A critical examination of the methodology and evidence of the first and second generation elite leaders of the Society for Psychical Research with particular reference to the life, work and ideas of Frederic WH Myers and his colleagues and to the assessment of the automatic writings allegedly produced post-mortem by him and others (the cross-correspondences).

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I certify that all material in this thesis which is not my own work has been identified and no material has been previously submitted and approved for the award of a degree by this or any other University.

Signature……………………………
Abstract

This thesis outlines the canons of evidence developed by the elite Cambridge-based and educated leaders of the Society for Psychical Research to assess anomalous phenomena, and second, describes the gradual shift away from that approach, by their successors and the reasons for such a partial weakening of those standards, and the consequences for the general health of the SPR. It argues that, for a variety of reasons, this methodology has not always been fully appreciated or described accurately. Partly this is to do with the complex personality of Myers who provoked a range of contradictory responses from both contemporaries and later scholars who studied his life and work; partly to do with the highly selective criticisms of his and his colleagues’ work by TH Hall (which criticisms have entered general discourse without proper examination and challenge); and partly to a failure fully to appreciate how centrally derived their concepts and approaches were from the general concerns of late-Victorian science and social science. Their early achievements (given the base from which they started) were considerable but the methodology they developed was gradually eroded in some fields by their successors. This was partly because of the nature of the material; partly because of the shared, subjective elite networks of the group; and partly because of the impact of the affair of Gerald Balfour and Winifred Coombe-Tennant on the assessment and interpretation of the cross-correspondence automatic writings. This led to some neglect of experimental work and to an almost cultish atmosphere within the leadership of the SPR itself, particularly damaging in the interwar period.
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Summative Statement

I am submitting the following sections from two books of mine for the Doctor of Philosophy in History by Publication. They form a coherent thesis which I outline in this summative statement below. They are: context (an edited version of parts of the introductions from both books); three chapters from my first book (Hamilton, T. 2009. Immortal Longings: FWH Myers and The Victorian Search for Life After Death. Exeter: Imprint Academic). They are: Myers and the SPR in the 1880s; Myers as Psychologist; Myers, science and the SPR.

Material from six chapters in my second book (Hamilton, T. 2017. Arthur Balfour’s Ghosts: An Edwardian Elite and the Riddle of the Cross-Correspondence Automatic Writings. Exeter: Imprint Academic). The sections are (the chapter headings have been simplified): Were the cross-correspondences unambiguous?; Were they a psychological artefact?; Did they occur above chance expectation?; Were normal avenues for acquiring information ruled out?; Were they the product of wishful thinking?; Were the aims of the communicators fulfilled?

In essence, these nine chapters and the contextual statement form a coherent argument and narrative: first, outlining the canons of evidence developed by these elite Cambridge-based and educated investigators to assess anomalous phenomena, and second, describing the gradual shift away from that approach, by their successors and the reasons for such a partial weakening of those standards, and the consequences for the general health of the SPR.

Together with this summative statement of 10,000 words they meet the criterion of around 100,000 words for the award of the Doctor of Philosophy by Publication. Harvard referencing is used with regard to the bibliography but references to different parts of the submitted material is by page number (in brackets) only.

The chapters submitted are original work in at least five ways. First, they are from the only published biography of Myers and also from the first book to evaluate the cross-correspondences in detail. Roy’s book (2008) had a wider focus and did not sufficiently concentrate on assessment issues. Nor did he access Winifred Coombe-Tennant’s archive at Harvard or Myers’ personal archive in Cambridge
(see Hamilton 2009). Second, this research has revealed that contrary to the standard view, the automatic writers were not as isolated from each other as claimed (Carter 2012; Hart 1959; Oppenheim 1985; Saltmarsh 1975). This picture has emerged from original research in a number of archives (see list of archival material consulted). Third, the summative statement re-frames the methodological work of the early SPR in the broader disciplinary context of late-Victorian academic and institutional life. Fourth, it examines and challenges the use by some cultural historians of the work of TH Hall (1980a; 1980b) in order to create a more balanced view of the SPR activities. Fifth, computer technology has been deployed to make the assessment process of the cross-correspondences manageable. All 3,500 plus scripts were individually scanned into a searchable PDF format which allowed a rapid comparison of scripts widely dispersed across a number of automatists over thirty-six years, to see if the patterns alleged to appear in the scripts actually did so. The approach taken has followed a broadly social constructionist approach (Berger and Luckmann 1991; Burr: 2003). The scripts have been treated with respect, acknowledging the original assessors’ excitement as remarkable content unfolded, but also with detachment, pointing out the psychological and historical filters that could condition their interpretations. The history of psychical research and parapsychology is a fiercely contested one and, obviously, no claims are made, outside of the context of this study, about their ultimate ontological status.

This summative statement will make explicit the argument that runs through this thesis and the evidence on which it is based. The overall thesis is that the work of the Cambridge co-founders (middle-class Spiritualists have an equal claim as founding fathers) of the SPR has been partially misunderstood and devalued by two main factors: a failure to fully appreciate both the central empirical methodology from which the SPR sprang which was part of the general disciplinary debate at the time and, second, the complexity of the documentary records and the controversies they generated.

The elite leaders of the SPR (Myers, Gurney, and Henry and Eleanor Sidgwick) developed in very difficult circumstances a methodology for investigating anomalous phenomena that has not always been described accurately or evaluated fairly. As Gurney (1887e) put it, the real issue was the nature
of evidence in matters extraordinary. Criteria to assess such were thought through and tested in practice in the early years of their investigations: in Sidgwick’s presidential addresses from 1882-9; in Gurney’s systematic and pioneering experimental work in hypnotism; in Myers’ investigation of automatic writing and mediumship; in his speculative synthesis of this work in his book *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*; and in the great SPR surveys of anomalous phenomena, *Phantasms of the Living* 1886 and the *Census of Hallucinations* 1894.

This statement further argues that due to a variety of circumstances some (though not all) of the second-generation leaders of the SPR moved away from the canons of evidence developed by the Sidgwick group and invested too much in one major psychical research project, the cross-correspondence automatic writings, to the partial detriment of the SPR and its reputation. In essence then, this thesis has a dual rebalancing purpose: first, to argue that the methodology of the SPR was not a bizarre desperate epistemological aberration but in the central tradition of intellectual enquiry of the late-Victorian period and second, that the cross-correspondences, though intriguing and containing much ostensibly ‘paranormal’ material, do not deserve their reputation as the outstanding evidence for post-mortem survival in the first third of the twentieth century, partly because of the assessment methodology adopted and partly because of the heavy emotional investment (to some extent, perhaps, encouraged and supported by the highly literary, allusive nature of the material studied) in them by a close band of networked automatic writers and their assessors. The success of the early SPR project was largely due to the cultural and physical capital of the elite that dominated it and the seeds of its partial decline were sown, to some extent, by the very dominance of this Cambridge elite itself.

**Methodology of the Elite Founders of the Society for Psychical Research**

The first chapter outlines the main evidential issues that the Cambridge elite grappled with as they tried to establish a scientific approach to anomalous phenomena; their nuanced and complex relationships with Spiritualists and Theosophists who appeared to share the same subject matter with them; and the negative influence on their reputation by the work of Trevor Hall which has not always been deployed judiciously by later cultural historians working in the fields of psychical research and Spiritualism. The second chapter discusses Myers’
significance as a psychologist in exploring and promoting a broader and more creative view of the unconscious mind than commonly held at the time. And the third chapter analyses what the elite leaders of the SPR meant by a scientific approach to their subject area. The bulk of the summative statement highlights key aspects of these topics.

The Sidgwick group approached their subject-matter without a secure tradition of enquiry on which to build. They were also exploring the anomalous in this field at a time when all the sciences were beginning to work towards their modern shape. They faced the same general issues, though without the advantage of accumulated experience, expertise, and financial and human resources, that Ziman (2002: 83-115) has outlined in his description of the gradual evolution of the key characteristics of modern science and which are explored in the main text.

In order to reach this, possibly academic Eldorado, the leaders of the SPR had to steer their fragile bark on unpredictable waters, buffeted by winds and weather from different quarters. The Spiritualists were a substantial component in the original enterprise both on the Council and as ordinary members (Nicol 1972). There were members who represented the Anglican, the Catholic, and the Nonconformist traditions. There were scientists who hoped to reconcile science and religion in an age of intellectual fluidity where new discoveries and concepts might lead to a theoretical and practical coherence that would shed light on the basic questions of the mind/body problem and what, and in what way, any element of the human personality might survive bodily death? (Turner 1974; Oppenheim 1985). In opposition to this were those scientific naturalists and the broader agnostic or materialistic community who saw the SPR as encouraging a return to pre-Enlightenment thinking. Moreover, as separate disciplines and specialisms built up their own boundaries in the late 19th century (Cahan 2003), the siting and recognition of psychical research created a number of difficulties for the initial SPR projects. It was a great tribute to Myers, Gurney and the Sidgwicks particularly, that they were able to interest a substantial minority of the cultural, social, academic and intellectual elite of the time in their work (39).

The methodology they developed was thoughtful and well-crafted, though not fully recognised and appreciated. The central argument of this thesis is that this approach achieved much for the SPR in its early years, including a degree
of stability and intellectual respectability which no such previous enterprise had ever managed.

These researchers were, Williams (1984) argues, strongly influenced by the inductive approach of John Stuart Mill and his emphasis on the professionalisation of the knowledge community (see also Collini 2006: 178). In this context it is important to remind oneself of Myers’ huge energy and drive in this enquiry – the enormous number of sittings he had with mental and physical mediums, the equally enormous reading he did on this and related subjects (Gauld 1995: 394), and his consistent emphasis in the pages of the *Journal* and the *Proceedings* on the accumulation of trustworthy evidence to provide a solid base for induction and inference.

This empirical emphasis and direction can be traced back to Sidgwick’s active involvement in the development of the Moral Sciences Tripos in which Myers, himself, took a first (Hamilton 2009: 29-30), and which both he and Sidgwick examined for (Sidgwick in 1865 and Myers at the end of the decade) and in which Mill’s presence was significant. Sidgwick was a major influence in this field for the next three decades, as psychology, philosophy, history, economics, gradually emerged as independent subjects within or outside its general framework. Such experience made Sidgwick acutely aware of the different knowledge claims and emerging disciplinary expertise in many areas of enquiry and this was reflected in his acute and cautious approach to the whole subject of psychical research. (For Sidgwick on psychical research see Broad 1938; Gauld 2007.) Sidgwick combined two remarkable qualities in all his intellectual activities: first, a great capacity for critical and reflective analysis which led to nuanced and tentative judgements (Collini et al. 1983: 279-307) and second, a belief in the professionalisation of knowledge. (See for example his criticisms of historians at Cambridge in the 1870s ‘antiquarians and grubbers of facts’ and his admiration for the thorough training German historians received in research skills. Soffer 1994: 131, 148.)

The moral sciences syllabus reflected an emphasis on clear thinking, empirical facts and the inductive approach. Myers’ uncle, Whewell, Master of Trinity when Myers was a student, was the main driver for the introduction of the tripos (though within an Anglican moral and intuitional framework). It should further be noted that Mill’s *Logic*, Bacon’s *Novum Organon* and Whewell’s *Novum Organon*
Renovatum were still required reading in 1891 (Ward 1891). (On these developments see Winstanley 1947:185-90: Brooke 1993: 437-443, 467-472.) Bacon obviously made an impression on Myers. He quoted him in Human Personality (1904 v.2.: 279): ‘Bacon foresaw the gradual victory of observation and experiment – the triumph of actual analysed fact – in every department of human study; in every department save one. I here urge that that great exemption need no longer be made.’ Bacon, like Descartes, left, for political reasons, religion and faith, outside his philosophical and scientific enquiries. Myers roundly and boldly claimed that the scientific enterprise should be applied to such subjects and that ultimately this will reveal ‘Divine knowledge’. He also occasionally lectured on Bacon, reflecting, as Stolerman (1969: 520) has commented, the revival of interest in Bacon in the Victorian period and the influence he had on ‘the three leading Victorian philosophers of science…Herschel, Whewell and Mill…’.

One can clearly see elements of the SPR methodology in embryo in this quotation from Bacon (Devey 1889: 430 ) ‘…there is such a multitude and host, as it were, of particular objects, and lying so widely dispersed, as to distract and confuse the understanding…[we]…must put its forces in due order and array, by means of proper and well arranged, and, as it were, living tables of discovery of these matters, which are the subject of investigation, and the mind then apply itself to the ready prepared and digested aid which such tables afford.’ This could well have described the early operations of the Sidgwick group in their collection, classification and presentation of anomalous experiences. (See particularly 64-76.) And Phantasms of the Living (1886 v.2: 707-722) provided an excellent example of the way a tabular display of the 701 cases published in the book could aid scientific reflection. It succinctly presented the nature of the phantasmal impression (ten types) and the relationship of putative agent to percipient (29 kinds) which could form a possible basis for hypotheses re the origin and nature of the sensory hallucination or phantasm and the role of familial and emotional links in its generation.

The methodology involved as far as possible the collection of evidence according to a structured questionnaire and a set of criteria. These were: first hand eyewitness accounts were to be prioritised and collected; such accounts had to be told to a third party before knowledge of the death/distress of the phantasm;
there had to be as much corroborative detail as possible; a judgement had to be made as to the educational level, balance and trustworthiness of the percipient; and the case material had to be tested through direct personal interviews with members of the Sidgwick group who travelled far and wide to complete this task (Williams 2011: 367-384). The energy, time and activity involved in this was absolutely enormous and West (1948) acknowledged that it was impossible to match this in his more modest replication of the Phantasms/Census of Hallucinations work eighty years or so later. Finally, although individuals collected the information the judgement as to its quality and value was a shared one. As Podmore commented (65) ‘…its investigation should be collective – that the task of appraising the evidence should depended upon no single judgement’.

One can see the caution of the Sidgwick group in their development of the concept of phantasm and their later use of the term hallucination. They did not want to prejudge the issue and create the impression that they were mere ‘spook’ hunters. For them the term phantasm (Myers 1904 v.1: xix) was meant to ‘signify any hallucinatory sensory impression, whatever sense – whether sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste, or diffused sensibility – may happen to be affected’. And, hallucination (op.cit.: xvii) was any ‘supposed sensory perception which has no objective counterpart’. However, those hallucinations which appeared to correspond to events happening elsewhere were seen as veridical and these were the focus of their great surveys. Moreover, in their use of the term phantasm, they distinguished between phantasms of the living and of the dead, since there was an apparent body of evidence from anecdotal accounts and Theosophical literature of the involuntary or premeditated projection of some aspect of the individual personality from one person to another. These nice distinctions irritated the Spiritualists but they were part of the attempts of the Sidgwick group, as with any other discipline, to create a body of concepts and a language to analyse their observed and recorded phenomena.

The role of Sidgwick in the development of canons of evidence to assess allegedly paranormal phenomena was central. In his presidential addresses to the SPR (Sidgwick 1882a, 1882b, 1883, 1884a, 1884b, 1888, 1889a, 1889b) he outlined and clarified a number of issues involved in the investigation of the peculiar kinds of problems that psychical researchers faced and the difficulties concerning the nature of inductive conclusions or causal inferences that might or
might not be drawn from those investigations, the importance of the process of eliminating alternative explanations, and the balancing of probabilities for and against a) the existence of the phenomena and b) a possible non material explanation.

The initial conclusions drawn from this enterprise, under the guidance of Sidgwick, were modest. Despite the irritation of a number of the Spiritualist members of the SPR who thought that these establishment figures were immediately going to launch investigations that would in a short period of time validate and promulgate the great truths of the Spiritualist creed, the strategy that evolved was quite otherwise. First, it was agreed, from 1884, that there would be no collective endorsement of conclusions (McCorristine 2010: 129). That was not the role of the Council. In practice, this distinction was sometimes blurred, but it did help prevent the Society as an organisation being too closely connected to a number of embarrassing episodes in its history. But, though no collective SPR judgement by the Council existed, collective discussion and debate, as stressed above in this paper, was seen as crucial to the making of informed judgments. Second, as Myers (1904 v.1.: 9) emphasized, before any conclusions, however provisional, could be reached concerning the great question of the survival of the human being in some form after death, a searching enquiry needed to be made into the territory of normal and abnormal psychology, ‘of man’s incarnate personality’. For this, alone, Myers and Gurney should be more greatly recognised and their huge contribution to the development of psychodynamic psychology acknowledged. Third, there should be nothing sensational or febrile about the approach. The psychical researcher should be calm and dispassionate and sit in front of the facts without presupposition or prejudice, of whatever sort, except an acute wariness when the phenomena appeared to contradict the established laws of physical science (Anon 1882) and the nineteenth century consensus that had crystallised around the work of Darwin and Clerk Maxwell. In fact, Myers argued, the researchers had more in common with informed opponents of psychical researcher than the credulous and naive (134).

It is important to unpick in greater detail the actual nature of the SPR investigations. The Sidgwick group tended to see History and Law as the key
disciplines on which to model their enquiries with their emphasis on the detailed examination of particular cases. This has been called the idiographic approach (Bouterse and Karstens 2015: 350-351). They were fully in favour of laboratory experimentation (the nomothetic approach), but appreciated its difficulty in capturing spontaneous phenomena. This idiographic approach plus the sifting and disseminating of evidence was their major contribution to the study of anomalous phenomena. For example, in his chapter analysing the evidence for spontaneous telepathy (Gurney et al. 1886: 114-172) Gurney anticipated a number of the findings of later psychologists in the area of eye witness testimony (see Loftus 1996) and clearly distinguished between, as a historian would, the credibility or otherwise of the sources, and succinctly defined the errors to look out for: errors of observation, of inference, of narration, and of memory. An amusing example of Gurney’s attention to detail is his analysis (op. cit.: 151-152) of the account of an apparition wearing a chimney-pot hat that appeared at one of Warren Hastings’s East India Council meetings in the 1780s. Gurney’s researches established that the chimney-pot hat did not come in before 1790 and that Hastings had left India in 1785.

Once plausible evidence had been through their analytic filter, their aim was to circulate it as widely as possible. As Cerullo (1982:86) has pointed out, their dissemination strategy, was admirable and sustained (see also 40 below). In 1883 the first collected set of Proceedings was sent to influential London newspapers for review and then more widely at home and abroad to strategically important influential societies and organisations, particularly scientific ones.

Asprem (2014: 289-290) has called the psychical research of Gurney, Myers and Sidgwick an ‘open-ended naturalism’. They, unlike, the scientific naturalists, were prepared to apply the scientific method to ‘the all-important problem of the existence, the powers, the destiny of the human soul’. (op. cit.:301). But as Williams (1984) lucidly puts it, the SPR ‘was not to be confused with a Spiritualist society, the membership being united by its belief in the need for investigation, not by belief in the reality of the phenomena’. It was the legitimacy of enquiry – which required enormous bodies of evidence from as many sources as possible – and the authenticity and verifiability of individual testimony which they wished to establish, before any wider speculation. The group had three further major objections to deal with. The first was the philosophical and historical argument of
Hume against miracles. Sidgwick referred to this on a number of occasions and realised that it was inextricably bound up with the quality of the evidence put forward (160) with regard to objections of this sort. Second, they had to deal with the perfectly reasonable comments which continue to this day, that they may and their witnesses (depending on the context, environment and the nature of the phenomena) have been duped and that the phenomena were the product of a mixture of psychological errors and weaknesses on the part of the observers and skilled conjuring or sheer mischief-making by the alleged percipient, medium, or psychic. The third was the apparent triumph of scientific naturalism (Turner 1974: 2-37). However, though Sidgwick was hugely empirical in the collection of evidence, he believed that there were limits to empiricism. He saw no contradiction in this (Turner 1974: 61): ‘It is possible to combine a practically complete trust in the procedure and results of empirical science with a profound distrust in the procedure and conclusions-especially the negative conclusions-of empirical philosophy.’

Sidgwick (1889a), as a philosopher, was particularly sensitive to these issues. He started his lecture on the Canons of Evidence in Psychical Research at Westminster Town Hall in the following way: ‘I may begin by apologising for the pretentiousness of my announcement which will, I fear, lead those who read it to expect a more precise and detailed argument of the rules to be followed in such an investigation as ours than I am at all prepared to offer.’ He went on to state that given the obscureness and tentative nature of the enquiry there was no exact method possible to deploy only ‘certain general, though vague, principles, which seem to me to be reasonable in dealing with the kind of evidence that comes before us…’. This is hardly the language of someone desperately trying to ‘re- enchant’ the universe by hook or by crook. This was parallel to the attitude he held to another, though more substantial, emerging discipline, sociology. In his presidential address to the Economics and Statistics section of the British Association in 1885 (Collini 1978: 19-21) he criticised the pretentious ‘scientific’ laws of Comte and Spencer and the need for a far more nuanced and modest approach.

Gurney (1887 v.1.: 227-273) fully supported Sidgwick’s position, stressing the difficulty of judging the evidence in this field, that ‘average specimens of humanity’ were prone to wild speculations and misinterpretations while scientists like
Carpenter (1877) could be dogmatic and claim expertise in areas that were novel and difficult to get a handle on. He pointed out how problematic it was to define what was meant by the educated public and by expertise relevant to psychical research. He further commented on the way in which people confidently pronounced on the probabilities in this field without any relevant experience, discussion or proper reflection on the issues and, he made the crucial point that ‘the mere treatment of the evidence, the mode of arriving at the truth of the facts, has often no relation at all to the ordinary rules of experimental procedure…and the right attitude to new facts depends here on something which is both more and less than laboratory and hospital experiences. The method is wider but less precise, more various but less technical; and the application of it demands disengagedness and common-sense rather than any specialized aptitude.’ The ‘phenomena cannot be commanded at will’ and ‘the work of investigating them must consist not in origination, but in the collecting, sifting and bringing into due light and order, of experiments which Nature has from time to time given ready-made.’ The skills required to evaluate this evidence are ‘that sort of many-sided acumen by which the historical student judges the records’ and ‘the general sagacity by which questions of probability and credibility…are decided in the matters of everyday life’. It was not possible, Gurney argued, to identify this with any particular department or skill and merely because it was not technical did not mean it was unscientific. Given the refusal of a considerable section of the community to take any of it seriously or to commit themselves to the most cursory of investigations, one of the key purposes of the psychical researcher ‘is simply to make evidence accessible -to take care that facts which easily might not be seen shall be seen’. His, Sidgwick’s and Myer’s main concerns were to address the ‘scandal’ (Sidgwick 1882a) that this whole area of anomalous phenomena was ignored or at the best cursorily examined and then dismissed.

There was also the importance of building up a community of expertise to match the other developing disciplines but one specifically appropriate to this field. In fact, it can be argued that the core methodology of the leaders of the SPR was the refinement and application of the Apostles’ methodology to psychical research. (The Apostles were a secret group of elite Cambridge undergraduates who met regularly for high-level intellectual discussion.) In essence, the Apostles’ approach (Schultz 2004: 29-30) was the candid, forensic discussion of the
argument put forward by the speaker ‘on the rug’: a discussion, ideally, to be conducted in a spirit of civility and tolerance. One can easily see this model being used by the SPR, the collection of individual testimonies replacing the speaker’s essay or presentation, and the active encouragement of group discussion and provisional consensus. Such an approach lay at the heart of Sidgwick’s teaching partly influenced by John Grote and the Grote Club (Gibbins 1998; 2007: 61-62; 455-459), his involvement in a large number of intellectual societies and his efforts to bring people of different ideological positions together to probe problems and seek solutions: whether this was Oxford and Cambridge learning from each other (Ad Eundum Society), work on committees to reform society (Charity Organisation Society, for example), or the reconciliation of the spiritual and the physiological (Metaphysical and Synthetic Societies). In his work on the Cambridge Apostles (1998) and on Victorian intellectual life generally (2010; 2015), Lubenow (36) has demonstrated Sidgwick’s formidable capacity for networking and his almost ubiquitous presence on the national intellectual stage.

**Boundaries of new sciences**

Gurney’s statement that it was not possible to identify psychical research exclusively with any one particular field was a crucial one and it was a problem that psychical research shared with its close neighbour, psychology. As Rylance (2000:1) has pointed out, Victorian psychology debates, reflected the wide range of specialist and generalist interests and agendas in this field and he usefully distinguishes a number of different discourses – that of the soul, of philosophy, of physiology, and of medicine – their fluidity, their inter-relationships – their (op.cit.:21) ‘four different ways of looking at the phenomena of the human mind’, which implied different conceptual structures and basic assumptions. He could have been describing psychical research. All of these can be mirrored in the debates and work of the Sidgwick group. Francis Galton, in correspondence with Myers, made a related point: psychology and psychical research were hugely complex enquiries in that their subject matter was at a junction where a range of competing expertises converged (Luckhurst 2002:3). This raised huge issues in terms of who had the ‘expert’ right to adjudicate on the evidence.

Sommer (2013:154) has explored these tensions pointing out that the development of psychical research occurred at the same time as the emergence
of modern psychology and that there were conflicts within psychology as well as between it and other fields depending on the approach of the particular psychologist: the German, and later the American physiological school, found the SPR psychological and historical enquiries vague and nebulous and that in them there was no progressive, measurable body of knowledge on which to build. However, not all academics saw it as a marginal and eccentric enquiry (Turner 1974) and it had a considerable influence on young, emerging psychologists of the Continental psychodynamic school like Flourney, Assagioli, and Jung; and, of course, the Harvard psychologist and philosopher William James (Taylor 1996: 76-81; 2009: 275-276). The closeness of the links between psychical research and some psychological schools at this stage is clearly shown by the attendance lists and records of the earliest International Congresses of psychology in the 1890s (Sommer 2013: 58; Rosenzweig et al. 2000: 17-41; Alvarado 2017).

In *Strange Science* (2017), Karpenko and Claggett, emphasis this general fluidity, the different knowledge and boundary claims made by particular sciences, the role of anomalies and curiosities in this process and the unsettling but exciting process of challenging and justifying scientific observations then and now. It was within that context that the SPR was founded and developed. Beer (in Karpenko and Claggett: foreword) suggests that much of it was amateurish, pre-laboratory and before the growth of scientific instrumentation. However, in this respect the SPR was in advance of its time. The core group established their own research culture and were well aware of the importance of laboratory work and scientific instrumentation (145-148).

Moreover, it is clear from their own writings and contacts that they were at the heart of disciplinary development and enquiry in the late nineteenth century and that they were determined to reflect best practice and the latest developments in knowledge. Myers, for example, engaged in correspondence with Acton (38, 136,157) on the trustworthiness of testimony of different nationalities and classes. He was also very familiar with the work of the physiologist Hughlings-Jackson on evolutionary physiology and on the double brain and he absorbed elements of all this into his development of the subliminal consciousness (Myers 1904 v.1.: 74; Harrington 1987: 137-145, 220-226). Gurney engaged Darwin and Spencer in debate about the evolutionary origins and purpose of music (Sommer
The SPR library, the writings and references of the Sidgwick group richly reflected current work, in English, French and German on hypnotism and psychophysiology. (See *Proceedings* 10, 1894:427-429 for an impressive list of titles.) And Sidgwick was determined to get more engagement from the German school of psychophysiology in the SPR work and made every effort to achieve this at the 1892 Congress of Psychology, encouraging the widely respected psychologist James Sully to be joint secretary of that congress (114-115).

In fact, their work in psychical research should be seen not just in the context of emerging disciplines but also in the wider Victorian intellectual debate about the nature of society, the professional knowledge structure required to service it and the underpinning cultural and ethical platform on which it should be based. Williams (1984) has outlined the spiritual values that lay behind the research of Sidgwick, Myers, and Gurney, but their social interventions are equally part of the piece and both Myers (1893d, 1897f) and Gurney (1887e) in their collected essays ranged broadly across the social and intellectual debates of the time. Myers strongly supported the higher education of women and worked for many years as a school inspector (Hamilton 2009: 104-110). Sidgwick (Rothblatt 1968; Harvie 1976) was a central member of the 1860s generation of Victorian liberals who believed in the reform of society based on impartial research and enquiry and through his example and influence these values were incorporated into the work with the SPR.

Nor were the enquiries of Sidgwick and his colleagues vague. They were able to operate on the micro as well as the macro scale. There was, for example, an increasing emphasis, by the SPR, on statistics and probability reflecting the emerging Victorian concern (Porter 2003: 254-290) in this period with these issues. In fact, Hacking (1988: 427-451) has pointed out that some members of the SPR were in the forefront of this work and one member, the leading statistician, Edgeworth (1885, 1886) particularly contributed to this debate. Several of the Sidgwick group had mathematical expertise. Sidgwick was a Cambridge wrangler as well as being Senior Classic and he produced (1896-1897) a statistical analysis of telepathic responses in order to reject the hyperacuity explanation of thought-transference put forward by two Danish scientists; Eleanor Sidgwick was a gifted mathematician with expertise in the calibration of the units of scientific measurement and worked with her in-law,
Lord Rayleigh, the Noble prize winner, on a number of projects (Gauld 2007; see also Gibson 2019 on Mrs Sidgwick’s and Alice Johnson’s scientific credentials: 176-209); Lodge was a celebrated physicist; and Alice Johnson co-operated very closely with Mrs Sidgwick on the technical details of the large-scale census of hallucinations published in 1894. And the motivation for that survey was very largely a statistical one. They wanted very greatly to increase the sample of accounts from Gurney’s in Phantasms of 5,700 plus – they aimed for 50,000 (they actually achieved 17,000) – in order to create a more robust basis for their statistical conclusions (Sidgwick et al. 1894: 39).

**Cultural History Readings of the late-Victorian and Psychical Research Scene**

There has been a resurgence of interest in Spiritualism and psychical research in the last twenty years by scholars who have used these topics primarily as sources of insight into the cultural history of late-Victorian/Edwardian Britain and as ways of reading the literature and art of the period. Brake (1994: 36) has described this turn as a move away from the aesthetic preoccupations of Wellek and Warren, or the moral imperatives of Leavis, to approaches influenced by postmodernism. This has led to a range of disciplines being used by literary scholars to inform the text and its being read in a multiplicity of ways. This can lead to exciting insights into the nature of texts and the societies which created them but it has the attendant risk of not always appreciating the contested nature of psychical research in a sufficiently sensitive manner.

Examples include: (Royle 1991; Warner 2006; Tromp 2006; Thurschwell 2001; Kontou 2009; Galvan 2010; Ferguson 2012; Wilson 2007; 2012; Owen 1989; Owen 2004; Johnson 2006; Johnson 2015; Luckhurst 2002; McCorristine 2010; Willis 2016). Some of this material, though highly scholarly, has tended too easily to accept the criticisms of a number of critics with their own particular agendas. In addition, they do not fully acknowledge the negative impact that the boundary work by American psychologists, as they attempted to establish a physicalist, experimentalist, laboratory-based science of psychology in the USA, has had on later scholarly attitudes to psychical research. They also ignore underhand attempts to discredit those who took a different line (Sommer 2013; Alvarado 2014).
There are a number of inaccuracies and omissions in Luckhurst’s otherwise admirable book (2002) on the conceptual development of telepathy after Myers’ 1882 coinage of the term. Luckhurst is selective in his treatment of the Creery family and their thought-transference experiments with the SPR. Some of these early ones were conducted under conditions which excluded the possibility of the employment of a code (42). He is inaccurate on Smith who did not sever his links with the SPR after Gurney’s death in 1888, remaining an associate member for the rest of his life. Luckhurst does not delve sufficiently deeply into the character and background of Blackburn who was a gifted writer (several of his South African novels have been well regarded) but also an unmitigated conman. His articles on the SPR experiments, written when he was probably short of money, were full of contradictions. (See Ruffles 2009 for a detailed examination of these issues: also 44-45 below.)

It is worth expanding this point since the Smith/Blackburn story, as with Trevor Hall’s (1980a; 1980b) denigration of Myers and the research skills of the Cambridge leaders of the SPR, has been trotted out damagingly by some though by no means all cultural historians and both these accounts are from dubious and ambiguous sources. Gray (1999: 13-76) has provided a judicious, highly readable account of Blackburn. He dismantles Blackburn’s biographical entry in *The Anglo-African Who’s Who* of 1895: ‘…misleading, semi-false entry…’ and states: ‘To unravel his life, then, we need one basic tool: a healthy suspicion that wherever Blackburn went a tall story might have flowed unchecked…and that Blackburn himself enjoyed wielding the weapon of ridicule…’. Delgado’s (2017) article on the SPR is a recent example of the broad acceptance of the Trevor Hall/Blackburn thesis and does not note the rebuttal of the Innes’ charge (the lack of contemporary letters attesting to the appearance of the phantasm) by Gurney himself and later by Sidgwick and Myers. (On this see Myers 1904 v.1.: 641-643; Sidgwick et al. 1894: 220-223.)

Because evidence for the phenomena studied by the SPR is largely based on formal and informal personal accounts and witness testimony, it is easy to see how seductive this material can become for the cultural historian reading the discourse from a particular conceptual perspective, for example, the thesis that young women from whatever class were able, by posing as mediums, to get a freedom and power that they would not otherwise have in a male-dominated
society (Owen 1989 passim; Walkowitz 1992: 176: for a counterbalance see Hazelgrove 2000:5). To what extent is this argument accurate with regard to the leaders of the SPR? The main evidence for this comes from the period of the 1870s when several young female mediums (Cook, Showers, Fay, Mellon, Fairlamb) were at the height of their notoriety (Owen 1989: 41-74).

These episodes predate the forming of the SPR and the earlier, pre SPR, Sidgwick group did not have a chance to investigate Cook because of Crookes’ proprietorial attitude towards her (Hamilton 2009: 92-94). There is no doubt that Myers was highly susceptible to physical beauty and Wiley (2005: passim) has clearly demonstrated Fay’s intelligence, and charm and her capacity to deceive. However, Myers quickly reversed his position after his initial admiration and neither Sidgwick nor Gurney were taken in. Moreover, their negative attitude to physical mediumship was intensified by their investigations of Mellon and Fairlamb under controlled conditions at Arthur Balfour’s London home in 1876 (Sidgwick, E 1886.) The thesis of ‘artful’ women mediums exploiting the séance room to exercise a power and authority they could not exercise normally, though probably sustained in some other contexts, does not really chime with the activities and processes of the Sidgwick group in the 1880s and 1890s. (See 268 below for a discussion of this point with regard to the cross-correspondences.) Mrs Sidgwick, Mrs Verrall, and Alice Johnson were also fully active in investigation and it is worth pointing out that the most celebrated mediums during this period were Dunglas-Hume and Stainton Moses, both male, and a goodly proportion of the allegedly fraudulent were male also (Rita, Williams, Eglinton, Slade: see Podmore 1902 v.2).

It is inevitable then and now that anyone who attempts to investigate this field in more than superficial detail will have their motives and their judgement questioned. What is remarkable is that Myers, Gurney and the Sidgwicks were prepared to put themselves on the line often at huge cost in time, money, energy and reputation and to accept the risks of occasional deception and frequent ridicule. (See the case of Mr ‘D’ in Gauld 1968: 221-222; Hamilton 2009:209 where the motive was pure mischief.) They often used their holidays for psychical research purposes and made an epic journey to the South of France to investigate Palladino, sent George Albert Smith to America to examine a major case of a premonition which had prevented a major disaster, and Myers and
Gurney travelled extensively in Britain to assess a range of phenomena and in France (80-84) to study the developing schools of medical hypnotism. (See Gauld 1995: 390-393; Crabtree 1993: 272-273; Crabtree 2003; Dingwall 1968: 263-273.)

The generation of scientific and psychological hypotheses

A key aspect of the scientific enterprise is the production of hypotheses that help to understand and control observed phenomena. Sidgwick and Gurney, after their initial excitement at some of the very early experiments, were cautious as to the existence and operation of telepathy as a scientific hypothesis. Cerullo’s comment (1982:7) describing these efforts as an attempt to retain ‘some nonmaterial, nontemporal dimension into its construction of meaningful reality’ is an inaccurate reflection of their conscious (though possibly not subconscious) purposes. Both Sidgwick and Gurney, in spite of personal tragedies in their own lives, would not go beyond what the evidence might suggest and for them both the possibility of telepathy between the living and, particularly, telepathy between the living and the dead were hypotheses that were not (after the initial enthusiasm of the period 1882-84) securely evidenced. And in the period around and immediately after Gurney’s death, Sidgwick took a particularly bleak view of what they had or had not achieved (110). In addition, they and Myers were very cautious about suggesting a possible physical basis for telepathy. None of the SPR leaders believed that telepathic forces operated in the way that electromagnetic waves did (Myers in Gurney 1886 v.2.: 277-316).

Myers, however, while always acknowledging the provisional nature of his ideas, was prepared to put them into the public arena for debate and discussion. He speculated on the nature and range of telepathy with great ingenuity, drawing his conceptual framework not just from the emerging discoveries of psychological science alone (Ellenberger 1995; Crabtree 1993) but from the great poetic, philosophic and romantic traditions as well. Myers broadly accepted the standard nineteenth century view that the universe was bathed in a universal fluid (ether) in which light and the electromagnetic forces travelled as sound did in air. However, he (Myers 1886d: 174) could be cautious in his use of the term: ‘I do not like to see the ether - the deus ex machina of a certain school of modern theorists – dragged in, if I may say so, by the head and shoulders, to explain anything,
whether physical or psychical, which particularly puzzles us.’ (On the conceptual complexity of the ether see Navarro 2018; Noakes 2005; Raia 2005; 2007.) Myers coined the phrase metetherial (1904 v.1.: xix) for the region within and beyond the ether of space where the forces responsible for telepathy, clairvoyance and psychokinetic effects might reside but accepted that this was highly speculative. It should also be stressed that others with a better scientific pedigree than Myers were also prepared to speculate in a metaphysical fashion. See for example Balfour Stewart’s and Guthrie Tait’s (a close friend of Clerk Maxwell) *The Unseen Universe* in their efforts to escape from the entropic run down of a limited universe that so haunted the minds of many scientifically informed Christians (Karpenko and Claggett 2017: 254-278).

However, his major achievement was the application of the nineteenth century comparative method to the whole field of unusual psychological phenomena (Burrow 1983: 209-246). As Griffith (2017:473) has stated: ‘The comparative method…emerged in the transition from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century as the preeminent method for finding commonalities across an extraordinary range of aesthetic, social and scientific fields of research, from philology to anatomy, from geology…’. Using this approach, Myers was able, through his concepts of the subliminal self and the subliminal consciousness, to bring an enormous variety of anomalous phenomena into some form of coherence by identifying common patterns and origins (119-128). This contribution, with the related emphasis on hypnotism and automatic writing as tools (Myers called them psychoscopes) for revealing the underlying similarities between phenomena, remains his most lasting achievement. (See Crabtree 2003; Ellenberger 1995; Shamdasani 1993 on Myers’ role in the evolution of psychodynamic psychology.)

Myers also played a central part in the last great Victorian debate on the relations between ‘Science and Religion’ in the meetings of the Synthetic Society (130-131). In his clashes with some of the members of that society (Hamilton 2011: 46-54) one can see his tendency to speculative theorising raising questions of competing claims of authority on metaphysical issues, even in a group so generally conducive to intellectual cooperation, indeed created for that very purpose. This curious mixture of hard-nosed empiricism and mysticism made
Myers difficult to ‘read’. But both characteristics were absolutely integral to his personality.

It was these speculative views on the nature and destiny of human evolution (Kripal 2011:82-85) which may well have underpinned and encouraged Piddington and Gerald Balfour’s interpretation of the cross-correspondences. They were very familiar with his metaphorical use of the electromagnetic spectrum to indicate where beyond the ultra violet band future as yet undeveloped powers might lie. They would also have been aware of Myers’ (1904 v.2.: 506-508 onwards) Synopsis of Vital Faculty in which he imaginatively outlined the possible metetherial influences at play on the individual personality, including prior to incarnation.

Methodology of the Second-Generation Elite Leaders of the Society for Psychical Research

The chapters selected give examples of the simple, complex and symbolic communications allegedly embedded in the automatic writing scripts; they examine the proposition that their cryptic nature was not the product of discarnate design but the by-product of the automatic writing process; they explore the question that they were possibly the result of the random literary connections in a body of work produced by highly literate automatists; they consider the issue of sensory leakage. Were the automatists really that independent from each other? What social networks might have provided them with apparently paranormal content? They outline the social, cultural and psychological forces that may have led Gerald Balfour and John George Piddington to their extraordinary conclusions and why, though intellectually they were fully alive to the critical objections mentioned above, they rejected them. In other words, they moved from the tentative, nuanced methodology of the Sidgwick group towards one that seemed to indicate the beginnings of a cult. (On the complexities re defining a cult, see Shamdasani 1998: 1-12.)

This later methodology can clearly be seen in WH Salter’s (1948: 9-10) private and confidential guide to the scripts. The earlier cross-correspondences were ‘a pattern of ideas or phrases, or topics distributed among two or more automatists’. It was easy to see the connection between simple ones but more sophisticated ones between which no obvious connection could be found required work on
them to establish the hidden clue which provided the meaning. This suggested the possibility of an external designer creating the pattern as this conceptual structure was not in the mind of any of the automatic writers involved (Johnson 1907-1909). In order to establish links and meanings the assessors had to sort out (Salter 1948: 29) the quotations and literary allusions which formed so large a part of the scripts, and to trace them to their source. This required going through a maze of allusive filters in order to get as close as possible to a match between the automatic writing and the original literary text hinted at which would provide the key that unlocked the meaning. The task was made even more complicated when Piddington (Hamilton 2017: 103-105) first discovered an additional symbolic layer in the writings which, he and Balfour eventually claimed, represented seven communicators most of whom were intimately linked as friends or relatives to the Balfour family. (See appendix 3 for a list of the main symbols identified.) Several large indices were constructed to collate all this information and the commentaries on them were collected in nine volumes of *Notes and Excursuses* (Balfour 1927, Piddington 1921, 1934, 1935a, 1935b, 1943a, 1943b, 1943c, 1943d).

How did it come about that two very senior members of the SPR could have devoted themselves, and years of their lives and finances, to such an apparently preposterous activity? For after the early death of Gurney in 1888 and of Sidgwick and Myers in 1900 and 1901 respectively, there was barely a perceivable shift away from the early standards laid down in the 1880s. The leading figures of the Society at this time were Lodge, Mrs Verrall, John George Piddington, Mrs Sidgwick and Alice Johnson and even though they all felt a palpable sense of the loss of the founders of the SPR the material apparently emanating from these ‘discarnates’ was rigorously assessed. They were very careful to record the general reading of the automatists and more broadly who knew what, when and where. The greatest testimony to this is Mrs Sidgwick’s monumental 86-page record to the end of 1918 of when each script was produced and who had access to it (Piddington 1921: 1-86). Her colleague, Alice Johnson, was equally committed to the empirical standards of Myers, Gurney and Sidgwick and her grasp of abnormal psychology was thorough (See, for example, her detailed review of the work of the German psychophysiologist Parish: Johnson 1896-1897:162-171.)
However, the involvement of Mrs Coombe-Tennant in the project, first, through the death of her daughter Daphne, and second, through the developing affair from 1911 with Gerald Balfour (and the birth of their child Henry in 1913) gradually turned the main focus of Balfour and Piddington’s intellectual energies in one particular direction. It is argued that this psychodynamic driver moved these second-generation leaders sufficiently far from the more detached standards of the founders into compromising and weakening the quality of their assessment judgements. This shift can be seen when one compares the detailed scholarly examination by the investigators (Hamilton 2017: 63-82) of Mrs Piper’s automatic script with the enormous edifice of abstruse, symbolic associations and references compiled by Balfour and Piddington.

The scripts are saturated with Biblical and classical references and much of the canon of English literature. One cannot but speculate that Gerald Balfour and Piddington may well have subconsciously read the material in ways that we today cannot fully reconstitute. In addition, there was a powerful allusive tradition in the classical canon and Victorian poetry which could well have further amplified these resonances. It is, therefore, interesting to examine the ways in which they used these literary references. Douglas-Fairhurst (2002: 1-84, 182-269) has dubbed conscious and unconscious craftings and borrowings by writers within a rich literary culture as metaphorical afterlives. Did these resonances and echoes contribute to a literal belief in afterlives? (See also Kontou 2009; Wilson 2007; 2012.)

A brief examination of the use of three poems as cross-correspondences (Shelley’s *The Cloud*:173-176; Barrett Browning’s *A Musical Instrument* and Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*: 181-183) reveals both how the subject matter could have subliminally influenced the interpretation of Balfour and Piddington but also, by comparing it with the way scholars have approached the evaluation of the poems on which these cross-correspondence were based, throws the Balfour-Piddington approach into stark relief. They were interested in design and meaning in terms of external communication and ignored issues of literary form and content. For example, the Shelley poem has intrigued scholars by its philosophical ideas and origins and its rhyme scheme; the Barrett Browning poem by its emphasis on the elements of struggle in the creative process and by two recent scholars (Hughes 2010; Davies 2006) in its subtle emphasis on power and
violence in relations between the sexes; and Tennyson’s In Memoriam by the way it captures the afterlives of previous poetic content and artifice. But for Balfour and Piddington the issue was pragmatic. How many automatists quoted the Shelley poem and what did it link with? How did the struggle of the Great God Pan relate to the destiny of Henry Coome-Tennant?

The question, however, still remains as to whether the underpinning associations and contexts of Victorian verse predisposed them towards accepting the messages of the scripts. Balfour and Piddington grew to manhood at a time of (Hughes op.cit.: 1-7) great expansion of the printed word because of the application of technology to print production and they were both highly literate men. Victorian verse was full of life and death symbolism for the key relations between men and women and their ritual passages through life. Take, for example, the extensive collection of references to different types of bells which Piddington carefully crafted into aspects of the Palm Maiden’s story (Hamilton 2017: 175-176). These, and other conventional themes and tropes of the Victorian period were ripe for a paranormal interpretation. In addition, Moreman (208-209) has pointed out the ease with which cross-correspondences of apparently persuasive meaning could be created from a selection of randomly-chosen literary texts.

A further possible influence is the effect of the eugenics and degeneration discourse on them and on their position in society. Neither Piddington nor Gerald Balfour seemed to have had the more active involvement in the Eugenics Education Society that Arthur Balfour (234) had. But, as has been pointed out, the theme directly or indirectly was fairly continuous and pervasive during the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods in literature (Richardson 2012), politics (Searle 1976), Spiritualism (Ferguson 2012) and beyond (Stone 2002; Childs 2001). Moreover, one must again stress the privileged position they occupied. Piddington was an old Etonian with a substantial income from his business career; Gerald Balfour (also an Old Etonian) was networked to the highest levels of government through his brother; Winifred Coome-Tennant had direct access to Lloyd George through their Welsh and Liberal political interests (Lord 2007; 2011). Behind all this was the social framework of the aristocratic coterie ‘The Souls’ (Ellenberger 2015) to which some of the Balfour family were closely linked.
There was some distance and separation between the early researchers and the evidence they forensically examined. Such critical attitudes broadly continued post 1900 in the general work of the Society but the major project, the cross-correspondence automatic writings increasingly became the preserve of Gerald Balfour, the lover of one of the mediums, Winifred Coombe-Tennant, and John George Piddington, an intimate friend, who came to live with Balfour and his family, at Fishers Hill in Surrey after World War 1. (See Roy 2008: 154-158.) Both men while courteously acknowledging contributions to the debate in the pages of the *Journal* and the *Proceedings* of the SPR, tended to be dismissive of those who suggested alternative approaches. And, Piddington (1916) in his comments on French critics of the cross-correspondences and in his address as President of the SPR (1924) could not avoid a tone of gentle amused superiority.

One area they did not overlook, being familiar with Gurney's work on hypnotism and Myers' on automatic writing, was the capacity of the subconscious mind to impersonate or dramatize another personality. Piddington called such creations dummies. Yet he did not seem to fully appreciate the extent of such imaginative fabrication across the scripts. And though he and Gerald Balfour were well aware of the problem of cryptomnesia, their attitude on this gradually seemed to soften as knowledge apparently beyond the normal purview of the senses and patterns suggesting an external designer appeared across the scripts of several automatists, and the scripts themselves, self-reflectively, began to indicate the best conditions for communication and clues to its interpretation. Furthermore, Pigou (1909), an economist and fellow of King's College, Cambridge, had a testing exchange with Gerald Balfour (1911) and Lodge (1909c, 1909d) when he argued that this appearance of design in the scripts was really a psychological artefact, the product of muddled automatic writing and erratic telepathic communication between the living (not the discarnate) and that they had ignored material in their own *Proceedings* that suggested that. (See specifically 184-202.)

Mrs Sidgwick's outstanding contribution to psychical research was mentioned earlier in this paper. (See Johnson 1936 for a detailed account.) Throughout her psychical research career, she was a model of caution, balance, grasp of detail and insight. The picture painted of her in Warner's book (2006: 293-295), with regard to the Sidgwick group's investigation of Eusapia Palladino is a travesty. She did not write later about Palladino, once they had discovered her cheating,
'in evident disappointment’. Nor were her comments ‘wistful’. These were emotions Warner has retrospectively provided her with. The Sidg wricks disliked the investigation of physical phenomena but felt in this case that they had a duty to do so and protect the Society from possible deception. How, and to what extent, and for what reasons did she come to accept the Story and the Plan (Schultz 2017: 290)? The evidence to help settle these questions is patchy. As Oppenheim (1995) has stated, her feminism was unaggressive and she was very supportive of her brothers, particularly Arthur. There is no evidence that she forensically dissected the Plan, unlike her thoughtful work on the cross-correspondences and her prodigious analysis of Mrs Piper’s trance scripts (1915). Indeed, the picture that emerges from Roy’s (2008) examination of family papers on the Story and the Plan is one of a certain discretion from her on this topic.

As one looks back at the huge body of material, and how it was handled and organised from 1901-1936, it becomes clear that there were three fundamental flaws in the methodology of the project – flaws that would have been spotted had the investigators had such materials given to them for assessment from another source. Once they decided to let the automatic writing run and only to assess it sui generis, the scope for ambiguity both in terms of the nature of the content and the philosophical questions that it raised were enormous. They had already some experience in controlled assessments (Verrall 1911; Salter W. 1928) and the careful deployment of that and more rigorous testing of specific outcomes may, if successful, have interested if not persuaded a wider intellectual community of the value of the scripts. The second point follows on from the first. By claiming that telepathic content from the discarnate was most effectively and powerfully communicated by the jigsaw approach identified by Alice Johnson, they created an unmanageable situation for any external and independent assessors to get a grip on the content. It was inevitable that, for cost and other reasons, they could only give selected portions of the relevant scripts. This led to the accusation that they only chose items that made sense, and that they and not any putative discarnates were the real creators of the meaning. But given the almost exponential growth of the scripts and the organisational demands consequent on this (see appendix 1) that charge could not be properly countered. Moreover, questions of privacy prevented complete release of all the scripts. This contrasts
unfavourably with the transparent and accessible provision of evidence in the early great projects – *Phantasms of the Living* and the *Census of Hallucinations*.

A final issue is that of collective cognitive dissonance and group think which is explored in the main text (247-248). Piddington and Balfour lacked the external independent challenge which might have made them more aware of the operation of such psychological processes in their own case. The intense intellectual dialogue sustained for over twenty years by these two Old Etonians, living in the same house, was at the opposite end of the spectrum from the open, collective discussion that Sidgwick had emphasized as the core SPR methodology for the examination of anomalous material. In addition, reinforcing this group think, for over thirty years they had to deal with the long running hostility of Mrs Myers (Hamilton 2009: 286-292) to messages from her ‘husband’ coming from mediums; Gerald Balfour and Mrs Coombe-Tennant were obviously deeply concerned that their affair and the true nature of Henry’s parentage should not be made public; and there was always the fear of the role of the popular press and the leakage of information by servants (McCuskey 2000).
Context (edited version of the introductions from both books)

Frederic William Henry Myers was a complex and original personality who provoked a range of contradictory responses from both contemporaries and later scholars who studied his life and work (see Hamilton 2009: 1-8). The problem of understanding and assessing him and his achievements is further complicated by the fact that not only was he working in the hugely contested field of psychical research; but also that he and his intimate friend and psychical researcher Edmund Gurney were accused by a later historian Trevor Hall (1980a: 1-8, 44-45, 166-170) of gullibility and lack of rigour in their work and Myers, especially, was submitted to a sustained character assassination by Hall (1980b:35-38). Furthermore, Myers’ alleged appearance post-mortem in one of the most iconic ostensibly paranormal cases, the cross-correspondence automatic writings, has added a further layer of complexity in evaluating the methodology of the Society for Psychical Research, since a number of his surviving colleagues seemed to have departed, when assessing that material, from the standards of evidence laid down by Myers, Gurney and Sidgwick in the 1880s.

A cross-correspondence has been defined (Johnson 1907-1909: 369) as ‘independent references to the same topic found in the scripts of two or more writers’. In essence, there appeared to be two sorts of communications: a) cryptic puzzles which it was alleged were designed to prove the continued existence of Myers and his colleagues, partly by their content and partly by their sophistication, and b) statements largely clad in symbolic language which referred to their plans to improve by ‘psychological eugenics’ the human race and its destiny. (See below.)

The main automatists were (writing pseudonym in brackets): Margaret Verrall, classics lecturer at Newnham College, Cambridge, and the wife of A.W. Verrall, classics fellow and tutor of Trinity College, Cambridge); their daughter Helen, also a classicist and later an SPR researcher and official; Alice ‘Trix’ Fleming (Mrs Holland), sister of Rudyard Kipling, and herself a gifted writer; Winifred Coombe-Tennant (Mrs Willett), sister-in-law of F.W.H.Myers, a magistrate, Liberal political activist, and an individual strongly committed to supporting Welsh life and culture; Leonora Piper, the only professional medium; Diana Raikes (Mrs Forbes), the
wife of Justice Raikes KC; the Mackinnon family (Macs) from Aberdeen; Mrs Wilson, wife of a high-ranking Army officer; Dame Edith Lyttelton (Mrs King), a social reformer, public servant, playwright, and the second wife of the politician Alfred Lyttelton (their child, Antony, who died of meningitis before his second birthday, figured in the cross-correspondences); and Kenneth Richmond (a psychoanalyst and SPR official) and his wife Zoë.

The communicators were: F.W.H. Myers; Edmund Gurney; Henry Sidgwick (all three fellows of Trinity College, Cambridge, and co-founders of the Society for Psychical Research and all dead by 1901—see Hamilton 2009: 111–117; Gauld 1968: 137–149); Laura Lyttelton (née Tennant) who died after childbirth on Easter Eve in 1886 and whose son Christopher died at the age of two. She was the first wife of Alfred Lyttelton and was the daughter of Charles Tennant, a Scottish industrialist. Her sister, Margot Tennant, later married Asquith, the Liberal Prime Minister; Mary (May) Catherine Lyttelton, who died of typhus fever on Palm Sunday 1875 (she was called the Palm Maiden in the scripts). May was Alfred Lyttelton’s sister and the daughter of Lord Lyttelton. Arthur Balfour, Prime Minister (1902-1905) was in love with her and her death devastated him; Francis Maitland Balfour, a distinguished embryologist who died in a climbing accident in 1882. He was Gerald, Arthur, and Eleanor’s brother; and Annie Marshall, the wife of Myers’ unstable cousin Walter. She committed suicide in 1876 and was the love of Myers’ life (Hamilton 2009: 39–47; Beer 1998: 116–88).

The first assessors of the scripts were: Alice Johnson, first-class in natural sciences from Newnham College and SPR researcher and official; J.G. Piddington, business man and Oxford classics graduate and SPR official; Sir Oliver Lodge, radio pioneer, SPR president, and celebrated physicist; Margaret Verrall; Eleanor Sidgwick (née Balfour), mathematician, co-founder and principal of Newnham College, Cambridge, and the widow of Henry Sidgwick; and Gerald Balfour, classicist, philosopher, fellow of Trinity College, and politician.

Three things stand out from this catalogue. Apart from Leonora Piper the individuals involved were of very high intellectual calibre and social status, which boded well for the quality of the assessment of the scripts. But potentially working against this was the highly intimate nature of their relationships and networks.
Most were members of the SPR, a number were Cambridge graduates (Oxford in Piddington’s case) with the intellectual energy largely coming from Trinity and Newnham Colleges, and, finally, some members of the Balfour and the Lyttelton families were part of the celebrated aristocratic circle called the ‘Souls’ that met regularly at country houses and shared similar aesthetic and intellectual interests (Ellenberger 1982; 2015). The third characteristic was the sensitive nature of the automatic writing material. There were references to Myers’ platonic relationship with his married cousin Annie Marshall and her suicide in 1876, to Mrs Myers’ refusal to allow the publication of Myers’ unexpurgated autobiography in which he told this story (Hamilton 2009:285-287), and even more sensationaly, to what has been called the Story and the Plan. The former was an account of the efforts by the discarnate May Lyttelton to convince Arthur Balfour that her love for him continued beyond the grave and that she would wait, on the borders of the next world, to be reunited with him. In addition, according to Piddington, there were veiled symbolic references to the central and positive role Arthur Balfour would play for the British Empire in the last long period of his political career and, also, (the Plan) the efforts of the discarnate communicators to work collectively for world peace by influencing the birth of children of remarkable qualities who had the requisite intellectual, moral, and leadership qualities to do so. Explicit, highly moving, and dramatic narratives on these two subjects occurred in the scripts of Winifred Coombe-Tennant and more allusively and faintly in others. She became the lover of Gerald Balfour in 1911 and had his child, Henry, in 1913. The scripts appeared to assign him, Henry, the major role in implementing the Plan. She had also lost one child, Daphne (whose symbol in the scripts was the Greek letter Delta) at eighteen months and another child Christopher in the First World War. There was some apparent implication in a number of the scripts that these and the other children who died young were ‘failed’ experiments on the road to the development of the outstanding children mentioned above.

There has been trenchant criticism of the methodology adopted by the early investigators of the cross-correspondences who stated that a statistical approach was not appropriate for the assessment of such a highly literary and subtle body of material. It has been counter-argued, at least before the sheer number of scripts spiralled almost out of control, that there could have been an effort to quantify numbers of successes against numbers of failures with regard to cross-correspondences attempted and achieved, and to relate this to cross-correspondences occurring by chance in comparable material (West 1962: 107-
For the scripts did not suddenly materialise in complete published form with dates, commentaries, and indices. They came haphazardly in spurts and starts over many years and often with no apparent links between them. The task of coordinating, interpreting, and printing the material was almost overwhelming, particularly as the investigators had other professional responsibilities both within and beyond the SPR. The limited extracts published in the Proceedings of the SPR are daunting enough but the issue of complexity is greatly intensified when one goes back to the full original scripts. There are only a few printed sets of the complete (or almost complete) automatic writings in existence so, first, getting a set is difficult and, second, cross referring between sets in order to evaluate any paranormal dimension is a time-consuming and tedious task. The present writer, as stated above, has scanned into a searchable PDF format and transferred to the computer all the scripts of the automatists that have been printed in volumes—the Verralls, Trix Fleming, Winifred Coombe-Tennant, the Mackinnons, and Mrs Wilson—and the associated commentaries by Balfour and Piddington. This speeds up the task of cross referencing but by no means eliminates the time, effort, and energy required to make assessment judgements, or the need to refer to a substantial body of background and contextual documentation. It was not possible to do this with Leonora Piper’s scripts since they were never printed in volume form.

A brief comment on automatic writing may be useful. It is a term which has almost completely faded from general discourse but at the end of the nineteenth century it was quite familiar in educated circles. Myers did a great deal of work on it and it helped to inform his concept of the subliminal self (Myers 1885a,c, 1887a, 1889a) but it is an under-researched area in much post-Edwardian psychology (Wegner 2002: 99–144; Moreira-Almeida 2012: 191–213; Palmer 2001: 205–117; Muhl 1930) and there are many misconceptions about the level, quality, and value of the content produced. (See chapter on psychological artefact.)
Myers and the SPR in the 1880s

Foundation of the Society for Psychical Research

William Barrett was clearly the prime mover in setting up the Society for Psychical Research, despite the later Cambridge dominance over it (see Williams 1984: 162–63; Noakes 1998: 259–61). He wished to bring before the scientific community, the anomalous and apparently supernormal phenomena that he had experienced, so that they could no longer ignore them, or react negatively without having properly examined them. He wanted able and educated men to authenticate supernormal phenomena if they existed or, as a service for the general public, expose them if fraudulent. He also believed it was important for investigators to have opportunities to work closely with Spiritualists, who were the people most knowledgeable about the range of phenomena that actually or allegedly occurred. The original idea (it is tedious to debate who first thought of it) emerged in discussion when he was staying with Dawson Rogers, a leading Spiritualist, at the end of 1881. It was decided to hold a conference to explore the matter in greater depth. This took place at the headquarters of the British National Association of Spiritualists in Great Russell Street, on the 5th and 6th January 1882. The conference adopted a resolution by Stainton Moses, to organise a society for those interested in ‘Psychological Research’. A working committee was set up to deal with the details and after several meetings terms like ‘occult’ and ‘psychological’ were weeded out, and at the next meeting of the conference on the 20th February the SPR was set up with Sidgwick as the first President.

Barrett may have had the original idea and spark, but the Spiritualists were the practical driving force in the very early days. They provided the rooms and they did the marketing and a substantial proportion of the early individual membership and members of the council were Spiritualists of longstanding and experience (Dawson Rogers 1911: 46–47). They particularly welcomed, as Barrett did, the link with the Cambridge group, and the prestige and status that Sidgwick’s name as President lent the fledgling organisation. It was in fact touch and go whether Sidgwick, Myers and Gurney, would become involved at all. Myers, though favourable to the setting up of the society was only willing to become heavily involved if Sidgwick led it. In the Barrett papers (SPR 3) in the SPR archive, the
names of Myers, Gurney and Sidgwick do not appear to be among the twenty-seven replies to Barrett’s proposal, possibly because of the phrasing of the original proposal, which was ‘to enquire into the phenomena associated with Spiritualism’.

Yet Myers was often more pro-Spiritualist than some of his published work would suggest. He certainly was concerned, like Gurney and Sidgwick, about the quality of the work of such a society, given that there were very few people capable of objective, systematic investigation. But, he, ‘secretly … desired anything which would bind them and myself to systematic work. There was also the hope that the Spiritualists might introduce us to phenomena of “home circles”, which we had been vaguely told of’ (Myers 26/63/44). This initially seemed possible since Stainton Moses, the most respected figure in Spiritualism and a major contributor to *Light*, gave his full support to the SPR. He had originally thought that the intellectual and social differences between the Spiritualists and the Cambridge scholars were too great to surmount (Oppenheim 1985: 137–38). But he quickly saw the value of the alliance with Cambridge. On 22nd July 1882 *Light* printed the SPR prospectus and details of its organisation; on the 3rd February 1883 it stated that the SPR was meeting the scientific sceptic by scientific methods; and in a retrospect at the end of 1883, Moses assured his readers that the SPR, ‘is rendering a service to Spiritualism which Spiritualists will appreciate in the future more than they are able to do now that the processes are so largely hidden’. And later (on 5th January 1884) he specifically acknowledged the impact that the writings of Messrs Myers and Gurney was having in bringing hitherto tabooed facts to public attention, particularly ‘among those who influence and lead opinion’.

However, despite initial good will, the early years of the SPR were characterised not just by painful clashes of personality and class but also by conflicts over both methods and areas of investigation. Williams (Williams 1984: 2, 5) has contrasted the liberal epistemology of the Cambridge group (based on rational, elitist, detached enquiry) with the plebeian methodology of the Spiritualists (based on the democratic, anecdotal common sense of the masses). This, however, is an over simple distinction. A number of the Spiritualists were well educated middle class and upper-middle class. It was the precise application and tone of the
Cambridge group’s methods which irritated them. Rather than concentrate on the immediate activities and experiences of Spiritualistic circles, it rapidly became clear to the Spiritualists that the SPR was investigating old cases of apparitions and the elusive concept of telepathy, instead of the core issue of individual survival of bodily death, for which, they argued, there was much contemporary evidence. A cogent letter in the SPR *Journal* from GD Haughton set out these concerns. Myers replied to it agreeably, but in a slightly lofty tone, in August 1885 (Myers 1885f: 29–32), defending the logical and evidence-based approach he and his colleagues adopted. Haughton had stated that the Society, ‘pursue the inquiry…like a firm of solicitors preparing a case for a trial’. Well, Myers was delighted by that, since a certain Devon solicitor had criticised the Society for not behaving as stringently as his firm would have done! He and Gurney actually agreed with some of the points Haughton made, but he quite understood Haughton not spotting this since, ‘It is only natural that on seeing the too frequently recurring names of Messrs Gurney and Myers at the bottom of an article, he should claim *Toujours perdrix!* and pass on to the next.’ Myers, therefore, managed both to imply that Haughton was a little superficial and casual in his approach, and to identify himself and Gurney, by implication, as the real workers.

