Republic of Experience: Citizen Science at the Limits of the Mind

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This work of creative non-fiction navigates the history of a forgotten science, psychical research, that captured the American popular imagination between the 1880s and 1950s with high-profile investigations of telepathy, clairvoyance, and life after death. Thousands of ordinary Americans participated by reporting their dreams and supernormal experiences to expert researchers, most famously the Harvard psychologist William James. I weave their firsthand accounts of supernormal experiences with my own explorations on the fringes of science, poetry, and memory, weighing the dangers of self-delusion against the real value of the intimate connections that psychical researchers pursued.

4.5

Interlude: Genuine Reality

I've been writing a book about a failed and forgotten science, poring over the testimony of people who saw and heard impossible things, for years now. I joke that it will make me crazy. People ask if I believe in ghosts, and I can tell when they're asking because they experience reality as haunted in some way, or because they think I've fixed on a wrong idea. Walking out of the icy, silent ASPR library into the still-bright heat of a summer evening on the Upper West Side, I feel like a shade among the living. I still have my feet in other people's inner worlds, their yearnings are mine. Traffic, bodegas, the cartoon animals on children's backpacks wash over me, meaning obscured by a halo of sheer sensory noise. Whichever friend answers my cell phone call from Central Park is, unbeknownst to them, talking me back into our present reality. Which is what, exactly? We are people with particular histories and associations.

That night I dream that I've planned a vacation with my family. I wake up at 5am ready to travel a long way north, but they, as usual, are not packed. Hours pass. Finally, aggravated, I declare that I won't – I can't – go with them. As usual, they make no claim on me, exert no guilt or persuasion, acknowledging that I must be busy with other things. After storming away, I feel terrible and decide to drive to the first stop on the trip to spend the day together, at least.

The destination is a large, choppy lake on a plateau that punctuates a steep mountain slope. The entry is marked by a squat, square stone plinth about the size of a carriage house, with no statue on it. There is a sort of open-air Swiss chalet with tables set out and a kitchen preparing breakfast under a cloud of steam. The post-dawn light pierces at this altitude. I wait, watching the unusually active waves as tourists attempt to paddle canoes. Their shouts back and forth are hardly audible, but I see them fumbling with brightly-colored oars. On the far side of the lake, hazy in the spray, a massive sheer rock face rises many hundreds of feet. I feel that I've been in

this place before.

Finally my family arrives and we sit down at a table. The server, a red-faced older woman in a Bavarian peasant getup with flaxen braids, tells us the story of the empty stone plinth at the entryway. It was built for a statue of a heroic horse that saved a drowning child. However, unnamed neighbors objected to this pagan blemish on their viewshed; there are lawsuits. The plinth stands empty, rising darkly above curls of steam. The legendary horse, she says, will one day emerge from the water and take its place on the plinth.

Painfully hungry, I follow her back to the kitchen. All the pots are full of boiling water, as are the ovens. Dark green moss blankets the surrounding rocks and blossoms between the tiles; the server and the cook slide around in wooden clogs. They open more pot lids and oven doors so that steam surges madly, rolling down to the lake. It hits the cold air and an updraft forms, rain starts to come down, and the lake surface rears into sculptural undulating peaks that bob like eager horses, peering mildly over a gate that will soon fly open. I've had this dream before. Varieties of it: the sense of never being in the right place.

At peace in the void with chicken

Writing, like being a ghost, is a placeless activity. I can stay up late into the night on a barrier island off South Carolina, piecing together the chronology of William James's nervous breakdowns. This is called a “working vacation”. By the time I get home, I have worked myself into a cognitive white-heat, unable to rein in my thoughts which gallop towards disaster, plummeting down James's “pit of insecurity beneath the surface of life.” Especially when moving between places, objects become inconstant and one sees oneself from the outside. As a figure in a passing car and the click of a turnstile and the thunk of a water bottle in the well of a vending machine. In an abstracted motel room I can sleep like the dead, but arriving home into

an envelope of things that purport to be mine sharpens my focus. There's a thread of thought that won't break for sleep. You can tell it's not a healthy thread because of the low electric buzz, the smell of burning in the brain.

I pick up work on a laptop in the backseat of a car northbound from Tampa to Baltimore. Behind me in the hatchback is a cardboard box of cremains. We are taking them to the Great Smokey Mountains, as per the request of the deceased. The ashes consist of a fine powder mingled with gravely chunks in a thick plastic bag. Ashes are of course completely sterile and do not contain the germs of death in any form. I guess the sealed plastic is to keep them from messing up the upholstery, which is a thing that still matters. It is possible for the living to feel more miserable. You would feel more miserable if you had to vacuum cremains from the seams of your car seats.

