

Spiritualism and Scholarship

Abstract “Spiritualism and Scholarship” provides background on the nineteenth-century New Religious Movement of Spiritualism and argues that the Seybert Report is a significant historical artifact because—in the United States—it documented the first of a series of institutionally sanctioned academic investigations into psi, which have raised questions about how we define and perform science in the academy, as well as how we determine the legitimacy of various branches of academic research.

Keywords Psi · Spiritualism · Western Esotericism · Natural science
Psychical research · Anomalous phenomena

THE “SCIENTIFIC” RELIGION

In the mid-nineteenth century, a new religious movement arose in Upstate New York. This movement, known as Spiritualism, began in 1848 when two teenage girls named Kate and Maggie Fox claimed to be communicating with the spirit of a peddler who had—many years earlier—been murdered in their modest Hydesville home. When the peddler’s bones were found in the basement of the house, Kate and Maggie quickly gained a reputation for having psychic abilities.¹ The girls had apparently devised an intricate system of “raps” with which to interact with their ghostly friend. Neighbors flocked to the house to hear the raps and to make the ghost’s acquaintance, and eventually Kate and

Maggie—together with their older sister Leah—began to provide public demonstrations of their skills. The Fox sisters' demonstrations were followed by those of other people claiming to have similar abilities, and eventually Spiritualism—which had originated simply with the belief that one could communicate with spirits of the deceased—came to be described by its practitioners as a religion.²

If Spiritualism was a religion, the *séance* was a key ritual component of Spiritualist practice. Attendees at a Victorian-era *séance* would have found themselves in a darkened room—most likely a parlor in someone's home. The attendees (who typically numbered anywhere from 3 to 12), would be seated around a table in such a manner as to balance male and female energies. They might have been asked to put their hands on the table with their fingers touching, or they might have joined hands. The medium, who was usually a woman, might lead *séance* attendees in singing a hymn or saying a prayer to “assist conditions” for the summoning of a spirit-control. Eventually, if the attendees were lucky, they would get what they came for: the medium would ostensibly be controlled by a spirit who would direct her to impart personal messages to various people in the room.

Mediums claimed to convey messages from the spirit world in a variety of ways. Some simply spoke in what attendees believed was the actual voice of a deceased being, while others used slates to write messages patiently dictated by the spirits. Still, others conveyed messages through a laborious system of raps and knocks much like that originally used by the Fox sisters in 1848. In time, as mediumship grew more widespread, audiences began to demand more empirical evidence of a spirit world. In response to this, a number of mediums began to produce what they referred to as “full-form materialization”—that is, a tangible spirit form that could appear at the *séance* and make physical contact with the attendees. These “full-form materializations” obviously aroused suspicion, and some scholars have argued that they contributed to Spiritualism's eventual downfall because they caused Spiritualism to take on the trappings of popular entertainment. Most significantly, perhaps, the *séance* served a therapeutic function for those who had lost loved ones. Under the cover of darkness, the bereaved could cry and share their feelings of vulnerability and pain. Scholars such as Brett Carroll, Cathy Gutierrez, Molly McGarry, and Marlene Tromp have argued that, particularly in the second half of the nineteenth century, the *séance* was appealing in that it offered attendees a small informal spiritual

community from which they could receive advice and comfort. In this respect, the ritual structure of the séance could have served a beneficial social function.

