

Something in a Stranger's Experience

Evangelical and Spiritualist Women's Autobiography

Hence it is, that despite themselves, and apparently in direct violation of broader aspirations, mankind devour with an instinctive relish whatever is supposed to be truly autobiographical. If a person seriously report himself in some periodical, even though an utter stranger, the world will receive the news with an appetite insatiable . . . The history of the world is interesting; that of a person is fascinating. There is always something in a stranger's experience which no mortal can divulge save the stranger himself.

—Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Magic Staff* (1857)

IN THE FIRST VOLUME of his own bipartite autobiography, the famous Spiritualist, Andrew Jackson Davis muses on autobiographical narratives and their potential to fascinate us. Davis suggests that autobiography is alluring because it promises access to a unique record of human experience. Reading about such experiences reminds us of our individuality, while also emphasizing our connection to one another: as the mysterious details of stranger's life are unveiled, we find that even when we are temporally and spatially separated from that stranger, we know him or her intimately. As Andrew Jackson Davis was no doubt aware, spiritual autobiographies were of particular interest to the nineteenth-century reading public. In the antebellum years, narratives written by Evangelical Christians of varying denominations comprised a significant portion of the market.¹ Later, after the Civil War, a different kind of spiritual autobiography appeared; that of the Spiritualist medium. While Spiritualist autobiography no doubt drew

on many of the conventions set by the immensely popular Christian autobiography, various elements of Spiritualist autobiography diverged considerably from those of Christian autobiography.

What makes the Spiritualist autobiography unique? In what ways is it different from the Evangelical autobiography? By way of providing context for later chapters in this book, this chapter offers a brief history of spiritual autobiography in the United States; discusses issues of race and gender; considers gender with an emphasis on tropes common to women's autobiographical writing; and examines differences between Spiritualist and Evangelical ideology. Finally, this chapter considers how the autobiographies of the four mediums in this study *reflect* Spiritualist values, as well as which elements of these autobiographies are derived from Christian commonplaces. More complex aspects of how Spiritualist ideology actually *informed* women's autobiography, self-construction, and strategic performances of femininity will be addressed in chapters 2 through 6.

American Spiritual Autobiography: Race and Gender

Early American spiritual autobiography began with the Quakers and the Puritans, many of whom kept journals to record their spiritual experiences. Writing about one's relationship with god was framed as a means of self-examination and as a way to mark spiritual growth.² When shared, writing about faith also functioned as a form of testimony and as an inspiration to others. Focused on divine punishment and judgment, Puritan writing tended toward the dramatic. In contrast, Quaker writing was more sedate, simply observing the benefits of living a divinely inspired life.³ In the late eighteenth century, when Evangelical faiths became popular, Evangelical autobiographies entered the marketplace. In Evangelical communities (and also later in Spiritualist communities), it was more common for men to publish autobiographies than for women to do so. In 1832, the first woman's Evangelical autobiography was published: Nancy Towle's *Vicissitudes Illustrated in the Experience of Nancy Towle in Europe and America*.⁴ But although Evangelicalism was popular during the early nineteenth century, other new religions and spiritual movements developed a broad appeal following the Civil War, including the Shakers, Mormonism, and Spiritualism. Spiritualist autobiography first appeared in the mid-nineteenth century, building on conventions established by popular Christian autobiographies.

While scholarship by Rosetta Haynes, William Andrews, and Elizabeth Elkins Grammer on African American Evangelical autobiographers indicates that Evangelical autobiography emerged across race, class, and gender boundaries, Spiritualist autobiography is far more restricted in its scope. Fewer Spiritualist autobiographies than Evangelical autobiographies were published, and those most visible on the historical record are representative only of the white middle-class. To the best of my knowledge, although selected autobiographical pieces by Spiritualist women were published in journals, only four full autobiographical life stories—that is, narratives that attempted to account for an entire lifetime of experience and that were explicitly marketed as autobiographies—were published in the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century. All of these works were penned by white women. Although there is certainly a need for more scholarship of this kind—especially for work attending to female African American mediums—such research is beyond the scope of this study. However, some excellent scholarship covering nineteenth-century African American Spiritualism includes John P. Deveney's *Paschal Beverly Randolph: A Nineteenth-Century Black American Spiritualist, Rosicrucian and Sex Magician*, Emily Suzanne Clark's *A Luminous Brotherhood: Afro-Creole Spiritualism in Nineteenth Century New Orleans*, Hans A. Baer's *The Black Spiritual Movement: A Religious Response to Racism*, Jason Berry's *Spirit of Black Hawk*, which references Spiritualist and novelist Mother Leafy Anderson, and finally Margarita Guillory's work on African-American women in Rochesterian Spiritualism.⁵

