

Apparitions and Appearances: Ghost Stories and Paranormal Research in the Nineteenth Century in Mary Louisa Molesworth and Ada Goodrich Freer

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Abstract

Literature on the supernatural became very popular in Victorian society. Ghost stories became widespread and veridical literature and studies on the paranormal arose as well. This essay will deal with an example of fiction, *The Rippling Train* by Molesworth and a non-fictional investigation, *The Alleged Haunting of Bellechin House* by Ada Goodrich Freer. The essay will show that while both differ in intent, both represent Victorian angst in terms of the ability to empirically determine reality and its shortcomings as well as attempts to subvert power structures through writing about apparitions.

'Let's tell ghost stories then,' said Gladys. 'Aren't you tired of them? One hears nothing else nowadays.' Thus begins Mary Louisa Molesworth's *The Rippling Train* (1887). Ghost stories during the Victorian era were intensely popular thanks in large part to the repeal of the newspaper tax in 1885 which saw many relatively cheap periodical publishing from *Tinsley's Magazine* to Dickens' *All the Year Round*. Ghost stories featured prominently in them and fuelled the Victorian taste for the supernatural. However, these ghost stories would resemble more the realist fiction of the era than gothic literature, and the later half of the Victorian period saw the rise of collections of true ghost stories. This fascination fuelled the creation of societies like the Society for Psychical Research, which tried to ascertain the true causes of paranormal evidence.¹

Unfortunately, ghost stories have been ignored for the most part by literary scholars. Only now has one begun to witness the rise of serious scholarly study on supernatural fiction. They were often seen not as serious literature, but more as fireside entertainment. However, now many see the ghost story in the Victorian era as containing expressions of Victorian angst. Clare Stewart surmises that the development of the ghost story became 'an ideal discourse for hidden agendas and deeper levels' and Freeman adds that they, 'combined a surface narrative, which seemed to reaffirm conservative notions of order, with a less easily deciphered set of considerations which challenged or criticised the very notions the stories' closure seemed to endorse.'² For many, the fact that many writers of ghost stories and most mediums were women points to the supernatural as a way for women writers to subvert the patriarchal and parochial discourse that dominated Victorian society; and indeed it is interesting to note the ties of spiritualist circles to early feminist pioneers such as Stanton, Lady Byron, Barbara Leigh-Smith and Elizabeth Blackwell. For many women who felt like ghosts in society, spiritualism offered a different vision of women and what they were capable of accomplishing.³ While it may be true that many women turned to writing ghost stories as a way of subverting male power structures, many also did it simply as a way of generating revenue due to their popularity. Also, there were just as many men writing ghost stories as well. Thus, it would be entirely valid to state that ghost stories provided a platform to challenge moral codes in general.

The nineteenth century and its advance of scientific understanding solidified the Enlightenment's view of a world operating under natural laws and mechanist principles.

¹ Michael Cox and R. A. Gilbert, *The Oxford Book of Victorian Ghost Stories* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), pp. 3-7.

² Nick Freeman, 'Sensational Ghosts, Ghostly Sensations', *Women's Writing*, 20.2 (2013), 186-201 (p. 187).

³ Nina Auerbach, 'Ghosts of Ghosts', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 32.1 (1999), 277-84.

Even before Lyell and Darwin, scientists were beginning to cement the epistemological importance of sight and its problems. This was important as it made objective reality something that could be ascertained and important for pragmatic purposes of science and technology (as shown in the rise of realist novels and detective stories). This speculation into sight and its objective validity concerning apparitions was the subject of two studies: John Ferriar's *Essay Towards a Theory of Apparitions* in 1813 and Samuel Hibbert's *Sketches of the Philosophy of Apparitions* (1824). Both studies point to the eye not merely as a passive organ but as active to the object being sensed, and which can fool itself due to certain external factors. This explained why sensible people sometimes saw fantastical images such as ghosts. Against this way of epistemological thinking, Ruskin and Carlyle still held that the scientific way of looking at the world was only one way: there was a 'spiritual sight' – to use Ruskin's phrase – of looking at a deeper reality.⁴ These two ways of looking at reality come to the forefront when one turns to the ghost stories being written at the time:

in the Victorian ghost story vision reveals itself as a stumbling block in, rather than a foundation for erecting stable epistemological or ideological constructs; the site where nineteenth-century ideas about truth, knowledge, and belief (as well as our historical accounts of them) are radically complicated.⁵

It is between the spectator and spectre where the dialect takes place. Both artefacts will be presented as challenging both cultural conventions and total endorsement of an empirical epistemological interpretation of reality.