A certain intellectual arrogance lay behind this approach to psychical research. WC Lubenow’s (Lubenow 1998) research on the Cambridge Apostles (though Myers was not himself an Apostle) provides a good insight into the intellectual milieu which formed Myers, Gurney and Sidgwick. It is significant, as Lubenow points out, that ‘For much of the century the Apostles operated out of the grandeur and intellectual power of Trinity’, the college contributing 92% of the membership in the 1860s (Lubenow 1998: 109–10). Also, as Lubenow indicates, the Society for Psychical Research could be seen in some lights as a natural ‘extension of apostolic interests’. Sidgwick, the model apostle, was President and a substantial number of other apostles were members or associates: Roden Noel, Arthur Myers, Arthur Hamilton Smith, Henry Babington Smith, Donald MacAlister, Oscar Browning, Arthur Sidgwick, Roger Fry, and Edward Marsh, for example (Lubenow 1998: 229–30).
In broad terms (with a range of shadings and refinements) they adhered to a political party-free liberalism involving respect for property rights and civil order, while at the same time they defended the right to apply rational thought to all areas of life. They valued (with some reservations) the training that the classical and mathematical tripos gave in developing powers of critical analysis, evaluation of evidence and incisive communication; and that these were transferable to all areas of human investigation and activity (Lubenow 1998: 352–55). They believed, too, in expertise (provided it was not marred by over-specialisation) and the importance of the new applied subjects that were emerging. They had, in addition, a strong conviction of the value of moral excellence and the importance of doing one’s duty, which was often translated into work for the public good or in the emerging public sector. They also had a certain suspicion and fear of the masses; and they found the context and ethos of Spiritualistic investigations often distasteful and vulgar.

The dominance of Cambridge values, approaches and priorities in the SPR was reflected in the nature of the committee structure established. It was evident that the main focus would be on an examination of the various paranormal properties of mind and not exclusively on the survival question and the physical phenomena associated with Spiritualism (Cerullo 1982: 44–45). The committees set up were on: thought-reading, mesmerism, the Reichenbach phenomena (this was the odic force which Baron Reichenbach stated penetrated all things and which certain sensitive individuals could see and feel), apparitions and haunted houses, and physical phenomena associated with Spiritualism. There was also a literary committee whose aim was to collect relevant written material for any of the other committees. Therefore, only one of the committees was tasked with investigating Spiritualism. Those on thought-transference and mesmerism rapidly emerged as the key ones, together with the literary committee. Myers and Gurney threw themselves with great drive and enthusiasm into the work of these committees, supporting Barrett, who was at this stage the leading figure, and initially on all the committees (Noakes 1998: 261). But they soon supplanted him in power and influence. As Nicol pointed out (Nicol 1972: 345–46), their relative youth meant that they had much drive and energy. All the important contributors to SPR work in the 1880s (with the exception of Sidgwick who was 43) were in their twenties or thirties in 1882. Several of them, in addition, had private incomes, and
considerable control over their professional and private time, which enabled them to travel freely and to undertake research.

The committee structure established in 1882 did not last the lifetimes of Myers and Gurney. It relied on the other members of the committees having their own drive and energy and capacity for mastering large bodies of detail. They did not. The haunted houses committee and the physical phenomena committee faded away within two years. The latter was revived in 1886, but again had little staying power. The Reichenbach committee also guttered out. Only the literary committee and later the library sub-committee—because of their emphasis on general information-gathering—had a more sustained existence, and, of course, relied heavily on the input of Myers, Gurney, and Arthur Myers. The general view gradually developed that rather than have large numbers of standing committees, working parties would be appointed to deal with very specific issues (like Madame Blavatsky, the *Census on Hallucinations*, and Dowsing). After their reports were delivered the thought-reading and mesmerism committees were wound up. In the former case because there was some confidence that telepathy had been established, and in the latter case, Gurney, as an individual, continued to lead investigations, in greater depth, on hypnotism and mesmerism. One exception to this general trend was the establishment of a Hypnosis committee in the 1890s, led by medical doctors rather than Myers, because of the increasing interest in this area, an interest partly due to the pioneer work of Myers and Gurney in the 1880s.

There was, no doubt, a lofty sense of social and intellectual certainty about the Cambridge group’s judgements which went against the grain for many Spiritualists. In spite of the former’s generally meticulous efforts to detect fraud and to obtain good corroborative evidence for phenomena, many then and now must have felt that there was a class-grounded interpretation of evidence at work. These quotations, taken at random from early reports—‘The witness was a clergyman of good standing and unimpeachable character personally known to me’, ‘The boy was loutish’, ‘The woman large, flabby, sallow’—would make many a reader uneasy today. Myers, in fact, wrote a letter to Lord Acton in which he clearly outlined the class and racially based criteria the society used in initially weighing evidence, which will be considered in greater detail later (Gauld 1968:
In a strange way these judgements almost foreshadow, or are parodied by, the sweeping confidence of Sherlock Holmes’ assertions and deductions. One wonders, a little fancifully, whether Doyle derived elements of the imperious, precise and self-confident tone of his great detective from his reading of the SPR Journal and Proceedings.

The sense of class difference manifested itself in other ways apart from personal judgements. One of the objects of the Society was that the Council would conduct their investigations as far as possible through private channels (thus avoiding lower class paid mediums) and subscription levels were set at well above what the working class could afford: associate membership at a guinea a year and full membership at two guineas. In addition, Sidgwick, as President, displayed very effective public relations skills, modelled the society on existing scientific society lines and set the appropriate ethos. He cleverly, after a short period, managed to create a situation where the Society expressed no collective views and where publications were clearly seen as being attributed to and the responsibility of the individuals concerned (Williams 1984: 96–97). This tactic allowed the Society, to some extent, to shield itself from individual crises, scandals, bizarre theories and viewpoints, and to retain a broad church coalition. Indeed, under his presidency, the Society expanded rapidly within the intellectual and social elite of the time. Within twenty years the society had over nine hundred members, many of whom had considerable intellectual, social, scientific or literary distinction. Gladstone, Tennyson and Ruskin were honorary members; two Cavendish Professors of Experimental Physics at Cambridge also joined—Rayleigh and his successor J Thomson (Rose 1986: 5). A number of glittering aristocratic names also appeared on the regularly published membership lists—the Ranee of Sarawak, Lord Bute, the Earl of Caernarvon, and the Earl of Crawford and Balcarres, for example. The list of members also reveals the very high percentage with fashionable London addresses, or comfortable rural or country house locations. In his otherwise valuable book on this period, The Invention of Telepathy, Roger Luckhurst (Luckhurst 2002: 1) does not do justice to the status that the society had, even though, of course, it did receive its fair share of ridicule and abuse.

It has often been suggested that the Society for Psychical Research was a desperate, last ditch attempt by nineteenth-century intellectuals to restore some
spiritual meaning to the Universe in the face of geological and biological evidence to the contrary, and that they accepted lower standards of evidence than otherwise in their desperation to retain a Cosmos that had meaning. This is to do them a considerable injustice. They had, indeed, individual motives based on emotional needs—Sidgwick had a nagging concern that there should be some set of justifiable ethical principles to underpin human behaviour, Myers had an overwhelming horror at the thought of extinction and Gurney was driven by compassion and empathy for humanity—yet they were quite prepared to face up to the fact that enquiries could peter out and they would then have to accept an existentially meaningless universe. They had considerable intellectual toughness and persistence and were quite ruthless in discarding evidence that they thought was contaminated or discredited in anyway, whatever their inner hopes and fears. As Williams has cogently pointed out (Williams 1984: 98), psychical research as practised by Sidgwick, Myers and their colleagues, far from being 'part of a late Victorian “flight from reason” ', was an embracing of reason, an attempt to look rationally—and in a scientific and scholarly fashion—at these strange and dubious phenomena, in the same way as the Bible and the ‘miracles’ of Christianity had been subjected to thorough examination.

However, once they were convinced that there was something worth investigating, they were determined to communicate this. Sidgwick oversaw a considered approach to the dissemination of the findings throughout the country, with the support of Myers and Gurney, who did most of the actual writing. The Journal (from 1884) was private to members but the Proceedings were circulated widely to libraries and to mechanics institutes, and eventually to some institutions abroad. Myers and Gurney also adopted a policy of summarising a number of their theories and findings in quality periodicals like the Fortnightly Review and the Nineteenth Century and Myers, from very early on, utilised his skills as a lecturer, to spread the message to appropriate audiences. There are many tributes to the way his skills in public speaking and social conversation facilitated and publicised the work of the SPR (Mastermann. 67, Salter 1958b:264).

One mark of this, as Stein has pointed out, is the fact that psychical research had a centrality then which it has never regained, ‘Almost anyone who had anything
to say in the period had something to say about psychical research, whether he believed there was any truth in the psychic experience or not' (Stein 1968: 8–9). Physicists, psychologists, anthropologists, depending on their temperament and personal experiences, all lined up on various sides of the great debate. Articles appeared in many of the leading and the popular periodicals, from Stead’s *Pall Mall Gazette* and *Review of Reviews* to the *Contemporary Review*, the *Fortnightly*, the *Nineteenth Century*, the *National Review*, and even *Mind*. The Archbishop of Canterbury (Benson), and the Bishops of Ripon and Carlisle (Carpenter and Goodwin) all took a keen if cautious (particularly in Benson’s case) interest in the field.

They were also prepared to see their work fully informed by the young science of psychology and even to challenge existing paradigms (see below). One particularly important development in this regard, was the burgeoning friendship in 1882 between William James and Edmund Gurney. James was actually in England in 1882, the year of the founding of the SPR, taking a break before starting his great book *The Principles of Psychology*. When their father died, William stayed in England, and Henry went to make the funeral and probate arrangements. Gurney who knew Henry, presumed on this to invite James to the December meeting of the Scratch Eight (an informal philosophical society) and from then on a close friendship developed (Epperson 1997: 49–50). It is not known if James met Myers through Gurney at this very early stage, but he would certainly, have heard about him and met him if he had not gone back to America in the spring of 1883. Gurney sent occasional letters to James outlining their investigations and the huge amount of work following up the leads—some private, some the result of the newspaper adverts in *The Times*—and it was from this initial contact that the mutually beneficial, intellectual cross-fertilisation between Gurney, James, and later Myers, grew (Skrupskelis et al. 1997: 491–92).

**Thought-transference, Telepathy and Mesmerism**

It is quite clear that when the SPR was first set up the main thrust of Myers’ early interest was in thought-transference and related phenomena. Just a few months after the Society’s foundation, Barrett, Gurney and Myers were in print in the *Nineteenth Century* with their work with the Creery children (Barrett, Gurney and
The Reverend Mr Creery was described as ‘a clergyman of unblemished character’ and, no doubt, his children were also seen as such. The children had been extensively investigated both at their home and at Cambridge and—in some of the experiments—in situations that would have prevented sensory leakage or the transmission of clues. Under a variety of controlled conditions, they appeared to demonstrate powers of thought-transference, by identifying the concealed faces of playing cards and other objects. They did this on a scale massively above what one would expect by chance. The authors of the article thus vigorously distinguished these phenomena from what they had encountered from Cumberlandism and the willing game, and they tried to eliminate all sensory sources of communication. They were later criticized on this score (Hall 1980a: 58–59) and on the grounds that they took the good faith of the participants too obviously for granted. However, they addressed these points in their second report on thought-reading (Gurney, Myers and Barrett 1882: 70–97).

They stressed that, in their key experiments, questioning the good faith of the Creerys was irrelevant since, ‘We based our conviction of the reality of the phenomena on experiments made when none of the Creery family were cognizant of the object selected’ (Gurney, Myers and Barrett 1882: 71). Myers and Gurney had visited the family in Buxton in April and the second report described, amongst other things, the experiments conducted when Myers invited the family to his new home, Leckhampton House, in Cambridge, the following July. The young Eveleen Myers took part in some of the tests, probably her introduction into the strange new world that would impinge on much of her future domestic life. The enquiry lasted for ten days and, quite often, the children were tested alone, with a thick, closed door separating the guesser from the investigator. Two of the sisters were also assessed by Barrett later in the year at Dublin. The results overall were above chance but not as spectacular as some of the Buxton findings. There were, the report commented, indications that boredom and tiredness could affect the results, a possible indication, one might think, of the trouble later to come.

The second part of the report described the much more spectacular results that Myers and Gurney had with two new subjects, Douglas Blackburn and George
Albert Smith, who lived in Brighton. Blackburn had written to Light claiming that he and Smith had a remarkable rapport which allowed Smith to read his thoughts and to share the same taste sensations when he ate or drank. Myers and Gurney visited them in December 1882 and the committee reported that, ‘The results of these trials give us the most important and valuable insight into the manner of the mental transfer of a picture which we have yet obtained’ (Gurney, Myers and Barrett 1882: 78–79). The quality of the results might have given them pause for thought and one wonders what enquiries were made into the backgrounds of Smith and Blackburn. Smith was a stage mesmerist and Blackburn a rather scurrilous journalist with a dodgy private life. In spite of this, Gurney and Myers were particularly impressed by their demonstrations and Gurney, even more so, by Smith’s abilities as a mesmerist or hypnotist. Gurney took on the chairmanship of the mesmeric committee in addition to his general duties as honorary secretary of the SPR in order to investigate hypnosis/mesmerism in greater detail. It was an exciting time and they may have got a little carried away. As Constance Buxton, an interested observer, enthused, ‘The accounts of the Brighton experiments with Mr Blackburn and Mr Smith are quite wonderful … I will certainly go on with our experiments on Thought Transference whenever I can get my husband into a sufficiently un-matter of fact state of mind’ (Myers 1/107: 11.5.1883).

However, both the experiments with the Creerys and those with Smith and Blackburn were severely questioned in later years. Firstly, Gurney discovered the girls using a simple code (Gurney 1888–89b: 269–70), which ironically was not long after the time that Myers wrote to his wife that the children seemed to have recovered their old form and that he had found that one of them was an excellent hypnotic subject (Myers 8/11:27.2.1887). From then on, Sidgwick rigorously excluded all their results as possible evidence for telepathy. Barrett strongly protested at this, pointing out that the code only covered situations when the sisters were insight of each other and that there was plenty of other evidence that telepathy occurred when these conditions did not obtain. He defended his position strongly in later years and gave examples of successful thought-reading where it was not possible to pick up sensory or muscular clues: ‘Stringent precautions were taken to avoid any information being conveyed to the subject through the ordinary channels of sense … one of the percipients, Maud, then a
child of twelve years old, was taken to an empty adjoining room and both doors closed. I then wrote down some object likely to be in the house, which we (the family together with myself) silently thought of. No one was allowed to leave their place or to speak a word. The percipient had previously been told to fetch the object as soon as she “guessed” what it was, and then return with it to the drawing room where we were seated’ (Barrett 2006: 53–54). The girls performed well on these and other tests but Barrett felt that it was obvious what had happened. The girls had become bored and were also worried that their abilities fluctuated, so they invented the code in order not to disappoint their important visitors. Myers partially agreed with him and wrote to him as late as 22nd November 1900 pointing out that the issue was always, ‘how to deal with the later cheating in connection with what I believe, with you, to have been the early genuineness’ (SPR3/A4/97).

In later years, the experiments with Smith and Blackburn came in for considerable criticism, in the light of the claims by Blackburn, in the 1900s (in 1908–1909 in John Bull and in 1911 in the Daily News), that the whole series of experiments had been faked. He had assumed that all the other key participants were dead. Unfortunately for him, Smith was still very much alive and wrote to the paper to insist that there had been no hoaxing. He did not deviate from this position for the rest of his long life. Blackburn’s confessions were thought by some to be prompted by a chronic need for cash and the SPR, in a rather lofty way, referred his accusations to the attention of their members, ‘We think that those of our members who do not regularly see the Daily News may be interested in reading the following letters and articles …’ (Journal 1911: 115–32).

After all this time it is not possible to state whether Smith was fraudulent or not. There just is not enough evidence. Certainly, he did start out as a hypnotist and mind reader on the Brighton stage and Blackburn was an out and out rogue. Though it should be stated that, later, he showed himself a gifted novelist on South African themes (Hall 1980a: xii). Certainly, Smith had strong show business interests and later exploited the world of psychics and spooks as subjects for his film factory at St Ann’s Well Garden in Hove (he was one of the earliest silent film makers in England). Yet, to the end he denied fraud, was thought very competent by Gurney, Myers and the Sidgwicks, and remained an
associate member of the SPR throughout his life (he did not ‘sever his connection with the SPR after Gurney’s death in 1888’, as Luckhurst [2002: 74] stated). It is also noteworthy that the Sidgwicks engaged in thought-transference experiments with Smith in 1889, that there was a further series in 1890 and 1891, and that Smith was—apparently very satisfactorily—used in a number of roles by the Society, generally without suspicion or contention. There were, however, on the other side of the equation, two moments of suspicion. Mrs Verrall, a close Cambridge friend of Myers, mentioned to Alice Johnson (the SPR’s research officer) in 1908 that there was some suspicion that Smith had cheated in the Sidgwicks’ 1889 investigations in Brighton. Furthermore, Sir Oliver Lodge told JG Piddington in 1909 that he though he remembered Gurney catching Smith out on one occasion (Hall 1980a:142). Myers referred to the Brighton suspicions in one of his letters to his wife but, given Smith’s continued involvement with the Society, the suspicions seem to have been allayed (Myers 8/275: 6.4.1891).

Alan Gauld (1965) in a well-balanced survey of the case rightly pointed out that the third report of the committee into thought-transference was rather inadequate, and that the show business element in Smith’s background did predispose one to looking much more carefully at him as a character. But he could not find any direct evidence, beyond Blackburn’s confession of their joint hoaxing, that Smith was fraudulent. However, a certain sense of residual unease remains in this case. It does give one pause for thought when one reads in Light 25th October 1884 an advert on Thought-Reading or, Modern Mysteries Explained by Douglas Blackburn, Price One Shilling. Furthermore, the letter Blackburn sent to Light in 1882, outlining the extraordinary powers of thought-transference that he and Smith could demonstrate, has all the hallmarks of bait. If it was bait, Myers and Gurney took it. They contacted Blackburn, as we have seen, and carefully examined the paper records and reports he sent to them. They visited Blackburn and Smith in Brighton on the 15th November and on the 2nd, 3rd and 4th December 1882, where they conducted their first experiments with them. Hall was to criticise the sloppiness of these initial experiments. Physical contact, for example, was allowed at times between the two demonstrators. But that, it could be argued, was not naivety but rather the varying of conditions in order to get a better insight into the phenomena (Hall 1980a: 101–103).
But all this was well in the future. At the time the evidence for the new human faculty that they thought they had discovered seemed strong, and they searched for an appropriate terminology—thought induction’, ‘ideoscopy’, thought-reading’, and ‘thought-transference’. Only the last developed any general currency, and even it was superseded by Myers’ coinage of the term ‘telepathy’ which caught on very quickly and soon spread into the language generally (Williams 1984: 172). The birth of this charismatic and puzzling child is described in a letter of Myers to Sidgwick, ‘What do you think of the words telaesthesia, telaesthetic, telepathy, telepathetic which I have just invented’ (Myers 12/170:2.11.1882). So, Myers and his colleagues now had, to some extent, an empirical fact and a concept, but not even the beginnings of a hypothesis as to how it worked. Did telepathy have a physical or a psychic vehicle as carrier? how, if at all, did it relate to ‘the luminiferous ether’? and to the physiology of the brain? Yet, they appeared to have demonstrated that mind was not totally dependent on brain and that there were things beyond the five bodily senses. A crack had opened in the apparently self-sealed and doomed materialist universe.

The third major source of evidence for some form of thought-transfer was the set of experiments carried out in Liverpool by Malcolm Guthrie, early in 1883. Guthrie, the owner of a drapery firm, had discovered that, stimulated by a visit to Liverpool of the stage performer Washington Irving Bishop, two of his female employees could transfer words, letters, numbers, to each other, crucially in some circumstances, without contact. Barrett went to see them in May 1883. Myers and Gurney followed later and eventually, Oliver Lodge, Professor of Physics at University College, Liverpool, became involved. As with the Creery children, the quality of the performance declined over time. But when Myers and Gurney investigated late in the year, they found that the girls, without being hypnotized, could detect with reasonable success, a substance tasted by the experimenter, and also, particularly in one case, six drawings were transferred with a considerable degree of accuracy. Lodge, in his tests, brought all the objects involved in experiments with him, and he alone knew what was to be used. He, too, came to the conclusion that the results were well above chance (Inglis 1977: 324–27).
Therefore, with evidence from the Creerys, from Smith and Blackburn, and from the experiments with Guthrie in Liverpool, Myers and his colleagues felt that they had established, if tentatively, the experimental existence of telepathy. But experiment was based on a lot of hard travelling and a lot of searching for factual information. It meant time and drudgery and there are many letters interchanged between Myers and Sidgwick with hotel rather than home addresses at the top. But they were buoyed up at times by what Myers called the Darien moment, the sense that ‘we were the first that ever burst into that silent sea’. This was a period of momentous excitement and exhilaration that even Sidgwick felt at times, and whose atmosphere was well captured by Jane Harrison, a young Cambridge classicist and acquaintance of the Cambridge psychical researchers: ‘This was the Psychical Research circle; their quest, scientific proof of immortality. To put it thus seems almost grotesque now; then it was inspiring’ (Harrison 1925: 55).

In the *Fortnightly Review* in March and April 1883, Myers and Gurney for the first time brought to the fore the question of telepathy in relation to ‘crisis apparitions’, seeing in such phenomena another form of operation of the same faculty (Gurney and Myers 1883a: 437–52, Gurney and Myers1883b: 562–77). That is, they applied the concept of thought-transference to the experiences that a number of people appeared to have concerning dreams, impressions, or visions of loved ones and friends in moments of danger or death. It should, incidentally, be noted that they ran these two lines of enquiry together and argued that they reinforced each other: the early reports on thought-transference had sections on spontaneous cases at the end. (During these years Gurney wrote regularly on this topic to *The Times* [17.12.1883] and other papers, both to publicise the SPR and to collect information.) In their articles Myers and Gurney stressed the need to sift, examine and corroborate and the importance of a personal interview with the experient (the individual experiencing the phenomena, as opposed to the agent, the person causing it). However, they stated that sometimes this was relaxed, ‘where the testimony of illiterate persons, difficult to reach, has been accepted as genuine, on the authority of the clergyman of the parish.’ Myers and Gurney were well aware of the weaknesses in their position and that they couldn’t just produce a collection of sensational ghost stories that had no evidence to back them up. They had to pitch it right: ‘Our tales will resemble neither the *Mysteries of Udolpho* nor the dignified reports of a learned society.’
Also, in these articles, Myers and Gurney tackled head on the assumptions of some Victorian men of science. They argued that it was legitimate to study these strange, marginal things in the interests of pure knowledge—not everything need immediately lead to utilitarian progress. Their subject matter was not what was conventionally labelled normal or natural. But neither was it miraculous. It was supernormal and would eventually be brought under the operation of the laws of the natural world. In short, their enquiries were perfectly legitimate, just at an early stage of development. But Myers and Gurney were very careful, as usual, not to venture on a physical explanation for telepathy. (They remembered James Knowles’ attempt in the Spectator in 1869 to put forward a physical explanation for brain waves. His argument was that chemical changes in the brain of the transmitter led to undulations which were then transferred through the universal ether, a substance of incredible fineness and not currently detectable by scientific instruments, to be picked up by the recipient [Stein 1968: 41].) There were just too many imponderables and it was important not to discredit their observations by premature and possibly ridiculous speculation.

Whatever the ultimate verdict on all this and whatever later hidden regrets he may have had, Sidgwick was prepared to go public, concerning these first experiments in telepathy, as early as 28th January 1884 in his lecture at the London Institution. He stressed the weight of evidence that lay behind his account, particularly concentrating on thought-transference, ‘numerous other illustrations of this class of evidence followed, the excitement rising as the lecturer proceeded’. The Times published the report as a summary narrative without the frivolous and sceptical asides that sometimes accompanied such descriptions. No doubt this was a tribute to the status of Sidgwick, who as The Times reported, ‘fills the chair of Moral Philosophy at the University of Cambridge’.

As well as establishing the independent status of telepathy, Myers and Gurney were also eager to explore the relationship between it and mesmerism, and the nature of mesmerism itself. This was discussed in some detail in the first report of the committee on mesmerism (Barrett et al.1883: 217–20). They had two central aims. The first was to get the medical profession to admit the existence of mesmerism in its hypnotic aspects. (In fact, one of the later triumphs of the SPR
was gradually to increase the medical profession’s awareness of hypnosis.) The second was to consider the residue of mesmeric cases, ‘where the evidence of a specific influence is hard to controvert’. This was particularly difficult for the wider educated community to stomach. These cases ranged from the ability to make someone turn round by staring at them, to preventing their walking or drinking, right up to the outlandish—but apparently verified—claim by a medical student that he could mesmerise a manservant, as he went to feed the pigs, from almost twenty miles away (Gurney and Myers 1885b:401–23).

Meanwhile the SPR was able to investigate mesmerism in better controlled experimental conditions through the co-operation of George Albert Smith. After the initial Smith-Blackburn experiments, Blackburn mysteriously disappeared (which suggests the Society may quite early on have found out something about this dubious character), but Smith remained and became of great value to the Society in their exploration of mesmerism. Although very young, only nineteen, he had already demonstrated mesmerism on the stage and had a number of very susceptible subjects, mainly working-class lads (the star was one Fred Wells, a baker) whom he got to ‘perform’ for the SPR investigators. Smith put them through all the usual stage routines but his subjects also exhibited some more puzzling abilities, like the reception of physical tastes and sensations from the mesmerist, which the committee found difficult to explain in terms of hypnotism. These, and the silent control from another room over aspects of the subject’s behaviour and the anaesthetisation of individual fingers (which the subject could not see because of an intervening screen), suggested the existence of some kind of influence over and beyond the suggestion/autosuggestion that Myers and Gurney were coming to see as the explanation for hypnotic phenomena.

This was a much more difficult set of phenomena to come to terms with than the general bizarre behaviour of Smith’s Brighton subjects, which were and still are the standard fodder of stage hypnotists. For example, ‘Wells was given a candle, which he was assured was a sponge-cake. He broke it in pieces, remarking that it was very stale, and actually ate about an inch and a-half of it. Shortly afterwards he began to feel the effects of his unusual meal; and, when pressed, flatly declined to have any more of “Mr Gurney’s sponge-cakes”’ (Barrett et al. 1883: 222–23). And, again with Wells as subject, ‘His power of imitation under the
influence of a suggested idea was most remarkable. Thus, he admirably mimicked at different times a parrot, a worm, a clock, a statue, a bear, and a frog. His leaps under the influence of the last-named impression were so energetic and so reckless that it became necessary to discontinue the experiment, lest he should do himself some injury. Finally, Wells excelled himself with his virtuoso performance as a nightingale, perching on a high bookshelf, his head pressed against the ceiling and ‘ineffectually’ flapping his arms/wings. It is not impossible that there was some element of make-believe, but Smith was a talented hypnotist and, on many occasions with the Society, showed himself perfectly capable of hypnotising susceptible subjects whom he had never met before.

Of particular interest to the committee (because of its close links to the phenomena that the committee on thought-transference were investigating) was what came to be called ‘community of sensation’. In two series of tests (one on 4.1.1883 and the other on 10.4.1883) the sensations of being pricked, pinched, slapped and the tastes of salt, wormwood and ginger, were, in broad terms, successfully transferred from Smith to Wells. The committee stated that they had strongly guarded against the possibility of codes and that the ‘mesmeric sympathy’ identified had previously been experienced and written about by Professor Barrett in his 1876 paper to the British Association (Barret et al. 1883: 227).

The remarkable nature and power of mesmerism was given wider circulation by Myers and Gurney, later in the year, in an article they wrote for the Nineteenth Century. They began with their by now standard lament, ‘We are really at a loss to account for the small measure of attention which has been accorded to phenomena so eminently impressive’(Gurney and Myers 1883c: 696). They were, therefore, eager to draw the educated public’s attention to them. At the same time they had to impress that public with their own detachment and capacity for critical judgement. The language they used, therefore, had a certain ironic distance to it, and the range of references was such as to reassure their readers that they were dealing with gentlemen and scholars. So, for example, in an account of stage mesmerism (obviously witnessed at Cambridge), ‘The scene may be a public hall in a university town, the operator a woman of vigorous frame and commanding gaze’ and an undergraduate rushes onto the stage ‘flinging
himself at the feet of the stern mistress of his destinies ‘having the previous evening been hypnotised and bidden to attend the next night. Or, when, ‘a ruffianly tanner’ is hypnotised in order to see imaginary angels, he ‘clasps his hands, and shows a dark visage concentrated into the dully glowing intensity of a Ribera or a Zurbaran’ (Gurney and Myers 1883c: 696).

But although they emphasized at this early stage in the enquiry that their aim was the collection and colligation of facts, they found it impossible to avoid some intellectual debate. They could not accept that the phenomena they had discovered were adequately explained by the dominant psychological thinking of the time, as represented in the work of WB Carpenter. He was a very significant and combative figure. He was a Fellow of the Royal Society and had been President of the British Association in 1872. His Principles of Mental Physiology, published in 1874, summarised his views concerning the explanation for abnormal mental phenomena like mesmeric trances and other unusual behaviours. He argued that the concept of mental reflexes adequately covered such areas. He asserted that the trance state induced by the mesmerist led to the suspension of the will and that the individual then responded in an imitative and zombie-like way to the suggestions of the mesmerist. He was not prepared to accept that the unconscious state actually initiated and controlled human behaviour (Hearnshaw 1964: 24). Michael Clark, moreover, has argued that this went well beyond Carpenter and was part of the general diagnostic repertoire of doctors in the late nineteenth century (Clark 1981: 271–312). Abnormal mental phenomena, hallucinations, a range of automatisms, were pathological in origin, the consequence of some physical disease or lesion. This caused the will to lose its grip on the body and the body’s perception of the external world. For Myers and Gurney, this was a travesty of an explanation. They found phrases like ‘automatic mental action’ and ‘unconscious cerebration ’grossly inadequate for the lively, vital and creative activity displayed by a good hypnotic subject like Wells, let alone for higher mental processes like the complexity, creativity and imagination displayed in the work of the poet and the mathematician (Gurney and Myers 1883c: 699–700).Moreover, they were gradually coming to the view that the source of this creativity lay not in normal everyday consciousness, but in an unconscious that was far richer and more dynamic than Carpenter ever dreamt of.
They had already, and were to gather many more, compelling examples that indicated there was a powerful intelligence, albeit thwarted or impeded, that was operating in these bizarre cases. For example, as Perry Williams has pointed out (Williams 1984: 190), the impotent fury with which Smith’s mesmerized subject struggled to pick up a sovereign offered to him, while forbidden by the mesmerist’s command, was certainly not the response of a mindless automaton, only capable of mirror-like imitation. It was also clear that the creation of stigmata, either through religious ecstasy, or deliberate suggestion, were other examples of this creative power. Myers, running his examination of automatic writing in parallel with the mesmeric investigations of Gurney, had in fact as early as 1885 come to the conclusion: ‘Coincidently with our normal or primary self there is within us a potential secondary self, or second focus of cerebration and mentation, which is not a mere metaphysical abstraction, but manifests itself occasionally by certain supernormal physiological or psychical activities’ (Myers, 1886a: 30).

However, the lofty and assured intellectual tone of these early articles by Myers and Gurney was not always warranted. Sometimes, without realizing it, they were skating on very thin ice and their first major fall came in 1884. Those who mocked the Spookical Society were delighted by the Edmund Hornby fiasco, the first of several embarrassing episodes that damaged—but did not destroy—the Society’s reputation for investigative competence. Sir Edmund Hornby was a very grand figure indeed. As Fraser Nicol states, ‘the case was printed very largely as an act of faith in Sir Edmund’s testimony (though ostensibly confirmed by his wife)’ (Nicol 1972: 352). And what a case! Sir Edmund had the grand title of Chief Judge of the Supreme Consular Court of China and was based in Shanghai. His customary practice was, the night before he gave written judgments in court, to brief favored journalists on his verdict, so they could catch the morning press. On one occasion he was awoken, he stated, just after one in the morning by a journalist asking for his judgement. Sir Edmund, though enraged, gave him the report verbally. The journalist said this would be the last time they met. Lady Hornby, aroused by the noise, was told by the Judge what had happened. She later confirmed this. The following day it was found that the reporter had been working on this very story at the time of his death, which was
about the time Hornby had seen him in his bedroom. This story was one of the
two vivid tales in the May and July editions of the Nineteenth Century which
eventually reached Shanghai. Upon their arrival a local newspaper editor wrote
to the periodical pointing out that Hornby was not married at the time and that the
reporter’s death had actually occurred between eight and nine in the morning
(Hall 1980a: 65–68). Gurney had to withdraw the case and make a grovelling
apology for not seeking corroborating evidence, which he should have done by
searching ‘the files of Chinese newspapers at the British Museum’ (Gurney
1885a: 2–4). Hornby, however, refused to retract his testimony. One
explanation, of course, is that it was a particularly vivid dream. Another, more
piquant one, is that Hornby was in bed with his future wife before they were
legally married and that the incident occurred broadly as he reported it (Lambert
1969: 43–55). But, bluntly, whatever the case, Gurney should not have accepted
his word—just because he was a senior judge—without searching for
corroborative evidence, as he had done in other cases. The matter was also
embarrassing for Myers, in that he received a letter from Harvey Goodwin,
Bishop of Carlisle, and a member of the SPR, expressing interest in the article
and pointing out that one of the judges mentioned in it was his brother
(Myers1/108: 15.7.1884).

There was, despite such occasional setbacks and failures, a real sense of
excitement about the early years of the SPR. They believed they had, as Crookes
thought he had with Home, demonstrated empirically—and sometimes under
laboratory conditions—the existence of a new force or faculty. What its
relationship was to the physical world, however, was much more complex. Balfour
Stewart, the physicist, reflected on this when he became President of the SPR in
1887. Did the mind of A act directly on the mind and then the body of B? Or did
the mind of A act on the body of B and then the mind? Or did the body of A act
through a medium on the body of B and then the mind? Was telepathy transmitted
in some way like light through the ether as vibrations which set up corresponding
vibration of the molecules of the brain in B? The problem with a physical or quasi-
physical basis, however, was that the effect should decline with distance
inversely; and why should it, if carried by the ether, be experienced only by one
Myers himself speculated at times that a spiritual ether (the metetherial as he called it) was the vehicle of transmission, but he was always careful not to rule out a continued link or bridge between mind and matter (Myers 1886c: 290). Nevertheless, he believed that there had been a breakthrough, in that there was some evidence for the mind's operating beyond the traditional constraints of matter, as the definition in his glossary of psychical research terms indicates (Myers 1904 1: xxii). Telepathy was seen as, 'the communication of impressions of any kind from one mind to another independently of the recognised channels of sense'. The adjective ‘recognised’ was very sensible. It acknowledged the possibility that there might be other modes of sense-based perception as yet undiscovered. For example, Rupert Sheldrake (using expertise from animal research) has postulated the existence of a sixth sense of different physical types based on electrical and magnetic fields, heat-sensing, or miniscule vibrations (Sheldrake 2003: 4). Despite the reservation implicit in ‘recognised’, Myers was certainly capable of pointing up the spiritual implications of their discovery, expressing towards the end of his life—in forthright terms—that, ‘to believe that prayer is heard is to believe in telepathy—in the direct influence of mind on mind’ (Williams 1984:172–79).

Myers, the SPR and Madame Blavatsky

It was, no doubt, with a mixture of excitement and scepticism that Myers heard of the initial reports of Madame Blavatsky and the work of the Theosophical Society. Here appeared to be an organisation which not only had gathered and examined phenomena similar to the SPR’s, but which also had adepts who claimed to be able to produce and replicate them under certain conditions. The Theosophical Society had been set up in 1875 in New York by Madame Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott. The former was a Russian aristocrat of considerable intelligence and resource and the latter was a well-meaning but rather credulous seeker after occult and spiritual truths. It was through his friend and fellow SPR Council member, Charles Massey, that Myers became fully involved in the Theosophical Society. This aspect of his life, which has been rather under-played, was brought to wider attention by one historian of Theosophy, Leslie Price (Price 1985, 1986), building on the earlier research of Waterman (Waterman 1963, 1969–1970).
Myers had dinner with Alfred Percy Sinnett, the leading English publicist of Blavatsky’s ideas, on 16th May 1883, and on 3rd June became a Fellow of the Theosophical Society (Price 1986: 2). So, even before the arrival of Madame Blavatsky in England there had been increasingly close links between some members of the SPR and the Theosophists. Myers, for example, immediately after the dinner with Sinnett, wrote to Massey: ‘Sinnett said that he would like to join the SPR. If you will propose him, I should like to second him’ (Myers 19/6: 17.5.1883). Indeed, Sinnett went so far as to assert in his memoirs that the salon of Gertrude Tennant (Myer’s mother in law), was a centre from which interest in Theosophy ‘radiated’ out into ‘London society at large’ (Sinnett 1922: Chapter IV). This must have been Myers’ influence rather than Gertrude Tennant’s. She confided to her journal on 7th May 1884 that Theosophy was ‘great rubbish’ (D/DT: 2535/5).

Charles Carleton Massey was a strong supporter of Myers’ investigation into Theosophy and, like him, tried to put the phenomena he encountered into the context of wider, even cosmic speculation. There were not many people within the SPR with whom Myers could relax intellectually in this way. Massey had trained as a barrister but, because he had a private income, he was able to give up the practice of law, and dedicate his time to research into Spiritualism and related phenomena. He joined the Theosophical Society in 1875 and became the first president of the British Theosophical Society in 1878. He had links with a range of occult organizations, dividing his time between the rather feverish and conspiratorial atmosphere of London-based sects and contemplative life in the countryside. Two incidents particularly turned him against Madame Blavatsky. He was dismayed by her apparent plagiarizing of an address by H Kiddle of New York, and incorporating it in a letter miraculously sent to Sinnett by her master, Koot Hoomi. He was further outraged by a letter he was shown in May 1882 (Hodgson et al. 1885: 397) which proved that another letter, supposedly sent supernaturally to him by an occult Master, had in fact been put by a creature of mere flesh and blood in a place where he would discover it.

The friendship with Myers was deep and long lasting, despite their growing differences over the way the SPR assessed Spiritualist phenomena. Massey was invited to become Leo’s (Myer’s son) godfather after the death of Prince Leopold,
his original godfather. Massey was also instrumental in providing Myers with a background in Theosophical and Eastern thought; and he also translated du Prel (Massey 1889) into English, furnishing Myers, and sections of the English upper middle classes with some insight into the German mystical and idealist traditions (Williams 1984: 215-217).

Myers’ first meeting with Madame Blavatsky, was, as befitted the great lady, in somewhat dramatic circumstances. On 7th April 1884 he attended the London meeting of the Theosophical Society to elect a new President. She burst in at the end of the formal business, arriving sweaty and out of breath. She had been ordered, she said, by the Master to leave Paris and attend. She had walked from Charing Cross station, following her ‘occult nose’, to the meeting at Lincoln Inn’s Field. The minutes of the meeting indicate that Myers used the opportunity of her presence to ask whether any documentary evidence could be obtained from India to substantiate the astral apparitions of the Mahatmas (Sinnett 1922: 54-56, Caldwell 2000: 244-45). She then returned to Paris, but shortly after came back to London and stayed till mid-August with Francesca Arundale at 77, Elgin Crescent, Notting Hill. There—downstairs, in the drawing room, in a big armchair—she received visitors, rolled and smoked her cigarettes, was the centre of certain phenomena, and had another encounter with Myers (Caldwell 2000: 253–58). On 9th August she attended a meeting of the Cambridge branch of the SPR in the rooms of a fellow of King’s, Oscar Browning. Myers and Sidgwick subjected her to sustained questioning for a couple of hours. The following day they had lunch with her. The Sidgwicks formed a reasonably favourable impression (Sidgwick and Sidgwick 1906: 384-85), in spite of the copious decorations of cigarette ash about her person.

Sidgwick, however, had been aware right from the beginning, perhaps more sharply than either Myers or Gurney, that the Theosophists posed a particular problem for the SPR. He raised the question in a letter to Myers (Add.Ms.c. 100/65: 21.6.1883) as to how far the SPR should mix with Theosophists or share rooms with them. He was re-assured by the number of Theosophists who came from the same class background as many members of the SPR, but he was also well aware of the potentially dangerous overlap in aims between the organisations. For example, one of the objects of the Theosophical Society was
eventually stated as, ‘to investigate the unexplained laws of nature and the powers latent in man’. This could, in some senses, be said to be what the SPR was doing (Dixon 2001:4). But could Theosophists be trusted to investigate in the same sceptical and balanced fashion as the SPR?

The paranormal phenomena linked to Madame Blavatsky appeared to go well beyond the sporadic and elusive cases of ghostly apparitions the SPR was collecting for what later became *Phantasms of the Living*. The Theosophists claimed that through intense training these phenomena could, under certain conditions, be produced and replicated at will by those who had been apprenticed, as Chelas or pupils, to advanced Masters in the Himalayas. Sidgwick could see that this was an area worthy of investigation—indeed central to the Society’s mission—but he was concerned that the SPR might lose credibility, as the almost inevitable tall tales and accusations of fraud circulated amongst the wider public. This linkage is clearly demonstrated in two of the appendices of the first report of the SPR committee set up to investigate Theosophical phenomena. They contain an account of the considered and pre-mediated ‘astral’ projection, on two occasions at night, of a Mr B (verified by the percipient) to a lady friend; all details of which were sent to and held by Gurney (Committee of the SPR 1884: appendices XL, XLI).

*The Committee of the Society for Psychical Research Appointed to Investigate the Evidence for Marvellous Phenomena offered by certain Members of the Theosophical Society*, was established by the Council of the SPR on the 2nd May 1884. It was chaired by Myers. Gurney, Frank Podmore (a senior Post Office employee with an increasingly sceptical view of much of the phenomena investigated) and JH Stack (a *Daily Telegraph* journalist) were members, as was Sidgwick, ex officio, as president. Witnesses were interviewed in some depth and the committee collected documentary evidence. The committee assumed that all its readers would be familiar with Sinnett’s *The Occult World* (Sinnett 1881), which gives some indication of the penetration of that book in cultural circles in the early 1880s. However, a short note by Myers, on key theosophical tenets, was added as a supplementary aid. It should be stressed that, as with all other SPR activity, the views and conclusions of this committee were only those of the participants and not the collective opinion of the SPR, which did not and does not
have collective institutional opinions. It was not a witch hunt. The SPR did not set out to ‘expose’ Theosophy and/or Madame Blavatsky. Madame Blavatsky was not herself examined directly by the committee but on two occasions, Myers and Gurney (26.7.1884), and once with William Barrett (5.7.1884) heard the ‘astral bell’ in her presence. It is worth quoting part of Gurney’s description, because of his trained musical ear: ‘In the middle of the conversation the attention of Mr Myers and myself was caught by a very distinct sweet musical sound, resembling somewhat the sound which can be made with the nail of a finger against a finger-glass, but differing in that there was less sharpness of “attack”. It was noticeably a free sound, such as could not be produced by any object whose vibrations were in anyway damped or checked’ (Price 1985: 25–35). In addition, Myers, after pleading with her, had a separate demonstration of his own. She asked for a finger bowl and some water and with her hands folded in her lap and well away from the bowl, several silvery notes soon resonated through the room. Myers went away saying that he would never doubt again but was back within a fortnight with possible alternative explanations, as was his usual response to startling phenomena; enthusiasm and then doubt (Caldwell 2000: 256–57). Not to be outdone, Eveleen Myers reported experiencing a similar sound at home while Myers was away, which was ‘quite unlike any tinkling sound I have heard before’, and she bravely went downstairs to investigate (Myers 25/137: 2.8.1884).

Myers was at this time on his annual holiday with his brother Arthur. They went to Belgium and Holland, combining frequent swimming and bathing with visits to art galleries. They then took the opportunity to visit Elberfeld in Germany where Blavatsky was staying with the leading German Theosophists, the Gebhardts. Myers had, on the 16th August, received from Padshah, a Theosophist, a letter stating that Madame Blavatsky had seen the astral projection of one of her supporters, Damodar, who was in India, standing in the corner of her London residence and asking her what she wanted him to do about her trunk (Myers3/129). Padshah asserted that this was a good opportunity to establish some independent corroboration of the claim. Myers managed to see an entry in Blavatsky’s private diary for 15th August, apparently written at the time, which described the incident. He was, however, back in Cambridge before the registered letter, that Damodar had sent from India confirming his astral projection, arrived at Elberfeld on the 10th September. Mrs Sidgwick (Hodgson
et al. 1885: 388–92) discussed the matter in some detail and showed, theoretically, how with careful forward planning, Madame Blavatsky and Damodar could have pulled off the trick, if trick it was.

Nevertheless, at the time, Myers’ visit to Elberfeld had a considerable impact on him. He wrote glowingly to Massey: ‘I give list of Elberfeld party as I met them. [There were thirteen adults there in addition to Myers and his brother and he listed and numbered them all.] …Nothing happened actually in my sight. Mrs Holloway is about the most important witness of the lot: Solovieff the next. They establish to my mind existence and powers of Mahatma KH and Maunjah’ (Myers 19/8: 9.9.1884). And more fulsomely: ‘I’ve spent 5½ days mainly in Mme B’s bedroom, cross-examining her as to past life etc.… My confidence in her has increased about fourfold’. The ending of the letter was pure Myers. He stated he had signed up four of the Elberfeld party as members of the SPR and he urged Massey to do some recruiting too. Myers was obviously greatly impressed and even Gurney seemed to be swayed in the rather intense and exotic environment that surrounded the Theosophists and their entourage. As a reflection of this, the committee reported in December 1884 that there was a prima facie case for more detailed enquiry. In anticipation of this conclusion, Hodgson had already been sent to India, in November, to investigate on the spot (Hodgson et al.1885: 203).

Yet trouble was brewing for Madame Blavatsky. Blavatsky and Olcott had left the Theosophical headquarters, in Adyar, India, earlier in the year to visit their centres of support in Europe. They went to Paris, London and then on to Elberfeld, as we have seen. But back in Adyar, her servants, the Coulombs, were spreading stories (possibly, it was alleged, paid to do so by local missionaries) that Blavatsky had forged letters from her occult Masters and produced phenomena by trickery. In other words, that she was a blatant fraud.

She was unfortunate, too, in the nature of her SPR investigator. Richard Hodgson was a complex, stubborn and highly independent character. He had come from Australia to St John’s Cambridge and had taken a high second class degree in Moral Sciences rather than the first he was expected to achieve. With characteristic perversity, he had not followed the syllabus in detail, preferring his own approach. Sidgwick, on the other hand, with equally characteristic
generosity, had paid for Hodgson to have a study visit to Germany so that he could improve his German in order to read their philosophy in the original; and he also helped to secure him an extra-mural lecturing position (Hackett 1920: 207–209). Sidgwick valued the directness and practical clarity of his thought and also believed his amateur interest in conjuring and legerdemain might be of use to the Society. But sturdy independence of thought could easily turn into prejudice and Hodgson was notoriously difficult to shift once he had made up his mind. RH Thouless made the same point, in his review of Waterman’s later criticisms of Hodgson (Waterman 1963): ‘It was I think characteristic of Hodgson that he decided early on in an investigation what was the truth of the matter and then tended to present the evidence in a way which supported the truth, tending to over-emphasize the part of the evidence favourable to his conclusion and to under-emphasize the part of the evidence which made difficulties for it’ (Thouless 1968: 344).

Hodgson spent several months in India, building his case against Blavatsky. He sent regular letters back to England outlining his findings. Sidgwick described the process in his journal and his reactions to it: ‘We talked over Theosophy, of which Hodgson keeps us amply informed by weekly accounts [from India] of his investigation. His opinion of the evidence seems to be growing steadily more unfavourable; but there are still some things difficult to explain on the theory of fraud. I have no doubt, however, that Blavatsky has done most of it. She is a great woman’ (Sidgwick and Sidgwick 1906: 405). In a later entry he noted Hodgson’s return (April 30th) and that Hodgson stated that, ‘all Theosophic marvels are and were a fraud from beginning to end’ (Sidgwick and Sidgwick1906: 410). There was, significantly, no reference to Blavatsky’s greatness of character this time.

Hodgson based his case against Blavatsky on four key grounds (Thouless 1968: 344). Firstly, that her disgruntled employees, the Coulombs, had documentary evidence showing that she had giving them orders to carry out certain fraudulent phenomena. Secondly, that she had a shrine built at Adyar in which, from her bedroom, she, or an accomplice, could put documents or other objects that would appear as precipitated or materialised apports in another room. Thirdly, that she, rather than supernormal Mahatmas or Brothers, had written the letters that magically appeared offering esoteric or practical advice. Fourthly, that these
Mahatmas were really her employees or servants in disguise. Hodgson added a bit of spice (seen most clearly in his preliminary overview of his conclusions in The Age 12.9.1885). He argued that Blavatsky’s main motives were political not occult. She was a Russian spy and Theosophy was a cover for her part in the Great Game between the British and Russian Empires in Asia. At the end of June 1885 Hodgson read part of his account at a meeting of the SPR and the account was published in full in December 1885. Both narrative and conclusions were rapidly and widely accepted at the time and for some considerable period to come.

Hodgson was strongly supported by Eleanor Sidgwick (Hodgson et al.1885: 378–96) who went over his handwriting analysis and agreed with his conclusion that Madame Blavatsky had faked the letters. She also demonstrated how Madame Blavatsky could have opened a letter sealed with red and yellow floss silk and put in a note from a Mahatma, without leaving any evidence of interference. In addition, drawing on the Society’s extensive experience in assessing evidence for the soon to be published Phantasms of the Living, she analysed four cases of astral projection or the sighting of apparitions. She dismissed them all because of the inaccurate observation of the witnesses, the scope for trickery, the psychological state of one witness, ‘whose organisation is highly nervous’, and lack of corroborating evidence generally.

The result of Hodgson’s account was a vigorous and robustly worded conclusion by the committee, namely that Madam Blavatsky ‘had achieved a title to permanent remembrance as one of the most accomplished, ingenious, and interesting impostors in history’ (Hodgson et al.1885: 207). It is probably the most celebrated quotation from SPR literature and has been well seeded in the wider academic consciousness because of the exotic nature of Blavatsky and her significance for fin de siècle cultural and social history. For example, a distinguished writer on nineteenth-century Spiritualism and the occult, Alex Owen, could, as late as 2004, describe Hodgson’s account as ‘devastating’ (Owen 2004: 34) without any qualification as to its accuracy or the later, revisionist scholarship that has weakened its authority. At the time, and for a long time to come, it certainly gave the Society a reputation for hard edged, no nonsense investigation, that did it no harm; and it boosted Hodgson’s status as a
researcher into and assessor of the anomalous and allegedly miraculous that would have significant consequences for the future direction of the Society and for Myers himself. Gurney enthusiastically assured William James of Hodgson’s qualities, after James had expressed some reservations: ‘But I think, when you see something of him, you will be struck by his really remarkable thoroughness & acuteness in the sort of work he is now doing. His qualities are absolutely invaluable; & psychical research ought to insure his life for about a million pounds’ (Skrupskelis et al. 1998:192). It was, politically, a very expedient report. The SPR was at a crucial stage in its history, the Society having surmounted a fair amount of initial criticism and gibing. Sidgwick’s cautious approach based on the gathering and sifting of very large bodies of evidence was having some positive effect on upper-middle class opinionmakers. The Society was well on the way to the publication of Phantasms of the Living and it did not want another disaster like the Hornby case (the exposure of the Creery children and concerns about the veracity of Smith and Blackburn still lay in the future) on an even grander scale. Such an occurrence would have severely damaged their credibility and ruined the impact of their first major publication.

Over the last century, however, a number of researchers have cast doubt on several crucial features of Hodgson’s research. Beatrice Hastings (Hastings 1937) severely dented the credibility of the Coulombs as witnesses, and Adlai Waterman (Waterman 1963) savaged, in considerable technical detail, Hodgson’s assertions concerning the fraudulent shrine. More recently Michael Gomes (Gomes 2005: ii) has re-emphasized this and also the physical impossibility of Hodgson’s suppositions in this connection. And Vernon Harrison (Harrison 1997), an expert on forgery and handwriting, pointed out the many weaknesses in the evidence put forward to prove that Madame Blavatsky had counterfeited the Mahatma letters. He also took to task the leading figures in the SPR at the time, who had gone from a rather bemused belief that there might be something in it all, to a complete and uncritical acceptance of the Hodgson Report.

The verdict also played to a certain view of the East by the West, which was not just Hodgson’s alone. JH Stack consistently argued that, ‘there is no country in the world where confederates and witnesses could be purchased so cheaply as
in India and where false testimony is so common’ (SPR4/1/8: 17.10.1884). He was alarmed by the way that as late as October 1884 Myers, and surprisingly Gurney, appeared to be susceptible: ‘I tried to convert Myers and Gurney yesterday; I am afraid my arguments had not much effect: they are still under the spell of the Blavatsky.’ It was almost as if they had been duped by Oriental magic and that Hodgson had released them from their enchantment. Myers, in later reviewing his ideas on the nature of evidence and the trustworthiness of testimony, placed low reliance on orientals as witnesses, largely on the basis of his experiences in the Blavatsky affair (Gauld 1968: 364–67). Blavatsky, in her turn, ridiculed the SPR investigations writing about their, ‘ungentlemanly, disgusting, Scotland yard secret proceedings’ (Dixon 2001: 36) and commented on Hodgson’s youth and naivety. But it was a blow, fair or unfair, from which she did not recover. She also complained bitterly to Sinnett about Myers’ underhand behaviour. He had promised not to reveal Blavatsky’s aunt’s name in print but had allowed Hodgson to publish it in connection with his accusations that Blavatsky was probably a Russian agent: ‘You ought to expose him before every honourable man, and this action he will not be able to deny, and will stand as a blackguard before many. If you do not do this, then you shall have lost the best opportunity of showing the Cambridge clique in its true light’ (Barker 1923: letter 61).

The collapse of Myers’ hopes and enthusiasm with regard to Theosophy, induced a sobering scepticism, after the heady days of the early 1880s, particularly concerning the possibility of life after death. As Myers put it: ‘Gurney up to the time of his death was quite uncertain on this capital point. He still held that all proved phenomena were possibly explicable by new modes of action between living men alone’, and, ‘the collapse of Madame Blavatsky’s so-called Theosophy—a mere fabric of fraud, —had rendered all of us severer in our judgement of the human evidence on which our own conclusions depended. Sidgwick urged that all that we had actually proved was consistent with eternal death’ (Myers 1961: 40–41). It would take the news of a new medium from America—William James’ ‘white crow’, Mrs Piper—to re-invigorate the quest.

Sinnett, looking back on the affair years later, blamed poor Colonel Olcott for the start of the rot, and for stimulating the desire of the leading figures in the SPR to
disentangle themselves from Theosophy (Sinnett 1922: chapter 4). He asserted that ‘the superficial aspects of his personality were of a kind quite certain to set the teeth on edge with Englishmen of the type of those who were leading the Psychic Research movement.’ But this was both unfair and inaccurate. As we have seen, the Sidgwicks responded positively to Blavatsky in August 1884, and Myers and Gurney were still alarming Stack as late as October that year by the seriousness with which they were taking Theosophical claims. It was the superficial vigour and coherence of Hodgson’s account and concern in case they jeopardised the reception of their mammoth domestic project, *Phantasms of the Living*, that were the most important factors in their disengagement.

Yet, there was one aspect of Blavatsky’s influence that Myers took with him, even if he rejected the phenomena associated with her. He had been stimulated to read more widely in Eastern philosophy, and this chimed with and enriched his other metaphysical reading (Williams 1984:218–22). This was a heady brew: Hartmann on the Unconscious, du Prel on Mysticism, Zöllner on Transcendental Physics, and now Sinnett on Theosophy. He had already a strong strain of Platonic mysticism in his intellectual repertoire (both directly and as filtered through Plotinus [Lambert 1928: 393–413]) and had been encouraged to apply the concept of Darwinian evolution to the spiritual sphere through contact with Alfred Russel Wallace. The encounter with the ideas of Theosophy helped to confirm, enrich and deepen the channels in which his thought already ran; particularly the idea that access to paranormal powers could be part of the destiny of humankind. They also informed his intuition, increasingly expressed in highly wrought digressions in his later writings, of man’s continuous evolution through a range of experiences and levels, post-mortem as well as pre-mortem, as part of an unending progression towards the Godhead itself in eternal growth.

*Phantasms of the Living*

Both rattled and relieved by the apparent exposure of Madame Blavatsky, Myers and Gurney turned with renewed vigour to the collection and sifting of evidence for their own investigation of *Phantasms of the Living*. They had first introduced the public to the concept of phantasms or crisis apparitions and hallucinations linked to death and trauma, in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1883. They stressed the
‘laborious quantitative work’ involved and their ‘systematic collection of facts’ and that readers should not treat the publication of such investigations as a manifesto of faith in supernatural agencies. They tried to make an initial catalogue of the types of crisis phenomena: feelings of doom/disaster/apprehension, specific visions, hearing voices, and getting ideas/impressions from objects. They also did some cautious and provisional speculation. They dismissed the idea of physical explanations based on brain-waves, but thought that the apparition might be caused by telepathic stimulation of the cortex which then sent messages to the optic nerve and the visualising centre and that the percipient in some way often modified the primary telepathic impulse (Gurney and Myers 1883b: 562–77).

It was also decided to print cases regularly in the Journal so that members would have an opportunity to comment on them. This approach was consistent with the Millian approach to evidence collection and examination that—so Williams (Williams 1984) has argued—particularly characterised the work of Myers, Gurney and Sidgwick. This is a point well worth reinforcing and Podmore has a valuable comment on this in his review of the Sidgwick memoir: ‘The aim of the Society, it will be recalled, the conception which marked out its investigation from all previous investigations of the subject, was that it should be collective—that the task of appraising the evidence should depend upon no single judgement.’ Sidgwick, from his usual largesse, provided the money to facilitate this process: ‘[He] came forward and defrayed the cost of having the entire collection—which mounted up week by week to almost incredible totals—printed on separate slips, with wide margins for comments and the insertion of additional evidence. In this way it was possible for each member of the Literary Committee to form his or her independent judgment on a case before discussing it in full conclave’ (Podmore 1907: 438–39). The ‘discussion in full conclave’ and the letters from readers of the Journal were seen as crucial parts of the assessment of evidence. It ensured the cases eventually printed in Phantasms of the Living were not there solely on the authority of the individual investigator, whether Myers, Gurney, Podmore, or the Sidgwicks.

By 1884, 500 cases of impressions and apparitions at moments of death and danger had been collected. It was on these materials that Myers began to display
his considerable gifts of organisation, pattern identifying and classification. This analysis of cases and their ordering started in the *Journal* of May 1884 and continued through nine instalments to January 1885. Myers was quite explicit about the way in which the material had been ordered, ‘and the direction in which additional evidence is specifically to be desired’ (Myers 1884–85: 54). He stated that, ‘the cases have been so classed as to illustrate the theory which regards phantasms of the living as a development of Thought-transference. The mode of impact on the percipient’s mind has, therefore, been the point primarily regarded’. The first category was that of a feeling of unease or calamity felt by only one person and he urged people to record these feelings and get them corroborated by someone else before it was known whether anything happened or not. One case, from ‘a trusted informant’, was the Hon Mrs Fox Powys, another was from Miss Agnes M.A.S. of Whepstead Rectory, Bury St Edmunds: reassuring names and addresses. He also made the customary appeal for additional cases of the same or a cognate kind. It was becoming clear to them that these phantasms, or crisis apparitions, came in a variety of forms, even though the dominant category was visual. Myers was later to argue that the type of manifestation might relate directly to the sensory modality (kinaesthetic, olfactory, verbal, visual) which most easily accessed the subliminal consciousnesses of percipient and agent. In fact, throughout his writings he demonstrated an embryonic but developing sense of the widely differing ways in which human beings experienced, processed and transmitted information: a perception foreshadowing the detailed work on human creativity produced by Howard Gardner in the following century (Gardner 1985).

In the *Journal* for December (Myers 1884–85: 213–20), Myers spelt out this classification in considerable detail. There were three divisions: individual cases; neutral cases (the percipient was, for practical purposes, alone, but it was impossible to say-if someone woke or passed by-whether or not they would have seen/experienced the phantasm); and collective cases. These divisions were divided into eighteen classes and then into fifty-seven groups. It was a considerable feat of phenomenological analysis and categorisation and laid part of the basis for Myers’ later substantial and sustained reflections on the nature of telepathic impressions and their emergence from the subliminal consciousness.
A number of themes and issues resulted from this first classification which were to exercise Myers and Gurney for the rest of their lives. Firstly, who was the most significant partner in the telepathic process? In experimental cases of thought-transference it appeared that the more gifted the percipient, the better the results. But in the case of death or trauma it might be that only a few individuals suffering that process had the ability to project, in whatever form, a phantasm of themselves (Myers 1884–85: 80–81). Secondly, some reported cases seemed to be examples of clairvoyance rather than telepathy; as when the percipient seemed to be transferred to another scene, in half-trance, drowsy, or in a dream, and viewed that scene from their own perspective. This could more rightly be interpreted as ‘an extension of the powers of some one individual mind rather than the result of any communication from another mind’ (Myers 1884–85: 143). Thirdly, some of these experiences had no clear friendship or relative link. Cyrus Read Edmonds, the headmaster of the Leicestershire Proprietary Grammar School, told his wife that, in a dream, ‘he had seen the Thames Tunnel break through. That the workmen rushed to the staircases or ladders, the means of exit, but one poor fellow…was overtaken by the rush of water and perished. He had the accuracy of his dream confirmed at a dinner party the following evening. Myers argued, ‘The kind of communication which we are now picturing to ourselves no longer resembles a whisper along a tube, but a shout diffused in space and caught by a casual listener’ (Myers 1884–85: 122–24). Picking up information about a major event like this would seem to be a radically different process and perhaps implied a cosmic ether, in which all events were retained and registered and were only accessible to the random few individuals with the appropriate sensitivity. Fourthly, though the phenomena were hallucinatory it was important to distinguish them from morbid hallucinations, by the quality of testimony for them and their proved link with specific events. The testimony of the masses, however, was suspect since, ‘The class of persons who send their children to public elementary schools is officially defined as including six-sevenths of the whole population’(Myers 1884–85: 188). Fifthly, the nature of the phantasm was very varied and complex (Myers 1884–85: 115). It was very rarely a full physical materialisation occupying space, reflecting light, and seen by different percipients from the appropriate perspective. It could range from a vague physical approximation to full visual hallucination. It could be symbolic or almost completely representational. Myers was to explore all these issues in greater
detail over the next seventeen years and attempt to develop a broad, over-
arching conceptual framework to explain and make sense of them and their
profuse variety. Gurney was also to tackle these issues in his own way in
*Phantasms of the Living*.

As the cases mounted, the question arose as to who should be responsible for
the big book that was obviously emerging from these detailed records. In terms
of first and obsessive interest in the field, it seemed right and appropriate that
Gurney should write it, for he seems to have been collecting material from the
1870s, if Lodge’s account in his autobiography is to be trusted. Lodge described
first getting to know Gurney when Gurney attended his lectures on mechanics in
the mid-1870s and how he was invited to lunch with the Gurneys; but he saw little
of Mrs Gurney (a recurring theme in their marital history), spending most of his
time in Gurney’s study, discussing the collection (spread out in packets over the
floor) of what Lodge thought were ‘a meaningless collection of ghost stories’
(Lodge 1931: 270–71). These were first-hand accounts of apparitions that
Gurney had already started to harvest and winnow.

Yet Myers, too, had claims in terms of the energy and enthusiasm with which he
had committed himself to the Society. There was some suggestion that they
should, therefore, write it jointly. But Sidgwick was worried by this. He preferred
one author (a secret preference for Gurney one suspects) so that only one
reputation would be threatened. As he recorded in his diary, ‘I urged this view,
but did not prevail: it was a delicate matter as I was palpably aiming at ousting
FM and leaving EG as sole author: estimating the superior trustworthiness of the
latter in scientific reasoning as more important than his literary inferiority. I could
see M was annoyed; but he bore it admirably. Ultimately, we compromised thus:
M to write a long introduction and G the body of the book’ (Gauld 1968: 161).
There was little doubt that Sidgwick’ assessment was accurate. Gurney had a
small but distinguished reputation with his book on the philosophy of music, *The
Power of Sound*. He had a wider scientific training than Myers (he had completed
the academic work necessary to become a doctor but had been put off by the
practice). He was a member of the Scratch Eight, the debating group of
distinguished and coming academics, and he had, as we have seen, a growing
friendship with the most influential and sympathetic American psychologist,
Myers faced a very difficult task with his introduction (Myers 1886b: xxxv–lxxi). He was introducing a book which went against the current medical and cultural orthodoxy with regard to hallucinations and visions of all sorts. The impact of eighteenth-century rationalism and nineteenth-century positivism meant that the ghost tended to be explained in comfortable psychological and physiological terms. Dickens, in his ghost stories of an earlier generation, usually found a physiological and materialistic explanation for them (Henson 2004). As Scrooge said to Marley’s ghost: ‘You may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato. There’s more of gravy than of grave about you, whatever you are’ (McCorristine 2007: 67–81, quoting A Christmas Carol). Ghosts and apparitions were seen by the mentally ill and those who had been temporarily destabilised by illness and injury. To admit the literal reality of the ghost was to move back to the dark ages. In this sense, by using telepathy as the explanation, the SPR were trying to avoid that accusation and give their apparitions a different status and origin from morbid ones. As the first report of the committee on mesmerism stated, ‘In virtue of having their real cause outside the percipient, and so in a way conveying true information, we may describe death-wraiths and the like as veridical hallucinations’ (Barrett et al. 1883: 217–29).