Women's Autobiography in the Nineteenth Century

Before considering how the social performance central to the production of Spiritualist women's autobiography is distinct from Evangelical women's autobiography, it is important to account for some of the fundamental features of women's nineteenth-century autobiography. As mentioned earlier, women were discouraged from entering the public sphere—so, if a woman were going to publish an autobiography, she would be expected to reassure audiences of her modesty and to explain why she felt it necessary to go public. Moreover, women autobiographers were compelled to apologize for being so presumptuous as to think anyone would be interested in reading their work. At the beginning of her autobiography, Emma Hardinge Britten attempts to deflect assumptions of hubris: “autobiographical publications sometimes

seem to imply a self-sufficient idea of the writer's own importance, a sentiment which would be wholly foreign to my mind or intention."⁶ Once Britten assures audiences that she doesn't believe herself to be important, she goes on to say that she writes not for self-aggrandizement, but to honor "the many notable Pioneers of the early Spiritualist movement."⁷ Similarly, Jones suggests that she writes not to promote herself, but because she owes her autobiography to the spirits since they have done so much for her.⁸ Thus, Britten and Jones assert that they write their autobiographies in order to repay friends (both terrestrial and celestial) to whom they are indebted. The notion of writing to fulfill a moral obligation was a common justification for women's autobiography, but other justifications included the author's framing of her own autobiography as a means by which to write the biography of a noteworthy man in her life. For instance, Nettie Colburn Maynard justifies her own autobiography *Was Abraham Lincoln a Spiritualist?* by suggesting that the book is primarily an epideictic work on Abraham Lincoln rather than her own life-story. Therefore, the modest nineteenth-century woman often claimed to have written her autobiography out of necessity rather than vanity, and her work was typically vouched for by an influential man, who would write a preface to the book. Evangelical women's autobiographies reveal corollary justifications: The women write because they feel compelled by God to share a message that could be inspirational to others.

Of the many similarities between Evangelical and Spiritualist autobiographies, one of the most prominent pertains to reports of what Catherine Albanese refers to as an "inaugural illness."⁹ That is, Christian writers often link their conversion experiences to a life-threatening illness during which they believe that they are communicating with the divine. Two out of four of the mediums I discuss in this study mention having been ill as children—but although their ailments ostensibly heighten their sensitivity to spirit communication, illness is not constructed explicitly as being a kind of conversion experience in and of itself as it often was in Christian autobiography. In women's autobiographical writing, the trope of illness also served to assist in the performance of femininity. Women writers often emphasized their ailments in order to remind audiences that they were constitutionally fragile and therefore—despite their social transgressions—retained their feminine qualities. The notion of illness and fragility as a signifier of femininity was an integral component of the nineteenth-century ideal of True Womanhood, but as discussed in the previous chapter, it was also explicitly rejected by Cogan's model of "Real Womanhood," which emphasized

good health and physical strength. The autobiographies discussed in this study are of particular interest with respect to various models of womanhood because they demonstrate ambivalence and contradiction. While an autobiographer might draw on illness to demonstrate her fragility, she might later reject that same discourse to impress on her audience an image of robust health and vibrancy. This contradiction is most glaringly apparent in the autobiographies of Emma Hardinge Britten and Amanda Theodosia Jones, who claim that Spiritualist practice revitalizes and emboldens them. In fact, Britten consistently speaks of being infused with a new strength and power once she stands up at the podium to speak publicly. These examples suggest that Spiritualist women as well as Evangelical women believed in spirituality as a means not only by which to emancipate themselves from social restrictions, but as a means by which to draw on hidden reserves of physical strength.