Many Spiritualist practitioners presented their religion to the public as a progressive and practical supplement to Christianity in that one could communicate directly with the spirit world rather than rely on the mediation of a priest. Other Spiritualists framed their beliefs not only as a supplement to Christianity but also as a viable replacement for corrupt and outmoded Christian institutions. Attending a séance, Spiritualists believed, would be infinitely more beneficial to a person in need of spiritual succor than going to church. But dominant Christian institutions were appalled by Spiritualists' claims to have unveiled the "truth" formulating the essence of all religions, and churches objected to competing with Spiritualists for followers. The Catholic church went so far as to condemn Spiritualism as being Satanically inspired blasphemy.³ And, Christian institutions were not Spiritualism's only critics. Scientists were similarly disenchanted with Spiritualism's spreading ideology: Spiritualists claimed that theirs was a "scientific religion." More specifically, Spiritualist practitioners believed that, given the appropriate conditions, a spirit medium at a séance could—through spirit manifestations—provide incontrovertible evidence of the existence of life beyond the grave. While skeptics believed that there was a firm dichotomy between what they referred to as "superstition" and science, Spiritualists believed that science and psi were intertwined, and that a clear division could not be drawn between the two. Cathy Gutierrez writes: "Spiritualism was the last grand attempt at allying science and religion. Science would prove the truth of religious claims, which would in turn provide innovative suggestions for the increase in science."⁴ Spiritualists believed in a kind of divine symbiosis between religion and science and were so convinced that their beliefs corresponded with empirical "truths" that they invited scientists to test séance phenomena for themselves.

CONDUCTING "PSYCHICAL" RESEARCH IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

From the 1850s onward, scholars on both sides of the Atlantic had conducted various informal investigations into the claims of people who purported to have psychic abilities. However, the first "experiment" that

was widely recognized within the scientific community and publicized as being affiliated with a university, was conducted between 1877 and 1878 in Leipzig, Germany, by Professor J.C.F. Zollner, a German astrophysicist. The results of the experiment were highly controversial: while many of Zollner's colleagues denounced the Leipzig experiments as having been a farce, Zollner claimed to have proved that spirit communication was possible. But, as more and more people claiming to be spirit mediums (or psychics) emerged into the public eye, scholars joined forces to begin more organized investigations. Although these societies were comprised of scholars—many of whom were interested in the then fledgling field of experimental psychology—such investigations were not formally supported by any university. In 1882, the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) was founded in London, and later, in 1884, the American Society for Psychical Research (ASPR) was established in Boston.⁵

In her study on intersections between Spiritualism, science, and realism in the nineteenth century, Sheri Weinstein discusses the SPR's first annual proceedings, with respect to the society's claim that psychic phenomena would be investigated according to the scientific method. In her analysis, Weinstein writes

The language of these proceedings reveals the S.P.R.'s similarity to the literary realism of its day. Empiricist diction such as 'investigate' and 'systematic,' 'observation' and 'testimony' implies a sort of organized objectivity, a faith in the senses' impartiality. But by disavowing prejudice and bias while it glorifies science as an exact and 'unimpassioned' form of inquiry, this statement, in fact, tells us that testimony and observation are always possibly fallible and unreliable. The S.P.R. courts the idea that its own investigations could be based on illusion and deception. In other words, we must trust the Society as we must trust realism; with faith in its mission but skepticism about its abilities to carry forth such a mission convincingly.⁶

According to Weinstein, the language of the proceedings of the SPR implied that the investigators realized on some level that even empirical knowledge could be relative. One of the founders of the ASPR was William James (1842–1910), a prominent American physician, philosopher, and psychologist. James himself recognized that—with respect to alleged psi phenomena—it would most likely be impossible to produce a definitive answer as to whether or not spirit communication was “real.” Psi was just too slippery—too difficult to quantify. James's view

of “truth” as being subjective and malleable, rather than as essential and “fixed,” was crucial to his research in Spiritualism. That is, while many investigators dismissed people who claimed to have psychic abilities, James was convinced that not all self-identified mediums were deliberately duping those around them—rather, they genuinely believed themselves to have such abilities. In this sense, then, Spiritualist claims could—within particular contexts—be considered “true.”⁷ More specifically, investigators like James felt that a distinction could be made between truth and authenticity. James believed that the very fact that some people were certain that such phenomena existed made their claims worthy of study:

The most ancient parts of truth ... also once were plastic. They also were called true for human reasons. They also mediated between still earlier truths and what in those days were novel observations. Purely objective truth, truth in whose establishment the function of giving human satisfaction in marrying previous parts of experience with newer parts played no role whatsoever, is nowhere to be found. The reasons why we call things true is the reason why they are true, for ‘to be true’ means only to perform this marriage-function.⁸

Here, James presents the idea that truth is socially constructed and contingent and that new truths are constructed by combining *a priori* experience with new ideas. James’s view was unusual—even radical—for an era in which scientific materialism was privileged above all other ways of knowing.

