

Christiane Barz

**Scientific Spirit, Spirituality and
Spirited Writing
– Spiritualism between science, religion
and literature**

It might at first sight seem recondite to deal with spiritualism in a serious manner, particularly given the other highly respectable scientific schemes from physics, mathematics etc. put forward in our present discussion on science and literature. With spiritualisms we are now going to confront a more popular and, what is more, ‘otherworldly’ conception of science – as a means of respiritualizing the modern world. Thus I hope that this supposedly weird topic will eventually turn out to present a cultural phenomenon in the 19th and early 20th century, bringing to light the intersection between religion and science – and between the thus emerging ‘scientific religion’ or ‘religious science’ on the one hand and literature on the other hand, occasionally with literally spectacular effect. The point in elaborating on spiritualism here is not a direct relation between science and literature, but we have to consider an intermediate step – virtually the filter of spiritualism. Therefore the course these reflections are to take leads from the relation between science and religion within spiritualism and consequently in a second attempt to the relation between spiritualism, and literature.

Spiritualism

Spiritualism enters the cultural sphere fervently attempting to reconcile the religious and the scientific view of life which makes it an eminent cultural feature with considerable spread from the 1880s to the 1930s. In addition to the supernatural becoming incorporated into literary reality also, as a countermove, spiritualist practise finds its way into modern literature. There are new impulses for advanced poetical approaches, and eventually spiritualism becomes a topic in two Danish novels from the early 20th century, written by Johannes V. Jensen and Anker Larsen.

To start with, we are straightway taking the plunge into a séance scene in Jensen's novel *Madame D'Ora* from 1904 in order to gain an idea of spiritualism's literary apparel: Edmund Hall, a German physicist of considerable fame, would occasionally arrange experimental séances in his New York laboratory. A few quotations may illustrate the scientific claim attributed to those happenings. Hall maintains:

[M]in Metode har aldrig hjulpen sig ved Tro eller Hypoteser eller andre Foreløbigheder. [...] Og Spiritualismen som Videnskab var heller ikke til, førend jeg begyndte at indstille mine Instrumenter paa den. [...] Der *kan* ikke være Tale om Bedrag. Jeg har fra første Færd udøvet den mest smaalige Kontrol. Laboratoriet her er fuldt af elektriske Gærder og Snarer, Dørene forsegles hver Gang vi har Seance, jeg har konstrueret Apparater, som vilde mærke selv de mindste Ting der kan undgaa vore Sanser. [...] Den fotografiske Plade bedrager ikke, ligesaa lidt som mine andre mekaniske Apparater.

This may give a little foretaste of the scientific self-image and the ideal of empirical verifiability by visualizing the supernatural right before the eyes of a devout congregation. Its adherents are duly ravished: "Verdens Mysterium, som Tusinde har grublet over, klarlagt, i alle Enkeltheder. Religionen centraliseret. Taagen bortvej-

ret”.¹ It becomes obvious that the gist of it, as in spiritualist activities in general, after all, is technical and empirical certification of a basically religious belief. Now things get going: At first an atmospheric change makes itself gradually perceptible – atmospheric pressure, scent and temperature tend to shift. Then spectacular things happen with the aid of a trance medium: a female spectre emerges who, in a way, begins to chair the vaudeville-like sensations to come. All of a sudden flowers are appearing and disappearing, exotic figures are entering – a Chinese and a Japanese woman, various creatures consisting of light – and everything is most opulent and visually overwhelming.

The essential consequence this experience has on the physicist Hall is the radical doubt about the status of reality he is henceforth stricken with. These doubts tie up with the crucial ideology of spiritualism dissolving the dividing lines between epistemological fields, so that religious and scientific ideas seem to mutually authorize each other, thereby abrogating the distinction between the sensory and extrasensory world. While looking out of his high-rise lab window down on the crowded streets of New York the scientist muses:

Vrimler der Millioner af levende, gennemsigtige Ildvæsner rundt ude i den grønligviolette Atmosfære over Byen? Er det dem der befolker Æteren hinsides Luften og vore Sanser [...]? Er det de Stoffri, de Evige? [...] er det virkelig altsammen? Er han selv til? Han ved ikke om han er ved Bevidsthed eller ikke, levende eller død. Han spørger sig selv, om det er de radierende Stoffers Indvirkning paa hans Øjne der har gjort ham *seende*, eller om det er synet der svigter.²

Here the conjunction becomes tangible: a renowned physicist is

¹ Jensen, p. 94.

² Jensen, p. 125.

experimenting – with sceptical intent but affirmative findings after all – in order to put to the test the positive truth behind a new religious movement.

