

SPIRITUALISM IN NEO-VICTORIAN FICTION

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the theme of spiritualism in two neo-Victorian texts: *In the red kitchen* by Michèle Roberts and "The conjugal angel" by A. S. Byatt. In recreating the Victorian setting, both writers self-consciously draw on the late nineteenth-century belief in the possibility of establishing communication between the living and the dead by means of spiritualist practice. In Roberts's novel, the presentation of spiritualism is combined with issues of gender and includes a modern perspective. While Roberts models her heroine on the historical medium Florence Cook, some of Byatt's characters are based on literary figures, which adds a metafictional dimension to the metaphysical one.

A. S. Byatt's acclaimed novel *Possession*, whose contemporary plot parallels and is partly driven by the lives of two fictional Victorian poets, is preceded by an epigraph quoting a passage from Robert Browning's dramatic monologue "Mr. Sludge the Medium". In the intertextual game Byatt plays the quote relates to the book on several levels. The fictional poet R. H. Ash is clearly modelled on Robert Browning, and the novel includes an episode in which Ash, taking part in a séance, angrily questions the authenticity of the medium and violently disrupts the meeting. The monologue itself is an attack on spiritualism inspired by Browning's own experience of the phenomenon. Browning was a sworn enemy of the famous American medium Daniel Dunglas Home. Browning's account of the séance in which he took part suggests that the poet, sceptical of the medium's powers, stayed alert to expose Home's supposed tricks. As it happens, Home was never caught out and remained highly popular until his death. What intensified Browning's evident hatred of Home was his wife's credulous fascination with spiritualism. Home seemed to reciprocate her interest: at one of his séances Elizabeth Barrett Browning was

persuaded into a kind of flirtation with a ghost acting through the medium (Aveni 2001: 227) – accusations of morally dubious goings-on were commonly levelled at mediumistic practices. However, although Mr. Sludge in Browning's poem has his chicanery exposed, he is allowed to present a lengthy self-defence and is eventually released, presumably free to pursue his trade. Isobel Armstrong argues that, rather than being merely an angry onslaught on spiritualism, the poem in its latter part explores questions of artistic truth and hence may be regarded as Browning's poetic self-reflection (1966: 212). The fact that the quote Byatt chose comes from the most persuasive part of the medium's apology suggests that she shares Browning's concerns. Indeed, Byatt herself may be said to practise literary spiritualism in the sense of recreating Victorian voices in her novels.

In both neo-Victorian works discussed here, Michèle Roberts's *In the red kitchen* and Byatt's "Conjugal angel", the theme of spiritualism serves two purposes at once: on the one hand, it metafictionally legitimises the connections between the living and the dead shown in the two books, on the other – it is an integral part of the Victorian setting. An American import, spiritualism gained immediate following in mid-nineteenth-century England and flourished well into the twentieth century. The popularity of the spiritualist movement expressed the desire to accommodate the need for transcendental experiences to the empiricism of nineteenth-century science. And so, for instance, while the public responded to the discovery of magnetism and electricity with mystical awe, phenomena such as spirit-rapping were thought possible thanks to the medium being tapped into a source of as yet unknown energy (Aveni 2001: 213-214). In his article "Victorian poetry and science" Daniel Brown argues that the rapid spread of spiritualism is understandable in the context of the age when Christian beliefs were undermined by science. He claims that "Spiritualism offered a credible alternative to materialistic atheism or reactionary religious conservatism because it apparently fulfilled the positivist criterion for knowledge by offering observable evidence of an immaterial human spirit and its life after death" (Brown 2001: 138). Poised between religion and science, spiritualism provoked open hostility from the former and ambivalent attitudes in the latter. The distinguished English scientist William Crookes (the prototype of the doctor in Roberts's novel) represented a not-so-rare combination of an empirical approach with fervent belief in spirit communication (Aveni 2001: 233). On the other hand, the Oxford-educated Frank Podmore made his name as the scourge of Victorian mediums. His relentless analysis of spiritualism resulted in 1902 in the publication of the book *Modern spiritualism* which exposed apparently mysterious phenomena as clever tricks or a form of psychological manipulation.