Also in the trunk are stacks of strange brightly-colored paintings: human-alligator men clutching hair dryers with their tails, a gigantic hammer and nails riding on a sailboat, and my favorite, “At Peace in the Void with Chicken.” The hard acrylic surfaces seethe with creatures and phrases snaking around each other. Dad-jokes by way of Jung, sly doggerel about years of drug counseling for hopeful and unredeemed residents of Hillsborough County. A fruit pie sits by itself in a desert scattered with bones. The orange desert is rutted like the open-pit coal mines near Ferguson, Indiana, where Roger grew up. He returned there at the lowest point in his life, divorced and in recovery. He took his two kids walking among the rubble of the coal pits. Arrowheads and stone points poked out of the displaced earth, and with most of an archaeology PhD under his belt, he picked them up and showed how they were made, what they were used for. Old tools brought to life by their fit in the hand. That's what his sons remember about the walks they took – not the despoiled present, but the way it allowed them to touch the past. Roger started painting much later, in a similar way. We see many strata simultaneously; accidents churn

up a history that belongs to someone else. It becomes lodged in our thinking. It re-makes the world, or makes it possible to see the world through the eyes of a bear or a pair of scissors. But there's a magic trick each time: it's still unmistakeably Roger.

The paintings are a vivid, detailed map of a person; the ashes form an unmeaning constellation – or one we don't have the tools to make sense of – over the Tennessee River.

I know that both fear and love make us clutch the map. It's reasonable to be afraid of how much we have to lose. Its reasonable to ask if we really do lose it, or if there are some alternative possibilities worth exploring. But I think I'm done for now. I wasn't looking for an end my personal fear. I was looking, I suspect, for the solidarity of the dead, which is different from a moving Ouija planchette or séance consolation. I feel closest to those who wondered, experimented, and then traveled on through the world not beholden to the desire for certainty. Who accepted that certainty is a feeling, not a logical proof, and wanting it stamped and ratified does a certain amount of violence to the very notion of spiritual truth. A double-edge there, of course – a wise person can live without certainty, but the absence of certainty can also make loss unbearable.

Light behind windblown fog and sand

The poet John Ashbery died on a Sunday morning in September. I was passing through his native New York on a train south from Boston, watching nautical mist give way to sun that dried the loading bays and cisterns of New Rochelle. The passenger line crossed Pelham Bay next to a steel trestle freight bridge, which had orange life preservers lashed to its beams at regular intervals. Do people often fall off the freight bridge while others stand on the catwalk and throw them tubes? The concern with even and regular spacing suggests that mundane disaster is equally possible at any point, but we have to slice it up somehow – we could cover the entire

bridge with rubber tubes, and no one might ever fall.

They're symmetrical anxieties: we need to catch things so that they don't vanish; but we also want something to transcend, pour out of us, and go somewhere else. Ashbery was born in Rochester, New York, eighty years after Rochester's railways, telegraphs, and canals piped modern American spiritualism out to a receptive nation. A place shot through with voices coming from far away and bound for somewhere else. He grew up in a tumbledown Victorian mansion and in the woods around it with a brother whose sudden death at age ten turned Ashbery into “a stinking adult”. Not so much the sadness as the confirmation of existence as a solitary enterprise. Memory and desire conduct the senses in a series of beautiful exercises known as experience, which we try to communicate to each other, usually falling short. Yet experience is also permeable in ways that only poetry can articulate, finding the pores and tendrils. At least, this is what I gather as an unstudied reader – plenty of scholars are better-equipped to say things about him. After his childhood in Rochester, a literary blossoming at Harvard, the New York scene and books and professorships, he was living quietly in Hudson when he made his escape. He easily slipped past the string of orange life preservers that they put out to catch him on his way to the ocean.

Modernists like Eliot, Yeats, and Pound were interested in spiritualist mediums and the way that they spoke in different voices. Mediumship was often profane; the words that it ascribed to the dead were senseless, hackneyed, bawdy. If spirit writing emanated from the collective unconscious of humanity, then the collective unconscious did not have very good taste. The detritus of popular culture required curation and cross-referencing to meet the poet's aesthetic standard. If individual souls whispered from the other side, then death had erased their dignity – Oscar Wilde's spirit spoke in Cockney, and William James's made razor blades fly through the air. Modernists seemed to conclude that this force, whatever it was, needed willful

masculine channeling rather than the messy sentiments of traditionally-female mediums. It was a well-known fact that Spiritualist mediumship was taxing bodily and mental labor for its practitioners, but outsiders dismissed this as birth-labor, animal-like and re-productive. For someone like Eliot, the will to make art is different from the passive experience of revelation; though a poem may be revelatory in nature, it has to be sought and produced.