A new religion with scientific air

As a new religious phenomenon spiritualism is part of a counter-movement complementary to modernity's rationalizing impact at the end of the 19th century. This counterpart comprises a tendency within religion itself towards regeneration and pluralisation, as well as towards a subjective syncretism which may (as spiritualism actually does) revert to Christian tradition (Christian ethics, the existence of God, life after death remain undisputed), to non-European religions (particularly Asian, the idea of reincarnation), to supposedly pre-modern types of religiousness (popular belief in ghosts) and, what matters most to the context in question, to current scientific theories and methods.

What emerges from this is not a consistent teaching, for there are but few basic convictions such as: life after death and a type of finely structured matter imperceptible by human senses. It is assumed to exist beside our physically visible material reality and occasionally looms into every-day world. According to that, immanence and transcendence merely seem separate to the restricted devices of the human mind, which boils down to an epistemological problem. However, otherworld is accessible by certain methods. Spiritualist practise is based on communication with spirits of the dead via mediums, that is to say via persons disposing of a state of mind beyond normal consciousness (trance). They become the worldly mouthpiece of a supposed ghost and would generate phenomena like materialization (apparitions), automatic writing or levitation (people or things hovering about the room). At this juncture two interpretations are conceivable (and ardently debated among spiritualist theorists). The first one is the orthodox spiritualist conviction about the otherworldly quality of those eerie occurrences,

the other one is an animist view regarding subliminal forces of the medium's mind as their true origin.

But no matter which of the two is concerned, the belief in ghosts and the assumption of supernatural abilities become subject to a decisive modernisation – and that's when science comes unto the scene. Those phenomena are being associated with the most recent findings of first and foremost modern physics. By means of atomic theory, electromagnetism and radioactivity matter becomes comprehensible as a form of energy, which makes the old dualist perspective on matter and mind seem questionable or even obsolete to the modern mind. New technologies (x-ray photography) are able to visualize hitherto invisible things, the world appears to be filled with waves, vibrations, radiation and energy. X-rays discovered in 1895 permeate the exterior and penetrate into the depth of interior structures.³ The discovery of electromagnetic waves (by Hertz in 1888), of radioactivity and the invention of wireless telegraphy seemed to surpass the positivist perception of the world previously predominant, and suggested new modes of communication as well. The British chemist William Crookes unmistakably gives voice to this empirical argument on the translation from scientific to spiritual logic:

It is not unlikely that the x-rays of Professor Röntgen [...] may have a possible mode of transmitting intelligence [...]. In this way some, at least, of the phenomena of telepathy, and the transmission of intelligence from one sensitive to another through long distances, seem to come into the domain of law,

³ Just this gives Strindberg cause to call for a revision of the very foundations of science itself which hitherto merely reflected anthropomorphizing simplifications of nature, Strindberg, 'Om Ljusverkan vid Fotografering', 1897. This may be regarded as a sample of contemporary epistemological uncertainty most virulent in the late 19th century following Nietzsche's decisive inventory in f. ex. 'Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinn', 1873.

and can be grasped.⁴

What was ensuing was a readiness to regard those recent findings as empirically corroborating spiritualist assumptions about invisible natural forces, eluding direct approach but revealing themselves in their effects, as of late technically made perceptible. In the eyes of spiritualists modern science turned something which up to then was a matter of mere conjecture into proven fact. Matter's atomic structure seems to allow of phenomena such as materialization (appearing and disappearing plainly being different energetical or physical states of one and the same substance). In the light of this analogizing logic x-rays and supernatural perceptiveness, as well as modern telegraphy and telepathy seem related. The Danish spiritualist Amalie Claussen (see below) thus enthused about technical progress describes prayer "som et radiotelegram" to God.⁵ Obviously it seemed possible for spiritualism to consider itself as a religion not only keeping abreast of modern scientific knowledge and methods but, in fact, having itself corroborated by those *a posteriori*. The inadequacy of human senses suggested by those findings points out to the provisional nature of all results yielded by materialist and positivist science. Experimental research into spiritualist phenomena thus aims at extending the empirical world to the supernatural. Alfred Nielsen, a leading representative of Danish spiritualism, claims its ability to integrate religion and science by recognizing and classifying the supernatural as a natural force.⁶

Albert von Schrenck-Notzing, a physician eagerly experimenting with media in Munich, gives this account of the objective world's extension to the supernatural:

To the 'impossibilities' of previously predominant opinion be-

⁴ Crookes, 'Adress by the President', 1897, p. 350ff.

⁵ Claussen, *En ny Reformation*, 1929, p. 19.