In many ways, the spiritual lives of both Evangelical and Spiritualist women did afford them more social freedom than was available to most women of their time. They traveled (often unchaperoned), spoke in public, and expressed unorthodox opinions. Further, both Evangelical and Spiritualist women describe how, at first, they tried to ignore otherworldly calls to leave home and proselytize, and the women express discomfort with breaching cultural mores that expected women to be silent. For example, despite her background as an aspiring opera singer and her former career as an actress, Britten expresses reluctance at entering the public sphere, denying any inclination "to fill the position of a Spiritual Rostrum Lecturer. It was in vain that I protested . . . that I was 'not one of those strong-minded women,' and shrank with disgust from the idea of being 'a female preacher.' My earthly friends declared my trance addresses as given at my circles were just what was required for the public rostrum, whilst my Spirit friends . . . alleged that I had been destined from childhood . . . for this special work."¹⁰ Despite Britten's apparent disgust at the idea of public speaking, her friends insist that she has no choice in the matter. At last, Britten declares that she is prepared to sacrifice her modesty for the sake of the Spiritualist cause.

By the time they published their autobiographies, Britten and Jones were already accomplished writers. Jones had published her poetry, and Britten had published a significant body of writing on Spiritualism. Both women knew that there would be specific audiences for their work. In contrast to Britten and Jones, Underhill and Maynard were new writers who were aware that they were writing for fellow Spiritualists, but were uncertain as to how their work would be received. Underhill suggests (albeit humbly) that

her own autobiography should be considered part of the historical record, a contribution to the broader narrative of Spiritualism's evolution. She begins her autobiography by acknowledging an abundance "of splendid literature" on Spiritualism that is "narrative, philosophical and religious" in scope. She justifies her own contribution to that literature by explaining: "It happens that nobody else possesses—both in vivid personal recollections and in stores of documentary material—the means and the data necessary for the task of giving a correct account of the initiation of the movement known as Modern Spiritualism."¹¹ To Underhill, writing this book becomes a matter of being beholden to a cause larger than herself. Maynard takes a similar approach, describing her authorship as being a response to "The earnest solicitations of friends that I should place on record the important events in my experience as a spiritual medium led me to complete these papers."¹² The sense of obligation to write one's autobiography became an extension of the obligation the women had first felt to go out and preach in public.

Women Speaking in Public

All four women in this study speak of experiencing a definitive moment at which they became aware of their gifts and decided that they would commit to practicing Spiritualism. Britten realized her commitment to Spiritualism after her first interaction with a medium, as did Nettie Colburn Maynard. The "call" to go out and speak in public about the marvels of Spiritualism inevitably followed, and the spiritually sensitive person had no choice but to accept it. Of the "call," Leah Fox Underhill writes: "long and strenuously we resisted its influence and its manifestations, and struggled against the absolute persecutions which at last forced us into publicity."¹³ That is, according to Underhill, the Fox sisters had never actually wanted to enter the public sphere to perform demonstrations, but had felt it to be an unavoidable obligation. Hence, Underhill emphasizes the element of self-sacrifice that accompanies the endowment of such unusual abilities; a responsibility to submit to an otherworldly authority.

But unlike the Evangelical preacher, the Spiritualist lecturer had no foundational text from which to draw "scriptural language." Grammer writes: "any preachers who paid attention to the prophetic books of the Bible could be expected to recognize . . . opposition as an important bona fides, a kind of credential legitimating one's own prophetic status, and thus to make