The West Coast poet Jack Spicer called this mode of production dictated poetry, differentiating it from automatic trance writing in both technical requirements and personnel. In his 1965 Vancouver lectures, he described his method of channeling the "unknown source" or "energy" that was a poem, and had to be realized through the poet's methodical, deliberate psychological dissociation.[1] "Whenever there's a line that you like particularly well, which expresses just how you're feeling this particular moment," he warned, "be so goddamn suspicious of it," for the line is from you and not the poem. "Wait for two or three hours before you put it down on paper," even if that means staying up alone in front of your typewriter all night.

He marks a subtle but insistent difference between the poet who receives dictation in this way and the mediums with their Cockney accents, who serve as a metaphor, alongside Martians and people with cleft palates, to help us imagine what the poet does, how the poet struggles against and is consumed by the friction of language. Spicer was trained as a structural linguist; his world was painstaking, systematic translation and the asymptotic gap between words and meanings. The very "naturalness" of mediumship, a passive flow through a feminine vessel, is refused by the poet taking dictation, who must scrutinize and authenticate each line – he is both medium and psychical researcher in one! Rejecting the bad data, the noise, before it ever hits the paper.

1 Jack Spicer, Vancouver Lectures 1 (June 13, 1965). <http://www.ubu.com/sound/spicer.html>.

Most of all, Spicer boasts a brash indifference towards the source of the poem. Everyone wants to stake their claim by naming it: an energy, an essence, an electric current. “All of these things I think are perfectly useful explanations of it,” he concludes pragmatically; “I prefer more the unknown.” There's a shadow of the behaviorist angle, renouncing what happens in the black box and focusing on the output, with an added aesthetic appreciation of the black box – the box of metaphysical meaning – as a site of mystery which we ought to respectfully leave alone.

Spicer's performative jocularity screens the unknown, protecting it with gags and feints. In his first book, *After Lorca*, Spicer cuts his translations of Gabriel Garcia Lorca with “new works” ostensibly channeled from the dead poet, and personal correspondence that riffs on typical exchanges between Spiritualist mediums and controls. Ghost-Lorca is in on the prank: “These poems are not translations,” he complains, through Spicer. “Mr. Spicer seems to derive pleasure in inserting one or two words which completely change the mood and often the meaning of the poem as I had written it.”[2] This ghostwriting is the beginning of Spicer's postmodern poetics, disclaiming individual authorship and renouncing the search for a single, unifying lineage of art stretching back to the divine origin. Abandoning the Logos for the “low-ghosts”, as Lori Chamberlain puts it.[3] Play, however, mimes an underlying precariousness. Spicer feels that the dead persist and want to be known. While it's our duty to try, we lack the appropriate tools. They inhabit a different temporality, eternally present, and eternally communicating themselves into being. The poet's job is to translate them, but that space of translation is unstable, battered by winds, seething with noise and electricity. Language is not an idealized signal that travels across the gulf; for Spicer, it is the gulf.

A poetics of dictation requires strict, systematic self-effacement. This was not a pose;

2 Jack Spicer, *After Lorca: The Collected Books of Jack Spicer*, edited by Robin Blaser (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow, 1975) 11.

3 Lori Chamberlain, “Ghostwriting the Text: Translation and the Poetics of Jack Spicer,” *Contemporary Literature* 26, no. 4 (1985): 427.

Spicer refused to have his work published beyond small presses and zines in the San Francisco area, limiting the number of copies they could circulate. Sometimes it's hard to disaggregate a rigorous philosophy of art from self-loathing. His lectures in 1965 were one of the few moments when Spicer stood before an audience to explain his ideas about poetry.

He began with the story of W.B. Yeats, whose best work appeared after he married Georgie Hyde-Lees and began communing with otherworldly spirits using his new wife as medium. The question people ask about Yeats is, did he really believe in the system of esoteric metaphysics he received through George's mediumship? In which case, he was either the victim of a hoax or tragically beholden to the fads of his time. Some critics assert that he intended the whole elaborate production as a pure work of art. In which case, he was a visionary of the post-modern. Until recently, no one was very concerned with what George Yeats thought.