⁶ Nielsen, *Den ny Aabenbaring*, 1926, p. 5ff.

longed: flying, voluntarily generating psychical dependence with a person (hypnotic suggestion), looking into closed spaces (x-ray), colour photography, wireless telegraphy, radioactivity and further facts produced by recent research. At all times new discoveries met with violent opposition. Facts were denied, because they were out of keeping with temporarily prevalent theories or because dreamers would draw inferences carrying too far.⁷

Apart from modern physics contemporary pre-freudian psychology developed a metaphysical conception of the unconscious mind – phenomena like somnambulism, trance and hypnosis were considered to point out to the supernatural dimension of the human soul, to the “transcendental subject” as Carl du Prel names it.⁸ To his avowedly “monist” thinking consciousness does not exhaust the world and self-awareness does not exhaust the self. Materialism had taken up the challenge to reduce the world to its sensual appearance and self to its rational activity. But just as there is a world beyond the powers of consciousness (transcendence), there is a double self, too, consisting of empirical self-awareness and the “transcendental subject” as outlined in du Prel’s psychology based on experimental evidence and transcendental inferences.

So spiritualism took up a position to legitimize itself by adopting the results of various scientific disciplines, and therefore it is no wonder that quite a number of renowned scientists supported spiri-

⁷ Schrenck-Notzing, ‘Materialisationsphänomene’, in: Pytlík, *Spiritismus und ästhetische Moderne*, 2006, p. 371 (as in the case of other German sources, I give my own translation).

⁸ Du Prel, *Philosophie der Mystik*, 1910, p. 408-439. Du Prel was a prominent figure within Psychologische Gesellschaft in Munich and dominated German psychical research up to his death. In his basic work he combines experimental psychology and metaphysical speculation, thus inspiring writers like Thomas Mann in Germany and Ola Hansson in Sweden, see: Barz, *Weltflucht und Lebensglaube*, 2003, p. 180ff.

tualism, among them the British physicist Sir Oliver Lodge, the German astrophysicist Carl Friedrich Zöllner (advocating the existence of a fourth dimension) and Danish representatives as the zoologist Julius Schiøtt and the psychiatrist August Wimmer. One of the most outstanding representatives of scientific-spiritualist intermingling, as already mentioned, is the renowned British chemist Sir William Crookes – the model for Jensen’s Edmund Hall. He was member of the Royal Society and president of the Society of Psychical Research as well, clear proof of his double interest. While trying to produce vacuum he perceived luminous colours in his radiometer which led him to the idea of radiating matter and the fourth physical state.⁹ This joins widespread speculation about “ether” and its possible breaching of the gap between material and immaterial world, positivist and spiritualist views. Crookes did a lot of experimenting on spiritualist phenomena, especially materialization in his laboratory lavishly equipped with instruments to measure and control proceedings, obviously the model for Jensen’s setting in *Madame D’Ora*. Like Jensen’s fictional character Hall, Crookes was given to work with a female medium conjuring a ghost named Katie King, who Crookes was said to have been wildly enthralled with, just like his fictional counterpart.¹⁰ Never-

⁹ As for an account of Crookes’ importance for spiritualism’s behalf cf. Kiese-wetter, *Geschichte des neueren Okkultismus*, 1891, p. 463ff.

¹⁰ In his ironic defence of spiritualism’s poetical aspect against its empirical ambition the Danish editor and writer Christian Gulmann uses this incident: “For vi vil slet ikke have Aanderne elektrisk belyste. Vi elsker det Dunkle netop for dets Mystik. Vi hygger os ved Spøgelsehistorierne, naar ilden fra Kaminen flakker ud med sit rødlige Vifteskær over Tæppet; drej op for den elektriske Kontakt, og Charmen er forsvunden. Vi røres over den henrivende Historie om Crookes’ Kærlighed et halvt Aar igennem til Aanden Katie King. Netop fordi han var saa stor en Videnskabsmand, skælver vort Hjerte besynderligt ved, at hans Hjerte samtidigt kunde eje saa lettroende og dyb en Fantasi. Hvad i Alverden skulde vi her med en Kommission?”, Gulmann, *Skjiftende Horisonter*, 1905, p. 25.

theless beside those extravagant proclivities, which looking back seem rather bizarre, Crookes' achievements in the field of chemistry and physics remain intact (to name some of the most known items: the discovery of thallium, research in the properties of highly rarefied gas, cathode rays and radioactivity). Within the scope of spiritualism Crookes pioneered the application of technical methods on the invisible world in order to verify its positive existence.

As this case forcefully indicates it would evidently be too simple and even amiss to wipe spiritualisms off modernity's cultural profile, by rashly denigrating it as a kind of anachronistic, escapist nonsense. It is, in fact, quite the reverse as it turns out greatly up-to-date by treating the rampant modern cultural conflict between religion and science in an era marked by eroding religious tradition and certainty. Its intended outcome implies a reconciliation between knowledge and faith, as Claussen puts it: "Videnskabens Resultater bør forkyndes for aabne Døre og fra Kirkens Prædikestole. [...] Spiritismen er en religiøs Videnskab, der søger at bevise Sjælens Udødelighed".¹¹

