Tele-visions of the Dying: Ghost-seeing in the Society for Psychical Research in the 1880s

In the dumb agony which seizes the soul when some loved one is taken from us, in the awful sense of separation which paralyses us as we gaze upon the lifeless form, there comes the unutterable yearning for some voice, some sign from beyond; and if in answer to our imploring cry for an assurance that our faith is not in vain, that our dear one is living still, a smile were to overspread the features of the dead, or its lips to move, or even its fingers to be lifted, should we deem any action a paltry thing that assures us death has not yet ended life, and still more that death will not end all?

This was written by Sir William F. Barrett, Professor of Physics at the Royal College of Science, Dublin, and founding member of the Society for Psychical Research, a scientific group set up to investigate claims of paranormal phenomena which had emerged toward the end of the nineteenth century. This quote serves to encapsulate the sheer utopian yearnings that were invested in the figure of the post-mortem body during this period.

Following the rapid spread of the modern spiritualist faith in America and Britain in the 1850s and 1860s, rationalist groups and circles of friends with an investigative urge and pretensions to the ‘scientific method’ had sprung up chiefly interested in exploring the validity of the unexplained phenomena emanating from the new spiritualist séances. Spiritualism was an anti-materialist faith with a varied set of beliefs centred upon the tenet that the spiritual world could and does manifest itself through so-called ‘supernatural’ occurrences in the physical world such as ghosts, materialisations, and extra-terrestrial communications via mediums. The establishment of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) in London in 1882 was the consequence of the efforts of a number of spiritualists and Cambridge scholars to place their beliefs upon a sounder, unprejudiced, and more scientific footing. This would lead to the establishment of ‘psychical research’ and the examination of ghost-seeing, as profoundly influential cultural constants in late-Victorian and Edwardian society.

Ghost-seeing is as old as the human nervous system, yet for the agnostic generation of the 1860s there was the feeling that the issue of apparitions had reached a crisis-point, with the validity of spiritualistic phenomena being fiercely debated in the public sphere, and blended into religious discourses on one hand and psychiatric discourses on the other. Seeking to find a way out of this extremism, the members of the SPR sought to usurp and replace what William James called the ‘will to believe’, with the ‘will to investigate’ – an avowedly scientific approach which sought to finally solve paranormal issues through the setting up of objective fact-finding committees, with a sceptical bias it must be said. The most productive of these committees was lead by Professor William Barrett who, after conducting experiments into ‘thought-reading’ in Co. Westmeath and London in the late 1870s and early 1880s, believed that the SPR would profit most by investigating the area of supernormal communications, where it seemed there was a huge amount of evidence above the rate of chance which could be gathered within an objective and scientific environment.

The theory of thought-reading, soon changed to the theory of ‘thought-transference’, that A could consciously know what B was thinking of, opened up new ways of approaching the
ultimate questions of psychical research, ways which could be packaged as both experimentally valid and scientifically pioneering. Yet the thought-transference hypothesis was most fully and fruitfully integrated into theories regarding hallucinations, apparitions, ‘phantasms’, and the alleged hauntings of the dead. The role of thought-transference was seen as crucial in determining the difference between delusive and veridical hallucinations, and this differentiation opened up the genre of supernatural hallucinations to scientific explanation and exposition. The increased speculations about thought-transference, and its wider implications for theories of hallucinations and apparitions led to its second name-change in the space of a year with Frederic W.H. Myers famously coining the word ‘telepathy’ from the Greek ‘tele’ (distant) and ‘patheia’ (feeling).

Despite the seeming prevalence of ghosts, wraiths, and spirits in everyday life, the SPR Committee on Haunted Houses and Apparitions seemed to encounter a reluctance on the part of their prey, for as it remarked upon the activity of ghost-hunting, ghosts ‘like aerolites, seem to be no respecters of persons; and no amount of scientific watchfulness will make them come to order’. It was undoubtedly the acute lack of sensational eyewitness experience on the part of SPR investigators which led to them toward a more sociological approach, toward the more pedestrian methods of collecting and collating masses of material, and issuing circular requests for data to friends of the Society and the major newspapers and journals. It prioritised a personal interview with the percipient – as they called the ghost-seer – and expressed the wish to ‘hear his story told in a manner which pledges his honour to its truth’. It was at this point that testimony from people the SPR considered hysterical, hypochondriacal, or uneducated would be discounted, for it is evident that notions of tellability and its hierarchical requirements played a key role in the scientific discourse on ghosts and apparitions at the time. This is further demonstrated by a footnote to the above quote which notes that if the case concerns the testimony of an illiterate person, the narrative is accepted as authentic only on the authority of the local clergyman. Clearly, then the SPR developed an a priori notion of an accredited ghost story which relied upon the non-sensational account of a literate and respectable member of the public willing to communicate with, and be interviewed by, the SPR. However, if the primary requirement of personal acquaintance with the person who experienced the occurrence were not possible, then cross-examination by letter would be a necessary procedure, an avenue which proved to be the primary method of verification for the SPR in the 1880s; some 10,000 letters were sent to correspondents by the SPR Literary Committee in 1883 alone.