The story goes that George discovered her mediumistic powers during the couple's dismal honeymoon in 1917. For reasons I haven't tried to figure out, Spicer transposes their breakthrough from the Ashdown Forest Hotel in Sussex to a private traincar on the Southern Pacific line steaming through the orange groves of California.[4] Spicer insinuates that poor Georgie was past her bloom (he guesses she was in her forties; she was twenty-five), and that W.B. married her for money while still desperately in love with the actress Maude Gonne as well as Gonne's daughter. Thus, George was trying to seduce or at least make herself interesting to the depressed poet when she reached for a pencil and began automatic writing. Her purpose, in this telling, was to save their marriage and to save her despondent husband's career, and she succeeded. Through his new bride's hand, the spooks informed W.B. Yeats, “We have come to

4 Yeats toured the U.S. in 1903, 1912, 1914, and 1920. Perhaps Spicer was thinking of that last visit, when George did perform automatic writing on the train through California. It would, of course, be fitting if the Yeats's breakthrough occurred in the country that birthed Spiritualism, on a vehicle that catalyzed modernity, and near Spicer's native Los Angeles, where, in 1965, another New Age was in full swing.

give you metaphors for poetry."[5] The famous modernist Yeats, Yeats the towering mystic, emerged from years of sittings with George. Together they systematically queried the spirits, experimented with methods, and synthesized their findings to construct the elaborate system of occult metaphysics published as *A Vision* in 1925.

Spicer sets aside the Yeats's authorial collaboration, and doesn't probe their ambivalent views about the ultimate source of the automatic texts. His point is that poems came to W.B. Yeats from somewhere else, they were much better than Yeats's previous poems about how miserable he felt, and this scuttled romantic notions of individual poetic genius. Spicer explains to a roomful of expectant students that being a modern poet means taking dictation – without, however, becoming hysterical and dropping one's hermeneutic tools. As Kate Zambreno points out, the canonical modernist poets were not really two-in-one mediums and authenticators like Spicer's taker of dictation, laboring alone over a typewriter deep into the night. Most relied on partners for mediumship, and for formal craft, and to run households and guide careers, though their partners did not get the credit.[6] Their work came from people speaking and living with and through each other.

Unlike W.B., George Yeats had made an extensive study of early Christianity and esotericism; her favorite philosopher was William James. She openly discussed the possibility that the voices she channeled came from her own or W.B.'s unconscious psyches, or perhaps their "higher selves".[7] *A Vision* describes the structure of reality as revealed by guides and discarnate personalities. These characters speak from a constantly-morphing trickster word imperceptible to the living, a world which we only access in dreams or trances. Initially, both W.B. and George asserted genuine faith in their method of accessing that world, despite a clear awareness that

5 William Butler Yeats, *A Vision* (1937; London: Macmillan, 1962) 8.
6 Kate Zambrino, *Heroines* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e)/Active Agents, 2012).
7 Margaret Mills Harper, *Wisdom of Two: The Spiritual and Literary Collaboration of George and W. B. Yeats* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

performance, ego, and desire mingled in the séance. George criticized those who posited telepathy among the living as an explanation, who likened mediumship to the dumb impersonations of "photography or television". This would mean that "all spirits in fact are not… spirits at all, are only memory," a position that she did not countenance. Spicer, in his own agnostic stance on the nature of the thing that communicates, also ruled out telepathy and distorted signals from the unconscious: "It is not a simple process like a mirror or a radio."

The dangers of channeling always have to be contained through formalities, whether by a gendered division of labor or, later, by a process in which the writer internalizes that split. The first mode of containment presumes that something truly beyond our control might come through the medium, or the medium might fail and fake; we need a rational man at the helm. Spicer, in contrast, winks knowingly at the spooks. To the dream of otherworldly communion, the linguist replies, "things do not connect, they correspond." If language is the ultimate barrier, and all we can do is translate Martian blocks, then mediumship has no power to overwhelm, madden, or shatter the self. It's a postmodern semiotic exercise in the shade of a modernist sculpture garden.