Myers adopted several strategies to deal with this problem. Firstly, he stressed the aims and objectives of the Society for Psychical Research and the dispassionate and scientific way in which its members examined what for many were strange and distasteful phenomena (Myers 1886b: xxxvii). He argued that science did not stand still and that psychical research was a new science, like anthropology, developing new methods for dealing with anomalous phenomena whose existence had often been ignored or throughout history. He carefully but forcefully both separated the Society from Theosophy, ‘a réchauffé of ancient philosophies’ and also refrained from endorsing Spiritualism, too closely
associated with ‘the specific suspicion to which the presence of a “paid medium” inevitably gives rise’ (Myers 1886b: xlv–lix).

Secondly, he stressed the importance of the term *Phantasms of the Living*. It clearly signalled that the temper of the book was agnostic. He and his colleagues were neither against religion nor trying to prove life after death. The selection of ‘Phantasm’ as the key term was important in that it did not signal any premature belief that the apparition/ghost/whatever was the surviving soul of an individual. It was meant to be neutral and imply no specific view as to the ontological status of the phenomenon. The central thesis emerging through the book was that crisis apparitions were produced telepathically by dying persons. This was based on well attested and examined evidence from sane and healthy individuals. These individuals had experienced an hallucination associated with the death or trauma of a distant person; and this had happened more frequently than one would expect from chance. The accounts in the book were the carefully sifted residue from over two thousand depositions investigated. These spontaneous, individual cases of telepathic contact were strongly supported by experimental evidence for telepathy which was also included in the book (Myers 1886b: lx–lxxi).

Statistics were not Myers’ forte. The statistical case was argued by Gurney. On the basis of a census he made of people ‘in good health, free from anxiety, and completely awake ‘who had experienced visual hallucinations, he calculated that 1 in every 248 of them had found their hallucination coincided with the death of the person identified in the hallucination. By comparing this to the daily death rate of the country’s population he worked out that the odds against the link between the deaths and the crisis visions being purely chance, were in the trillions to one (see Gauld 1968: 167–68). It was therefore vital, Gurney stressed—in the light of such remarkable figures—to make absolutely sure that the original accounts were accurate and valid. The investigators had to check that there was no way the percipient could have had prior knowledge of the impending death/trauma of the apparitional figure, that there had been no deliberate fraud or playful hoaxing, and that there was other oral and written evidence to corroborate the original testimony. Gurney showed particular alertness to all these issues and deliberately headed his first chapter *Preliminary Remarks: Grounds of Caution* (Gurney et al. 1886: 1–9).
In one sense, then, the claims made at the end of this vast book were modest: there was some evidence for the existence of telepathy between living people both within the laboratory and, in certain circumstances, spontaneously in the wider world. Sidgwick, however, was very concerned at the possible reception of the book. ‘We have reached the real crisis in the history of the Society, for Phantasms of the Living is printed, and advance copies have been sent to the newspapers’ (Sidgwick and Sidgwick 1906: 460). Yet he was to be pleasantly surprised. Eveleen Myers wrote to her mother expressing their astonished pleasure at the positive review in *The Times*: ‘Mr Sidgwick rushed in last Sunday morning in such a state of excitement & delight at the Times article. I Hope You saw it, it was so very unexpected that they would accept it in that way. —Mr. Gurney too is quite amazed! to have a leading article on it before the Book was out (as one may say) & in such a very friendly spirit & in the one newspaper of importance, was very gratifying, do you not think so dear Mother?’ (D/DT2585/1: n.d.). She also stated that they had expected the *Saturday Review*’s mocking notice. William James had noticed that too and commented on it in a letter to Henry: ‘What an infamous thing is the *Saturday Reviews* article (Nov 20th I think) about Gurney’s masterly book on Phantasms (Skrupskelis et al. 1993: 54).’ In fact, selective quotation from reviews has sometimes created a false impression of the book’s reception. As Stein pointed out (Stein 1968: 11), Shaw in the *Pall Mall Gazette* and Wilde in the *Nineteenth Century*, made, as they would, witty fun of the whole enterprise, but reviews in *The Times*, as we have seen, and the *Spectator*, were positive, as were others in the provincial press. Gurney was also particularly gratified by a serious review in *Nature* (*Nature* 35, 345: 10.2.1887) and immediately wrote asking its readers to send him more cases.

Trevor Hall (1980a) has made much of the fact that Gurney handled the attacks on *Phantasms of the Living* without any support from his colleagues. In fact, Gurney was far and away the best person to deal with these attacks as he had written so much of the book, and was so close to it. He faced two main opponents, CS Peirce and AT Innes. Innes (Epperson 1997: 85–97; Hall 1980a: 76–78) argued that there was virtually no evidence of letters written at the time and before the death of the person whose apparition had been seen, which confirmed the linkage. Gurney replied that he could only find three, but it was in the nature of
such experiences that people would tell others about it but would not necessarily write it down and formally send it to others as proof and corroboration. Moreover, even without the letters, the incidents had been confirmed, as far as possible, by other documentary evidence, and by individual in depth interviews.

A related charge of Hall’s was that Gurney was severely overworked and that he delegated much of the checking in detail to Podmore and George Albert Smith—neither of whom Hall believed discharged the task with much efficiency (Hall 1980a: 74–75). These points have been strongly rebutted by others. Nicol has argued that Smith merely provided secretarial assistance and that Podmore was more thorough than Hall gave him credit for. Nicol in his examination of the book found 185 cases in which the investigator could be identified—Gurney 105, Podmore 30, Sidgwick 14, Myers 5, Mrs Sidgwick, Hodgson and others 3 each, and 16 others one each (Nicol 1972: 353–54). Factored up this was clearly and hugely Gurney’s book and he travelled the United Kingdom extensively to interview witnesses, writing to William James about his ‘hundreds of personal interviews’ (Skrupskelis et al. 1998: 194–95).

The debate between Gurney and Peirce was conducted with a certain good humour, though with a little testiness at times on both sides (Gurney 1887 c: 157–79, Gurney 1887d: 287–300 and Peirce 1887a: 150–57, Peirce 1887b: 180–215). Gurney generously declared that, ‘The foregoing review has been to me a source of genuine pleasure and profit.’ Like Myers, he preferred detailed argument with an engaged sceptic, rather than the indifference so many showed. They both had the capacity to separate their intellectual differences from their personal friendships. Peirce made a number of useful points, particularly in the field of probability theory. His work in astronomy was one of the few areas of science where work had developed in this field. He welcomed Gurney’s attempts to apply it to psychical research but felt his approach was flawed. He particularly criticised the huge odds Gurney quoted against the apparition/ death link being by chance. Gurney was prepared to admit the force of some of Peirce’s technical points, especially the need for a much larger survey, but believed that these did not outweigh the sheer volume of the evidence he and his colleagues had presented. Moreover, he was able—quite easily, and with a certain amount of low key, gently malicious humour—to show that Peirce had not read the individual cases
particularly carefully and that there were many inaccuracies in his remarks. Peirce replied, and Gurney was in the process of completing his response at the time of his death. This was published with a postscript by Myers.

Myers, in his postscript, paid tribute to Gurney’s scrupulousness, ‘I am absolutely sure that he would never knowingly have allowed a single sentence to stand which overstated his own case in the smallest particular’ (Myers 1889k: 300). He addressed Peirce’s concern that Gurney had included a number of cases where anxiety might have contributed to the creation of a phantasm. He pointed out that Gurney had been the judge of this and he had excluded such cases. However, he agreed with Peirce that as the percipients had been the judges of whether they were in ill-health or not, there should be tighter controls on this in any future survey. Spiritualists in particular found these debates arcane and even irrelevant and they could not understand the terminology. Why ‘phantasms’? Surely the apparition was the astral body of the departed. Why ‘of the living’? Surely the apparition was the spirit of a departed loved one or friend. The authors of *Phantasms of the Living* argued that the apparition was said to be of the living if it occurred within twelve hours before or after death since the precise moment of death or of the telepathic transmission of that event could not be accurately identified. It was also important to set a time limit in order to distinguish the inquiry from one that was out to study communications from the dead, both because the book was not an enquiry into Spiritualism, and because only with phantasms of the living was it possible to establish a base-line against which statistical probabilities could be established. Members of the general public were also confused. They did not appreciate the attempt at underlying theory and they found the distinction between phantasms of the living and the dead rather artificial. For them, as the popular journalist WT Stead (1970) so clearly appreciated a little later on, these were just real ghost stories.

Apart from the statistical issues with Peirce and the issues of corroboration with Innes, Gurney had also to deal with internal theoretical conflicts within the SPR itself. There was general agreement that individual phantasms of whatever sensory modality were caused by telepathy—difficult though that concept was. There was no such agreement with regard to phantasms experienced collectively. Myers argued strongly, in his note in the second volume of *Phantasms of the*
Living, that some kind of physical impact was made when an apparition was seen and that this explained the cases where more than one person witnessed it (Myers 1886c: 277–316). Gurney, in a letter to James, was scathing about Myers’ attempted explanation: ‘Myers’s note seems to me a hopeless attempt to present a frankly material view of ghosts with elimination of the material element’ (Skrupskelis et al. 1998: 191). But with characteristic honesty he was not at all happy with his own view of some kind of collective telepathy to explain phantasms perceived collectively. In fact, there were many holes in this thesis, particularly the idea of the telepathic infection of other people. In addition, collective apparitions seem to have been seen according to the viewpoints of the individual concerned: for example, side on or head on. Regardless of these difficulties, however, William James had no doubt as to the value of the work, particularly in comparison with what had gone before. In a letter to Carl Stumpf he stated: ‘Have you seen Gurney’s two bulky tomes “Phantasms of the Living,” an amazingly patient and thorough piece of work? I should not at all wonder if it were the beginning of a new department of natural history’ (Skrupskelis et al. 1998: 205). He also opened his review of it with an uncompromising flourish: ‘This is a most extraordinary work, —fourteen hundred large and closely printed pages by men of the rarest intellectual qualifications (James 1986: 24).’

However, there have been many criticisms of it in later years (often with the benefit of hindsight and ignoring the poor quality of what had gone on before) pointing out that it was a collection of well-evidenced eye witness accounts but that it was irredeemably anecdotal. RH Thouless may be taken as representative of this school of thought. He pointed out that very few spontaneous cases fulfilled tight conditions. He argued that, ‘the observational evidence we have is generally vitiated by the fact that the records were not made until after the verification of the supposed paranormal experience, with all the possibilities of distortion which result from thinking and talking about the event afterwards’ (Thouless 1972: 14). He called Phantasms of the Living a magnificent collection of stories but felt that this approach underestimated the ‘importance of experiment as a method of advancing theoretical understanding’. But this was to misunderstand the initial approach of Myers, Gurney and the Sidgwicks. They were not against experiment and the Journal and the Proceedings record a wide range over the years at home and abroad. What they were immediately concerned to demonstrate was that
something actually existed, something was actually taking place in ordinary, everyday life, that was worth investigating. It was a question of getting people, particularly those in the scientific and educated community, to sit up and take notice. As Gurney wrote to James: ‘On the whole, I should say that the great difficulty the whole business has to contend against is not so much contempt as indifference. One’s material being human beings, with wills of their own, one is continually baffled by the fact that they have no vision of the subject as a whole, or as a subject at all, therefore cannot be brought in to tender their item of help’ (Skrupskelis et al. 1998: 190). One cannot but have huge admiration, particularly for Gurney, in this remorseless, untiring, piling up of the evidence. Myers, the Sidgwicks, Podmore, all had their professional demands; so much fell on Gurney’s shoulders, the unpaid honorary secretary of the SPR. In addition, as he wrote to James, just before publication almost the whole edition of *Phantasms* was destroyed in a fire. He had to proof read 1,400 pages again and see a new edition through the press. And this was done in two months, ready for publication at the beginning of November (Skrupskelis et al. 1998: 193 n.6).

It should be stressed that a certain amount of work has been done since the publication of *Phantasms of the Living*, pointing out in greater theoretical detail than Gurney and Myers were able to, the complexity of both the phenomena and the explanatory concepts they had developed. Stephen Braude in particular (1978: 267–301) has explored the difficulties involved in both grasping a possible carrier mechanism for telepathy and matching it against the sheer range of literal, contextual and symbolic meanings that telepathic messages might carry. CD Broad (1962: 224–49) has exposed in some detail the problems with Gurney’s theory of telepathic infection, and Hornell Hart has produced a comprehensive phenomenological analysis of apparitions/phantasms (1956: 153–239). He examined the six leading theories as to the nature and status of apparitions and argued that, on balance, the evidence suggested that there was an ‘objective’ element involved supporting Myers’ view that in some unknown and complicated way, ordinary space was actually modified or impacted on by the phantasm.

Myers’ contribution to *Phantasms of the Living* was limited. He only did a relatively small amount of interviewing. He contributed two comparatively short chapters. He had no expertise to bring to the statistical section or to those aspects of post-
publication controversy. What he could give to Gurney, in the long hours of isolation from other people and the possible distancing from his wife, was companionship. They still frequently met each other and they collaborated, to some extent, on mesmeric/hypnotic experiments and on visits to France to meet the French savants. Myers, as the more consistently buoyant character, must have helped his intimate friend through the difficulties he faced. The impression Hall gives (1980a: 72–78) of his abandoning Gurney to the savage criticism of the outside world is a travesty.

Automatic Writing, Hypnosis and the Multiplex Personality

Parallel with the collection and examination of phantasms, went the collection and examination of other unusual and abnormal phenomena, both naturally occurring and experimentally induced. Myers and Gurney, particularly, saw automatic writing and hypnosis (and later various forms of crystal gazing) as new experimental methods peculiarly appropriate for examining the hidden depths of human personality. Myers also had, virtually on his own doorstep, an interesting individual example in his brother Arthur, who had a strong and informed interest in hypnotism, was a medical doctor and suffered from both *haut mal* and *petit mal*. When suffering an attack, he could apparently continue to function normally to outward appearances, including diagnosing and treating a patient (Williams 1984: 197), but be unable to recall the episode later. Their first significant insights came from Myers’ detailed examination of the phenomena of automatic writing and from Gurney’s work on mesmerism and hypnotism. However, Myers’ conviction that not all these phenomena could be explained by automatic ideomotor reflexes and unconscious cerebration was greatly strengthened by the visits that he took, sometimes alone and sometimes in conjunction with either or both Gurney and Arthur Myers, to French psychologists in the mid1880s. In addition, Arthur Myers was useful to his brother because of his medical knowledge and his access to medical records (Myers 3/95).

In his first signed articles in the *Proceedings* in 1884 and 1885, Myers, as an individual, began to consider in some detail the implications of these phenomena for knowledge of an increasingly enriched view of the nature of man and as evidence for life after death. This can very clearly be seen in the article ‘On a
telepathic explanation for some so-called Spiritualistic phenomena’ (Myers 1884b: 217–37). The telepathic mechanism he mainly focused on was automatic writing and in later articles on the subject he used that term rather than the clumsy original. He argued that, ‘in no way can psychical research be better aided than by constant and varied experiments on Thought-transference in every form. We have got, as we hold, a definite fact to start from, a fact of immense and unknown significance’ (Myers 1884b: 217). He selected automatic writing for study in this connection since he believed that the partial dissociation caused by automatic writing (in a milder way parallel to thought-transference in the hypnotic trance or somnambulistic state) was a useful tool for studying telepathy and the creative workings of the unconscious mind.

In his examination of automatic writing Myers enthusiastically encouraged his readers to experiment, even pointing out that the SPR had planchettes (devices used for automatic writing) for sale! There was a kind of breeziness about his approach which seemed to imply that no sane, well-balanced member of the English upper-middle classes need have any fears, though he did on occasions offer one or two brief words of caution and advice. He identified five possible theories to explain automatic writing and he stated that he was most reluctant to accept the fifth—the spirit hypothesis—until all the others had been completely ruled out. These were: writing by deliberate conscious will; writing automatically by unconscious cerebration; automatic writing inspired by a higher faculty of one’s own; automatic writing inspired by telepathic impact from other minds; automatic writing inspired by spirits or extra-human intelligences. He described four days’ experiment in automatic writing by a friend (Mr A)—‘on whose accuracy we believe we can thoroughly rely’—who briefly thought, as well as experiencing other puzzling communications, that he might be in contact with a beautiful spirit, Clelia, who was to be born on the earth in six years’ time. What impressed Myers about the above was the complexity of the unconscious processing; for example, Mr A’s subconscious memory of Spinoza was worked on, altered, and disguised in a teasing way in an anagram to express Spinoza’s statement about life as a revelation of the Deity (Myers 1884b: 227–28).

Myers already suspected, by 1885, that the vast majority of material that Spiritualists claimed originated from discarnate beings through automatic writing
really came from a hidden intelligence within the conscious personality. In his conclusion, however, he stated quite moderately that, ‘some of the effects which Spiritualists ascribe to spirits are referable to the unconscious action of the writer’s own mind’ (1884b: 237). This hidden intelligence could produce, without the conscious knowledge of the rational mind, both sense and nonsense, but even when there was evidence of insightful and creative activity, no external source need be posited in the vast majority of cases. It was not really until the arrival on the scene of Mrs Piper, the Boston medium, that he thought there was any substantial evidence for an external source of information. But even in this case, telepathy between sitter and medium needed to be rigorously ruled out first.

In his second paper (1886a: 1–63) he tested in greater detail the claims that some automatic writing contained information that the writer did not know. He pointed out the absurdity of people paying attention to the predictions that the unconscious mind made through automatic writing: ‘One smiles at finding Philip sober thus appealing to Philip drunk, — the waking man guiding his judgement by the capricious utterance of his own unconscious brain.’ He argued that the mind had often retained impressions and details that it was not consciously aware that it had and which, in certain circumstances, might be wrongly ascribed to an external source. But in a small number of cases he believed that he had—from automatic writing, as well as from earlier SPR thought-transference experiments—evidence of mind-to-mind contact. He based a substantial part of this argument, in his second paper, on his examination of the private diary of the Reverend PH Newnham. This diary recorded the experiments for eight months in 1871 when Newnham attempted to ‘transmit thought voluntarily to his wife’. They established a set of ground rules. They sat about eight feet apart. The husband wrote questions in his notebook, with his back to his wife, and she, not knowing the questions, used the planchette to reply. There were moments of real humour. Newnham stated, on one occasion, that, ‘I had to engage a clergyman who was not a favourable specimen of his profession, as I could procure no one else in time to get the Sunday’s work done. He was much amused with Planchette, and desired to ask: —How should a bachelor live in this neighbourhood.’ The answer came, ‘Eating and drinking and sleeping and smoking.’ Newnham received over three hundred responses from his wife via automatic writing, often with considerable relevance to the original unseen question, and frequently displaying
a mixture of humour, cunning and prevarication when searching or persistent questions were asked.

Myers had his own reflections to make, but he also recorded Newnham’s suggestion that there might be a dual state in every brain and that the second state might emerge from the right hemisphere, the untrained side, the side that behaved like a mendacious and cheating child. Myers himself raised the question of terminology, what was this unconscious mind? He distinguished it from the ‘complex unconscious cerebration’ of his first paper. Unlike unconscious cerebration, which occurred when conscious attention was elsewhere, it presented itself ‘as co-ordinate with the conscious action, and as able to force itself upon the attention of the waking mind’. In addition, he stated that: ‘A secondary self—if I may coin the phrase—is thus gradually postulated, —a latent capacity, at any rate, in an appreciable fraction of mankind, of developing or manifesting a second focus of cerebral energy which is apparently neither fugitive nor incidental merely—a delirium or a dream—but may possess for a time at least, a kind of continuous individuality, a purposive activity of its own’. In a note at the foot of the page he acknowledged a paper by Hellenbach, which reflected much of this view, and its links with his earlier paper in the *Contemporary Review* expressing much the same idea (Myers 1885b). He also referred to Baron du Prel’s *Philosophie der Mystik* (Myers 1886a: 23, 27, 30) and pointed out that this line of argument ‘has, of course, been advanced, with more or less distinctiveness, by many previous writers. He was not always so punctilious about indicating past influence, as Carlos Alvarado has pointed out (2003: 13); partly because, as Williams suggests (1984: 215–22), many ideas were in the general zeitgeist, and also because of a desire to distinguish his work from Spiritualistic platitudes. However, Andreas Sommer (2008, 2009), has strongly argued the particular impact on Myers of du Prel’s work both in its original German and after it was translated into English by Massey in 1889 (Prel 2008).

In addition, Myers linked the telepathic phenomena of the Newnhams with the SPR’s growing collection of *Phantasms of the Living* and proposed three hypotheses which he never withdrew for the rest of his life: the existence of a secondary self; telepathy as one of its supernormal activities; and the manifestation of such phenomena through channels usually associated with
‘abnormal or morbid vital phenomena’ like automatic writing or somnambulism. As a rider to this last hypothesis, he stated that these phenomena could be evolutive or dissolutive. For him telepathy was part of the evolutionary process. He was prepared with Newnham to assume that the secondary self, with its apparently telepathic powers, manifested through the right hemisphere. But he was not prepared to accept that this was the home of the ‘untrained moral sense’. He knew of no ‘well-recognised doctrine of cerebral localisation’ that would authorise that conclusion. Finally, he laid down a challenge to the Spiritualists.

His argument was that these phenomena showed no ‘spiritual influence other than that of the spirits of living and breathing men’. He needed evidence—‘cases which they can give on first-hand testimony, and with full details’—that an intelligence other than that of some living man was at work. But in spite of an appeal ‘in the leading Spiritualistic news-paper’ he had received very little, nor was he to.

Nevertheless, in a later article on automatic writing he softened his earlier position, ‘It is by far the most interesting hypothesis, and there are a few cases which tell strongly in its favour’ (1889a: 522–47). Yet it was a mark of the paucity of the contemporary evidence he was receiving from Spiritualists that a substantial part of that article focused on the Daemon of Socrates and the voices of Joan of Arc. It was in that context that Myers first developed in detail his concept of automatisms. Firstly, a very wide range of sensory and motor activities came under the heading of automatisms—not just automatic writing. Secondly, they were independent phenomena and not symptomatic of an organic disease. Thirdly, they were message-bearing, usually internally from one stratum of the personality to another. Fourthly, they were active if they found a motor channel of expression and passive if they found a sensory channel. The messages from the secondary consciousness would manifest themselves through the individual’s dominant sensory-motor mode, whether auditory, visual or motor.

Myers’ growing belief in a secondary self was enriched and consolidated by his visits to France in the mid and later 1880s. He made four significant and substantial visits: to Paris and Nancy with his brother and Gurney in August and September 1885; to Paris and Le Havre with his brother in April 1886; to Paris
and Lyon with his brother and Gurney in October 1886; and to Paris and Blois in April 1887 alone.

In *Human Personality in the Light of Hypnotic Suggestion* (1885c) he fed back—to an England largely ignorant and complacent about European developments in this field—what he, Gurney and Arthur Myers had discovered. As he stated: ‘I have, through the kindness of Drs Charcot, Féré, Bernheim, and Liébeault, myself witnessed typical experiments at the Salpêtrière in Paris, in the Hôpital Civil at Nancy, and in Dr Liébeault’s private practice; have been allowed myself to perform experiments (with the aid of Mr Gurney and Dr AT Myers) on the principal subjects whose cases are recorded’ (Myers 1885c: 6). In a letter back to his wife he expressed his delight at the reception they received from the French savants: ‘The way in which we were received by savants in Paris was most gratifying. We are far better known than we expected’ (Myers 7/207: 30.8.1885). In the article he tried to strike an appropriate balance between doing justice to the material and its implications and not alarming his readers. Stage hypnotism, as in the performances of Donato across Europe since 1875 (Pick 1996: 149), threatened to discredit the scientific and medical uses of hypnosis. Myers gave the terrifying example of Mlle AE ‘a very amiable young person’, who ‘was made by Professor Liégeois to fire on her own mother with a pistol which she had no means of knowing to be unloaded’. But he immediately stressed that such influence was highly unusual and that proper precautions should always be taken to prevent exploitation of the very small number of highly sensitive subjects. This exposure to the work of Liégeois, Liébeault and the Nancy school, reinforced his belief that hypnosis was a powerful tool in experimental psychology and of great potential value in the study of supernormal phenomena: ‘Hypnotism is in its infancy; but any psychology which neglects it is superannuated already.’ The examination of the extraordinary states made possible by hypnotism provided new insight into the mind and, ‘we may return to those normal states which lie open to our habitual introspection, having gained a new power of disentangling each particular thread in the complex of mentation, as when the microscopist stains his object with a dye that affects one tissue only among several which are indiscernibly mixed’ (Myers 1885c: 2).
The second visit to France with his brother Arthur gave him a deeper insight into the possible links between hypnosis, telepathy, and even clairvoyance. It was one thing to admit the power of hypnosis as a scientific method for exploring the mind. It was quite another to accept the reality of sommeil à distance (the putting someone to sleep and getting them to perform certain actions) and its implications. Since his own experiences as a young man and the later contacts with Barrett and then GA Smith, he had become increasingly aware of the paranormal evidence supposedly associated with the practice of hypnotism and mesmerism. However, this second visit to France gave him his first opportunity for sustained contact with a gifted subject who had already been assessed and tested by reputable scientists. This was Léonie, a middle-aged woman, of peasant background from Normandy. When hypnotised by both Dr Gilbert and Pierre Janet she appeared to demonstrate sommeil à distance and the Myers brothers witnessed and were involved themselves in these experiments from 20th to 24th April 1886 at Le Havre (Dingwall 1968 1: 266–70). There, apparently, Léonie was both sent to sleep from a distance and ordered, from a distance, to perform particular actions, which she did. Hacking (Hacking 1995: 157–58) has implied an alternative explanation for all this, based on her long experience in being mesmerised. Namely, that it was a form of learned behaviour. Janet, too, played down the apparently supernormal elements. Myers reported on these experiences in considerable detail in On Telepathic Hypnotism, and Its Relation to Other Forms of Hypnotic Suggestion (1886d: 127–88).

The third visit to France in October 1886, with Gurney and Arthur Myers, was at first less successful. They went down to Lyon to see a Dr Perronet, who appears to have exaggerated both his and his patients’ powers. Myers laconically noted in his diary (14/2) for 19.10.1886 ‘Cold bad: experiments fail. Perronet a bore.’ However, on the return to Paris Myers managed to recruit the distinguished Dr Ribot for the SPR and to observe Babinski and Charcot at work in the Salpêtrière, to listen to a paper read by Babinski at the Société de Psychologie Physiologique. He was critical of Babinski’s ‘account of some experiments in the transference of hysterical symptoms, without suggestion of any kind, but by the aid of a magnet, from one patient to another’ (Myers 1886i: 443). He outlined, as on other occasions, the precautions to take in order to eliminate the impact of other factors. He was, however, considerably impressed by Voisin’s work and his account of
how, through hypnosis, he cured a criminal lunatic who became a nurse in a Paris hospital, and whose subsequent behaviour was irreproachable (Myers 1887b: 505).

Myers' visits to France plunged him into the middle of the intellectual warfare, concerning the nature of hypnosis, between Charcot's school at the Salpêtrière (the biggest asylum in France and sited on the left bank of the Seine in Paris) and the Nancy school of Bernheim and his colleagues (Gauld 1995: 327–52). The latter believed that Charcot's three specific and almost mechanical stages of hypnosis (lethargy, catalepsy, somnambulism) did not really exist and were the product of suggestion reinforced by the highly orchestrated, authoritarian and theatrical nature of Charcot's observation, diagnosis and teaching (Zeldin 1977 2: 857–66). Myers increasingly came to side with the less pathological and more patient-centred Nancy approach.

Bernheim, a professor of medicine at the modern hospital at Nancy, utilised and then publicised the gentle approach to hypnosis developed by a country doctor, Liébeault. He argued, contrary to Charcot, that there could be many and varied hypnotic stages, that gentle suggestion building on the patient's own resources of attention and auto-suggestion was very effective, and finally, people who were not mentally ill (men as well as women) could be hypnotised to their positive benefit. It was on the basis of this work that Myers began to build his theory that the human personality had inner resources which, if tapped, would have great evolutionary potential.

The final visit in April 1887 was notable for his observation of a particularly sensitive subject. The Commandant of Engineers at Blois, de Rochas, had a considerable interest in hypnotism and his subject, Benoît, through his unusual suggestibility, demonstrated a range of interesting behaviours under hypnosis. He was told that ‘three and two make four’, and ‘Benoît, going next day to the Prefecture, where he is a junior clerk, continued to add three and two as making four, and when his sums were sent back to him, could not discover his mistake’ (Myers 1887d: 98–99). He had to be re-hypnotised out of this state. In front of Myers it was suggested that de Rochas' son had come into the room. Benoît addressed the phantasm respectfully. Myers then gave the illusory young de
Rochas a box round the ears and ‘Benoît stared in amazement at my insolence’. A later reader might wish to comment on several aspects of all this: the fact that it was an amateur who was doing the hypnotising; that a slightly airy view was taken of the impact on Benoît’s work (he was only a junior clerk after all); and that Myers himself made no observations on these features.

Myers’ views were not only based on direct observation. He read very widely and was particularly impressed by Pierre Janet’s account of further work with Léonie, published in the *Revue Philosophique* for March 1888. It was Léonie’s later development, when, under Janet’s control she exhibited three distinct personalities—Léonie, Léontine, and Léonore—which gave him much additional support for his ideas. He was, therefore, able to challenge the existing intellectual grain in psychology with greater confidence (Gauld 1995: 372–73). As we have seen, the general belief—though this was gradually being modified—was that reflex actions applied from the lowest to the highest activity. And, as Carpenter argued, the automatic action of the cerebrum could account for all abnormal as well as all normal and creative activities. Huxley, while remaining agnostic about ultimate, metaphysical questions, supported this position. He argued that there was no evidence that the mind produced ‘molecular’ changes, rather the reverse (Cook [Kelly] 1992: 110–18).

So, on these two key counts one can see Myers challenging the existing orthodoxy, even before he had fully formulated his concept of the subliminal self. He could not accept the conventional view that unconscious actions that appeared conscious were really just physical reflexes. They certainly were involuntary in the sense that the individual did not consciously will them, but they were not automatic and reflex in the traditional sense (Kelly et al. 2007: 303–305). Myers, in fact, believed that there were other centres of conscious activity and purpose in human beings which, at their own level, consciously initiated the so-called reflex behaviour, and that terms like secondary intelligence, or multiplex personality, better explained the phenomena. Already by late 1885 Myers had enough evidence to publish on the hidden secondary self explicitly using the adjective ‘multiplex’ to describe personality (1885d: 637–55) and slightly later to coin the phrase ‘multiplex personality’ (1886h: 443–53).
He expanded this concept in his paper on *Multiplex Personality* in the *Proceedings* (1887b: 496–514). The visits to France had encouraged and strengthened his belief in the mutability of human personality and the range of personalities that could exist in one body. He argued strongly that this mutability, this capacity for modification, had hardly been recognised by the scientific establishment, and that what they might call ‘morbid disintegration’ in abnormal personalities gave us clues as to the nature of the working of the ‘normal’ personality and that the behaviour changes were ‘not all of them pathological or retrogressive’. He described the strange case of Louis Vivé, who was frightened by a viper at fourteen and completely changed his stable, quiet and obedient personality. This had led to ‘a series of psychical oscillations on which he has been tossed ever since’ so that ‘his character had become violent, greedy and quarrelsome, and his tastes were radically changed’. According to his doctors, he could be made to go through a number of personality changes by the application of metals which Myers, interestingly, associated with the inhibition of the right or the left hemisphere of the brain. He argued that ‘the alternate predominance of right or left hemisphere affects memory and character as well as motor and sensory innervation.’ ‘Inhibit the left side of the brain, where the higher qualities resided, and Louis reverted to more savage and primitive behaviour. Inhibit the right side of the brain and ‘there is self-control; there is modesty; there is the sense of duty.’ Myers drew two conclusions from these phenomena—both of which were disputed—but which have been taken up again in recent years.

The first (and Myers had announced his changed view on this in the *Journal of the SPR* [Myers 1886g: 226–27] largely on the basis of the Vivé evidence) was that the right hemisphere of the brain retained traces of its savage ancestry and that the unconscious self could use that side of the brain and get its messages through into consciousness. This explained why cunning, clumsy, sometimes silly and obscene material was often part of the phenomena observed. The messages, psychological or spiritual, could not get through the logical, academic left brain into full consciousness. Myers further argued, in support of this, that automatic writing was often full of mistakes, reminiscent of those of aphasic patients, who had damage to the right cerebral hemisphere. Janet, however, was not convinced that the immorality and oaths and awkwardness associated with some automatic writing was necessarily linked to the right hemisphere.
Myers’ second conclusion was that these psychological automatisms, which Janet and others believed were pathological—signs of disease, of insanity, hysteria, epilepsy—were a clue to humanity’s health and growth, as well as an indication of disease and dissolution. Rightly understood, they could point the way to the releasing of considerable human potential. However, he took a more pessimistic view than Janet with regard to the timescale necessary to effect a cure. Janet believed it was possible to create an integrated personality in one earthly lifetime. Myers—probably because his concept of the subliminal self, as he later came to call his interpretation of the unconscious mind, was larger, more complex and grandiose than Janet’s—believed that such unification was unlikely if not impossible in this world.

It is important to understand that Myers was trying to rescue these phenomena from the dustbin of psychology and physiology. His central and powerful point was that the study of these phenomena could shed greater light on the processes of creativity and of psychological health. For example, that appropriately applied, hypnotism could have a moral effect on character and could be used to discourage bad habits. There is, for example, the amusing story of the idle boy and Dr Liébeault: ‘On another occasion an idle boy was taken to this potent moraliser, and it was suggested to him that he would henceforth be a model of diligence. The boy did actually work hard for some months, by an impulsion which he could neither understand nor resist, and rose rapidly to the top of his class. But the suggestion wore off, and he obstinately refused to be hypnotised again, having by no means relished his involuntary role. His mother was weak enough to let him alone’ (Myers 1885c: 18). For Myers there was huge and optimistic potential in this area, ‘We hold the wand of Hermes, which we have not yet learnt to sway’ (Myers 1885c: 19).

Myers, in the last part of that paper, sketched out an apparently utopian scenario where hypnotism could be widely used to get more ‘work’ out of us, improve our creativity, get rid of pain, and reform our characters. Who can deny that a range of new age therapies and strategies, largely based on hypnotic suggestion, has in some ways moved us in the direction anticipated by Myers, over one hundred years ago? Myers believed in man’s capacity to renew and remake himself, in his
fundamental creative plasticity, which promised a glorious destiny and was in stark contrast to those degenerative views of humankind that others were putting forward (Pick 1996: 1–11). There is of course a danger here. This plasticity that we recognise in ourselves may suggest an element of role playing, a desire to please, in those being treated by hypnosis. Hacking, for example (Hacking 1995: 171–82), has pointed out how Vivé may well have fabricated his states in order to get the rewards he was not able to obtain in any other way. Myers himself was not unaware of this possibility, pointing out how the hysterics in Charcot’s Salpêtrière, were all able when hypnotised, to exhibit with uncanny accuracy, as we have seen, the three stages of what Charcot called the grand hysteria.

Myers, in this work in the 1880s and based on his mixed experiences in the 1870s, was always alive to the possibility of fraud, but always balanced this against the need to find as many interesting phenomena as possible. On occasions, he and his colleagues were even prepared to investigate stage performers if they appeared to be trustworthy. They decided to assess the mesmeric skills of H D’Auquier, who seemed to be a gentleman, and on one occasion they brought him and his entourage to Cambridge, paying him well. They exposed his tricks and D’Auquier complained bitterly at his treatment and at, ‘the shameful misrepresentations put forward in the SPR Journal’ (Light 19.12.1887 320: 85). They said that he used a code to trick them but, in fact his female assistant was in a deep, mesmeric trance which they verified ‘with needles, a galvanic battery, and ammonia placed under her nose’. He was not a cheat and was happy to demonstrate and perform ‘before any properly qualified committee of gentlemen who may be willing to bear testimony to the truth, whatever they find it to be’. There was the distinct implication in his final remarks that the Cambridge leaders of the SPR neither wanted to countenance the existence of the phenomena, nor—unlike the experienced readers of the pages of Light and despite their intellectual pretensions—were they actually qualified to investigate and assess them. But this was an accusation Myers and his colleagues were quite prepared to live with.

By the mid-1880s Myers appeared to be attacking the Spiritualists on all fronts. Gurney’s work on hypnotism and mesmerism and the visits to France clearly demonstrated the suggestibility of many people and the ease with which
distraction and suggestion could create the illusion of the paranormal. Research into automatic writing indicated that the messages, no matter how lofty or sonorous, could often be traced to latent faculties in the writer’s mind, or incarnate mind-to-mind interaction. Voices were not spirit voices but messages from the hidden, secondary self. Silly and obscene automatic writing was not the product of evil spirits but of the untrained child lurking in the right hemisphere. Dreams, too, were the dramatic inventions of the internal actor in us all and not an arena in which the spirit world interacted with us. As he developed these ideas, Myers crossed swords with one of the more elevated Spiritualists, his fellow poet and Trinity graduate the Hon Roden Noel. They clashed in two lively exchanges in the Journal for December 1885 and April 1886 (Myers 1885–86: 122–31, 234–43). Noel resolutely believed that automatic writing and dreams were the vehicle for communication from deceased spirits. Myers criticised him (tangentially) for a lack of general background in medicine and psychology, unlike Gurney, and he lamented the fact that there was no good general textbook of abnormal conditions of mind available to instruct him. With regard to Noel’s views he stated that, ‘one begins to see the dangers of a too resolute avoidance of any contaminating knowledge of the labours of the materialistic school’. He also pointed out that Noel’s definition of consciousness was far too simplistic—either A or not A. There could be more than one centre of consciousness which could express itself both in dreams and in automatic writing. It would be easy, but foolish, to take these as the result of spirit communication. For Myers argued that, most of the time, ‘The personages who appear in our dreams… are mere products of our own dramatic faculty.’

Yet at times Myers did express views that could almost make the Spiritualists believe that, if not actually one of them, he was a fellow traveller. For example, the accusation was made that his researches and theorising on the nature of human personality led to the negative conclusion that man was just a bundle of fragmentary and competing personalities, with no core or unity. In defending himself, Myers replied: ‘My own conviction is that we possess—and can very nearly prove it—some kind of soul, or spirit, transcendental self, which even in this life occasionally manifests powers beyond the powers of our physical organism, and which very probably survives the grave’ (Myers 1885c: 2). The Spiritualists could be forgiven for feeling intense irritation on reading this. At one
moment Myers seemed as hard-nosed as any materialist, and at another, cosmic yearnings seemed to suffuse him. They were perfectly entitled to ask him—‘If our evidence isn’t good enough for you, where is yours?’

The Break with the Spiritualists

While Myers was undermining the Spiritualist position by attributing most of their phenomena to a psychological source, Mrs Sidgwick and Richard Hodgson were robustly attacking their claims by demonstrating the role of deception and distraction in the production of allegedly supernatural physical phenomena. The investigations of the 1870s had, as we have seen, left Mrs Sidgwick quite jaundiced in this regard (Sidgwick 1886: 45–74). She was particularly rough on William Eglinton, the slate writing medium, who was viewed very favourably in Spiritualist circles. She wrote a substantial critical article on him in the Journal, pointing out that items for impersonating spirits had on one occasion been found in his effects, that he had dubious links to Madame Blavatsky, and that on the basis of the reports she had read, she had ‘no hesitation in attributing the performances to clever conjuring’ (Williams 1984: 235). The Spiritualists attempted to get her to retract her statements and when she refused to do so, several of them resigned from the SPR.

She had been reinforced in her belief by Hodgson who pointed out Eglinton’s use of distraction as a way of implementing his tricks. She and he were further supported by a young man, SJ Davey, who tried to see if he could deceive his friends in the way Hodgson suggested. He was very successful in this as he explained in a number of places, particularly in a long joint article with Hodgson in the Proceedings (Hodgson and Davey 1886: 381–495). It was quite clear to them all that the overwhelming bulk of such phenomena was the product of fraud. It was in vain that Spiritualists like Hensleigh Wedgwood protested that their theories and Davey’s demonstrations did not, by any means, explain all the phenomena that Eglington produced—the levitations, the writing on two slates that had been sealed together etc. Davey particularly aroused their fury, as he was seen in the Spiritualists’ eyes as an apostate, a turncoat. He had originally been a believer in Eglington (Fodor 1969: 121). But after his discovery that some of the simpler phenomena of slate-writing could be replicated by conjuring tricks,
he had gone over to the sceptical camp of Richard Hodgson and Mrs Sidgwick and, according to his critics, had only demonstrated his simple conjuring tricks on naïve subjects. What he did, the Spiritualists argued, bore no comparison to the full range of phenomena exhibited by Eglinton. And what was more, stated Stainton Moses, who rated him very low, ‘he resolutely refused a challenge again and again repeated to meet trained observers’ (*Light* 10.8.1889: 377–9). *Light*, in fact, went to considerable lengths to put the record straight, as they saw it, with regard to Eglinton. His defence, ‘Mrs Sidgwick, The Society for Psychical Research, and Mr W Eglinton’ graced the front page of *Light* on the 16th October 1886 and a copy of it was sent to every member and associate of the SPR.

Myers had no direct involvement in the exposure of physical fraud. He bowed and would continue to bow (for most of the time) to the superior patience and powers of observation of Hodgson and Mrs Sidgwick. However, he was a little alarmed at the situation and felt that contact with Spiritualists should be maintained, particularly with regard to accessing opportunities for investigation, which were very meagre. He wrote to Henry Sidgwick, enclosing a letter he had received from Massey, which pointed out the dangerous situation that was developing and that Massey and Stainton Moses might have to leave the SPR. He particularly stressed the variance of views developing about the slate-writing phenomena and the Hodgson/Mrs Sidgwick thesis of always attributing it to ‘the performance of clever conjuring’ (SPR 49/25: 8.7.1886). In the end though, there was no mass exodus from the SPR. Moses left, but Massey, Wedgwood, Rogers, and Wallace remained to fight their corner from within, possibly to the disappointment of Mrs Sidgwick, who wrote to her husband at this time: ‘I really think the Spiritualists had better go. It seems to me that if there be truth in Spiritualism their attitude and state of mind distinctly hinders it being found out…we are better and stronger without them, so that if they wish to go I should not like to hinder it…and people who fly into rages are such a bore … Their spirit is theological not scientific, and it is so difficult to run theology and science in harness together (Sidgwick 1938: 99).’ There was in her an instinctive dislike of the showy, the over-emotional, and the passions aroused by Spiritualism.

Part of Mrs Sidgwick’ attitude can be explained by the extreme credulity of some of the Spiritualist members of the SPR. One of them was at the heart of the
Society itself, Morrell Theobald. He was one of the original founders, by profession accountant, and currently auditor of the SPR. He had published a record of Spiritualistic activities and manifestations in his own home, which had started after the death of several of his children (only four of whom out of eleven had survived childhood). The phenomena increased in power when a new cook, Mary, joined them. In collaboration with the daughter of the house, Nellie, she found that the spirits were helping them light the fires, lay the table, and make the tea. Even spirit writing began to appear on the ceiling (Owen 1989: 75–106). Morrell Theobald invited Sidgwick and his wife to lunch and allowed them to examine his written narrative of these events. Given his status in the Society, he might, perhaps a little foolishly, have expected supportive treatment. Podmore, who was sent in by the Sidgwicks to investigate, produced a short, dismissive report. In the Journal for October 1885 Theobald criticised that report and asserted stubbornly that the phenomena continued. Myers' only contribution in all this had been a passing reference to the case in his reply to Haughton on Methods of Research pursued by the Society in August 1885 (Myers 1885f: 29–32). He stated that Theobald had offered to let a member of the Society come and observe on a more intimate basis. Theobald replied saying that the offer, which he didn't remember making (though he had not been against it) was now no longer on the table (Journal October 1885: 85). It would be too disruptive and would serve no purpose. Nothing would be seen. He had tried continuous observation, shivering in the cold, waiting to catch the lighting of fires, but to no avail. Poor Theobald. More sinister figures than servant girls in the guise of amiable fire-lighting spirits were later to take advantage of his trusting nature. He became auditor to the infamous fraudster Jabez Spencer Balfour (calling himself J Spencer Balfour to vaguely align himself with more respectable Balfours), and signed off the accounts of Balfour’s Liberator Building Society, which crashed in 1892, ruining many small investors and creating much misery and hardship (McKie 2005: 191–94, 225). He was duped, but that did not save him from a harrowing trial and a prison sentence; and he died a few years after serving his term.

For Myers, the Spiritualists were not just a threat to the Society because they were credulous and dupes. As Janet Oppenheim has stated, it was common practice for Spiritualists to describe themselves as scientific in their approach,
because they argued that they demonstrated under repeatable conditions the presence of another world (Oppenheim 1985: 59). Yet for Myers and his colleagues, their use of the word scientific was a travesty. They did not test evidence properly, they did not control conditions adequately, and they were open to exploitation by charlatans and conjurers. He was also concerned that, under the guise of an apparently scientific approach, the Society would become too closely identified with their magical view of the world. Sidgwick’s note attached to the bottom of the Objects of the Society was fully subscribed to by Myers and his colleagues and regularly re-iterated by them in letters and articles: ‘To prevent misconception, it is here expressly stated that Membership of this Society does not imply the acceptance of any particular explanation of the phenomena investigated, nor any belief as to the operation, in the physical world, of forces other than those recognised by Physical Science’ (Proceedings 1882 1: 5).

The Spiritualists again and again reiterated that the apparently bizarre behaviours in the séance room would be revealed as subject to laws as predictable and clear as physical ones. However, they argued that the method of investigation and examination of the phenomena required a specific, respectful and sensitive approach to the situation, taking the views of mediums, sitters, and ‘discarnate entities’ into account. It was not simply the straightforward application of the existing methods of physical and biological science. The Cambridge leaders of the SPR were broadly sympathetic to some aspects of this viewpoint, but not when it allowed slack control and palpable fraud. They also had considerable intellectual, social and cultural capital, and they had to be very careful how it was spent.

Yet the situation was not clear cut. While resenting the methods represented particularly by Podmore, Mrs Sidgwick and Hodgson, the Spiritualists were genuinely appreciative of what the SPR had done to raise the status of enquiry and practice in this field. This was of considerable importance, given the general hostility towards Spiritualism which existed in many sections of the community. It has not always been appreciated, in accounts of the period, that the practice was a risky one, both legally and socially, for many people. The involvement of the SPR helped confer some kind of legitimacy and, in certain circumstances, a social and intellectual umbrella, that less fortunate members of the community could
shelter under. Leigh Hunt, for example, provided a graphic description of some of the social pressures that the Marylebone Spiritualist Association laboured under when referring to the lack of specific names and records kept by the Association: ‘From personal knowledge, I can say that such names were often left unrecorded by the special desire of those concerned, for, to be then known as a Spiritualist was to risk one’s business, as well as social, position. Even notes of proceedings in Committee, etc, of those times were not kept for any period beyond what was absolutely necessary. But from 1890 things were a little better in this respect’ (Hunt 1928: 5–6).

So, the Spiritualists were grateful for the SPR’s raising of the social status of their activities, but what they found difficult to stomach was the arrogance of the SPR and its dismissal of the vast amount of practical knowledge that experienced and intelligent Spiritualists had. For example, in 1883 the Central Association of Spiritualists issued a circular on the conduct of physical séances which was designed to deal with the issues of fraudulent séances and stressed the importance of continuous observation by all participants, just as much as the SPR did (Light 12.5.1883: 225). This anticipated by several years the article in the Proceedings that summarised the sceptics’ objections to fraudulent phenomena of the kind Eglinton apparently produced (Hodgson and Davey 1886: 381–495). Furthermore, one of the Spiritualist publications, WH Harrison’s the Spiritualist Newspaper, was funded to promote a scientific approach to the phenomena, and exposed fraudulent mediums in its pages (Oppenheim 1985: 45–46).

Often Light criticised a hasty SPR investigation borne of arrogance, for example, Podmore’s perfunctory examination of the phenomena in the Theobald household, or, in 1891, the young Cambridge graduate’s brief and (from their point of view) ill-informed examination of Edina’s automatic writing, or the ring on the wrist of the medium Cecil Husk, which Gurney resolutely refused to accept as definitely proved to have been put there by spirit agency. The last two cases mentioned clearly illustrate the different approaches that the believers and the more cautious Cambridge investigators adopted. A man, hidden under the pseudonym ‘Edina’, had given in the pages of Light an account of his daughter’s automatic writing. Myers got a young acquaintance, Withers, a Cambridge graduate and a solicitor, to investigate (Myers 1891f: 100–105). He quickly
discovered that the girl, though deaf since the age of eight, was an excellent lip reader and that, with Myers concurring in the interpretation, her messages were garbled memories accessed from the sub-conscious self. Myers, from personal knowledge, was able to point out the inaccuracies in the 'spirit' Livingstone’s account of the courtship and marriage of Henry Stanley and Dorothy Tennant!

The outcome of the Husk affair was equally irritating to the Spiritualists and is a good example of the way each camp used expert witnesses. The Spiritualist, George Wyld, quoted Maskelyne, the great showman and conjuror, as stating that Husk’s ring was the most puzzling thing, he had seen in Spiritualism. Gurney (Light 18.4.1885: 224) went direct to Maskelyne to get his views in precise detail. He then reported that what Maskelyne had really said was that (a) it was not possible to rule out that the ring had been put on Husk’s wrist by natural means and (b) that the ring was sound, whole and in one piece—no evidence of tampering. Such—to their way of thinking—over fussy precision hugely irritated the Spiritualists and Light thundered, ‘We warn them from a standpoint of knowledge that these things are proven facts before they begin to deal with them’ (Light 25.6.1887: 286). As Helen Brietzcke wrote to the Journal: ‘I take my own folding slates, hold these in mid-air between the medium and myself, have a friend in her normal condition to sit by and watch with me, and under these conditions get writing in the folding slate. I fail to see here the chance to cheat, and cannot but believe’ (Journal 1886: 406–407).

The Spiritualists did not reserve quite the same fury for Myers as they did for Davey, Hodgson and Mrs Sidgwick. In fact, as we have seen, they found it rather difficult to get a handle on him. For some he was a covert Spiritualist who hadn’t quite the courage to announce his conversion. For others he was a sceptic who was putting forward psychological explanations to discredit phenomena attributed to the agency of discarnate spirits. Tirelessly, Myers wrote to Light to correct these and other misapprehensions: the Society held no collective views; the only common thread in all activity was the careful examination of evidence, particularly that which provided information not known to any person at the séance and which could be later demonstrated as accurate: and that he, as an individual, merely because of the scrupulousness of his approach, was not antagonistic towards them; indeed, ‘Various converging lines of evidence have led me individually to
think it probable that in some at least of the cases here cited there has been a real agency of deceased persons’ (Light 19.4.1890: 193).

The Death of Gurney

Myers was not a man who easily gave his heart and his affection to others. With most people he presented a mask of genial distance while managing, though not always quite successfully, to mute the extreme snobbishness of his youth. But to those few whom he saw as intellectual equals and who shared his sense of the importance of addressing the great metaphysical and ethical questions directly, rather than going through life in a complacent daze, he opened up his heart and worked in intense comradeship with them. To no one was he closer than to Edmund Gurney. There may initially have been a homo-erotic element in their early relationship, but the bond in essence was much deeper than physical attraction. Eveleen Myers—though she disliked the visits of Mr and Mrs Gurney, wanting her Fred to herself as a young, newly-wed would—clearly and generously recognised what they meant to each other (see below).

Therefore, the news of Gurney’s death, in the Royal Albion Hotel in Brighton on the night of Friday 22nd June 1888, hit Myers in a way that nothing had since the death of Annie Marshall in 1876. This was particularly so since there had been no inkling that anything was amiss. Early June had started well for the Sidgwicks and Myers with the opening of Clough Hall (a considerable addition to the facilities of Newnham College) by the Prince of Wales and the Prime Minister, Nora Sidgwick’s uncle, Lord Salisbury (Sutherland 2006: 118–19). Gurney, too, seemed to be stable. He had dined with Cyril Flower at the House of Commons the night before his visit to Brighton, apparently on very good form and displaying none of the symptoms of the manic depression that occasionally engulfed him. There may have been difficulties in his marriage because of his intense workload, but that work itself was going well. His research on hypnosis was attracting the interest of a small but select band of scholars and Phantasms of the Living had received a more positive press than was initially thought likely; he had vigorously and effectively defended the book against the criticisms of CS Peirce and AD Innes, while frankly and without rancour accepting valid points. In his memorial account of Gurney’s work, Myers was in absolutely no doubt about Gurney’s
importance and that Gurney knew how valued he was, taking ‘deep delight’ in work ‘done in consultation by a small group united both in personal friendship and intellectual interests’ (Myers 1888c: 370).

Myers pointed out the great nature of his achievements (Myers 1888c:366–70). The middle of the nineteenth century was a barren time for research into hypnosis in England: ‘Incredible as it may seem, in all the long interval from (say) 1855 till 1883—the date of publication of Edmund Gurney’s first experiments—there was scarcely an experiment performed in England which added anything further to our knowledge,’ and, independently of the French revival in hypnotism from 1875 onwards, ‘He devised and carried through (1885–88) a complex series of experiments, surpassed by no other hypnotist in exactness, either of observation of record.’ In this he anticipated ‘the remarkable papers of a cognate kind’ of Pierre Janet’. But Gurney’s experiments had been carried out, and largely executed, before Myers had informed him of Janet’s results. His other great achievement, of course, was *Phantasms of the Living*, which ‘is not only the best discussion in our language, but actually the only one in our language’.

It is, therefore, difficult to believe that such a man, at the ‘top of his game’, should have committed suicide. However, the events of the night of 22nd June were open to a number of different interpretations, one of which might support that hypothesis. Gurney had dined at the hotel and gone to bed around 10.00pm. At 2.00pm the following day, since there had been no response to earlier knocking, the door was broken down. Gurney was found dead in his bed with a sponge-bag pressed over his nose and mouth. A small bottle, with a little chloroform in it, was by the bed. Gurney had either been using it to commit suicide, or by inhalation or direct application, as a palliative for neuralgia. This was quite a common practice but it had its attendant dangers as Cromwell Varley’s description of his near-fatal inhalation in 1871 demonstrates. Varley described how, possibly in very similar circumstances to Gurney, he had applied a chloroformed soaked sponge to his face, ‘After a little time I became conscious…and I saw myself on my back with the sponge to my mouth, but was utterly powerless to cause my body to move’ (Nicol 1972: 348–49). His wife, sensing something wrong, came in and saved him. This is what could well have happened to Gurney, and as there was no
evidence to suggest that he intended to commit suicide, the coroner’s jury delivered a verdict of accidental death.

Using a wide range and variety of circumstantial evidence, Trevor Hall has challenged this verdict (Hall 1980a). He argued that the poor reception for *Phantasms of the Living*, the revelation that a number of the Society’s spontaneous cases and experimental researches were severely flawed (and he conjectured that Gurney had gone to Brighton to receive evidence that Smith was fraudulent), and the lack of support from Myers and his colleagues, had led an over-worked and manic-depressive Gurney to take his own life. This thesis has a surface plausibility but it has been powerfully, and in my view, very adequately taken apart by Gauld (Gauld 1965: 53–62) and Nicol (Nicol 1966: 5–59). There are also two unpublished manuscripts in the Trinity archives which make similar criticisms (Broad 1965 D/17: 297–322 and Broad [notes from Nicol] 1970 D/17: 38–51).

As we have seen, *Phantasms of the Living* was not badly received by the daily and weekly press, and Gurney responded, by his own lights, effectively to the criticisms in the periodicals. The Society was ruthless, quite rightly, in discarding flawed evidence, and no one was quicker to acknowledge mistakes, without taking it personally, than Gurney himself. He, Myers and the Sidgwickss, fully accepted that they were ‘learning a new trade’ and that it was inevitable that errors and inaccuracies would occasionally occur. A characteristic of them all (except possibly the Sidgwickss in the case of physical phenomena) was their willingness to argue, debate, accept criticism, and modify their original positions without rancour. As Myers said of Gurney, ‘He delighted in the fray—delighted in acknowledging a fair stroke or rebutting a foul one; delighted in replying with easy courtesy to attacks envenomed with that *odium plus quam theologicum* which the very allusion to a ghost or the human soul seems in some philosophers to inspire’ (Myers 1888c: 371). Finally, there is no evidence whatsoever that Alice Smith, Smith’s sister, had summoned Gurney to Brighton to tell Gurney about his deception, while Smith was conveniently away on honeymoon, as Hall alleged (Hall 1980a: 187–90).
Indeed, there is a simple reason for Gurney’s visit and one available to Hall if he had wished to cite it (Gauld 1979: 186–95). The Society had considerable interest in a haunted house in Brighton at the time. Gurney went there on the 13th June to interview the latest tenant and was impressed by her quality as a witness. In his role as Hon Secretary it was part of his responsibility to follow up on these matters. After his death Podmore interviewed another witness (9th July) and arrangements were made for Smith and his wife, back from honeymoon, to occupy the property, which they did between 17th August 1888 and 27th September 1889 (Podmore 1889/90: 310–13). The matter was organised by Arthur Myers who kept Sidgwick informed (Add.Ms.c. 94/163: n.d.) Gurney would have obviously negotiated the details with Smith himself had he lived, so any ‘mysterious letter’ summoning him to Brighton, most probably refers to this.

Writing to her sister and mother shortly after the event, Eveleen Myers gave a vivid account of the discovery of the death, the SPR’s fears of the damage that it might do to the cause of Psychical Research, and the impact on her husband: ‘Dear Mother it is impossible to describe to you the terrible grief that this is to Fred. — His Mother’s death or his brothers would not I think have come quite so terribly because she is 77. and much as he adores her….still it is to be expected—but Mr. Gurney was so dear to him, for 21 years they have loved each other so completely, telling each other every most secret thought and such an understanding, and love of the same things in work, nature, humour, & it might have been expected that years were before them,—Freds mind and his mind were at a complete unity together.—No words of mine can describe dear Freds grief. Arthur came this morning I was at church with Leo & Silvia.—and he broke the news to Fred and his mother.—Fred will go to the funeral on Tuesday.—& is writing all the notices for the papers but he can hardly do it for the paper is so deluged with his tears,— We are all very anxious that people should not talk unkindly about any of the circumstances, or say that the S.P.R. drove him mad, or anything ridiculous of the kind you know how cruel people are so if you and Dolly will just read this carefully and do not let Hamilton or any one make up any story.—He had been dining on Thursday last at the house of commons with Arthur Balfour and Cyril Flower.—on Friday he went to Brighton. He had been suffering dreadfully from sleeplessness and, & neuralgia tho’ he spoke very little about his own discomfort he told Arthur Myers how it reduced his strength the
want of sleep. —He went to the Albion Hotel on Friday last the day after the dinner party. —he wrote a letter to Dr. Arthur Myers asking him to join him there for some S.P.R. experiments. -He did not post this letter, but went to bed & in the morning was found dead with a little bottle of chloroform beside him which he constantly had by his bed side. —he had been taking it on cotton wool and it was still over his mouth. —The letter was found in his pocket and poor Arthur was quickly sent for, as no other address was found, —He had to see all the Drs & arrange all & rush back to London & tell Mr Arthur Gurney at the Church. —& poor Mrs Gurney. She has only known it this bright Sunny Sunday Morning what a day for her! — for she loved him dearly. —and now all is over. — Fred had an important appointment with him for next Friday. He was spending last Sunday at Tarling with Lord and Lady Rayleigh in perfect health. —He was very difficult to affect with narcotics & he must have taken at last a dose too large to leave him power to moderate it. Please do not allow any distortion of these facts to be spoken of in your presence by Hamilton or any one. —& I am sure dear Dolly will also not allow anything to be said about one so dear to Fred. —especially also as the facts are as I tell you, I am so tired, Yours Evey, I have told Fred to write to Hamilton, as he is so full of gossip (D/DT: 2585/2 n.d.)

This account sheds some very interesting light on past theories and speculations concerning Gurney’s death. Eveleen Myers’ letter and the verdict of the jury were consistent with each other and with the events as they were known. Had there been strong concerns with regard to suicide she would have explicitly mentioned it to her mother, from whom she kept little or nothing. The letter demonstrates that she was aware that gossip about the death could damage the work of the SPR and that Hamilton Aïdé, their socialite cousin, could be unreliable in this respect. But there is no indication at all in the letter that suicide had been suspected. Indeed, she stressed that the real problem was sleeplessness and neuralgia. She also made the revealing point that as a very big man he had a certain resistance to small doses of narcotics and probably needed to take a substantial amount. One could interpret this all as a very effective cover story, but it reads more like a straightforward and moving account of an accidental death.

Trevor Hall, in support of his thesis of suicide, has cited the testimony of Alice James, the witty, gossipy sister of William and Henry James. She, possibly
because it fitted with her psychological needs, was convinced that it was suicide and wrote to William (Yeazell 1997: 152–54) declaring it to be so, and painting the picture of a rather loveless, almost Pygmalion style marriage, in which a beautiful, empty-headed chatterer was frequently put down by a neurasthenic workaholic. She partly blamed Myers. She said he urged Gurney to marry her (this in contrast to Hall [Hall 1980a: 33, 39], who using the unreliable memories of Gurney’s daughter, alleged Myers really wanted Kate Sibley/Gurney for himself!). Epperson, on the other hand, paints a more generous picture of their relationship, as did Eveleen Myers (Epperson 1997: 145–46). Yet it cannot be denied that Gurney had his unstable, nervous and difficult side. He drove himself very hard, often to prostration, with periods of tremendous activity followed by burn out and lassitude. He could also be sarcastic and impatient at times with those he thought foolish or trivial. His wife sometimes suffered in this respect. There are a number of references in the Myers-Sidgwick letters to his illness and weakness; and a sad letter exists from Myers to his wife—marked quite private—about certain aspects of Gurney’s temperament, ‘… a moonlight walk with the Coon who feels sadly that he does not get people to feel how much he cares for them & sympathises with them; —owing to something in his manner wh they think sarcastic’ (Myers 7/132: 5.7.1884). This may have had something, too, to do with his outward appearance. As Myers described him, ‘He was over six foot two in height: thin & loosely built, but upright of being and swift of step; with a face whose features seemed moulded for haughty scorn, but whose expression was of absorbed melancholy with gleams sometimes of sarcastic humour, sometimes sympathetic tenderness’ (Myers 26/63).

However, none of this suggests that he was suicidal at that time. In fact, Gurney’s determination to research and research suggests that it was unlikely he would wish to take his life and leave unfinished business. C Downing wrote to Myers after his death stating that he remembered asking Gurney how long he would go on collecting evidence, ‘and he answered “Till I die,”’ which Downing thought strange, subtle and sad (Myers, 2/44: 26.6.1888). There were, too, a number of letters to Myers on Gurney’s death, testifying to the wide respect in which he was held. Finally, Fraser Nicol, the writer who has most effectively dealt with Hall’s thesis that Gurney committed suicide, has stated that, ‘it would be an act of unreason to doubt the propriety of the jury’s verdict’ (Nicol 1972: 341–67).
There is some danger of tedium in raking over again and again the ashes of this debate. Yet, the devil is in the detail. Hall’s skilfully selective and persuasive work has been quoted almost uncritically in a number of quarters by scholars whose main expertise has been literary or cultural, rather than the history of psychical research. This has led to false and simplistic views of the characters and achievements of the early leaders of the SPR amongst the wider intellectual community and establishment of the twentieth and twenty-first century—particularly with regard to Myers’ character and to Gurney’s achievement. He was the leading researcher into hypnosis in the 1880s at a time when England lagged behind in this field. His loss was felt immensely strongly by Myers and William James and was undoubtedly the greatest blow suffered by the Society in its early years. Myers had great energy and drive and capacity for developing explanatory conceptual schema; but he had other employment. Gurney had equal but complementary intellectual skills and was working full-time for the Society. James’ reaction was heartfelt, ‘Poor Edmund Gurney! How I shall miss that man’s presence in the world…He had both quantity and quality, and I hoped for some big philosophic achievement from him ere he should get through’ (Skrupskelis et al. 1998: 429–30).

Interestingly, some irritation with Myers flared up in Mrs Gurney when she wrote to William James in November 1888 (Skrupskelis et al. 1998: 455–56). She explained that she had hoped to send James a photograph of Gurney herself but that Myers had already anticipated this. Myers (Skrupskelis et al. 1998: 608) in a letter of 17th October 1888 had sent James a photograph stating that he did so at the request of Mrs Gurney. It is as if in the misunderstanding over the photograph they were symbolically contesting the ownership of Gurney and his reputation—did he belong to Myers and the SPR or to his wife? A year later Mrs Gurney married Archibald Grove and severed all contact with the Society—making no donations to its funds—unlike Gurney’s blood relatives.

