

RECLAIMING PASSED LIVES: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ACCOUNTS OF SPIRITUALIST WOMEN

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This article will discuss the ways in which Spiritualist women in nineteenth century Britain used autobiography, memoir and personal narrative as a means of legitimising their authority by validating their personal, spiritual experiences. In publicly offering narratives of their personal experience I suggest that Madame Helena Blavatsky, Annie Besant and Madame Elisabeth d'Esperance (*née* Elisabeth Hope) were attempting to free themselves from the patriarchal constraints that sought to dictate the appropriateness of women's writing. Linda Anderson points out that genre is gendered, and that the novel, for example, was still considered a masculine form well into the nineteenth century (33). Autobiography, then, offered women an 'alternative space' in which they could 'contest their socially sanctioned position of silence and submission' (34). This article does not seek to confirm that their spiritual experiences were true, as such; but rather to explore how they were able to gain authority in the public (read: masculine) sphere by publishing their personal accounts.

D'Esperance's *Shadow Land* (1897) was written, in part, to combat accusations of fraud which overshadowed the final few years of her career in Britain. In the preface, she explains she now feels a 'burden of responsibility' to reveal the 'truths' she has been receiving since childhood, after having initially planned for the publication to be posthumous (xiii). Annie Besant was already a well-known activist for suffrage and trade unions when she met Madame Blavatsky and became engrossed in Theosophy. She wrote *Why I Became a Theosophist* (1889) and *An Autobiography* (1893) to discuss her spiritual transition from vicar's wife, to militant atheist, to Theosophist. Blavatsky, in her published works, displays less emotional attachment to her beliefs than these previous women. In *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Key to Theosophy* (1889), she prefers to frame her experiences in a dry, almost scientific manner. Blavatsky, in her personal narratives, projects the image of a humble woman; one who strives to do the work of the divine. She claims that she did not write *Isis* herself per se; rather, she acted as a conduit for the spirits to speak through her. This modesty—this 'polite social ritual', as Anne Campbell notes—is common in female personal

accounts (130). Yet I would argue that Blavatsky does not intend for her protestations of modesty to be taken seriously: ‘Women recognise that another woman’s understatement of her ability or success is not to be taken as a serious assessment, but...designed to assimilate her into the group’ (130). ‘The problem,’ Campbell explains, ‘is that men often fail to understand this [ritual]’ (130). Likewise, Besant and d’Esperance credit the spirits with influencing their works, if not writing them directly.

Before I discuss the personal narratives themselves, it is necessary to first offer brief explanations of Spiritualist and Theosophist belief. Men and women claiming contact with spirits, divine or demonic, have existed in all ages and in all countries. But the Spiritualism that flourished in the nineteenth century began in 1848 in an upstate New York hamlet called Hydesville. The Fox sisters, Margaret, Kate and Leah, were visited by a spirit who they called Mr Splitfoot; possibly a reference to the cloven hooves of the devil. Every night Mr Splitfoot would interact with the girls by knocking or rapping on the walls. Eventually they devised a system where he would use the knocks as a means of communication: knocks would signify letters of the alphabet, or serve as response to yes/no questions. Their unique powers attracted the attention of New York City’s elite, and news of their successful interactions with the Spirit World soon reached Britain and the Continent. They toured Europe, performing their *séances* for the great and good of society until the late 1870s. A decade later, Margaret wrote a full confession explaining that the phenomena she and her sisters produced were simply parlour tricks; but the spread of Spiritualism was not to be halted.