Despite his formal understanding of dictation and what it entailed, Spicer was not separate from his poetry. Like earlier mediums under the strain of communion with the unknown, he flew apart. Certainly there were other problems; writing poems doesn't make you an alcoholic. But the commitment to being written through, to using oneself as a sieve and a cipher for something that you renounce all knowledge of, has a certain volatility to it. His friend Robert Duncan described Spicer as writing "partly in humor, partly in earnest, partly in desperation, partly in anger."[8]

There's a circular effacement to Spicer's thinking: poems, he said, are written for and by ghosts; "the ghosts the poems were written for are the ghosts of the poems." But the ghosts don't

8 Duncan quoted in Michael Davidson, "Incarnations of Jack Spicer: Heads of the Town up to the Aether," *Boundary* 2 6, no. 1 (1977): 106.

have any traction in time and space: “define ghosts as an India-rubber eraser created to erase their own past.” At a certain point, one gets the uncanny sense that Spicer is channeling his own ghost, learning from it and arguing with it, perhaps slowly intuiting what the “unknown source” might be. That as he writes, he erases himself. Spicer gave a series of lectures in Vancouver in June 1965; by August, he was dead of liver failure in San Francisco General Hospital. He had adamantly refused to publish with a major press; for decades, the only way to read most of Spicer's poetry was in xerox copies passed hand-to-hand. “As if merely by being dead it could make the motions of what it was apparent.”[9]

Jack Spicer died in 1965; his contemporary, John Ashbery lived another six decades. They shared certain modernist influences and instincts, cultivating the aesthetic of chance or automatism. Ashbery perfected a subtle, gently oblique cacophony of dictation. I'm drawn to him because he's a medium for mundane reality, lettuce and socks, bits of chatter at a party, television news. Gone is the strenuous sense-making of Yeats's spooks and gyres. Spicer's self-effacing apparatus, “wires [dancing] in the wind of the noise our poems make,” is a distant rattle. Time passes on its own muddled terms. The lettuce and socks carry an obscure meaning, Ashbery follows a thread that only he sees. You don't have to trust a poet to enjoy their poetry, but I trust Ashbery, a person I've never met and never will meet.

Ashbery seems to have escaped the deadly solipsism of taking dictation from his own ghost. For him, relations are the “unknown source” – relations with humans, with objects, with the current of time and the world. He is not preoccupied with the problem of whether we can have total knowledge of the other without losing ourselves. Total knowledge is not really on the table. The poet serves as a device of radical permeability. By 1970, many of his peers, upstarts of the “new American poetry,” were dead; Ashbery lived, and his poetry became comfortable and

9 Jack Spicer, *My Vocabulary Did This to Me: The Collected Poetry of Jack Spicer*. (Wesleyan University Press, 2010) 300.

bourgeois. I guess that's a problem with permeability, one takes on qualities of the material that flows through and around. Yet in the whirlwind of odds and ends, Ashbery is always there. Like William James, he shows rather than asserts what it is about being embedded in relations that allows a person to cohere.

Like James, he found trees an effective illustration:

> These are amazing: each
> Joining a neighbor, as though speech
> Were a still performance…

The poet and an unnamed partner are connected like the trees and by them, routed through a tree's awareness of how time and presence transmute into understanding:

> … you and I
> Are suddenly what the trees try
>
> To tell us we are:
> That their merely being there
> Means something; that soon
> We may touch, love, explain.[10]

Your tongue is exactly the kind of tongue that you're born with

It was hard for his friends to let William James go. “I always thought that William James would continue forever,” declared the irascible editor John Jay Chapman, “and I relied upon his sanctity as if it were sunlight.”[11] His death in August of 1910 came on quickly, though he had long suffered from an ailing heart on top of the neurasthenic symptoms that dogged him from youth. The fact that he was so often sick, and the causes of his illness so obscure, made even James doubt the physical inevitability of heart failure. Perhaps he could still think his way out of

10 John Ashbery, “Some Trees,” in *Some Trees* (Yale Series of Younger Poets, 1956)

11 John Jay Chapman, “William James,” in *William James Remembered*, Linda Simon, ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999) 50.

it, if only he could overcome the growing anxiety that his major contributions to philosophy, 1907's *Pragmatism* and 1909's *A Pluralistic Universe*, were being misinterpreted and poorly-received. Severe shortness of breath was "partly a spasmodic phenomenon," he insisted, something in the mind. If James knew his body was at its limit, he could not accept it. Yet, as his brother and wife rushed him across the Atlantic after another failed Alpine rest cure, it became clear to all of them that it would be his last return to New England. In constant pain, he could no longer walk and had to be carried on a litter. Sixty-eight years of chaotic comings and goings, restless transmissions, had come to an end.

This event left Henry "in darkness… abandoned and afraid."[12] The elder brother was a pillar shoring up Henry's unstable emotions. "His death changes and blights everything for me," Henry wrote, staggering under the weight and finality of loss. Amidst her devastation Alice was more serene, believing as she did that William's soul would persist in a form that she might reach. If she wanted to contact him in the afterlife, he'd be the last person to judge her for trying or for failing. Alice hosted seances in her home, but was not satisfied that any of the messages came from her husband.