Technical exploration and tangible evidence

In its cultural double position between religion and science it is obvious that spiritualism is far from being undisputed in its period of origin. Vehemently combating contemporary rationalism and materialism with reformist aplomb, spiritualism on the other hand sees no problem in appropriating technical innovation and scientific arguments in its own support, quite the reverse. Not unlike its critics would with the aim of breaking the spell, convinced spiritualist disciples avail themselves of technical methods in order to verify their primarily religious belief. Especially one other type of "medium" has to be mentioned here: photography. Its development in the beginning of the 20th century runs parallel with the triumphant pro-

¹¹ Claussen, p. 21 and 43.

gress of spiritualism. The camera surpassed the faculties of the human eye and became a virtual third eye for the supernatural which helped to spread spiritualist opinion. Pictures of spectres and rays were printed and multiplied, pictures became palpable icons¹² with otherworld taking visual shape. Newspapers, magazines and books were brimming with spectres materializing during a séance, ectoplasm choked on by mediums, aura and thought photography visualized fluidal emanations.¹³

By reasoning that this was duly to be regarded as spiritual energy rendered perceptible by technical means, the same scientific dignity and objectivity was ascribed to spectre photography that was otherwise unquestionably attached to x-ray photography. On this understanding, those photos would become part of spiritualist ritual repertoire. They served as empirical pieces of evidence, a modern technique to prove the validity of spiritualist phenomena with photos ostensibly showing supernatural occurrences. Startling and thrilling photos were published to promote spiritualism to the general public, and f. ex. the Danish photographer Sven Türck rose to fame in the field of capturing spectres on film.

The Danish association *Spiritistisk Mission* issued a work by Alfred Nielsen in 1926 *Den ny Aabenbaring* which intended to be a spiritualist textbook (see below) comprising, beside an inventory of supernatural phenomena (knocking poltergeists, levitation, supernatural perceptiveness, automatic writing etc.), numerous photos meant to substantiate ghostly occurrences. Picture and text are supposed to mutually certify each other. Notwithstanding its utilization for affirmative purposes, the very same medium was simultaneously brought into operation in an attempt to unmask spiritual-

¹² Meyer, 'Åndernes Fremkaldelse – om spiritisme og fotografi', in: Buchardt/Böwadt, *Den gamle nyreligiositet*, 2003, p. 98.

¹³ An abundant and impressive range of spiritualism's photographic outcome in: Fischer, 'Ein Nachtgebiet der Fotografie', 1995, pp. 503-552.

ist methods as being deceitfully manipulated. The mechanized look at matters believed to belong to the realm of spirits was often easily outwitted by gaze curtains welling from people's mouth pretending to be ectoplasm, or lurid faces of dead celebrities appearing beside the figure of the trance medium almost bursting with concentration are suspicious look-alikes of newspaper clippings. Techniques employed for producing supernatural effects on photos beyond that were, for example, double exposure, distortion of objects or photomontage as Alfred Lehmann¹⁴ demonstrates already in the 1890s with spectre photography in its prime. Enchantment and disenchantment avail themselves, in effect, of the same dodges for their respective intentions.

Experience and reason

Apart from thus taking into service scientific discoveries and techniques mentioned above, there is a further association of religious and scientific self-images within spiritualist ideas: the importance of experience. In accordance with positivist empirical knowledge (marked by experiment, control, measurability, repeatability) spiritualism acts as an experience-related religion. Unlike traditional Christian practise, which was at the time widely regarded as a non-sensual dogmatic religion with its invariable divide in activity between vicar and congregation, spiritualist practise by contrast is based on direct, tangible experience and active involvement in ritual proceedings. Its contact with the supernatural sphere, seen as corresponding to Christian miracles, is not limited to abstract belief but really takes place in full view of everyone in a non-hierarchical community encouraged to join in.¹⁵ So on the one hand spiritual-

¹⁴ Lehmann, *Overtro og Trolddom*, 1893.

¹⁵ Within the new religious landscape spiritualism becomes an attractive lay religion, not least because it opens new fields of experience and room for manoeuvre especially for women, acting as mediums and organizers cf. Linse,

ism puts empirical ideas into practise. On the other hand it shrewdly acts as an alleviating compensation for the deficits inflicted on the modern world by those very empirical ideals – that means mainly the shattering of reality into incalculable isolated disciplines which are prone to produce unsynthesized and unverifiable results. Regarding the remedy of spiritualist ideas and practise, however, experience remains tied to individual perception and activity.

A further, and in this connection last, aspect substantiating spiritualism's affinity towards scientific thinking is its reference to reason. It bluntly lays claim to be a "reasonable" religion, in accordance with the laws of nature, and to represent a humane type of religion by eliminating death and consequently fear from religious thought. "Døden er et fysisk Blændværk"¹⁶ explains Jensen's spiritualist physicist, since in spiritualist ideology the material world constitutes a mere part within the overriding whole of reality. Accordingly death is no longer absolute but marks a mere transition and transformation (additionally taken as a higher level on the way to perfectability as defined by evolutionism) which therefore cannot possibly be an object of fear: "[Spiritismen] lærer, at Døden saa langt fra at være en Udslettelse tværtimod er Fødselen til et nyt og højere Liv".¹⁷ It is all about an enlightened and optimistic religion able to integrate transcendence into immanent evidence. This does not only affect the basic dualism in traditional physics between matter and mind which is to be renounced subsequent to modern advancement, but the intrinsic Christian dualism, too, can be dissolved in one go: man and God, matter and mind, reason and soul, experiment and religion make part of an all-embracing relation of correspondence.