Historians are divided on whether or not nineteenth-century members of the SPR and ASPR were attempting to debunk or verify Spiritualist phenomena. In fact, at different times in their respective histories, depending upon who was in charge, these societies may have been biased either way. Indeed, both societies were comprised of scientists who believed that psychical phenomena could be “real,” as well as scientists who did not.⁹ Significantly, the research methodologies deployed by the SPR and ASPR did not encourage investigators to determine whether their subjects were lying or delusional—rather, investigators simply made observations, collected information, formed case studies, and provided circumspect analyses of the data they had compiled. That is, the SPR and ASPR tended to rely on information-gathering and research methodologies typical of the social sciences, rather than the natural sciences.¹⁰ The

SPR and ASPR were not necessarily interested in proving or disproving the possibility of spirit communication—rather, they were interested in understanding why mediums believed themselves to be communicating with the spirit world. Could patterns be identified in their case histories? Under what conditions did people who claimed to have psychic abilities seem to be receiving messages from beyond the grave?

Yet, the Seybert Commission was tasked with a different agenda. Instead of merely collecting, cataloging, and interpreting studies and personal histories, the Commission was challenged to determine, via the scientific method, whether or not the phenomena produced in séances were objectively “real,” and whether or not the mediums who claimed to produce such phenomena were telling the “truth.” In other words, could this anomalous phenomenon be explained by natural science? Since Commissioners were convinced it could not, they could only assume that any phenomena arising during a séance must be fraudulent.

THE SEYBERT COMMISSION

Being a Spiritualist himself, the late Henry Seybert had no doubt hoped that the Seybert Commission would provide empirical proof of the veracity of spirit communication and, as such, had arranged for a fellow Spiritualist and friend named Thomas Hazard to act as a consultant to the Seybert Commission. Hence, in 1884, the Seybert Commission for Investigating Modern Spiritualism was established at the University of Pennsylvania, marking the first officially university-sanctioned exploration of Spiritualist phenomena in the United States. Commissioners launched their investigations immediately, and 3 years later, in 1887, compiled the *Preliminary Report of the Commission Appointed by the University of Pennsylvania to Investigate Modern Spiritualism in Accordance with the Request of the Late Henry Seybert*. The so-called Seybert Report was published by J.B. Lippincott in that same year. Essentially, the Seybert Report indicated that, despite the fact that Commissioners had been unable to categorically prove that Spiritualist phenomena was purely illusory, they believed Spiritualism to be an elaborate hoax that posed a social threat. Commissioners claimed that Spiritualists’ practices challenged Christianity, undermined the scientific establishment, encouraged superstition, and caused widespread financial and emotional exploitation of vulnerable populations. Convinced of the danger of Spiritualist beliefs, Commissioners asked the University

Trustees to allow them to continue their research. This request was apparently denied, and the Commission disbanded shortly after the report was published.

In 1887, when J.B. Lippincott published the book-length Seybert Report, the text reached a broad audience and met with widespread criticism. To begin with, a number of scientists had strongly objected to the investigation taking place at all, claiming that it seemed to dignify Spiritualist phenomena with undeserved attention. The ethos of the “psychic investigators” and the endorsement of an Ivy League university led skeptics to fear that the public would base its belief in Spiritualism on the high profile of the investigations, rather than taking seriously the Commission’s negative findings. Both Spiritualists and skeptics criticized the Commission’s methodology, complaining that it was inconsistent at best and that Commissioners’ writing displayed a lack of professionalism. Further, influential Spiritualists—including a very disappointed Thomas Hazard—claimed that the Commission had been comprised entirely of men who, from the outset, had been determined to expose the alleged production of psi phenomena as being a hoax. Spiritualists complained that their religion had been misrepresented, and accused Commissioners of simply reiterating existing reports of fraudulence rather than making a genuine attempt to examine mediums impartially.