Given William James's fame and far-ranging connections, the search for his spirit would not remain a family affair. Indeed, the philosopher's worst fears about his intellectual legacy unfolded in the pages of American newspapers from Hartford to Portland to Miami. Within a month of his death, headlines announced a secret pact between James and Hyslop, a sealed letter in a safe. If a medium could channel what James wrote, they would prove the reality of the spirit world. Hyslop denied any such plan; reporters attributed it, vaguely, to "a member of the society in Boston". Meanwhile, the Metropolitan Psychical Society, an ASPR splinter group led by vehement debunker Joseph Rinn, announced a $10,000 prize for the contents of the apocryphal

12 *Henry James Letters*, volume 4 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974-84) 561-62, quoted in Richardson, *Maelstrom*, 521.

letter. By October, fifty mediums had answered the call. “The expressions [they] used are similar to those of professional mediums since the days of the Fox sisters,” Rinn scoffed. Of course, they could never match James's letter, since no such letter existed – rather, Rinn's stunt proved the duplicity of mediums.[13]

Hyslop, too, rejected all of the resulting claims, and even went to Boston to root out the perpetrator of the letter myth, concluding that it was a fabrication top to bottom. However, the tidal wave of mediumship had been unleashed. The press ran regular updates on the latest James rappings. The usual suspects, well-known Spiritualists like M.S. Ayer and the Reverend Frederick A. Wiggin, formed the crest of the wave, but beneath them rose scores of amateur mediums and chance experimenters who claimed that they had little knowledge of or interest in the works of the dead Harvard professor.

Typical of these was a young woman from Washington, D.C. who claimed that James contacted her only four days after he died. “She did not know Professor James,” the newspapers reported, “and had not read any of his writings.” A constant refrain with female mediums – investigators assumed, or the mediums cannily attested, that they'd never read a book or a newspaper, and had no inkling of such high-minded affairs. While riding a train south from Boston to New York on September 20th, 1910, the woman received a rambling message in which James explained the difficulties of communicating without a body: “the spirit must work out its more or less gradual emancipation from the labyrinth of the earth conditions.” An underwhelmed Hyslop read the text and “failed to find anything which suggests the style of Professor James while writing here on earth.”[14]

Despite such flippant remarks, Hyslop did not actually believe that literary style could prove a spirit's identity. He shared the standard Spiritualist explanation for gibberish from

13 “$10,000 Offered to Quote Letter,” Associated Press wire, New York, Oct. 5, 1910.
14 “Did the Words Come from Beyond the Grave,” *The New York Herald*, November 20, 1910.

beyond: the spirits struggled to form mortal thoughts in their transcendent new state of consciousness, while neurasthenic mediums only distorted the message further. In the same interview where he condemned the chorus of James channelers, Hyslop waxed philosophical on the very nature of communication: “There are enormous difficulties associated with the communication of ideas normally,” he reflected, “and only a laboriously-constructed process of artificial symbols ever enables us to establish intellectual relations between minds at all. What we suppose to be an easy and natural means of ascertaining each other's thoughts is an exceedingly difficult one.”[15] All speech is an elaborate translation, in which meaning and intent are often misconstrued. So much more with speech across the unfathomable abyss of death. In this passing allusion to the problem of language itself, we have an inkling of Jack Spicer's Martian blocks, the roaring winds and flailing wires. The real terror is not dissolution at death, but the flimsiness of our superficial sense of “solvency”.

Rather than a spot-on imitation of James's prose style, Hyslop had quietly begun searching for “the little, trivial incidents” – intimate details known only to family and close friends of the public philosopher. He proposed that the scientific way to confirm spirit identity was to find these bits of unconscious flotsam, echoing the “Morelli method”, the “Sherlockian method”, and ultimately the Freudian method of solving a mystery with mundane and therefore objective clues.[16] To find those clues, he consulted two mediums who had earned his personal trust, Minnie Soule of Boston (known as “Mrs. Chenoweth” in ASPR publications) and Mrs. Willis M. Cleaveland of Virginia (known as “Mrs Smead”). Around September 5th, Smead contacted Hyslop claiming that she saw James's apparition on the night of his death and had been receiving transmissions ever since. Smead seems no less opportunistic than any of the psychics

15 “Influence of Hysteria on 'Spirit Messages,'” *The Cleveland Plain Dealer,* May 28, 1911.
16 Carlo Ginzburg, “Morelli, Freud, and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method,” tanslated by Anna Davin, *History Workshop Journal*, no. 9 (1980): 5–36.

duped by the Metropolitan Society, but Hyslop took her seriously based on their prior relationship. Moreover, she lived in "in one of the southern states in the mountains, 13 miles from a railway." Naturally she claimed to know nothing about James's work. Hyslop rushed to rural Virginia to sit at the séance table with the Smeads. For someone who believed in telepathy, he found it surprisingly hard to imagine how information could reach lower-class women by ordinary means.