the most of it in his or her textual self representations.”¹⁴ Here, Grammer’s point is that Evangelical women gained ethos by comparing their own journeys (and the opposition they faced) to examples from the Bible. In contrast, Spiritualist mediums (both male and female) could provide no such bona fides. Nonetheless, Spiritualist communities were more willing to accept female speakers than Evangelical communities were. Nineteenth-century Americans “assumed that women, more emotional and passive than men, were naturally more religious as well.”¹⁵ This meant that women were believed to be more likely candidates for mediumship than men. However, in Spiritualism, the notion of females communicating with the divine was considered to be the rule, rather than (as Grammer describes in her study of Evangelicals) the exception. Further, Christian women’s spirit visions bore different cultural implications from those of Spiritualist women. The Puritans had mistrusted women who had visions, suggesting that such women were overly emotional, insane, or influenced by the devil.¹⁶ Elizabeth Reis writes: “For New England ministers, women’s encounters with angels in the seventeenth century were invariably suspect, likely delusions conjured by the evil angel Satan, rather than visitations authorized by God.”¹⁷ Slowly, this attitude began to change, and by the nineteenth century, visions of angels were no longer believed to signal impending doom. Nonetheless, people—especially women—who claimed to have seen angels or spirits continued to be treated with suspicion. In Spiritualism, however, women were deemed the obvious choice for spirit communication—albeit for sexist reasons. Assumed to be naturally weak-willed and empty-headed, it was believed that women could more effectively surrender their agency to an otherworldly being and convey messages from beyond the grave: “the female medium’s inattentiveness was as important in séance networks as in technological ones . . . because her automatism implied her ignorance of the often personal and confidential facts she communicated from the departed, it also implied the authenticity of the communications themselves, thereby verifying Spiritualism.”¹⁸ As a mere instrument for communication, with no agency of her own, a female medium posed little threat in comparison to someone believed capable of manipulating communications to suit his own agenda. In a sense, women’s presumed weakness became an advantage when they were able to draw on commonplaces about feminine submission and passivity to procure work as spirit mediums.

But while a female medium could potentially cultivate as strong a following as a male medium, Evangelical women speakers faced discrimination from churches that refused to ordain them. Simply put, Evangelicalism was bound

to patriarchal interpretations of Christianity, whereas—to some degree—Spiritualism attempted to challenge Christian doctrine and its gender restrictions. That is, Evangelical women were trying to carve out a rhetorical space for themselves within a well-established patriarchal institution, versus creating a new spiritual ideology.

The Afterlife

If expressions of deference, public testimony, direct experience with the divine, “inaugural illness,” and the sense of answering a “call” to embark on a particular spiritual path were key similarities between Evangelical and Christian women’s autobiographies, what were the differences? The most fundamental disjunctures between Evangelical and Spiritualist autobiography arose from how adherents to each tradition viewed the afterlife. With respect to piety, the reader of Spiritualist autobiography should be aware that Spiritualist and Christian interpretations of what it meant to be “religious” diverged significantly. Whereas the idea of salvation was of paramount importance to Christians, it was relatively inconsequential to Spiritualists. And although Christian tradition presented myriad uncertainties regarding the individual soul and what would happen to it, Spiritualists operated on the assumption that the soul would live on after death, steadily evolving into a state of spiritual perfection.

Christians held a distinctly Manichean worldview—that is, aspects of both the material and the spiritual world were seen in binary terms as being either categorically good or evil. The forces of good and evil were in perpetual tension, and one had to constantly be on the lookout for nefarious influences. Since the devil was given to deception and trickery, spirit communication occurring outside of the purview of Christian ritual was believed to be dangerous (see chapters 2 and 3). On the other hand, Spiritualists—who did not believe in evil *per se*—trusted that spirits who chose to communicate with humans were benevolent entities. No matter how mischievous (or profane), the “controlling spirit” could only tell the “Truth.”