The two contemporary texts with a Victorian setting do not investigate the nature of spiritualism but above all use the phenomenon as the basis for plot

construction. Whereas Byatt's book resonates with the voices of Victorian poets, Roberts's focuses on the feminist perspective in the history of women communicating across time barriers.

The three-fold story in Roberts's book is held together owing to spirits manifesting their presence in different ages and places. While it is undoubtedly true that, as Susan Rowland argues in her article, *In the red kitchen* offers "a critique of Victorian culture" (2000: 203), the book uneasily combines its suggestion that female mediumship was predominantly a response to patriarchal culture with the possibility of genuine spirit communication. The main part of the plot features Victorian heroine Flora Milk rising from an undistinguished lower-class milieu to fame and prosperity as a powerful medium. There are two other heroines: a contemporary woman called Hattie and an Egyptian female pharaoh Hat King. As the story progresses, connections are revealed between the three. Flora produces a spirit materialisation calling herself Hat King and displaying features of royalty. While presented as an emanation of Flora during séances, Hat is also shown to have an independent existence, prior to the other two women. She desires an afterlife by entering other beings: "I am a spirit condemned to roam for ever through the dark, never to find a resting place, never to be venerated again as a god on earth ... I shall seek for a scribe who will write down my name and let me live again" (Roberts 1991: 133). The same ontological ambiguity surrounds the modern-day Hattie – she might be another materialisation of the Egyptian spirit roaming the earth, or, equally, the Egyptian heroine may be a figment of Hattie's imagination: "At night, in my narrow white bed encircled by white curtains, I escaped into another country called Egypt where I was king" (1991: 135). Hattie unknowingly inhabits the house that used to belong to Flora's family. Again, the narrative remains poised here between two options: the apparitions Hattie encounters in her house are either products of her troubled mind or ghosts appearing to a modern-day medium, albeit unconscious of her powers. However, although individual incidents lend themselves to two interpretations, the number of parallels in the lives of the three women produces the overall impression of authenticity of the spirit world in the fictional world of *In the red kitchen*.

In creating her nineteenth-century heroine Flora Milk the writer follows loosely the life of the famous Victorian medium Florence Cook, whose case illustrates the main controversies involved in spiritualism (cf. Owen 1990: 51-55, 64-69). Suffering from hysterical fits and trance-like states in adolescence, under the guidance of practising spiritualists Florence acquired the craft of mediumship and found the oddities of her behaviour quite desirable in the new context. The fictional Flora Milk takes up mediumship simply as a trade, goaded by domestic poverty. She is presented as a precocious girl, capable of astute financial arrangements. However, the first-person account of her contacts

with spirits suggests that this is not fraud after all – communication with the unseen takes a real gift apart from skill in manipulating audience responses.

Florence Cook gained fame when she found her “spirit control”, i.e. a leading spirit acting and speaking through the medium. Hers was Katie King – the model for Hat(tie) in Roberts’s book. Florence’s spiritualist performances progressed: she learnt to produce materialisations of spirits, moving to a cabinet to improve the effect. The invisibility of the medium, although apparently necessitated by the need for more privacy, provoked doubts in the more sceptical participants of the séances. Like other mediums, Florence was frequently subject to forcible attempts at exposure, notably one in which her spirit guide was seized by one of the sitters (a procedure known as “spirit grabbing”). However, the ensuing scuffle rendered the test inconclusive.

Michèle Roberts recreates the episode but goes further to stress the vulnerability of the female medium (who risked more than scientific exposure) by embellishing the original biography with an imaginary episode of the heroine being taken to Dr Charcot, researching spiritualism as a symptom of female hysteria. Apart from the public humiliation Flora suffers (like many of her authentic prototypes), she is also subject to sexual abuse from the researcher William Preston – an episode probably corroborated by the treatment of Florence Cook by Dr William Crookes, whose interest in mediumship apparently took forms other than scientific. In combining spiritualism with gender issues Michèle Roberts follows Alex Owen, whose essay on female mediumship is cited as a source in the acknowledgements to the novel. Owen’s subsequent study *The Darkened room: Women, power and spiritualism in late Victorian England* (1990) argues for the interdependence of spiritualism and “the woman question”, on the basis of the observation that most of the prominent Victorian mediums were women. On the one hand, claims Owen, the nineteenth-century notions of femininity seemed to predispose women to be passive receptacles for irrational forces, but, paradoxically, mediumship also allowed women to “infringe culturally imposed limits” (1990: 11). Taking her cue from the ideological impact of Owen’s research, Michèle Roberts uses the phenomenon of spiritualism to foreground “the woman question” as a theme in the Victorian part of the plot, and as a structural device to forge connections with the other two narrative levels by imagining “intuitive communications between women across space and time” (White 2003: 182).