Taking up Gurney’s Torch

Myers rose to the challenge of Gurney’s death and the removal of the Society’s most gifted full-time worker. He began to discuss, in the pages of the
Proceedings, in a more considered and systematic way, the nature of ghosts/apparitions and the type of evidence required to support belief in life after death. He did this in three papers which completed material Gurney was working on at the time of his death and which responded to the sceptical arguments of his fellow SPR honorary secretary, Frank Podmore; for after Gurney’s death, Myers and Podmore split Gurney’s role as honorary secretary of the SPR between them.

In the first paper Gurney (with Myers agreeing) stressed the importance of developing clear criteria to establish that the apparition of a dead person was not just a subjective hallucination. Three such criteria were specified: that more than one person saw or was independently affected by the phenomena; that the apparition conveyed information (which the percipient had never known) and which was afterwards found to be true; and that though the percipient did not know the apparition he/she could give a sufficiently accurate description of it for it to be identified. A number of cases were outlined which met at least one of these criteria.

Completing Gurney’s paper (Gurney and Myers 1889: 403–85), Myers commented that the idea of a latent and then emerging telepathic impact from agent to percipient did not seem adequate in all cases. In some cases the idea of telepathic clairvoyance, to explain or describe the transfer from agent to percipient of the agent’s actual viewpoint and experience, was more appropriate; and to make matters even more complicated, it could occasionally happen when the agent was dying but not dead. Apparitions could be seen before death: ‘About two months before the death of my dear father, which occurred on December the 10th 1887, one night about from 12 to 1 a.m., when I was in bed in a perfectly waking condition, he came to my bedside [the father was dying, bed-ridden and helpless, three floors below at the time], and led me right through the cemetery, stopping at the spot; where his grave was afterwards made…I had at that time never been in that cemetery, but when I went there after his interment the scene was perfectly familiar to me (Gurney and Myers 1889: 450).’ Of course, though interesting, there was no independent direct corroboration of any part of this story. Myers further pointed out, using a graph, the fact that the records of recognised apparitions became fewer and fewer the more time had elapsed after death, and,
therefore, how vitally important it was to collect and compare all such exiguous records (Gurney and Myers 1889: 462).

In the next paper (Myers 1889c: 13–65) Myers actually began to bite the bullet and to raise the question of survival after death, ‘The momentous step, of course, is already taken so soon as we consent to refer any post-mortem apparition, — dating even from the morrow of the death, —to the continued agency of the decedent. Few readers will question the assumption that in that unknown journey ce n’est que le premier pas qui coûte.’ He was well aware that even in raising this he was courting controversy, so in a note at the foot of the page, he stressed he was speaking only for himself: ‘Various converging lines of evidence have led me individually to think it probable that in some at least of the cases here cited there has been a real agency of deceased persons. But no one else is responsible for that opinion; nor do I even claim that the evidence cited is enough to prove its truth’ (Myers 1889c: 13).

And, for the first time, he discussed in detail what we might mean by a ghost. He pointed out that the popular view of a ghost as ‘a deceased person permitted by Providence to hold communication with survivors’ was based on a number of ‘unwarrantable assumptions’. Firstly, we should not assume that ghosts are exceptions to law, but that they will eventually be found to be in accordance with the laws of the universe. Secondly, that though there may be a causal link with the deceased, we have no right to assume that it is the deceased in any obvious incarnate sense. Thirdly, we must not, over simplistically, ascribe any specific motives to the phantasm. All we can assume is that a ghost is ‘a manifestation of persistent personal energy’ in some way linked to a ‘person previously known on earth’. With his characteristic urge to classify, he ranged the cases, listed in the paper, in descending order from those which showed intelligent purpose, down to those which appeared to be only, in Myers’ vivid expression, ‘a dead man’s incoherent dream’.

Myers provided interesting examples for each category. Some of the ones demonstrating purpose seemed particularly impressive and he often cited them in his lectures and on his country house visits. The apparition of a young girl with a red scratch on her cheek appeared to her travelling salesman brother. He
mentioned the scratch to the mother who confessed that she had accidentally scratched the corpse’s face when preparing it for the funeral and, horrified, had used cosmetics to hide the mark. The mother died shortly afterwards. The granddaughter of the Earl of Egremont, sliding down the banisters one afternoon, saw an old-fashioned lady who then vanished. Telling the story years later, she was informed she had described her great aunt, ‘She came to fetch her brother. He died very soon after.’ A husband and wife lying in bed both saw the apparition of his father—long dead—he spoke his son’s name warningly and reproachfully. The phantom appeared to have some tangibility since, ‘As it passed the lamp, a deep shadow fell upon the room as of a material person shutting out the light from us by his intervening body’. The husband had been about to take some financial advice which if followed, it was later found, would have ruined him. Myers argued that a very small number of cases like these, demonstrated a clear sense of purpose, sometimes even over trivial matters; and the humbleness of the motive was, in itself, no reason for dismissing the account (Myers 1889c: 33). He also, and, almost as an aside, suggested that death-bed visions, ‘have very rarely been observed with the right kind of care’ and that they should be (Myers 1889c: 24, 18-28).

Myers pointed out that those ghosts like the above, which showed purpose, were few and far between. Many cases were, as Mrs Sidgwick had stated (Sidgwick 1885: 143, 147, of the recurring automatic type, local and connected to a specific property. Either they seemed to be condemned to perform the same ritualistic activities over and over again, almost like the working out of a post-hypnotic suggestion, or they were mere impressions of past action, somehow caught in that specific environment. It was often difficult to investigate these cases thoroughly, and make the appropriate discriminations, since, for obvious reasons, ‘the owners of house property … conceal well-attested ghosts as carefully as defective cesspools’.

Having stressed that there was only a residue of good cases, Myers then moved on to provisional explanation. Here he begins for the first time in detail to pull together into a conceptual framework all the phenomena he has examined. Although Sidgwick, above all, had urged the piling up of case after case, evidence after evidence, Myers had an instinctive and driven need to go beyond this and
to categorise, classify and explain. He argued that the concepts of telepathy and of multiplex personality— which he believed been adequately demonstrated by the collection of cases by the Society, their experiments in their rooms, and the work in France—could be used to provide some initial understanding of the phenomena (Myers 1889c: 47–49). He hypothesised that just as the telepathic message starts from and impinges on the sub-conscious of both agent and percipient in the flesh, a similar process may take place between the living and the dead. The process by which that occurs may be not unlike that of somnambulism, induced or spontaneous, or that of post-hypnotic suggestion. In all these cases the figure seems to be 'working out some fore-ordained suggestion with little reference to any other mind.'

In his third paper, ‘A Defence of Phantasms of the Dead’, Myers took the opportunity to rebut Podmore’s (Podmore 1889–90: 229– 313) comprehensive explanation of phantasms as the product of telepathy between the living, hallucination and occasional deceit. It gave him an opportunity to deal with philosophical matters rather than the detailed case studies of the previous two papers. He hoped that the division of opinion between the two honorary secretaries might stimulate further discussion and, most importantly, evidence. He put his finger on the central problem: ‘It remains, that is to say, to be seen whether Science can accord to honest testimony (of a kind which can rarely be confirmed by direct experiment) a confidence sufficient to bear the strain put upon it by the marvellous matters for which that testimony vouches’ (Myers 1890a).

Myers argued, firstly, that Podmore pushed the explanatory power of telepathy too far. It was a first hint of discoveries to come. It was dangerous to pronounce on it too definitely as in the hypothesis that it operated through brain waves vibrating in tune, like the other vibrations traversing space (Myers 1890a: 317). Telepathy did open a ‘door way out of which materialism can never be shut’. But its mode of operation and relation to ‘a mixed multitude of obscure phenomena’ was complex. There was now increasing evidence for clairvoyance, ‘some energy exercised by the percipient’s mind alone’. He further asserted that though it was incontestable that our conscious powers were tied to the physiological activity of the brain, the manifestations of the unconscious self showed ‘a greater independence of certain corporeal conditions’. Indeed, he argued that ‘telergic
action varies inversely, [rather] than it varies directly with the observable activity of the nervous system or of the conscious mind’.

Podmore asserted that the lack of purpose and motive in most phantasms suggested a hallucination on the part of the percipient. Myers agreed, in one sense, but argued that it was how a voluntarily projected phantasm like those recorded in *Phantasms of the Living* (Gurney et al. 1886: lxxxi–lxxxiv, 106–107) would behave. He particularly stressed the case of Mr SHB (Myers 1890a: 319, 322). Myers was especially impressed by this case, which originally appeared in *Phantasms of the Living* and was later cited in *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* (Myers 1904 1: 292–96). Mr SHB was able to project an image of himself from his home in Kildare Gardens to the home of two sisters, the Misses Verity, in Hogarth Road, Kensington, three miles away. Both sisters saw and testified to the fact that they had seen the phantasm. The dead might be able to project a simulacrum of themselves in the same way that a very small number of living people appeared able to do. The effort to produce such an image might leave the spirit, incarnate or discarnate, with no energy for anything else. Moreover, the projection in some cases might be involuntary or part of an incarnate or discarnate dream. All this was highly speculative, but for Myers it tied in with what he had observed in some cases of somnambulism, dissociation and hypnosis.

He further argued that there was no evidence for Podmore’s assertion that the percipients of ghosts were subjected to regular hallucinations, or that they could telepathically infect others. He did agree, however, that some hallucinations could be latent and appear some time after death. He quoted the example of Miss X (Ada Goodrich-Freer), whose experiments in crystal vision demonstrated that the subconscious could produce after-images, whether or not the image had been perceived consciously in the field of vision; and some of these after images might have a telepathic origin. He expressly rejected Podmore’s infection theory in the case of the Brighton haunted house investigation. This was a version of Gurney’s theory outlined in *Phantasms of the Living*. Podmore suggested that Miss Morris, a previous tenant, had through thought-transference sparked off Mrs G’s anxieties about the house. Myers countered that this grossly overestimated the power and regularity of telepathy. Telepathy, as it was known to the Society, was
‘rare, fleeting and inconspicuous’. We were not equipped—our basic terrestrial sensory structure being designed for daily survival—to pick up the full range of influences on us. The influences were subtle and evanescent: ‘We must look for a miscellaneous interfusion among terrene phenomena of phenomena generated by extra-terrene causes’ (Myers 1890a: 330). And it was, therefore, essential to study in detail all the accompanying phenomena around the central phantasm—lights, sounds, etc. Myers here proposed a phenomenological approach to the subject which has only partially been developed in later years.

He provided an outline classification into which the different sorts of phenomena of apparitions/hallucinations/ghosts could be grouped. He identified five types of related phenomena: hypnotic suggestion; telepathic experiments; spontaneous telepathy of the living; phantasms at death; phantasms after death. He argued that each of these types or stages had the same three forms of manifestations: hallucinations of the senses; emotional and motor impulses; definite intellectual messages through automatic writing. The very last category, phantasms after death communicating through automatic writing, was the most significant for Myers. But this was also the one where most care had to be taken, since one could easily be duped by grandiloquent language and messages claiming they emanated from the greatest minds of the past. Finally, he touched on the modern conception of super extra sensory perception: ‘It is conceivable that thought-transference and clairvoyance may be pushed to the point of a sort of terrene omniscience; so that to a man’s unconscious self some phantasmal picture should be open of all that men are doing or have done,—things good and evil photographed imperishably in some inexorable imprint of the past’ (Myers 1890a: 337). And that after death a kind of psychic précis of the individual lodged in that universal record.

Myers put that forward, for the sake of completeness, as a theoretical alternative to personal survival; but he was much more interested in the former. He argued that on an immediate practical level, in order to attempt to prove continued personal identity after death, two things were required, ‘first the need of definite facts, given in the messages, which were known to the departed and are not known to the automatist; and secondly, the need of detailed and characteristic utterances; a moral means of identification corresponding, say, not to the meagre
signalement by which a man is described on his passport, but to the individual complex of minute markings left by the impression of a prisoner’s thumb’ (Myers 1890a: 337–38). It is interesting that Myers did not tighten the first part and state ‘not known to anyone alive’, since one could argue that the information had been obtained telepathically. This, however, was an oversight since he had mentioned it frequently in his earlier articles on automatic writing. That is also why the fulfilment of the second condition, clear evidence of unique personal identity, while not definitive proof of survival, was an additional pointer in that direction.

Finally, he discussed the strange fact that rather than stimulating false hopes of immortality through their researches, their work was mostly ignored. This was a complaint Gurney had also often made. Many people found the subject distasteful and depressing. Educated people had ‘a kind of shrinking from the magnitude of fate’. The discoveries of astronomy had revealed a universe which was not *homo sapiens* centric, ‘A soul from which the Christian confidence is withdrawn may well feel that it is going forth into the void, —not as a child to his Father’s home, but rather as a spark of sentiency involved amid enormous forces, and capable of unimagined pain.’ Yet, he argued, this attitude prevented people from addressing the evidence that he and his colleagues were generating, distasteful, perplexing, even grotesque, maybe. But it was evidence: ‘As well might Columbus have turned back when the first drift-wood floated out to him from America, on the ground that it was useless to discover a continent consisting only of dead logs’ (Myers 1890a: 340).

It is worth at this point expanding on the relationship between Myers and Podmore, since they were increasingly coming to cross swords as Myers tried to develop a speculative, provisional framework to make sense of the evidence the Society received. There does not seem to have been a personal antagonism. The few letters that survive from Podmore are perfectly friendly ones but they do not suggest such a close and warmly enthusiastic relationship as Myers had with Gurney, James and Lodge. In one early letter Podmore described, with a certain aplomb, and in terms that suggest a degree of intimacy beyond the casual acquaintanceship, a near fatal incident when he got lost in the snow on Ben Nevis (Myers 3/135: 8.5.1883). He also wrote warmly and sympathetically to commiserate with Myers on the death of Gurney (Myers 3/136: 26.6.1888). Yet,
one detects a certain distance, as if Podmore was not quite part of the inner circle. He was not as wealthy as Myers or Gurney and did not have their range of social connections. He appeared to spend more time in those slightly raffish and subversive groups—like the first stages of the Fabian Society or the Fellowship of the New Life—that challenged conventional social and political thinking (Mackenzie, Norman and Jean 1977). Indeed Edward Pease, the founder of the Fabian Society, was active for a while in the SPR. Finally, Myers may well have heard rumours (founded or unfounded) that Podmore was linked to the homosexual demi-monde (Hall 1980a: 200–206).

Eveleen Myers was certainly no fan and she thought Podmore parasitic on Myers’ ideas and researches. Sidgwick, in fact, eventually drew up a memorandum of agreement between the two to try to clarify certain overlaps and issues, Podmore being quicker into book form than Myers (Myers 3/139: 19.12.1895). Myers was concerned that Podmore, who was proposing a book ‘on SPR work’, would either steal his thunder (after all he had produced a huge amount of material), or their books would come out at the same time. Therefore, it was agreed that some evidence, like *Phantasms of the Living*, would be common property; that other cases would be specifically for Myers to use (Mrs Piper; the Cheltenham Ghost-Collins 1948; Lambert 1957-1958, for example); while Podmore himself, in the memorandum, did not wish to reserve any material exclusively); that their books should come out at different times, and that Sidgwick should arbitrate if there were territorial disputes. It was likely, however, that there would always be some residual underlying tension between the two of them. Podmore’s disposition, and the tone of his writing, was more sceptical than Myers’ (Myers called it ‘carping’ on one occasion to Lodge, when it was proposed that Podmore write up the Palladino episodes). It was obviously easier, in terms of writing for publication, to analyse in a critical and possibly negative and destructive sense, material largely gathered by others. There was not the same level of creative challenge as that faced by Myers: the building up of a huge volume of evidence, based on almost encyclopaedic reading, substantial experimental work, and considerable personal investigation at home and abroad, and then the synthesizing of it into a comprehensive publication.
But by the end of the 1880s, the critical and negative perspective of Podmore appeared more in harmony with the events and results of that decade, than the ebullient optimism of Myers. Hodgson’s demolition work on Blavatsky, Eglinton and others, the confession of the Creery sisters, the withdrawal of a number of Spiritualists from the SPR, and the death of Gurney, together created in the SPR, if not a defeated, then at least a diffident and cautious mood. Sidgwick’s attitude and its effect on Myers has been quoted before, but the point bears expansion: ‘He thought it not improbable that this last effort to look beyond the grave would fail; that men would have to content themselves with an agnosticism growing yearly more hopeless, —and had best turn to daily duties and forget the blackness of the end. His words touched many a latent doubt in my own bosom. As I have implied, the question was for me too vital to admit of my endeavouring for a moment to cheat myself into a false security’ (Myers 1893/1961: 41).

Yet, the Hodgson who was partly responsible for that mood, was also the Hodgson who eventually helped to lift it, by his sustained investigation of one of the most gifted mediums the SPR ever encountered, Mrs Leonora Piper. And Myers, from his own involvement in this, was, he believed, to gain the first convincing evidence of the post-mortem survival of Annie Marshall—and of his intimate friend, Edmund Gurney.
Myers as Psychologist

Myers, the SPR and the International Congresses of Psychology

Exhibitions, expositions, and international congresses became increasing features of nineteenth-century commercial and intellectual life. The international congresses were sometimes very specific: statistics in 1851, medicine in 1867, and criminal anthropology in 1885 (Rozenzweig et al. 2000:11). But often they were tied, for publicity reasons, to broader commercial and cultural purposes. For example, July 1889 was the centenary of the French Revolution, and congresses on psychology, hypnotism and physiology were held in conjunction with the Paris International Exposition, celebrating that fact and French social, economic and cultural life generally. They afforded tremendous opportunities for networking and breaking down the isolation that workers in new fields often felt. They also allowed specialists to reach a wider audience. The exposition in Paris attracted over 32 million visitors. The World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago received over 27 million visitors and had an associated Psychical Congress that Myers and Hodgson attended.

Myers was quick to spot the opportunities presented by this developing trend and pushed for the SPR to take an active part in the Paris congress. Myers was very keen that the ideas about the nature of man that he, his brother and Gurney had developed should be put before the wider, international community. The original idea for an international psychological conference had come from Ochorowicz, a Polish psychologist (Rozenzweig et al. 2000: 17). It was taken up in France by Charles Richet (the French polymath and later winner of the Nobel prize), who suggested the SPR’s involvement to Myers. He enthusiastically passed the idea on to Sidgwick. Sidgwick wrote to him, ‘Your proposal about Paris takes my breath away: but we are prepared to discuss it’ (Add.Ms.c.100/ 132: April 25/1889). Myers, energetically, tried to rustle up support from the wider English psychological community. He was keen to get Francis Galton to attend (Myers 2/65/1: n.d.). Galton declined, pleading bad French, but he did in fact go after further consideration and pressure. Despite his ambivalence with regard to séances, Galton was always willing to read and receive SPR literature (Myers 2/66: 14.10.1889). He was also helpful with contacts in the medical profession,
putting Gurney and Myers in touch with those of his colleagues who might open doors for them (Myers 2/69/1: 6.11.1886).

The 1889 International Congress of Physiological Psychology was a great success and Myers enjoyed it hugely—particularly for the opportunity it gave him to deepen his friendship with William James. He also relished its unintentional comedy. Eveleen wrote to Dorothy: ‘Fred describes his International Congress of experimental Psychology in Paris as a very amusing experience. It was a great success, and a great many eminent men were there But There was much conflict of opinions: and Fred found himself one day compelled to take the chair in a mingelled [sic] assemblage of Russians, French, Swedes and Germans all having Different ideas, & all wanting to express them at the same moment! ... Charcot—would not come—which was a great mistake but he was in such a rage at th Nancy school … (D/DT 2587: n.d.).’

Arthur Myers produced a detailed report of the congress as a supplement to the SPR Proceedings (Myers A 1889: 171–82). He pointed out that attendance was variable at the sessions since a variety of other congresses were taking place at the same time. He also colluded with the fiction that Charcot, the President, was indisposed, rather than boycotting the congress through pique. There were six members of the British SPR attending—the Sidgwicks, Myers and his brother, and Messrs Barkworth and Kleiber. Myers’ report showed that the contributions of the English contingent and the work of the SPR, which was mentioned in some depth in several places, was taken seriously by a section of the attendees, even if—in other quarters—there was some concern about the threat to the status of experimental, physiological psychology.

Richet, as secretary, outlined the main work of the congress, mentioning hypnotism and hallucinations as two areas where there should be unbiased collective action and made a graceful tribute to Gurney, ‘dont la science deplore la mort prematurée’ (Myers A 1889: 172). On the 7th of August the congress agreed to continue to develop the Census of Hallucinations along the lines already started in England, France and America, with a recommendation by Delboeuf that the mental habit—visual, audile or motile—of the subjects should be noted. Myers’ report then concentrated on the more animated and extensive
debates on hypnotism on the 7th, 8th, 9th and 10th August, with which the SPR were intimately concerned. There was broad agreement that the term animal magnetism should be dropped, with its suggestion of some kind of fluence or force. There was also discussion as to whether particular races or classes of people were more or less easily hypnotisable and whether, as Sidgwick asked, all hypnotisers were of equal power. FWH Myers outlined the striking experiments with Gurney and the baker's boy Wells at Brighton, described earlier which, contrary to the above statement concerning animal magnetism, seemed to suggest some influence emanating from the individual hypnotiser. Delboeuf theorised that Myers' results were due to a hyperacuity of feeling which allowed the subject to distinguish different hands. Myers stated that they had tested the subject for this but had found no evidence of it (Myers A 1889: 177).

In the discussion on hypnosis, Janet doggedly continued to assert that to be hypnotisable was a sign of mental and moral weakness and Richet (as Myers had done before him on many occasions) protested against this (Myers A 1889: 180–81). Delboeuf supported Richet, as did Myers in his description, on the 10th, of thought-transference experiments with a hypnotised subject. He pointedly stressed that the subject was healthy. Richet hoped that Myers' experiments, which produced results much greater than chance, would be replicated widely and with great care. Sidgwick added that such results, though they could be obtained with subjects in normal conditions, tended to be greater when the subject was in the hypnotic state. Therefore, at the end of the congress, the Myers brothers and the Sidgwicks could be well pleased with their first efforts to engage the wider psychological community. There were differences and there was some hostility, but an indication that they had not been marginalised was the decision that the second congress be held in England in 1892 and that Sidgwick was to be its President.

Myers was grateful for the support that Richet had given him at the 1889 congress and their friendship and co-operation deepened in the 1890s. He encouraged Richet to produce a French translation of *Phantasms of the Living* and helped him draft the preface (Myers 12/31: 11.9.1890). He was most determined to get Richet to the International Congress of Experimental Psychology in London in 1892 for which he, Myers, had become one of the joint organising secretaries.
Experimental had replaced physiological as the key epithet, since it emphasized the empirical more forcefully.) This was a major coup for the SPR in terms of publicising their work but both Myers and Sidgwick were very careful to avoid antagonising the physiological school. For example, they chose James Sully as joint secretary to the congress with Myers, since he would be a reassuring figure for the continental psychologists (162-163 below.) Myers and Sidgwick also rearranged the dates of the 1892 congress so that people could attend both it and also, most of the British Association meeting in Edinburgh. Myers very strongly re-emphasized the importance he and his colleagues attached to Richet’s attendance: ‘We do very much want you! & your position as the virtual founder of the whole thing just makes your absence rather marked’ (Myers12/54: 23.7.1892).

Sidgwick and Myers were very keen to get as wide a variety of English intellectuals as possible to receive visitors and offer hospitality. Sidgwick approached Herbert Spencer, the psychologist, for his support, since he would be the best known to continentals. Spencer replied, a little testily, that he would be happy to join the reception committee provided the definition of experimental psychology meant physio-psychology. He was not prepared to countenance a link with telepathy (Add.Ms.c.95/90: n.d.). Spencer’s name, however, is not listed in The Times (2.8.1892) as one of the illustrious figures who attended the congress. Sidgwick gave a masterly opening address in which he tried to be fair to different schools of thought; he pointed out some of the difficult philosophical issues involved in the mind/body problem, and defined the term experimental in a broader sense than purely laboratory work. But he stressed that he in no way countenanced unscientific and unsystematic enquiry, and he emphasized the specific organisational arrangements he had made to give due weight to German psychologists. These had felt inadequately represented and acknowledged at the previous congress. This was principally done by arranging parallel sessions so that attendees could avoid those contributions and topics they thought of little value. Myers played a lesser, but socially very useful role, in that he organised a major evening reception for the delegates at his mother-in-law’s grand salon in Richmond Terrace, on 3rd August (D/DT 2636). The reception was not till ten in the evening, so the delegates certainly needed some stamina.
This second congress was also very successful. Much of that was due to Sidgwick’s intellectual deftness and the effective practical organisation of Sully and of Myers. Sidgwick had been particularly careful not to make the work of the Society over prominent and a relatively small number of papers covered psychical research matters—particularly the work on the international survey of hallucinations. Hypnosis was again discussed in depth and it was pleasing to the SPR and Myers that the Salpêtrière view of hypnosis no longer held much credibility. For Sidgwick and Myers, as noted in Sidgwick’s report of the congress, the key point was not the acceptance of telepathy or thought-transference by psychologists who attended (Sidgwick 1892: 283–93). There was absolutely no attempt to force this issue. The main significance of the congress for the SPR was that, ‘representatives of our Society have claimed a place for their special investigations, as a recognised department in the scientific study of psychology, and have had their claims admitted without opposition’. In fact, apart from the work on the census, the only significant contribution from the SPR was the paper Mrs Sidgwick presented on experiments in thought-transference, and the paper Myers read on the experimental induction of hallucinations. It was gratifying to Myers that Janet corroborated the reality of the kind of facts that Myers had put forward in his paper—namely that through crystal vision, or automatic writing, or some other source, it was possible to induce hallucinations that might contribute to the diagnosis and identification of the underlying causes of fears, obsessions, idées fixes (Sidgwick 1892: 290).

The issue of the nature and meaning of hallucinations came strongly to the fore on the Wednesday afternoon when Sidgwick read part of his final report on the Census of Hallucinations. He stressed that amongst the 17,000 respondents only in a very small number of the cases ‘was there any observed disturbance of health at the time of the hallucination’. This statement led to a clear polarisation of views in the discussion that followed. William Osler of Johns Hopkins stated that ‘the mere fact of experiencing a hallucination implied some serious organic disturbance’. Dr Elizabeth Blackwell pointed out that the word hallucination was being used in a new way, since as normally used in medicine it implied morbidity. Myers strongly objected to Osler’s view, in the light of the large number of healthy subjects who had been induced to have hallucinations through post-hypnotic suggestion (Sidgwick 1892: 291–92).
The report appeared both in the *Journal* and as a *Supplement* to the *Proceedings*. In the *Supplement*, Myers’ initials as well as Sidgwick’s stand beneath the text which, unlike the *Journal*, had general public circulation, and one can detect his influence in the greater stress given to the positive aspects and benefits of hypnotism and its wider acceptance by the scientific community. It was also there in the resounding, classical conclusion, urging them onwards and upwards: ‘Just as the conquest of Gaul, which for so long seemed a chimerical hope, became inevitable so soon as the Roman Republic had reached a certain pitch of military force and ambition, so like-wise when Experimental Psychology has filled its ranks and perfected its methods, its bolder spirits must needs enter as conquerors the mountain-guarded region which we are now imperfectly surveying as pioneers of the scientific host’ (Myers, Sidgwick 1892: 611).

Another challenge and opportunity arose in 1893 to spread the cause of psychical research at the Chicago World Congress of Religions, which was part of the wider exposition celebrating the four hundred years of achievement since Columbus’s discovery of America. Myers tried, without success, to get Richet and then Lodge to go, the SPR offering to pay expenses (Myers 12/59: 8.12.1892). Myers was disappointed but decided to attend himself since, ‘I think that it will be very important for prospects of SPR in America at that Congress SPR should take the lead,—not the vulgar American Spiritualists’ (Myers 12/60: 16.12.1892). His HMI work was demanding but routine and it proved possible to re-schedule his inspection visits. He was the right choice, given his sense of occasion, his dramatic presence, and his gifts as a speaker. He sailed on the *Majestic* in August 1893, not put off by a medium’s warning conveyed to him by the over-credulous Stead. Myers wrote to James that ‘Stead’s wife’s uncle’s ghost says that the Majestic is to sink on this trip…He has been trying to dissuade me, but I tell him to think of the “copy” if we do go down’ (Myers 11/134/1: 2.8.1893).

His description of the impact of the congress on himself and Hodgson and his own performance smacks of the immodest—but it was, after all, in a private letter to his wife. He wrote from Chicago: ‘The Congress is a great success—We have more than any other congress—an enormous meeting this morning to hear me speak on the Subliminal Self’ (Myers 9/138: 23.8.1893). He was riding on a great
high and enjoyed a considerable personal triumph. He described a later event: ‘Last night over 1000 people came and sat in absolute stillness while I held forth about immortality etc, & then cheered me, and rushed up to me, & shook hands, & blessed me, & joined the SPR, & said all kinds of things wh I won’t repeat’ (Myers 9/139: 26.8.1893). He was impressed by the tremendous energy in Chicago and became convinced, with his usual over-optimism, that Chicago would eventually become the main world centre for psychical research. This was clearly a prediction that the University of Chicago has yet to fulfil.

Owing to the death of his mother in 1896, Myers was unable to attend the third International Congress of Psychology (the earlier adjectives ‘physiological’ and ‘experimental’ both having been dropped) in Munich. It, too, was successful in terms of networking, and the numbers attending exceeded the previous congresses (Sidgwick 1896: 295-99). However, not surprisingly given the location, the dominance of the German language and German physiological approaches to psychology, meant there was a much restricted discussion of psychical-related material. There were five topic sections running simultaneously and only section IV discussed material aligned with SPR interests. It was also unfortunate that no representative of the Nancy school of hypnosis, with which Myers and the Sidgwicks had much sympathy, was in attendance to reply to criticisms. Telepathy attracted only marginal interest and Myers was not there to read his paper on trance phenomena. Mrs Sidgwick was, however, able to present her paper on the sensory hallucinations of persons in good health; and her husband, his, on involuntary whispering and thought transference.

Neither Myers nor Sidgwick was in a position to make much personal impact on the fourth International Congress of Psychology that met in Paris in 1900. Sidgwick was near death and died in late August and Myers had lost his vigour and was to die a few months later. It was unfortunate that the two leaders were so weak, since they might have been able to check the more enthusiastic expressions of occult and psychical sentiments. The official history of the congress (Rozenzweig et al. 2000: 35) states that there was irritation from psychologists that Spiritualists, theosophists, occultists etc, tried to dominate the congress. However, the Dutch psychotherapist van Eeden’s report and Myers’ addendum to it (Eeden, Myers 1901: 445–47) put a slightly different perspective
on things. Van Eeden stressed that there had been a change of attitude and that privately participants were much more prepared to take the area seriously. This was over optimistic. The 1900 congress was the last at which there was any significant consideration of such issues and this reflected the growing professionalism of psychology and the increasing predominance of physiological and laboratory-based approaches. Myers gave a more vivid and anecdotal account in a letter to William James: ‘The Congress received our speeches and papers on Mrs T extremely well: —largest gathering of all the meetings-séance general [sic]—Richet & I spoke & Van Eeden read a good paper. I found at the last moment that they would not understand English, so had to confine myself to extempore Anglo-French. However, they cheered, & then crowded round Mrs T at the evening parties & tried to wheedle séances out of her. She gave very good sittings to Richet & van Eeden. There were various silly Spiritualistic papers—no great coup of any kind, I think.’

Apart from the excesses of the Spiritualists, he was also concerned at the activities of a young Russian of great social gifts and energy, Youssevitch, who had roped a variety of big-wigs (including the Czar) into an institute he had set up for studying psychical phenomena. Myers was worried that he was raising expectations far too high and that eventually these important figures would melt away and lapse into indifference (Myers 11/169: 2.9.1900).

Nevertheless, despite the fears of the subject being tainted by ‘silly Spiritualists’, it was very important for the SPR to present their point of view given that the dominant trend in science was to naturalise ‘strange’ phenomena by medicalising them (Alvarado 1989a: 4–7), by localising individual functions in specific parts of the cortex and by stressing the pathological basis of abnormal phenomena. Unconscious muscular movements and unconscious cerebration were still seen as the explanations for so-called Spiritualistic phenomena, and mediumship was linked to insanity and particularly to women undergoing the change of life or the onset of puberty. Hysteria was regarded as the underlying condition that produced the extreme behaviours, including physiological effects, that some attributed to supernormal powers. Myers, at the congresses and in his work on the subliminal consciousness, worked hard to dispel this pathological and morbid interpretation of the phenomena, but he was rowing against a stiff and powerful
current. However, Richet in his tribute to him after Myers’ death (Journal April 1901: 56) gave Myers a central role at the international congresses. He stated that Myers played a large part in ensuring their success and, ‘he rescued telepathy, premonitions, thought-transference and kindred subjects from the scientific ostracism which had hitherto excluded them from discussion’. He achieved this, ‘not by his audacity, but by his rigid adherence to logical principles and scientific methods’.

Richet’s assessment of Myers’ centrality may perhaps be unrealistic, but John Monroe (2008: 200–201) has emphasized the variety of views and positions expressed at the 1900 congress (and of course in previous ones). In this rather mixed environment, before subject boundaries had hardened, Myers with his command of languages, and his conceptual quickness, could well have played a central and impressive role.

Myers and the Subliminal Consciousness

Myers was unable to present his greatest contribution to psychology—his concept of the subliminal consciousness—in any sustained detail to any of the congresses. He had not worked out the framework till the very substantial articles he published in the Proceedings between 1892 and 1895 (which was too late for the first two congresses). He was not present at the third, and in no position by the fourth to contribute in significant detail, for given his illness, what energy he had left was spent on his Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death. In addition, the Eusapia Palladino investigations (Hamilton 2009: 213-221) and the Ballechin House affair (op.cit.:234-243), had all taken their toll, and, apart from the intensive work with the medium Mrs Thompson (op.cit.:221-227), he considerably scaled down his investigations into mediumship and related phenomena.

It is worth expanding, in a little more detail, some of the adverse currents Myers had to contend with when developing his thesis about the subliminal. As Bourne Taylor (2007: 13–30) has pointed out, there were trends in psychology which were inimical to him. On the pessimistic side, Nordau’s Degeneration (published in English in 1895) identified a range of features in art and society which
suggested a pathological mental and moral degeneration occurring in the human species. It seemed quite possible for evolution to take a negative turn and downward spiral. This ran quite counter to Myers’ frequent asides on the evolutionary potential and ultimate destiny of humankind. From a different perspective, and in different ways, Henry Maudsley, building on the work of the redoubtable WB Carpenter, emphasized the importance of will, control and organisation, and rejected the idea of a richly creative and healingsubconscious (though he believed imagination was a useful and productive force: Hearnshaw 1964, 29). According to him, the abnormal behaviours Myers identified as possible clues to artistic and spiritual growth and to healing were symptoms of poor training, unfortunate physical inheritance, and pathological injury. And although Myers stressed on many occasions the importance of a strict, exact, empirical, experimental, scientific approach (Myers 1885c: 1), his own writing sometimes soared too far from that disciplined base. In America, France, especially Germany, and to a limited extent in England, Myers’ writings were not perceived generally, either in subject matter or sources of testable hypotheses, as contributing to the programs of experimental physio-psychological laboratories that were gradually being set up.

Aside from these formidable obstacles in the intellectual zeitgeist, Myers had considerable problems with terminology. He was trying to find a way to conceptualise thinking (mentation in the language of the time) that did not take place as part of normal, daily consciousness. He did not wish to use the terms unconscious or subconscious, because he believed that both words carried connotations about the nature of the phenomena. They seemed to suggest that the activity was only operative or in existence when caught in the light or the beam of normal conscious activity. Both he and William James rejected this view, arguing that the processes were continuous and vigorous, whether the conscious mind was aware of them or not. Therefore, the term he used, as a classicist, was subliminal — from the word Latin word *limen* meaning threshold. This does not, *pace* Gauld, suggest a passage ‘from outer darkness into a well-lit domain’ (Gauld 1995: 393). It was meant to indicate relatively easy access from one centre of consciousness into others, from one area of activity into others, and not to carry implications of the torchlight theory of consciousness mentioned above. The word means going across the threshold (*limen*) but should not carry
connotations of burrowing downwards. It has variously been suggested that one sees it as a vertical division, from left to right, from outside to inside, rather than from higher to lower as, unfortunately, the word still might imply. The other misleading connotation of ‘sub’ was that it might suggest that the activities and processes were necessarily inferior and primitive. Myers was aware of this and towards the end of his life started to put forward terms like extra marginal or extra liminal to get around this (Kelly et al. 2007: 77–78). For the range of the subliminal, in his thesis, was immense, even awe inspiring. Once within, a whole range of activity would be taking place—the control of the automatic physiological processes of the body at the basic level, communication between different layers of consciousness, highly creative and inspirational and problem-solving activity, and supernormal processes of a telepathic or external spiritual nature. These activities were not rigidly stratified (even though he sometimes used a geological metaphor). They were miscible. They flowed into each other. They were permeable and the nature and type of the permeability both within and across the threshold varied from person to person depending on their makeup.

He continually tried to get closer to the essence of the subliminal by employing one metaphorical device after another. In his glossaries of psychical research terms in the Proceedings in 1896 and in Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death, he made its wave-like qualities very explicit: ‘Subliminal.—Of thoughts, feelings, &c., lying beneath the ordinary threshold (limen) of consciousness … The threshold (Schwelle) must be regarded as a level above which waves may rise,—like a slab washed by the sea, -rather than an entrance into a chamber’ (Myers 1904 1: xxi). For some, the flow would be auditory, for others visual, or emotional, or expressed in physical movement, or a synaesthetic combination. The extent and nature of an individual's control over his or her subliminal would lead to them being characterised as normal, hysterical, creative, clairvoyant or whatever. For Myers it was part of the evolutionary challenge to develop this huge area of psychological force for the benefit of humankind now and in the future. And one way for this to happen was to use the hypnotic stratum in the subliminal (that part of the subliminal that had the power to exercise a control over the physiology of the body that the waking self could not) to eliminate through suggestion and self-suggestion undesirable characteristics and cultivate positive ones; and even eventually develop supernormal powers of clairvoyance
and thought-transference. The main methods for achieving this were through hypnosis, automatic writing and crystal vision. As Henri Ellenberger has pointed out, Myers predicted in the 1880s that hypnosis could be used to improve people through positive suggestion, to act as an anaesthetic, and that these original ideas have been taken up through Coué’s autosuggestion, painless childbirth techniques, and Johannes Schultz’s autogenetic (Ellenberger 1994: 174. See also Playfair 1985).

Myers’ second problem with terminology was in his definition of the self. For Myers, the self that emerged from his reading and experimentation was both unified and multiple. He believed that to meet the needs of daily life we constructed a self that had continuity, reason, character, temperament, consistency and stability. Yet under certain conditions, other personalities could form with a brief or a more sustained existence, and that these would have their own memories and thoughts and attributes. However, Myers asserted that there was a fundamental unity behind these shifting identities. He believed that this essential core was strongly indicated by the fact that in cases of multiple personality there was often one personality that seemed to be aware of all the other selves. Myers was encouraged in this thesis by the celebrated case of Léonie, already referred to. The third personality ‘inhabiting’ Léonie was Léonore, who was the only one of the three who had knowledge of the other two and who seemed the calmest and most sensible of them all (Myers 1904 1: 322–26).

As Emily Kelly lucidly points out, Myers’ views can be more easily and fully understood if one tries to standardise his terminology (Kelly et al. 2007: 83). This was something he was keen to do, but occasionally he slipped back into looser usage. It is important to keep the word Individuality and Self (upper case) for the fundamental individual unifying principle. The term subliminal self or selves should be used to describe those temporary or more durable personae that exist in the subliminal and the term subliminal consciousness should be applied when describing those conscious processes taking place outside ordinary consciousness. The subliminal is the place in which both the temporary personae and the fundamental Individuality have their being. The Individuality, or Subliminal Self, however, has part of its being outside terrene existence where, in a fashion never defined (who could!), it accesses, in certain circumstances,
great gifts and talents. The more the full, rich potential of the Individuality streams across the threshold, the more evolved and developed the self in this life. Myers also uses the term personality to describe the self or selves, again contrasting it with the core individuality. An extra confusion emerges from the fact that he was not always consistent with his capitalisation; and to add even more to the muddle, the book was titled _Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death_. Therefore, is one talking about the survival of the fundamental Individuality, or the terrene personality, or both? Kelly has argued that a change in the title of the book after Myers’ death has compounded this confusion (Kelly et al. 2007: 96). The original intention appears to have been to publish the book under the title of _Human Personality in the Light of Recent Research_, which might well have attracted a wider, less Spiritualistically flavoured readership.

Myers was eager to welcome fellow workers in the field of the unconscious and warmly acknowledged Freud as an ally (Myers 1893a: 14–15) because he believed that Breuer and Freud’s work, from a clinical perspective, supported his view of hysteria. He further expanded this view in 1897 (Myers 1897b: 51–58, 69–70) and in _Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death_ (Myers 1904 1: 50–55). For Myers, Freud was a late entrant into a field that Myers, Gurney, and Janet, had already explored in some detail. Keeley (Keeley 2001: 767–91) has argued that Freud was concerned at being seen as a junior partner and grew determined to differentiate his position sharply from that of Myers. Freud, who became a corresponding member of the SPR in 1911, used an invitation to write an article for the SPR, to do just that. This was _A Note on the Unconscious in Psycho-Analysis_ (Proceedings 1912–13: 312–18) In this article, he forcefully denied that Myers’ subliminal was the same as his, Freud’s, unconscious. It was merely the preconscious or foreconscious where some lightly latent ideas mingled with normal, everyday consciousness. Freud’s unconscious was cut off from normal consciousness and specific techniques, requiring substantial training, were needed to access it. There was no easy permeable membrane or miscible strata. Jones, Freud’s biographer, has given a laconic summary of this: ‘According to psycho-analysis, the unconscious is a region of the mind, the content of which is characterised by the attribute of being repressed, conative, instinctive, infantile, unreasoning, and predominantly sexual’ (Tyrrell 1946: 28). This grim definition bears little resemblance to Myers’ essentially optimistic, even
romantic subliminal realm. Through the key techniques of psycho-analysis (word association, dream analysis, the examination of verbal slips) the unconscious could, with great difficulty, be accessed. By using methods that were not associated (however unfairly) with late-nineteenth-century Spiritualism and mesmerism, and by conceptualising his unconscious in a radically different form from Myers, Freud was putting in place the strategy that would eventually lead to the virtual disappearance (for some considerable time) of Myers from the mainstream historiography of the unconscious in the twentieth century.

As well as suffering from the avant garde, Myers was also attacked by the traditional medical establishment. His cheerful encouragement to the upper-middle-class members of the SPR to experiment with automatic writing was anathema to many doctors. In 1893 there was a spate of articles in the British Medical Journal criticising the practice (Shamdasani 1993: 105–106). As one contributor put it, ‘Automatic writing, that is undirected ideomotor writing, is common enough in acute insanity. To recognize that such manifestations are seen to their fullest development in the insane, the epileptic, the sexually irritated, the neurasthenic generally is positive proof that they are morbid phenomena.’ One of the contributors to the attack on automatic writing, Henry Rayner, went further, and identified the use of hypnotism as a parallel danger: ‘On this ground [the reduction of mental phenomena to that akin to animal life] I have always opposed the extensive use of hypnotism, and now oppose the self-induced automatic habit … The risk of mental deterioration by the frequent induction of states of incomplete consciousness, hypnotic or other, should be … distinctly taught, and the habit for those of the neurotic diathesis labelled, “Dangerous—this way madness lies”’ (Williams 1985: 234–41). Again, the dominant nineteenth-century paradigm reared its ugly head: that the collapse of sensory-motor control, the weakening or suspension of the will, signalled that automatic writing and related automatisms were morbid and pathological.

For Myers, the unconscious was not a mere repository of rubbish or the source of psychological disease. It contained gold. The subliminal had elements of the sublime. From the subliminal emerged the insights, the skills, the inspirations, that one associates with genius and the highest creative achievement. Though Myers may not have used all these specific examples, it is clear that Wordsworth,
Coleridge, Shelley, Tennyson, Stevenson and others, all attributed aspects of the creative process to sources not necessarily under their conscious control. The original insight or phrase may have required some mundane and systematic re-styling or re-shaping, but the primitive impulse often came suddenly, unbidden, and sometimes with almost overwhelming emotion and force.

Myers also asserted that mystical insights and experiences came from the same subliminal source: the sense of wonder and of joyous insight into the nature of all things. Nor, for Myers, were these creative and mystical experiences unhealthy or pathological. On the contrary, they were the mark of the highest levels of development and of what mankind generally might become with appropriate reflection, insight and proper training. This applied to extraordinary skills demonstration just as much as to poetic insight. Myers (1904 v.1: 79-85) studied a number of individuals with extraordinary powers of calculation and noted that for some of them the powers that manifested in childhood only lasted a number of years and then faded away. He speculatively concluded, along with Wordsworth, that they reflected pre-natal powers, and that, through the subliminal, one was getting in touch with that greater self that was both discarnate and incarnate at the same time.

Most of the sustained criticisms of the concept of Subliminal Self came after Myers’ death, but a contemporary one by Arthur H Pierce in the *Proceedings* (Pierce & Podmore 1895–97: 317–32) raised all the old objections that Myers had been fighting so hard against since the early 1880s. Pierce bluntly stated that, ‘All writers upon the subject of secondary consciousness seem utterly to forget the well-known experiments upon frogs and pigeons that have been repeated time and time again in physiological laboratories. These animals when deprived of their hemispheres will swim or fly, as the case may be, will avoid obstacles, regain their normal position… Here we have acts of considerable complexity with nothing but the lower nervous centres to control them.’ There need only be the appropriate stimuli since ‘no act is spontaneous’. The secondary consciousnesses identified by Myers were nothing more than automatic habits, created by well-worn nervous pathways. This central doctrine should not be abandoned. Evidence from dreams did not indicate the operation of another self. It was only ‘the normal consciousness working under peculiar conditions’.
This approach completely failed to recognise the full potential of Myers’ concept and (as Podmore pointed out) that psychological complexities could not be properly explored, let alone explained, using just physiological language. It also failed to recognise our almost total ignorance as to the way physiological and psychological processes related to each other in detail. The most positive critic of Myers’ theory was William James who clearly recognised its richness. James expressed these views in his memorial address after Myers’ death in 1901. He argued that Myers’ first achievement was to address the Subliminal at a time when ‘official science practically refuses to attend to Subliminal phenomena’ (James 1986: 198). His second was to expand the concept so that it contained both rubbish and gold dust. He further believed that some of the information in the Subliminal ‘he could reasonably trace to departed human intelligence’ (James 1986: 200). James, as a mere empirical psychologist, declined to comment on that or Myers’ general evolutionary conception of the Subliminal, only stating that ‘the latter is a hypothesis of first-rate philosophic importance’. Again, it is interesting that neither in the narrow sense relative to survival (outside the work of Gerald Balfour 1935 and Tyrrell 1954) nor in the broader psychological field, can one find much evidence that James’ hopes for Myers’ ideas have been fulfilled and implemented. They certainly influenced James, however. Eugene Taylor has asserted that, ‘Myers’s formulations were, in fact, central to the development of James’ psychology and philosophy in the 1890s, and they form the epistemological core of James’s scientific activities in abnormal psychology and psychical research’ (Taylor 1996: 78–81).

However, other critics were less appreciative. Particularly powerful was the argument of the philosopher GF Stout that Myers’ hidden agenda was to find justification for his belief in the paranormal and the survival of the soul and that the various stages of his argument, and the evidence put forward, had been carefully crafted to this end (Stout 1903: 44–64). Stout further argued that multiple personality could be explained on the basis that it was difficult to coherently and automatically access our past experience. The fragmentary and inefficient way that we did this led to the impression of multiple personalities inhabiting the same body. Stout also asserted that by his theory Myers was trying to create a guardian angel out of the subliminal. But Myers himself did not make this claim. He was
quite clear about the mixed ragbag of powers and purposes that there were in the subliminal and he did not have a fully worked out framework for it. His ideas were initial attempts to deal with intractable problems (aporia) which others could follow up on. As Gauld has pointed out, the detailed alignment and articulation of his broad theories to the mass of detail he marshalled in support of them, has not been carried through (Gauld 1995: 399–400).

The Subliminal and the Survival Question

This emphasis on the subliminal by Myers has puzzled many people, particularly those, past and present, whose main interest in him and in psychical research, has been the survival question. This is often the case, as we shall see later, when people come to read his posthumous book—Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death—and find in it much more evidence of a range of psychological abnormalities than for the survival of death. Emily Cook [Kelly] has addressed this directly. She states that when she went to his original material to consider this question, she was surprised to find that Myers ‘did not discuss the survival problem or survival research as frequently or as directly as I had thought he would’ (Cook [Kelly] 1994: 41). Myers, in fact, decided that he would have to address wider issues, including the mind–body problem and human abnormal psychology, as well as the results of research into mediums, if he was to develop a satisfactory and persuasive theoretical framework to which others might give, at least, provisional assent or interest. Otherwise, his and the Society’s work would be treated as just a better written and better evidenced set of Ghost Stories than those of the past.

Yet, this has meant that Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death, his masterpiece, has seemed a little lop-sided—literally Hamlet without the ghost. On a number of occasions in print, Myers asserted that, for him, survival had been proved, or very nearly so. Yet (for confidential reasons) he did not provide all the evidence that was available to him; nor did he argue through in great detail, taking into account and answering in logical form, all the intellectual objections that have been put forward against this thesis. His assertions obviously reflected the tremendous impact of his private sessions with Piper and Thompson, where the discarnate Edmund Gurney and Annie Marshall apparently came through with
sufficient verisimilitude to meet his standards of evidence. However, he was caught in a Victorian dilemma. One set of desires, the yearning for the immortal, spiritual universe, was opposed by another set, which was the wish for privacy and the hiding of any evidence that breached the unimpeachable façade of familial and moral behaviour. His need to prove and even preach survival was counterbalanced by his reticence over intimate evidence. After his death, his wife’s determination to keep that evidence from public interrogation further inhibited a full assessment of the basis on which he believed in survival.

Myers also believed that ultimately the survival question—and the full range of psychic activity—would be brought under an expanded and understandable paradigm, no matter how complex or difficult to erect (Myers 1894a: 422), and that one day, though not in his time, the psychological and physical conditions of their operation would be discovered. He believed ultimately in the unity, continuity and friendliness of the universe. It was friendly in that it was understandable and that it was designed for personal growth and evolution, though with great and continuing challenge for all. Tools existed to examine it, though those that he and others had developed needed considerable refinement. He pointed out how scientific instruments have revealed many key aspects of the physical universe that lay outside our normal perception; and just as the microscope and the spectroscope and the telescope had done this, so, too, automatic writing, hypnosis, crystal gazing etc, could do the same for the spiritual world. His assertions in this area were totally metaphor-based. Our conscious mental life was equivalent to the part of the electromagnetic spectrum that we could see. The infrared end referred to our primitive abilities and the ultra violet end to those we might yet attain through evolution. Each individual would be, to some extent, at a different position along that spectrum and this could well change through life. In an ideal world, humanity would move steadily towards the ultra violet end as lower level abilities became more automatic and internalised. Myers was fully aware that these ideas were speculative and hoped that they would provide lines of investigation for future researchers to explore. Probably the individual who has taken these ideas forward, in a broad sense, with most academic and practical vigour, has been Michael Murphy (Murphy 1992). But there has been remarkably little work expanding, refining, and testing Myers’ specific framework since his own time, with the recent exception of *Irreducible Mind* (Kelly et al. 2007).
The Cosmic Myers

It is difficult enough to accept the above schema. But the cosmological elements that Myers links to his concept of the subliminal self are probably steps far too far for most readers. The Individuality, the Subliminal Self, the unifying and organising power lying beneath the range of personalities, has enormous potential and a cosmic destiny. He postulated its pre-existence in a Platonic sense as a possible explanation for the great talents that some people seemed to demonstrate at an incredibly early age: and following Plotinus (Lambert 1928), Myers asserted, in certain passages, that the soul, after death, progressed through a number of spheres where eventually, in a way which was a mystery to us, the soul united with the ultimate principle while still retaining its individuality. There was much in this which smacked of Spiritualism but also much that was mystical. Myers did not dwell on the frankly materialistic heavens, or levels, that the Spiritualists reported on, though he did accept the idea of progression and growth beyond the grave. He had little to say on re-incarnation—a concept which still divides the Spiritualist communities. Yet he was prepared to tackle the even more bizarre problems of retro and pre-cognition, as part of his enquiry into the ultimate nature of man, and here, no doubt, very few professional psychologists or educated lay people then or now would follow him. However, he was courageously prepared to speculate and to throw out ideas and concepts about ultimate things which fleetingly puzzle people in general and permanently fascinate a tiny minority. Moreover, he was capable of synthesizing these speculations in diagrammatic form in the last of his articles on the subliminal consciousness. This laid out a range of cosmic progressions and relationships which many readers might find imaginatively highly challenging and even bewildering (Myers 1895d: 586). And it was this willingness to speculate, to collate and to classify, spanning both the spiritual and pure as well as the temporal and gross, which makes Myers vulnerable to the mockery of those whose sights are set on more modest and manageable targets.

He himself recognised this and was well aware of his isolation; that, as a man of very high gifts who wanted social and intellectual recognition, he was working in an area that many would dismiss and whose achievements very few would deign
to recognise. As he stated in the preface to *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*, he owed much to the huge support and intellectual comradeship that Sidgwick and Gurney gave him, since: 'The conditions under which this enquiry was undertaken were such as to emphasise the need of some intimate moral support. A recluse, perhaps, or an eccentric, —or a man living mainly with his intellectual inferiors, may find it easy to work steadily and confidently at a task which he knows that the bulk of educated men will ignore or despise. But this is more difficult for a man who feels manifold links with his kind, a man whose desire it is to live among minds equal or superior to his own (Myers 1904 1: viii).'

So, he demonstrated huge courage and persistence and, no doubt much later than he would have predicted, much of his work has demonstrated its considerable relevance, despite his florescent and orotund prose, for those who study the current phenomena and literature of channelling (Klimo 1998: 132–33).

One can see this sense of both achievement and frustrated isolation most clearly in Myers’ relationship with the Synthetic Society. Increasingly, towards the end of the 1890s, Myers began to feel that both theoretically and practically he had a better sense of the possible nature of the universe than materialistic scientists or narrow-minded clergymen. He had done the actual fieldwork. This could occasionally lead to controversial outbursts. The Synthetic Society, a debating and dining society, set up in 1896, was, to some extent, an imitation of the Metaphysical Society of the 1870s. The Synthetic was more disposed, however, to the transcendental than the previous society and there was a stronger clerical element in its membership. It discussed fundamental metaphysical issues over and after regular dinners. In general, its members behaved very courteously towards each other in discussing the great questions, so much so that one of the waiters at the dinners believed that the society was called the sympathetic society (Ward 1934: 368).

Myers, with a resurgence of his youthful arrogance, tended to assume that he and his co-workers in psychical research knew far more about the nature and reality of the spiritual world, than those who administered and preached the conventional banalities of the Christian church (Ward 1934: 363–67). There were mutterings amongst the membership about his attitude and there were
suggestions that he should tone things down a little. Ward wrote tactfully to him:

I have had several letters from H. Sidgwick as to the coming Synthetic session. I fancy that if you made the paper you plan nominally on ‘the new religious synthesis,’ describing the religion you want, and incidentally making it seem that you consider the limitations of Christianity fatal to its being adequate or ultimate, your paper would quite fit in with the temper of the society. I fancy you will agree with this. A paper simply on ‘the limitations of Christianity’ would incidentally run into an irritating and apparently destructive tone. The Society being constituted as it is, I should fear it. But your sketch of what you consider a wider religion, including a civilly expressed indication of the limitations &c. as well as an indication of those elements in Christianity which you would retain and develop, would, it seems to me, be free from the special difficulty to which I refer. What do you say to this? (Ward VII 217/3/2 [b]: 27.12.1898).

Lodge, in fact, had raised the whole question of psychical research and its implications in a less vehement fashion than Myers, in his papers of May and June 1896 (Stein 1968: 49). And in a third paper in September 1897, he hoped that ‘our common friend Myers’ would add a paper to the debate (Stein 1968: 51).

Myers did and argued that only science, not intuition and tradition, could unite mankind in its search for ultimate truth, and that the SPR had already discovered the way forward through its investigations into telepathy (Myers 1898a: 187–97). His second paper was a brief reply to a member’s objection that mediums might have particular gifts but it did not necessarily follow that they had any moral insight or integrity (Myers 1898b: 212–16). It was in his third paper that he followed up Ward’s tactful suggestions and produced, in florid prose, a visionary account of the future life and the evolution and destiny of mankind (Myers 1899a: 264–74).

This was re-printed as the epilogue of Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death in 1903 (Myers 1904 v. 2: 284–92).

All his life this capacity to startle, this sense of something vehement and exotic at work on the margins, clung to him. This may have been the reason why he never attained the secure intellectual status of those, say, who were members of the Athenaeum (Collini 1991: 15-21) by special election. The Athenaeum was a London Club founded in 1824 for intellectuals, scholars and creative figures of particular distinction. In fact, an unresolved question mark hangs over this matter.
His wife wrote him a gushing and admiring letter congratulating him on his gaining membership of the Athenaeum by the ordinary method—no black balls (Myers 6/325: n.d.). Yet there is no record of his membership of that organization (Rockall A 2007: p.c.). One wonders, quite naturally, what happened? It may be, bearing in mind Myers’ huge efforts with the SPR and extensive publications in the Proceedings, and his sense of his own worth, that he thought election by the special method (rule 2) was his legitimate right, and that he refused to accept the more conventional route to membership. But this is pure speculation.
Myers, science and the SPR

A Scientific Approach to Psychical Research?

One of the claims of Myers and the SPR was that they adopted a scientific approach to their subject. It is important to examine what this means in detail. The initial problem was to justify their belief in psychical research as a valid field of study; that it had as much right to existence as say, anthropology or sociology. Then as now, this hurdle was extremely difficult to surmount. Opponents argued that there was no subject matter to study. Illusion and fraud could explain all cases of apparently paranormal activity (Foster and Parker 1995: 9). Because of this the SPR approach blended, occasionally uneasily, the desire to accumulate facts in order to bludgeon an indifferent audience into taking notice, with the need to establish a sound, evidential base before they could move towards theorising. However, the manner in which they carried this out, and the assumptions on which that methodology was based have, surprisingly, never been examined in sustained detail—that is, with the partial exception of JP Williams’ excellent thesis, to which reference has already been made (Williams 1984: 10–41). Ed Kelly, in *Irreducible Mind* (Kelly et al. 2007: 582–84), has a short section headed ‘Myers’s Methodological Principles’, but it is not very substantial. He rightly points out that Myers—starting from a basis in classics and literature, and through very wide reading, direct investigation (particularly in France) and detailed discussion with scientists like Lodge—turned himself into a scientist. But we need to ask what this means in terms of actual practice.

Amongst the early leaders of the SPR, there was none of the Keatsian or early Wordsworthian distaste for science and the ‘meddling intellect’, or, closer to Myers’ own time, the early Yeats retreating into a Celtic twilight. Either they were already scientists by training and qualification—Barrett, Lodge, Mrs Sidgwick, Podmore—or else as academics (Sidgwick, Myers, Hodgson) they fully appreciated and supported the scientific method. In his obituary of Sidgwick, Myers put forward a view of the scientific approach to psychical research from which few could dissent: ‘…we must remember that our very *raison d’etre* is the extension of the scientific method, of intellectual virtues—of curiosity, candour, care, —into regions where many a current of old tradition, of heated emotion,
even of pseudo-scientific prejudice, deflects the bark which should steer only
towards the cold, unreachable pole of absolute truth. We must recognise that we
have more in common with those who may criticise or attack our work with
competent diligence than with those who may acclaim and exaggerate it without
adding thereto any careful work of their own. We must experiment unweariedly;
we must continue to demolish fiction as well as to accumulate truth; we must
make no terms with any hollow mysticism, any half-conscious deceit (Myers
1901c: 459–60).

Myers and his colleagues pursued two approaches to psychical research (Gauld
1993), the investigation of specific cases (the idiographic) and attempts at
laboratory-based research, so far as was possible, testing and experimenting
under controlled conditions (the nomothetic). Regardless of whether in
nomothetic or idiographic mode, their behaving scientifically (though there would
obviously be deviations from this ideal model depending on context and
circumstances), meant demonstrating certain key behaviours, and it is important
to see how effectively Myers and his colleagues displayed these. They include: a
systematic and considered approach to the collection of evidence; the use of
appropriate tools and methods of enquiry; the judgement of evidence against
objective criteria; the prioritisation of physical explanations over spiritual ones;
the elimination of fraud; the use of experiment to identify and establish the
conditions under which the phenomena can be manifested and replicated; the
construction of testable hypotheses; the avoidance of presuppositions and
prejudice, particularly those based on class, gender and race; and the publication
of results in a scholarly format so they can be publicly scrutinised. It is accepted
that this is an over-simplified model and that in reality actual working practices
and the pressure of sociological forces may lead to deviations from this ideal
model (Ziman 2002; Collins and Pinch 2003; Becher and Trowler 2001; and
especially Sheldrake 2003: 165–77). Nevertheless, claims to behave scientifically
require assessment against general criteria such as the above.

The Collection of Material

An essential characteristic of Myers and his colleagues was their infinite capacity
for taking pains. Gurney dedicated his life to research, perhaps at the expense of
his marriage. Myers travelled ceaselessly at home and abroad to investigate promising cases while still holding down the important position of a senior inspector of schools. The Sidgwicks, particularly Mrs Sidgwick, produced extensive, thoughtful, detailed and cautious analyses of phenomena, the equivalent (as also in Myers’ case) of a number of large published tomes. Gauld (1968: 313) has calculated that of the 11,000 pages that made up the Proceedings and the Journal to 1900, Myers and his intimate friends must have produced fifty or more per cent; and of that group, only Gurney and Hodgson could be considered to be full-time.

It was vital for them to demonstrate that these strange, wayward phenomena, sometimes manifesting in sleazy and shabby contexts, actually existed and deserved to be studied seriously. This, in itself, was no easy task given the swirling currents and counter currents of Victorian culture. It was particularly difficult in that the scientific community, as we have seen, was gradually establishing itself in terms of authority and methodology and distinguishing itself from the work of the rich, amateur and clerical. Men of science had no wish to replace one superstition with another and must have viewed with a certain unease the number of clergymen and their wives who provided testimony to the SPR in the early years. As both Nicol and Oppenheim have pointed out, the SPR may have appeared to many a sceptical Victorian, as a refuge for the disillusioned Anglican; the last chance to restore the spiritual, the miraculous, in an increasingly dark and materialistic world (Oppenheim 1984: 119, Nicol 1972: 346).

Therefore, the methods of the law court, the police, the private detective, the journalist and the historian were used in order to establish the fact that something had actually taken place. Sidgwick in his addresses (1882ab, 1883, 1884ab, 1888, 1889), Gurney in his chapter on caution in interpreting evidence at the beginning of Phantasms of the Living and in his chapter criticising the evidence for spontaneous telepathy (Gurney et al. 1886 1: 1–9, 114–72), and Myers in many places throughout his extensive series of articles in the Proceedings, emphasized canons of evidence. Myers himself, apparently the most emotionally involved, was one of the most thorough in thinking through criteria for evidence with regard to the specific phenomena under observation. In generic terms, this
involved above all direct interviews, the checking of names, dates, times, places, against other people’s evidence and documentation, adjusting for observational error and possible bias, and always searching for some form of independent corroboration of the phenomena beyond that of the original observer or experient. Myers was continually through his career urging people to have the presence of mind to record accurately what was taking place. There was much emphasis, as one might expect with academics comfortable with the written word in several languages, on the examination of documentary evidence. Myers himself furnished particularly thorough examples of these in his examination of Reverend Mr. Newnham’s diary (1886a), Stainton Moses’ extensive records (1894-1895), and the written statements (Barrett assisted him with this) that Mrs Home had gathered to confirm the phenomena associated with her husband, Daniel Dunglas Home (1889). There were frequent, tedious difficulties. Sometimes the witnesses had died, moved away, did not wish to write out an account, or would refuse to testify because of embarrassment or—in the case of hauntings—because it might damage the value of their property. But Myers and his colleagues, with a very few unfortunate exceptions, were relentless and thorough. He, Gurney and the Sidgwicks, travelled extensively in the United Kingdom through the 1880s to interview witnesses. He, his brother, and Gurney made several trips to France; GA Smith was dispatched to Florida and Hodgson to India. Many thousands of miles were covered in the name of psychical research.