'Säkularisierung oder neue Religiosität?', 1997, p. 135-139.

¹⁶ Jensen, p. 135.

¹⁷ Nielsen, p. 134.

Physical reality is put in accordance to supernatural reality with the fervent intent to enlighten and demystify the supernatural, by means of transcending the scientifically defined boundaries of reality with the means of modern science itself. Having this in mind, Jensen's physicist maintains:

Den Ganske Jord er opdaget [...]. Hvorfor saa ikke søge Fremtiden i det Overnaturlige? Vor Udvikling fører lige dertil. [...] Jeg er ikke Mystiker, jeg tænker paa den ny Type, som vi er nødt til at vente ifølge Udviklingen. [...] [Jeg haaber] at føre Menneskene frem til det næste Udviklingstrin – der muligvis ligger hinsides det vi kalder Døden.¹⁸

With these convictions spiritualism is in perfect unison with contemporary scientific optimism, which it otherwise accuses of being materialist and thence endeavours to overcome. It belongs to the compensatory movements evolving about the late 19th century which, indeed, remain within scientific logic, as f. ex. the other religious-scientific movement of biologically inspired monism does.¹⁹

In spiritualism religious and scientific thinking essentially converge on three levels: in utilizing scientific findings for the sake of spiritualism, in applying technical methods in order to certify and spread an originally religious conception and, thirdly, in conferring evolutionary optimism upon the growing human sense for the supernatural. Inferentially there is a progressing shift between the natural by virtue of the laws of nature and – on the other hand – the supernatural which, for the moment, is not yet scientifically approachable. Du Prel describes a “threshold of consciousness”²⁰ between the possibly comprehensible world and the ability to comprehend that can be lowered with anthropological mental progress.

¹⁸ Jensen, p. 135.

¹⁹ Barz, *Weltflucht und Lebensglaube*, 2003, p. 60-72.

²⁰ Du Prel, p. 122.

Conditions on this side and beyond consciousness and self-awareness do not exist in succession but they are, in fact, “simultaneously present [...], although unconscious of each other”²¹ since separated by the mobile “threshold of consciousness”. Mainly during somnambulistic experience the self is admitted to its unconscious part under ordinary circumstances cut off by the threshold. Du Prel ties this individual crossing of mental borders to popular Darwinist evolutionary optimism: “Mystical phenomena within emotional life are therefore anticipating the biological process”²² in the course of which the threshold is shifted, so that what once was a secluded part of transcendence gradually becomes accessible. Contingency is eventually declared surmountable by progress. In this connexion he also coins the term “transcendental Darwinism”,²³ stressing things still inexplicable will progressively become explainable as thoroughly natural through the advancement of human understanding.

Spiritualism in Denmark

In Denmark the spread of spiritualism starts in the year 1894 with the establishment of the *Spiritistiske Broderskab* in Copenhagen and its magazine *Spiritisten*. Their mixture of séances, lectures, experiments and service²⁴ attracted growing numbers of people interested, so that the section would acquire premises of their own called *Bethsaida Templet* in 1900. This pattern of activities is largely adopted by spiritualist associations to come into being in the fol-

²¹ “gleichzeitig vorhanden [...], wiewohl gegenseitig unbewusst“, Du Prel, p. 62.

²² “Die mystischen Erscheinungen des Seelenlebens sind also Antizipationen des biologischen Prozesses, und darum besteht eine innige Verbindung zwischen Darwinismus und Transcendentalpsychologie“, Du Prel, p. 408.

²³ Du Prel, ‘Der Spiritismus’, without date, in: Pytlík, *Spiritismus und ästhetische Moderne*, 2006, p. 37

²⁴ Alfred Nielsen speaks about “Gudstjenste” with regard to mediumistic proclamations in spiritualist rituals, Nielsen, p. 101.

lowing years,²⁵ each of them experimenting with their own mediums, and several of them publishing a journal. Those activities are suspiciously peered at or sceptically attended by writers. After the First World War there is a prolific ideological debate in Denmark entailing a reassessment of science, technology, evolutionary optimism and progress. Items such as Darwinism, the relationship between religion and science as well as new religious movements within and without *folkekirke* are ardently debated among authors and critics.²⁶ The writer Johannes V. Jensen advocating Darwinism and the essayist and critic Helge Rode with his Christian thrust may be considered as counterparts in that argument.

