FROM ELECTRICITY TO ECTOPLASM: HYSTERIA AND AMERICAN SPIRITUALISM

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Just six years after the Fox sisters’ “mysterious rappings” in Hydesville, New York, a group of spirits calling themselves the “Association of Electricizers” instructed the Universalist minister John Murray Spear to build an engine that was to function like the human body. Spear, following instructions from the Association, completed the “New Motive Power” in High Rock, Massachusetts in 1854. The machine was to be a gift to humanity from the spirit world for the creation of a new but unspecified power on earth. The New Motive Power sat dormant on its perch until the appearance of an unnamed woman who had previously been told by the spirit realm that she would become the “Mary of a new dispension”. On June 29, the Boston New Era published a lengthy description of the events of that day:

When there [High Rock], however... she began to experience the peculiar and agonizing sensations of parturition, differing somewhat from the ordinary experience, inasmuch as the throes were internal, and of the spirit, rather than the physical nature, but nevertheless quite uncontrollable, and not less severe than those pertaining to the latter. Its purpose and results were wholly incomprehensible to all but herself; but her own perceptions were clear and distinct that in these agonizing throes the most interior and refined elements of her spiritual being were imparted to, and absorbed by, the appropriate portions of the mechanism: its minerals having been made particularly receptive by previous chemical processes1.

The newspaper proceeded to recount that the machine ‘gave indications of life or pulsations’, which continued and grew stronger as the weeks progressed through a series of ministrations by the anonymous woman, ‘precisely analogous to that of nursing... until at times a very marked and surprising motion resulted’2. The new “Electrical Motor”, as Spear coined it, was unfortunately destined for infanticide by a posse of intolerant Spiritualists who destroyed it when it failed to do anything.

In psychoanalytic terms, this incident appears to be a textbook example of a hysterical pregnancy, and it is by no means unique in the context of the Spiritualist movement. The history of American Spiritualism is rife with anecdotes of what one may consider hysterical attacks, and certainly contemporaneous crit-

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1 Cited in Brandon, The Spiritualists, 9.
ics of the movement were quick to label Spiritualists as “hysteric”

3. Despite the many striking resemblances between hysteria and Spiritualist trance mediumship, contemporary scholarship on the latter has been loath to connect the two. However, an examination of the shared characteristics of hysteria and Spiritualist mediumship, rather than serving to pathologize believers, in fact reveals that Spiritualism saw itself as a competing discourse to the emerging one of psychoanalysis, self-consciously and adamantly offering an alternative view of similar phenomena. The hermetic impulse in Spiritualism provided a different referent for the secrets of the cosmos than the young democracy and its medical teachings did. The answers Spiritualists sought were external to the individual; believers tried to uncover the secrets of the past, rather than the secrets of their selves. By explicitly attacking psychoanalytic constructions of the unconscious as a locus of mental illness, Spiritualism offered not only a theological understanding of alternative psychic states, but also a radically alternative interpretation of the body—especially the woman’s body—as an instrument of intangible forces.

1. The Birth of Mediumship

Spiritualism was born in the mid-nineteenth century, the last great religious movement to come out of the Second Great Awakening and arguably the clearest articulation of postmillennial progressivism of the age. Positing an unprecedented continuity between this world and the afterlife, Spiritualism proposed that the dead could be contacted to offer advice and solace to the living. The inauguration of communicating with the dead caught the religious imagination of antebellum Protestants, and by Ann Braude’s estimation, Spiritualism may have claimed as adherents half the population of the country.

The atmosphere of America was ripe for this peculiar form of continuing revelation; the myriad religious movements begun in this epoch bespeak the need for new religious answers tailored to the ethos of the moment. In content, Spiritualism assuaged grieving and provided new and heavenly knowledge. In structure, it was individualistic, populist, and antiestablishment in its iconoclastic form of bestowing credentials on those with a gift for talking to the dead. Amid the romantic mythos of the self-made man and the merit-based rewards of industrialization, Spiritualism provided the possibility that anyone, and particularly women, might have the necessary talent to be invested with quasi-religious authority.

3 For a detailed account of various diagnoses of mental illness among Spiritualists, see Fornell, The Unhappy Medium, 70-83.