Lord Acton was particularly interested in the activities of the SPR in this area because he felt it might help him with his work on Christianity—specifically, the handling and treatment of miracles. He asked two questions of psychical researchers: ‘How they deal with miracles when they meet them?’ and ‘what light your experience tends to throw on mine’ (Myers 1/7/1: 6.3.1892). In reply, Myers sent him a detailed statement on canons of evidence based on their work to date (Gauld 1968: 364–67). In this reply he clearly distinguished those activities for which there was no known explanation from those which had now been brought under known laws or which were capable of empirical reproduction. The distinction in the second half of the sentence is interesting. One could explain an eclipse. One could not explain the production of stigmata by suggestion; but one could empirically reproduce it. This was rather over optimistic of Myers but it did
point to an interesting debate about what one might mean by replication (Williams 1984: 11).

The collecting and checking of other people’s experiences made Myers and his colleagues acutely aware of the need for accurate record keeping and that often in very difficult, real world, conditions. They did not always live up to this but they tried. They took recording seriously and when stenographers became available these were employed (especially in relation to Mrs Piper) to capture extra detail. They also developed the idea that observers were there not just to record but also to observe what else was going on in the séance room, including each other. Myers and Sidgwick were also prepared to finance direct investigation, particularly if they trusted the observer, and George Albert Smith was particularly useful in this respect. He was, on one occasion, sent to Florida to examine a particularly important and gifted subject, Mr Skilton, a train driver, whose premonitions several times saved him from death (Myers 1895d: 559). After Smith’s honeymoon, as we have seen, the SPR paid for him to live in a haunted house with his new wife and make investigations. One wonders what the new Mrs Smith thought about this as an introduction to married bliss. AT Myers, for example, wrote to Sidgwick that he had ‘just talked the Brighton arrangements over with Smith and he is inclined to guarantee that Mrs Smith will not be inconvenienced by (being) there and will not break off a year’s residence there’ (Add.Ms.c.94/163: n.d.). Smith was also keen to get a London/Brighton season ticket so that he could work with Podmore and on hypnotic subjects in both places. And Lodge was later to pay him to see if, through normal detective work, he could find out the same personal details about Lodge’s family that Mrs Piper had in trance.

Appropriate Tools of Enquiry

A very important part of methodology is establishing appropriate tools of enquiry and knowing what weight could or could not be placed on the evidence gathered because of the methods used. Myers argued that just as new scientific techniques had opened up medicine, astronomy and chemistry, so too, parallel techniques were needed in the field of psychical research. Just as one had developed instruments for investigating the chemical composition of objects or the interior of
the human body, so too one had to find appropriate mechanisms for exploring the human psyche. He believed that these techniques existed and he labelled them psychoscopes. He saw them as the psychical equivalents of telescopes, microscopes and spectroscopes. These methods included: the use of hypnosis to initiate altered states, automatic writing, crystal visions, the planchette, table tilting, the study of dreams, and so on. They were ways of accessing the unconscious mind and exploring the various permeable strata of the multiplex personality.

Doctors (as has been seen) gravely warned of the consequences for sanity of indulging in such unhinged practices, particularly automatic writing. But Myers approached automatic writing and the other mechanisms with a much cooler head and indeed encouraged the members of the SPR, their relatives, and the educated wider community to experiment themselves. In this he almost seems to be in the tradition of early medical scientists who used to test ether, chloroform and cocaine on themselves in small doses. There was considerable insouciance in his approach. Another method was the use of crystal vision either in or out of hypnosis. He traced the method back to the Elizabethan scryer and magician, John Dee. He accepted that the crystal or speculum pictures, could partly be explained by a partial, self-induced trance and/or by point de repère, tiny little marks that could stimulate and suggest pictures to the observer. But this did not cover all cases and the experience seemed more complex than that, and often provided access to the symbolic and occasionally supernormal faculties of the subliminal (Myers 1904 1: 237–39).

The Judgement of Material

Judgement requires criteria against which sound assessment can be made. Myers called this the establishment of canons of evidence and he frequently worked through and published such canons in the Journal and Proceedings. An early example of this approach occurred in the paper that Myers jointly wrote with Edmund Gurney on higher aspects of mesmerism (Gurney and Myers 1885b: 401–23), particularly with regard to its ability to alleviate pain: ‘The canons of evidence which may reasonably be applied to this class of phenomena are such as even laymen may venture to indicate,
1) That the case should be reported throughout by a medical man…
2) The case should be reported, as nearly as may be, at the time and publicly …
3) The case must be one in which no other form of medical treatment has been concurrently employed.
4) The recovery should be such as cannot reasonably be attributed to the vis medicatrix naturae.
5) The influence of imagination should be, as far as possible, excluded.’

He and his brother applied similar criteria (Myers and Myers 1893) when they investigated the alleged miracles at Lourdes. Obviously, they applied the same canons of evidence to apparitions of the Virgin as they would apply in their general investigations into phantasms. However, they needed specific criteria for judging the reports of miraculous cures and the Myers brothers argued that these cases should always be first hand, detailed, medical experts should be involved, and there should be objective records. Over one hundred years later, Dean Radin (1997: 149) was still pointing out the failure of alternative medicine providers in this field. In essence, what the Myers’ were saying was that there was a need for accurate medical description pre-miracle and post-miracle—otherwise the evidence, no matter how superficially impressive, was worthless. Again, with regard to the use of magnets to treat French patients, both Myers and Gurney were hugely sceptical, believing that much could be explained by suggestion and auto-suggestion, so that Myers (Myers 1886d: 132) carefully outlined the canons of evidence required to judge effectively whether magnets had any impact on patients or not.

The Prioritisation of Physical Explanations over Spiritual Ones

One essential element in the demonstration of the physical reality of the phenomena studied was the application of statistical techniques to them to prove that they happened more frequently than by chance. Unless this was done they would be unable to convince the scientific community that there was anything worth investigating. As Hacking has pointed out (1988: 427–51), Myers and the SPR were starting to grapple with problems of sampling and probability before many other parts of the scholarly community, even if by modern standards their
initial work appears unsophisticated. For example, Gurney and Myers’ acceptance of the randomisation of the Miss Wingfields’ telepathic experiments, and Peirce’s criticisms of Gurney’s statistical conclusions in *Phantasms of the Living*, both reveal errors of different sorts but they were errors from which the SPR tried to learn (Hacking 1988: 443–48).

A further important point was to accept that there was a number of cases of apparent paranormal activity which could be explained by existing scientific knowledge, and that these cases should be eliminated from enquiry or any statistical analysis. For example, as JP Williams has pointed out (1984: 14), cases of thought-reading where people had physical contact and many of the movements of tables in table-tilting and turning could be explained by unconscious and involuntary muscular movements of the participants. Yet, the fact that some phenomena could be understood in this fashion was not to be used as a device, for explaining away everything. Sidgwick and Myers were particularly aware of the tendency for a number of men of science, particularly the powerful and lucid Carpenter, to operate in this fashion.

The fundamental problem that Myers and his colleagues faced was that for many in the scientific community—particularly the developing community of psychologists—what they were doing was not science. Psychology was the study of the physics and chemistry and biology of the body and the impact of that on mind. Matter and its laws were dominant and they produced the illusion of mental activity and individual volition. Others adopted a middle position of psychophysiological parallelism, where both physical and mental processes were seen to be correlated with each other but where it was not possible to say anything about their interaction. Myers, however, wished to challenge both these positions, believing that they had some—albeit limited—evidence for the independent operation of mind. Such a challenge required a scrupulous approach to the collection of evidence, and a considerable respect for the existing knowledge paradigm.

Myers, in fact, accepted many of the tenets of scientific naturalism. The SPR was not founded in opposition to this. He believed in scientific knowledge and its public examination and assessment, and in its laws. Where he parted company with a
number of scientists was in his attitude towards the anomalous. If an observation conflicted with the known physical laws, this did not mean a return to a magical view of thinking, just recognition that it might be linked to laws and principles as yet unknown. The scientific naturalists saw this as a way of smuggling superstition and magic back into the debate. Myers, however, shared with Gurney (1887e) the idea of the tertium quid, the need to move beyond dichotomous positions—each of which might have something useful to say for itself—to a third position that transcended them both (Epperson 1997: 98–100). It was this concept that sections of the scientific community were so reluctant to embrace.

As to physical laws, none of the SPR investigators would claim that they had found definite laws in this area—not even Myers. The most they would claim would be that there was some evidence for telepathy and that provisional hypotheses like the subliminal consciousness were useful for guiding future investigation. Indeed, as James himself stated, in a letter to the psychologist Münsterberg, in July 1891, there were no theories in psychology itself which yet had definitive value: ‘The man who throws out most new ideas and immediately seeks to subject them to experimental control is the most useful psychologist, in the present state of the science’ (Skrupskelis et al. 1999: 180). That quotation applied equally to the field of psychical research. Gurney and Mrs Sidgwick, in particular, were the great experimenters in the sense of repeated, controlled experiments to establish the existence of certain hypnotic and telepathic phenomena and to subject spontaneous phenomena to accurate observation and examination of testimony. Myers, much to James’ relish, was the thrower out of new ideas par excellence. However, it was in the bridging laws (which exist in abundance in the macroscopic Newtonian world) that there was and still is a huge gap.

Myers was not just a theorist. He was always careful to tie in his work with what he knew of other disciplines. For example, Gurney and he (1884c: 168) invoked current knowledge of the structure of the cortex and the optic nerve in their explanation of a possible telepathic origin of hallucinations. He referred to retinal hyperaesthesia in trying to explain bright lights linked to the appearance of a phantasm in a darkened bedroom (Myers 1892g:372) He examined in detail existing theories of unconscious cerebration and reflex mental action when
developing over time his theory of the subliminal subconsciousness. Though Myers and his colleagues were attacked by the scientific establishment, they did try to eliminate all physical explanations before positing supernormal ones. They were certainly prepared to consider that there might be physiological and pathological explanations for most if not all unusual behaviours: Broca on aphasia, Charcot on hysteria, and Binet and Janet on dissociation. But they reserved the right to accept or reject them in the light of their own reading and research.

This can be seen particularly clearly in Myers’ alignment of certain features of automatic writing with contemporary work on double brain hemisphere issues (Harrington 1987: 137–45). Building on his own examination of the automatic writing of the wife of the Reverend Mr. Newnham, and his readings of Pitres, Bernard, Bérillon and Hughlings Jackson, he considered the links between aphasia/agraphia and automatic writing. He suggested there were considerable similarities, both in the ways that words were mangled and, in the tendency, to swearing and obscenity —this latter possibly indicating the less evolved and primitive nature of the right brain. As we have seen, he was hesitant to assume too positive a relationship without further confirmation, and he felt, to some extent, he had received this in Bourru and Burot’s detailed case study of Louis Vivé. The point is that, rightly or wrongly, he was concerned at each stage of the development of his argument, to base it on evidence from the latest medical and physiological research.

With regard to crystal visions, he was as keen to link them to existing physiological laws as to speculate on what they might indicate about the nature of the subliminal consciousness: ‘We still want to know more on every point connected with these visions. How far, for instance, do they follow optical laws? Is there any tendency to complementary colouring, so that a green picture would be seen after a red? Are they magnified by the interposition of a magnifying glass? and, if so, is this a mere result of suggestion, or of the presence of something in the field of view which is really magnified? … I can imagine no fitter problem for research in a psychological laboratory (Myers 1904 1: 239).’
Myers and his colleagues were eager to involve professional psychologists and men of science generally in their work, and to learn from them. We have already discussed the visits of the brothers Myers and Gurney to Charcot, Janet, Binet and other leading figures in France, and their extensive practical and theoretical knowledge of hypnosis. The list of scientists who joined the SPR was considerable and in his personal correspondence Myers reached out to as many more as he could. We have also seen the considerable involvement that he and Sidgwick had in the early international psychological congresses, and his enthusiastic support for Freud’s early work as a confirmation of his own ideas.

The group of SPR leaders relied heavily on two concepts in the establishment of their case that, after all existing physical explanations had been exhausted, there was still something worth examining. These were the ideas of ‘residual cases’ and of ‘faggots’, or collective bundles of evidence. Williams has clearly outlined the first: ‘when all cases explicable by known causes have been eliminated, if there still remains a residue of cases, then the existence of an unknown cause is proved’ (Williams 1984: 15). Gurney stated the second concept in Phantasms of the Living: ‘The true metaphor is the sticks and the faggot…The multiplication of such examples (good but not perfect individual cases or sticks), therefore, makes a faggot of ever-increasing solidity’ (Gurney et al. 1886 1: 169–70).

The Elimination of Fraud

However, in order to establish a basic core of unusual cases, fraud as well as physical explanations needed to be considered in some depth (Williams 1984: 15). Ruth Brandon in her book The Spiritualists (Brandon 1983: 255–86) has a detailed appendix on methods of trickery that fraudsters used to gull the credulous. Yet she is not sufficiently generous with regard to the SPR’s role in detecting fraud. Myers, Gurney and Sidgwick went to great pains to avoid being taken in and were honest in admitting it on the rare occasions when it did take place; and they took care to improve their procedures. They certainly made a mistake in the case of Mr D, as we have seen, but for each failure there were a number of successes in exposing fraud, and where they incurred the wrath of the Spiritualists, as in the case of Eglinton or Husk, they thought that that was a price worth paying. Also, according to Inglis (Inglis 1983: 209–12), Brandon’s book is
vitiated by a number of inaccuracies and examples of *suppressio veri*, particularly with regard to Daniel Dunglas Home and Eusapia Palladino, but not only them. For example, Brandon stated that Mrs Piper gained clues to the kind of statements she should make by fishing for evidence, or using the indicators she obtained from holding the hand of the sitter. Berger made it absolutely clear that this was not a feature of many of the best sittings and described the considerable lengths Professor Hyslop and Hodgson went to prevent Hyslop giving her any sensory clues that might provide evidence she could use to fabricate spirit communication: ‘Hyslop would arrive in Mrs Piper’s home in a closed coach. Before entering he donned a mask which covered his entire face and which he wore as he entered the house and sat with the medium. Hodgson introduced him to Mrs Piper as ‘Mr Smith,’ the name Hodgson used also to introduce all strange sitters to her. Sitters like Hyslop were were instructed to say nothing so that voice, in addition to face, was concealed. Like Hyslop, sitters merely bowed when introduced to the medium. During the sitting they never spoke in a normal tone. Moreover, during the sittings Mrs Piper was never touched by a sitter so as to avoid any muscular suggestion. Nor were clues given by questions asked in order that facts obtained might not be suggested by questions. Finally, the sitters stood behind the medium so that she could not see them or their movements (Berger 1988: 24).’

It is also worth pointing out, in this context, that orthodox science itself was and is not immune from accusations of fraud. William James has an amusing section in his *Confidences of a ‘Psychical Researcher’* on the problems scientists face when demonstrations of their experiments go wrong—the demonstrator who drove a nail through a machine to keep it steady, the physiologist who pretended to kill a rabbit, and James, himself stated, for teaching purposes, ‘To compare small men with great, I have myself cheated shamelessly’ (James 1986: 364). Fraud is a hazard in all aspects of intellectual life—both the relatively harmless low-level fraud of the teacher or lecturer to ‘improve’ the demonstration of some scientific principle, and the more serious high-level cheating in the interests of mammon and ego. But it is quite unfair to accuse the leading SPR figures of not being alive to the issue. Despite his emotional longing for the certainty of survival, Myers believed the matter was too important to be settled by easy belief. Phenomena had to be probed, examined and discarded, no matter how
comforting, if they failed to meet the standards of evidence required. However, it could be argued that at times, Myers particularly, could be both a little over enthusiastic and careless. His judgement was certainly affected by the physical attractiveness of Anna Eva Fay. There must, too, be some suspicion that in his handling of those séances with Mrs Piper and Mrs Thompson that were under his supervision, the boundary between the social and the scientific was occasionally blurred, thus allowing, at the very least, the potential leakage of information. Yet, though not professional parapsychologists, he and his colleagues were aware of many of the issues outlined in modern guides to psychical research (Milton and Wiseman 1997: 32–51). And, to be fair, they had no extensive, pre-existing resource base, no community of international researchers easily accessible through email or the internet to support them. They did the best that could be expected of them, given the fact that they were at the start of the discipline, that there were still considerable transport and communication problems to face, and that the network of fellow researchers in the USA, France and Germany, was miniscule.

The Place of Experiment in Early Psychical Research

RH Thouless (Thouless 1972: 15) has criticised the early leaders of the SPR for not having a proper concept of the nature of scientific experiment. Yet that statement is perhaps unfair and again made with the benefit of hindsight. It also takes a narrow view of the meaning of the term experiment. An experiment is not just a designed intervention into the natural order. It can also be deliberate and careful observation intended to reveal particular information (Ziman 2002: 93–94). The SPR, as we have seen, was also labouring under particular difficulties and trying to ride a number of horses at the same time—to demonstrate the existence of paranormal phenomena both in the world at large and under controlled conditions. Their experiments were initially designed to demonstrate the existence of something and not to explain it. They had not the control over their phenomena that physical scientists generally had (Gurney et al. 1886 1: 6–9). Nor had they a theoretical base comparable with that in physics, chemistry and biology, which would easily elicit specific hypotheses that could be tested under laboratory conditions and accepted or rejected. In fact,
ignoring the sensational elements like Home, Moses, and Blavatsky, it could be argued that all the pioneers of psychical research like Myers and Gurney ever fundamentally claimed was this: that their observations, experimentally based and historically collected on an individual basis, allowed them to assert, ‘the ability of one mind to impress or be impressed by another mind otherwise than through the recognised channels of sense’ (Gurney et al. 1886 1: 6).

As Harvey Irwin has shown (Irwin 2004: 49–50), right from their investigation of the Creery sisters (which slightly pre-dated the setting up of the SPR), Myers and his colleagues were moving towards the concept of ‘a controlled test in a laboratory situation’. Their first efforts focused on the careful observation of a situation in which they selected material, inaccessible to the percipient through normal sensory channels, and through themselves, or someone else, hoped to transmit the information. They increasingly became aware of the number of variables that needed to be controlled if they were to feel secure that no normal method of communication had been utilised. They also quickly realised that they should benchmark successes and failures against what could be ascribed to random chance. In the Creery case they often used playing cards (1 to 52, 1 to 13) to establish this. It was Gurney, building on the research of Richet (Gurney et al. 1886 1: 31), who first stressed the importance of very large numbers of trials.

Myers was quite aware of the appropriate procedures, and of the way scientists said they worked. He knew that ‘We must, in the first place, vary our actual deliberate experiments as widely as possible; in turn introducing and excluding as many separate conditions as seem likely to have a bearing on the result’ (Myers 1884b: 217–18). That parallels Broad’s remark, ‘But all experience in other branches of science suggests that such discoveries are most likely to be made by deliberately varying the conditions under which recurrent phenomena take place and noting concomitant variations in those phenomena’ (Broad 1962: 19). Yet, as stated above, the phenomena did not obligingly recur in the way that basic physical phenomena did. The experimenters did not have control over the conditions of recurrence. Gifted subjects were rare, temperamental, and elusive and their powers waxed and waned under laboratory conditions. As for spontaneous phenomena—well, the detective always seemed to arrive after the crime scene had been cleared! In addition, the temperaments of all involved could
have an impact on the success or failure of the experiment—including of course
the hypothesised discarnate spirits who might or might not be able or prepared
to co-operate. Broad also suggested (Broad 1962: 20), eighty years after the
founding of the SPR, that the use of hypnotic suggestion as a key variable, which
Myers and his colleagues utilised frequently, was still one of the most promising
and undeveloped lines of enquiry.

In addition, it could be argued that they had already, to some extent, taken up the
concept of a physiological/psychological laboratory that was developing in
Germany and America (Mauskopf and McVaugh 1980: 13) and from the 1870s
onwards applied it to psychical research. It has been suggested that the rooms
in Dean’s Yard were, de facto, one of the first psychological research laboratories
in the UK (Katz 2005: 129). The SPR gradually improved its protocols and had
built up much useful experience after Barrett’s early researches. Myers was
involved in the early experiments but his interests shifted into more philosophical
mode later on. Some early experiments, of course, were the attempts to see if
any individuals were sensitive to and could detect the influence of powerful
magnets. Leading figures in the SPR took this very seriously and completely
blacked out one of the rooms in Dean’s Yard in order to test whether or not, in
the complete darkness, subjects (over forty were tested) could detect by sight, or
some physical effect on them, the influence of the electromagnet (Myers 1904 v.
2: 483). They found three who could, and three individuals who experienced
discomfort when brought close to the magnet. Barrett (Barrett 1917: 93–94), who
led the investigations, believed in these powers. There has been some later
support for this view (Karagulla 1978: 149, Targ 2004: 119–20) but no
widespread, mainstream replication, to my knowledge.

A further consideration was the need to take the phenomena out of a show
business or sensational context. Barrett, Gurney and Myers all disapproved of
the excitable environments created by ‘thought-readers’ like Bishop and
Cumberland and stage mesmerists. Myers also, as Williams has pointed out,
viewed the dramatic manifestations at Charcot’s Salpêtrière, with a certain
distaste and suspicion (Williams 1984: 17–18). The taking of rooms for the SPR
with space for both discussion and the calm examination of phenomena was an
essential part of the strategy to remove the theatrical and Spiritualistic elements that might distract from accurate observation and assessment.

The Construction of Testable Hypotheses

The Sidgwicks, Hodgson and Podmore, in particular, did not see their role as a speculative one. They believed that their main function, essentially, was to examine anomalous phenomena without preconception or bias, in order to test if there was anything in them or not, and the crucial part of ‘anything in them’ was whether they existed or not. The Sidgwicks till Myers’ death had a limited belief in telepathy. Sidgwick fretted that he could not get the least idea, or ‘working hypothesis’ as to how telepathy operated (Sidgwick and Sidgwick 1906: 473), but he realised that the time was not right for theorising. Hodgson, with the evidence of an enormous amount of Piper material, moved towards the Spiritualist hypothesis. Podmore operated as and remained a well-informed sceptic, though he acknowledged the existence of telepathy between the living, and certain puzzling features of the trance phenomena of Mrs Piper and Mrs Thompson. Myers alone took up the challenge, always expressing the inadequacy of his efforts and their provisional nature, to try to create an intellectual framework which would make sense of the phenomena and which could lead, eventually, to more detailed experimental work. This can be seen in his articles on the subliminal consciousness in the 1890s, in *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*, and perhaps most clearly in his work on the vocabulary of psychical research which he first published in the *Proceedings* in the 1890s (Myers 1896a: 166–74).

He identified three types of words or concepts that were used in psychical research: words with a standard philosophical/medical meaning which were used in the same way in psychical enquiry, those which were used in a special way in psychical research, and, finally, new coinages which he and others created. A listing of these last shows how much the psychical research community has been indebted to Myers for helping to create a vocabulary to take investigation forward. The words include: dextro-cerebral and sinistro-cerebral, entencephalic, hypnopompic, metetherial, methectic, panaesthesia, paramnesia, preversion,
promnesia, psychorrhagic diathesis, retrocognition, supernormal, telepathy, and telaesthesia.

It interesting that Myers did not claim ownership for the term subliminal but that he did claim credit for using and extending it in a particular way: ‘Excitations are termed subliminal when they are too weak to rise into direct notice; and I have extended the application of the term to feeling, thought, or faculty, which is thus kept submerged, not by its own weakness, but by the constitution of man’s personality. The threshold (Schwelle) must be regarded as a level above which waves may rise, — like a slab washed by the sea, —rather than as an entrance into a chamber’ (Myers 1904 1: xxi).’

Note: unfortunately, the classical associations of limen—the threshold of the room— still, as a metaphor, created and continue to create some confusion of interpretation. (See page 121.)

Several of the terms Myers coined are still in general use: hypnopompic, retrocognition, supernormal, telepathy, and to some extent telaesthesia. Others either never caught on or have fallen out of use. Myers’ glossary was meant to be a provisional attempt to make some sense out of a strange, contradictory and muddled field and he hoped that others, more professionally qualified, would generate from it more precise concepts, generalisations and hypotheses that could be explored with experimental rigour.

However, Myers was very concerned lest in an attempt to frame testable hypotheses, psychology (and psychical research as part of psychological enquiry) should narrow down to relatively trivial laboratory-based research projects. He expressed this concern (Kelly et al. 2007: 583) in his reviews of L’année psychologique, the annual French review of psychological developments. His main focus, however, (indeed all he had time for in one busy life!) was to experiment in the sense of making accurate and reliable observations to demonstrate that something was actually taking place; experiment in the sense of exploring a number of operational hypotheses under a range of very tight laboratory-controlled conditions, in order to explain and predict and replicate, was certainly understood by him and hinted at on occasion, but it was not his main
priority or forte. In addition, he was always concerned that the methods of the physical sciences, while there was much to admire and emulate in them, should not be applied without sensitivity to the real world, spontaneous phenomena studied in psychical research.

As we have seen, Thouless has argued that the early SPR researchers were not experimentally minded in the sense of testing a range of hypotheses under controlled conditions to further their understanding. They certainly tried to draw conclusions from a range of gathered spontaneous experiences and from their limited tests for the existence of telepathy, whether under hypnosis or not. Mrs Sidgwick’s account *On Hindrances and Complications in Telepathic Communication* is a good example of this (Sidgwick E 1923: 28–69). But there was no consistent and planned programme of laboratory-based research. Gurney had died; Myers was heavily involved in continuing to prove the existence of physical and mental phenomena; the Sidgwicks were fully committed to the development of Newnham College; Podmore (like Myers and the Sidgwicks) had a day job and had cast himself in the role of SPR sceptic rather than active researcher; Lodge was building up a very successful business and academic career; Barrett was in Ireland; and Hodgson was becoming totally absorbed in the Piper phenomena. Had Gurney survived the situation might have been different. However, this is again perhaps too critical. Psychological laboratories were themselves a very new concept, with probably the first one being set up by Wundt in Germany in 1879; there wasn’t the equivalent at Oxford till the mid-1930s (Hearnshaw 1964: 181).

In terms of ‘hard’ knowledge, however, one could argue that neither their careful investigation of individual cases (the idiographic approach) nor their experiments under controlled conditions (the nomothetic approach), contributed significantly to establishing a knowledge base, in the algorithmic way that mainstream science operates. John Ziman has stressed that ‘science generates knowledge’, and that this knowledge is encoded in scientific theories that are ‘widely held to be primarily exercises in *algorithmic compression*’ (Ziman 2002: 5). John Barrow (Barrow 2005: 10–11) has described this as a process whereby massive amounts of observational data are summarised in shorthand formulae which, through pattern recognition, create meaning out of the original information. It also allows
the prediction of future physical patterns and the conditions under which those patterns will manifest. It has also meant the creation of cumulative bodies of knowledge to which new knowledge has to conform, or by its overwhelming persuasiveness, lead to a modification of the knowledge base. Myers, with characteristic intellectual honesty and generosity, would have acknowledged that psychical research had contributed little to this: knowledge, certainly, in terms of research methods, but not in terms of secure and codified theory leading to the prediction and replication of psychic phenomena. He did, however, assert that their immense labours proved that there was something worth investigating, and that his provisional speculations suggested worthwhile places to look, and instruments to employ when looking. It could be argued (Alvarado 1996: 221–34) that the inevitable and quite natural emphasis on proof in this field has, right from the beginning of systematic work in psychical research and parapsychology, led to a neglect of process issues (understanding, replicating, predicting) and the accumulation of agreed bodies of knowledge. This again is perhaps unfair. But it is a tension that continues to resonate down to the present day.

The Avoidance of Presuppositions and Prejudice

In their public statements, the leaders of the SPR promoted the image of the dispassionate observer. This was a concept that would play a very important part in the battle for the support of educated opinion and was an effective strategy for differentiating themselves from undesirable occult and Spiritualistic elements. It was particularly stressed in the Constitution and Rules—‘membership does not imply the acceptance of any particular explanation of the phenomena investigated, nor any belief as to the operation, in the physical world, of forces other than those recognised by Physical Science’ (Anon 1882: 5). However, this was a little difficult to square with Sidgwick’s statement in his inaugural address that, ‘it appeared to us that there was an important body of evidence—tending prima facie to establish the independence of soul or spirit—which modern science had simply left on one side with ignorant contempt’ (Sidgwick 1882a: 7–12). This could give critics ammunition to claim both that the SPR did not really approach phenomena without preconceptions and also that they were encouraging a return to the old superstitious days. This was a false argument, as Sidgwick pointed out, and reminiscent of the debate twenty years earlier about the examination of
Christianity in the light of modern evidence—when some insisted that the religious attitude could only be preserved by careful abstention from dangerous trains of thought. Nevertheless, it could be argued, even allowing for all Sidgwick’s legendary reputation for balance and caution, that the phrase ‘tending prima facie to establish the independence of soul or spirit’, was somewhat of a hostage to fortune.

However, despite this slight slipping of their guard, the Sidgwicks, Myers and Gurney stressed again and again that they had no presumptions for or against the origin of the phenomena. Their only presumption was that there was something worth investigating. Their method, as we have seen, was to eliminate all cases explicable by known causes and then to build up a powerful residue to present to the educated community. In the final analysis, the aim was to drive the objector to admit the inexplicability of the phenomena or ‘accuse the investigators either of lying or cheating or of a blindness or forgetfulness incompatible with any intellectual condition except absolute idiocy’ (Sidgwick 1882a: 12). This is what lay behind Myers’ incessant—almost frenetic—efforts to establish appropriate conditions and canons of evidence for each of his areas of investigation and discussion, Gurney’s paper on the nature of evidence in matters extraordinary (Gurney 1884–85: 472–91), and Mrs Sidgwick’s sustained and cool approach to the whole subject (Johnson 1936: 53–93).

Yet they may not have been as objective and without presupposition and prejudice in their practice as they would have liked to have been. One of the most extraordinary members of the SPR in the twentieth century was Eric J Dingwall, who took rather an iconoclastic approach to the SPR establishment. Susan Blackmore provides a vivid account of him in her autobiography, with his vigorous and perceptive interventions, at her first SPR AGM in 1978. Apart from her criticism of Arthur Ellison, the chair of the meeting, which seems a little unfair—by all accounts he was a decent and courteous man—Dingwall’s capacity to draw attention to himself and to take a different line from the established ‘old guard’ of the SPR seems well caught (Blackmore 1996: 209).

One of Dingwall’s persistent themes was that Myers and Gurney occasionally forsook their own canons of evidence and accepted stories about spontaneous
phenomena without corroborating evidence because of a ‘naïve belief that the social or academic standing of witnesses is sufficient to substantiate the stories they tell’. He cited as examples of this the Hornby case, which was encountered in a previous chapter, and the Aberlour Orphanage case, where a clergyman stated that the warden of the orphanage was a reliable witness. The warden had related how he saw a cloud of light over a child’s bed in the night and the following morning the child had told him his dead mother had been to visit him. However, the physician to the Orphanage in the mid-1890s stated that the warden was an inveterate liar (Dingwall 1961). Another gifted member of the SPR, J Fraser Nicol, also criticised the early leaders of the SPR on the same general point, but in a rather more understanding fashion: ‘The Society’s double standard of evidence arose in the following way. The Society’s leaders were members of the middle and upper middle strata of society. When faced with the problem of estimating the value of evidence, they divided the world into two classes: (a) Members of their own class (Ladies and Gentlemen in the Victorian sense) whom they tended to treat trustingly; (b) Members of the lower classes, whom for brevity we may call the Peasants: them they treated with suspicion. This division of the British nation into ‘goodies’ and ‘baddies’ was never acknowledged in print but it was plainly carried out in practice. I do not think that snobbery had anything to do with it; rather this was the era—or nearly so—of Disraeli’s ‘Two Nations’ in which one nation did not know how the other one lived, thought or behaved. And what the SPR people did not understand they feared (Nicol 1972: 351–53).’

In support of this contention, Nicol contrasts the way that the medium Mrs Piper (‘wife of a Boston shop assistant’), GA Smith, the hypnotist and agent in telepathy experiments (‘son of a boarding house keeper’), and the young female Liverpool telepathists (‘shopgirls’), were closely watched and in some cases put under surveillance, with the laxness with which the Countess of Radnor’s friends—the Miss Wingfields (mediumship/telepathy experiments), the Reverend PH Newnham (telepathy/automatic writing), and Myers’ near neighbour and friend Mrs Margaret Verrall (telepathy/automatic writing)—were treated. The situations were not in all cases entirely comparable but prima facie it is a serious charge to answer.
Their attitude, in essence, was a disposition to trust the educated over the uneducated. An amusing example of this was the clash between the young Butler Yeats and Frank Podmore over the value of testimony from different classes of society. Roy Foster, the biographer of Yeats, stated that Yeats did not become an associate member of the SPR till 1913 (Foster 1997: 462). This may be so in terms of formal membership but Yeats certainly attended a general meeting as early as 29th November 1889 (Journal 1889: 172–74) and at that meeting he vigorously opposed the common belief that the evidence of educated people was to be preferred to that of the uneducated. To compound his folly, in that rather dry environment, he stressed that the materialistic theory of apparitions was still held by many Irish. He described his collection of ghost stories from peasants in the West of Ireland and that there was coherence and theory behind them. He hinted at a lack of humility in the approach of scientific men. Yeats was twenty-four at this time and one wonders at the reception of this fey exotic by the leading intellectuals of the SPR. But he directly challenged one of their basic premises and Podmore took him head on, as Myers would have done had he been present: ‘In answer to Mr Yeats, Mr Podmore said he preferred the evidence of educated to that of uneducated persons: and he would not, as a rule, choose to base a scientific theory of ghosts on folk-lore and the fairy tales current amongst peasantry.’

Nevertheless, the criticisms of Dingwall and Nicol have to be taken into account. For example, Myers, basing his views no doubt on his HMI experience, stated that some testimony would come from the 6/7ths of the population who sent their children to board schools, and he raised the question of what amount of credit could be given to uneducated witnesses in matters of this kind: ‘But although a poor ignorant man’s evidence is good enough to hang his neighbour, it is hardly good enough (if I may say so) to raise him up again’ (Myers 1884–85: 188–89). There was a need for corroboration by a mind more carefully trained. And, for Myers and the SPR, this would often mean a local clergyman or doctor. Though this may sound like snobbishness to a twenty-first-century reader, one has to consider the position with regard to the education of the mass of people in the 1870s and beyond. It was obviously very difficult to get the balance right and one can sympathise with their difficulties.
It is interesting to compare Myers’ response to the Devon solicitor (mentioned earlier), with his reply to Mr Barkas’ letter on the medium Madame d’Espérance (Myers 1885e: 407–409; Myers 1885g: 117–18). The former was treated by Myers with considerable respect. The latter must have aroused in Myers and his colleagues memories of the unprofitable séances of the 1870s—some of whose leading mediums Barkas had introduced them to at Newcastle—for neither Mr Barkas nor the medium were given much time or consideration, beyond the minimal public courtesies. There can be little doubt that the files of the SPR are saturated with class-based judgements. Some of them are obvious and easily discounted with their comments on appearances and the loutishness of persons of the lower orders and, to be fair, it is not unknown even today for a sensitive middle-class democrat to say something similar in private. Other statements suggest an alarming gap and lack of comprehension, as when Myers hoped that people would report on the sighting of Voltaire’s ghost at the Chateau de Prangins in Switzerland, as the place was easily accessible (Myers 1889c: 53). Certainly, it was, but only to the privileged upper-middle classes (Davies 2007: 9).

As has been said before, Myers was a snob, and this could well have affected his judgement at times. For example, he reacted quite virulently when his wife expressed an interest in palmistry, and her mother Gertrude appeared to be flirting with the idea of inviting Cheiro, the celebrated palmist, to lunch. ‘As to Cheiro, all that I can say with certainty is that he is quite fraudulent’, pronounced Myers (Myers 10/86: 14.7.1897) and then, in a second letter on the same day, he thundered: ‘I hope your mother won’t have Cheiro to lunch… I think he is really too low…He is, I suppose, originally, on about the footman level’ (Myers 10/87: 14.7.1897) In certain situations scientific and social certainties could blend conveniently together.

This prejudice can be overstated, however. The comments about the working class tended to be rather throwaway and descriptive, applying to their person and character and not necessarily to the quality of their evidence, and the upper-middle class context of much of the evidence did not generally mean that that evidence was sifted and evaluated with less thoroughness. The small number of cases in which the Society was mistaken or hoaxed was not necessarily because class blinded them in their judgement but because of other factors. It is also quite
easy to point to cases in the twentieth century when scientists have been hoaxed, and where class has not been a factor. It can be argued as inevitable that there should be a strong class-conscious element visible to us and less so to them, but that that did not fundamentally flaw the work that they did. The number of cases where they made mistakes or were ‘duped’ is very small indeed compared with the total examined and investigated.

Yet, and yet … At times reading through Myers’ correspondence one does get a sense of the investigations as heavily class-biased and psychical research as a kind of hobby pursued with congenial upper-middle class and upper-class friends. Myers certainly enjoyed attractive female company in comfortable surroundings. He wrote to his wife from Hurstbourne Park in October 1890: ‘Lady Malmesbury has become my special pal here, She has joined SPR & I have not yet invited her to Cambridge but feel that it may be unavoidable’ (Myers 8/242). Early in 1893 he was with Lady Radnor at Longford Castle, Salisbury, and later that January he was at Thornes House, Wakefield: ‘I have found a true comrade in Lady Mabel Howard (wife of Henry Howard of Greystoke) who gets very good automatic writing, and is very nice’ (Myers 9/88, Myers 9/89).

There are also vivid accounts in memoirs of the time of his holding forth on the subject at the dinner table and at soirées—the very model of a modern psychical researcher. He had a strongly histrionic side to his character and obviously through his life enjoyed being the centre of attention. In 1890 ME Grant Duff recorded in his diary: ‘Mr F Myers was of the party, and talked much of the Psychical Society. He confirmed what I had previously heard—that they found the evidence for appearances of deceased persons at the moment of death very strong indeed, but could make much less of the stories about haunted houses, the difficulties in the way of enquiring into them being extremely great! (Grant Duff 1930: 126).’

Edward Marsh’s memoirs mentioned Myers’ table-talk more mockingly (though he had considerable respect for Myers’ general literary skills): ‘In my last year I was included in a very choice dinner party at the Jebbs’. It began with Frederic Myers telling us the social gossip of the next world about which he had exclusive
information: George Eliot, he understood, had lately been seeing a great deal of Wordsworth (Marsh 1939: 17).

In defence of Myers, he clearly felt, as he himself stated, that since he went about a fair bit in society he had a role as a kind of ambassador for the cause, as awareness raiser and information provider; but if he was not careful, this could sometimes spill over into the posturing and the comic, particularly in front of unsympathetic or sceptical audiences.

Myers was very keen to involve members of the public, not only by having their awareness raised in this field, but also, as we have seen, by taking part themselves in basic experiments in telepathy and reporting carefully recorded spontaneous cases to the SPR. That is an approach which faded away in the early twentieth century, but in recent years Rupert Sheldrake has imaginatively revived this methodology, based on public engagement through carefully designed but simple experiments, particularly with regard to telephone telepathy (Sheldrake 2003).

The other main criticism was (and is) that they made judgements on the basis of race as well as class. Though never strongly explicit in their written work, one cannot help but feel that elements of an unreflecting racism in the work of the SPR show through at times. The draft of Myers’ letter to Acton clearly indicates a hierarchy in terms of trustworthy and untrustworthy sources of evidence. It is, however, anachronistic to describe this as sweeping bigotry, as Bart Schultz does in his biography of Sidgwick (Schulz 2004: 316–17). Myers was really talking in terms of education and scientific attainment, rather than making a wholesale condemnation of other societies. It is true, of course, that he contrasted the ease with which some races could be hypnotised/mesmerised—the French, the Indian—compared to the sturdy Anglo-Saxon. But, in general terms, Myers was not an active racist, and displayed no more than the normal, unreflective language of the educated upper-middle class at that time. An early letter to Sidgwick, for example, describing the visit of an Indian Guru to Cambridge and Oxford is completely without any racial tinge to it: ‘I must say this, that a more charming, a serener, a holier man than the Baboo I think I have never seen: if we
are to have Theism developed into an organised religion I think he is your man’ (Myers 12/97: 22.5.1870).

The Publication of Results in a Scholarly Format

The final characteristic of their work that marks it as ‘scientific’ was the determination of the leading members of the SPR to publish their findings in a scholarly form and to expose their views to public intellectual debate. Myers fully accepted these standards and his articles are well referenced and backed up by detailed evidence and the sources on which they were based. However, once these conditions were met, he was usually prepared to publish, confident in the quality of his evidence and his arguments. The Sidgwicks (continuing to be rooted in the Cambridge academic world) and William James (at the cutting edge of modern psychology) were more cautious. James was always acutely aware of what we might now call ‘the boggle factor’, particularly when it came to endorsing physical phenomena; his attitude during the Palladino affair is particularly revealing. On 4th October 1894 he wrote to Lodge, advising him against the widespread publication of the endorsement of Palladino by himself, Myers and Richet, ‘and by no means send it to Nature, Science, or the XIXth Century’. He clearly pointed out that, having got rid of the more extreme Spiritualists in the 1880s, the Society could now be in danger of exchanging places with them: ‘We are changing places with a set of beings, the ‘regular’ Spiritualists, whom we have hitherto treated with a species of contempt…and we are since using … language towards our hard-hearted colleagues almost identical with that which we have so often heard the aforesaid Spiritualists use to us (Skrupskelis et al. 1999: 553).’

Though Myers published a great deal, he was always against unnecessary, sensational and simplified popularisation. For example, Myers needed to keep some contact with the Spiritualists and their periodicals in order to gain access to events, incidents and individuals that had an apparently supernormal element to them. Yet the Society’s reputation for scepticism and even unfairness led to a number in that community shunning them. There was also a particular issue with WT Stead, the crusading journalist and publisher of Borderland, who in 1891 was proposing to take many of the SPR’s cases and to publish them as part of his Review of Reviews, which had been founded in 1890 by himself and George
Newnes, the editor of *Tit-Bits*—a publication hardly calculated to appeal to the austere and academic tastes of the SPR. This had the merit of bringing the SPR to wider attention, but carried the danger of possibly discrediting it by associating it with mere sensationalism. Writing to Richet, Myers hoped that he had got round this problem since ‘he [Stead] has allowed me to insert a letter explaining that the SPR is not responsible for what he prints’ (Myers 12/47: 9.11.1891.). This had little effect on Stead who published the material as ‘Real Ghost Stories’ a title with much more punch than Myers’ cautious disclaimer.

Finally, discussion—free and fearless—was seen as an essential part of the scientific process, in order to test the strength of evidence in a collective forum. While the SPR held no collective views, it was agreed that nothing would be published unless it first met the standards of the Council. Papers to be published were read at general meetings and the floor was opened to questions afterwards. The great joint publications, *Phantasms of the Living* and the *Census on Hallucinations*, were both subject to what Gurney (in the context of the former) had called a ‘great grind’. There were also frequent private discussions at Cambridge outside the formal confines of SPR meetings. Myers relished such discussions and believed in the Millian merits of free, dispassionate debate.

Discussion, however, required something to discuss, and there was an intense and admirably sustained strategy on the part of the SPR leaders to disseminate information, as has been indicated. Libraries were built up—a general one on psychical research, and later the Gurney library on hypnotism—for the use of the membership. The *Proceedings* were circulated nationally to the main scientific bodies and ‘as far as is found practicable to Free Libraries, Mechanics’ Institutes and Literary Institutions’ (Cerullo 1982: 86). Substantial donations of books and money were made, particularly by Myers and his family and by the Sidgwicks. The *Journal*, from 1884 onwards, enabled members to examine and make contributions to specific cases and phenomena investigated by members of the Society. Finally, as we have seen, a policy of publishing in quality periodicals (often material almost verbatim to that in the Proceedings) was adopted by Barrett, Gurney, and most completely by Myers. All the major periodicals—*National Review, Fortnightly Review, Nineteenth Century, Contemporary Review,*
Cornhill—had articles and/or letters on psychical research in them; as did the more popular _Pall Mall Gazette_, _Light_, and Stead’s short-lived _Borderland_.

John Ziman (2002: 97–102) has pointed out how important the publication of results in an appropriate format is, and has been, for establishing trust into individual and group testimony. Reports should be written up according to standard conventions, so that they provide the person studying the report with all the information necessary to recreate the procedures and processes in order to replicate the original result. It is interesting that deviation from this procedure is still pounced upon. For example, a letter in _Nature Biotechnology_ complains of ‘a lack of documented methodology and information that is essential to faithfully reproduce the science claimed …’ (Noseda and McLean 2008: 26–28). There is little doubt that the early leaders of the SPR tried to follow this model, based as it was on the emerging science journals and practices in the late nineteenth century. They provided their readers, as has been seen, with guides and supplements to the use of the planchette, crystal balls, thought-reading experiments, and the tabulation of results. They wrote up their experiments in ways which would allow their readers to try to replicate their results and to criticise their procedures. However, they only claimed to have demonstrated the existence of certain phenomena under certain conditions and not to have provided a guaranteed formula for their replication, or a theory for their explanation. Their work could be criticised by modern standards, but they were starting a fresh discipline not inheriting a well-developed and secure one.

Sidgwick, Myers and Gurney sometimes speculated on how much evidence was necessary to gain the attention of the scientific community, let alone win them over. The first stage was to get enough evidence to refute or at least weaken Hume’s argument against miracles. Hume stated we have the universal experience of all ages that miracles do not happen and against this a small amount of human testimony that they do. We have no experience that miracles happen and plenty that human testimony is fallacious; consequently, it was highly unlikely that supernatural phenomena existed. Sidgwick argued in his addresses as President (Sidgwick 1884a: 153–55, Sidgwick 1889a: 1–2) that a large and substantial amount of evidence, that was carefully tested and sifted, could weigh against the inherent improbabilities of miracles. It is difficult to fault this as an
approach or to think of any other line that they could have taken, but no amount of testimony gathered by them could prevail against those who thought them deluded, their methods suspect, and that they had not the authority, the right, the training, or the credentials, even to investigate—let alone make judgements in—this field.

The Problem of Interpretation and Explanation in a World of Contested Expertise

There was a considerable and confused debate over who had the right to assess the phenomena in this area. Richard Noakes (Noakes 2004: 23–43) has vividly illustrated this in his account of the clash between WB Carpenter and Sir William Crookes over the investigation of Spiritualism in the 1870s. Carpenter argued that Crookes’ expertise in one area of science did not prevent him from being deceived and deceiving himself in the swirling murkiness of the séance room. He knew nothing of the physiology and pathology of the human mind and its inveterate tendency to self-deception. Crookes, for his part, stressed his technical expertise with scientific instrumentation and his trained powers of observation. It should be noted that the same issues and conflicts arose in France and Germany as investigators pursued similar aims to Myers and his colleagues (Treitel 2004, Monroe 2008). So, who was to adjudicate between these conflicting claims? And what expertise could Myers and his colleagues appeal to in justification of their conclusions?

With some exceptions, the core Cambridge group at the heart of the SPR had built their intellectual authority on a detailed and expert knowledge of a relatively small number of classical texts, and a shared high Victorian literary, historical and philosophical culture. What they were doing, in the 1870s and 1880s, was moving away from that narrow context and undertaking detailed field research in a difficult, contested and ambiguous region. In moving outside their home territory, they bumped up against other types of expertise. These included the tacit, practical and experiential knowledge of both the Spiritualist community and the showmen who could expose and duplicate the trickery, as they saw it, of mediums. They also collided with the new world of professional science, which may well have seen the SPR’s approach as misguided and anachronistic: that
they were reviving the old-fashioned approaches and methods of Natural History—where gentlemen, gentlewomen and clergymen tried to demonstrate God’s natural order, by deploying the lower-level scientific skills of description, collection, and classification—not this time on flora and fauna, but on ghosts and bogies.

This made them especially vulnerable to the charges of people like Carpenter and Henry Maudsley and they tried to guard against this, as we have seen, by a rigorous methodology and a retreat from the obviously entertaining, melodramatic and stagey, and by an intensive programme of self-education in the sciences, particularly in the cases of Myers and Gurney. They also utilised appropriate expertise, for example as has been seen, FY Edgeworth on the calculus of probabilities applied to psychical research (Edgeworth 1885, 1886) and they cultivated leading scientists of a broadly sympathetic disposition, like Lodge, Rayleigh, and J J Thomson.

What made the issues more difficult to grapple with was the woolliness and softness, and sometimes distastefulness, of the subject matter. For many people, the grand successes of Victorian Physics—the steam engine, the railway, the telegraph—carried all before them. The laws, on which these achievements were founded, were demonstrable and validated every day. In contrast the phenomena the SPR studied were evanescent and not easily replicable. To many outside observers, they strongly suggested self-delusion, even temporary insanity, and often fraud. The obvious conclusion then, was that the alienist should deal with the former and the conjuror and police with the latter. Conjurers and reformed fraudsters asserted time and again that, ‘The scientist may be versed in certain lines of scientific subjects, but their knowledge in those lines will not be of service to them in their investigation of the “medium”’ (Dingwall and Price 1922: 131). It was greatly to the SPR’s credit that faced with attitudes like this, they managed to make out a strong case for psychical research as an important area of study in its own right. They argued strongly that only by applying and adapting scientific procedures to this difficult field, could hard won expertise be built up, which entitled an individual to have his or her conclusions taken seriously.
Was this same approach continued by the second-generation of the SPR leadership with regard to the cross-correspondence phenomena, to which we now turn?
Were the Cross-Correspondences Unambiguous, Consistent and Meaningful?

Five types of cross-correspondences (to some extent they can merge and blend) have been identified in the scripts: simple, intricate or complex, symbolic, ideal, and progressive. They are largely verbal (though there are occasional drawings that are relevant to the communicators’ purposes) and they are scattered across the automatists often at around the same chronological period but also over a longer timescale, appearing, disappearing, and then resurfacing years later. The content itself could be highly fragmented both in terms of its allusiveness, terseness, incompleteness, or appearance in a script with no obvious link apparent to what went before or came afterwards.

The simple cross-correspondences are easy to assess—the same word or topic was clearly expressed in two or more scripts. The problem is more difficult in the case of intricate cross-correspondences. In essence, a series of clues, disguised in a variety of ways (this provides the intricacy or complexity) were scattered across the scripts of two or more automatists. The investigator has to identify the underlying theme or topic from the limited information available. Alice Johnson (Hamilton 2017: 46-47) argued that this method was devised to surmount the objection that telepathy from the living was the source of so-called mediumistic messages. There is much to be said for this argument but the approach has disadvantages.

For example, it has often been argued by supporters of the cross-correspondences that when the key phrase or clue was identified in the script it made the whole intricate cross-correspondence fit together like a jigsaw. This is a misleading metaphor. A traditional jigsaw is cut so that one and one only picture/pattern can emerge from the small physical elements into which the jigsaw has been dispersed. The fit is geometric. There can be no argument about it. It is a physical fact. However, the script material was densely literary and historical and required literary and historical judgement and sensitivity to evaluate it. Therefore, unambiguity in this context means best fit based on a considered and informed assessment of the scripts and not the absolute unambiguity of the jigsaw. While some intricate cross-correspondences just seemed to click into
place (Thanatos for example, op.cit.: 70), in others there was room to challenge the interpretation and to suspect bias or the over-ingenious interpretation of large convoluted bodies of data.

Saltmarsh (1975: 34–5) argued that there were a number of intricate/complex correspondences between two automatists that were beyond dispute, but that ideal examples, conforming to the Latin Message type (see appendix 2), and involving at least three automatists, could not be found. The very fact that Alice Johnson claimed to have identified several emphasises the problems with the jigsaw metaphor mentioned above.

In addition, when assessing symbolic cross-correspondences one needs to look at the spread of symbols across the automatists and their first independent appearance in each script. It should be stressed that the symbolism referred to in this case was the internal symbolism that the interpreters stated was created by the communicators. It should not be confused with (even though it may draw some of its power from) the wider world of esoteric and occult symbolism (Tresidder 2008; Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1996). The symbolism can work in the revelatory and participatory ways that Main (1907: 57–62) suggests it can often do in a spiritual context, but in the cross-correspondence scripts its main rationale was more pragmatic. The progressive cross-correspondences raised the same issues as the other types with the additional consideration that as they occurred within the scripts of one automatist it was more difficult, though not impossible, to argue for an external design.

There are certain generic tests one can apply to the cross-correspondences. Operationally, this means a) estimating whether the cross-correspondence was or was not a fortuitous platitude derived purely from the automatist’s own cultural resources. One must look closely at the nature of the link, the precision, complexity, vagueness, or generality of the phrase, and the frequency of its use or recurrence in scripts in order to be able to do this; b) mapping the extent to which the key phrases and topics were distributed across the writings of the automatists before they had, if ever, access to the other scripts involved in the cross-correspondence. This is particularly important with regard to the symbolic cross-correspondences since Gerald Balfour (1927) and Piddington claimed the
symbols lay concealed in the earliest scripts until the communicators decided the time was right to reveal the clues that liberated them; c) checking whether the automatist consistently used the same symbol in the same way to stand for the communicator, or another symbol. Using other symbols increased the sense of complexity and design but it also increased the likelihood of chance generating the link. One must interrogate the rationale for assigning a particular symbol to a particular individual. Did it connect directly or indirectly to something in their life history, or was the association a more tenuous one, a desperate attempt to create a cohesive meaning? d) looking at the rest of the script from which the cross-correspondence (of whatever type) came. Was the rest of the script unintelligible? Was there anything in the script to indicate that the cross-correspondence had been signalled or intended? This last point is part of the wider issue of incarnate/discarnate interaction and will be explored in greater detail in a later section.

Given the sheer volume of the scripts, the actual number of cross-correspondences worth identifying and examining was comparatively small and they mainly occurred in the period before 1916, even though technically the scripts went on into the 1930s. There were two main reasons for this. First, under the influence of Winifred Coombe-Tennant’s scripts, Piddington and Gerald Balfour shifted their main focus from cross-correspondences pure and simple (if that is the appropriate phrase) to gathering evidence for the broader purposes that underlay the scripts—the Story and the Plan. Much of this later material, with some exceptions, was rather repetitive, even static, adding little new, except extra layers of possibly imagined complexity. Second, the number of individuals available to map and assess the whole body of material contracted. Margaret Verrall died in 1916. Alice Johnson had increasing ill health. Oliver Lodge was out of favour for some time (Lord 2011) and Mrs Sidgwick was getting older and was engaged in her massive Piper study. Moreover, the private nature of the material prevented the obvious solution—the introduction of young and energetic research assistants to help with the assessment.

A small selection of examples in each category is given to see how they measure up to the criteria outlined above and only, because of time and resource constraints, a limited demonstration of the application of the criteria can be
provided. Note, too, that just the basic structure of the cross-correspondence is sketched out.

**Simple Cross-Correspondences**

*The Blue Flower*

Trix Fleming 24/10/1906:

(Drawing of a flower) The Blue Flower.

Margaret Verrall 24/10/1906:

Where others see the flowers blue... The misty blue veiled flower. Let him that has eyes see.

The cross-correspondence was very simple and clear and pointed up. The timing was tight: in fact, the same day. There was nothing cryptic. However, the lack of complexity increased the possibility, with such a common adjective and phrase, of mere coincidence. Obviously, this objection was weakened if other cross-correspondences were discovered between these automatists in the same scripts. Two other examples were very similar in format. Again, in these other two, notice both the closeness of the dates and the unambiguity of topic (see Piddington 1908: 145, 177–8; Johnson 1910a: 207–8, 215).

*Note:* Trix Fleming was in India. Margaret Verrall was in Cambridge.

*Violets*

Leonora Piper 11/3/1907:

Violets. Dr. Hodgson [said-he had died in 1905] violets

Margaret Verrall 11/3/1907:
With violet buds their heads were crowned...The city of the violet

Note: Margaret Verrall was in Cambridge. Leonora Piper was in London.

Yellow

Trix Fleming 6/8/1906:

yelo...yellow ivory

Margaret Verrall 8/8/1906:

I have done it to night y yellow is the written word...Say only yellow

Note: Margaret Verrall was in the UK. Trix Fleming was in India.

Intricate Cross-Correspondence

Euripides

Margaret Verrall 4/3/1907:

Hercules Furens Ask elsewhere for the Bound Hercules

Margaret Verrall 25/3/1907:

...the clue is in the Euripides play if you could only see it. Bound to the pillar.

Leonora Piper 8/4/1907:

Do you remember euripedes(?)...I meant to say Harold

Trix Fleming 16/4/1907:

Lucus. Margaret. To fly to find Euripides. Philomen.
Browning had translated the *Hercules Furens* and it was a central feature in a poem of his, *Aristophanes’ Apology*. Lucus was one of the characters mentioned. Another was Philomen who cried, ‘I’d hang myself—to see Euripides’. Often the name Margaret (Verrall) was used to signal a cross-correspondence. Piddington also argued that the Christian names of Myers’ children—Leopold, Silvia, Harold—had also been used in this way in scripts. Trix Fleming had not read the poem and wryly commented that ‘it was one of the peaks in the Browning range which I still wait to scale’. The clue could possibly have referred to the wider sacrifice theme of the scripts. In his madness (*furens*) Hercules murdered his children. It is interesting that the simple idea Euripides appeared in Leonora Piper’s script; classical allusions in Margaret Verrall’s; and literary references in Trix Fleming’s (Piddington 1908: 210–20, 244–8, 251–9). Much the same approach as with the Thanatos cross-correspondence. (see Hamilton 2017: 70).

Piddington was fully alive to the objection that one could read into Leonora Piper’s often faint and disorganised automatic writing what one wanted. In this case ‘Mrs Sidgwick sent me a tracing of the original, and I have no doubt Euripides is the true reading’. In the case of the name Lucus, which was indistinct: ‘I asked Mr Bickford-Smith… to say how he read the word.’ He confirmed Piddington’s interpretation.

**Ideal Cross-Correspondence**

*Prometheus*

Leonora Piper 31/3/1908:

[Dorr-one of Mrs Piper’s main American sitters- suggested Prometheus as a cross-correspondence]

Margaret Verrall 23/9/1908:
In a casket was hidden the fire by which Prometheus made men unto like God. There is something wanting to make this complete.

Helen Verrall 19/11/1908:

Time’s hour glass whose sands never run out—Time and Eternity

Trix Fleming 30/12/1908:

We bear Time to his tomb in Eternity (from Shelley’s Prometheus Unbound)

Note: Leonora Piper was in the United States. Helen Verrall was in Cambridge. Margaret Verrall was in the New Forest. Trix Fleming was in the United Kingdom. Neither Helen Verrall nor Trix Fleming saw Margaret Verrall’s script.

For Alice Johnson this cross-correspondence, like the Medici Tombs, was a fulfilment of the Latin Message (Johnson 1910b: 255–61. See also appendix 2.) The Margaret Verrall script had a clear allusion to the story of Prometheus and to concealment and a statement that something was wanting; the Helen Verrall script had a specific reference to the relationship between Time and Eternity; and the Trix Fleming script brought them together by linking Prometheus in Margaret Verrall’s script with Time and Eternity in Helen Verrall’s, using the quotation from Shelley’s Prometheus Unbound, Act IV.

**Symbolic Cross-Correspondences**

*Sevens*

One of the most difficult problems for the modern assessor is that the scripts have to be assessed on two levels at the same time. Two examples are discussed here, ‘Sevens’ which was the subject of Piddington’s sealed envelope test (see Hamilton 2017: 30-31) and Shelley’s *The Cloud* (see below). Piddington’s experiment seems to have been hijacked by the discarnates for their own
purposes as part of the evidence for the plan to produce the Messianic Child (see Hamilton 2017:21-22). It was also an impressive cross-correspondence (Johnson 1910a: 222–53).

Helen Verrall 6/8/1907:

A rainbow in the sky
Fit emblem of our thought
The sevenfold radiance from a single light
Many in one and one in many

Helen Verrall 11/5/1908:

The seven branched candle stick it is an image
The seven churches but these not churches
Seven candlesticks united in one light and
Seven colours in the rainbow to
Many mystic sevens all will serve
We are seven who F.W.H.Myers

Leonora Piper 8/5/1908:

We are Seven. I said Clock! Tick, tick, tick.

Leonora Piper 12/5/1908:

We were seven in the distance as a matter of fact.

Helen Verrall 16/5/1908:

A seven stringed lute the lute of Orpheus

Mrs Frith 11/6/1908 (a minor automatist):

Pisgah is scaled the fair and dewy lawn
Invites my footsteps till the mystic seven
Lights up the golden candlestick of dawn

Trix Fleming 23/7/1908:

There should be three at least in accord and possibly seven

Mrs Home 24/7/1908 (Cheltenham trance medium, Myers communicating):

Seven times seven and seventy seven
Send the burden of my words to others

Note: Helen Verrall was in Cambridge. Leonora Piper was in London. Trix Fleming was in India. Mrs Frith’s location is not known.

On the level of a cross-correspondence these seemed to be pretty remarkable, as also were the links with Piddington’s sevens letter. A further layer of complexity was that Alice Johnson believed that some of the content which formed the sevens cross-correspondence came from Cantos 27–31 (Purgatorio) of Dante’s Divina Commedia (Salter 1961: 177). Dante had a vision of seven candlesticks whose trailing flames were like the colours of the rainbow and then he encountered Beatrice, with her wonderful emerald green eyes. Piddington and Balfour later came to believe that Dante and Beatrice were symbols for May Lyttelton and Arthur Balfour, and Gerald Balfour, particularly (1927: 67–71), added a richly esoteric layer connected with the Messianic Child: ‘The blending of the seven colours of the rainbow to form white light symbolises the perfect combination of elements to be looked for in the Messianic Child. White light is the unity of the rainbow colours. So in like manner the Octave (diapason) was conceived to be in some sort the unity of the seven notes of the scale.’ There was also the implication in ‘We are seven’. Balfour and Piddington later concluded that all seven of the discarnate individuals identified as communicators were referred to in this cross-correspondence and, in different ways, were supporting the development of Henry Coombe-Tennant. They based this (Balfour 1920: 173) partly on the statement in the Winifred Coombe-Tennant script of 22/4/1915: ‘The seven stars and the seven pillars in the House of Wisdom’; and the clustering of
symbols in scripts for the Angel of the Annunciation, and for the Palm Maiden and the Knight (see appendix 2). However, while one can see reasons for regarding the cross-correspondence elements as persuasive, the wider claims for the symbolism seemed to be based purely on the emotionally charged Winifred Coombe-Tennant scripts and on the general resonance of seven as an important magical number.

*Shelley’s The Cloud*

As Gerald Balfour stated (1927: 83): ‘There are few passages in poetry more frequently referred to in the scripts than this stanza of Shelley’s.’ It was an easily understood example of what Piddington called the scriptic method: the challenge being to find the source that made sense of a number of statements spread across the automatists’ scripts which led to an intelligible message. In this case at least eighteen references could be found as quotes from or allusions to the stanza. The stanza runs:

That orbèd maiden with white fire laden
Whom mortals call the Moon
Glides glimmering o’er my fleece-like floor
By the midnight breezes strewn;
And wherever the beat of her unseen feet,
Which only the angels hear,
May have broken the woof of my tent’s thin roof,
The Stars peep behind her and peer.
And I laugh to see them whirl and flee
Like a swarm of golden bees,
When I widen the rent in my wind built tent, —
Till the calm rivers, lakes and seas,
Like strips of the sky fallen through me on high,
Are paved with the moon and these.

Of the eighteen or more references in scripts to this poem, the first four by Helen Verrall and Trix Fleming were almost certainly uncontaminated by knowledge of the other automatists’ scripts. Both Margaret Verrall and Winifred Coombe-
Tennant as joint writers/researchers with access to the scripts of the others could have obtained the phrases normally. Just a selection is provided here but the range is sufficient both to indicate the way the script intelligence persisted with a particular phrase and the manner in which it could draw attention to its significance.

Helen Verrall 3/12/1908 (Margaret Verrall present):

Wherever the beat of her unseen feet

Trix Fleming 1/4/1909:

Charonic the staircase for the unheard unseen feet of those returning

Helen Verrall 26/8/1910:

and wherever the beat of her unseen feet

Trix Fleming 23/6/1910 (Fishers Hill: Eleanor Sidgwick, Gerald Balfour present):

Orbèd maiden with white fire laden

Margaret Verrall 15/7/1911:

And ever the beat of those unseen feet

Margaret Verrall 1/1/1912:

The beat of those unseen feet which only the angels hear—There is a point about the moon which you have not seen—Perhaps I can make it clearer later on—

Margaret Verrall 8/1/1912:

And ever the beat of those unseen feet
Helen Verrall 7/4/1913:

a swarm of golden bees

Note: Due to considerations of space just the location and content of the first four scripts quoted above are considered here. Both automatists were in the UK, probably Cambridge in Helen Verrall’s case and Tisbury in Trix Fleming’s. The only potential source of leakage was Trix Fleming’s visit to Fishers Hill on 23/6/1910.

In all cases the references to the poem were absolutely unmistakable. But above and beyond this, the question, of course, is what was their symbolic purpose and what did they combine with in the particular script that they appeared in? Piddington and Gerald Balfour argued that Shelley’s *The Cloud* was used in a strategic sense across the scripts to act as a symbol for the continuing illumination and support sometimes hidden, sometimes blazing forth in dreams or the passionate mediumship of Mrs Coombe-Tennant—that May Lyttelton gave to Arthur Balfour. The image of the moon emerging from behind the clouds was, therefore, very appropriate. The examples were so clear that the modern parapsychologist might point out that they appear to have avoided the trap of subjective validation: that is, searching for verbal associations that combined to build a general meaning for the reader, and discarding the rest.