An Evangelical belief in the existence of evil and a Spiritualist rejection of it held profound implications for what happened after one’s death. If there was no inherent evil, and if “evil” were due only to ignorance, the best remedy for it would be education. According to the Spiritualist “law of progression” misinformation and ignorance could be corrected

by education provided in the afterlife.¹⁹ There was no longer a need to fear hell—sinners could look forward to an opportunity for spiritual evolution even after death. As Spiritualists Judge Worth Edmonds and George T. Dexter put it: “man is the creature of Progression, and . . . he does not instantly upon dying change into a state of perfection, but only into a condition where he can more readily progress toward perfection.”²⁰ In other words, all men are capable of eventually achieving perfection, but they must work to attain it. The afterworld is therefore scaffolded to ensure an unambiguous process of spiritual evolution. According to Spiritualist Uriah Clark, “the spirit-world is only a higher type of our world, and spirits are human beings; only, in proportion to their progress passed on to a higher sphere and unfolded on a higher plane in communion with worlds and intelligences far beyond our material vision.”²¹ The idea of the spirit world as being “only a higher type of our world,” where people could continue to evolve, allowed for a second chance, whereas Christianity allowed none.

The Spiritualist afterworld consisted of seven spheres, each representing a more advanced level of spiritual development. After death, one would progress through the spheres becoming increasingly enlightened, until one essentially became godlike—or part of the cosmos. Of the seven spheres that comprised Spiritualist heaven, the first three were closest to earth, and the inhabitants of those spheres were the most readily available to communicate with humans. Therefore “spiritualists were not greatly interested in the remote spirit realms, their attention being focused on existence in the second and third spheres of the spirit world, where society resembled a utopian vision of earthly life. Astral bodies of the departed looked in these places very much like their earthly bodies had looked.”²² In addition to being relieved of one’s physical ailments, and being reunited with loved ones, the Spiritualist afterworld offered other benefits: “Sin, hell, and the last judgment were eliminated. For Spiritualists, the love of dead children replaced the love of Jesus, and heaven became a wonderful place, where excellent child care was available, education continued, and spiritual progress was assured after death.”²³ Rather than fearing retribution, Spiritualists could rely on comfort and support after they died. Hence, Spiritualists could look forward to ending up in a perfect world comprised of specialized communities where people lived much as they had on earth.

The notion that people no longer had to fear death conflicted with the agenda of a predominately Christian establishment whose power was largely

predicated on ensuring that their congregations submitted to the impending specter of judgment. For Spiritualists, this lack of fear was liberating:

The young crouched in terror no more, but talked of brothers and sisters only gone on before; and the orphan saw a dead mother transformed into a guardian angel, watching over the lone one by night and day, and singing songs of the everlasting home . . . Fathers and mothers, and the long train of mourners who wept and wailed over the dead, lifted their faces heavenward, and, lo! the veil was parted by beloved ones, and the home of “many mansions” hymned to earth.²⁴

The dead were seen as being deeply vulnerable—in need of care, guidance, and sympathy rather than punishment and judgment. Further, death did not have to be considered a permanent separation from loved ones and did not mean having to contend with an unknown fate. Through Spiritualism, death had been domesticated. It was made familiar and friendly—and everyone was guaranteed a place in heaven. In “Crimes of the Soul,” Cathy Gutierrez writes:

Spiritualists disbanded hell. Heaven was not only universally possible, it was universally necessary as the final destination for all humankind. The multicultural ramifications of this fiat were tremendous: all races and religions were bound for the same afterlife, and they were often depicted in séances as having their own temples or shrines in their own heavenly neighborhoods where they continued to worship in culturally specific ways.²⁵

The Spiritualist afterlife did not discriminate according to race, class, or gender. One was expected to retain one’s cultural identity after death, but without suffering oppression. The idea that people of all races and religions could coexist peacefully—as well as the fact that one did not necessarily need to be Christian to enter heaven—spoke to Spiritualism’s expansive, egalitarian, and revolutionary views.

Structure, Style, and Spiritualism

Drawing on the scholarship of Angelo Constanza, historian Rosetta Haynes discusses how the Christian spiritual autobiography reflects a process

of self-awareness that is “conventionally represented as a series of stages of grace that include the narrator’s initial conviction of sin, his or her descent into a phase of depression stemming from this conviction, the elation of conversion and the assurance of achieving this experience, and periodic episodes of spiritual deadness.”²⁶ In other words, the Christian autobiography typically represents a process of struggle between one’s higher nature and baser impulses in order to earn salvation. While Evangelical autobiographies follow this pattern, references to sin, depression, conversion, and revelation were not prominent aspects of Spiritualist autobiography, which tended to read as a series of persuasive (and often didactic) anecdotes, rather than linear narratives.