Mary Louisa Molesworth (1839-1921) published *Four Ghost Stories* in 1888. This was a departure from her writing of children's literature. One story, *The Story of the Rippling Train*, is fictional but disguises itself in its appearance of being a true ghost story. It takes place at a party at a country house owned by the Denholmes. It has already been some days, everyone is tired of dancing and is looking for a different form of entertainment. Gladys Lloyd proposes a ghost story which leads to this interesting dialogue between Mr and Mrs Snowdon. Mrs Snowdon says:

Aren't you tired of them? One hears nothing else nowadays. And they're all "authentic," really vouched for, only you never see the person who saw or heard or felt the ghost. It is always somebody's sister or cousin, or friend's friend,' objected young Mrs. Snowdon, another of the guests at the Quarries. 'I don't know that that is quite a reasonable ground for discrediting them en masse,' said her husband. 'It is natural enough, indeed inevitable, that the principal or principals in such cases should be much more rarely come across than the stories themselves. A hundred people can repeat the story, but the author, or rather hero, of it, can't be in a hundred places at once. You don't disbelieve in any other statement or narrative merely because you have never seen the prime mover in it?'⁶

Mrs Snowdon calls into question real ghostly encounters, pointing out that one never hears the event from the person who witnessed it but from someone who heard it from someone. This removes it from authenticity. The husband claims that in itself is not grounds for rejecting all that testimony. The dialogue is an interesting play on empirical veracity and testimony. How is one to say everybody is wrong simply because the eye-witness is not present? To do so would call most accepted facts or reports into question.

It seems that no ghost story is forthcoming when Lady Denholme's daughter, Nina, asks her mother to get her uncle Paul to tell his ghost story. Lady Denholme gets nervous by this request but Paul enters in soon enough overhearing the last part of their conversation. He gladly agrees to tell it, stating that anyone affected by it has already

⁴ Srdjan Smajic, 'The Trouble with Ghost-Seeing: Vision, Ideology, and Genre in the Victorian Ghost Story', *ELH*, 70.4 (2003), 107-135 (pp. 111-114).

⁵ Smajic, p. 130.

⁶ Cox, p. 330.

died. Paul Marischal begins by cryptically referring to a "she" he cared for years ago and is reminded by Nina to relate who "she" was:

A very sweet and attractive girl, named Maud Bertram...You will wonder....why if I admired and liked her so much I did not go further. And I will tell you frankly that I did not because I dared not. I had then no prospect of being able to marry for years to come....I was wise enough and old enough to realize the situation thoroughly, and to be on my guard.

Paul realised that he had no reasonable grounds in even attempting to win her due to his circumstances. He left for Portugal and Maud married, going to India with her husband afterwards. Though Paul says he thought about her every now and then, 'some passing resemblance would call her to mind – once especially when I had asked to look in to see the young wife of one of my cousins in her court-dress, something in her figure and bearing brought back Maud to my memory'.⁷ Years later while in his brother's study in London and about to begin his work, Paul sees the door open by itself and decides to close it. He then begins to see something like smoke:

But I dismissed the notion almost as soon as it suggested itself... My next idea was a curious one: "It looks like soapy water," I said to myself; "Can one of the housemaids have been scrubbing..." But—no, I rubbed my eyes and looked again – the soapy water theory gave way. The wavy something kept gliding... gradually assumed a much more substantial appearance. It was –yes, I suddenly became convinced of it, it was ripples of soft silken stuff... And I sat there and gazed.

Here one sees the spectator constantly questioning what he is seeing and reinterpreting the object when a slight period of reflection is given. Paul looks again and again to verify what is happening. The object of his vision begins to take a more solid shape: 'I saw – it came upon me like a flash, that she was no stranger to me, this mysterious visitant! I recognised, unchanged it seemed to me since the day, ten years ago, when I had last seen her, the beautiful features of Maud Bertram.'⁸ This is the climax of the story: Paul sees a vision of Maud's profile only but she seems as corporeal as everything else in the room. It seems that the corporeality of the apparition may make it an objective solid.

However, Maud herself seems not to notice that Paul is there: as he is gazing fixedly at her, she is doing the same towards the distance, motionless like a statue. Furthermore, when Paul's brother comes in Paul does not take his eyes off of her but his brother does not see anything at all.⁹ Herbert tells Paul to take down the date to ascertain its significance. If Maud is still alive, the apparition will have been her doppelgänger.¹⁰ Paul later found out that around the time he saw her she had suffered serious burns to half her body and died later from the shock. He is convinced that he only saw half of her face because Maud would only have wanted him to see her when she had been beautiful.¹¹ Yet, that is only half the story: Maud was still alive when the apparition appeared, Paul had a habit of bringing her to mind every now and then when stimulated by external factors, and his brother never saw anything. The reader is left open to the interpretation that Hibbert would have endorsed: Paul, a sane man, had suffered a delusion brought about by outer stimuli causing his mind to conjure the image and Maud's accident at the same time was a coincidence. Molesworth is leaving the reader to ponder whether it was all in Paul Marischal's head. He truly did see *something* but was it really *anything*?