In this sociology of the ghost story, exaggerated, embellished, and “readerly” accounts were to be mistrusted, and the Society was proud of the fact that the ghost stories they reported were ‘far more likely to provoke sleep in the course of perusal than to banish it afterwards’. This quantitative, rather than qualitative methodology of reducing ghosts to statistics was certainly a novel approach to the area, an approach that was in tune with the new sociological trends of the period, and which aimed to develop a critical mass of evidence from witnesses whom they considered of a high character. In short the SPR developed a montage-approach to ghost-hunting with a view to synthesising recurring themes within an experimentally valid framework. They sought to counter beliefs that they were only engaged in cold theorisation and snobbishly experimenting within their chosen circle, and assured percipients that statistics in this matter were everything: ‘The achievement which we claim for our Society is not a theory of cases but a colligation of facts’. They went even further and outlined the direct role that the public could play in supporting and constructing the work of
the SPR: ‘The public are for the first time being made participators in scientific work: for the first time they appear as the sources of evidence, as the actual material (so to speak) of the experiments, which the novel nature of recent inquiries demands’. While this does point to a conscious development in the democratisation of scientific work, it may be more accurate to conceive of a chosen ‘community of sensation’ within the SPR’s ghost-seeing investigations. Thus from the outset, the success or failure of the SPR theory of apparitions depended to a large extent upon public participation in their investigative enterprise, upon offering up cases of ghost-seeing for the project, based as it was upon a liberal epistemology and middle-brow marketing.

By far the most common type of ghost being described by the correspondents of the SPR in the 1880s was the ‘crisis apparition’: this involved cases where A, or the agent, entered a critical or traumatic state, usually a dying situation, and supernaturally appeared to B, or the percipient, in the form of a hallucination of the senses, possibly due to a pre-existing personal rapport with the percipient or a strong psychical connection with the locality of the occurrence. This type of ghost-seeing experience was usually a decidedly family affair, with, for example dying husbands appearing to their wives, or was an acute awareness of the loss of a close relation, and thus could be verified in death records as to the factual reality of the claims made.

Building upon this veridical nature of apparitions, the SPR began to use the term ‘phantasm’ to refer to the paranormal apprehension of a crisis apparition. Thus, by describing them as mental phenomena with no physical reality, by dealing with a person who was dying, i.e. still technically alive, and by linking the topic to what they believed was scientifically proven – telepathy – the SPR sought to modernise the ghost story as an empirical narrative within the precepts of scientific naturalism. The classic representation of this exploration remains *Phantasms of the Living* (1886). This two-volume work is a huge compendium of some 700 tales of ghosts from Britain and Ireland of many different hues with speculative comments interspersed by the SPR psychologists Edmund Gurney, and Frederic W.H. Myers, who were aided by Frank Podmore, a postal official and co-founder of the Fabian Society.

*Phantasms of the Living* included many stories which resembled cases of experimental thought-transference in the extreme banality of the impression received. Non-lethal telepathic hallucinations included the case of a woman who felt she was struck on the lip at the very moment her husband was elsewhere, a clergyman who intuitively ‘knew’ when his daughter had arrived safely in India, and a father who had a feeling that his child had fallen out of the bed many miles away. However the themes in *Phantasms of the Living* quickly took on a darker tone, for it is primarily a book drenched in death and dying: about half the cases included deal with an attested occasion when a percipient’s ghost-seeing experience either coincided with, or shortly followed, the death of a loved one. The problem that the SPR now faced was how to distinguish between the ghost of a dying person and the ghost of a dead person, how to distinguish between the cessation of life and the cessation of its psychical affects. The creation of this distinction was crucial in proposing theories of ghost-seeing which could be propounded as naturalistic and scientific, without the taints of theology, spiritualism, or the occult. As a result the SPR implemented a temporal limit of 12 hours from the moment of the agent’s death during which the ghost-seeing experience of the percipient, the appearance of the phantasm, would remain within the boundaries of scientific naturalism and remain a phantasm of the living and not a phantom of the dead. By
compartmentalising and allotting arbitrary time-frames to the moment of death and the moment of ghost-seeing based upon neo-Schopenhauerian theories of vitality and the latency of psychical forces, the SPR sought to break up the supernaturalism of the traditional ghost story and reformat it as a phenomenological event within a temporal culture. The intervention of the SPR into theories of ghost-seeing, and its influence in paranormally translating late-Victorian attitudes on death and dying would link its interest in the cultures of intimacy surrounding telepathy with the more precarious and quasi-spiritual theories clustered around the moment of death and the possibility of survival. Thus, after a few years of research the SPR had forcefully begun to advance the rather surprising thesis that it was ‘phantasms of the living’ and not the ghosts of the dead which held the most evidential, experimental, and ultimately speculative value for society.