In 1924 Rode sets out to scrutinize modern, pluralized religious life in *Pladsen med de grønne Træer*, taking this opportunity to cast a glance at fashionable spiritualism as well. Helge Rode (being an articulate critic of the materialist reduction of reality in the name of science) declares spiritualism's boom to be the "retaliation of the free mind" having been kept in leading strings long enough by Modern Breakthrough's dogmatic concept of reality. Indeed he can't resist from gloating:

Den tilbagetrængte Aandserkendelse, de undertrykte Forestillinger, den nedkæmpede Tro, laa sammenpressede i Underbevidstheden og sprang pludselig op som en Trolde af en Æske, huggede vildt med Bordbenet [...] men selv som samtlige Spiritismens Aander kun var én og samme store Spotteaand, saa er denne Aand i alt Fald en vittig og belærende Aand, der har gjort sin Gavn. Sig, om det ikke ogsaa var en god Vittighed, at Spiritis-

²⁵ Nielsen names: Spiritistisk Menighed, Circlen Den gode Vej, Circlen Haand i Haand, Dansk Spiritist Alliance, Spiritistisk Mission i Danmark, Isols Menighed, Circlen Haabets Venner, Spiritistisk Samfund, Circlen Solhjem, Spiritistisk Samariter Samfund, Spiritistisk Tros Samfund, Circlen Hjemlandssolen, Psykisk Oplysningsforening in Copenhagen and their branches all over the country (Nielsen, p. 101-118).

²⁶ For a survey of the debate cf. Kragh, *Kampen om livsanskuelse*, 2005.

men meldte sig, som den eneste villige, da Rationalismen ventede en Videnskab, der kunde afløse Religionen? 'Jeg er Videnskab', sagde Spiritismen med et højtidelig Buk, og mange berømte Forskere gengældte Høfligheden, medens Kritiken fik kolde Svedperler paa Panden.²⁷

Devout scientism in this malicious diagnosis equally finds its due consequence and reversal as well. Johannes V. Jensen for his part is a trifle more considerate to spiritualism's implications in his early years – given his father and sister, the writer Thit Jensen, were devout spiritualists. On the occasion of Alfred Lehmann holding a lecture on spiritualism in the student association in 1894, he gives his view in an article *Om spiritisme*.²⁸ He criticises Lehmann's allegedly haughty dismissal of spiritualist ideas, thereby leaving it to half-witted adherents instead of delivering to it the death-blow with plain scientific refutation.

So my chief hypothesis, in this regard, is spiritualism making a classic example of the modern crisis of meaning within a rational age of optimism about progress and science. This led, firstly, to an understanding of science charged with religious ideas and, secondly – this is particularly relevant in the case of spiritualism – to a scientific garnish and authorization of religious matters, by a technical seizure of the supernatural thus objectified. This is to say, boundaries are being dissolved from both sides: religious spiritualism opens up for scientific provability and at the same time experimental science gains religious orders by utilizing it as positive empirical "revelation" of the secrets of nature.

Selskab for psykisk forskning

The Danish *Selskab for psykisk forskning* is founded in Copenhagen

²⁷ Rode, *Pladsen med de grønne Træer*, 1925, p. 17.

²⁸ Quoted in Handesten, *Johannes V. Jensen. Liv og værk*, 2000, p. 26.

in 1905 as, in fact, the third foundation altogether, pioneered only by the British “Society for Psychical Research” (founded in 1882) and the American section (founded in 1885) and got down to investigate apparent supernatural phenomena by unbiased scientific examination. Its first chairman was Julius Schjøtt, the director of the zoo in Copenhagen and a popular figure at the time. Its vice-president was Alfred Lehmann, Denmark’s first professor of psychology running a psychophysical laboratory at the University of Copenhagen and doing research in hypnosis. Ardently interested in spiritualism but also a staunch critic insisting on positive evidence, Lehmann is vigorously opposed to spiritualist explanatory models and sets out his critical position in several volumes with the title *Overtro og Trolddom*.²⁹ In the early years of its existence the society had a number of distinguished scientists in prominent positions (doctors, physics, psychologists and chemists as Christian Winther who specialized in experimenting on psychokinetics). But also the humanities dispatched outstanding representatives with f.ex. the religious historian Vilhelm Grønbech (chairman in 1917) and the professor for philosophy at the University of Aarhus Kort K. Kortsen (chairman in 1921). The first decades were fairly triumphant: the first ever international congress on psychic research was hosted in Copenhagen in 1921, the *Tidsskrift for psykisk forskning* was released, the society acquired premises of its own and the number of people joining increased immensely, gathering a mixture of faithful and sceptical members. Not surprisingly the scientists were mostly to be found in the latter group. Even though they did not bluntly renounce the existence of unexplored natural forces generating mediumistic phenomena, they yet dismissed any supernatural cause and looked for scientific justification.