⁷ Molesworth, p. 330.

⁸ Molesworth, p. 333.

⁹ Molesworth, p. 335.

¹⁰ Molesworth, p. 337.

¹¹ Molesworth, p. 338.

For Paul there is no question. He believes it was a plea for sympathy. This is proof to him that Maud cared deeply for him. Paul questions whether he should have been so reticent to declare his love for her. Many people overhearing the story believe it a case of Maud's inner declaration of love. Gladys asks Lady Denholme if Paul ever married:

'No,' said Lady Denholme; but there have been many practical difficulties in the way of his doing so. He has had a most absorbingly busy life and now that he is more at leisure he feels himself too old to form new ties.' 'But,' persisted Nina, 'if he had any idea at the time, that Maud cared for him so?' 'Ah well,' Lady Denholme allowed, 'in that case, in spite of the practical difficulties, things would probably have been different.'¹²

This is how ghost stories were able to provide a way of overcoming societal conventions. Paul has done everything that was asked of him and has always been a reasonable and practical man. However, it has always held him back from attaining his true needs and kept him from telling Maud what he felt for her. Maud's spirit, subverting the laws of science and Victorian etiquette, gives solace to a man in solitude. If society and obligation kept them apart, they could at least come together in the spiritual realm. Cox writes: 'In personal terms, ghosts were obvious, though still potent, images of the lost past — past sins, past promises, past attachments, past regrets — and could be used to confront, and exorcise, the demons of guilt and fear.'¹³ Molesworth's play on the power or fallibility (or both) of sight along with the ability for the immaterial to leave a lasting impression on a rigid society takes the apparition as its "prime mover" – or is it the mind?

Another method by which interest in the paranormal was expressed was by the rise of a more "scientific" enquiry into phenomena. The Society for Psychical Research was formed in 1882 by a number of Cambridge graduates and intellectuals such as Henry Sidgwick, F.W.H. Myers, Edmund Gurney, and Frank Podmore. They wanted to apply the scientific method to phenomena and reach conclusions based on empirical data. One example was a Census on Hallucinations (1894) which sought to use statistics as a tool in explaining mesmerism and hallucinations. So respected was the SPR that it played a serious role in the early psychological conferences of 1889-1896. The goal was to explain paranormal phenomena as either a validation of the survival of consciousness or to find a new way the mind was able to produce it.¹⁴

Ada Goodrich Freer (1857-1931) was a prominent member of the SPR from 1889-1900 and delivered many lectures at their yearly *Proceedings* on everything from crystal-gazing to "second sight" enquires made in Scotland. She was also the chief editor of *Borderland* from 1893-97, an occult magazine created and owned by W.T. Stead, a leading pioneer in "yellow journalism" and an advocate of using journalism and public sentiment to mould political decision making. At the behest of the SPR, Freer along with Colonel Taylor and support from Lord Bute (Vice President of the SPR) took lodgings at Ballechin House owned by the Stuart family in Perthshire in 1896 for a period of months. The purpose was to investigate alleged ghostly phenomena and provide a detailed report. After the investigation was over a scandal arose which played itself out in *The Times* begun by Mr. J Callendar Ross (1844-1913), a correspondent who spent a short time there. The Steuart family (who owned the house) and their solicitors claimed that they were misled into thinking they were letting it out to Colonel Taylor and his family for fishing and many participants wrote decrying the whole investigation as

¹² Molesworth, p. 338.

¹³ Molesworth, p. 339.

¹⁴ Andreas Sommer, 'Professional Heresy: Edmund Gurney (1847–88) and the Study of Hallucinations and Hypnotism', *Medical History*. Medical History, n.d. Web. [accessed: 25 February 2015].

unscientific.¹⁵ F.W.H. Myers, who himself stayed at Ballechin House, decided to divest the SPR's responsibility of the whole affair and decided not to publish a report on it citing he found nothing worthy of noting down during his time.

