is the common characteristic of the phenomenal." <31> Her belief was in the verbal communication where thought and intelligence could be displayed, and not in the easily fabricated physical phenomena of rappings and table tilting. <32>

The early stages of the spiritualist movement, in the first decade after the revelations of the Fox sisters, was characterized by "moments" of phenomenal occurrences which were "quite spontaneous, no one demanding or expecting them." <33> As the century progressed, however, there was a widespread demand for spiritualist phenomena and the movement responded by conforming to the general Victorian trend towards professionalism and away from individualism. The later appeal of the movement was based upon phenomena from trained mediums and from the evidence gathered by the various societies that were formed. The spiritualist movement formed its own class of leaders and its own system of training and preparing them, although spiritualism retained its distance from established religious and spiritual institutions. In an era in which traditional religion had been threatened by the rise of new sciences and the theories of a certain Mr. Darwin, Victorians were still searching for a belief system and often turned to spiritualism in an open need for faith. <34> There was an unconscious recognition of the certitude provided by an organized, professional religious institution rather than a random series of phenomena. Coupled with the influx of scientific ideals and methodology to all elements of society, the spiritualist movement became progressively structured as the century neared its close.

The obvious evidence for this aspect of increased professionalization in the movement is found in the formation and existence of a plethora of spiritualist societies, with specific and clearly defined goals, tenets, and intentions in mind. The Society for Psychical Research is probably the most important of the many formed; it was certainly one of the most widely known and the one with the greatest status of respectability. The Society was founded in 1882 by Henry Sidgwick, a professor of moral philosophy at Cambridge, a position which characterized his approach to spiritual studies. <35> The Society for Psychical Research, under Sedgwick's guiding hand, was dedicated to the scientific and analytical evaluation of physical data; using an objective, scrupulous, and rigorous method in examining psychical evidence. <36> The Society had an illustrious membership roster, which undoubtedly aided in establishing its respectability. Honorary members included the poet Tennyson, parliamentarian Gladstone, as well as the active participation of the members of various noble houses. <37> Sidgwick was obviously concerned with the moral implications of spiritual belief-, he envisioned a moral system

whereby altruistic behavior among society members would be encouraged by the concrete proof of existence after physical death. <38> There were numerous other societies formed in the latter half of the Victorian period, such as Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society, and an earlier American organization, the Society for the Diffusion of Spiritual Knowledge, circa 1854. <39>

Increased professionalism, while adding orthodoxy to the growing movement, also provided ample opportunity for the systematic manipulation of naive advocates. Some opponents of spiritualism did characterize certain aspects of the movement as cynical attempts by charlatans (especially the more popular mediums) to take advantage of any sympathetic audience and as concerned solely with economic rewards. Robert Browning referred to his wife's spiritualist interests and to their cause as "the imaginary, spiritualistic experiences by which the unsuspecting and utterly truthful nature of Ba [Elizabeth] was abused; she was duped." <40> Apparently she also occasionally questioned her spiritualist beliefs; she once asked her brother whether or not she was "generally supposed to have a good stock of credulity." <41> Robert Browning would have undoubtedly agreed with George Eliot's description of mediums and spiritualism as the "painful form of the lowest charlatanerie." <42> Browning himself went on to lampoon the spiritualism movement in his bitter poem "Mr. Sludge, 'The Medium,'" in which he mocks the profession of mediumship. George Eliot accused spiritualism of having too weak a scientific basis, built on testimonials which are "no more true objectively because they are honest subjectively." <43> Spiritualism for Eliot was a "misguidance of men's minds from the true sources of high and pure emotion." <44>

Some mention has been made of the scientific approach to spiritualism; this, however, deserves careful attention. One of the new sciences that arose in the nineteenth century was that of psychology. <45> Spiritualism, "like most other fields of human knowledge and interest" of the nineteenth century had " also been brought within the domain of science," particularly the new field of psychology. One writer applauded the discovery of the concept of "personality," of a mental being wholly separate from the physical self, and related this as a "scientific proof" of the possibility of the "survival of the human personality after physical death." <46> This same writer concludes that "the popular beliefs really point to a series of interesting facts bearing on the spirit of man" which was "only of late recognized and studied by psychologists." <47> The general principle of spiritualism, that the soul was immortal, was seen to be proven by science, which stated that "matter gravitates and the matter was indestructible." <48> The physical materializations of the mediums remained a mostly philosophical (i. e. metaphysical) controversy, however it sought to incorporate scientific language. <49> Even Sidgwick remained skeptical of ever having absolute scientific proof. He stated that he was "drifting steadily to the conclusion . . . that we have not, and are never likely to have, empirical evidence of the existence of the individual after death." <50> Not all believers wanted scientific proof, one devotee was described as having special "delights in believing anything that puts science to rout and confounds the philosophers," perhaps in another example on the non-conformist elements of the movement. <51>