The Society’s string of successes was corrupted by scandals and cases of fraud. A decisive one concerned the Society’s showpiece

²⁹ Lehmann, *Overtro og Trolddom*, 1893.

medium Ejnar Nielsen who was renowned (due to media reports at the beginning of the 1920s) throughout the Danish public for producing vast amounts of ectoplasm. He underwent further examination at Kristiania University in Norway and was subsequently sent home irrevocably convicted of cheating. Thus duped and gloated over by the press, the Society was in dire straits and its members gradually separated into sceptics and faithful spiritualists who, after all, were in the majority and kept a strong influence right into the 1930s and 40s.

Homegrown directorial texts

There were influential early texts outlining spiritualism as a modern religion and final source of wisdom. In the front line this was the case with *The Spirits' Book* from 1857, which gained currency throughout Europe as spiritualism's "gospel". The French writer Hippolyte Denisard Rivail used the pen name Allan Kardec because he ostentatiously renounces authorship of the profound insight presented there, but claimed merely to record, in his own opinion, mediumistic messages bestowed on him. So already this important inaugural document with its concept of mediumistic writing alludes to the problem of authorship, which is to be of considerable poetological impact on the advanced literature after 1900. Kardec points the way ahead for the crucial theses spiritualism is to put forward: material and spiritual world forming a unified whole, a teaching of metempsychosis according to which the individual soul passes through a sequence of incarnations aiming at spiritual advancement. With that we have the evolutionist element on the individual level as well (with the idea of development as directed towards perfection). To this end the Hindu belief in reincarnation is reshaped in a more optimistic line of thought, because the danger of relapsing to stages of development fortunately overcome is be-

ing replaced by linear ascent.³⁰

Fictional samples of spiritualist faith and exercise in Denmark are obviously outnumbered by an abundance of confessional writings in the first decades of the 20th century. Two texts may convey their characteristic mode of blending descriptive and missionary manner, optimistic faith in science and reformatory access to Christian creed: *Den ny Aabenbaring* (1924) by Alfred Nielsen and *En ny Reformation* (1929) by Amalie Claussen. Those titles do not allude to Christian tradition by chance, and therefore help to single out the specific feature with Danish spiritualism as against its German, English or French counterparts. They may serve not only to prove the compatibility of Christian faith and spiritualism but actually do display how emphatically spiritualism in its scientific array is put forward to revive faith beyond supposedly ossified church doctrine.

The scheme of Nielsen's *Den ny Aabenbaring* requires already an idea of nature profoundly tinged with religion: "Gud er i Naturen og ikke udenfor den. Han manifesterer sig gennem sine underfulde Love".³¹ By virtue of allying itself with progress and modern science spiritualism is established as a particularly "modern" revelation of ancient religious belief. Mediumistic contact with the spirit world is taken to unequivocally prove assumptions about the hereafter, hitherto merely hoped for:

De beviser Sjælens Udødelighed og Personlighedens fortsatte Tilværelse hinsides Graven paa en Maade, som ingensinde før i Verdens Historie, og Grundvolden for al religiøs Kultus – Troen paa det kommende Liv – bliver derved en Vished, som hviler

³⁰ This makes spiritualism an attractive ingredient of theosophy's indiscriminate assortment of remote religious traditions.

³¹ Nielsen, p. 5. This is a conviction shared with contemporary monism as mentioned above.

paa ubstridelige Fakta.³²

God within his creation (increasingly unravelled by science) reigns as “den fuldkomne Videnskabsmand”,³³ whose recently discovered laws permit man to regard ideas such as ubiquitous soul, universal transformation and progress or ethereal bodies³⁴. To Nielsen’s incredulous annoyance the church would not consent to this “mest logiske og naturlige Forklaring”³⁵ spiritualism offers, even though it proclaims to be in full compliance with the Bible. The gap between “ortodoks og spiritistisk Kristendom”³⁶ must inevitably deepen.

Nielsen sets out to utilize spiritualism, its scientific attitude and technical methods, as a modern means of shedding light on recondite parts of the gospel (“some er dunkle og slet fortolkede”)³⁷. According to his spiritual approach to Christianity the divine had always been revealed by mediators, former prophets would now become mediums, with Jesus (here Nielsen reverts to Kardec)³⁸ as “Guds direkte Tolk; hans Medium”.³⁹ What was previously marvelled at as a biblical miracle could now be explained and verified as a mediumistic phenomenon. On this behalf Nielsen assumes a parallelism between initially disconnected fields of meaning: clairvoyance and telepathy is put on a level with x-rays and telegraphy,

³² Nielsen, p. 10.

³³ Nielsen, p. 125.

³⁴ “Atomforskningen har f. Eks. Bekræftet Læren om et Æterlegeme”, Nielsen, p. 132.

³⁵ Nielsen, p. 159.

³⁶ Nielsen, p. 169.