Meanwhile, the spirit-James cavalcade was rapidly coming to resemble "the most farcical [of] vaudeville skits."[17] On November 14th, a New York man produced a spirit photograph of James, along with a gushing, sentimental message; the reporter bemoaned "a marked change in the literary style of the late Professor of Psychology and a falling off of logical faculty as well." By January James reached the West Coast, appearing in the automatic writing of Los Angeles psychologist Herbert Luzon. Hyslop publicly decried these reports as "nothing but cases of hysteria." Many, he chided, were "fakers pure and simple."[18] He maintained that he was not investigating any James appearances: "I would not waste a minute of my time bothering with them." Despite his outspoken public skepticism, Hyslop had already established a series of cross-correspondences between the mediums Smead and Chenoweth. He believed that clues repeated by both mediums independently could substantiate James's identity.

It took almost two years for Hyslop to go public with his investigation. By that time the media frenzy had subsided, but reporters happily picked up where they left off. From Hyslop's tedious and strident explanation of the Smead and Chenoweth cross-correspondences in the ASPR *Journal*, they extracted the money headline: "Pajamas from Spirit Land," the papers declared – "Pink Pajamas Talked of by Spirit". Indeed, the clue that persuaded Hyslop was a recurring reference to James's pink pajamas, the trivial detail known to no one else.

17 "New Yirk News," *The New Advocate*, Baton Rouge, June 22, 1912.
18 "Influence of Hysteria on 'Spirit Messages,'" *The Cleveland Plain Dealer,* May 28, 1911.

"Was that the most characteristic thing about himself the philosopher could think of?" jeered the *New York Tribune*. "He might have told the world whether or not he found his theory of pragmatism true." And there it was – in the crucial years when students and followers could have built on James's work and solidified his intellectual legacy, this drawn-out survival debate reduced the philosopher and his ideas to a laughingstock, or at best a hapless pawn in other people's petty machinations. In a 1913 incident, James's spirit reportedly ordered Hyslop to "write a paper against woman suffrage. It is my desire that you do this… PS: Don't let your wife see it."[19]

Jesting headlines also obscured the larger problem of how identity, writing, and translation connect the living and the dead. Hyslop believed he'd solved it with the cross-correspondence method, but this was another form of retreat into the familiar, of the projection that Spicer warned against in dictated poetry. Hyslop and his fellow investigators, communing with their dead colleagues, saw the afterlife as site of "big science" parallel to (and in fact realizing their aspirations for) the big science of psychical research – they extolled "the detail, the large and comprehensive way in which [the spirit control] worked as by a chart."[20] In the same period, W.B. Yeats believed he'd solved it with the system of *A Vision*, a system which, conveniently, produced "metaphors for poetry." With so many efforts to know and channel the dead leading down these solipsistic blind-alleys, newspaper satirists weren't the only ones wishing that inquiring minds would leave the dearly departed alone.

Asking brother where my pen is

Drifting in his grief from Boston to New York to London, and finally back to his retreat in Rye, Henry James ignored the tabloid headlines from America for months. Inevitably, though,

19 "James's Spirit Warns Hyslop," *The Bridgeport Evening Farmer*, Bridgeport, Conn., January 21, 1913.
20 James H. Hyslop, "A Case of Hysteria," *PASPR* 5, 1911, 634.

his brother's ventriloquized spirit penetrated into Henry's intimate circles. In 1912, his close friend Theodate Pope, one of the first female architects in America and an ASPR trustee, sent Henry a transcript of a séance in which William appeared. Henry referred to it as "the dreadful document…without hesitation the most abject and impudent, the hollowest, vulgarest, and basest rubbish I could possibly conceive." Clearly, he took deep personal offense at the tone-deaf Spiritualist maneuver of negating grief by simply producing a piece of spirit-writing. Despite his fondness for Pope, Henry answered her with a diatribe against the American "flatness of level" – the plebeian sentimentality that suffused even highbrow Spiritualism. He marveled that a well-bred, educated person could "pass on such a tissue of trash."