Spiritualism appealed to various elements of the Victorian upper and middle classes for many reasons. Spiritualism provided an ' alternative form of spiritual faith and belief, distinct from the established orthodox Christian churches yet relying on traditional Christian spiritual belief in the continued existence of the soul after physical death. Yet spiritualism also coincided with the rise of materialistic empirical sciences. The spiritualist movement of the late Victorian period was characterized by the collection of large bodies of personal testimonials on the physical manifestations of the spirits; they were believed to have tilted tables in parlors, tapped out messages on walls, levitated men and objects, moved chairs, formed ectoplasmic entities, and a host of other "tangible" evidence of spiritual presence on earth. <52> To many Victorians these manifestations appeared to be unquestionable proof of the traditional Christian concept of spiritual life after death. Furthermore, spiritualist activity such as seances provided a milieu in which normally conservative, socially conformist Victorians could display individualistic tendencies and personality traits. Behavior, normally kept tightly in rein by Evangelical and utilitarian tenets of morality, could break free. Intense emotionalism and sentimentality could be openly expressed in spirit communications. In fact, the very desire to communicate at all with the souls of dead relatives and friends, the most commonly sought spirits, reveals a need to express emotions and feelings. It also indicates the importance of familial relationships in Victorian society; that the family unit was so important to the Victorians that they wanted it to transcend even death. Women, in particular, were given greater opportunity at self expression and independence through the movement. Spiritualism also provided a source of expression for the tensions between growing professionalism and the traditional amateurism it supplanted. Critics and advocates alike both reflected upon this unconscious tension, mixing purely spiritual concerns of the soul's immortality with purely scientific concerns of irrefutable empirical data. Spiritualism in late nineteenth century English society had an inherent ability to reflect on a particular, specific level, the general dynamics of the Victorian mentality. Spiritualism straddled Victorian social, religious, and scientific culture like an ectoplasmic colossus guarding the spiritual harbor of society.

Notes

1 Robert Browning, "Mr. Sludge, 'The Medium'" from The *Poems, Volume 1*, ed. John Pettigrew (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), lines 814-16.

2 George Lewes, from *The George Eliot Letters, Volumes I-VII,* ed. Gordon S. Haight (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), vol. III, p. 335.

3 Janet Oppenheim. *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 329.

4 "Spirits and Spirit Rapping," *The Westminster Review* 69 (January, 1858): 16.

5 Oppenheim, p. 11.

6 Oppenheim, p. 11.

7 Lewes, vol. III, p. 335.

8 "Spirits and Spirit Rapping," p. 21-24.

9 "Spirits and Spirit Rapping," p. 19.

10 Richard D. Attick, *Victorian People and Ideas: A Companion for the Modem Reader of Victorian Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton Company, 1973), pp. 165 and 233.

11 Oppenheim, p. 62.

12 W. E. G. Fisher, "Modem Spiritualism," *The Edinburgh Review* 488 (October, 1989), p. 319.

13 "Influence of the Dead on the Living," *The Spectator* 81(July30,1898): p. 142.

14 Lord Amberley, "Experiences of Spiritualism," *The Fortnightly Review* 21 (January, 1874); p. 82.

15 Amberley, p. 83.

16 Ruth Brandon, *The Spiritualists: The Passion for the Occult in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1983), p. 44.

17 Henry Sidgwick, from Brandon, p. 44.

18 Fisher, p. 308.

19 Attick, p. 30.

20 Amberley, p. 85.

21 Fisher, p. 326.

22 "Influence of the Dead on the Living," p. 142.

23 "Influence of the Dead on the Living," p. 142.

24 Eliot, vol. V, p. 48-49.

25 Eliot, vol. V, p. 49.

26 Eliot, vol. V. 253.

27 "Spiritualism as Related to Religion and Science," *Fraser* 77 (January, 1865), pp. 24-25.

28 "Spirits and Spirit Rapping," p. 18.

29 Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *The Letters of the Brownings to George Barrett*, Illinois: The University Of Illinois Press, 1958), pp. 192-193.

30 E. B. Browning, p. 192.

31 E. B. Browning, p. 201.

32 E. B. Browning, p. 190-19 1.

33 "Spirits and Spirit Rapping," p. 24.

34 Oppenheim, p. 109.

35 Oppenheim, pp. 111 and 123.

36 Oppenheim, p. 119.

37 Oppenheim, p. 135.

38 Oppenheim, p. 116.

39 "Spirits and Spirit Rapping," p. 21.

40 R. Browning, p. 309.

41 E. B. Browning, p. 203.

42 Eliot, vol. V, p. 253.

43 Eliot, vol. V, p. 49.

44 Eliot, vol. V, p. 28 1.

45 Fisher, pp. 305-306.

46 Fisher, p. 305.

47 Fisher, p. 305.

48 Fisher, p. 320.

49 Oppenheim, p. 61.

50 Sidgwick, from Oppenheim, p. 117.

51 "Spirits and Spirit Rappings," pp. 26-27.

52 "Spirits and Spirit Rappings," p. 17.