In her study of nineteenth-century Evangelical women’s autobiographies, Grammer finds the endings to these works to be problematic in that the Evangelical women’s narratives seem to always remain unresolved. She writes, “And as for the kingdom of God on earth, like all their predecessors and successors in the continuing labor of Christian reform, these evangelists failed to bring it about though not for lack of trying. They must end their stories as they may well have ended their lives . . . pursuing an ending that kept receding before them as they moved.”²⁷ In short, the problem of Christian soteriology meant that one never quite achieved salvation—one was always in the process of becoming. As such, I argue that Spiritualist autobiographies (and perhaps more specifically their endings) tend to be more “satisfying” in the sense that Grammer describes, because Spiritualists did not believe in the Christian fall and, therefore, were not caught up in a predetermined soteriological drama. In contrast, Spiritualist women autobiographers tended to end their stories on a definitive and triumphant note, their work often emulating a catalog of achievement, or *vitae* detailing material accomplishments. Spiritualist autobiographies project an unambiguous message of social progress and recount instances during which bigots and naysayers were transformed and became believers. Liberated from the need to remind readers of their status as fallen individuals seeking endless renewals of conversion and salvation, Spiritualists could regale audiences with tales of their success.

Another marked difference between Evangelical and Spiritualist autobiography lies in the women’s relationships’ with their families. According to Andrews’s and Grammer’s respective studies of nineteenth-century Evangelical women’s autobiographies, certain patterns emerge with respect to the women’s family lives. Evangelical women were roundly criticized for leaving their husbands and families to preach. The African American Evangelical

preacher Julia Foote describes difficulty getting along with her mother and her parents' disapproval of her choices.²⁸ A white Evangelical preacher, Lydia Sexton, also alludes to a tense relationship with her mother.²⁹ According to Andrews, Foote and Sexton were not alone: vexed relationships with spouses, parents, children, and clergy seemed to be common among itinerant Evangelical women, who were accused of being too radical and individualistic in their approach to Christianity. As a result, these women often felt alienated by the very communities that had once nurtured them.³⁰ In contrast, although Spiritualist women were frequently accused of being heretics and witches, they did not have to contend with a lack of support from within their own communities.

In fact, Spiritualist women's families seemed unfailingly supportive of their endeavors. The women in this study describe uniformly positive relationships with their parents and siblings. Generally speaking, Spiritualist women's family members accepted Spiritualism even if they did not practice it themselves. Jones's and Britten's mothers were initially skeptical, but later were convinced by their daughters' abilities and offered them full support. Maynard's family exhibits no skepticism about Spiritualism at all. In fact, when young Nettie's parents believe that their daughter might be psychic, they invite a medium to their home to help the young girl develop her skills. In cases where parents were reported as demonstrating immediate support of their children's ostensive abilities, one might ask if perhaps the children were exploited. In Maynard's case, this is unclear. In the Fox's case, there is no implication that Mrs. Fox pushed her children into performing demonstrations—although she did accompany them on some of their journeys. According to nineteenth-century investigative journalist Reuben Briggs Davenport, Mrs. Fox was endlessly credulous, but her husband, John Fox and their son David always remained skeptical about the source of the Hydesville rappings.³¹ Nonetheless, neither John nor David Fox stood in the girls' way. David was too busy with his farm to pay his sisters much heed, while John Fox was a chronic alcoholic who (in his more serious bouts with the disease) was separated from his wife for months at a time. However, despite Davenport's claims, Underhill suggests that she could always rely on her family to support her endeavors.