Seybert Commissioners had no doubt expected that their work would inspire controversy, but what they most likely did not anticipate was that the report would help to raise questions—that are still relevant today—pertaining to the construction of legitimate science. (This will be more fully explored in later chapters.) The Seybert Report provides a unique perspective on academic research into psi and how such research has contributed to what we now understand to be “normative,” “mainstream,” or “regular” science. Finally, the Commission’s investigations tell us about historical relationships between the general public, the academy, and scientific research.

PSYCHICAL RESEARCH, THE ACADEMY, AND WESTERN ESOTERICISM

In *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Wouter Hanegraaff defines Western Esotericism as a term used to encompass “worldviews, practices, and ways of knowing that have not succeeded in becoming dominant and have therefore been marginalized as ‘rejected knowledge’ since the age of Enlightenment.”¹¹ Similarly, historian and esotericist

Tim Rudbrog outlines how stringently science was defined following the scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries:

what science was—and what it was not supposed to be—was very clear in the positivist’s historiography. Everything belonging to religion and especially metaphysical or occult types of thought was an irrational embarrassment. In their writing of the history of science, when problems arose—such as the fact that some of the great scientists also studied religion, metaphysics, magic, and the occult sciences—they were simply either ignored completely, written out of history, or explained away.¹²

Since the boundaries of what constituted science were so carefully delineated, the idea of challenging such boundaries by studying subject matter categorized as being metaphysical was considered to be a radical and subversive act. Given that such subject matter was hotly contested, Victorian-era scientists were divided over whether investigating Spiritualist or psi phenomena was a productive endeavor. Some claimed that since séance phenomena could not be supported by natural science, it was unworthy of examination. Others felt that Spiritualist claims could not be so easily dismissed. As Hanegraaff puts it, academics have long been in the habit of claiming “that since science and scholarship cannot discover the divine or the absolute it therefore does not exist. However, it is logically more consistent to admit that we simply do not know and cannot know.”¹³ And, despite the fetishization of scientific materialism, not all Victorian-era scholars were willing to accept the absolute primacy of materialism. These scholars rejected the rigid academic insistence on a positivist worldview.

For example, writing in 1873, Alfred Russel Wallace, British naturalist and later a “leading organizer” of the SPR¹⁴ complained of a colleague who had apparently refused to consider Spiritualist claims of encounters with psi as warranting scientific investigation:

I should not have expected a scientific man to state, as a reason for not examining it, that spiritualism ‘is opposed to every known natural law, especially the law of gravity,’ and that it ‘sets chymistry, human physiology, and mechanics at open defiance,’ when the facts simply are that the phenomena, if true, depend upon a cause or causes which can overcome or counteract the action of these several forces, just as some of these forces often counteract or overcome others; and this should surely be a strong inducement to a man of science to investigate the subject.¹⁵

Wallace deplors the scientific community's tendency to dismiss the notion of psychical experimentation before it has even begun. He points out that we should be investigating not what we believe we already know, but what we don't know. According to Laurence Moore, James shared these views, condemning prevalent sociocultural attitudes that "systematically ignored those facts that could not conveniently be pigeonholed within the existing theoretical structure of nature."¹⁶ James questioned how scientific disciplines that seemed beholden to pigeonholing and "neatness" could be capable of fostering new discoveries. Moreover, the fact that James was a psychologist who supported exploring Spiritualist phenomena is of particular significance, given that, in the late nineteenth century, experimental psychology was a new field struggling to establish its legitimacy in the academy. Up until the 1880s, the words "psychical" and psychological were often used interchangeably. However, when the term "psychical" began to be associated with psi, academics (particularly psychologists), scrambled to draw a distinction between the two.¹⁷ As historian Deborah Coon puts it: "Investigating the supernatural and paranormal seemed to many psychologists simply to be courting disaster for the budding discipline."¹⁸ But Coon clarifies that despite these reservations, James:

argued that because the psychological realm had never been studied scientifically before the mid-nineteenth century, little was known about the actual laws and conditions governing it. Therefore, his argument continued, it was too early in the course of the young science to rule out some phenomena as impossible a priori.¹⁹