By contrast, A. S. Byatt limits her plot to a Victorian setting. For the characters – some of them based on authentic figures – spiritualism is an accepted form of mourning, coming to terms with the loss of their beloved. Typically, one of the participants Mrs. Hearnshaw (like Milly Preston in Roberts’s book) seeks to communicate with her dead babies – a practice viewed with scepticism by her husband but tolerated as a form of psychological cure. The circle portrayed in

“The conjugal angel”, although one of many such groups of like-minded friends dabbling in spirit communication, is, however, distinguished by its attempts to evoke a spirit mourned on the national scale: Arthur Hallam. *In Memoriam*, which is Tennyson’s elaborate expression of his prolonged grief and sense of loss, struck a sympathetic note in Victorian readers, elevating Hallam to the status of national emblem. Although Byatt’s Tennyson (like his real-life prototype) does not take part in the séances, it is the spirit of his poetry as much as the spirit of Hallam that permeate the meetings. In the more personal sections of *In Memoriam* Tennyson not only recollects his friend, but also seeks contact with his spirit in order to be comforted and to (as Carlisle Moore put it) “revive his belief in man’s immortal spirit and in love as the universal law” (Moore 1970: 247). Tennyson’s intimations of Hallam’s presence culminate in the trance-like state described in Section 95, where Tennyson recounts his mystical experience of contact with the dead man, sparked off by re-reading his letters:

... I read
Of that glad year which once had been,
In those fallen leaves which kept their green,
The noble letters of the dead:

And strangely on the silence broke
The silent-speaking words, and strange
Was love's dumb cry defying change
To test his worth; and strangely spoke

The faith, the vigour, bold to dwell
On doubts that drive the coward back,
And keen through wordy snares to track
Suggestion to her inmost cell.

So word by word, and line by line,
The dead man touched me from the past,
And all at once it seemed at last
The living soul was flashed on mine,

And mine in this was wound, and whirled
About empyreal heights of thought,
And came on that which is, and caught
The deep pulsations of the world,

Aeonian music measuring out
The steps of Time—the shocks of Chance—
The blows of Death. At length my trance
Was cancelled, stricken through with doubt.

(quoted after Abrams – Greenblatt 2000: 1265).

Tennyson confessed in a letter:

A kind of waking trance I have frequently had, quite up from boyhood, when I have been all alone. This has generally come upon me through repeating my own name two or three times to myself silently, till all at once, as it were out of the intensity of the consciousness of individuality, the individuality itself seemed to dissolve and fade away into boundless being, and this not a confused state, but the clearest of the clearest, the surest of the surest, the weirdest of the weirdest, where death was an almost laughable possibility (if so it were) seeming no extinction but the only true life

(quoted after Abrams – Greenblatt 2000: 1265).

Although Tennyson in Byatt's novel does not try to conjure up ghosts by fashionable methods, it is his personal loss that indirectly consolidates the circle. The séances are organised by Tennyson's sister Emily, once engaged to Hallam, who however failed to live up to the icon of perpetual grieving maidenhood and married somebody else, to the disapproval of not only both families but most of the Victorian reading public. In Byatt's book Emily almost to the end plays the role of Hallam's would-be widow, yet privately examines critically her brief relationship with her brother's friend and learns to appreciate the marriage she eventually made. Of the two supposed mediums presiding over the séances only Sophy Sheekhy is capable of extrasensory experiences whereas Mrs. Papagay clearly draws in her pronouncements on shrewd psychological observations of the participants.