To test this one has to look at the remainder of the scripts from which the allusions came. The other parts of Trix Fleming’s two scripts contained a further reference to the poem, an allusion to the value of suffering in producing great achievement, as in the *A Musical Instrument* theme, a possible comment on the Cadoxton coalmines of the Coombe-Tennants, and Delta, the symbol for Daphne, some comments on the difficulties of communication, a possible communication from Lady Mount-Temple concerned about the illness of her daughter Juliet (this was later confirmed as accurate), and a prediction that at the SPR meeting the following day there would be a brief announcement which would later become of significance (this was the first mention of Mrs Coombe-Tennant’s mediumship and the Lethe Case. Therefore, the Shelley references were embedded in scripts which contained other material that was relevant to the overall structure of the
scripts and the individuals involved. Note: the Lethe case was to become one of the most studied and intriguing of the cross-correspondences. See Hamilton 2017: 80-81.)

The same patterns continued with the other scripts, though as stated above one cannot be sure that the automatists had not, by this stage, read material in which the Shelley *The Cloud* symbolism appeared. Each of the Helen Verrall scripts, as well as the Shelley quotation, had familiar symbols in them for the main personalities—in one Arthur Balfour, in another Frank Balfour, and in the third there was an interaction with Piddington clarifying the nature of some of the communications. Most of the *The Cloud* references were in Margaret Verrall’s scripts and they clustered around the crucial period 1912–14 and the revelation of the key messages in the scripts—the relationship between Arthur Balfour and May Lyttelton and the coming of the Messianic Child. The scripts themselves stressed the importance of these quotations as well as providing symbolism relevant to the deaths of Laura Lyttelton and her child Christopher. There was also an apparently evidential communication from S.H. Butcher, Arthur Verrall’s great friend. The Winifred Coombe-Tennant scripts, as with most of her automatic writings, were easily understandable with their references to May Lyttelton (Madonna della Candela) and Frank Balfour (Il poverello—St Francis), and the last in 1923 linked *The Cloud* reference to symbols for the Messianic Child, which in this case were the Orb and Sceptre.

To sum up: an examination of these scripts certainly does not prove survival but it does demonstrate that there was a pattern in them and that the pattern was not purely the product of wishful thinking or a kind of verbal pareidolia. It should be stressed that Trix Fleming never saw any of the scripts of the other automatists (except possibly one reference to the charonic staircase: Johnson 1910b: 273) and that Helen Verrall did not see any of the Margaret Verrall scripts referring to *The Cloud* or the Trix Fleming scripts before her early scripts of 1908 and 1910 were written. On the other hand, Margaret Verrall and Winifred Coombe-Tennant, as part automatists/part investigators, saw many scripts.

**Progressive Correspondences of a Single Automatist**
Two famous examples of this type of cross-correspondence, Statius and the Ear of Dionysius, have been examined in (Hamilton 2017: 117-118). A less familiar one is presented here (Johnson 1907–09: 312).

*Theseus*

Margaret Verrall 19/2/1906:

Ask for the volume bound in green with a swan upon the cover. She will know…

Margaret Verrall 21/2/1906:

The green book must be found with the swan upon it, there is verse inside. The swan is gilt and quite conspicuous

Margaret Verrall 14/5/1906:

Ask for the fragment about the snake and bowl—your friend will know

Piddington took this to mean a nudge towards (a friend of the Verrall family) Gilbert Murray’s (1904) *Euripides translated into English Rhyming Verse*, which contained in its appendix a number of fragments from his lost plays. The book was bound in green and it did have a swan on the cover. The last fragment in the book was the *Theseus* (the snake and the bowl referred to another fragment in the book that Murray had translated) and Piddington particularly noticed the shepherd’s speech announcing the arrival of fresh victims for the Minotaur, one of whom was Theseus whose intention was to slay the monster. The shepherd was illiterate and could only describe the letters on the prow of the ship which spelled out Theseus’s name in capitals (Murray 1904: 351–2). Piddington spotted that the descriptions of the s’s, the sigmas, were described as ‘curled like curling hair’ and that they had frequently appeared in early Margaret Verrall script and played a dual symbolic role with their reference both to the Palm Maiden’s hair and the labyrinth of the Minotaur.

The direct quotation from the play was:
Piddington also concluded that there was a richer symbolism involved, since references to Theseus and Ariadne fitted neatly in the scripts in terms of the relationship between the Knight and the Palm Maiden; in terms of symbols of loss and separation; and in terms of a metaphor for solving a complex problem like the automatic writing scripts: ‘Ariadne gives the clue’, ‘A long clue to unwind in a maze labyrinth’. (See Piddington 1919a: 208; Balfour, J. 1958–60: 214–15.)

One can therefore see that a number of the cross-correspondences did stand up in terms of the accuracy of the link between scripts and that this was not a mere imposition of meaning onto vague generalities. Yet, these symbolic cross-correspondences required an additional form of assessment: that is, a mapping or tracking exercise to see how the symbols were used in the scripts of other automatists. Was there a consistent rationale across all three thousand plus scripts (see appendix 1) for their selection and deployment? The task was and is an enormous one and beyond the scope of this thesis. (However, for an example of a possible approach to this, see Hamilton 2017: 170-179.)

The Plan

When one considers another major feature of the scripts—the prediction of a new Golden Age ushered in by a new Augustus—two further questions present themselves. First, were the references to a new Golden Age sufficiently clear, sustained, and reliable to be called messages? Second, was there any evidence beyond the scripts of Winifred Coombe-Tennant that the new Augustus was to
be Henry Coombe-Tennant? (On the complex detail of this see Salter 1961 and 1948.)

One of Margaret Verrall’s early scripts stressed the importance of Virgilian references (largely though not exclusively from the *Aeneid*). The main sections in the *Aeneid* referring to the Golden Age occurred, quite naturally since they were both classicists, in her scripts and in Helen’s. The most significant were made long before Winifred Coombe-Tennant became involved in the automatic writing. These were: In Margaret Verrall scripts 21/12/1901, 13/1/1902, 29/1/1902, and 3/2/1902, clear references in Latin to people of the toga, which meant those wearing the toga, the symbol of Roman citizenship and the Pax Romana, and came from *Aeneid* Book 1 257–296, a section which also predicted the coming of peace under Augustus.

In Margaret Verrall script 21/3/1901, Helen Verrall script 2/12/1907, 10/2/1909, 29/8/1904, 16/8/1907, 6/5/1909, there were clear references in Latin to the Sibyl of Cumae who prophesied the future greatness of Aeneas and his line leading to Augustus and the death of Augustus’s nephew Marcellus, who was regarded as a sacrifice to the future destiny of Rome. These allusions clustered round the famous scene in Book VI when Aeneas descended into the underworld and visited his father, Anchises, who showed him his descendants, including the unfortunate Marcellus.

And there were further relevant allusions in Margaret Verrall scripts, 19/3/1903 and 12/12/1910, to *Aeneid* Book VIII and to the shield of Aeneas made by Vulcan, the craftsman god, decorated with great events in Roman history with at its centre the future victory of Augustus over Antony and Cleopatra at Actium. However, these references were rather sparse and fragmented and it is very important to look at the remaining information in these scripts to try to deal with the charge that the material was not just cherry-picked from unintelligible free-associating automatic script.

For example in Margaret Verrall 21/12/1901:
Marigolds and Cockle shells—Find the key for the lock and keep it close…gens
togata

One can see script symbolism, later very familiar to the investigators but at this
stage completely unknown to anybody, being introduced, and there was the hint
with the lock/key reference that the matter was significant. For in this script were
brought together Knight and Palm Maiden symbols which in their turn were
connected with the theme of peace.

It is also important to examine whether or not the Plan was just a piece of
consolatory interpretation grafted onto the scripts by investigators working on
them during the dark days of World War I and the economic and social difficulties
postbellum. But such references occurred long before the War and seemed to
have had a crafted structure to them and they were not just found in Margaret
Verrall’s writing. For example, Helen Verrall (who did not see any of her mother’s
early scripts on this theme till 1912) expressed the Messianic theme, in a nuanced
and indirect fashion, combining sources from two different Latin poets.

Helen Verrall 6/5/1909 (Margaret Verrall present):

…tu Marcellus eris that was said tanta erat moles Romanam condere gentem
many sacrifices to the purposes of Fate that was the thought it is in Horace
too Do you U.D? [understand]

Margaret Verrall.

Yes. Is the word or idea in Horace?
Idea jam satis and elsewhere in Horace

*Jam satis* (already enough) referred to the second ode in Book One of Horace’s
Odes. The poet argued that only Augustus could bring to an end the suffering
and ghastly portent that afflicted Rome after the murder of Julius Caesar. Which
God, the poet asked, would restore order? Not Mars the God of war but Augustus
in the guise of Mercury the God of poetry. In scripts Augustus stood for the
Messianic Child. Equally specific was the Virgilian reference in *tanta erat moles*
etc. above (so great a struggle it was to found the Roman Race). This statement and references to it cropped up throughout the scripts and Myers himself alluded to the phrase at the end of Human Personality, adapting it to the spiritual struggle of humanity as it strove for spiritual development both incarnate and discarnate. Note that Helen Verrall was not told the details of the Plan till the 1930s. Margaret Verrall was not informed of the Plan till 1912. Therefore, it was a truly independent reference to one of the two main themes in the scripts.

Two further aspects of the Messianic theme need to be stressed. First, that the Messianic element was much more than the Pax Romana which was based on the triumph and power of Roman arms. It was to be the establishment not only of world peace but also of a world civilisation, as has been seen.

Margaret Verrall 29/4/1907 (quoted before):

But I mean a wider thing, a universal country, the mother of us all…Not O fair City of Cecrops But Oh fair city of God…The city of Cecrops is violet and hoary look back at that. The Universal City is all colours and no colour but best described as a golden as a golden GLEAM.

Second, this Plan could not be achieved without a considerable amount of suffering and sacrifice. A number of cultural allusions were used to express this: the Thyestean banquet and Medea killing her children, for example. However, a particularly accessible one was the role played in scripts by Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poem, A Musical Instrument. The theme of the poem was astern and challenging one: that great art and achievement sprang from toil and suffering:

This is the way laughed the great god Pan
(Laughed while he sat by the river),
The only way, since the gods began
To make sweet music, they could succeed.
Yet half a beast is the great god Pan,
To laugh as he sits by the river,
Making a poet out of a man;
The true gods sigh for the cost and the pain—
For the reed which grows nevermore again
As a reed with the reeds of the river.

Gerald Balfour argued that directly or indirectly elements from this poem were
used in ten Helen Verrall scripts and that Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* was also
deployed in a sophisticated way to get the theme across, particularly in the Helen
Verrall script below.

Helen Verrall 22/1/1909:

The river—by the river. What is he doing the great good Pan? E.D.B.
what initials are those? I sing but as the linnet sings Trix Fleming wrote it too.

There was the slight error in Mrs Browning’s initials (really E.B.B.) and one
senses a deliberate mistake in good for God, hinting that the pain was for ultimate
benefit. The phrase ‘as the linnet sings’ led to *In Memoriam* xxii:

I take the grasses from the grave
And make them pipes whereon to blow.

Two immediate points are worth comment. Trix Fleming did not write anything
from that part of *In Memoriam* though she frequently quoted from or alluded to
the poem. In addition, it is interesting that, on one of the occasions that he sat
with Helen Verrall, Piddington was asked to make sure that he traced and
understood the references to this topic; and in Helen Verrall’s script of 10/11/1910
there is no vagueness or ambiguity about this:

I take the rushes from the grave and make a pipe whereon to blow—that is
better—it is something of the same idea in Mrs Browning the great god Pan—the
living man and the dead—the heart of a man—that is what we wanted to say here
and elsewhere—I think it should be traced.

In Mrs Browning’s poem the tall reed in the river was hacked down by Pan, its
pith (like the heart of a man) removed so that Pan could blow into it and make
sweet music, and the same process was alluded to in the Tennyson quotation.
Tennyson described himself singing like Pan to ‘him that rests below’, namely the
dead Arthur Hallam: ‘I take the grasses of the grave, And make them pipes
whereon to blow.’ He had been accused by critics of making poetry out of private
pain, and ignoring the great issues of the time, but his defence was ‘I do but sing
because I must, And pipe but as the linnets sing’.

The whole point, Piddington and Balfour argued, was to link the idea of pain and
sacrifice to ultimate gain and achievement both for individuals and civilisations.
Just as Hallam’s death led to Tennyson’s greatness as a poet, so, too, war and
sacrifice would lead to spiritual growth and social and international reform, and
the early deaths of Laura, Edith’s and Winifred’s children would lead ultimately
to the development of an individual (Henry) and a group of spiritually influenced
young people working to establish the new world civilisation. There can be little
doubt that these themes of sacrifice and the coming of a new Golden Age did
appear in the scripts, but there does not seem to have been any explicit linkage
of a persuasive nature to one individual, one Messianic Child, except in the scripts
of Winifred Coombe-Tennant.
Were they a psychological artefact?

Psychological artefact is used in two senses in this section: first, that the scripts were the product purely and simply of the psychological and psychodynamic needs of the living rather than sustained and significant messages from the dead; and second, that the apparently cryptic and allusive nature of many of the scripts was really a function of the automatic writing itself as the automatist accessed the confused and dreamlike nature of their own subconscious.

For many people automatic writing can be easily dismissed. It may appear to be involuntary or caused by some kind of external agency and it can be argued that that is an illusion, as some simple psychological experiments appear to have demonstrated, or, if produced via the Ouija board or planchette, the product of ideomotor action, as William Carpenter asserted in the nineteenth century (Wegner 2002: 120–1). It could also be the result of imitative behaviour. A platform medium or a medium in a general séance faces certain sociological pressures to behave in a particular way, so too some automatic writers may have read about automatic writing and subconsciously moulded their writing to conform to that norm.

One notices two contradictory things: first that there has been an enormous amount of automatic writing produced, and second there has been very little contemporary research into it compared with that, say, on hypnosis or dissociative identity disorder. This has led to occasional uninformed public enthusiasms and fads for it, as Stevenson has pointed out (1983), but with little advice and guidance for those who get carried ‘far out in waters beyond their depth’. And, at the other end, it has led to an assumption that all the material is drivel, which might mean that occasional examples of high quality may be unfairly denigrated.

There is a very rich history of automatic writing, painting, drawing, composing, playing, and speaking, barely acknowledged by the academic community, and some of it of considerable quality. Some of the most famous historical examples are: Stainton Moses, Pearl Curran, and Geraldine Cummins in the USA, England and Ireland, Alan Kardec’s mediums from France, and Carlos Mirabelli and Chico
Xavier from Brazil, and from Sweden the automatic paintings of Hilma af Klint which, in some ways, prefigured the abstract work of Kandinsky and Mondrian (see Hastings 1991; Klimo 1998 for overviews). Indeed, high quality creative writers and academics have sometimes used automatic writing as a stimulus to their imagination (Platt 2015; Lurie 2001; Knight 1975). More recently, the automatic drawing of Matthew Manning and the painting of Luiz Gasparetto are also of great interest. Incidentally, one notable feature of the cross-correspondence writings was that, regardless of automatist, they were austerely verbal, the few drawings and diagrams in them were generally of poor quality and, one could argue, reflected the interests and capacities of the communicators themselves. However, the Manning material does share one characteristic with the cross-correspondence scripts, particularly those of Trix Fleming: that is the way stray communicators sometimes wistfully, sometimes almost desperately, broke into the main communication.

To assess this material is difficult and, in the same way that Myers and his brother Arthur (1893) stressed that medical experts should always be involved when examining the miracles at Lourdes and similar phenomena, so too individuals with experience of the particular content base of the automatic writing to be assessed should also be consulted. Otherwise, superficial verdicts, either way, may be delivered. Some recent automatic writing is very impressive in terms of its access to precise information and skills way beyond those of the automatist. See particularly the Rollans case where a discarnate Hungarian chess player Maróczy (Rollans, the automatic writer, could not play chess) put up an excellent fight against the world number 2 Korchnoi and gave extremely accurate and consistent information about a number of events in his life (Eisenbeiss and Hassler 2006).

One looks in vain for a detailed, balanced, authoritative modern text on automatic writing. As Wegner (2002) states: ‘There is simply not enough systematic research on automatic writing to allow a full understanding of its nature and causes. What we have at present is a collection of observations that point to the possibility that some people can lose either conscious awareness of what is written, or the feeling of doing, or both when they try to do so as they write. We
don’t have enough collected observations of the effect to have a strong conception of when and why it happens.’

His chapter on automatic writing clearly reflects the thinness of the research in this field. His comments on automatisms (op. cit.: 99–144), at first glance, do not easily fit the context, conditions, and behaviours of the cross-correspondence automatic writers. They did not require a simple psychological trick, like *movement confusion*, to get them going; they sometimes had a very strong sense of external agency and personality, often accompanied by tension, pain, or headache, before the writing; they had sufficient control and awareness to interrogate the writing as it continued; the quality of the writing was often high and contained information sometimes demonstrably beyond the knowledge of the automatist; and the automatist did not, in life, display the attributes of a dissociated personality but contributed fully, even outstandingly, to the social environment around them. In the jargon, the mediums had non-pathological spiritual and psychic experiences, a characteristic that many contemporary gifted mediums and psychics share.

However, one must explore the question in a little more detail. Dissociative identity disorder is characterised in various ways: the manifestation of two or more distinctly different and discrete personalities; dissociative amnesia; depersonalisation; and sometimes somatoform disorders like temporary blindness or deafness; and the cause being usually some kind of trauma (Lilienfeld et al. 2015: 113–52). One cannot link this list in any comprehensive sense with the cross-correspondence group. The only obvious candidate for this interpretation was Leonora Piper, the trance medium. And Helen Dallas wrote to Hyslop, the psychologist and psychical researcher, who took over the detailed investigation of Piper after Hodgson’s death, to ask for his views (Dallas 1910: 69). His reply was: ‘As secondary personality is known to the Scientist it has no traces of the supernormal… We must remember that the term secondary personality is not a name for any special power of mind other than the normal, as many people have supposed, but is as I have defined it… Mrs. Piper shows no traces of secondary personality as defined and recognised in psychiatry or pathology.’ However, the SPR investigators, by and large, would have partially disagreed with this interpretation. Mrs Sidgwick (1915) in her massive study of
Leonora Piper argued that she did share, in trance, certain common features with those suffering from multiple personality disorder. On the other hand, genuine, verifiable information came through these bridging sub-personalities and in her daily life Leonora Piper did not display such characteristics. She was able to contain them within the social role of mediumship and lived a normal life, as her daughter and biographer stressed (Piper 1929).

All the automatists abhorred anything connected with conventional Spiritualism and the idea (even probably subconsciously) that they would wish to imitate the conventional automatic writing medium would have been extremely distasteful to them. Trix Fleming (Hamilton 2017: 49) made a particularly explicit statement to this effect. Margaret and Helen Verrall would occasionally practise using the planchette with friends, but Margaret Verrall was very abrupt and sharp with any sensational behaviour by the planchette—the stupid thing, as she called it. Outside the SPR circle, the only medium Winifred Coombe-Tennant respected (Lord 2011) was Mrs Leonard, and when after her son Christopher’s death (much of her best automatic writing pre-dated this) she occasionally sat with a new medium she usually found the process distressing and objectionable, and the activity petered out.

The cross-correspondence automatists had a variety of responses with regard to the agency involved and there was considerable initial reluctance to ascribing the source of the writing to an external source. Both Margaret Verrall and Helen Verrall were familiar with Myers’ work and methods of classification and would have been alert to the nature of trance and its potential for deception. Moreover, the main communicators themselves exhibited consistency of focus and purpose and not the instability of a fugitive temporary personality, providing, and it is a big provide, one is prepared to attribute errors and vagueness to the difficulties of communication. Certainly, the discarnates displayed particular irritation at times with the way the automatists distorted their messages.

Trix Fleming 22/2/1905:
If one could only find a stupid sensitive but the very quickness the impressionability that enables the brain to perceive an influence from afar renders it an ever-present danger to the message that is trying to be impressed.

And they were equally annoyed when the investigators failed to respond to their efforts. They had an agenda and they stuck to it, in exactly the way Myers and Gurney did at psychical research during their lives. They were also a little unfair to the investigators at times. It should be repeated again and again that Piddington particularly had a huge administrative task in collating, printing, and indexing the scripts and the complex material they contained, and that this took many years. It was a major task to identify patterns and puzzles and respond to them within a reasonable timescale.

There was also a consistent emphasis by the communicators to all the automatists for the need to create the right conditions for the activity—calm, rest, no overwork, yet at the same time no complete withdrawal from the world as that would lead to self-deception. There was absolutely no sense here of the sudden ‘switching’ associated with the individual suffering from multiple personality disorder. The changes in awareness and perspective were much more varied and subtle. Indeed, the remarkable thing about the cross-correspondence automatic writing is that the consciousness of the individual automatist, particularly Winifred Coombe-Tennant, appeared to fluctuate between several levels of awareness: dream/trance with little or no awareness; automatic writing consciously aware but little control of the writing; and writing that was highly interactive (Balfour 1920: 2–3). In fact, one reading of the cross-correspondences is that of a massive exercise in individual training and development for each of the automatists except for the full trance medium Leonora Piper, where the emphasis was on handling her better and not giving the communicators, through her, too many complicated tasks at one time. But it must be acknowledged that, though some of the best evidence came from Leonora Piper, some of the silliest (if divorced from its narrative context) did as well.

Trix Fleming worried away at her writing and was continually reflecting on what might or what might not be the product of her recent reading. She did not like to recognise real names in her scripts and also had a particular distaste for the
sugary automatic writing in vogue in certain circles, as has been mentioned (Hamilton 2017: 48-49). She had too much critical intelligence to be deceived, as her letters to Alice Johnson clearly demonstrated. Margaret Verrall, though largely unaware of the gist of her communications when writing them, had a healthy disregard for them and was quick to pounce on the silly and confused elements. Her daughter Helen remained detached from the whole process and seemed to rattle out short, cryptic scripts with only an occasional sense of effort. In later years she tried trance writing and speaking but found some of it difficult and stressful.

Apart from Leonora Piper, the traditional trance medium, all the other automatists had a very strong sense of their own identities and, while trying to put themselves in a passive and receptive state to facilitate the writing, would always react against matter and experiences they found unpleasant or distressing and intensely disliked any indications of the beginning of the full trance state. Winifred Coombe-Tennant was a partial exception to this in that the communicators stated that they could bring her to the edge of trance but allow her to remain sufficiently self-aware to act as an intermediary between the worlds in terms of question and answer in a way the other automatists could not.

Myers (1893b), himself, provided a useful classification for trance utterances which can also be applied to the cross-correspondences. This classification was based largely on the psycho-physiological origin of the behaviour. ‘Trance is a name given to a form of motor automatism, whether healthy or morbid, in which the automatist appears to be in some way altered, or even asleep, but in which he may speak or write certain matter of which his normal personality is ignorant at the time, and which it rarely remembers on his return to waking life.’

He identified five classes or categories into which trance could be grouped. The classes were: simulated fraudulent trance utterance based on prior research or fishing as was ‘usually the case with professional clairvoyantes’; genuine trance but morbid and degenerative even if some statements showed ‘memory or accuracy greater than the normal’; genuine and healthy and coherent but ‘no actual fact unknown to the automatist’; genuine and healthy with facts not known to the automatist but to others present or existent elsewhere and known possibly
through telepathy or telaesthesia; genuine and healthy with facts not known to
the subject or the observers but verifiable and ‘might probably be included in the
memory of certain definite deceased persons from whom they profess to come’.
1 was false; 2 was hysteria; 3 could be created by hypnotic suggestion; 4 could
be telepathy or telaesthesia; 5 could be ‘a temporary substitution of personality’.
One should note the double stress on ‘genuine and healthy’. For Myers these
powers could be a sign of health and growth, not disease and degeneracy:
‘Telepathy is surely a step in evolution… To learn the thoughts of other minds
without the mediation of the special senses, manifestly indicates the possibility of
a vast extension of psychical powers.’

In a second classification he focused more directly on the source and quality of
the information. He (1904a vol 2: 119) identified four potential sources. In A) the
contents may come from the automatist’s own memory, subliminal memory, and
be dramatised as from another mind. Some of Trix Fleming’s script fit very
appropriately here. In B) ‘…we may place messages derived telepathically from
the mind of some other person still living on earth… that person being either
conscious or unconscious of transmitting the suggestion’. In C) ‘the message may
emanate from some unembodied intelligence of unknown type…’ benign or
malicious. In D) ‘from the mind of the agent—the departed friend—from whom
the communication does actually claim to come’. Myers admitted that ‘the great
majority of such communications represented the subliminal workings
of the automatist’s mind alone’. He stressed that a very small portion of messages
contained supernormal knowledge. Even after these alternative explanations had
been discarded, one was still not home and dry: ‘Parallel with the possibilities of
reception of such knowledge from the influence of other embodied or
disembodied minds lies the possibility of its own clairvoyant perception, or active
absorption of some kind, of facts lying indefinitely beyond its supraliminal
purview.’

The first investigators of the cross-correspondences worked cautiously with this
classification of Myers and used his language, challenging, as Myers himself did,
the physicalist approaches of Carpenter, Maudsley, and Huxley, which asserted
that mind and behaviour were, no matter how apparently sophisticated, ultimately
the products of highly complex and intricate physical reflexes and that it was not
possible to access information other than through the normal channels of sensory communication. Examining the cross-correspondences one hundred years later one has to ask whether this theoretical framework and the language in which it was couched is still relevant.

A number of years ago Myers’ terminology would have been dismissed out of hand given the climate of behaviourism in mainstream psychology and the colonisation of the territory of the subconscious and unconscious processes by Freudianism. However, there has been some recognition in recent years by parts of the psychological community that unconscious processes occupy a larger part of the executive and decision-making activity of mind and body than was previously thought. Given this, using Myers’ conceptual framework does not appear as bizarre as it once might have, provided one points out where it treats of content and processes that the modern psychologists would not accept. For example, the cross-correspondence investigators’ use of the term subliminal is much richer than the conventional modern one which tends to define it in terms of below conscious threshold perception of stimuli, though this concept in certain circles is now broadening. Second, there is the general minefield, reflecting different theoretical perspectives, as to how one should generally apply the terms unconscious and subconscious.

One thing is clear, regardless of terminology (Hassin et al. 2005: 82), subconscious/unconscious processing of sensory information is vastly superior to that of conscious processing: ‘…our senses can handle about 11 million bits [of incoming information] per second’ but, depending on the task, consciousness processes it at 45 bits per second or less. This continuous unconscious activity can lead to high quality outputs when it emerges into consciousness. That has increasingly become recognised as has the fact that it is not just exhibited by the insultingly termed ‘idiots savants’. This development of what has been called ‘the new unconsciousness’ vindicates much of the pioneering work of Myers on the subliminal mind. However, suggestions that this new unconsciousness could access or create paranormal phenomena would certainly be beyond the pale for the vast majority of modern psychologists. But whether they accept the origin of the phenomena or not, it exists, and the best of it is very sophisticated. However,
the mere fact of a crafted and refined product should not lead one to attribute, prematurely, or necessarily at all, a discarnate origin.

Thus, though it is increasingly being recognised that much human behaviour and decision making is based on processes that one is not fully or even partially aware of (Wilson 2002; Mlodinow 2012; Eagleman 2015), the crucial question is to what extent do these developments help one explain and assess the kind of high quality automatic writing studied in this book and mentioned in other sources? Is it a product which is a combination of suppressed creativity and longing, and does it capture authentic paranormal information? Two credible and substantial books of collaborative authorship by a number of academics across a range of disciplines have argued, in a robust but scholarly fashion, that Myers’ framework is relevant now more than ever. That is, both in terms of the richness of the unconscious/subconscious it delineates and the evidence accumulated since the time of Myers to support his assertion of the powerful part the subliminal plays in the perception and production of paranormal phenomena (see Kelly, E.F., Kelly, E.W., Crabtree, A., Gauld, A., Grosso, M. & Greyson, B. 2007; and Kelly, E.F., Crabtree, A., Marshall, P., et al. 2015.) On the other hand, the specific phenomenon of contemporary automatic writing is still under-researched in parapsychology (let alone psychology), as has been seen. There appear to be only scattered examples in the literature (see, for example, Palmer 2001; Palmer 2017; Krippner and Friedmann, 2010) and the classic text on it is over eighty years old (Muhl 1930).

One must not be gullible. A strange enchantment can sometimes descend on the producers and consumers of automatic writing. Much of the drive for the production of sophisticated and persuasive communication may stem from the psychodynamic imperatives of the automatists themselves. This point needs to be taken very seriously indeed with regard to two automatists particularly: Winifred Coombe-Tennant and Trix Fleming. Winifred Coombe-Tennant wove a certain amount of anxiety concerning her children into her scripts and usually Gurney was able to reassure her. She had lost Daphne in 1908 and Christopher in 1917 so her anxiety was completely understandable. One might argue that in her desire to make sense of these tragedies she elevated in her scripts the personalities, achievements, and potential destinies of all her children.
Sometimes one can see this inappropriately overpowering a script. For example, in Winifred Coombe-Tennant’s script of 18/6/1916, the birth of a child (Myers’ daughter Silvia was pregnant) was described in Messianic language. Gerald Balfour’s only explanation, a lame one he admitted, was that at this stage thoughts of a coming child triggered the Messianic vocabulary through association (Balfour 1920: 325–6).

There is also the very important matter of Winifred Coombe-Tennant’s relationship with Gerald Balfour. (See Hamilton 2017: 98-99, 133-135.) It was not the height of scientific control and objectivity to have medium and chief sitter conducting a passionate affair in conditions of considerable secrecy, which may itself have heightened the emotions. Taken in this light, aspects of Winifred Coombe-Tennant’s scripts and sittings in their most important period between 1911 and 1916 resembled less an act of independent mediumship and more the classically intense relationship a patient might have had with Freud or Jung, with all the obvious symptoms of transfer. The example of the relationship of Hélène Smith to Flournoy (1910/63) is also relevant in this context. But this should not be pushed too far. Winifred Coombe-Tennant produced evidential sittings with Margaret Verrall and Sir Oliver Lodge and was always prepared to co-operate in the provision of non-paranormal interpretations of her material. Moreover, she was a sturdily independent character who had a strong sense of her own position, values, and goals in life. Jean Balfour (Roy 2008) made a clear distinction between Mrs Willett the medium (‘I felt I could love and almost worship this one’) and the rather bossy and possessive Winifred Coombe-Tennant whom the children of the Balfour household did not really like.

Trix Fleming was another candidate for a psychodynamic explanation. She had suffered the traumatic experiences of the House of Desolation and she had a long and unhappy marriage with a depressive of limited means with whom she was not physically or intellectually compatible (see Hamilton 2017: 36-43). She had literary and creative gifts which were never fully developed or recognised. Because of her sense of conscience and duty and lack of an independent income she could not leave him. It could be argued that her writing was a form of fantasy or escape or compensation, were it not for the nature and quality of much of it. Such items can be found but they constitute a fragment of the total production.
And Alice Johnson (1934a), who knew her well, stressed both in conversation and in writing that she was happiest during the period 1903–1910 when she was doing automatic writing, when she was in the company of intelligent, civilized, and supportive people, and when she had long periods of time away from her husband. In addition, there is evidence (Lee 2004) that the origin of her psychic and mediumistic gifts were powerful and genuine and partly inherited, and that she saw their exercise as natural and not created by frustrations in life.

On the other hand, Trix Fleming’s scripts sometimes expressed opinions in a tone and voice that hovered ambiguously between her talking to herself and the communicator reflecting on her condition, her state of mind, and her psychic receptivity. In such passages the source of the statement was by no means clear cut.

Trix Fleming 29/7/1909:

I am anxious that she should avoid any approach to hypnotism. Even unconscious self induced hypnotism would be undesirable in this case—The difficulty is to prevent the reflections of other minds near at hand to be a good channel for the further influences.

Elsewhere there were comments in scripts that she was generally too psychic, that she would pick up any number of stray communications from the recently dead, or psychometric impressions generally. These sorts of statements may well have reflected her constant worry about her husband’s mental state and her parents as they grew older and also about the physical and mental ailments of people generally. There was a fussiness and anxiety in the scripts at times with regard to this. She was possibly the most naturally gifted of the automatists but never had the support that the Verralls and Winifred Coombe-Tennant had.

Helen Verrall, it could be argued, as a loved only child in a highly civilised and protected environment, just wished to please her parents and meet their very high academic standards (Hamilton 1917: 128). There appears to have been very little discomfort in her life. She had a pleasant childhood in an environment of comfort and status and met many highly educated and creative people. Her marriage was
a partnership between equals and was long and collaborative. She seemed to be easily able to switch the writing on and off and without distress except on the occasions when she experimented with deeper trance. She easily tapped into the rich literary nexus that her education and environment had furnished her with. Whoever the sitter was the symbolism always seemed to swing back to the central themes of the scripts. Take that of 4/3/1914 written at SPR headquarters ‘to amuse a stray American lady who called at 20 Hanover Square’. Woodland green, Beech woods, shamrock, lotus, Bacchus, and Ariadne all popped up. Was that an example of the tenacious focus of the script intelligence? A disapproval of sittings for purposes outside the vast cross-correspondence project? Or was it just the facility with which Helen Salter accessed subliminal mental processes and her subconscious desire to please? Bacchus and Ariadne certainly figured in script symbolism but, though Piddington claimed a consistent rationale for the other items, as symbols drawn from nature, they could be seen as too vague to impress.

In the case of her mother, Margaret Verrall (Hamilton 2017: 13-14), the main motive was scientific and intellectual curiosity and there seems to have been no other subconscious driver apart from that. She had lost one child but had reconciled herself by 1900 to the probability that there was no survival. She, too, had a long and deep marriage. She had a strong sense of loyalty to her friends and to her university colleagues, and particularly to Myers and his work, and one could argue that this might have warped the content of her scripts. Yet, she fought very strongly against any indications of discarnate identity in the scripts (for which the script intelligences often scolded her) and for a long time she saw the material as subconscious fabrication drawn from her general knowledge.

She, and the other investigators, were very familiar with Myers’ research and his co-ordinating work on automatisms. The idea that messages would arise automatically from the subliminal (subconscious) and find the most appropriate vehicle of communication depending on the individual physiology and psychology of the automatist writing was a given to them all. As was also the idea that the message might take some time to emerge or be altered on its way to the supraliminal (normal consciousness). This became the language in which they talked about and approached the writing.
This, of course, presented the researcher with considerable problems of interpretation and explanation. Was it possible that the cryptic nature of the more complex cross-correspondences might be simply a function of telepathic communication between the living, or very similar to the random dreamy associational state that occurs just before sleep (hypnagogic state) or just after waking (hypnopompic state), which sometimes seem to have flashes of the paranormal in them? Or, was it a product of the difficulties of communication from the discarnate to the incarnate, much complained of in scripts, and which further exaggerated the gnomic character of the writing? Or was it, in fact, as Alice Johnson (Hamilton 2017: 46-47) argued, that the cryptic method, while superficially looking like the product of the factors mentioned above, had been deliberately shaped by the communicators to circumvent the argument from telepathy and/or clairvoyance. Cryptic fragments could be telepathically transmitted but the design behind them was in no incarnate mind and so could only be accessed after the transmission of the final fragment, the clue or key. Gerald Balfour extended this argument by pointing out that, owing to the extreme ambition of the communicators and the delicacy of some of the arrangements, the cryptic method when applied to the Story and the Plan had been designed to reveal information in driblets and only as and when it was appropriate and safe to do so. There was almost a cultic element to this. To quote Balfour (1927): ‘In like manner it is only natural to suppose that the communicators on their side should desire to restrict the number of the initiated within the narrowest limits.’

A.C. Pigou, a Cambridge economist, sharply challenged this position in an article in the SPR Journal of 1909. He asserted that evidence already published by the SPR itself—the telepathic experiments of Miss Ramsden and Miss Miles and the One-Horse Dawn episode (Hamilton 2017: 21-22) involving Margaret Verrall’s automatic writing and her husband Arthur—clearly demonstrated that the cryptic element was an illusion. It was created by the imperfect and inaccurate nature of telepathy. He gave a number of examples from the One-Horse Dawn case that showed that telepathic fumbling around a particular signal could create the illusion of complex design (Pigou 1909: 300–1). There was no plan behind it all but just attempts of variable quality to access the central phrase or idea. It might be yellow dawn, one horse, alone, a crowing cock, but nothing more. (Without
telling his wife, Verrall had tried to telepathically transmit to her three words from Electra’s lament in Euripides’ *Orestes*, ‘monopolon es Ao’-alone towards the dawn-or towards the one-horse of dawn: Eur. *Or*. 1004.) Pigou stated, too, that when Miss Miles tried to transmit Sphinx and Miss Ramsden received Luxor in Egypt, that was a parallel example that supported his case. Braude made a similar point in his paper on telepathy (1978: 269): ‘For example, there is evidence suggesting that a person’s mental state can be causally efficacious in producing a similar mental state in someone else, independently of channels of communication involving the five senses. Thus, A’s thought of the Queen of Spades might produce in B the thought of the Queen of Spades, or the Queen of Hearts, or Queen Elizabeth.’

Certainly, there were examples in the scripts of connections between different automatists that are more easily explained on this impressionable and associational basis than on crafted cross-correspondences. Take Eheu Fugaces and Electra (Johnson 1907–09: 313, 363–4).

**Eheu Fugaces**

The phrase comes from Horace C.2.14 line 1. Ah me, Postumus, Postumus, the fleeting years are slipping by (*Eheu fugaces, Postume, Postume, Labunter anni*).

Trix Fleming 11/4/1906:

A great black shadow and the sound of a wailing wind—Eheu fugaces

Margaret Verrall 11/4/1906:

Bells and a whip…they drive together over frozen roads Something fluttered and was gone—and the black bat night has flown—There is an effort to have the same words this time. On bat’s wings rides Queen Mab

*Note: Both Margaret Verrall and Trix Fleming were in the United Kingdom. The former probably in Cambridge and the latter probably at Tisbury.*
The Latin quote would have been known, as a tag, by any literate person then, even if they didn't speak Latin. The impression of blackness and flight was common to the two but the link was purely impressional and the intention about getting the same words was not realized in practice. Coincidental but of impression and not of specific phrase: an impression picked up on the same day.

Electra

Trix Fleming 28/2/1906:

_No not in the Electra. M. will know better_

Margaret Verrall 28/2/1906:

_Be sorrow sorrow spoken, but let the good prevail_

The quotation comes from Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon* and Trix Fleming just seemed to pick up from Margaret Verrall an impression of a quotation from Greek Tragedy.

It is notable that both these cross-correspondences occurred on a single day. In the former the impression of rapid flight was communicated in two different ways. In the latter the deep inexorable nature of Greek tragedy was caught but through different associations. Pigou therefore concluded that what Alice Johnson called the complementary element (the clue that made sense of the cross-correspondence: the item from which one could infer purpose and design) in a complementary cross-correspondence was an illusion. There was clear evidence of telepathy between the living but anything more was the product of overingenious interpretation. He was strongly supported in this by Anna Hude (1913: 46–58): ‘This is the simple explanation of the complementary correspondences—a systematized “reading” of impressions, which only because it took place while the percipient was writing automatically differs from that of Miss Ramsden and other sensitives experimenting in a conscious state.’
If that was true the whole edifice of Alice Johnson’s theory of the cross-correspondences and Gerald Balfour’s and Piddington’s elaborate tracing of symbolic connections in the scripts had all been based on the shaky foundations of a psychological quirk. This led to an arcane debate between Lodge and Pigou in the letter pages of the Journal in 1909, where Pigou stressed that he was stating ‘not that a complementary correspondence, but that the complementary element in a correspondence, can originate in subliminal activity’. Lodge accepted, with his characteristic generosity, that he had originally misunderstood Pigou but that there was, with regard to the phenomena in scripts, a distinction between the accidentally fragmentary and the purposive complementary (Pigou 1909; Lodge 1909c; Lodge/Pigou 1909d). This debate, virtually unnoticed in the general literature on the cross-correspondences, was crucial for the team investigating and assessing the material, and in 1911 Gerald Balfour produced a paper in the Proceedings which attempted to settle the matter. He accepted Lodge’s distinction of 1909 and stressed the way in which the best cross-correspondences explicitly signalled intention and purpose (as in the Thanatos and Ave Roma cases: see Hamilton 2017: 70, 282-286) and that Pigou had not proved from the examples he gave that ‘the production of complementary correspondences of the best type is within the known capacities of the subliminal self’.

This was an ever-present tension and uncertainty in the work of the investigators who would have accepted Pigou’s position with regard to some of the simpler phenomena. They knew from Gurney’s and Myers’ pioneering work on hypnosis and automatic writing of the subtleties, indirectness, and confusion of the subconscious mind. As Mrs Sidgwick, as President of the SPR, in 1908 pointed out (and demonstrated in her later paper on telepathy in 1923: 435-438): ‘Hypnotism, chiefly because it enables the experimenter to communicate with the subconscious strata of the mind in a definite way, is one of the most effective means we have of experimentally investigating automatism and the relation of the subconscious to the conscious mind.’ And this work had clearly shown the way that the subconscious or subliminal mind distorted both what it received and what it communicated. In his work on the Ganzfeld, Adrian Parker has much more recently demonstrated this process at work (in Storm et al. 2003: 65–89).
At a later date, Gerald Balfour (building on Piddington’s enormous and persistent industry in trying to make sense of the scripts) would have given a much more confident answer. He would have said it was clearly not a by-product of the subliminal activity of the automatists; that the correspondences were marked by specific signs of purpose through precise instructions and signalling in the very best cases, by the intricacy, ingenuity, and aptness of their design and expression, and by their, at times, displaying ideas and information beyond the range and capacities of the individual automatist concerned. However, two fundamental questions remained. Was such purpose and design also evident to an objective and independent student of the scripts? Was such purpose and design beyond the capacities of the subliminal minds of one or more of the automatists or possibly the creation by a general psychic factor or force unknown and unidentified by any of the investigators? These issues will be taken up in a later section.

There are certainly examples in the scripts of intention by an apparently external source to transmit something, of the automatist only partial picking up the message and possibly distorting this, and of that external source picking the distortion up and correcting it and trying to get the message through the most appropriate sensory modality. Take what Saltmarsh called the Spirit-Angel case (1975: 81–3; Piddington et al. 1908: 227–30).

Margaret Verrall 3/4/1907:

Write three words—something about their serried ranks…wings or feather wings… [drawing of a wing with feathers] …long pointed rainbow wings…Of man’s first disobedience—no that is something else…The hosts of heaven… [drawing of an angel with wings] …F.W.H.M. has sent the message through—at last!

Leonora Piper 8/4/1907:

Spirit and Angel…with reference to messages I am trying to give through Mrs.V.
It seems a perfectly feasible interpretation based on the evidence (the complete Margaret Verrall script was on the same theme) to argue that Myers had done what he intended, had spotted Margaret Verrall wandering off into the wrong Miltonic associations (Of man’s first disobedience), had corrected this verbally, and used a visual image as the best way on that occasion of getting the message across. The angel drawing in the original script was quite unmistakable.

One must also include the investigators in this examination of possible psychological and psychodynamic motives behind the cross-correspondence phenomena. Of the investigators, Lodge became a convinced believer in survival through sittings with Mrs Piper (Myers et al. 1890) and the death of his son Raymond in 1915, and his sittings with Mrs Leonard and others (Lodge 1916, 1922) just reinforced this. Margaret Verrall was more cautious and only gradually moved towards some form of acceptance of survival. Piddington and Gerald Balfour were also initially non-committal, as was Mrs Sidgwick. However, Balfour (as had Arthur and Eleanor) had lost a beloved and gifted brother and, as the cross-correspondences developed, began an intense affair with Winifred Coombe-Tennant. For twenty years he and Piddington (who had separated from his wife, partially disengaged from his business interests, and who suffered intermittently from a number of possibly psychosomatic stomach problems) shared the same house, Fishers Hill in Surrey, working indefatigably on the inner meaning of the scripts. Maybe this alone gave Piddington’s life meaning? Did folie à deux or trois, group confabulation/ group thinking (call it what one will) cloud his and Gerald Balfour’s judgement?

And there is a further more general sociopsychological point. World War I started in 1914. There was vast loss of life, and a particular burden, in terms of proportions of casualties per social group, fell on the ‘officer class’ from which the Souls and their friends came. This has been movingly examined in Jeanne Mackenzie’s Children of the Souls. Bradley (1910: 100-101)) and Hughes (2010: 58-59) spotted Tennyson’s use in In Memoriam of the convention in which the singer is supposed to be a shepherd, as a method of masking and controlling his much deeper grief. In the same way one can see that the use of the symbolic structure in the scripts helped the interpreters to handle the individual and collective grief that they and the wider group of the Souls faced at the loss of so
many remarkable young men in the war (of all classes). Yet, the loss of Hallam turned Tennyson into a great poet and, commenting on Helen Verrall’s script of 10/11/1910, Gerald Balfour hoped that there might be a parallel spiritual growth collectively and that this theme—suffering and sacrifice that produced the final flower of achievement or perfection—referred to the ‘establishment of a “Universal City” and the reconcilement of nation with nation’. Though many scripts were written before 1914, much of the interpretation of the scripts came during the horrors of the war and the difficulties and consequences of the post war settlement. To work in a methodical fashion on complex literary problems may well have helped Gerald Balfour and Piddington to position and distance themselves from the sufferings and partial collapse of their world and their class.

There is one final point. The cryptic nature of the cross-correspondences might be explained by the difficulties of communicating telepathically between the subliminal minds of two or more automatists. Might not the errors, inconsistencies, and partial truths displayed in the scripts also be a function of the difficulties involved in communication between discarnate minds and the subliminal minds of the living? There were frequent complaints from the communicators about the complexities of this and the obstacles to be overcome. This was also reflected in the wider Spiritualistic and mediumistic literature, particularly that of Drayton Thomas who made an extensive study of Mrs Osborne Leonard. Minds seemed to meet and meld in a dark and shifting zone of great sensitivity where the clarity and cohesion of normal consciousness (whether incarnate or discarnate), of memory, purpose, and identity, was fragile, making erroneous and misleading messages and responses highly likely. Regardless of one’s own views on the credibility of all this, the literature on this, from a phenomenological perspective, in the cross-correspondence scripts and other sources is broadly consistent. (See Crookall’s survey of psychic communications 1961; also, Fontana 2005: 142–4.)
**Did they occur above chance expectation?**

West (1954/1962) has stated that ‘even the elementary question how far the cross-correspondences could be attributed to chance coincidence cannot be answered with certainty, owing to lack of control experiments and lack of precise information as to the volume of scripts from which the “coincidences” were extracted’. A scientist and numerate herself (as were Lodge and Mrs Sidgwick, of course), Alice Johnson (1907-09, 1910a, 1910b, 1914-1915) addressed this point directly when she developed the theory of the cross-correspondences. She argued that it was not possible to assess the cross-correspondences as if they were experiments in telepathy using playing cards. The probabilities could not be calculated nor was there absolute clarity as to whether a cross correspondence was successful or not, given that some of the material could represent ideas gradually emerging from the subliminal to the supraliminal. Therefore, it meant that all allusions to a particular topic at different times had to be compared together. In other words, the skills of literary, linguistic, and historical scholarship were the skills needed to assess the cross-correspondences.

This approach, putting forward a literary rather than a statistical methodology for assessing the cross-correspondences, did, however, make the argument against chance more difficult since stretching the correspondence to include related associative connections, alternative phrasings (as has been seen), and emergent attempts at the message greatly increased the possibility of random meaning. Margaret Verrall (1906: 206) made this point with her usual clarity: ‘To the discussion of these references I shall not apply any statistical method. Where all is tentative and undetermined it might be misleading to classify.’ In fact, the only attempts to quantify hits and misses occurred in Piper script from 1906–1908 (Piddington 1908) but the approach was abandoned as the increasing complexity of the scripts was realised. In essence, the SPR investigators eschewed randomised controlled testing which systematically examined and isolated a number of variables, in favour of a rich narrative of individual bodies of evidence whose paranormal connections were to be validated in various ways by a largely post hoc analysis.
Part of the uncertainty centred around the way they thought the telepathic process might be operating. Alice Johnson distinguished the messages in the scripts from discrete experiments in telepathy because they were not isolated units but part of a continuous process with the content emerging gradually from the subliminal to the supraliminal in the writing of a number of automatists. And, as it was embedded in complex cultural and literary material, it required those kinds of skills to assess it: not in terms of aesthetic quality but with regard to its inner meaning. And, as Myers himself had speculated that subliminal action between automatists could be greatly stimulated by telepathy from one or more discarnates, this meant that the assessment problem hugely increased in difficulty. Who and when was transmitting what to whom? As Myers put it (1904a v. 2: 55): ‘I conjecture that a current of influence may be started by a deceased person, which, however, only becomes strong enough to be perceptible to its object when reinforced by some vivid current of emotion arising in living minds. I do not say this is yet provable; yet the hint may be of value when the far-reaching interdependencies of telepathy between the two worlds come to be better understood.’

This was one of the reasons that Johnson (1910b: 262) deprecated the comparison of telepathy to wireless telepathy ‘as it inevitably suggests the inference that the processes referred to are essentially similar’. This points to a very real issue in the early and continuing debates in the SPR and elsewhere about the nature and behaviour of telepathy (Alvarado 2009). If the physical model of telepathy which Gurney discussed in Phantasms was adopted as a hypothesis, using the ‘familiar phenomena of the transmission and reception of vibratory energy’ as an analogy, one could attempt to calculate odds against chance in the sending and receiving of impressions and messages and just accept that there was some unidirectional physical base from source to receiver even though one had no idea of the actual mechanism.

On the other hand, in the cases studied by the SPR, there was rarely the direct transmission of an unmodified image or impression, making it difficult to estimate success or failure. As has been seen, Gurney, Myers, and Mrs Sidgwick all stressed the part which the mind’s unconscious operations could play in telepathic phenomena. If one added additional variables (clairvoyance,
precognition, and the possible agency of the discarnate) the situation was complicated in several ways. It made the measurement of telepathic hits and misses even more difficult if modification of the original sender target was allowed in the assessment of the recipient’s response, and it introduced alternative explanations for either the success or failure of the attempted communication. Take the Medusa’s Head cross correspondence, for example.

**Medusa’s Head**

Leonora Piper 13/04/1908:

[Dorr suggested Medusa’s head was sent as a cross-correspondence]

Leonora Piper 12/05/1908:

Blood—Horse—Head [Trix Fleming] wrote that

Trix Fleming 19/05/1908:

Perseus—The Fateful Head—Medusa—The mirrored shield and the winged sandals of swiftness…such rocks as Andromeda knew while she waited for the coils of the sea monster to lift curling among the slow ripples at the margin of sand

*Note: Leonora Piper was in the United States. Trix Fleming was in the United Kingdom.*

This was an interesting and successful correspondence. It is clear that the less educated Leonora Piper grasped the gory physicality of the event but its emergence in Trix Fleming’s script took five weeks and was clothed in the wider, more literary, details of the story (the gifts of Pallas which aided the destruction of Medusa) appropriate to that automatist (Johnson 1910b: 277–9). In this case the modification was obvious but in some of the more extreme of Piddington’s interpretations the associational links appeared to reflect less an automatist dealing with the same central message from her own subliminal resources, and
more the post hoc construction of theoretical links. And given the nature of the material this was an ever-present danger.

In addition, there was the mundane question of counting. In a cross correspondence did the same theme or topic in two scripts just count as one cross-correspondence? What if there were more hits/points of contact in the scripts? As below (Johnson 1910a: 213–15).

**Procession**

Trix Fleming 17/10/1906:

The men with staves head the procession…The noonday sun has dimmed the torches flare

Margaret Verrall 3/10/1906:

The sun shone in the north at midday…The propomps wave their Torches

*Note: Trix Fleming was in India. Margaret Verrall was in Cambridge. She did not see the Fleming script before writing her own.*

There were three clear points of contact here: procession, noonday, torches. Was this a triple or a single cross-correspondence? Despite these reservations, there were some attempts to explore aspects of the role of chance coincidence in the generation of cross-correspondences.

Helen Verrall (1911) set up an experiment in which six participants were invited to do some free writing based on the random stimulus from a literary work of their choice and to do this six times. Her conclusion was that, apart from a simple correspondence to do with moonlight, such writing, though often highly literary like the cross-correspondence scripts, did not generally share their characteristics. This experiment was repeated in a slightly different format by her husband after World War I (Salter 1928). He found ‘fourteen members of the Society, who kindly consented to co-operate in the experiment, [and] who were
given a certain number of phrases to choose from, and [who] were asked to write
down any words or phrases that suggested themselves and to post the replies to
me before a definite date’. The second task was further complicated by including
two telepathic experiments, one from Piddington and one from Salter. Both
exercises were resolutely literary and in neither case were the products like the
scripts of the automatists with their characteristic features of hidden design or
signalled purpose. Nor were Piddington’s and Salter’s telepathic efforts
successful.

At this moment, well over a hundred years after Mrs Verrall’s first scripts, it is
virtually impossible to answer West’s criticisms satisfactorily, as a brief illustration
will demonstrate. Using the data from the Helen Verrall experiments and a list of
the cross-correspondences based on the guides to the content of the cross-
correspondences produced by Clennell (1966, 1967), it is possible to give a very
approximate answer to aspects of West’s original question and, at least, to
highlight some of the difficulties involved. An average of 250 words is assumed
for each of the Verrall experimental scripts and 137,000 words have been broadly
calculated for Trix Fleming’s scripts once the surrounding notes and commentary
have been removed. There was only one substantial correspondence in (36 x
250) 9,000 words in the Helen Verrall experiment; 53 correspondences in the
Fleming scripts, so one cross-correspondence per 2,585 words. The automatic
writing cross-correspondences did appear to stand out in terms of a ratio of more
than three to one. But such comparisons depend on the security of two key
variables. How accurate the word count is and agreement on what constitutes a
cross-correspondence.

And is such an exercise really of any value? Scouring through the individual
Fleming scripts to include the simplest topic links with other scripts and checking
and re-checking the precise wordage of each individual script might produce an
even more superficially impressive result, as would, in the other direction,
allowing the smallest connections that Helen Verrall saw between her thirty-six
scripts. In addition, with Trix Fleming, one would have to decide which scripts of
the other automatists involved in the cross-correspondences, and over what
period of time, would have to be included. Otherwise the wordage is too low and
not generated from the total number of scripts across the automatists from which
the cross-correspondences were drawn. It would be a costly and laborious task, even with computer technology, to do this right across all the scripts, and establishing a consensus about the level and quality of the cross-correspondences would, in addition, be very person intensive.

Moreover, there are issues to do with the conditions under which cross-correspondences were or might be generated. One must establish whether or not like is being compared with like. The Helen Salter experimental scripts were clearly based on an external stimulus which guided them in a particular direction whereas, for the cross-correspondence automatists, working independently, in theory they could have started anywhere and gone anywhere in terms of content. It could be argued that a few really remarkable cross-correspondences exhibiting unambiguous design, intricate planning, and conscious purpose were of much greater value than a larger number of vague ones stemming from a common, contrived stimulus.

These issues emerge quite starkly in the more recent debate between Moreman (2003) and Keen and Roy (2004) on the matter of chance coincidence in the cross-correspondences. Moreman’s work and the earlier experiments of Verrall and Salter clearly demonstrated that, whether through stimulus material or the selection of literary texts at random, data could be produced from which a certain level of correspondence might be extracted. This was never in dispute. What was, and still is, is the relationship of that type of material both with regard to the conditions under which they were created and their quality with those in the scripts assessed by Johnson and Piddington et al. Moreman listed 18 examples in Appendix B of his article. This appears substantial. But one should remember the conditions under which the Moreman scripts were produced: the scripts were derived from a sample of just over six thousand books from the fiction section of a local public library. The list of topics forming the basis of those cross-correspondences seemed just what one would expect to emerge from the concerns and interests of novelists past and present, and would, in theory, increase the possibility of commonality and overlap of content. Moreman’s five participants were an ‘intelligent group of post-graduate students from the department of English Literature’ who ‘were encouraged to be as creative as possible’. Such a group could extract a coherent symbolic meaning from a
shopping list. However, a serious point. They did try to strive for an objective, agreed consensual meaning and this central issue haunted and still haunts the interpretation of the cross-correspondences.

Moreman usefully summarises a number of the above issues and arguments. He asserts: that there wasn’t sufficient control over the production of the scripts; that many of the simpler cross-correspondences were banal; that the more complex cross-correspondences could have been produced by a combination of chance, cherry-picking of elements of the scripts, and over-ingenious interpretation; that telepathy and clairvoyance were more ‘straightforward’ explanations for the phenomena; and, finally, that the investigators did not even bother to count successes and failures, so unscientific were they in their approach to this matter. These are fair but not new points and all had been considered in various ways and at various times by the original investigators. There is no doubt that his approach can generate cross-correspondences by chance, but whether they in any way have the characteristics of their more famous ancestors, as Keen and Roy have pointed out, is highly debatable. But Moreman’s article remains useful in that it puts all interpreters of the scripts on their guard against misattributing to a discarnate intelligence what may be the product, singly or in combination, of the factors mentioned above.

The conflict between this literary approach and the statistical approach to the cross-correspondences was what lay behind an acerbic exchange between the experienced psychical researchers Michael Coleman and Montague Keen (1998). Coleman asserted: ‘That there is no satisfactory method for deciding whether the correlations observed in the published material represent a statistically significant fraction of the whole.’ But Keen argued that that was irrelevant given the large number of individually impressive cases contained within the scripts and that the real problem was ‘whether such examples of paranormal knowledge can somehow be explained by avoiding the hypothesis of survival of human consciousness’. These are spontaneous paranormal phenomena. ‘The evidential value cannot be assessed by any statistical method but only by common sense. The more highly specific the information the less likely it is to be guesswork or chance.’
On the other hand, one of the most valuable features of the cross-correspondences is that they were embedded in automatic writing which created a permanent record that could be examined over and over again and the amount of material that appeared inexplicable gradually reduced, and the rationale for that reduction openly debated. In terms of the inner pattern of the cross-correspondences, Piddington demonstrated, to his own satisfaction, time and again over the years that the automatic writings had a coherent symbolic structure, if enough work was put into them. This also applied and still applies to the issue of paranormal cognition. It is still possible to study and research the unrecognised names and descriptions in the scripts. Indeed, Lambert (1971) has argued that he traced eleven names in the scripts ‘which can, with reasonable certainty, be identified as or related to named individuals who were at Cambridge in Henry Sidgwick’s time’.

Hindsight is easy, and one must continue to regret that, once one or more automatists began to join Margaret Verrall, the idea of joint control experiments was not systematically developed (only twice: Verrall, H 1911; Salter, WH 1928) and a pool of disinterested and objective volunteers (assessors and automatists) not built up. But, on the other hand, the logistics would have been too formidable to overcome and in 1901 there was absolutely no idea how the writing would proliferate over the coming thirty years or so, or indeed that anyone else would contribute significantly to it.

All one can really do is to identify within the scripts such examples of precision combined with complexity as to make the objection of chance coincidence (particularly if such examples proliferate over time) almost farcical. If this is combined with a clear intention in the scripts to create a cross-correspondence, of whatever sort, and it occurs within a reasonable time period, so much the better.

There is more to be said on the time factor—in part supportive of the cross-correspondences and in part not. Some of the cross-correspondences were impressive in the way they satisfied certain basic criteria: a cross correspondence was signalled; whether complex or not there was substance in the correspondence; and it occurred within a short timescale. For, the longer the
delay and the vaguer or more opaque the reference, the more likely it was that
the asserted connection was the product of chance and wishful thinking. Gerald
Balfour (1927) stated that in the early years of the investigations no cross-
correspondences were to count unless they were nearly contemporaneous
(about a week), but in later years the links were seen as stretching over a long
period of time as the hidden symbolic meanings became more important. To a
twenty-first-century observer this creates a curious effect. There was a sense of
momentum, development, even intellectual excitement with regard to the earlier
scripts, but in the later ones this slows down. The messages become curiously
static and repetitive, particularly in Helen Verrall’s (Salter) scripts and Winifred
Coombe-Tennant’s, and though the Richmonds joined the team after the war,
their scripts spelled out the same basic message but without a real sense of
progression. Gerald Balfour argued that this emphasis on repetition was to drive
the messages home, one of great personal importance for Arthur Balfour and one
of wider significance for humanity. To a later reader it might sometimes appear
that the communicators and their mediums had run out of steam and were almost
literally just on ‘automatic’ pilot.
Were normal avenues for acquiring information ruled out?

Given the similarity of allusive content across the scripts, it is crucial to ascertain what knowledge the automatists had of each other’s scripts and what knowledge they had acquired generally of the main events and personalities referred to in them. There were social networks that linked a number of the automatists together and these have to be explored. In the literature on the cross-correspondences there has been too much emphasis on the isolation of the mediums from each other and this, though often true, was not in fact always the case. For example, Carter (2012): ‘The messages which became known as cross-correspondences, were received by mediums in England, the United States, and India during the period 1901–1932.’ It is true that some of the automatists were sometimes so isolated but not all, and not always. As Alice Johnson recorded (1934a): ‘She [Trix Fleming] was in England (or on the Continent) from April, 1904–July, 1906, then returned to Calcutta and spent two years there, and came back for good in July, 1908.’ Leonora Piper was in England from 1906–07, and from May 1910 to at least February 1911 (Piper 1928). Margaret Verrall and her daughter Helen were often writing together (though separately) in Selwyn Gardens. Mrs Coombe-Tennant divided her time between London and Wales but had frequent close contact, particularly in the early years, with Margaret Verrall.

The automatic writers and their investigators shared a range of formal and informal networks which could potentially have provided them with normal sources of information that might otherwise be interpreted as paranormally acquired. All of the investigators and all of the automatists had some knowledge, slight or profound, (even Leonora Piper) of several or more of the communicators. The Balfours, the Verralls, Lodge, Piddington, and Alice Johnson were steeped in the history of the SPR. Gerald and Arthur Balfour knew the Tennant and Lyttelton families intimately through their involvement in the aristocratic coterie known as the ‘Souls’, as did Lodge in a more marginal way (Lambert 1984, Ellenberger 1982, Ellenberger 2015). Alice Johnson was a biologist like F.M. Balfour and became the director of the laboratory set up in his honour at Newnham College (Richmond 1997, Gibson 2019). Trix Fleming’s parents retired from India to Tisbury, close to the Wyndhams at Clouds where they and their
children Rudyard and Trix were welcome and where members of the ‘Souls’ met, including the Lyttelton, Tennant, and Balfour families (Ankers 1988, Dakers 1993).

Several of the automatists had London Clubs. The Verralls, their friend the classicist Jane Harrison, and Alice Johnson were all members of the Sesame Club, founded in 1895, with its civilised ambience and its programme of literary and educational interests. Winifred Coombe-Tennant and Edith Lyttelton also were members of London Clubs reflective of their particular concerns. These clubs, which began to proliferate in this period, were a sign of the greater mobility and independence of women. The Albemarle Club, founded in 1874, was particularly favoured since, like the Sesame, it was open to men and to women, and Gerald Balfour’s wife, Betty, and Millicent Fawcett, the suffragist leader (who knew the Verralls) were both members (see Stewart 1959; Crawford 1999.)

Another common link was an interest in suffrage, as suffragists (Hamilton 2017: 14-15) rather than suffragettes, though Lady Betty’s sister, Constance, was active in her work for the cause (Lytton 1925) and went to prison for a period. They also had an interest in social reform even though their political affiliations and tactics might have differed. The only one partially outside this network was Trix Fleming, partly because of her geographical isolation in India for some of the time, and possibly because she did not possess the financial resources of the others (Paget 1924 vol.2: 351-352.)

There was certainly a link between Lavinia (Lyttelton) Talbot’s husband, Warden (later Bishop) Talbot of Keble, and Sir Oliver Lodge and Arthur Balfour which might in theory have been a conduit for the Palm Maiden and the lock of hair story. Talbot was the first chairman of the Synthetic Society (Stephenson 1936: 128, 232) which brought Lodge, Myers, Arthur Balfour, Gerald Balfour, and others together, in the mid-1890s, to discuss the great metaphysical questions. It had been stimulated into being by the publication of Arthur Balfour’s *Foundations of Belief* in 1895 (Lubenow 2005). It is unlikely but not impossible that some personal material may have mingled with the metaphysical. But it should be stressed, the Synthetic Society was wound up before Lodge and Gerald Balfour had any inkling of the significance of the hair symbols in the scripts.
The Souls were very well-known in English society and were a close knit group, and, though not exclusive in the way that other aristocratic cliques were, they were certainly elite and establishment in background: ‘…none of the Souls attended a public school other than Eton or Harrow, or, with the exceptions of White, Cowper, and Windsor, a college other than Balliol or Trinity’ (Ellenberger 1982: 140). Arthur and Gerald Balfour were members (Arthur Balfour was the leader: Gerald more tangential) of this group as was Edith Lyttelton, and many references to the group can be traced in the scripts. The paintings of Watts, Rossetti, and Burne-Jones, artists particularly favoured by the group, also figured significantly as material for cross-correspondences.