Thus, while most psychologists struggled to separate the psychical from the psychological because they feared that psychical research would damage psychology's credibility, James did the opposite: although he worked hard to legitimize psychology as an academic field, he balked at excluding claims to anomalous experience from his research agenda because he believed that psychical research could help to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the psyche.²⁰ At the same time, however, James argued "that in order to be a natural science, psychology had to remain completely positivistic and not inquire into metaphysical matters of causality and ontology."²¹ But how could a "positivistic approach" justify the exploration of phenomena and belief systems that seemed to oppose

positivist methodologies and principles in every way? Coon provides an illuminating explanation of James's reasoning:

The appeal to positivism enabled James to dismiss concerns about psychophysical causality, that is, how the mental could possibly induce other mental (or even physical) consequences, as spiritualists claimed. All that any positivistic science could study was the functional relationships among its special phenomena. James argued that just as the physical sciences had abandoned worries about how mechanical causality worked, so psychology should abandon worries about how psychological causality and psychophysical causality worked. They should simply study phenomena presented to them—which included telepathy and spiritistic phenomena—and describe the functional relationships among them.²²

By comparing psychology to the physical sciences, James draws a convincing parallel between mechanical causality and psychophysical causality. With this astute rhetorical move, James reassures his audience that rather than attempting to bolster Spiritualists' claims to metaphysical experience, he would simply be considering how such phenomena appeared to the disinterested observer: Like a physicist, James would be considering "functional relationships" between observable phenomena—only this phenomena would be psychological, rather than mechanical or chemical. Despite this compelling analogy, James's personal interpretation of positivism was at times murky—and Coon suggests that James repeatedly undermined his own agenda of constructing arguments based entirely on empirical knowledge. However, David Leary's work on the rhetoric of psychology suggests that James simply understood empiricism differently from most scholars of that era:

The goal of presenting an argument that would end all argument was foreign to James's temperament and—as he pointed out—foreign to the historical reality of science itself. Following in the footsteps of his beloved Ralph Waldo Emerson, James believed that "science is nothing but the finding of analogy" and that the analogies of science—indeed, the analogies underlying all forms of knowledge—are 'fluxional' rather than "frozen." Though a staunch empiricist—or rather, as he saw it, *because* he was staunch empiricist—James insisted that there are always new ways to experience reality and different ways to categorize any experience.²³

According to James, there was simply no such thing as one way to understand or interpret data. To James, a good scientist was one who

was creative enough to formulate and convey meaningful analogies that would resonate with scientifically-minded audiences.

In the *Rhetoric of Science*, Lawrence Prelli also illustrates how James tended to frame his deviations from orthodoxy, explaining that James:

allowed additional kinds of data to count as scientific—for example, self-reports of feelings and attitudes. The logic of rhetoric in psychology rests not only on formal criteria for inference but on informal criteria of ‘legitimacy’ applied to data and inferences...Thus, at least two kinds of informal logic operate in rhetorical discourse: the logic of terminological choice and the logic that prescribes what counts as legitimate data and inference.²⁴

When Prelli speaks of “terminological choice” he suggests that disciplinary boundaries are often drawn in relationship to how language is used and understood within those disciplines, rather than in relationship to “formal” and universally recognized criteria. In this manner, James was able to argue for the inclusion of evidentiary materials that other scientists might have rejected. He was able to take advantage of the often blurry line between the construction of formal and informal inference to convince his colleagues of the viability of his interpretative work. Moreover, Prelli’s assessment of James’s logic highlights some of the methodological pitfalls that those in the “hard” sciences typically assigned to the “soft” sciences: That is, a heavy reliance on interpretation and inference in order to formulate a conclusion. Hence, James shaped the terms of experimental psychology in such a way that otherwise nebulous findings did not necessarily need to be eliminated from his research.