Devoid of any systematic set of beliefs, spiritualism accommodated a whole spectrum of approaches. In Byatt's novel, Mrs. Hearnshaw finds in it Christian consolation and further validation of Christianity, which gives her comfort in her bereavement. Yet for their notions of spiritualism most of the people portrayed here are indebted to Emanuel Swedenborg, whose work had been published in London in 1845 and subsequently popularised by the spiritualist movement, especially among the well-educated elite who found his arcane mysticism very appealing (Owen 1990: 21). The eclecticism of the movement is here exemplified by Mr. Hawke, formerly "a Ritualist, a Methodist, a Quaker, a Baptist" (Byatt 1993b: 166) who has now joined the Swedenborgian Church of New Jerusalem. Mr Hawke is a comic character in the story, with his clumsy physique at odds with his high-flown concepts. Another confirmed Swedenborgian Emily née Tennyson seeks in spiritualism the answer to what troubled also her brother Alfred: "a pressing and threatened desire to know that the individual soul was immortal" (1993b: 184). The title concept of the conjugal angel is derived from Swedenborg's theory that every man and woman has a soul mate or a spiritual affinity. In heaven the two perfect halves, joined in conjugal love, make up an angel. In Byatt's light-hearted reversal of the Swedenborgian concept, the conjugal angel becomes an earthly one as Mrs Papagay's long-lost

husband returns in the flesh. Likewise, Emily responds to Hallam's message "We shall be joined and made one angel" (1993b: 283) by choosing her down-to-earth living husband over the spirit of Hallam, although popular imagination has designated them as emblematic lovers.

However, the presence of yet another conjugal angel is implied in Tennyson's recollections of his friendship with Hallam. Tennyson (alive at the time of the action) is briefly glimpsed by the medium which enables the narrator to pass on to a long passage of Tennyson's meditations. Byatt follows here modern biographers who detect unconscious homosexual proclivities in the bond between the two young Victorians. But it is not only in the biographical reference that Byatt betrays her modern perspective. As Hilary M. Schor notes, although "The conjugal angel" as well as its companion novella "Morpho Eugenia" are "written with no visible interruptions from the twentieth century ... writing as a Victorian does not mean an absolute seamlessness, for these novellas continue her modernist habit of internal disruption and interpolation: variously, pseudo-scientific works, journals, bits of poetry, and fables of animal life dot the text, as do more palpable intrusions: séances; encrypted messages; and ghostly visitants" (2000: 235). In "The conjugal angel" spiritualism has been transposed into an intertextual mode. Communication with the dead takes the more plausible form of reception and transformation of literary texts. In the circle portrayed here the messages received by the mediums are usually composed of the poetry or correspondence of Hallam and Tennyson, the basic hypotext being *In Memoriam*. The successful medium Sophie Sheeky, we learn, could "produce the necessary vague, floating state of mind by reciting poetry to herself"; "Poems rustled together like voices" (Byatt 1993b: 246-248). In another episode, still brooding on his loss, Tennyson "heard the buzzing of little flying fragments of language that hung around his head all the time in a cloud, like the veils of living and dead smoke, like the motes of dust that hung in shafts of sunlight, 'thick-moted' as he had so beautifully described them" (1993b: 254). Tennyson's reflections are interspersed with both explicit and unacknowledged references to his own poetry as "the truth was that both he and Arthur had seeped into his poem, had become parts of its fabric, a matter-moulded kind of half-life he sometimes thought it was..." (1993b: 268). But Tennyson recognises that his poetic output incorporates not only his own and Hallam's spirits, but also "the ghostly voices of his ancestors, his poem let them sing out again, Dante and Theocritus, Milton and the lost Keats, whose language was their afterlife" (1993b: 269). Communicating with the dead is indeed possible through writing – both the automatic writing pursued by the mediums and the literature created by the poet who – sometimes intentionally and sometimes automatically – evokes the dead.

Although neither Roberts nor Byatt ascribes much validity to the Victorian pursuit of spiritualism, each believes in a form of half-conscious communication with the dead – be it women sharing similar experiences or generations of poets building up the literary tradition. And of course in the latter sense Byatt's novella is an implicit metafictional indication of her own writerly approach.

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