In her autobiography, *The Missing Link in Modern Spiritualism* (1885), Leah Fox Underhill recounts the tale of a young preacher visiting the Fox's church in Rochester:

He introduced himself as the "servant of the Lord," and, walking up to mother, said, "This is sister Fox, I suppose?" Mother replied,

“I am Mrs. Fox.” “Well, Mrs. Fox, there is a complaint against you for countenancing your children in carrying on a wicked deception. It is calculated to do much harm, and it is contrary to the religion of the Bible.” He urged her to make her confession before the church and to cause her children to discontinue their unholy pursuit, and she could remain in good standing in the church. This little man was a circuit preacher, and we suppose had taken upon himself to do the Lord’s work, in his own way, as we never heard from him again; and I seriously doubt if anyone ever sent him.³²

Although Mrs. Fox apparently failed to comply with the preacher’s demands, she was not expelled from the church. Furthermore, “the leading members came to our side—minister and all.”³³ To Underhill, this is not only a personal triumph, but a triumph for the Spiritualist movement. And, true to Spiritualist style, Underhill also ends her autobiography on a triumphant note.

A chapter summary titled “Miscellaneous Incidents” lists a series of bizarre events: “Crowd of Spirits made Visible by Lightning—Scarcely Credible but True—A Game of Euchre—Margaret’s Dream—Mistaken Names Corrected by Spirits—An Unwilling Convert made grateful and Happy—A Spirit Knows better than the Postmaster—Opening of a Combination Lock—A Visitor Magnetized into a Medium Himself—Curious Story about a Mutilated Limb . . .”³⁴ This seemingly miscellaneous list acts as a directory of various phenomena that Leah Fox Underhill achieved over her lifetime of Spiritualist practice. With details culled from a “minute book” of the Underhills’ séances, readers are given a final catalog of evidence arguing for Underhill’s unique skills and for the power of Spiritualist practice. The end of Underhill’s autobiography leaves the reader with the sense that Underhill believes that her life’s work has been as meaningful for others as for herself.

In *Was Abraham Lincoln a Spiritualist?* (1891), Nettie Colburn Maynard describes an evening when, as a young girl, she had a profound clairvoyant experience. On the night before an election, Maynard prophesies who will win:

A number of guests were at dinner, and my father was affirming his confidence in the election of his candidate, when my hand was seized by a power I could not control and was violently shaken. I was frightened, and knew not what to do, trying to hold my right hand still with my left. My father watched me for an instant; then quickly taking his pencil from his pocket, he placed a piece of paper hastily before

me and the pencil in my right hand. Instantly the name ‘Buchanan’ was scrawled upon the paper.³⁵

Buchanan indeed wins the election, and Maynard’s credibility within the community is enhanced. It is this event that appears to catapult her into the public eye, leading her to first become a trance speaker, and then a private consultant within elite circles.

In the preface to her book, Maynard describes her career in Spiritualism as having been a great blessing:

Looking back over my life, it is a source of undying joy to recall the scenes where I have been the instrument in the hands of the Spirit World to carry health to the sick and peace to the sorrowing, and to kindle the light of hope where reigned the darkness of despair. It brings me that peace that passeth understanding to remember that by the aid of this precious gift I have brought comfort to the bedside of the dying, and more than once have staid the suicidal hand; while many souls wandering in the paths of sinfulness have been reclaimed and brought back to a life of virtue and honor.³⁶

This list of Maynard’s accomplishments is placed at the beginning of her autobiography—inviting the reader to learn more about her numerous successes—and echoed again at the book’s end. Like the other mediums in this study, Maynard speaks of the practical nature of Spiritualism and how it has transformed her own life and the lives of others. And finally, Maynard celebrates her achievements as a Spiritualist, speaking of death as a triumph and as a reward.

In the *Autobiography of Emma Hardinge Britten* (1900), Britten writes: “I quietly informed my mother I had just been visiting another Spirit Medium. To this announcement, my mother replied with an emphatic declaration, that although she had followed my footsteps over the wide world and was still ready to accompany me anywhere, yet for this horrible and blasphemous subject she had no spark of sympathy.”³⁷ Britten’s mother goes as far as to threaten to return to England without her daughter if the “abominations” continue. But like Jones, Britten is able to convince her mother of the “truth” of her spirit communications and that such communications are sacred rather than blasphemous.