DISCIPLINARITY AND BOUNDARY-DRAWING

The Seybert Commission was ostensibly tasked with assessing whether Spiritualist phenomena were empirically “true.” That is, claims of spirit communication would need to be debunked (or proven) by the Commission via the scientific method in order for the investigation to have fulfilled its purpose. But although the Commission’s investigation was framed as being “scientific” in scope—not all of the professors appointed to the Commission had backgrounds in science. The University of Pennsylvania’s Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts (2015)²⁵ provides the following information on the Seybert Commission’s investigators:

Horace Howard Furness, a Shakespeare scholar... George S. Fullerton, a clergyman, a professor of philosophy, the first holder of the chair endowed by Seybert, and the secretary of the Commission; and Robert Thomas Ellis [sic]²⁶, another clergyman and a professor of English literature and history. The scientists associated with the University were William Pepper, provost, professor of clinical medicine, and ex officio Chair of the Commission; Joseph Leidy, director of the newly-formed biology department, professor of comparative anatomy and zoology, and member of the Academy of Natural Sciences; George Augustus Koenig, professor of mineralogy and metallurgy; James William White, professor of dentistry; and S. Weir Mitchell, doctor, trustee of the University, and fellow of the College of Physicians. These men were also joined by Calvin B. Knerr, a doctor; and Coleman Sellers, an engineer and a professor of mathematics at the Franklin Institute.²⁷

As seen above, of the 12 members initially appointed to the Commission, three were clergymen, and were philosophy, English, or history professors; four were trained physicians, and the remaining three were in the natural sciences and engineering. Despite psychical research's links to psychology, there were no psychologists on the Seybert Commission because the university would not establish a psychology department until 1887 after the Commission had disbanded. (Furthermore, no Commissioners seemed to have any experience with psychology, except perhaps for Silas Weir Mitchell, whose Draconian "rest cure" for depressed Victorian-era women gained infamy by way of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story, the "Yellow Wallpaper".) It may be assumed that Mitchell, along with other members of the Commission, was appointed because he was assumed to have superlative observational skills, however, no explanation is ever given as to how the selections for the Commission were made—or even whether it was a competitive process. The investigators' disciplines were not emphasized in the Seybert Report—if anything, they were obscured. (The notion of disciplinary background, as well as reasons that it may have been glossed over in the Seybert Report, will be taken up later in my discussion of the Slade-Zollner investigation.) The lack of emphasis on the Commissioners' disciplinary backgrounds is striking to the twenty-first-century scholar because, when interdisciplinary research is conducted today, researchers are typically chosen to pursue specific lines of inquiry based on their unique disciplinary perspectives. But, since "[T]he work in each discipline is framed around the problems and discussion internal to that field"

what happens when there is no work in any specific discipline to build upon.²⁸ In some cases, a new discipline must be created, along with its own methodologies and problematics, but Commissioners—who considered themselves to be short on time and money—were apparently in no position to do this.

SELF AND OTHER

As David Hess points out, much academic study of the history of psychical research involves boundary-drawing. Such boundaries operate across a variety of discourses. In the late nineteenth century (and to some extent, today) academic boundary-drawing pertained mostly to disciplinarity: for instance, separating psychical research from psychology. But as Hanegraaff and other Western Esotericists point out, such boundary-drawing actually occurs across multiple disciplines in the sciences and arts, providing parameters for what is and is not considered a serious area of study. This boundary-drawing occurs not only in psychology, but also in history, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, religious studies, folklore, and medicine. Each academic discipline establishes its frontiers—and subject matter that lies beyond those frontiers is contested.