The arena for this modern prophesising, or pre-emptive grief, was firmly within the normality of everyday life, and the manifestation situation of ghost-seeing reflected a passive state of mind on the part of the percipient – about as far away from the agent’s crisis as was possible. Indeed, most ghosts, like accidents, happened within the security of the home, and many of the cases recorded in *Phantasms* were reported to have taken place in the bedroom where such an encounter with the *unheimlich* would resonate most fully. An example of this would be the case of a woman waking up after dreaming of her own death to find her husband sobbing beside her, saying that he had dreamt the exact same thing.

When the case relied upon visual sightings, the apparition was usually distinctly recognised by the ghost-seer. The apparition was described most commonly as being anthropomorphic, pale, misty, and of a melancholy demeanour. Notably the figure of the hallucination rarely induced horror or fear in the percipient. Rather, profoundly existentialist themes of dread, anxiety, and *Weltschmerz* feature prominently in many of the cases recorded in *Phantasms*, and indeed premonitions and the physical reactions to such forebodings were a common trope of popular ghost stories. However, in the 1880s these premonitions of the death of the other appear to resemble the simulated death of the self. I’ll give one example of the type of language used:

**Case No. 68:**
Mrs Powys reports: ‘About 3 months ago as I was sitting, quietly thinking, between 5 and 7 p.m., I experienced a very curious sensation. I can only describe it as like a cloud of calamity gradually wrapping me round. It was almost a physical feeling, so strong was it; and I seemed to be certain, in some inexplicable way, of disaster to some one of my relations or friends, though I could not in the least fix upon anybody in particular, and there was no one about whom I was anxious at the time…on Monday I got a letter from my sister…in which she told me she had received a telegram…informing her of the dangerous illness of her brother-in-law, at which she was greatly upset. This appeared to be a very probable explanation of my extraordinary presentiment, and I wrote and told her all about it at once’.

The psychoanalyst Nicolas Abraham has theorised the phantom as representing a gap within the mind of the percipient, as a secret hidden and buried in a crypt constructed by the mind. In the cases recorded by the SPR, the phantasm of the dying person can be interpreted as using the emotional apparatus of the percipient to express the secret of the death of the
other/self, to fill the gap left by the pre-empted loss of a loved one. That this gap is usually confirmed by the swift arrival of a black-bordered telegram, which confirms the death of the other and affirms the ghost-seeing of the self, suggests how bodies in crisis can act as both the medium and the message. It can be seen quite clearly how the essentially nunciative function of the telepathic apparition can be linked to contemporary innovations in tele-technologies such as telephones, telegraphs, phonographs, x-rays, spectroscopes, and photographs. With many cases involving the phantasmic appearance of loved one’s residing throughout the British Empire, it can be seen that ghost-seeing functioned as a form of magical thinking and magic linking which to some extent reflects developments in instant communication in late-Victorian science and culture. Furthermore, the psychological impact of the new magical technologies can be traced in the large amount of cases involving auditory hallucinations, or the hearing of the voices of loved one’s in one’s own head. For this forms a direct link both with the experience of receiving a telephone call from the other side of the world, and with the appearance of new dissociative mental disorders at the end of the nineteenth century, such as Multiple Personality Disorder. Through its committed investigation of ghost-seeing and the phantasmic death of loved ones, the SPR inspired experimental psychologists such as Richet, Janet, Myers, Flourney, Jung, and Freud to deal with the dark phenomena of unconscious desires, fears, and projections that came to characterise the birth of modernity.

To conclude: In the 1880s we have the concerted attempt to normalise, scientise, and collectivise ghostly experiences by withdrawing investigations from religious and psychiatric discourses of faith and diagnosis and attempting to place them within a psychical context. With the telepathic hypothesis entrenched in interpretations of ghost-seeing, psychical research suggested a salient feature of modernity – the idea that the spectres of the self expressed a rich and disturbing psychical reality more marvellous by far than the sensational accounts of ghosts and ghouls so prevalent in Victorian and Edwardian fiction. Ghosts, spirits, and ‘phantasms of the dead’ as phenomena embedded within popular literary-oral and spiritualist culture were to be either pushed aside as unsubstantiated superstitions or else examined through the medium of the scientific and experimental standards which the SPR championed, standards which held an increasingly ambiguous status in the mainstream spiritualist movement. As a Society which was at the crossroads between a spiritualist group based upon belief and a scientific society based upon fact, the SPR provided a unique arena of ‘as-if-ness’ where ghost-seeing and its implications could be expressed with the tools of empiricism, sociology, and abnormal psychology. With ghosts, phantasms, and spirits trapped between traditional modes of religious belief or supernatural expressionism on one hand, and modern scientific trends of public demonstration, explication and cultural investigation on the other, the huge level of ghost-seeing in the 1880s is not surprising at all.