Madame Blavatsky began the Theosophical Society (usually referred to as TS) in New York in 1875. She claims that she was introduced to Spiritualism in 1858 whilst travelling in Paris, where she met Daniel Dunglas Home, then the world’s most famous and successful medium. Theosophy drew on tenets of Spiritualism and a blend of Eastern and ancient philosophies, and was intended to serve as a new method of searching for universal truth. Both Spiritualism and Theosophy instructed that when humans died, their spirit would live in the Other World or Astral Plane. Once in this new plane of existence, spirits could choose to speak to living humans, but would usually require a medium to facilitate the conversation. Spiritualism and Theosophy also taught that all humans could have access to divine or spiritual communication without the need for an official religion. Besant writes that Blavatsky’s teachings ‘woke in us powers, the possibility of which in ourselves we had not dreamed of, energies of the Soul that

demonstrated their own existence' (*Autobiography* 354). Spiritualism and Theosophy became popular, in part, because of the phenomena they (allegedly) produced. These phenomena included hearing voices (clairaudience), full-body apparitions, automatic writing, furniture being moved seemingly by itself, levitation of the medium, as well as the raps and knocks popularised by the Fox sisters.

As Spiritualism rose to prominence in the mid-nineteenth century, female mediums and Spiritualists began to feel confident speaking publicly about their spiritual experiences. Understanding personal experience is vital to any study of Spiritualism, as Spiritualism is an inherently experiential process. Devotees of and converts to Spiritualism—and later Theosophy—believed in the received truths because of what they saw, heard, or felt within the *séance* room. In contrast to positivism and empiricism, these (alleged) truths about the afterlife were revealed through experience; a highly personal encounter that could not be replicated in laboratory conditions. Raymond Williams notes that, until the late eighteenth century, the words 'experience' and 'experiment' were often used interchangeably (116). In the nineteenth century, in the climate of scientific positivism, 'experimenting' was how one could gain truth, knowledge or authority. 'Experiencing' was linked to emotion and feeling, therefore to women. Williams defines experience, in part, as 'a particular kind of consciousness, which can in some contexts be distinguished from reason or knowledge' (qtd. in Scott 60). However, Joan Scott argues that knowledge is gained through vision: 'vision is a direct, unmediated apprehension of a world of transparent objects.... Writing is reproduction, transmission—the communication of knowledge gained through (visual, visceral) experience' (58). In this sense, then, visions accrued via the *séance* experience may be understood as a sort of experimenting; a new means of gaining objective knowledge. It is the transmission of experiences via personal narrative that lends authority to d'Esperance, Besant and Blavatsky.

Mary Jean Corbett explains that the autobiographical form was the most effective literary genre for spiritual women to further their messages:

By erasing all traces of art and artfulness, she shows herself willing to be able to mortify her 'literary pride' before those readers in order to establish a reading community of comprehending converts. (20)

By appealing to emotion and experience, then, as opposed to received knowledge, these authors sought to engage with the emotions and experiences of their readers. D'Esperance and Besant humbled themselves by offering brutally honest accounts of their lives in order to gain respect and authority. D'Esperance notes the pain and loneliness of her childhood, and how difficult it was for her to navigate life when she could see things others could not:

I can recall no time when [spirits] were not familiar and natural; so that the only curious thing to me seemed the fact that other people should not have had the same experiences...indeed the refusal of my companions to accept my version of what was going on around us sometimes irritated me beyond measure. (2)

I would argue these passages are intended to comfort readers who, like d'Esperance, perhaps struggled with their spiritual gifts, such as they were. By sharing the fear and confusion in her own childhood, it is very likely she sought to encourage the next generation of mediums. d'Esperance explains that her spiritual gifts are far from miraculous; they have simply been with her since childhood (1). Besant, too, notes that she had her first spiritual experiences as a young girl, but was not able to fully understand or benefit from them until she was introduced to the Theosophical Mahatmas through Madame Blavatsky (*Autobiography* 58).