This might have been the end of the "story" but Freer, not willing to back down on her investigation, decided to write a book with Lord Bute: *The Alleged Haunting of B--- House* (1899). The book contains a point by point refutation of the charges made against her and includes her journal entries taken during the time. The book states its veridical content by providing tangible points of reference such as a pictorial layout of the estate. This allows for the "base" of a physical locality. She then turns to letters and diary entries from respected members of society to refute the previous letters that were sent to *The Times* in 1897. What this does is it allows for her to refute criticism, not by appealing to her own viewpoints, but by showing that other authoritative voices do it for her. This presents one with a pretence to impartiality.

One case in point is appearance of a brown crucifix. Freer shows that this happened multiple times: both before her investigation and during it. In Part I of the book Lord Bute relates that he spoke to Father H--- who had slept in the house before the investigation. Father H--- stated to Lord Bute:

When you mention the brown wooden crucifix, you awaken a new memory in me. I now seem to live some of those hours again, and I recollect that between waking and sleeping there appeared before my eyes- somewhere on the wall – a crucifix, some eighteen inches, I should say long, and, I think, of brown wood. My own crucifix is of black metal, and just the length of this page (seven inches); and though I usually have it in my bag I cannot say for certain that it was in my bag.¹⁶

This is echoed in part two of the book when Freer cites a letter by a Mr. Q written to Lord Bute. He had taken part in the investigation and claimed that he had a paranormal experience: 'Suddenly I looked up and above the bed, apparently on the wall, I got just a glimpse (like a flash) of a brown wood crucifix; the wall was quite bare, not a picture, nothing to make it explainable by imperfect light or reflection.'¹⁷ This is important to Freer for it ties two people, one a priest, to have seen the exact same thing at two different times. To further validate the testimony of Father H--, Freer points out that Sir W. Higgins had examined him and reached the conclusion he could not have hallucinated the crucifix.

This section of the book is Freer's way of substantiating her work at Ballechin House without saying a word; she had been accused of "seeing" all the important phenomena. Yet, her selection of testimony shows her creating her own narrative. It is in her choice of testimony that she uses as a base to authenticate her experience that is given in the second part of the book. If they were all the products of hallucinations, they were shared by other "respectable" people as well.

The second part of Freer's book is made up of her journal entries. In contrast to the first part of the book, this section is more reflective of the phenomena she experienced and also contains her own commentary on the journal. She witnesses the apparitions of a nun she claims is called "Ishabel" and a lady in white named "Margaret". Needless to say, she is the only one to witness these events though others with her claim to hear the

¹⁵ John Lorne Campbell and Trevor H. Hall, *Strange Things: The Story of Fr. Allan McDonald, Ada Goodrich Freer, and the Society for Psychical Research's Enquiry into Highland Second Sight*, (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1968), pp. 185-188.

¹⁶ Ada Goodrich Freer (Miss X), *The Alleged Haunting of B---House*, Google Books. George Redway, n.d. <http://books.google.com/books/about/The_Alleged_Haunting_of_B_House.html?id=vCQPAAAAIAAJ>. [accessed: 25 February 2015] (pp. 16-17).

¹⁷ Freer (Miss X), p. 132.

"murmuring of voices."¹⁸ Her first sighting of "Ishabel" provides an interesting insight into Freer's ability to sense spirits as well as her own scepticism of what is being viewed. She sees Ishabel as she is walking outside in the snow:

Her face looked pale. I saw her hands in the fold of her habit. Then she moved on, as it seemed, on a slope too steep for walking. When she came she disappeared – perhaps because there was no snow to show her outline. Beyond the tree she reappeared for a moment, where there was again a white background, close by the burn. Then I saw no more. I waited, and, still in silence, we returned to the avenue.¹⁹

Interestingly, no one else with her sees anything. However, this does not surprise her for even though the people with her had done parapsychological research because she concludes, 'they are not by temperament likely to experience either subjective phenomena or even thought-transference' (now known as telepathy a word coined by SPR member Myers).²⁰ Freer does not end her speculation there but even throws in her own brand of scepticism. She had a few nights earlier had an Ouija séance where the name Ishabel was given. Freer took it to refer to a lady in an eighteenth-century portrait but Freer claims the face was different. In fact, Freer even calls into question the validity of the séance itself; in her commentary which contains a letter to Lord Bute, she regards it as possible 'induced phenomena, more particularly those of automatic writing, in which, as in dreams, it is almost always difficult to disentangle the operations of the normal from those of the subconscious personality'.²¹ It is interesting to note that Myers of the SPR was an advocate of the 'subliminal consciousness' before Freud had developed his theory. Freer and the SPR believed that most phenomena could be explained as self-produced, though not voluntarily. This scepticism differentiated it from spiritualist and theosophical groups.