Another clique, or coterie, was the Cambridge secret society known as the ‘Apostles’. It was composed of a handful of gifted Cambridge undergraduates who selectively replenished their numbers each year from the incoming freshmen (Lubenow 1998). Gerald Balfour, Arthur Verrall, Frank Balfour, Richard Jebb, Walter Leaf, S.H. Butcher, who were all mentioned in the scripts, were members of this self-perpetuating elite, and all at some stage fellows or aspiring fellows of Trinity College. There is some doubt, however, as to whether Arthur Balfour was ever offered or accepted membership (Deacon 1985: 46-47.) There was also a more informal clustering of wives in the Cambridge Ladies’ Dining Society (Shils 1996: 87), of which Margaret Verrall was a key member, and another network was the Cambridge-based group of graduates of Newnham College, like Margaret and Helen Verrall and Alice Johnson, who admired the Sidgwicks’ work for women’s higher education and strongly supported and worked with Eleanor Sidgwick on both psychical research and educational issues.

The direct impact of networks on the scripts was particularly visible in the scripts of Trix Fleming in early 1906. She was in England at the time and met Arthur Balfour and members of the Souls on a number of occasions. For example, in describing her script of 18/2/1906, she wrote (Johnson 1916a Vol 1: 114): ‘I think the political prophecy [this was that the Liberal ministry would last less than two years before an election: it lasted four] may be explained by my having met Mr. Balfour at dinner that evening. I “read” his hand and was cheered to see that the really brilliant part of his career lies between his 60th and 70th birthdays!’ This
led to her scripts during this period being sprinkled with references such as that Balfour should have a complete rest after his period as Prime Minister and should read only light fiction, to the famous old yew tree at his family home Whittingehame (linked to Darnley and Mary Queen of Scots), and to his mother, Lady Blanche Balfour. Items of no real evidential value. On the other hand the prediction had a certain element of truth in it with regard to his later service in the War Coalition. In 1919 Arthur Balfour was seventy and Foreign Secretary (Adams 2007: 340-343.)

The most celebrated and romantic paranormal item in the cross-correspondences is the story of the silver bronze box Arthur Balfour made, in which was kept a lock of May Lyttelton’s hair. In the light of what one knows about the formal and informal networks to which both automatists and investigators belonged, what was the likelihood that this material had been consciously or semi-consciously acquired (then forgotten) by one or more of those involved? Gerald Balfour (1927) stressed that the story was forty years old at the time of revelation in Coombe-Tennant script in 1916 and was unknown to any of the automatists. However, the story of Arthur Balfour’s love for May Lyttelton was not unfamiliar in upper class circles in the 1870s (Gladstone 1930: 95) and the New York Times referred to it on Arthur Balfour’s death in 1930. It is, therefore, not impossible that other aspects of the story also circulated.

The central issue is: can one trace a specific connection from the limited circle of Lytteltons and Balfours to the automatists involved in the cross-correspondences? It has been seen that there was a theoretical Bishop Talbot/Oliver Lodge/Gerald Balfour link but this was highly speculative. The investigators to their credit did explore this issue as thoroughly as they could and Balfour and Piddington recorded what each automatist knew and when. Margaret Verrall knew nothing of A.J.B.’s story till June 1912. She was acquainted slightly with Lady Mount-Temple of Broadlands and the Balfours of Fishers Hill before becoming more fully involved in the later stages of her scripts. She had heard of Francis Maitland Balfour and his death. But that was all. Helen Verrall knew the Sidgwicks well but was told nothing by them of the Palm Maiden story. She did not hear the details till 1933, long after she had ceased automatic writing (on all this, see Salter, WH 1948.) As a child she (Salter H 1950a) had played with the
children of May’s brother, Arthur Lyttelton, who as Master of Selwyn College lived very close to her home, but that was the faintest of links.

There is an interesting letter in the Salter archive from Mrs Goldney (Goldney 14/1/1966), a senior SPR figure, on the circulation of the Palm Maiden story over the years. This was in the context of what Geraldine Cummins (1965) might have acquired from normal sources in connection with her book *Swan on a Black Sea*, allegedly the post-mortem communications of Winifred Coombe-Tennant. The letter revealed the gossipy and indiscreet nature of Edith Lyttelton and raises again her role in the possible leakage of information over the years, particularly to Winifred Coombe-Tennant.

After the revelations of the key scripts of 31/3/1912 and 4/4/1912 (Hamilton 2017: 103-105) which indicated May Lyttelton as a key communicator, Winifred Coombe-Tennant motored over from Eastbourne where she was staying and Gerald Balfour interrogated her about her knowledge of Arthur Balfour and private events from the past (Lord 2011). She seemed to show no knowledge or awareness of the individuals referred to symbolically in the scripts and of the events around Palm Sunday 1875. Nor was there any indication in 1916 after her script at Carlton Gardens with Arthur Balfour, which hinted pretty directly at it (Hamilton 2017: 108-109; 105) that she had any knowledge of the casket and the lock of hair story. It is clear from her diary (Lord 2011: 97–101) that she was in an intense and heightened state during these years, but there is no evidence in it of any attempts at fabricating a message or of concealing sources of information. Furthermore, there is no trace in her published diary of concerted efforts by her to research the background of the Balfour family. It is true to say she may have learnt something about the Balfours from Edith Lyttelton when they met for the first time on war work in 1917. But by this time her most evidential scripts had been produced.

Neither Oliver Lodge, a close friend of Arthur Balfour, nor Eleanor Sidgwick, his sister, knew the story of the silver casket, and Arthur Balfour was highly reticent in intimate personal matters. Trix Fleming never knew anything about it all and her scripts stopped in 1910. Therefore, the only other possible source of information was via Mrs Talbot (May’s sister Lavinia who married the Warden of
Keble, later Bishop Talbot, as has been seen). It does appear, however, that Betty Balfour learnt of the story of the lock of hair and the silver box from Lavinia Talbot probably in the mid-1890s, but she never seems to have told Gerald Balfour or, if she did, he said that he had forgotten it (Balfour 1927). She was bringing up young children and he was actively involved in political life, first as Irish Secretary and later, in Arthur Balfour’s administration, as President of the Board of Trade. So, it is not inconceivable that the communication between them was poor at times.

The lock of hair in the silver bronze box may broadly, with some qualifications, stand up to scrutiny, but given the close connections and networks between a number of the individuals involved, many script statements are moving but not evidentially impressive. Take Winifred Coombe-Tennant’s script of 1/5/1911 (she was planning to visit the Verrall’s in Cambridge): ‘I know Cambridge My Cambridge I shall be there with you Myers ask Mrs V whether she remembers a time in a garden a an enclosed garden Myers open to fellows.’

This was a reference to the Trinity College Fellow’s Garden between Grange Road and Queen’s Road, where Myers and Margaret Verrall had often walked, and Myers had had his iconic encounter with George Eliot (Hamilton 2009: 77-78; Beer 134-135.) Winifred Coombe-Tennant denied any knowledge of the garden but, given her occasional visits to Cambridge to see Myers and Eveleen, she was very likely to have picked up something about it or even walked round it.

The more one probes, the more potential opportunities for leakage can be identified. For example, it was assumed, perhaps wrongly, that Leonora Piper, poorly educated and a trance medium, would not have been in a position to pick up relevant material through normal channels. Yet she, and her daughters, were virtually made part of the Lodge family when they came to England (Piper, A 1929.) But sometimes too much can be made of these theoretical possibilities. The original investigators were alive to this issue and checked the normal avenues for acquiring or generating the information through printed material, gossip, and conscious fraud—and were, too, aware of the possible shaping of these sources through unconscious fraud, self-delusion, and cryptomnesia into something that appeared to have a strongly paranormal flavour. One example of
this was the pains taken to investigate Leonora Piper both by a detective, by the investigators, and by an examination and questioning of the books she read. (See Hamilton 2017: 80; also Baird 1949: 45-46.) She put up with it because she was treated well and because she was being paid. The other automatists voluntarily submitted to (apart from investigation by a detective) the same discipline, often a wearying clerical task. This was an important activity, then and now, since a very impressive example of paranormal cognition, like Trix Fleming’s dramatic account of Gurney’s death, as has been seen, was only properly evaluated when Alice Johnson (a fact that Trix Fleming had completely forgotten) realised that she had told Trix Fleming about it some time before. (See Johnson 1907-1909:286.)

But the most truly puzzling problem of all centres around Winifred Coombe-Tennant and what she might or might not have known. It almost beggars belief that in her account of the birth on 9/4/1913 of Henry and the help and support that the dark young man gave her through the labour that she did not ask the Balfours who he was, particularly as she had seen a photograph of him in Mrs Sidgwick’s Cambridge house on her first visit there in January 1912. She was deeply in love and having her lover’s child. Wouldn’t she have wanted to have found out all she could about him and his family? Especially as she had an ambitious side to her which seems to have fitted rather uneasily with the strong liberal sympathies she expressed publicly throughout her life. But Gerald Balfour was very explicit on this point (Balfour 1928: 4): ‘[Winifred Coombe-Tennant’s] persistent failure one might almost say, refusal—to recognise the identity of the Dark Young Man is very curious and noteworthy. Not only does she affirm both in script, and also in her normal condition, that she is ignorant of it, but she has no wish to be informed. For the matter of that I have never in the whole course of my experience known [Winifred Coombe-Tennant] express any desire to have her scripts explained to her.’

This last statement contrasts somewhat with their private letters and her diary in 1911, and one can only reconcile the two accounts if one assumes that the earlier discussions of script focused on tracing literary and artistic sources rather than their deeper meaning.
Trix Fleming suffered from the same selective blindness or ignorance in her scripts. She initially had to have the references to Laura Lyttelton and Alfred Lyttelton pointed out to her by Alice Johnson. The investigators eventually came to the conclusion that in certain circumstances there might have been a discarnate telepathic hypnotic influence (a discarnate version of the living Gurney’s experiments in the 1880s with George Albert Smith) in order to keep the automatist from contaminating her script. But this is not a hypothesis particularly congenial to a later researcher outside the nexus of influences in which the scripts were produced.

The general potential for social leakage has been well established but even more important was, and still is, ascertaining what knowledge each automatist had of the others’ scripts and when they acquired it. It is impossible to state precisely at any one time from 1901 to 1918 where the scripts of each automatist actually were, and sometimes individual and small groups of scripts were shown to an automatist to stimulate further writing or for help with interpretation. But after the discovery of the Palm Maiden story in 1912 this process was discouraged and the scripts came securely under Balfour’s and Piddington’s control. Mrs Sidgwick then compiled a detailed list which set down precisely which automatist saw which scripts of the group and when. A study of this reveals that the statement that the automatists wrote in ignorance of each other’s scripts needs considerable qualification. To roughly summarise Mrs Sidgwick’s exhaustive list (Piddington 1921: 1–86):

- Trix Fleming was probably the most isolated of the writers under discussion. She saw some of Margaret Verrall’s scripts, a handful of Helen Verrall’s scripts, and no Coombe-Tennant scripts as far as can be established.
- Helen Verrall did not see the first three hundred of her mother’s scripts till 1912, but she saw the remainder fairly soon after they had been produced. She saw a small number of Fleming scripts in 1907 and the whole of vol. 1 in 1912. She saw the first 27 Mac scripts and only around 35 of the Coombe-Tennant scripts.
- Winifred Coombe-Tennant saw only one of the first three hundred of Margaret Verrall’s scripts but she was given access to the remainder in large increments over the years, from 1909 onwards, and she had access to many Helen Verrall, Fleming, and Mac scripts.
Margaret Verrall saw all Helen Verrall’s scripts shortly after production. She had seen well before her death all Fleming scripts. She saw the first two hundred or so Coombe-Tennant scripts shortly after production, though from January 1912 she received them at greater intervals. She saw all Mac scripts.

Given this greater access to each other’s scripts than has previously been mentioned in the published literature, one has to hazard (but only hazard) a guess that the sense of common style and symbolism which so impressed the very cautious Janet Oppenheim (1985: 132-135) may not be an example of external design but of the subconscious stylistic influence of other automatist’s scripts. A further complicating factor was that Margaret Verrall had, for a number of years, (as did Winifred Coombe-Tennant) a dual role as automatist and interpreter of scripts, and Helen Verrall, herself, became an active official of the SPR and later (though after her writing ceased) with her husband a trusted confidant of Balfour and Piddington. One cannot help but suspect the development of a common line or approach to the material which might have inhibited really robust assessment of the content, even amongst individuals as gifted and conscientious as they were.

A final note on cryptomnesia or source amnesia is relevant here. A wide range of theoretical possibilities for acquiring information that might otherwise have been ascribed to paranormal cognition has been outlined above. But a certain common sense and balance is required. Stevenson (1983–84) has laid down a very clear set of criteria to judge these matters. They can be summarised as follows: a detailed correspondence between the information ‘paranormally acquired’ and its availability from normal sources; evidence that the producer of the material did at one time acquire (or it was more probable than not that she/he did acquire) the information normally; and that all elements in the situation be considered.

Applying these criteria to the cross-correspondences one can clearly see that in many cases there is not enough information to rule on this issue and that it would be irresponsible and lazy to invoke cryptomnesia as a catchall explanation for the apparently inexplicable demonstration of knowledge accessed beyond the range of the normal sensory channels. On the other hand it cannot be ruled out. And, finally, only by looking at all the evidence in the case of each automatist, in
particular the chronological evidence, can one make a fair and sensible judgement. The fact, for example, that by 1916 Winifred Coombe-Tennant had become an intimate of the Gerald Balfour family should not be used to discredit her apparent knowledge in her script of 1910, before reading Myers’ autobiography, of the importance of syringa in his life (Hamilton 2017: 96.)
Were they the product of wishful thinking?

There is always the suspicion when reading script extracts in the *Proceedings* of the SPR that, no matter how discriminating and meticulous the commentary, information may have been manipulated and massaged, particularly when one comes across something like this in the volumes of the complete printed scripts:

Helen Verrall 1/1/1907

Mancilium travetone Ambrose the name was a clue a father of The church in olden times less wise than pious Shadwood Mentone Corun what was that to do with the peas there was no need For others to interfere Memorabilia silent voces opulentia incumbit pondere magno (scribbles) Xen (Things to be remembered The voices are silent Wealth weighs down with a great weight)

Or

Margaret Verrall 4/9/1908:

Pettigrew and the forecastle and another word which you have not understood. Then look back in earlier writing for a distinctive word which will give you the clue to his identity, Rector’s I mean You have not found all that is hidden in your writing yet, it is in an early writing…Nequiquam Deus prudens…

It is interesting to see the way Piddington dealt with these two scripts. The former he took as a reference to Arthur Lyttelton, May Lyttelton’s brother and former Master of Selwyn College and later Bishop of Southampton. He also identified a possible allusion to the Lyttelton children who died young. He based this on the references to a father of the church and also to Mentone on the French/Italian border where the Bishop had died. He took Shadwood as a mistake for Sherwood. Piddington argued that one of the symbolic codes in the script was Robin Hood (Arthur Balfour) and Maid Marian (May Lyttelton) and that Antony Lyttelton was seen as Puck or Robin Goodfellow inhabiting the forest with Robin Hood and his merry men (see Piddington 1943c: 1178). He ignored the rest apart
from pointing out that Xenophon had written (Memorabilia) a document on Socrates.

He also ignored, or did not trace, the Pettigrew reference in the latter script. There is nothing on it in the Excursuses. He would have argued in both cases that stray phrases and puzzling statements could sometimes just be part of the wave motion of subliminal flotsam and jetsam. Communication was rarely pure and unsullied. That may be true but there is a limit to the amount one can tweak in a script without it devaluing the rest. Sometimes, and who can blame him, he was unable to track a statement to its source. Myers, in fact, had been very interested in Nelson and wrote and lectured on him and this may well be an example of an encoded reference to Nelson turning a blind eye and disregarding an order to avoid action before the Battle of Copenhagen. Pettigrew (1849) had written a biography of Nelson. This would fit with what Piddington decoded as the main theme in the script—the dangers of sea travel as a metaphor/symbol for the difficulties of communication between the dead and the living (see below), and the need, as Nelson did, and as the Palm Maiden did, to take risks for success. This interpretation was supported by a later script of Margaret Verrall’s on 18/3/1914 which referred to the Nelson touch in an appropriate context:

The battle & the breeze—and the Nelson touch. Copenhagen and other victories, victories too of peace no less than war

Piddington (1919:119) argued that the communicators used Margaret Verrall’s fascination with the real identity of Leonora Piper’s controls (Rector and Prudens, particularly, who acted as intermediaries between the incarnate automatic writers and the discarnate communicators) to get the link to the Horace quotation (C.1.3.21–26: deus abscidit prudens etc.), the gist of which was that God had wisely and deliberately separated countries from each other by means of the ocean but impious and audacious humanity still ventured on the waters. Horace’s ode described the voyage of Virgil to Greece across the rough Aegean and Piddington connected this to another poem which was quoted or alluded to several times in the scripts, Matthew Arnold’s To Marguerite: Continued, particularly the line ‘the unplumbed, salt, estranging sea’. He saw both poems as symbols for the separation of the Palm Maiden and the Knight and her showing
great daring in attempting to make contact with him. He argued that in Winifred Coombe-Tennant’s script May Lyttelton’s passionate and courageous determination to make contact with Arthur Balfour was made fully explicit.

Piddington’s years of study of the scripts gave him the confidence to bring together these scattered fragments into a meaningful, thematic unity. He (1913b:237, 242) believed that he had discovered the central methodology that lay behind the process of communication. In discussing, for example, the way in which Gray’s *Elegy* was treated in the scripts and the gradual, apparently muddled emergence of references to it, he stated: ‘They start by being scrappy and disjointed; then, as years go by, the separate elements are gradually drawn together—never all of them together, but first, say, topics (a) (f) and (c), next (c) (d) and (e), and so on; until finally in Mrs. Coombe-Tennant’s script come the clues which enable us to co-ordinate and interpret all the component elements.’

As has been seen, Margaret Verrall was always a little uneasy about this. The difference in viewpoint came out most clearly in Piddington’s preface to Margaret Verrall’s scripts Vol. III (1919: 1–10). Piddington stated that the first set of Margaret Verrall’s scripts to be edited and published was volume II by him in 1912 and she edited and published volume I in 1914. This curious and muddled arrangement meant that both volumes were thinly noted. Piddington also stressed that by the time Margaret Verrall came to edit the first volume of her scripts she knew about the Palm Sunday Case and she had been told about the new method of interpretation but, for various reasons, she neither fully accepted nor followed the method. This meant that many of the references to the Palm Maiden, the Knight, and the Peacock Lady were not commented on or fully brought out in her notes.

There were a number of reasons for this. Temperamentally she liked to get through tasks and have done with them. She tended to scoff at the slow and minute way in which Gerald Balfour and Piddington operated. She also was inclined to treat the scripts in isolation and in a literal way, often trying to pin them down to an event in her current experience. This led her to ignore the repetition of ‘striking words or phrases when the repetition occurred in a group of scripts having nothing in common according to her view with a group in which these
words or phrases had first appeared’ (Piddington 1919: 4–5). This helped to explain why, even after her knowledge of the Palm Sunday Case, she did not fully pick up on the personalities or the generic themes of the scripts.

Yet, despite her partial disagreement, Piddington remained confident that the methodology he and Balfour had evolved was the correct one. He emphasized, as well, the enormity of the task, the difficulty of ironing out (if ever) all inconsistencies, the importance of getting all the scripts in print, and the production of separate volumes of explanatory Notes and Excursuses because of the sheer complexity of the material. He also concluded in 1919 (op.cit.: 2) that during their five years’ work on the scripts since 1913 ‘our methods of interpretation are in the main sound, and that the scripts of all our automatists are a composite whole’.

He also made a very bold claim for the early Margaret Verrall scripts. He stated (1919: 5) that her scripts from March 1901 to the summer of 1903 ‘contain, I believe, adumbrations of nearly all the leading topics that have figured in the scripts of all the automatists subsequently’. He asserted that they were expressed by certain key words or literary allusions. They were embryonic and grew into the full expression of the theme much later on: something clearly seen in the early sword and sigma references and the cryptic references to the Peacock Memorial at Mells (Hamilton 2017: 176-178). In Margaret Verrall’s later scripts the topics became more clearly elaborated and more easily seen as connected. He believed, as did Gerald Balfour, that the approach was deliberate, laying down the key themes very early on but not revealing their inner meaning till the appropriate time.

But do Piddington’s assertions and conclusions actually stand up? Was the method of cryptic communication actually there? Did tracing the quotations and topics between scripts and across time lead to coherent and consistent results? Given the sheer body of material to be studied and the number of allusions and references to be explored, it is quite natural to raise questions about the methodology used and the objectivity of the interpretation. These issues have been rather ducked or ignored in recent years. Were the original investigators overly influenced by the cultural space and historical context they inhabited?
(See, for example, Turner 1981: passim; Hardie 2014: 114.) This is not to say that they did not strive for objectivity, for their efforts in this direction were strenuous and admirable, merely that one needs to look particularly closely at the personal, social, and cultural climate within which they operated.

Were there any key ideas at the time which predisposed Piddington, Balfour, and the others to accept the enormous claims that seemed to be emerging from the scripts? Certainly, the view of Rome and its importance in the development of civilisation would have been a common theme amongst the Victorians who saw themselves as heirs to both Athens and Rome with the additional moral enrichment of Christianity. One could argue that this underpinned the progressive and predictive element in the cross-correspondences though there was also a strong emphasis on the unity of opposites, the union of East and West, the theme made popular by E. Arnold’s book *Light of Asia* and Blavatsky’s Theosophical Society. This reflects another emerging theme of the age, the gradually developing sense of a need for international solutions to problems, something which was well exemplified in the life and career of Winifred Coombe-Tennant herself, the first British female delegate to the League of Nations, and in that of a fellow member of the SPR Gilbert Murray. (On Coombe-Tennant see Hamilton 2017: 136; and on Murray, Stray 2007: 217-260.) There was also the strange charisma which Arthur Balfour exercised in the public and private circles he moved in. He was called King Arthur among the Souls. He was sometimes caricatured as such in the media, and there were frequent references to Tennyson and the Arthurian legends in the cross-correspondences. And Balfour, whose political career seemed to be over in 1911, nevertheless saw it revived in the First World War and in the various international settlements after it. He became the British elder statesman at a time Piddington and Gerald Balfour were deep in the interpretation of scripts (Adams 2007: 324-356).

All the above influences and tendencies may have made the more outrageous elements of the scripts easier to accept and to suggest deeper layers of meaning. For Theosophy had already predisposed sections of the artistic and cultural elite to ideas of spiritual development across and beyond traditional religious boundaries well before the deaths of the communicators, and it also strongly emphasized the concept of the spiritual growth and progression of the human
race which Myers himself expressed in *Human Personality* (Dixon 2010; Asprem 2014). The theme of the destiny of the race of man to become the race of angels ran through the scripts and this was clearly reflected in the Messianic scripts of Winifred Coombe-Tennant. These kinds of ideas were part of the zeitgeist during the first part of the twentieth century, with the ultimate battle between Good and Evil being predicted, and the search for new gurus and spiritual leaders like Gurdjieff and Krishnamurti eagerly underway (Owen 2004).

One wonders, too, whether even the critical and shrewd Alice Johnson was swayed by these heady considerations. There is a revealing letter (Houghton archive) of 5/3/1915 from her when she staying at Cadoxton with Winifred Coombe-Tennant: ‘Dear Mr Balfour, You asked me to try to prevent Mrs Tennant from overworking, so I think you might like to hear a little about things here’, and the letter shows her thoroughly integrated into the family, wheeling the smiling baby about the place, and doing her best to prevent the energetic Mrs Tennant from overworking. This was hardly the picture of a detached and objective researcher. The fact that Henry was Gerald Balfour’s son was revealed to Piddington by Winifred Coombe-Tennant (Lord 2011: 203) in December 1916 but it is not clear when, if ever, the other investigators knew that, only that he was a child for whom the scripts had prophesied a great future.

One can also, perhaps fancifully, detect a strong semi-conscious and unexamined sense of Englishness in the scripts and the commentaries on them, reflecting the pride and angst of the upper and upper middle classes at this time. A growing emphasis on the legends of Robin Hood and King Arthur has been seen as a reflection of this (Barczewski 2000). There was a revival of heraldry in the nineteenth century associated with national pride after the defeat of Napoleon and certainly, in the scripts, coats of arms and their crests and mottoes figured quite significantly as symbols. In a slightly broader way, in some of the memoirs of the individuals mentioned in the scripts, and in Piddington’s jovial asides (1916), one gets a slightly jossing sense of Anglo-Saxon superiority. The Americans and the French, particularly, were teased. However, this point should not be stressed too much. The standard of languages was generally high amongst the investigators and there was a very strong literary appreciation of other cultures. Moreover, in his work as senior partner in the postal and parcel
carrier company that his family had founded (Ellis 1949), Piddington had a much wider direct experience of European culture than many of his contemporaries.

It is very important to bear this contextual material in mind when examining the bizarre matter of the Messianic Child or children, and the children who were failed spiritual experiments on the way. An enormous amount of energy and ingenuity was expended by Balfour on the Messianic Child interpretation and by Piddington on the children who died young, Daphne and the two Lyttelton boys. One can, perhaps, only explain it by their natural and unconscious assumption that, if such things were to take place, it was appropriate that it should be situated in the milieu of the Balfours and the Lytteltons, the core of the Souls who numbered in their ranks a Prime Minister, his brother the handsome and gifted scholar politician and philosopher, and members of the Lyttelton family with their wide establishment connections (Hynes 1968: 389).

Such unconscious assumptions and drivers may well have helped energise and sustain Piddington as he continued his largely solo interpretive task. And, increasingly as Gerald Balfour aged and withdrew from the process of interpretation, Piddington may have lacked the critical friend necessary to give him objectivity and balance. It is worrying, for example, that such a huge amount of time and erudition was spent on his, first, identifying Bacchus and his mother Semele with Henry Augustus and his mother Winifred, and then an equally enormous amount of time and erudition given to revising that interpretation and replacing the mother by Laura Lyttelton and the child by Christopher Lyttelton. In all, he had to cancel over one hundred and sixty pages of interpretation in volume one of Notes and Excursuses (Piddington 1921: 4). There was also uncertainty as to whom the Dido references pointed. Piddington settled on Laura Lyttelton while Jean Balfour, who had access to the scripts and who empathised strongly with her situation, argued in unpublished papers that Dido was Betty Balfour, the neglected wife of Gerald Balfour (Kremer archive).

From the vantage point of the twenty-first century, the vaingloriousness in interpreting the scripts as of cosmic significance for one dead aristocrat, and for one elderly one and his child by one of the mediums, appears astounding. But did this ever occur to anyone at the time? Was a lack of perspective rather than
anything more sinister the main weakness? Piddington was a shrewd businessman who mixed with a wide variety of people. Gerald Balfour, however, was much less worldly and, like Arthur, ineffective in commercial enterprises. Witness the brothers’ disastrous involvement in the scheme to convert peat into fuel for commerce and industry. It almost ruined the family fortunes (Egremont 1980: 311-312). Vanity ran right through the Coombe-Tennant scripts particularly, and others, perhaps, were subconsciously excited to be caught up in the dream. One notes a letter from Alice Johnson to Gerald Balfour: ‘have you observed that Augustus’ head is the same shape as Shakespeare’s. It comes out beautifully in one of your photographs’ (Roy 2008: 295). The present writer much prefers the earlier comment on Shakespeare’s head by Trix Fleming: that she enjoyed eating caramel walnuts ‘because of their extraordinary resemblance to the bald head of William Shakespeare’ (MacInnes 1961: 119). In terms of vanity, one could almost postulate that Winifred Coombe-Tennant’s scripts were a subconscious attempt on her part to integrate herself and her child into one of the great families of the United Kingdom which governed, in part and at different times, the greatest empire in the world.

There certainly seems to have been an element of this in the Coombe-Tennant script of 16/8/1915 (Houghton archive):

WCT. it is one family A and PM A and Peacock Lady and A linked to third A Augustus ‘Yes but not only supernaturally but in blood. (That is, Arthur Balfour, Alfred Lyttelton and Augustus Henry Coombe-Tennant.)

GWB. I understand that

WCT. Well you should ‘None of the scripts can be understood apart from the Paternity of the Child’ ‘To the Palm Lady the Child is as it were the fruit of the House into which she would have been drawn’ ‘she has woven it all into the vicarious child of hers and his—Do you see’ and ‘the large share of the Frate Minore’ [Francis Maitland Balfour] in all this and the child to be ‘the whole race bloom in that perfect flower’(Henry Coombe-Tennant).
That is perhaps unfair and over-simple, for Winifred Coombe-Tennant had a very powerful sense of social justice and sympathy for the poor, and she had an intense dislike of the public school system (Lord 2011) and the insensitive, militaristic characteristics it developed in many men; though she did make use of it for her children. On the other hand, what is one to make of an early script from her deceased child Daphne (Hamilton 2017: 88) which put Daphne at the centre of the SPR in the other world and co-opted a discarnate Charles Darwin into the activity?

The language of the scripts and the references in them may well have contributed to this sense of elitism. Knowledge of the classics, for example, was a central underpinning assumption of many of the scripts and their interpretation. It was a status marker, both within the SPR and more widely, as a rapid increase in wealth derived from commerce and industry in the late nineteenth century led to greater fluidity in the social field and the rise of the non-public school educated entrepreneur and industrialist (Stray 1998). References to Horace figured prominently in a number of the cross-correspondences and knowledge of Horace was regarded as a special mark of the English gentleman. There is an amusing passage in Ronald Knox’s novel *Let Dons Delight*: ‘it seems to me quite certain that the whole legend of the “English Gentleman” has been built upon Latin and Greek. A meets B on the steps of his club and says: “Well, old man, *eheu fugaces*, what?” and B says “*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*”, and the crossing sweeper falls on his knees in adoration of the two men who can talk as learnedly as that.’ J.W. Mackail (the Oxford classicist who married one of Trix Fleming’s cousins and of whom Myers himself approved) compared the psalms of the Bible to the odes of Horace: ‘But both, in their enormously different ways, are central and fundamental; permanent lights on life and aids to living’ (Harrison, S. 2018).

Two automatists were first-rate classicists, but even Trix Fleming and Winifred Coombe-Tennant (and to a much lesser extent Leonora Piper) would have had indirect access to the classics through general English literature, and major classical texts and myths would have been encountered in translation at school or in the home. They all (except Leonora Piper) had a high general level of culture (whether or not they were classicists) and had been brought up on the great (and not so great) literature of the Romantic and Victorian traditions. Galvan (n.d.) has
stressed that ‘this literary essence is important, in turn, for thinking about how the scripts worked, conceptually and emotionally, on the investigators who studied them’. She argues that at the turn of the century ‘these voices were still affecting enough to seem to evoke beings from another world’. She is virtually asserting that the communicating spirits were conjured out of the literature, that the literature the SPR investigators were brought up on conditioned and predisposed them to that belief.

One can see this particularly clearly in the scripts with regard to some of the symbols that were applied to Annie Marshall, Myers’ love. Myers/ Orpheus certainly searched desperately for Annie/Eurydice, going deep into the other world of Victorian mediumship in his quest. Myers may well have felt that though there was nothing dishonourable in their relationship he might have put too much emotional pressure on her and this could have been something that indirectly contributed to her suicide: ‘I said Ophelia Myers did Hamlet seek to win forgiveness from the dead Underline that forgiveness from the dead.’ Beer (1998:1882-1883), in fact, has argued that by the standards of the time Myers’ behaviour was extreme and Annie was compromised. Therefore, there was something to forgive.

The script from which these lines came was written on 29/5/1910 with Lodge present and, according to Winifred Coombe- Tennant’s published diary (Lord 2011), Lodge did not tell her the story of Myers and Annie Marshall till 26/9/1910. But Piddington and Balfour had certainly read the unexpurgated autobiography and were fully alive to references to lost, thwarted, and abandoned lovers in literature and in the scripts.

One should also stress, regardless of the emotional impact of literature, the sheer high general literariness of it all, particularly when the Verralls, mother and daughter, and Trix Fleming were involved. The cross correspondence below seems to have been just such a literary artefact (Johnson 1910a: 211–13).

**Savonarola**

Helen Verrall 6/10/1906:
Remember the word and the date. Carthusians two and two the long black robes and the candles and the images the bright sun and the gaping crowd she will remember

Trix Fleming 8/10/1906:

Ask his daughter about the dream—Grey monks of long ago—

Margaret Verrall 10/10/1906:

Savonarola all wrapped in black in threes and threes they entered...

Note: Trix Fleming was in India. Margaret Verrall and Helen Verrall were probably both in Cambridge.

A.W. Verrall was frequently referred to in Fleming scripts so to take ‘ask his daughter’ as indicating Helen Verrall seemed reasonable, as was interpreting ‘dream’ as script. Margaret Verrall had read George Eliot’s Romola and found a description in the chapter Unseen Madonna which described a long line of monks processing on a bright day—white, grey, and black, with Savonarola bringing up the rear. The Franciscans were in grey—a symbol for Francis Maitland Balfour.

In addition, the Bible, its stories and its texts, which was also freely used as a cultural resource in the scripts would still have had such a powerful emotional resonance for the automatists’ and investigators’ generation (even if they no longer had a conventional faith). So, one must suspect that not all the allusions made were carefully crafted from an external source but could easily have been produced by a dream-like free association. Larsen (2012) has looked at the impact of the Bible in his A People of One Book: The Bible and the Victorians and the way it affected the philosophy and actions of important Victorians right across society, including those like Huxley and Annie Besant who rejected its miraculous premises. A number of the symbols used for the Messianic Child, Moses in the bulrushes/John the Baptist symbols, references to out of captivity, to the promised land, the Babylonian exile, would all have been familiar to the
automatists and might well have come virtually unbidden to their pens. Take for example:

Helen Verrall 11/9/1911:

The promised land—he shall lead his people—the land of Egypt bondsmen to a strange race The chosen people the destiny of a nation—Ecce homo.

Helen Verrall never knew anything about the Messianic implications of the scripts till the 1930s. What, therefore, was the source of the phrases—her recent reading, random association, telepathy from another automatist, or the external design of a discarnate intelligence?

One should not, however, exaggerate the influence of poetic and literary language on Balfour and Piddington. They were absolutely clear that their interpretations were not literary in the literary appreciation or criticism sense. There was no effort to get at what Shakespeare, Shelley, or Keats or whomever actually meant unless the script intelligence seemed to think that relevant. For example, in the Hope, Star and Browning case, Gerald Balfour clearly and firmly distinguished between the scriptic meaning of the C Major of this Life and Browning’s meaning. They might overlap but for him the key questions were distinct: what does it mean in the original poem? Has it the same meaning in the scripts? (Piddington 1921: 27–35). For him the crucial point over and beyond the celebrated cross correspondence was the relevance of this and the other scripts to the prediction of a Messianic Child and the coming of a Golden Age. This applied to Balfour’s and Piddington’s treatment of all the literary and cultural references. Their use was purely utilitarian and for scriptic purposes, even if their combination, to the modern reader, could produce (as in Eliot’s poetry) an aesthetic frisson, an emotional and imaginative synthesis, built on unexpected and laconic juxtaposition.

The investigators’ elite status in society may well have predisposed them to look favourably on the positive and optimistic long-term messages in the scripts. However, later readers of the scripts may well boggle when examining the psychological eugenics theme in the automatic writings. But this would be to read
later appalling associations of the word back into the Edwardian period. Before, and for some time after, the First World War, many middle- and upper-class people of different persuasions saw some intervention of that sort as necessary to prevent the continued decay and degeneration of the nation’s human stock. Arthur Balfour was a member of the Eugenics Education Society and gave the 1908 Henry Sidgwick memorial lecture on the subject of decadence. He encouraged the establishment of a chair of genetics at Cambridge, addressed the First International Eugenics Conference (held at the University of London) in 1912, and supported the passing of the Mental Deficiency Act in 1913 (see Rose, J. 1986: 135–41; Searle 1976: 13–40, 72). Gerald Balfour seems to have shared his brother’s views.

One could argue that there was more than a whiff of elitist hypocrisy in all this. In fact, Gerald Balfour (certainly) and Henry Asquith and George Wyndham (apparently) had children with women other than their wives. But that was quite different, they might have countered, from the feckless immoral activities of the lower classes. Curzon’s behaviour well illustrated this double standard. He had a mistress in Westbourne Terrace. The liaison foundered. The mistress unwisely decided to blackmail him and sent letters to senior politicians denouncing him. These were stopped and destroyed. She confessed to Curzon that on the night he left England ‘she went on the street and took a man’ (Egremont 1977). Curzon’s reaction was reflective of his class and the time: ‘Treachery, betrayal, anger, abuse, revenge—all I have forgiven but coarse and vulgar sin never—no, not till I die.’ The politician who sorted the situation out for him was, interestingly, George Wyndham, whom it was alleged (probably falsely) was the real father of Anthony Eden (Thorpe 2003).

This fear of the immoral masses and the need to control them should not be overstated. Harris (1993:232) has pointed out the wide spectrum of views that the Edwardian eugenics movement contained, ranging from a non-interventionist policy of neglect to active ‘policies of selective breeding and sterilization of the unfit’. And one of Arthur Balfour’s great achievements was the Education Act of 1902 which introduced the public funding of secondary education from the rates (Searle 2004: 329–33).
All this has to be seen in the context of the lives of the investigators before and after World War I, the civilised douceur of life for the upper and upper middle classes which Joad (1949) outlined as a preamble to his biography of Bernard Shaw (though see Hynes 1968 for a corrective to this view). It is really difficult to put oneself back into the cultural and historical context that shaped these people and the general assumption even among many moderates and social reformers, including a number of the automatists and their wider circle, that the British Empire had a uniquely civilising role to play in the world (Bush 2000). Imperialism, eugenics, and the occult subculture created by Annie Besant and others (Owen 2004) could all have fused at a subliminal level in the investigators’ minds to soften and make less unacceptable the outrageous claims made by the scripts. After all, if such things could happen at all, it would make sense for the child to have been fathered by a Balfour whose brother had been Prime Minister and who was a central figure in the War Coalition fighting the forces of darkness—thus might Gerald Balfour and Piddington have mused subconsciously.

They had to be very careful, therefore, as to what they could reveal about the true nature of the scripts and when. It was not till the summer of 1912 (Hamilton 2107: 104-105) that the interpreters first began to treat the scripts as one potentially intelligible whole. Statements made in the Proceedings about methods of interpretation tended to focus, a little misleadingly, purely on the cross-correspondences and on elements of paranormal cognition like predictions. Issues of privacy prevented, for many years, a fair estimate of the scale of the task Piddington and Balfour faced in balancing the delicate relationship between private intimacies and public interpretation. As Piddington said: ‘We do not pretend to understand all the scripts, but we do understand enough to realise that they contain matter of so private a nature that it cannot be published for a long time to come…’

The privacy issue adversely complicated the wider publication and reception of the results of the interpreters’ efforts. It prevented the best evidence being revealed and it established a secrecy and mystery about the cross-correspondences which a number of people, particularly if they themselves had had clear, positive evidence from direct sittings with mediums, found hugely
irritating. The long prohibition on examining the original scripts and associated papers is the prime example of this. The Salter archive was not open till the late 1990s and Winifred Coombe-Tennant’s four locked boxes deposited at Harvard were not available for inspection till 2008. Nor was the repository of materials from Jean Balfour (the Kremer archive) available till the early 2000s.

Nevertheless, Balfour and Piddington were content to work patiently on the scripts till the time was right to reveal their wider structure. Balfour (1927) outlined this pattern in his introduction to volume 2 of *Notes and Excursuses*. Period 1 was the accumulation of material which would provide evidence of post-mortem design largely through the cross-correspondences. Period 2 started with the scripts of Winifred Coombe-Tennant which from November 1909 onwards began to spell out the plan that a child was coming whose worldly impact would be considerable. The initial reference appeared to be to Alexander Coombe-Tennant but Gerald Balfour argued, through various bits of internal evidence in the scripts, ‘that they had never looked upon Alexander (Henry’s elder brother after the death of Christopher) as more than the forerunner of a more perfect being yet to appear’. Period 3 began on Palm Sunday 1912 with the 289th script of Winifred Coombe-Tennant, continued with the birth of Augustus Henry Coombe-Tennant on 9 April 1913, and culminated with her sitting with Arthur Balfour in 1916 that referred to the Palm Maiden’s hair in the silver/bronze casket. Then came the long fourth period, which, Gerald Balfour asserted, was a period of repetition and consolidation in order to drive the main messages in the scripts home. It also continued the theme of current and future wars culminating in world peace and world civilisation, as well as predicting a future late flowering greatness for Arthur Balfour.

This overall structuring and ordering of the material seems problematic. One can see in the early scripts apparently disjointed statements that made plausible sense when the Palm Maiden story was revealed—or at least a good if not definitive case (because of the issue of cherry-picking, etc.) can be made for it. But the Plan rested, at least to this writer, on more fragile grounds. Each of Winifred Coombe-Tennant’s children was seen as absolutely remarkable and the concept of psychological eugenics only really appeared explicit in her scripts. It is true that the return of the Golden Age was strongly flagged up in a number of
scripts outside hers but these seemed to be more in the sense of a general development of the human race rather than one specific individual. The only evidence outside this, and it was dramatic evidence, was the series of sittings Winifred Coombe-Tennant had with Leonora Piper, and on Gurney's insistence in them that she bear another child which in some way would be strongly influenced by him, and would do great things (Johnson 1934c).

Alice Johnson summarised these sittings in a letter to W.H. Salter (1935): ‘From the fourth sitting, on Oct. 23, 1910, onwards, E.G. through Mrs Piper asked Mrs Willett to bear another child… in some sense his child… The coming child is not indeed called a Messiah, but only a Genius… an exceptional kind of genius.’ One can theorize that perhaps, as much with Leonora Piper's trance writing, she was picking up subliminal yearnings from Winifred Coombe-Tennant. But the sittings with Leonora Piper began both before the affair and also expressed views that strongly contradicted Winifred Coombe-Tennant’s conscious wishes. She found childbirth extremely difficult and had no desire to experience it again. Her published diary (Lord 2011: 56–61) shows the overwhelming impact of these sittings (which were orchestrated by Lodge at Mariemont in Birmingham, where on two occasions she stayed for several days) on her own. They clearly anticipated the Plan. Mrs Piper had sown the seed but, as has been raised before, what independent corroboration of this was there in the scripts of the earlier automatists, particularly Margaret Verrall?

After the physical affair with Balfour had ended, the original scriptic intensity declined and Helen Salter, Mrs Wilson, Edith Lyttelton, and the Richmonds became the keepers of the flame. But their writings may have been given an unwarranted authority since by this time Balfour and Piddington already had a pretty fully formed idea, from their vast reading, of what patterns they were looking for and the kind of evidence that would confirm them. This could well have been (though this is not certain) reinforced by the fact that the Richmonds and Edith Lyttelton were close friends, all intimately involved in the SPR business, and all hovering on the fringes of the inner mysteries so carefully guarded by Piddington and Balfour.
The value of these later scripts is questionable but they certainly added to the volume of material and to the scale of the interpretive task. Piddington recognised that few readers would follow him through the intricate processes of his argument and that the demands on them would be considerable. In his introduction to volumes three, four and five of Notes and Excursuses (1934) he referred whimsically to the gentle reader, the patient reader, and the long-suffering reader who had to wade through the scripts and a full-blown scholarly apparatus of footnotes, cross-references, and commentary. One could be tempted to see him and Gerald Balfour as a kind of British Bouvard and Pecuchet or a highly literate Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, were it not for the fact that their standards were very high, their industry (particularly Piddington’s) prodigious, and their central questions—the survival of bodily death and the hope of world peace—hardly trivial.

On the other hand, the clinging to this complex rationale and methodology may not just have created order and meaning where there was none but it may also have led them to miss genuine, more straightforward examples of paranormal cognition. Take, for example, the case of Bobby Palmer.

**The Bobby Palmer Case**

Gerald Balfour’s family was concerned about the fate of Bobby Palmer (Captain, the Hon. R. Palmer) who was with the British Army in Mesopotamia and who died from wounds there at some time in the first half of 1916. Palmer had a romantic attachment to one of Gerald Balfour’s daughters, and his father, Lord Selborne, was both a political colleague of Arthur’s and Gerald’s and a personal friend. The fate of Bobby Palmer seems to have been alluded to in two of Winifred Coombe-Tennant’s scripts (she was aware that the family were worried about him) and in one of Margaret Verrall’s (Balfour 1920: 283–5).

Winifred Coombe-Tennant 11/3/1916:

On March 11, 1916, at 9.50 a.m. Mrs. Coombe-Tennant felt a rush of somebody else’s urgency, and the words ‘Pray, pray, pray’ pressed on her mind. She waited a second or two; the impression was renewed; she felt frightened in a vague
undefined way, and seemed to catch the sense of stress. She knelt down, and began to pray—in the sense of reaching out to some Power beyond things here. The sense of rest came to her at once. Very shortly afterwards she tried for automatic script; and in answer to her questions the script said there was no danger to her or hers: ‘None what ever. But there are those needing help.’ Question Is it something happening in the war? Yes, simply pray—that is the message.

Margaret Verrall 17/3/1916:

Consule Planco Palmam qui meruit ferat ...there has been a special message awaiting record but I do not think you have taken it yet Palm Palmer Give me my scallop shell of quiet Look back at that—qua lambit Hydaspes Oh it all seems so muddled & yet it is a plain story I have to tell—Try Browning A death in the desert but nothing to do with the subject of the poem, only the words help— Dominus illuminatio mea—That comes in—...My mind to me a kingdom is...the last quotation has a special Point

Margaret Verrall did not know Bobby Palmer or that the Balfours were interested in him. Yet her script was particularly apposite. The first Latin tag was from a Horace ode which indirectly referred to a young man on active service, as was Horace in the consulship of Plancus (C.1.7), and the second Latin reference (let him who has won the palm bear it) was the motto of Lord Nelson. *Dominus illuminatio mea* was the motto of Oxford University and Palmer was an Oxford scholar. 'lambit Hydaspes' (a river) was an allusion to Horace C.1.22, an ode often used to symbolise Arthur Balfour in scripts. The last quotation was particularly pointed up as was the usual way with the scripts and Gerald Balfour later discovered (in 1918) that the line ‘My mind to me a kingdom is’ came from a poem by the Elizabethan Sir George Dyer and the sentiments of the first four lines were accurately reflected in another of Winifred Coombe-Tennant’s scripts on 30/5/1916. In addition, she had a specific reference to the Selborne family in a script three days later.

Winifred Coombe-Tennant 2/6/1916:
A pair of friends David & Jonathan that should be said a community of occupation links of friendship...And weep for Adonais He beckoned like a star from the abodes where the Eternal are A glistering star A man with two dogs in a leash dogs built for speed Greyhounds—but these are black long & clean limbed There is a point in these dogs which should be identified They have a meaning

There was a clearish reference to the Selborne coat of arms in the latter part of the script since two greyhounds sable formed the supporters of that coat of arms and, as has been seen, the Hon. Robert Palmer was the son of Lord Selborne. So, a fair case can be made out for some evidential material related to Palmer, but Gerald Balfour found himself briefly locked in a tussle with Lord Selborne over the identity of the second person referred to in the Coombe-Tennant script. Lord Selborne wrote: ‘I am surprised that you think David and Jonathan in the W script of June 2/16 cannot naturally be interpreted as referring to Bobby and Purefoy Cawston. Knowing the romantic friendship between the two I have never taken it for anything else. David and Jonathan exactly and without exaggeration describes their relationship—‘a community of occupation links of friendship’, ‘a brother in arms by ties united.’ They never knew each other till they found themselves in the same regiment in 1914, and then they found a wonderful correspondence of tastes and opinions... then come the quotations from poetry about friends parted, all very apposite. When you see the Leonard script of my sitting last Wednesday you will see that Feda at once said that Bobby (not named but described) had with him another young man who was not with him before, and proceeded to describe Purefoy well. Again and again it was said how immensely happy these two were to be together, and finally he was named.’

However, Balfour argued that the second individual was Charles Lister (who had died in 1915 after Gallipoli), because of the play on the name Lister in ‘glistered’, and that Lord Selborne did not know the way the scriptic intelligence worked through puns and puzzles. Certainly, there was a good cross-correspondence between Coombe-Tennant and Verrall scripts predictive of the death of Palmer. But there was a definite clash over the evidence and its interpretation. Lord Selborne preferred the direct evidence from traditional mediumship, especially from the remarkable Mrs Leonard, while one senses a proprietorial element in Gerald Balfour’s approach, and a lack of common sense, basing the identity of
Jonathan largely on the scriptic pun ‘glistered’. There is one further point. From her diary of 27/3/1916 when staying at Fishers Hill, it is clear that Winifred Coombe-Tennant knew of the concern for Bobby Palmer since Nellie Balfour and he had a relationship. Therefore, only the Margaret Verrall element in these scripts had a claim to paranormality (Lord 2011).

One wonders, too, whether the general reputation as psychical researchers that Piddington and Gerald Balfour had was fully deserved. Certainly, Gerald Balfour was wheeled out on a number of occasions to pronounce authoritatively on the subject. He was involved in the case of David Wilson, a chemist who had invented an electronic machine which he claimed could communicate with the dead. Unfortunately, since one of the messages was in German, Wilson was soon in trouble with the authorities and Gerald Balfour tried to help (Foster 2003: 80–1). He was also (admiring the detailed accuracy of their report on Mrs Leonard), supportive of Una Troubridge and Radclyffe Hall in the difficulties they faced when Radclyffe Hall took out an action for slander against Fox-Pitt, a member of the SPR, who accused them of immorality (Souhami 1998: 100, 105–12). Gerald Balfour was seen to have intellectual and social authority but his range was rather narrow. When he became President of the SPR in 1906 he had a philosophical interest in survival but no detailed field experience, and the bulk of his and Piddington’s expertise through life was in the assessment of mental mediumship with mediums, by and large, who were part of their own circle. They had little experience of physical mediumship or ghost hunting and when asked to investigate the famous case of the apparition of the chimney sweep Samuel Bull (who was seen by several members of his family after his death) they arrived, for a variety of reasons, too late to make any direct observations (Mackenzie 1982: 171–5), and one speculates that they might have been secretly relieved.

In fact, they had more than enough on their agenda given the sheer complexity of the communicators’ methodology. So convoluted was it that it almost defeated its own purpose. As Piddington stated: ‘...I cannot rid myself of a suspicion that in their attempt to invent a form of evidence that cannot be easily attributed to the automatists, the communicators have created a body of evidence so complicated that it will repel investigators.’
Piddington was quite candid in the *Notes and Excursuses* both about the effort involved to follow their arguments and the puzzles and inconsistencies that still remained. Addressing his remarks to any future readers of the scripts, he suggested that the reader was not competent to pass judgement until he/she had read some of the volumes three times. He was acutely aware of the problem of false or misguided interpretation with regard to such complex material. He stated that ‘In this connection I would add that I regard several of the interpretations that I have advanced in these and earlier volumes of *Notes and Excursuses* as no better than tentative. Some I believe to be right in the main; others to be partially right; while some are probably wrong in the main, and some further study has shown to be wrong’ (Piddington 1934).

Examples of tortuous interpretation, false starts, and the discovery of deeper, more complex patterns abound. The Bacchus and Semele case has already been mentioned. Others include the layers of meaning discovered in the One-Horse Dawn case which was initially meant by Arthur Verrall to be an experiment in telepathy. Eventually it was believed that the discarnate communicators had hijacked this experiment: that the underlying purpose was to draw attention to Jebb’s note on Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannicus* in which Jebb discussed compound adjectives whose first element was a word associated with number, that is, monopolon, etc. This was then expanded into references to Oedipus, the blind wanderer, who stood in the scripts for Arthur Balfour. The other element was reference to the herb moly and Milton’s Comus, which led the investigators to Verrall’s edition of *Medea* where Verrall quoted Comus in the context of a general discussion on the interpretation of corrupt texts. It was argued that the real point of the allusive reference was to point up the importance of the sacrifice of children in the *Medea*, as part of the general topic of psychological eugenics. So Piddington had ultimately added two layers of mystery to Verrall’s telepathy experiment—the topic of psychological eugenics and a major symbol for Arthur Balfour, one of the two main protagonists in the scripts. The modern reader must continually wonder, perhaps merely through sheer exhaustion, whether the text could bear such weight placed on it. Was each link in the allusive associational chain sufficiently robust?
This dogged ingenuity plus his belief in the overall rationale behind the scripts led Piddington into Herculean efforts to bring apparently disconnected topics under general headings that fitted with and reinforced the Story and the Plan. With regard to Trix Fleming’s scripts: ‘I came to the conclusion that there are at least sixteen different topics in Fleming scripts which are clearly interconnected.’ These are absolutely bewildering, at first sight, to the contemporary reader (Piddington 1943a: 220-221):

Lord Bute and Shelley’s *Adonais*,
Everard Feilding and members of his family,
Lord and Lady Mount-Temple, their residence Broadlands, and their friend Stainton Moses,
Myers’s death at Rome, and the date of it—Jan. 17, 1901,
Wireless Telegraphy,
Henry Fawcett, and other persons of the same surname,
Various people of the name Tennant,
The name Merrifield,
Sensitive Plants,
Eliot Norton,
Leslie Stephen,
F.W.Maitland,
Cordelia Marshall,
William James and members of his family,
Myers’s birthday, his marriage, and his children,
Laurence Oliphant, members of his family.

There is not space to explain the inter-relationships between Piddington’s topic headings but one can easily see from them that there was considerable detail on the death of Myers, Lodge’s role (Wireless Telegraphy), the Tennant family, and the Verralls. However, much of this was in the public domain and one has the uneasy feeling, at times, that the idiosyncratic style of Trix Fleming’s automatic writing, plus her superb memory, and Piddington’s ingenious sleuthing and synthesising skills contributed much to the creation of the product. In fact, Piddington sometimes argued that it was the way the material was combined, rather than the revelation of paranormal knowledge, which was the truly
paranormal element in the scripts. Unfortunately, this put a huge premium on other people being able both to follow the argument and also to verify the source material and the automatist’s access to it.

One keeps coming back to the central question—why did some of the material have to be expressed in such an indirect and sometimes grotesque way? This particularly refers to the Plan, for in its essence one could argue that aspects of it were not bizarre or objectionable, indeed it could be seen as a fusion of the best of optimistic late-Victorian liberal progressive values with Myersian concepts of cosmic and spiritual evolution. And, if one accepts and acknowledges a spiritual world that can interact with the mundane world (Saints in the Catholic Church), is it that odd or illogical to assume that the discarnate world might wish to work with the incarnate world for its spiritual progress? But what was most difficult to take was the distasteful message expressed, through extremely odd and indirect symbolism, that Daphne died to act as a spur to get Winifred Coombe-Tennant involved in automatic writing, and that Antony and Christopher Lyttelton were failed experiments on the way to the Messianic Child, Henry Coombe-Tennant. One can detect a certain unease in the commentators’ writings on all these matters, particularly the last element. Salter, in his introduction to the scripts and in correspondence with Piddington, preferred to stress the wider point—an emphasis on children of the spirit rather than one individual; and Piddington, for his part, produced a detailed handwritten paper trying to establish clarity on this point, particularly with regard to the way in which Winifred Coombe-Tennant’s maternal predisposition may have coloured the scripts (Salter 1948, 1947; Piddington 1947).

C.D. Broad (1925: 542–6) has commented on the need for someone not connected emotionally, socially, intellectually with the cross-correspondences, either in their production or interpretation, to take an objective look at the materials. Even Mrs Sidgwick, renowned for her critical balance and insight, was not immune to this, particularly with regard to Arthur Balfour. As Oppenheim has put it (1995: 196–232), ‘Mrs. Sidgwick’s commitment to her husband muted her brother-worship during Henry’s lifetime, but after his death in 1900, it re-emerged undiminished. Visiting Whittingehame in September 1906, Beatrice Webb commented on the way that Eleanor, Alice and their two sisters-in-law all paid
reverence to “Prince Arthur”. Broad’s point was particularly with regard to the earlier complex cross-correspondences but it applies with equal, if not with greater, force to the hugely emotional issues of the Palm Maiden’s love for the Knight, and the Messianic Child or Children theme. The judgement does not necessarily require the skills of a classicist since all the main references and translations were provided by the original investigators and very little interpretation rests on disputed issues of translation. But what has never been done is the application of assessment criteria to a broad swathe of scripts, not just to see if individual cross-correspondences stand up (some of them certainly do) but to test Balfour’s fundamental assertion (1927: viii) that the Story and the Plan were ‘analogous to that given by a scientific hypothesis that brings into unity a multiplicity of phenomena apparently disparate’, and that this could only be tested ‘by a careful comparative study of a very large number of individual scripts’: in other words that the scripts could almost be seen as one giant symbolic cross-correspondence. Elements of this task have been attempted by the current writer (Hamilton 2017: 169-175) but it was a very, very limited sampling.

There can be little doubt that the more impersonal theme is relatively easy to identify: the gradual evolution away from the blood feuding savagery of the ancient world to a civilisation based on ethics and law. In the scripts this was frequently illustrated and symbolised by references to the House of Atreus and the treatment of it by the Greek tragedians. The narrative was that Thyestes seduced Aerope, the wife of Atreus the King of Mycenae. She then stole for him the golden lamb which gave the right to rule Mycenae. For this impiety Zeus temporarily reversed the movement of the sun (see One-Horse Dawn episode: Hamilton 2017:21) and Atreus, in revenge, feigned reconciliation and fed Thyestes the flesh of his own sons at a banquet. Thyestes cursed the House of Atreus and so the bloodbath began: Atreus’s son, Agamemnon, was murdered on his return from Troy by his wife Clytemnestra (because he had sacrificed their daughter Iphigeneia to obtain favourable winds for the Greek fleet to sail to Troy). Agamemnon’s son Orestes, with the help of his sister Electra, killed Clytemnestra and the curse was eventually lifted when Orestes, pursued by the Furies, was tried for murder by an Athenian tribunal on the Acropolis, only to be saved from death by the casting vote of Athena. It was argued, by A.W. Verrall and others, that this was the beginning of a more civilised legal and social system, and that
the Furies were changed from avenging into beneficent powers (the *Eumenides* of Aeschylus).

The scripts particularly referred to this by quotations from Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon* (140–150). At the opening of the play the watchman in his tower was awaiting the return of the brothers Agamemnon and Menelaus from Troy and then the chorus recounts the story of the Greek army’s prophet Calchas seeing two eagles tearing apart and feasting on a pregnant hare. These eagles were symbols for the two brothers who would defeat Troy, but there would be a terrible vengeance, ‘Sing Sorrow, Sorrow, but let the good prevail’.

The concept of spiritual and ethical progress was further alluded to in the Virgilian references to the coming of Augustus and the return of the Golden Age, and to the Christian slant Dante gave this, since Virgil’s work was later interpreted as a prophecy of the coming of Christ. Finally, there were a number of references in the scripts (some via Wagner) to the old Norse and Germanic gods gradually becoming more civilised.

The scripts were full of such allusions and quotations but the special role allotted to Henry Coombe-Tennant in this process of gradual civilisation seems less clear. However, Piddington argued (with some reservations) that that was what the interpretation of the scripts pointed to. There is a huge paradox here. Both Piddington and Gerald Balfour were humane and civilised men of a certain class. Both were fully aware of the woolly thinking and foibles of humanity. Yet in this one area they lacked insight. Why should Henry Coombe-Tennant be the chosen one? Surely the process of psychological eugenics ought to be taking place all over the world continually? If the message was the evolution of humanity of which Henry was merely seen as a good example, a mark for all to aim at, that was less extreme and more acceptable, but it would still be a stretch too far for most people.

On the other hand, some of the evidence was fairly explicit with regard to one of Winifred’s children: the linking of the murder of Medea’s children through the Epiphany references of myrrh and frankincense to the birth of Daphne. She was born on 6/1/1907. This was in the script below just hours before her death.
Helen Verrall 20/7/1908 (with Margaret Verrall):

Why tarry ye for the bridegroom when the hour is past? The day of the feast with myrrh and with frankincense a white bull for the sacrifice garlanded and with the horns gold tipped and a train of maidens therewith With song and dance the hours are sped/With rhythmic beat of holy feet/Honour the maiden newly wed Sullen Medea and horror heaped on horror till the senses reel Something flaps in the wind something white

One very final point. One has looked at those predetermining factors that might have predisposed Piddington and Balfour to interpret the scripts in a particular way, but what really made them stick at it for so long, particularly as the scripts in the later stages merely seemed to be recycling the same symbolic messages? One answer may well lie in the theory of cognitive dissonance developed by Festinger (2008) in When Prophecy Fails. This theory developed from the remarkable case of Marian Keech, who through automatic writing, was told by aliens that the world was shortly to end but she and her colleagues would be rescued. Two of Festinger’s colleagues managed to infiltrate the organisation and monitored the various psychological processes the group used to excuse the continued failures of the prophecies.

There is only a partial fit with the cross-correspondence automatic writings since Henry was still relatively young when Balfour and Piddington died. There was, theoretically, still time for him to make an impact. But it could help to explain, particularly, Piddington’s obsessive efforts in the Notes and Excursuses in the late 1930s and 1940s to fit as much corroborating detail as possible into the framework that they believed had been revealed in the Coombe-Tennant scripts. Taking a summary of Festinger’s theory, point by point, how might this apply to Piddington?

(Festinger: 4.)
1. The belief must be held with conviction and relate to what the believer does and how he behaves.
2. The believer must have committed himself to action that is very difficult to undo.
3. The belief must be specific enough and sufficiently connected to the real world for events to refute it.
4. Such refuting events must occur and be recognised by the individual holding the belief.

Some aspects of the intellectual behaviour of Balfour and Piddington fit this theoretical model. There was a commitment for the whole of the second halves of their lives in terms of intellectual effort and also of finance for the study and printing of the scripts (1 and 2). It could be argued that part of what fuelled the interpretive drive, apart from the elitism and vanity mentioned above, was the unconscious fear that they had wasted the years certainly from 1912 to 1945 when Gerald Balfour died (Piddington died in 1952). They were, however, spared the actual direct challenge to their beliefs (3 and 4) since they died while Henry was still in his mid- to late thirties. On the other hand, Piddington (Roy 2008) wrote to Gerald Balfour near the end of his life that he never regretted their collaborative efforts regardless of what Henry might or might not achieve, and in their *Notes and Excursuses* and articles in the *Proceedings* they were very willing, in a civilised fashion (as were all the core team investigating the scripts), to debate and argue through different points of view, scaffolding their arguments with the appropriate scholarly apparatus, even on occasions to an unbelievable nth footnote.
Were the aims of the communicators fulfilled?

The main aims of the communicators were:

- That Arthur Balfour should be convinced of the Palm Maiden’s post-mortem existence and of her continuing love and support for him;
- That the incredibly complex structure of cross-correspondences and symbolism revealed in the scripts, plus the paranormal cognition displayed, would convince careful readers that telepathy and clairvoyance were inadequate to explain the phenomena. Only the hypothesis of survival would cover the full spectrum of evidence;
- By intensive efforts from the spirit world to promote world peace (which would be successful after considerable difficulties) through supporting the incarnation (the process quite naturally was opaque!) of a number of highly gifted and special individuals, amongst whom Augustus Henry Coombe-Tennant was the putative leader. No precise timescale was provided either for the initiation of the work from the spirit side or the date of its successful completion.

Was Arthur Balfour convinced that the Palm Maiden had actually contacted him? He was deeply moved by the Coombe-Tennant scripts, but that is not the same as conviction. He had a deep spiritual intuition of survival and mentioned this on a number of occasions during the First World War to women friends who had lost sons in battle. While interested in mediumship and the paranormal he appears to have undertaken no specific investigation of mental mediumship to contact May Lyttelton and to have relied completely on the initiative of others. To the outsider, the most obvious question to be posed is why Arthur Balfour didn’t have a sitting, one to one, with a high-quality traditional medium like Mrs Leonard? This seems never to have happened and his own intuitive sense of survival emanating from childhood (a religious faith that never seems to have been shaken by his scientific interests) probably sufficed him in general terms.

Certainly, when he did sit with Winifred Coombe-Tennant and in his last years with Mrs Salter and the Richmonds, the results were mixed. Some with Winifred Coombe-Tennant were persuasive and moving and the one on 19/6/1916 was specific enough to remind him of the silver bronze casket he had had made for
May Lyttelton’s hair. But those with the others were less so and just repeated the standard symbolic formula. For example, on one occasion Piddington and Gerald Balfour knew that Arthur Balfour would be at Fishers Hill at the same time as Helen Salter and so they arranged for him to sit with her. It was a short twenty-minute automatic speaking trance at about 4 pm and W.H. Salter recorded it. Helen Salter was not in the least put off that Arthur Balfour, former prime minister, foreign secretary, senior politician, and diplomat, was to sit with her: ‘As regards a script—I am perfectly willing to try. Knowing the steamroller habits of my script, I hardly think it likely to be affected by any slight accident—like [Balfour]. But I will do my best.’ Afterwards the Salters stated that Arthur Balfour, who was rather deaf by this time and couldn’t hear her clearly, didn’t seem much interested in it and ‘couldn’t make head or tail of it’ (Piddington 1930: 603–12). But both Piddington and Gerald Balfour thought the script was an excellent one containing all the appropriate symbolism for the Palm Maiden and the Faithful Knight and quite distinct from Mrs Salter’s other scripts of that period. In other words, the information from the sitting fitted in with the formal symbolism of the scripts rather than providing Arthur Balfour with personal, intimate evidence of survival. In fact, Edith Lyttelton wrote to Lodge (SPR MS 35) shortly before Arthur Balfour’s death that he seemed to be a bit bewildered about it all and perhaps Lodge, of whom he was fond, could come over and make things clearer.