The table of contents of Britten’s book—organized (more or less) in order of the countries that Britten visits—creates the effect of a checklist, suggesting

that Britten has conquered the world one country at a time. Toward the end of her autobiography, Britten describes arriving at the farthest reaches of the globe—the Australasian continent, which she refers to as “that once-dreaded *terra incognita*.”³⁸ In Australia, Britten encounters opposition from devout Christians along with rough terrain and dangerous travel conditions. Despite these challenges, the antipodes become the most significant of her conquests—the jewel in the crown—the *ne plus ultra* of her achievements.

When, in *A Psychic Autobiography* (1910), Amanda Theodosia Jones describes telling her mother that she is a “writing medium,” her mother seems both dismissive and irritated. “But presently, being fair-minded, she commanded: ‘Get a slate and pencil. If spirits can move your hand, they can read my mind. I will ask for one I used to know, and should the name be written, I will ask another question. Should there be a false or inconsistent answer, showing that my thoughts are not known that will end *my* investigation.’”³⁹ When Jones’s mother is eventually satisfied that her daughter’s abilities are reliable, she offers her unequivocal support.

The final chapter of Jones’s autobiography is titled “Fountains of Desire,” and it begins with a catalog of spirit-inspired visions that sparked some of her scientific inventions. For instance, she describes her discovery of a method of packing fruit without exposing it to air: “The door was shut; but still I seemed to see with psychic eyes whatever passed within; the rending of the cells, the air-escape from fruits below and fluid overhead, the dripping down in unison, the filling of the jars brimful, the cases topping them.”⁴⁰ According to Jones, God works through these spirits, giving them helpful messages to pass on to human beings. In this chapter, Jones reiterates some of the main arguments Spiritualists typically deploy to convince audience of the importance of their faith. That is, she emphasizes how the spirits help us to achieve scientific progress. Jones insists that Spiritualism is practical and that rewards can be received in this life, rather than after death. However, the idea of receiving practical advice is bound up in the concept of agency: Spiritualists often criticized Evangelicals for their belief in predestination, arguing that there was simply no point in making any effort to improve oneself at all if everything one did had already been determined.⁴¹ Thus, Jones ends her book not only by emphasizing practical knowledge, but also by discussing free will and agency—both of which she believes are crucial to effective Spiritualist practice. In Jones’s view, people are not slaves to spirits but have the freedom to decide whether or not to do the Spirits’ bidding (see chapter 6). This was a radical viewpoint to express at a time when women excused themselves for

speaking in public by suggesting that their behavior had been inadvertent—that, under control of the spirits, they were not responsible for their actions.

Conclusion

In her study of Evangelical women, Grammer points out that these women typically left home on their spiritual mission after they had already started families; referred to the Bible as a central authority; emphasized their struggles, and ended their narratives indeterminately. In contrast, my own study reveals that Spiritualist women typically began lecturing before they were married; referred to no central authority; emphasized their successes, and ended their narratives on a conclusive and optimistic note. Although Underhill, Maynard, Jones, and Britten's autobiographies begin with the typically apologetic tone of the nineteenth-century woman entering the public sphere—their initial deference comes in sharp contrast to the impressions that they leave at the ends of their books, wherein they provide lists of their achievements as a means by which to catalog the cumulative effects of their work.

Both Evangelical and Spiritualist women violated social norms by entering the public sphere and by constructing themselves as spiritual leaders, but the autobiographical self-construction of Spiritualist women is of particular interest in terms of how it deviates from the Evangelical model. Spiritualist women were transgressive in that they asserted themselves as being spiritual authorities in their own right—that is, outside of patriarchal systems of theological, social, and political hierarchy. Christian women were, by and large, preaching under the auspices of a well-established religious institution and were sometimes seen as eccentric or deviant, but they were not believed to be iconoclasts as Spiritualist women were. Examining these Spiritualist autobiographies then, illuminates ways in which their authors mimic tropes typically used in the Christian autobiography as well as ways in which they deviate from Christian commonplaces in order to formulate a new genre.

In the next chapter, I will discuss more specifically how the Spiritualist women in this study were required to challenge the values of True Womanhood and to draw on the Real Womanhood model in order to invent new ways of performing femininity.