It is significant that throughout *Shadow Land* d'Esperance stresses that her gifts were inherent in her from birth: unlike Besant and Blavatsky, who sought advice on spiritual communication, and effectively learned their art, d'Esperance had no choice. In the second chapter ('My Troubles Begin') she details her mother's anger at what she believed was her daughter's fanciful behaviour, the scepticism of her tutors, and her fear that one of the many doctors she was sent to would have her sectioned. After an incident where her mother chastises her for 'tomboyish mischief' and 'abominable and wicked conduct', d'Esperance writes: 'I had a wretched suspicion that there must be something wrong somewhere in me' (19). Blavatsky and Besant also touch on childhood experiences with the supernatural, but not to the vivid degree of d'Esperance. According to Mary Poovey,

the avowedly 'subjective' text the autobiographer composes, which formally and thematically negotiates the line between private feminine experience and the

public masculine world, presents itself as neither mediated nor mediating, as a window that opens directly onto the soul. (qtd. in Corbett 18)

Soul-bearing, then, was purposeful. When d'Esperance recalls weeping after her mother's stern reproof, or Besant writes of the pain and fear she felt when losing her Christian faith, they seek to connect on a meaningful, emotional level with their readers. By relaying their own experiences, they attempt to empathise with their readers' experiences.

Religious autobiography, Corbett argues, was not a solely female literary form, but it was one in which women could claim authority:

If religions helped produce the ideology that assigned women to the domestic sphere, it also enable[d] them, within that realm, to write and act in ways that women who sought access to literary authority on purely secular grounds could not. (19)

By writing about their personal experiences, then, Spiritualist and Theosophist women were attempting to relate their experiences—and thus, the knowledge they spiritually received—to a wide audience.

Although not all practitioners believed the *séance* to be a religious act, a number of Spiritualists did attempt to incorporate the *séance* into religious worship. Blavatsky would not have described herself as a religious leader, yet her texts were written in a similar fashion to holy writ: she offered wisdom and advice; she laid down rules for members' behaviour; she gave accounts of her transcendental experience to her many eager converts. *Key* is effectively an instruction manual: written in a question-and-answer format, its chapters have titles like 'On Self-Improvement', 'Our Eternal Reward and Punishment' and 'What a Theosophist Ought Not to Do'. Though she claims she speaks only as the spirits and Mahatmas instruct her, Blavatsky's works were religious instruction, and by publishing them—by stepping into the public sphere and offering these works—she transgressed Victorian boundaries of acceptable female religious involvement. Corbett explains that the 'discourse of Christian piety' meant that female, Christian autobiographers in the nineteenth century were reluctant to 'locate [themselves] permanently in the public realm of exchange' despite briefly entering into the public, masculine sphere (17). Pauline Christianity (the tradition in which Blavatsky, Besant and d'Esperance were each raised) dictates: 'Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over

the man, but to be in silence' (1 Timothy 2: 11–12). Women who wrote these Spiritualist accounts, then, were at best subversive, and at worst heretical. Autobiographies by Spiritualist and Theosophist women both challenged and transgressed the religious status quo of *fin de siècle* Britain.

Corbett argues that the 'the spiritual autobiographer must not upset the distinction between the norms that constitute appropriate feminine behaviour' (17), and this is true of the Christian authors that she surveys in her article. But in considering the Spiritualists, who were also writing from a religious or quasi-religious perspective, it is clear that these women sought to upset the proscribed norms. For Corbett, authority was granted to Christian autobiographers because they sought not to inject their works with politics, but to simply offer their personal experiences of God. The inverse is true of works by Theosophist women; Besant and Blavatsky in particular combined their political views with their spiritual writing. In *Key*, Blavatsky claims that both Buddha and Christ 'preach[ed] most unmistakably Socialism' (170). Besant, similarly, claims that she was drawn to the movement, in part, 'to be a nucleus of a Universal Brotherhood' (*Why* 14), and that Theosophical teaching encouraged her to continue her 'vigorous Socialist work, and the continual championship of struggling labour movements' (*Autobiography* 358). Janet Oppenheim explains that Besant's shift from atheism was due to the 'warring sects' within the atheism movement; she felt they were not working toward that universal brotherhood for which she strove (15). These writings, then, were politically charged with a left-leaning philosophy that I would argue does not diminish their authority. Corbett claims that female authorship is 'sanctioned' when writing spiritual autobiography, because the form combines 'religious and domestic authority', both of which largely belonged to women at that time (19). By offering their private experiences of divine manifestation, they found 'a viable way of representing female experience' (19). Not all Spiritualists and Theosophists were women, of course, but mediumship was considered a female occupation, because it relied on experience and emotion.