Henry was the wrong person to ply with the Spiritualist reanimation trick; he knew his brother's voice inside and out. For four decades they had bared their souls to each other in written exchanges, so that William's identity *was* his letters, his words – language was not a mere vehicle, but the substance of their relationship. If the conditions of spirit-life reduced William James to something "utterly empty and illiterate… a mere babble of platitudinous phrases," then this spirit-life was worse by far than the preacher's hellfire.[21]

Henry turned his efforts to editing the unfinished work that William left behind, organizing his brother's correspondence and building the intellectual monuments that keep the thoughts of the dead on the tongues of the living. For the literary- and literal-minded Henry, textual preservation was the only survival that mattered. The corpus, the body of words, was fixed as its author intended, a closed canon safe from the bizarre, degrading whims of mediumship. Of course, Henry's disenchanted view also reveals a reflected desire. This is what he wanted for himself and feared he would never attain: an enduring textual corpus, literary immortality.

21 Henry James to Theodate Pope, January 12 1912, in *Henry James, Selected Letters* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987) 394.

A novelist of meticulous psychological insight, Henry James epitomizes the realist school that directly preceded modernism. Almost despite himself, (perhaps because of William), he edged towards the precipice. The more obsessively he captured his characters' fragmentary memory, contradictory desires, and unconscious motives, the closer he came to dissolving the unitary, Enlightened self that made novels possible to begin with. Henry struggled throughout his life with episodes of sheer despair; one could name, as a causal factor, his suspicion that we are nothing more than a fleeting, unstable bundle of impressions and influences. Moreover, he worried over the feminine valence of sensitivity, that receiving too much could unmake and unman. Yet through sheer force of authorship – persuasive, dazzling authorship – he tried to assert a unified self that persists.

Many things shattered in the transition from Henry James's lush novels to Eliot's *Wasteland*. William James anticipated many of these things, but he denied the inevitability of despair – he asserted the nineteenth-century ideal of constant, disciplined self-making as a bulwark against the void. By the time we get to Spicer the discipline is still there, but it's become a discipline of dissolution, a poetics of confused, layered, fragmentary voices coming through from the far reaches of time and space. The poet taking dictation is a “tissue of trash,” a doomed explorer, a linguist translating from nonsense to nonsense, and ultimately, a specter. Yet Spicer never questioned the duty to take dictation. At some point, his determination to produce good art elided into a sense of perilous responsibility to the dead.

Mediumistic texts make the tragi-comedy of communication palpable. They dramatize the medium's struggle against “the tongue [they] were born with”, and the spirits' struggle to make themselves known with only shreds of a shared language. Anyone who's ever tried to communicate a complicated feeling can relate to both sides of the equation. Just as some poets stake their usefulness on expressing our emotions better than we can, Yeats and Eliot asserted

that poets have the discipline to channel the dead, or a true idea of the dead, better than ectoplasm-spouting psychics. Subsequent writers would, in turn, find fault with Eliot's polished-marble formality and seek something rougher, closer to the struggle of automatism so familiar from the séance-table.

A young woman given the pseudonym “Ida Ritchie” received some messages from William James that model how the unschooled drama unfolds:

> October 14, 1912: “William James will not Prof. James for there are no professor here. God * * but will W James Prof Jam... [ran off paper] James * * Jams James William James.”
> October 15, 1912: “William James Mind better Mind better the law the law of God rather than man. Mind the law as [?] of the trees. the [y] fall no matter how beautiful or how strong or large the trees....thus wastes man the hour glass is every man's life but we live again like the sturdy oak in life made perfect.”[22]

Hyslop investigated Ritchie and found that the “alleged messages from Professor James do not present evidence of identity in any form that is scientifically recognizable.” No pink pajamas, that is. But Hyslop didn't really know James. James in fact harbored a deep personal dislike towards his ASPR successor, suspecting that Hyslop lacked nuance and empathy. The assumption that Hyslop would be the target of all James's attempts at metaphyscial contact, out of mere professional courtesy, is somewhat absurd.

In Ritchie's trance she mingled the initials W.J. and H.J. Supposedly unaware of either individual's work, she scrawled William, Henry, James, Henry, William, across the page. Said the dead one to the one who survived: “James lives my brother lives lives. Asking brother where my pen is.” Said the surviving brother of the dead one: “He is a possession, of real magnitude, and I shall find myself still living upon him to the end.”[23]

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22 James H. Hyslop, “A Case of Musical Control,” *PASPR* 7, 1913, 433.

23 *Henry James Letters*, volume 4 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974-84) 561-62, quoted in Richardson, *Maelstrom*, 521.