Freer, nonetheless, seeks to find a historical source for the weeping nun and goes through a number of family members until reaching the conclusion it must be Miss Isabella S---, sister to Major S----, who became an ordained nun in 1850 and died in 1880. She cites *Burke's Landed Gentry* 1886 which also cites an Isabella Margaret as a nun. So, Freer now has two historical sources which 'validate' her vision supported by the séance.²²

To cite a second instance which shows Freer's determination not to accept every incident as paranormal, she describes another time she saw the nun: 'I could hear no words; the ice was giving, and the burn had begun to murmur. (I tried to persuade myself that the murmur accounted for the voices, but the sounds were entirely distinct, and different quality and amount.)' She contends that the nun and woman in grey are in fact ghosts but the voices are called into question: 'it seems probable that the sounds also were hallucinatory, but were what is called in the vocabulary of the SPR the "collective" hallucination of two persons. This seems to render it highly probable that each hallucination had a cause external to both, although common to both.' She even cites *The Times* correspondent as admitting that Freer is always ready to admit that an experience is entirely subjective and can be dismissed.²³ Freer is making her account one that is suspicious of her own impressions and trying to be as objective as possible. This is designed to give the "investigation" an aura of scientific integrity. Something had been experienced but there was no certainty it was a case of objective reality, which is quite in tandem with Victorian angst about vision and validity.

¹⁸ Freer (Miss X), pp. 89-90.

¹⁹ Freer (Miss X), p. 101.

²⁰ Freer (Miss X), p. 102.

²¹ Freer (Miss X), p. 103.

²² Freer (Miss X), pp. 104-105.

²³ Freer (Miss X), p. 111.

Freer's book is directed against both her detractors who wrote to *The Times* and to the SPR. Though she defends the SPR's principles at times, she also points out F.W.H.'s unprofessional demeanour towards her. In fact, the very book begins by a quote from Myers' letter to *The Times* on 10 June 1897

I visited B---- representing that Society [S.P.R.] And decided that there was no such evidence as could justify us in giving the results of the inquiry a place in our *Proceedings*.

She places this at the very beginning of the book, an odd place to put a quote so dismissive of her entire case! Yet, seen in light of her comprehensive refutation of every detractor, it is a brave and witty way to represent her own belief in her investigation. She acknowledges Myers' hard work but states that it is he who has 'alienated the sympathies of many of its (SPR) members, by the extent to which he has introduced into its *Proceedings* the reports of spiritualist phenomena, and the lucubrations of medium.'²⁴ She reprints letters by Myers to her and Lord Bute stating, though he has only himself heard noises that he intended to bring to a *Proceeding*, being convinced by eye witness testimony that the house was indeed haunted.²⁵ Freer does this to counteract his claim in a letter to *The Times* on June 8 that the SPR neither endorsed the investigation nor ever thought of bringing it forth in its *Proceedings*.²⁶

Freer is using her experience of the paranormal in the same way Paul Marischal used Maud: as a method of vindication. This is how Freer's account subverts convention. She calls *The Times* (specifically Mr. J. Callendar Ross), the Steuart Family, and the SPR into question by using their own words against them. Her investigation vindicates itself by questioning its findings but a great deal of it is taken up with showing that the scandal against her was without merit. She shows that she did not begin the ghost stories concerning Ballechin. She was not the only one witnessing events but she was the only one with the exception of Lord Bute who tried to methodically question the occurrences. She subverts the establishment by using the book as a defense against all the charges against her. In a way, Freer was using her creative abilities of choosing material to take control of the past. Indeed, if Maud's doppelgänger could comfort Paul's subconscious wishes, Ballechin House was Freer's own particular way of coming to terms with the past. Both examples fuse the familiar and fantastical to call the reader to question whether the eye or mind does the seeing. Doing so, one can see a new way of interpreting convention and reality.

It is important to note that after writing the book, Freer left the SPR, left paranormal research and moved to the Near East, writing folk tales intermittently. The *Alleged Haunting* may have been her way of exorcising her past as she was about to begin a new part of her life; or was she being haunted by the scandal still? Later she moved to New York and donated her personal copy of the book to the British Museum one month before she died in 1931.²⁷ The significance of this death-bed action is open to interpretation, as was her vision, as was Paul Marischal's. Maybe it was Freer's last attempt at subverting the past, or redeeming it?

²⁴ Freer (Miss X), p. 190.

²⁵ Freer (Miss X), pp. 192-194.

²⁶ Freer (Miss X), p. 195.

²⁷ Campbell and Hall, pp. 166-167.

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