While Hess argues that at the center of each discourse community there is a “Self” and, at its boundaries, an “Other,” he adds that even within disciplines explicitly defined as esoteric, boundary-drawing endures. One example of such a discipline would be parapsychology, an oft-overlooked branch of psychology that concentrates on researching anomalous psychological experience. With respect to parapsychology in particular, distinctions are often drawn between “experimental parapsychology versus spontaneous case research.”²⁹ That is, even within parapsychology, an already marginalized area of study, some forms of research are considered more legitimate than others. Hess asserts that the position of the Other is of vital rhetorical importance to the Self—and that the strength of the arguments at the center of a discourse are often legitimated by the belief systems that lie at the fringes of those discourses. Put another way, legitimate science is defined as much by what it is *not* as by what it is. Further, even practitioners of science that have been deemed illegitimate by the mainstream draw distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable practices.

Because séance phenomena and much psychical research have been classified as being illegitimate science or “pseudoscience,” it is important

to consider how pseudoscience is defined. According to Michael Gordin, pseudoscience is not “amateur” science; rather it is a shadow discourse to mainstream or “normal” science in that it imitates “normal” science. This means that there can be “good” or “bad” pseudoscience.³⁰ Like Hess, Gordin points out that sometimes the tightest boundaries of all are drawn within the realm of “fringe” science or pseudoscience itself. Since pseudoscience mimics the discourses of mainstream science, it is not surprising that it would also mimic mainstream science’s tendency toward boundary-drawing: “That is, scientists routinely castigate other doctrines as pseudoscientific and it stands to reason that those on the fringe would adopt a penchant for demarcation. Not only could they call other competing fringe doctrines pseudoscientific; they would also call establishment science so.”³¹ Scientists who produce pseudoscience certainly do not think of their work as such: No one actually intends to perform pseudoscience—their scholarship is simply labeled that way by mainstream scientists. According to Gordin:

Individual scientists (as distinct from the monolithic ‘scientific community’) designate a doctrine a ‘pseudoscience’ only when they perceive themselves to be threatened not necessarily by the idea themselves, but by what those ideas represent about the authority of science, science’s access to resources, or some other broader social trend.³²

As other scholars have argued, feeling threatened was a common nineteenth-century establishment response to psychical research. Aside from numerous methodological problems that rendered psi phenomena almost impossible to test reliably, there was a fear that dignifying psychical research with resources, publicity, and a university affiliation would increase Spiritualism’s popularity thereby creating “a neuropathological or Spiritistic epidemic.”³³ That is, the idea of Spiritualism as a social contaminant prevailed in positivist nineteenth-century discourses.

CONCLUSION

In many respects, the Seybert Report becomes a cultural artifact representative of a nineteenth-century imperative to maintain the integrity of the scientific establishment. The Seybert Commission’s stated purpose—to prove Spiritualist phenomena fraudulent once and for all—can be interpreted as an exemplar of an ongoing cultural battle waged within

the academy to separate “real” science from fake science. A rhetorical analysis of the Seybert Report reveals from the investigators’ perspective, the challenges of scientifically framing a quest for empirical evidence of psi. But the Seybert Report also demonstrates that as positivism became an increasingly dominant force in the academy, some scholars had begun to question the practices and assumptions underlying the production of empirical truth: the scientific method. The Seybert Report reveals that at least one member of the Commission was beginning to question categories of “legitimate knowledge” and to reconsider what it might mean to conduct an effective scientific experiment. This observation, coupled with Alfred Russel Wallace’s point that it is irresponsible for a scientist to declare the impossibility of psychic phenomena without first examining those phenomena, is significant from a historiographical perspective because it foreshadows postmodernist thought. Does “doing” science mean the uncovering of a single finite “Truth”? Or are there multiple truths? Are all truths fixed, or are they malleable, contingent, and socially constructed? Over a century later, we continue to ask such questions with respect to the social and cultural implications of scientific research.

NOTES

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The Seybert Report

Rhetoric, Rationale, and the Problem of Psi Research

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