Nevertheless, as has been seen, in Winifred Coombe-Tennant’s final sittings with him shortly before his death something seems to have got through, but how much of it did he really appreciate? And, to come down to earth, Winifred Coombe-Tennant had been Gerald’s lover and then friend for nineteen years. No self-respecting and independent member of the SPR, trained in canons of evidence by Myers, Gurney, and the Sidgwick’s, could possibly have accepted her statements as veridical. Balfour’s bewilderment about the evidence for survival appears to have continued for a while after his death. Winifred Coombe-Tennant wrote to Gerald Balfour (1938: 19) in April 1930 describing her first sense of Arthur Balfour’s post-mortem existence: ‘I have been feeling very exhausted since my return from Eton W.O.’s affairs to see to by day, & apparently—A.J. B’s by night! … apparently the process of “finding his feet” over there involves this drain on my vitality.’
She was told by the Dark Young Man that Arthur Balfour needed temporarily to stay in touch with her world, through her, till the confusion of transition settled. However, by August that had gone and in sleep she had contact with him: ‘I found myself face to face with A.J.B.—he clear-eyed, vigorous, full of radiant life… his whole frame the embodiment of strength & energy, as of a man in the full zenith of his powers.’

But, again, these psychic impressions contained nothing that could be assessed and verified. There is also some uncertainty about the third broad aim, both the timing, and the specific role of Henry Coombe-Tennant. It is quite possible, of course, for a variety of reasons outside the communicators’ control that the script interpretation could be generally correct but the predictions too complex, idealistic, and problematic to fulfil in an earthly environment. Indeed, one consistent theme in the scripts was that the communicators did not claim infallibility or complete command of the situation, either in the accuracy and clarity of their messages or their ability to shape and influence individuals and events. There is no doubt that the emphasis on Henry Coombe-Tennant as a world leader and initiator of peace (remarkable man though he was) was a failure, and the documents in the Kremer collection at Cambridge and the Coombe-Tennant archive at Harvard suggest some possible reasons for this (Roy 2008: 553).

There were perhaps certain features in his character—a lack of drive, a certain detachment from the everyday world, not unlike his father? He had brains and courage and when faced with challenges rose well to them, but he was not a self-starter and perhaps found obvious political rhetoric and solutions too simplistic. Yet, huge expectations were placed on him by Gerald Balfour and Piddington, without his having, for many years, any direct sense of this or the challenge he had to rise to, and, thankfully for him, that failure on his part might discredit the intense interpretive efforts of more than thirty years. For, as Gerald Balfour put it, on one level the whole business appeared ‘in the highest degree fantastic and improbable’ and ‘if the promises do not come to fruition who will wade through these scripts?’

But it is possible to rescue the above aims and intentions from total failure. As Brookes-Smith (1964) has stated, provided one interpreted the Plan in a more general sense without the focus on one charismatic and gifted individual, there
are arguments (from a UK-centric perspective) in favour of the theme of progressive world improvements interspersed with considerable periods of conflict: the creation of the Welfare State, the move for international control of nuclear weapons, the United Nations, all seemed to be suggesting a move in the right direction. On the other hand, it is easy at almost any time in history to select pointers making for peace and indicators suggesting the trend was in the opposite direction. Moreover, in terms of acceptance by the general educated public, the two main claims in the scripts can work against each other. It is quite possible for someone to take very seriously the evidence in the scripts for a sophisticated approach towards proving survival, but that evidence is in great danger of being contaminated by the inherent and ridiculously implausible claim made for the status and future role of Augustus Henry Coombe-Tennant.

Moreover, the concentration on this topic and the inevitable climate of secrecy surrounding the cross-correspondences, with the frequent hints that, though remarkable evidence had been provided, there was still much that was too private and intimate to be revealed, could well have damaged the SPR. Dingwall (1930–1), a tenacious critic of what he saw as the ‘Old Guard’ of the SPR, lamented that the SPR, to the detriment of a broader, more objective approach, concentrated on ‘the investigation of manifestations produced by private persons in their own immediate entourage’. If one adds this sense of almost Masonic-like secrecy to the already academic, rarefied, and exclusive ambience of the core leadership, one can see why, after the First World War, so many members were restive. A number of people, particularly those of the Spiritualist persuasion, became frustrated by what they saw as a lack of vigour and leadership in investigating (or dismissing without adequate enquiry) the remarkable physical and mental mediumship and spontaneous phenomena that was reported to them (Hamilton 2013b).

In addition, as has been seen, the Messianic element can cast doubt on the whole body of the scripts and reduce them, in many eyes, to the status of sub-theosophical mumbo jumbo, and millenarian dottiness, of which there was much in the years 1900–1930. Gerald Balfour’s consistent emphasis in Notes and Excursuses on the seven separate influences of the communicators blending to form the octave, the Messianic Child, smacks a little of this: the seven rays, and
the seven types of personality outlined in the books of Alice Bailey, an erstwhile disciple of Blavatsky (Balfour 1927; Hastings 1991: 91–4).

Therefore, it is perfectly reasonable to ask to what extent the scripts, their production and interpretation, are indicative of a cult like the Panacea Society (which was also based on automatic writing initially and, in that case, in the return of the actual Christ: see Shaw 2011) or many of the organisations surveyed in Barrett’s *The New Believers* (2001). Or the case of Marion Keech mentioned above. Superficially, the comparison is invalid. The academic enquiry of the SPR investigators was conducted in a balanced and critical way quite alien to the above cases and none of them made drastic personal lifestyle changes and commitments or sealed themselves off from conventional society, in ways reminiscent of cultish behaviour. But it could be argued that there were some similarities in that their initial premises and conclusions were irrational and delusional, that together, as a small core of elite and secretive individuals within the SPR, they mutually reinforced these beliefs, and that, as mentioned before, they suffered a certain cognitive dissonance as time went on, which made Piddington, particularly, burrow deeper and deeper and more ingeniously into the scripts for further confirmation.

This point, again, is only partially accurate. The first period of the scripts, up to 1912, bore witness to the investigators, without any doubt, examining and testing the material with great rigour and not from a prior commitment to survival, except in the case of Lodge. It took much solid documentary evidence for them to shift, gradually, towards a survivalist position. They were, of course, on much more dubious ground, with regard to the Messianic element. Yet, even here, though Gerald Balfour’s final statement on all this was unambiguous with regard to interpretation, it was much more nuanced with regard to expectation (1938: 2–4):

‘Do we still believe that the facts of the case are best explained on the hypothesis that the Communicators are really what they claim to be, and that, they have been genuinely engaged in an effort to bring about the birth of a child of Messianic order? To this our answer is emphatically in the affirmative. No more now, than then, do we accept the evidence for this belief as amounting to conclusive proof. But we are, and have long been, sufficiently convinced of its truth to act as if it were true.’ Moreover, unlike Krishnamurti, no cultic behaviour (except the
embarrassing name ‘Wise One’) ever developed around Henry. As to Henry’s role, or knowledge of the destiny intended for him, Gerald Balfour (1938: 3-4) wrote: ‘The central figure round whom the Scripts turn is now a young man of twenty-five; but signs and wonders are still to seek. Here again we can but wait and see.’

Henry Coombe-Tennant had outstanding intellectual gifts and so for a while it seemed not such a totally implausible prediction, particularly if the scripts were interpreted as the development of a body of remarkable young people rather than the emphasis on one charismatic and inspirational leader (and if the specific embarrassing comparisons with Christ were dropped), but, however interpreted, the plain fact was that Henry, though a remarkable individual, did not have the impact that the scripts suggested.

Finally, how well have the cross-correspondences stood up against the arguments of critics past and present? There has not been a huge amount of published criticism of them and what there is varies in quality. There are thoughtful criticisms (see Carrington 1914-1915; Pigou 1919, 1909d; Maxwell 191-1913; Hude 1912-1913, 1913) published by the SPR and elsewhere, and there are broader more knockabout criticisms that are not so well informed and show no real engagement with the material. One reason for this as Wilson (2012) has pointed out, is that the whole tranche of movements that developed from the 1880s—Occult Societies, Magical Orders, Theosophy, the Spiritualist Movement, etc.—were not using these activities purely for social reasons or creative ones (as Yeats put it, ‘metaphors for poetry’). Many of them actually believed in the reality of the phenomena, as eventually, after a long intellectual struggle, did those assessing the cross-correspondences. To the modern reader, therefore, any involvement in this field must feel like a step back into a pre-Enlightenment world, with all the terrors, superstitions, and stupidities that that might bring. The issue then is how to overcome one’s inevitable initial prejudice against the very idea of the cross-correspondences, their genesis and their purposes, in order to engage in depth with them and evaluate them fairly.

Maxwell (1912–1913), a highly educated French investigator with an excellent command of English, produced the longest and most detailed early ‘outsider’
criticism of the cross-correspondences. Much of his analysis mentioned ‘the usual suspects’: accidental coincidence; subconscious impersonation; arbitrary selection from scripts; automatists too closely involved in the assessment of scripts; cryptomnesia; the banality of many of the correspondences; and a too easy and unthinking acceptance of the spiritist hypothesis. Mrs Sidgwick (1912–13) was able to counter a number of these points. She stressed the efforts taken to trace every statement back to its potential source in the automatist’s normal experience; that the best cross-correspondences were not simple banalities or accidental coincidences and demonstrated purposive intention and creativity beyond the automatists’ own powers; and that rather than coming from ‘spirits’ most of the material came to a large extent from ‘a dissociated phase or portion of the automatist’s own personality’: through which, of course, sometimes came substantial veridical material. However, her response to Maxwell’s point that there were issues with regard to the good faith of the automatists themselves and the blurring of the automatist/investigator role was only partially convincing: ‘I should like to know how M. Maxwell would propose to investigate automatic script, produced otherwise than in a trance, without letting the automatists share in the responsibility. Would he keep them in solitary confinement?’

Because of the nature of the material and its production, and the nature of the relationships between automatists and investigators, tensions between objectivity and control and understanding, support, and motivation were inevitable, and on one level Maxwell was right, particularly as the interpretations became more extreme and the emotional investment in them more intense.

A more sympathetic and subtle commentator on the cross-correspondences was the Swiss psychologist Flournoy (1911: 174–87). Like Pigou, he argued that ‘the caprice shown by the phenomena of the association of ideas’ could, accepting that telepathic impressions existed, give the illusion of external design. But he went further and agreed with the investigators ‘that we are in the presence of a new and original method, deliberately adopted by some superior intelligence in order to prove its existence independent of the medium which it employs’. But though the creator of this method might claim to be Myers and show elements of his intellectual and personal qualities across the automatists, nevertheless both personality and puzzles could be a group subliminal creation steered and led by
Margaret Verrall, who perhaps felt his loss the most keenly. But, sensibly and modestly, he stated ‘that it would be ridiculous to decide so early upon a question so complex’. It is surprising another European, the great polymath Richet (1923: 173–6), a pioneer of psychical research and an intimate of Myers (Hamilton 2009), did not study the cross-correspondences in the depth that Maxwell and Flournoy did. He acknowledged the role of cryptesthesia (clairvoyance) and telepathy in their production; he sided with Carrington that much of the material was the product of ‘simple subconscious memory associations’; and with Maxwell and Flournoy that the subconscious was very good at producing dramatic personifications of individuals. He realised that they had to be studied in depth in order to make a proper judgement: ‘Any analysis of them, however, would be lengthy and if not minute would be unenlightening.’

Amy Tanner (1910) in her Studies in Spiritism also criticised the cross-correspondences. But her book was riddled with errors, as both Hyslop (1911) and Mrs Sidgwick (1911) pointed out, and she failed to comprehend the essentially nuanced and literary nature of the material. Eric Dingwall (1985), from within the SPR launched possibly the most personal attack, accusing the original investigators of obstruction, evasion, and the destruction of documents. And he returned to this theme in later years, using as evidence of this the later automatic writing of Geraldine Cummins in Swan on a Black Sea, which he summarised in a misleadingly truncated and inaccurate form.

More broadly, and more significantly, it is argued, the existence of the cross-correspondences despite all their ingenuity and their later symbolic glory do not conclusively prove the survival hypothesis. As Podmore (1975) has lucidly pointed out: ‘We cannot assign limits to the power of telepathy.’ And Braude (2003) and Sudduth (2016) have perceptively expanded this basic point, stressing uncertainty as to the nature and range of such powers and that, regardless of the methodology devised to generate evidence for it, there are unproven and unexamined assumptions that lie behind statements that individual human personalities survive bodily death.

Jean Balfour (1958–9: 171), herself, stated in regard to the enormous Palm Sunday cross-correspondence, and despite her intimate familial involvement with
the subject, 'We do not yet know the full extent of subliminal activity, and so it must be admitted that there is nothing in this case that was not known to somebody somewhere and therefore could not be explained by telepathy from persons still alive who knew, or had once known, the facts.' One should stress that Myers himself (and his colleagues knew this) was well aware of the complexities in stating what might or might not survive and in what form and how this related to other cosmic variables. This can be clearly seen in his articles on the subliminal self in relation to both retrocognition and precognition and his diagrammatic representations of the issues (Myers 1895b: 334–407; Myers 1895c: 408–593).

Louisa Rhine (1967: 234–5) was incorrect in asserting that the early leaders of the SPR did not realise the implications of unconscious mental action both in the narrower sense of subliminal interactions between people in close contact and the wider Myersian sense quoted above. She also criticised the apparent lack of method by which the cross-correspondences’ allusive references were judged and does not seem to have read or to have followed Alice Johnson’s complex argument. But, from her perspective on the latter point, she was correct. It was a definite clash of methodologies and approaches.

Behind these arguments lie unresolved and possibly unresolvable questions about the nature of personal identity both before and after death: in other words, what does it mean to say that one has survived death? The philosopher Parfit, using the model of Star Trek/teleportation, has argued that mental continuity and psychological identity are one model for survival (Dainton 2014: 129–8, 133). If all the information about a person, their dispositions, talents, life history, memories, knowledge, capacities, and skills, is transferred to another location and rehoused in another material unit, is one entitled to talk of the survival of that person? It certainly highlights the two main components of personal identity—the physiological and the psychological (Braude 2013). What is missing from that definition is the lived experiential consciousness of the individual going through the change from life to death and communicating post-mortem. Unless one can find some way to share, access, and validate that (as the best mediums allegedly appear to be able to do), there will always be concerns about impersonation and deception. In some ways this is less an issue for the cross-correspondences
since traditional survival evidence (though there is plenty en passant in the scripts) was not, as Alice Johnson pointed out, the prime aim of the communicators. One is always, however, left with the uneasy feeling that on this issue one can never outflank or rule out deception from another source: a non-human intelligence with a desire to play games, a psychic husk that just contains static memories, or the creative imagination of a living mind.

Carter (2012) has argued robustly against a number of the above objections. He asserts that the script personalities displayed, in convincing detail, the persistent and dynamic purpose, the point of view, and the skills associated with them in life. Their tenacity was remarkable. As Jean Balfour stated at the end of her Palm Sunday study: ‘There can be no doubt about one thing, that there was purpose behind it all.’ But whose purpose, one might ask?

Earlier sections have clearly demonstrated that evidence broadly characteristic of Myers particularly could be found in the scripts and that the construction of the cross-correspondences suggested an external intelligence that was trying to circumvent the argument from living agent telepathy or psi. But was there more specific evidence than this? Piddington wrote a thoughtful letter on the subject published in the *Journal* for 1910 which introduced a useful distinction. As he stated: ‘though the form of the cross-correspondences may be evidence of an active intelligence, it affords no evidence, positive or negative, of the identity of that intelligence. This kind of evidence may, however, be afforded by the content of cross-correspondences…’ In other words, the selection of the content was highly characteristic of Myers’ interests and preoccupations in life and was, on occasions, demonstrably beyond the capacity or knowledge of any of the living individuals, like Leonora Piper, Trix Fleming, or Winifred Coombe-Tennant, from whom it might otherwise have been derived. (See Hamilton 2017: 77-81, 59-61, 102-103, for example.)

It is important not to be too Anglo-Saxon centred in this context. Certain features of the cross-correspondences are very impressive but are they the best that the psychical research/parapsychological community is aware of? For example, Moreira-Almeida (2012: 204–206) has pointed out that an analysis of a number of poems by deceased Brazilian and Portuguese poets in the automatic writing
of Chico Xavier (though, as with most automatic writing, the conditions under which they were produced may not have excluded the possibility of fraud) go well beyond ‘simple literary imitation’. Moreover, there is an ‘intricate and sophisticated intertextuality’ in them and references to writings ‘that were not in the public domain when the mediumistic texts were produced’. The more cross-cultural evidence of this sort that can be obtained, the less likely that the cross-correspondences will be seen as some kind of literary sport or freak.

What light did the scripts themselves shed on the deeper issues addressed by Braude (2013), Sudduth (2016), Griffin (1997) and others? The answer is very little. There was a detailed account by Winifred Coombe-Tennant on the process of communication which was ably summarised by Gerald Balfour (and discussed in Hamilton 2017:101-103), and also some philosophical/mystical material on the relationship of individual consciousness to group consciousness; there was a recognition of the uniqueness of each individual medium and a reluctance to generalise; there was the clear distinction made in Trix Fleming scripts between the nature and appearance of the discarnate entity and the projection or eidolon used in an apparitional sense for recognition (Piddington 1935b: 1192 onwards). This seems to the current writer a position quite consonant with what one knows of the academic backgrounds of the three men. Just as they avoided the conventional Spiritualist approach in the content of their communications, so too they largely steered clear of the fundamental questions—what survives, what is the survival vehicle, how long does the what survive, and is that survival for all or just some, and does the what that survives reincarnate? They were academically cautious and focused on their specific task. In essence one will find very little in the scripts of, say, the detailed metaphysical or pseudo-metaphysical content of the Seth books or the other material referred to in studies of channelling (Klimo 1998, Hastings 1991).

To what extent does other automatic writing or mediumistic communications support the cross-correspondence case either directly or indirectly? There is some impressive evidence from Mrs Leonard of a personal nature linked to some of the investigators—Lodge, Piddington, Edith Lyttelton, and Winifred Coombe-Tennant. There is the broader, cosmic writing of Geraldine Cummins (1952, 1967) which has certain Myersian flourishes and touches. Do the ideas
expressed by Myers in her scripts fit in with other automatic writing on the nature of the afterlife, or with the very limited comments expressed in the scripts themselves? Certainly, her scripts address the difficult process of designing and communicating the cross-correspondences (see Carter 2012) and they also catch the urgent energy of Myers, though they partially contradict him on reincarnation. Do the messages of Robert Hugh Benson (a son of Edward Benson, Archbishop of Canterbury), an alleged communicator after death through automatic writing (Borgia 1954), and whose brother Martin, it was hinted at in the scripts, was in the background helping with the preparatory work on the cross-correspondences, shed any insight on the problem? They do not appear to do so.

Though the context and the detail may vary, the persistence of the Myers communicator over the years has been very impressive. Do the latest manifestations of Myers and colleagues as described in *The Scole Report* (Keen et al. 1999) ring true with what is known about the earlier material? Myers (and Lodge) was also alleged to have taken part in the physical mediumship and literary puzzles developed by the mediums under the controlled conditions laid down by T.G. Hamilton in Canada (Hamilton ML 1969). Juliet S. Goodenow (1923) published *Letters to Juliet*, supposedly produced via telepathic contact with Myers. Both Florence Upton (Lyttelton 1926) and Aelfrida Tillyard (Mann 2013) wrote material supposedly directed by him. All this content is variable in quality, some quite reminiscent in style and approach of Myers in life, but much of it shares the common characteristic (as in some of the channelled material alleged to have come from William James) of operating at a lower intellectual level than the named communicator in their actual life. An additional weakness appears to be the lack of awareness of these ‘Myers Personae’ of each other. It would be a huge task to map, compare, and analyse this material, and the questions raised above go beyond the limits and resources of this current enquiry.

But what about the communicators? Granted that they were who they claimed to be, what was the environment which they inhabited and were they any more likely to be free from the conditioning assumptions than their incarnate colleagues? Broad has commented quite tartly on this (in Cummins 1965: intro). Without either accepting or rejecting the ontological status of the content, the evidence from
surveys of automatic writing generally, which purports to describe the afterlife and from the more celebrated individual examples, suggests that there is not necessarily an immediate expansion in knowledge and spirituality after death and that like-minded consciousnesses tend to cohere in environments that they have mentally created to meet their temperaments and beliefs. Could one argue that this narrowly academic and highly technical approach to demonstrating survival, and the hugely ambitious emphasis on supporting the development of gifted children who would work for world peace and a new world order, was the product of a sheltered and impractical idealism, but, on this occasion, from the other side of the grave? Certainly, the Glastonbury scripts of John Alleyne (Hopkinson-Ball, T. 2007) and the Cleophas scripts of Geraldine Cummins (1974) would suggest such a posthumous group think and clustering.

One last point: are the cross-correspondences as impressive as the best mediumship evidence from other sources past and present? Do they meet tight modern criteria—regardless of any literary flourish or decoration? The same basic demands, often phrased in slightly different language reflecting the predominant discourse of the intended audience, crop up again and again when attempting to assess the paranormal. *The first is the sealing off of all normal channels for acquiring the paranormal content.* An interesting modern example is the work by Main (2007: 14) in which he proposed four criteria that needed to be met if a coincidence were to qualify as an instance of synchronicity:

1. ‘two or more events parallel one another through having identical, similar or comparable content;
2. there is no discernible or plausible way in which this paralleling could be the result of normal causes;
3. the paralleling must be sufficiently unlikely and detailed as to be notable;
4. the experience must be meaningful beyond being notable.’

These criteria though referring to synchronicity relate closely to the assessment statements outlined in this study—they emphasise ‘identical, similar or comparable content’; they stress the lack of a normal cause for the paralleling of content or communication; they emphasise the notable and meaningful nature of the paralleling of communication. One expects to apply all these criteria and see
all of them satisfied if the scripts’ claims are to stand up, and in many cases they do.

However, there is one extra factor that characterises the cross-correspondence scripts which goes well beyond the identification of synchronicity. In the case of synchronicity, one has no sense of the cause. Is it a random coincidence or purposive agency? The script communicators positively and unambiguously claim purpose and design in the construction of cross-correspondences and the demonstration of paranormal cognition. And, for this reason, Salter called the ‘the production and interpretation of the automatic writings of the S.P.R. group’ the most important work they had done. But how does the assessment of the scripts stand up to the best practice developed by parapsychologists over the ensuing years after the founding of the Society for Psychical Research?

The second demand that seems to crop up again and again when assessing paranormal research is the objective assessment of the paranormal content. The fundamental issue was and is how to objectively demonstrate the paranormality of the cross-correspondences. This is a little (but not completely) like the identifying of coherent messages and recognisable images in remote viewing and the Ganzfeld experiments. A considerable body of expertise has developed with regard to these activities (Tart 2009; Sheldrake 2003) which was not available at the time the cross-correspondences were produced. Nowadays one would expect blind judging and the training of disinterested assessor panels. This point must be taken seriously since there is little doubt that the original investigators (though they did their best to guard against this) were deeply involved on a personal level with the scripts and their contents, and Margaret Verrall, particularly, had a difficult dual role as both automatist and investigator. However, though these points do compromise the material to a certain extent, they do not fatally compromise it.

Unfortunately, by dismissing the kind of simple outcomes-based tests that they had, to some extent, used in the telepathic hypnosis experiments of 1889–1891 (Sidgwick H et al. 1889; Sidgwick E and Johnson A 1892) as irrelevant to the phenomena they were assessing, the investigators were inevitably going to encounter, from critics then and now, the problems raised above. In addition, they
also ignored the expertise of the best elements of the Spiritualist community. Their view of the Spiritualist tradition was coloured by the disappointing and depressing investigations of earlier years. But this meant that they did not have access to the long experience Spiritualists had through training and development (Payne 1992; Boddington 1995) of the ways in which mediums could deceive themselves.

Was Winifred Coombe-Tennant someone with great natural gifts who eventually, to some extent, fell prey to this? Had Gerald Balfour not been her lover and the father of her coming child during the crucial period, had Margaret Verrall been a little younger and fitter and lived longer, and had Alice Johnson, too, not been ill for some of this time, there might have been less Messianic colouring in Coombe-Tennant’s scripts. One could argue that the SPR leadership, while clearly seeing the dangers of traditional Spiritualism and the desire for immediate, direct, straightforward evidence of survival, failed to fully appreciate the issues of need, emotion, and bias that were masked by their own more dry-as-dust approach.

Broad (1925: 542-546) laid down criteria which, he argued, would, if satisfied, tilt the argument more in favour of the survival hypothesis by strengthening the argument from design: ‘It seems to me that we should have grounds for postulating the survival of a mind, and not the mere persistence of a psychic factor, if and only if the communications showed traces of an intention which persisted between the experiments and deliberately modified and controlled each in the light of those which had preceded it.’

He asserted that if the cross-correspondence material came up to the specifications for an ideal cross-correspondence (reminiscent of the Latin Message), ‘I think we should have to admit that it looks as if a single intelligent being were deliberately trying in an extremely ingenious way to produce evidence of its continuous existence’. His specifications were: three automatic writers in three different places with no communications between them; scripts to be produced over a number of years and sent to an impartial authority; the scripts of A, B, and C to be separately unintelligible; injunctions in A to refer to past, present, and future scripts of B and C, and these injunctions to also be found in B and C scripts. The independent assessor then works through the criteria, compares the
scripts, and ‘finds that these separately unintelligible sentences combine to convey something which is highly characteristic of a certain deceased person who is alleged to be communicating’.

His conclusions were tentative. He did not believe that ‘most of the alleged Cross-Correspondences accurately exemplify this ideal type’. He was suspicious of the enormous effort and ingenuity required to extract meaning from the scripts. ‘Would not the same amount of patience, learning and ingenuity discover almost as good Cross-Correspondences between almost any set of manuscripts?’ He wanted lots of negative evidence, no matter how laborious the process, ‘before I was able to stake so much on this argument for human survival’.

There can be little doubt (Hamilton 2017) that some of the cross-correspondences went some way towards meeting Broad’s criteria, and he was writing without access to the Notes and Excursuses of Balfour and Piddington. But the bar was set very high by Broad and when one studies the ecologies of psychical phenomena they are rarely if ever amenable to such complex and stringent demands. Broad also ignored the fact that the cross-correspondences’ production might require particular gifts and conditions that only occurred irregularly in time, and that they also require great emotional resonance (Palmer 2014) between the living and the discarnate. Such conditions, like astronomical conjunctions, may only take place a few times in a century.

Broad (1925) also asserted that, even if the above hurdle was jumped, the race to prove discarnate survival still had not been won. Suppose it was ‘rendered practically certain that some other mind was involved’— might it not be Margaret Verrall’s? He gave three reasons: intense interest in a problem often involves unconscious processes; telepathy may take place ‘between the unconscious parts of living minds’; the unconscious is often extremely obliging in providing the conscious mind with what it wants. Points one ignores at one’s peril. And, of course, although Margaret Verrall died in 1916, her gifted daughter Helen lived long beyond the termination of the cross-correspondence phenomena.

So, a hundred years or more on from the inception of the phenomena how do the cross-correspondences stand up to the formidable challenges posed by Broad
and other critics (many of them sympathetic to the aims and objectives of psychical research)? It is not possible to distinguish between the living agent psi hypothesis and the survival hypothesis in this or any other case. The hypothesis that there was subconscious collaboration between automatists and investigators in order to produce scripts that were shaped and selected to fit a range of hidden desires and purposes, including proof of survival after death, is certainly worth examining. The fact that such a task would be fiendishly complex is not fundamentally destructive of it as a hypothesis (pace Gauld 1983; Carter 2012). One just does not know. But one must always be cautious since explaining away the spiritist hypothesis by other contested hypotheses like telepathy, clairvoyance, or some kind of cosmic reservoir may mean substituting one species of ignorance for another.

It may be more sensible to avoid such speculation and to continue to refine methods for exploring the more manageable hypothesis of Broad that there must always be the suspicion that equally plausible meanings could be derived from the same mass of complex data. So, why should one privilege the Piddington/Balfour interpretation—apart from the self-evident intelligence, expertise, and effort they put into it? It is a fair point but no one has risen to the challenge of providing an alternative holistic explanation, though Carrington provided a superficially plausible one for the Statius case (Hamilton 2017: 117). Nor have attempts to generate cross-correspondences of the same intellectual quality and persuasiveness from the random selection of passages in literary texts been successful.

There are two fundamental generic weaknesses (apart from the above) that stand out with regard to the phenomena as proof of survival, and both reflect the historical context in which the scripts developed. They are too elitist and they are not cost effective. The researchers adhered vigorously to the canons of evidence laid down by the founders of the SPR in their books and articles, but while they were fully alive to the prejudices, passions, and delusions of the uneducated, were they fully alive to their own? The cross-correspondences are permeated with an unchallenged elitism and the privileging of one set of associations, one way of knowing, over others. Were alternative meanings and interpretations really rigorously pursued? Were the links they finally established strong enough to bear
the weight put on them? To fully explore these questions across all three thousand five hundred plus scripts and associated commentary would be many years’ work for a team of researchers now, and the team and the funding are most unlikely to be available. This current thesis has just scratched the surface. And, in terms of a cost–benefit analysis, would it be worthwhile?

Information technology has helped in making the physical process of comparing scripts and identifying clusters of symbols much easier than for Piddington with his stack of books, concordances, articles, and encyclopaedias piled high on tables in his eyrie at the top of Fishers Hill (Roy 2008), but there is still a literary and psychological judgement to be made (and the same would apply in the application of any style recognition or author attribution software that might be devised for the cross-correspondences). Moreover, in that field, though results could well be extremely interesting and suggestive of further lines of enquiry, they would not be based on secure foundations (a problem acknowledged throughout this study) since the automatic writing will have been heavily coloured by the individual personality of the medium involved; and even though enough material from Myers and Gurney has been digitised (Phantasms of the Living/Human Personality) for matching purposes, the main automatists were familiar with some if not all of that literature.

But, on the other hand, to ignore the best examples of cross-correspondence and paranormal cognition outlined in this book and in more detail in the Proceedings, the original volumes of scripts, and the commentaries on them, is pure intellectual dishonesty. There is design, there is purpose (consistent over a number of years), there is insight and self-reflection, there is a sense of a continuing consciousness post-mortem. And this is clearly there even allowing for all the very valid cautions about the misinterpretation of evidence. But it does not quite meet the standards Broad set for it, or the more recent criteria Braude (2013: 31–32) has laid down that really persuasive mediumistic communications would have to meet. These are (slightly adapted): the evidence is not contaminated by psychological disorders; the evidence should not serve the psychological needs of the living; the evidence should make best sense if attributed to the agendas and interests of the deceased; the evidence should begin and be documented before the recipient has identified and researched the life of the deceased; verifiable intimate
details of that life should be provided; these details should be recognised by several individuals on separate occasions; idiosyncratic skills or traits should be displayed; they should be as foreign or alien to the medium as possible, ideally from a different culture; skills associated with the deceased should be of a high level, require practice, and of a kind not usually associated with savants or prodigies; evidence should come from multiple remote physical and cultural sources.

As indicated in the text, the best of the cross-correspondences stand up well against some of these criteria (the character of the automatists, their physical separation from each other, the confirmation of content from multiple sources, the demonstration of knowledge and skills beyond their known abilities), but less so against intellectual and emotional separation from the alleged communicators.

As an exercise in interpretation, the *Notes and Excursuses* and the printed volumes of scripts with their notes are absolute triumphs of intellectual energy, organisation, and persistence. This should be fully recognised, and the best of the cross-correspondences of the earlier period stand the test of detailed assessment even though, complex and moving as they are, they do not circumvent the fundamental problem discussed above. Nor should one assume that the investigators deprived of their God by nineteenth-century science rushed to re-enchant the universe by swallowing the cross-correspondences at once and whole. Mrs Sidgwick’s Presidential Addresses of 1908 and 1932 should be read as a record of her long path to conviction. Parts of the cross-correspondences are highly persuasive of paranormal knowledge, both of facts, events, and of individual personality traits, but there is no absolutely certain demonstration of such. They cannot, however, be dismissed. Apart from this central point, there is much unexplored material in them for the cultural historian on the nature of evidence, reception studies in the classics, the Bible, Victorian literature generally, the Edwardian class structure and its mores, the nature of psychological automatisms, and particularly the important role of highly gifted women in this huge interpretive enterprise (Wilson 2007; 2012; Kontou 2009; Galvan n.d.).
However, the cultural historian of psychical research sometimes needs to treat this work with a little care, particularly if the material is being framed in the context of another discipline or subject-specific thesis. For example, Wilson (2007: 19) writes of the ‘potentially transgressive appropriations of cultural and literary mastery’ in giving the female automatic writer power in the way the female medium in the séance had but suggesting that the male authority reasserted itself in the interpretive role. The power relations in the cross-correspondences were much more nuanced than that. The interpreters in the early years of the cross-correspondences were Margaret Verrall, Alice Johnson, and J.G. Piddington, with support from Eleanor Sidgwick (1915) who also wrote a massive study on Leonora Piper’s mediumship. And Lodge, who was also part of the team, relied heavily on Margaret Verrall’s expertise in his reports. Hardly a male dominated environment.

As the above example illustrates, one can say with some degree of confidence that the conclusions any investigator comes to concerning the cross-correspondences will depend on the cultural procedures and traditions of their professional discipline and their own preferred cognitive style. (See Hudson 1972, Becher 2001, Gardner 1985, Irwin 2015), for some of the classic British and American exploratory work in this field.) The fuzzy, descriptive approaches of the arts and the humanities which seem to be what assessment of the cross-correspondences demands (with its constant cross referencing of a range of quotations) may well irritate and unsettle those for whom objective analysis in terms of clear outcomes calculated against chance is crucial. Many, whether from a humanities or science background, would also point to the possible role of vanity and emotional investment in the construction of the Messianic Child element of the scripts; they would, rightly, point out the lack of external assessment by impartial observers; and would begrudge the investment of time and energy in painstakingly applying detailed assessment criteria to a mass of complex data, over a century old, and not produced under properly controlled conditions.
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Appendix 1 The flow of Scripts 1901–1936

Mrs Verrall 739 scripts 1901-1916
Helen Verrall 651 scripts 1903 1928
Mrs Fleming 293 scripts 1903-1910
Mrs Coombe-Tennant 430 1908-1930
The Mackinnon family 60 1908-1911
Mrs Wilson 198 1915-1931

Notes

1. This demonstrates the scale of the task the interpreters faced. The scale is increased when one remembers that Winifred Coombe-Tennant, at times, produced both scripts and Daylight Impressions and in the printed volumes the interpreters counted them as one item.

This study has been based on the printed scripts available but examples of the handwritten originals can still be found in the Salter papers at Trinity and in the voluminous Piper, Lyttelton, and Richmond papers in the SPR/CUL archive.

2. There was a very heavy load between 1908 and 1911 when up to five automatists were writing. There were also the Piper sittings with George Dorr and Winifred Coombe-Tennant’s sittings with her.

Not all the scripts were of equal length. Many were short and fairly laconic but the Coombe-Tennant script was quite often voluminous.

2. To get a sense of the total task one should add the 141 Kenneth Richmond scripts, the 143 Zoë Richmond scripts, the 854 Mrs Lyttelton scripts (there may be more: these were just those spotted) quoted in the Notes and Excursuses.

The total number of scripts is in excess of 3,500 without including the Piper material mentioned above or the scripts of Mrs Raikes.

3. In addition, one has to consider the sheer volume of commentary on these scripts: the thousands of pages in the Notes and Excursuses; the thousands of pages in the Journal and the Proceedings; and the secondary literature in book form.
Appendix 2 The Hope Star Browning Complete Scripts and the Latin Message

This cross-correspondence involves, in essence, five scripts: Margaret Verrall 23/1/1907 and 28/1/1907; Helen Verrall 3/2/1907 and 17/2/1907; and Leonora Piper 11/2/1907. By 2/1/1907 a message had been dictated in Latin to the entranced Leonora Piper urging Myers to give apparently unrelated messages to two different mediums, A and B and then a communication to a third, C, which would reveal the underlying links between all three. On 16/1/1907 Piddington suggested to Myers through Leonora Piper that Myers draw a circle with a triangle inside it to indicate such a cross correspondence. (On the detail of the Latin Message see Hamilton 2017: 66-67; Hude 1912-1913.) The whole point of it was to encourage the further development of the kind of complex cross-correspondences that Alice Johnson thought she had already identified in the scripts and, a precaution, Mrs Piper knew no Latin.)

The full Margaret and Helen Verrall scripts now follow with the relevant Piper extract. Translations are those of the original interpreters.

Margaret Verrall 23/1/1907:

JUSTICE HOLDS THE SCALES. That gives the words but an anagram would be better Tell him that—rats stars tars and so on. Try this. It has been tried before RTATS rearrange Those five letters or again tears stare seam same and so on. Skeat takes Kate’s Keats stake Steak. But the letters you should give tonight are not so many—only three ast.

Margaret Verrall 28/1/1907:

Star Wonder the world’s wonder and all a wonder and a wild desire the very wings of her A WINGED DESIRE winged love—then there is Blake and mocked my loss of liberty. But it is all the same thing—the winged desire passion the hope that leaves the earth for the sky—Abt Vogler—for earth too hard that found itself or lost itself—in the sky. That is what I want—On the earth the broken sounds threads In the sky the perfect arc. The C major of this life But your recollection is
at fault. [Drawing of a semi-circle with a triangle in it. Drawing of a triangle inside a complete circle with ACB at top and D at bottom.] ADB is the part that unseen completes the arc.

Helen Verrall 3/2/1907:

Vulliamy not to be confused with the other Williams more precious than rubies what was the name of the younger child Cecil at Mundellier wherefore in Sicily he sets out a green jerkin and hose and doublet where the song birds pipe their tune in the early morning a healer from aliens. [Drawing of a monogram Drawing of a star Drawing of a crescent moon.] The crescent moon remember that and the star. Like a thunder riven oak the grim remains/stand on the level desolation of the plains/ a record for all ages of the span/which nature gives to the weak labour of a man. [Drawing of a bird.] bird.

Leonora Piper 11/2/1907:

JGP. Do you remember what your exact reference to Browning was? Myers. I referred to Hope and Browning…I also said Star.

(The next private sitter with Leonora Piper was then announced)
JGP. Now, Myers, I must say goodbye as the friend is here.
Myers. Do I U.D. that I am to go. [understand]
JGP. Yes…
Myers. Meanwhile look out for Hope, Star and Browning.

Helen Verrall 17/2/1907:

Androsace Carthusian candelabrum [Drawing of an arrow] many together [Drawing of a star] that was the sign she will understand when she sees it diapason rhythm through all no arts avail the heavenly harmony as Plato said the mystic three (?) and a star above it all rats everywhere in Hamelin town now do you understand Henry (?)

Finally, Mrs Sidgwick took over the sittings with Leonora Piper from Piddington and asked Myers which poem particularly lay behind this cross-correspondence.
After some difficulty, he got out Abt Vo and variations on the word Vogler which Mrs Sidgwick completed for him (but he had got the essentials). Leonora Piper’s writing hand waved with excitement and then wrote—‘Now dear Mrs Sidgwick in future have no doubt or fear of so called death as there is none.’

With regard to the cherry-picking or manipulating of data, the whole of Margaret Verrall’s script of 23/1/1907 was quoted in the *Proceedings* and it virtually all referred to the Hope, Star, Browning case. The only line which did not was the first line—Justice holds the scale—which was part of a major theme developed later in other scripts. The whole of Margaret Verrall’s script on 28/1/1907 was quoted and it was all relevant to the theme. Moreover, it included the triangle in the circle drawing which Myers promised Piddington through Leonora Piper that he would draw to signal a cross-correspondence.

One has to assume that Margaret Verrall was not told of this sign by Piddington. Margaret Verrall’s two scripts which started the cross correspondence were not seen by Helen Verrall or by Leonora Piper before their contributions to the cross-correspondence. Helen Verrall saw them on 23/2/1907 after she had written her two scripts on the 3rd and the 17th of February respectively. The whole of Helen Verrall’s scripts were quoted.

The first and last parts of the script on the 3rd and the first part of the script on the 17th referred to important themes that are later developed in the scripts but were not recognised at this stage. Leonora Piper provided the essential clue on the 11th of February with her Browning, Hope, Star, so Margaret Verrall could not have been influenced by it in her earlier scripts or Helen Verrall in her script of the 3rd. The crucial question is, had Helen Verrall any access to the Piper script of 11/2/07 before she wrote rats everywhere in Hamelin town? Her mother told her on 15/2/07 about a correspondence but gave her no clue as to its focus or detail.

Piddington picked up the general references to Browning’s poems, to *The Ring and the Book* (and all a wonder and a wild desire), to the *Pied Piper of Hamelin* (jerkin, hose doublet, a healer from aliens) and through the star theme (aster was star in Latin and teras in Greek and they were anagrams of each other), to *Abt*
Vogler and to the one of only two places where star occurred in the poem: ‘But here is the finger of God… such gift be allowed to man / That out of three sounds he frame, not a fourth sound but a star.’

Piddington argued the scripts fulfilled the demands of the Latin message. Script A was Margaret Verrall’s script of the 23rd of January 1907: *Try also to give to A and B two different messages between which no connexion is discernible.* Script B was Helen Verrall’s script of 3rd of February 1907, reinforced by her script on 17th of February 1903), and Script C was Leonora Piper’s of the 11th of February 1907: *Then as soon as possible give to C a third message which will reveal the hidden connexion.* There was, of course, a fourth script, Helen Verrall’s of the 17th of February. But this could be read as anxiety on the part of the communicators for the connection not to be overlooked.

In addition, a related meaning of teras was wonder or sign and the actual quotation Piddington discovered in *Abt Vogler* had been deployed in Liddell and Scott’s *Greek Lexicon* to illustrate that very point. The anagrams used were of the sort Myers and Hodgson frequently constructed; the bird theme in the quotations and drawings, a symbol for soaring heaven-wards, was also a pointer to *Abt Vogler* since Vogler derived from the German for bird (vogel) and Vogler was a bird hunter or trapper. The mystic three were obviously the three automatists. It should also be noted that the communicators signed or pointed up their actions: ‘now do you understand Henry’; plus the drawing of the triangle in the circle as requested. They commented on failure—‘but your recollection is at fault’—meaning that ‘perfect arc’ rather than ‘perfect round’ was quoted from *Abt Vogler*. They also (and this happens throughout the cross-correspondences) altered quotations to suit their particular purposes: for example, ‘the hope that leaves the earth’ rather than ‘the passion’ of the original. Note, too, the relatively short timescale of the scripts and the fact that Margaret and Helen Verrall did not see each other’s scripts till after the cross-correspondence was over, apart from a brief mention by Margaret Verrall to her daughter on the 15th of February that something interesting appeared to be developing.

An extra layer of complication (mentioned above) was added a few years later when Piddington and Balfour saw many of the references, in this cross-
correspondence and others, as referring to the underlying theme and purpose of the scripts which was the prediction, after many wars and troubles, of an era of peace, a new Pax Romana, established by a new Messiah and a race of spiritually developed children, the Children of Light. For example, Balfour connected the star with the Magi, with the advent of a Child of Destiny and a return of the ‘Golden Age’ citing ‘Justice holds the scales’ which was the first line of Margaret Verrall’s script on 23rd of January. He saw this as a clear allusion to Virgil’s *Messianic Eclogue IV*: ‘*Jam redit et Virgo redeunt Saturnia regna*’—Justice (Virgo) returns and the reign of Saturn returns (i.e. the Golden Age).

Note: there was very little irrelevant chaff: Vulliamy, Cecil at Mundellier, Androsace, Carthusian, candelabrum. But even this could be winnowed down by Balfour (1927) and Piddington (1943b): Androsace (a pink star-shaped Alpine flower); Cecil at Mundellier (a garbled script reference to Anthony Mundella, a Liberal politician who had links to Myers’ work as an Inspector of Schools and who in scripts stood as a symbol for Antony Lyttelton); candelabrum (the seven candle sticks a symbol for Henry Coombe-Tennant); leaving only Vulliamy and Carthusian unexplained.
Appendix 3 Types of Symbols in the Scripts

In broad terms, four types of symbolism were deployed in the scripts: A. allusions to personal and family details; B. allusions from history and literature to situations that clearly matched aspects of the personal and family details of the individual concerned; C. highly indirect allusions from history and literature that matched aspects of the personal and family details of the individual concerned; D. general symbolism drawn from the natural world and general language that in a poetic and descriptive sense matched aspects of the personal and family details of the individual concerned. In C the links may be too tortuous, esoteric, and fine-spun to stand up. Conversely, in D, the symbolism may be so commonplace and general that it could immediately and vaguely apply to almost anyone. It should be stressed that a commonplace symbol can become more convincing if it occurs in the context of other relevant material and that the symbols quoted are examples and by no means the totality of references to the individual named.

May Lyttelton

An enormous number of additional symbols, more than for any other of the communicators, were eventually identified as referring to May (Mary Catherine) Lyttelton. The type A list is reasonably comprehensive but only illustrative examples are provided in the other categories.

Type A: play on her names—Mary, Mary, quite contrary, May blossom, Catherine/Kate/Cat; photograph of her as the lady with the candle (from a family photograph), candle drawings, candle quotations and the indirect allusions in Macbeth (the sleep-walking scene), the Catherine Wheel and the bells of St Catherine of Alexandria; frequent references to the colour and abundance of her hair; her old-fashioned dress; her pearls; the emerald ring Balfour placed in her coffin and the silver box he had made for a lock of her hair; Lyttelton family references: references to her sister, Lavinia Talbot, and to Keble College, Oxford (she married the warden); the family crest which was of a Moor’s head wreathed and three scallop/cockle shells on the shield and the motto Ung Dieu Ung Roy; her love of music; the day of her death, Palm Sunday; the Palm Maiden; her family home, Hagley Hall.
Type B: Ariadne; Berenice, Beatrice; The Blessed Damozel; Persephone; Diana; Artemis; Shelley’s The Cloud, ‘the beat of her unseen feet’; Arethusa; Camilla; references to Tennyson’s Maud (abandoned by her lover); the story of Hero and Leander and her lighting the beacon to guide Leander in his nightly swim across the Hellespont as ‘the lonely hope of Sestos’ daughter’, etc.

Type C: the frequent use of lighthouses generally (particularly St Catherine’s lighthouse); the White Ship that sank on St Catherine’s Day (via quotations from Rossetti and Gray); sigma M, sigma C, sigma curl of hair, etc.; use of male symbols (promising men who died young) for Palm Maiden (Keats), etc.

Type D: phantom of delight, vision of hope, dew on parched earth, water in a thirsty land, nightingale, lark, lily, rose, water lily, stolen joy, still small voice, stars, deep calls to deep, responsive chord, etc.

Arthur Balfour

Type A: Arthur Balfour name or initials, family motto and coat of arms, Scottish and Irish references, Duke of Wellington his godfather, Excalibur, Perseus paintings in the Long Room, the silver/brass casket.

Type B: Ariadne and Theseus, Hero and Leander, Dante and Beatrice, Orpheus and Eurydice, etc.

Type C: Oedipus, Hippolytus, Endymion, Faust, Integer Vitae, Aes triplex, Aeneas, Ulysses, Virgil, Shelley, etc.

Type D: London Pride, Shamrock, Thistle, Meditation, Pilgrim, Wanderer, etc.

Francis Maitland Balfour

Type A: his Christian name or initials—Frank, Francis, F.M.B.; reference to the brother or the three brothers; references to the lowlands of Scotland (East Lothian); references to Alpine mountaineering/ice axes and an accident (it was on the Aiguille Blanche de Peuteret that he died); his scientific work in Naples and his laboratory in Cambridge (he had the chair of Animal Morphology at Cambridge), etc.

Type B: references to great scholars and makers and magicians—Felix qui potuit, Opifex the great Artificer, Daedalus, Abt Vogler, Michael Scott and Melrose
Abbey, the Magi; to the Franciscan order and St Francis; to a brother or brothers as in Catullus’s *Frater Ave*; to his portrait, ‘the dark young man’ in family photographs.

Type C: Bizarrely, Piddington and Gerald Balfour interpreted references to gifted men dying young as symbols for May Lyttelton. So there appear to be no examples in this category, for him, except occasional mentions of a ‘broken column’ as below.

Type D: Fish, coral, sea, ice and snow on mountain peaks, mountain references, broken column, brown monk, etc.

**Laura Lyttelton**

Type A: names of Laura and her husband Alfred, her Peacock Memorial in Mells Church, the bequeathing of her cradle to Lady Elcho, Easter Eve, etc.

Type B: Dido, Cleopatra, Rosamund, a Siren, a Mermaid, Circe, Dolores, Helen of Troy, a Will o’ the Wisp, a Wizard of Delight, etc.

Type C: Panopticon Sphaerae, Volatile Ferrum, etc.

Type D: Peacock feather, Ophelia, general flower references, etc.

**Henry Coombe-Tennant**

Type A: It is interesting that there appear to be none in this category which go across the automatists’ scripts.

Type B: references in Virgil and Horace to Augustus and the Golden Age, Epiphany, the Magi, the Angels of the Annunciation, etc.

Type C: all references in scripts to psychological eugenics and the failed prototypes, Antony and Christopher Lyttelton, etc.

Type D: orb and sceptre, seven colours of the rainbow, seven notes of the scale and the octave, seven stars, seven pillars of wisdom, promised land, etc.

**Annie Marshall (Myers’ love)**

Annie appeared in the early scripts but gradually seemed to fade out as the theme of another young woman dying young (May Lyttelton) began to develop and some of the symbolism emerging could easily apply to either. However, distinctive symbols for her were: Ophelia, Eurydice, the white bird (Myers, in life, used bird symbols to describe women he cared for), Phyllis (from Virgil Eclogue 7 lines
59/63: when Phyllis comes all the woods will be green/ Phyllis loves the hazels) and Syringa (referring to the walks he had with her through wet syringas in the garden at the Marshall family home at Hallsteads and the poem he wrote about them: so a mixture of A and C and D.
Commentary and Personal Reflection

This final section reviews the summative statement and those sections from the two books submitted for the award. It introduces new material to describe the different methodology that emerges in the second of the two published works and considers both the evidence of the cross-correspondences as well as the methodologies of the SPR investigators. It provides more detailed material on the digital corpus mentioned earlier both with regards to its construction and its possible value as a future resource and its wider application. It expands previous historiographical comments particularly in the light of material published since 2009. Finally, it self-critically, reviews the sections from the two published books and, as part of my intellectual journey to this stage, considers what might have been done differently, or in greater depth, or what alternative approaches to and treatments of the subject matter might have been adopted. The archives and bibliography have been amended accordingly in the light of these reflections, additions made and minor formatting errors corrected.

The early work in this field (Gauld 1968, Turner 1974, Cerullo 1982, Oppenheim 1985) adopted a broadly historical and descriptive approach. More recently, scholars in different disciplinary areas, using a variety of approaches, have seen psychical research, Theosophy and Spiritualism as useful sites of entry into late Victorian and Edwardian social, cultural and intellectual life. Recent examples from the perspective of general intellectual history include Navarro’s (2019) examination of the conceptual and epistemic significance of the concept of ether in the late Victorian and early twentieth century; Asprem’s (2014) exploration of the concept of Weberian disenchantment which has stressed the similarity of the problems faced by the leaders of the SPR with those investigating anomalous phenomena in Europe and the United States; and Ferguson’s (2012) mapping of the concept of evolution in Spiritualist thought with its often almost comic materiality. Each of these books would have enriched the social and cultural context of my first book: Navarro, for example, stressing the way the concept of the ether gave a reassuring underpinning to the idea of survival; and it would have been useful to contrast Spiritualist views of the nature of evolution in this and the ‘afterlife’ with those of Myers.
There is also a range of recent work based on specific disciplines and special interests which has significantly deepened my understanding of this wide and complex field. This includes: Noakes on physics (2019), Sommer on psychology (2013), Kripal on religious studies (2011); and the developing literature by cultural historians (which one can trace back to Royle (1991: 1-8) metaphorically linking Myers’ concept of telepathy to other emerging and apparently equally mysterious, equally invisible means of communication: the telegraph and the telephone. (On this see Grimes 2011, Kontou 2009, Galvan 2010.) In addition, recent work on the role of skilled professional entertainers has contributed to a more nuanced appreciation of the role of fraud and delusion in this field. (On this see Wiley 2012, Lamont 2013, Tompkins 2019.)

Noakes (2019: 238-241) has produced the most authoritative and detailed work in recent years on the SPR and his description of the general SPR methodology and some of its difficulties broadly coincides with my own. Particularly insightful and suggestive has been his mapping of scientists against their SPR membership and general psychic interests (2019: 95-103). This could be extended to other disciplinary areas and in conjunction with the SPR membership addresses and the tracking of occult sites that Luckhurst (in Phillips and Witchard 2010: 50-62) produced for nineteenth century Bloomsbury, could illuminate new interdisciplinary connections and sites of cultural exchange.

Within the broad interest in this area by cultural historians, there has been a small amount of published work on the cross-correspondences (Kontou 2009, Wilson 2013b, Galvan 2010) since the publication of my first book, most of it based, unlike the submitted texts in my thesis, on secondary rather than primary sources. This has led to a number of inaccuracies though some interesting insights are produced. For example, Galvan (2010: 136) states that four mediums produced, largely independently, the thousands of scripts. The actual figure is at least twelve and they were by no means as independently sealed off from each other as described in the secondary literature on which Galvan and Kontou depend. Wilson (2013b) has at least, through the work of Roy (2008) managed to get closer to some of the original sources. However, all three writers make some stimulating points. For Galvan the revelation of private
matters in seances parallels the typist’s/telephonist’s access to private information as she transmits often highly confidential information. Kontou stresses in the cross-correspondences the shift of the authorship role from the medium to the interpreter further blurring ‘the distinctions between mediumship, and authorship and interpretation’; and also, interestingly, the theatricality of physical mediumship, providing one additional reason as to why the SPR (in most situations) reacted so strongly against it and why it preferred its own, non-professional, educated group of automatic writers. Wilson, most illuminatingly has focused on the privileging of the written word over other sources of evidence. The primacy given to this approach and the linguistic markers which signal high status and intellectual authority were discussed in this submission but could have been explored in greater detail.

There is, however, a danger that the cultural historian might overemphasis the literary and metaphorical at the expense of professional procedures in the historical and psychological disciplines which may lead to a misreading of the work and purposes of the SPR. It can also reflect, as Johnson (2015: 3) has pointed out, a back projection into the past of our contemporary attitudes to the allegedly paranormal and those who studied it. This can distort and devalue the achievements and motives of those at the time. For example, it is absolutely true as Grimes (2011: 6) points out ‘that a multidisciplinary approach [covering psychical research, Spiritualism and the novel] …offers the most salient means of understanding the late Victorian period’ but terms like ‘uncanny’ ‘gothic’ ‘spectral’ while totally appropriate in a literary and cultural history do not in any way reflect the purposes, procedures and language of the core leadership of the SPR. Myers (1904 vol 1: xxii) the most romantically (in the widest sense of the term) inclined of them all abhorred language that suggested the supernatural, preferred the term supernormal and stated that ‘The word *supernatural* is open to grave objections: it assumes that there is something outside nature and it has become associated with arbitrary interference with law.’ Emily [Cook] Kelly (1992, 2007: 63) who has done most to situate Myers’ thought within the context of Victorian and twenty first century science, has vigorously demonstrated his commitment to the fundamental principles of scientific discipline building. ‘Myers thus believed that all phenomena-mental and material, normal and abnormal, commonplace and rare – are in some sense
continuous, coherent, and amenable to the rational, empirical methods of science.’ His florid, ebullient prose and capacity for extended metaphor when describing the workings of the human mind (particularly in its malfunctioning state) should not mislead the reader as to his absolute commitment to the above principles.

Two recent works – not literary or cultural history – have helped illuminate the intellectual milieu in which Myers, Gurney and the Sidgwicks operated. In the first Schultz (2017), building on his earlier work (2004), has stressed the centrality of psychical research in Sidgwick’s life and thought in a way not fully brought out in my first book. In addition, Schultz has described the cautious elitism of Sidgwick’s attitude to homoerotic relationships, calling this ‘esoteric morality’, which, given the fact that he was the brother-in-law of both Arthur and Gerald Balfour, has provided insights into the way sexual matters seen as ‘transgressive’ at the time were hushed up and handled. In the second, Knapp (2017), a study of the American psychologist Williams James and his work with the SPR, demonstrates the dynamic cross-fertilisation of ideas between the Sidgwick group and James particularly in the relationship between psychic phenomena and unconscious processes and in the development of systematic procedures to study the field.

Nor did I sufficiently make explicit (though I was familiar with the work of Collins 2003 and Becher 2001) the power of social and cultural roles when applied to intellectual and academic disciplines to reframe and manipulate the nature of belief and the presentation and interpretation of evidence (Lamont 2013; Force in Waskul and Eaton 2018: 19). In other words, ‘the alignment of individual experiences with culturally supported (inter) subjective interpretation’ carries more weight ‘than any argument about the objective facts of the matter’. And to complicate matters still further, I have become increasingly aware that different paranormal cultures themselves will have their own criteria for what counts as explanation and interpretation. This is well explored in Jenzen and Munt (2013: 1-28, 65-78). One consequence of this was that there was not, in my first book, a full appreciation of issues of boundaries and demarcations as specific subjects tried to establish the unique status of their focus and methodology both then and now. These issues include the underlying psychological and
sociological factors, especially the socioeconomic status of the individuals involved, and the methodological, philosophical and terminological issues associated with what constitutes ‘real’ scientific approaches to the anomalous. (On this see Pigliucci and Boudry 2013, Lamont 2013 and on the boundary issues in psychology and physics, Sommer 2013 and Noakes 2019.)

More could have been made of Myers’ writing style and his use of powerful imagery both in analysing the psyche as it disintegrated (its dissolutive aspects) and, particularly, as it grew and integrated into health (evolutive). It is this evolutive element that Kripal, the historian of religious studies (2011) and Kelly et al. (2015) have focused on. Kripal (2011: 83) quotes the passage in Myers’ *Science and a Future Life* where Myers with wit and humour compares the movement of the larva to imago (slug to butterfly) with humanity from animal to divinity/immortality. In both cases there are indications of the potential future state and, for humanity, it is the extraordinary powers of telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, cure of physical conditions by hypnosis, communication with the dead through mediums, mental abilities of *idiots savants*. More could have made of this feature of his work and its potential to counterbalance pessimistic views on degeneration and eugenics in the Edwardian period. (See Stone 2002, Searle 1976, Pick 1996.)

As well as wit and humour, Myers could also condense key methodological issues into a short compass. In this extract Myers (1904 v.1.: 243) clearly anticipated the work of Rhine (1937) and his Zener cards in his telepathic experiments, using neutral signs rather than highly emotional or richly symbolic ones: ‘[We should] start from telepathic communications intentionally planned to be so trivial, so devoid of emotions, that it shall be impossible to refer them to any common memory or sympathy; to anything save a direct transmission of idea, or impulse, or sensation, or image, from one to another mind.’ One notes a certain cosmic irony in the incarnate Myers proposing a methodological approach apparently at odds with the subjective, literary approaches of the cross-correspondence communicators and interpreters.

This review of what has been learn from more recent literature (both that specifically mentioning the cross-correspondences and that more widely on
aspects of the period) highlights the essential tension in this field between historical and literary approaches to the subject matter, where they collide, and where they intertwine. The methodology used for the Myers’ book and sections of the Balfour book was ‘traditional’ historical methodology, stressing the primacy of chronology, identifying and using the key primary and secondary sources, and challenging received accounts based on single rather than multiple sources, or selective detail, as in the case of Trevor H Hall’s work (1980a, 1980b); and doing this across the board, applying the same techniques to ‘expose’ the cross-correspondence interpreters where they, in their turn, appeared to be economical with the truth.

But in the case of the cross-correspondences the external facts which can be checked by traditional methods are embedded in an enormous body of symbolic and referential literature. As Gray (2011: 91-93) puts it the task is a hermeneutical one. (On the hermeneutic methodology see Thistleton 2016 :1-16; Cuddon 1998: 376-378.) This method (a hermeneutic circle) requires very close textual reading of the scripts, and constant cross-referencing, to see if the meanings claimed for scripts actually are there and if there is intellectual consistency and coherence across the scripts once the allusive symbolism has been decoded. As Maclean (in Cuddon: 377) states: ‘The circle is that movement from a guess at the “whole” meaning of a work to an analysis of its parts in relation to the whole, followed by a return to a modified understanding of the “whole” of the work.’ This is exactly what the original interpreters were doing, though they were not formally versed in Victorian Christian hermeneutics, and what this writer has done in trying to follow and reconstruct their arguments and interpretations. Gray has particularly stressed that this was based on a shared culture of both automatists and interpreters, so powerful that it was a kind of collective unconscious. ‘Not only did they understand the allusions in the same way, they associated them with the same images.’

This hermeneutical method has been based on close textual reading to identify and map the sources of the quotations in the scripts, on detailed research into the cultural milieu in which the automatists and interpreters operated and on wide reading in the nature of automatic writing. To deal with this enormous task (and it was only possible to provide a few worked examples in both the thesis
and the published book given the requirements of space and the sheer scale of the activity) all the documents as previously mentioned were scanned into a PDF format with a search tool allowing very quick access for cross-comparison of scripts which facilitates, again as mentioned previously, the possibility of asking and answering the key questions about any consistent, internal meaning. This is obviously a much easier retrieval and study process to manage than working laboriously with the original paper volumes, all thirty-one of them.

An important consequence of this and a significant contribution to the development of new knowledge has been the creation of a literary corpus of well over 3,000 scripts written by female mediums (with the exception of Kenneth Richmond) and interpreted by both male and female interpreters, all of whom were well connected to sections of the British intellectual and social elite in the first third of the twentieth century. The content is substantial and wide ranging in terms of both classical and modern literature, some children’s literature, many Biblical allusions, as well as wider cultural references to Ruskin, the Pre-Raphaelite painters, Blake’s etchings, Schubert, Schumann and Wagner, for example. It is a record of what content most readily came to mind in the semi-trance state in which the writing occurred, what it was associated with, and, quite often, the medium’s own reaction to it. To use Myers’ term, it provides a giant psychoscope into the reading and cultural habits of the significant intellectual elite mentioned above. This material is currently in USB format but there are plans to upload it to the Cloud and make it more widely available depending on copyright and related issues. These documents in digital form have great potential for individual and collaborative work across a variety of related corpuses in the relevant literature and a variety of institutions: very much in line with the collective digital strategies as suggested in Berry (2012).

Another field of which I was insufficiently aware was the use not just of the occult to provide richer insights into the literary culture of a period but more broadly the general mutual enrichment and cross-fertilisation of science and literature themselves in their historical contexts. This has been particularly exemplified in Willis (2016) on the links between scientific observation (microscope/telescope), occult themes and literature in the nineteenth century.
and Willis (2015) more generally on the ways in which across the sciences (biology, physiology, psychology, physics etc) and literature key themes and topics could be fruitfully explored. In this context I could have examined (mentioned in Hamilton 2009: 72-73), and more closely aligned, the sections on Stevenson and Henry James with Myers’ work on the subliminal, automatic writing, and hypnosis. A particularly good example of this approach is McCorristine’s work (2010: 75-90, 192-217) on the concept of hallucination in nineteenth-century psychology.

Finally, if starting again, I would wish to analyse in greater detail, the relationship of Oliver Lodge to the Cambridge elite. He was very close to Myers and, later, to Arthur Balfour and his public profile was of considerable value to the general standing of the SPR. But this masked differences. Sidgwick, Mrs Sidgwick, Gurney, and Myers, always stressed the rigorous assessment of evidence in order to establish, as far as possible, the existence of truly anomalous material and were rightly very hesitant about premature physical and quasiphysical explanations. Lodge’s concept of the ether (Noakes in Navarro 2019: 88-106) and of the physicality of the spirit world and the etheric body was a little too close to the materiality of Spiritualism for the inner dry as dust core of the SPR. For example, in Mrs Sidgwick’s (1923) classic paper on the processes of telepathic communication, the ether as a factor or force in the communication was not, or barely mentioned, yet it was central to Lodge’s philosophy and world view. The whole emphasis in that paper was on psychological processes, based in part on Myers’ concept of the subliminal, and not on the ‘physical’ operation of the ether.