One particularly fascinating aspect of Besant's personal narratives is her frank discussion of her relationship with religion. As a girl '[she] took [her] religion in strenuous fashion,' following the example of her Evangelical Christian mother and governess (23). In her teenage years, she was devoted to studying her faith, reading not only the Bible, but also commentaries and stories written by early Christian scholars:

I fasted, according to the ordinances of the Church; occasionally I flagellated myself to see if I could bear physical pain, should I be fortunate enough ever to tread the pathway trodden by the saints. (57)

Her mother pushed her into marriage, and it was then that her faith began to waver. Oppenheim writes that Besant found her husband cold and unfeeling (though he was never brutal), and when her daughter Mabel fell gravely ill in 1871, Besant began to struggle with her convictions (13). Though she appeared to be the ideal Christian wife—meek, supportive, bearing two children and writing hymns in her spare time—Besant was dissatisfied with her lot in life. It was then that she threw herself into charity work and social campaigns, and found her calling. Besant no doubt hoped that her honesty concerning what Oppenheim called ‘spiritual restlessness’ (12) would be a comfort to other struggling women. Her experiences were her authority in the stead of formal ordination. In 1870, Besant joined the National Secular Society and was a vocal campaigner for atheism (amongst other issues) until her conversion to Theosophy. She was emphatic in her newfound conviction: ‘I *know*, by personal experiment, that the Soul exists, and that my Soul, not my body, is myself’ (*Autobiography* 345). Besant does acknowledge that her readers may be ‘dissatisfied with second-hand evidence’ and will require ‘ocular demonstration’ or their own ‘personal experience’ to be convinced of Theosophy’s truths (*Why* 19). Blavatsky’s writing advocates personal experience as evidence, and encourages all those interested in Theosophy to try to communicate with the Other Side on their own. She writes that ‘Faith is not a word to be found in Theosophical dictionaries’ and that all knowledge she has received is the result of ‘*observation and experience*’ (*Key* 87; emphasis in the original). She objects to learning Theosophy by rote, explaining that examinations—‘the terror of modern boyhood’ (266)—are ineffective in receiving true knowledge. Rather, it is what one personally sees, hears and feels that will lend the greatest instruction (266–67). In other words, truth and knowledge come from personal experience. Although Blavatsky published several volumes explaining the tenets of Theosophy, as well as hundreds of articles for journals and newspapers, she stressed that she did not intend widespread conversion to Theosophy. Instead, she encouraged people to trust in their own ‘direct personal experience’ to dictate whether they should follow the path that she had forged (259).

Corbett writes that books are like women: ‘they are moral agents whose influence shapes the interior life of their readers’ (26). This was

true of the ideal nineteenth-century woman, the ‘angel of the house’, who was expected to be the religious authority within her family—and within her family only. With the advent of Spiritualism in the mid-nineteenth century, women working as mediums began to question why their voices, their stories, were not granted the same weight as contemporary male religious writers. Many mediums were made known to the public by the men who audited them: Florence Cook, Hélène Smith and Mrs Green, to name but three, performed miraculous feats, but their voices have been lost. There are no records detailing the experiences from their points of view; that task was left to William Crooks, Théodore Flournoy and C.G. Helleberg, respectively. Spirit contact, for mediums and Theosophical adepts, was a highly personal experience, which (they believed) yielded significant truths about this life and the next. In examining the autobiographical accounts of Madame d’Esperance, Annie Besant and Madame Blavatsky, it is possible to gain understanding of how they experienced the phenomena. By removing these experiences from the domestic (feminine) to the public (masculine), they not only amassed followers and converts, but demanded authority at a time when women were, broadly speaking, discouraged from giving religious instruction outside of the home.

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