³⁷ Nielsen, p. 10.

³⁸ Nielsen is in a number of respects indebted to Kardec. Thus he would while drafting his book consult his “leadingspirit” lest he should give false information, f. ex.: “Jeg har fremsat disse Spøgsmaal for den Aand, som vejleder mig i dette Arbejde, og skal her meddele hans Svar”, Nielsen, p. 186.

³⁹ Nielsen, p. 8.

which in its turn is put on a level with biblical prophets. The same procedure is applied to materialization, photography and an angel appearing to Moses in the shape of a shining cloud.⁴⁰ Nielsen regrets the technical backwardness and scientific blindness in biblical times, which spiritualism has to sort out afterwards: “Bibelen kender alle Former af Aabenbarelses, some er omtalt her, paa det nær, at Menneskene paa den Tid ikke kendte Fotografien og derigennem savnede et meget vigtigt Kontrolmiddel”.⁴¹ To spare the spiritually minded contemporary reader the upsetting experience of being at a loss to grasp and classify peculiar things happening around him, Nielsen ends each chapter of his “Ledetraad” with a “lesson”. By a number of recapitulating questions the keen reader is enabled to monitor his progress in understanding the spiritualist doctrine.

Amalie Claussen with *En ny Reformation* roughly toes the line with Nielsen, stressing the need for “reformation”, that is, a renewal of Christian faith in the light of spiritualist findings. She is passionately opposed to what she regards as outdated, illogical and untenable church dogmatism, combating it spurred by spiritualism’s verve of progress, enlightenment and emphatic invocation of truth. Spiritualism is clearly advocated in its dual alignment as “en religiøs Videnskab”⁴² and as a positive religion: “Spiritismen er den enkle, uforvanskede Kristendom, befriet fra teologiske Tilsætninger, og den har givet os utallige Beviser for Livets Fortsættelse efter Døden”.⁴³ Accordingly the responsibility of a church in keeping with times has to be “at forene Tro og Viden”.⁴⁴ Claussen, too, endeavours to put forward spiritualism’s scientific proof of biblical

⁴⁰ Nielsen, p. 56.

⁴¹ Nielsen, p. 73f.

⁴² Claussen, p. 43.

⁴³ Claussen, p. 63.

⁴⁴ Claussen, p. 21.

miracles by drawing on telepathy, aura and automatic writing. Stripping off allegedly distorting and alien traditions of clerical-theological origin (such as christening and communion)⁴⁵ she aims at penetrating to the core of Christianity immediately made intelligible by spiritualist explanations.

The pivotal concern of both texts is advocating an avowedly evolutionist concept of Christianity. This is achieved by implementing spiritualism's focus on technical, scientific and mental progress expressed in the phrase "transcendental Darwinism" used by du Prel (see above). Nielsen's spiritualist creed sums up three "aandelige Naturlove"⁴⁶. The first one, "Udviklingsloven", boils down to teleologically remastered Darwinism comprising physical and spiritual dimensions. The second one is "Genfødelsesloven". It combines the idea of an undying immaterial energy changing physical shape, akin to the principle of the conservation of energy, with the Asian belief in reincarnation (most probably imported via theosophy). "Gengældelsesloven" is the third law in like manner amalgamating scientific (law of cause and effect) with religious thinking (karma): "Gengældelsen er ikke en vilkaarlig Straf, der tilmaales os af Gud, men Handlingens iboende Følge [...]. Det er en Naturlov, der er lige saa almengyldig, lige saa urokkelig som Tyngdeloven".⁴⁷ Those three hybrid laws interact in order to propel man's ascending "Pilgrimsrejse"⁴⁸ towards purification, improvement and enlightenment.

Particularly the third law deviates most strikingly from Christian guidelines. Here Claussen chimes in, like Nielsen revolted at the thought of delegated redemption and the idea of undeserved acts of mercy, and embarks on reinterpreting the New Testament under

⁴⁵ Claussen, p. 51ff.

⁴⁶ Nielsen, p. 160.

⁴⁷ Nielsen, p. 167.

⁴⁸ Nielsen, p. 163.

the auspices of Karma.⁴⁹ In this respect the two spiritualist adepts lay claim to being more Christian than orthodox Christians: “Den kirkelige Forsoningslære er en Skamplet paa Kristenheden, en Blasfemi uden lige”.⁵⁰ “Spiritualist Christianity” (as put forward by Nielsen and Clausen in their own understanding), however, attaches great importance to man’s self-determination on his life’s journey through various incarnations towards perfection, led by the principle of causality, and to “en langsom og naturlig Vækst i Aandens Verden som i den materielle”.⁵¹

Fiction and spiritualism

This highly ambivalent approach is voiced by literature. Rode sums up: “Litteraturen viser Omslaget, Bøger og Blade fortæller om religiøs Hunger til Overmættelse. Ingen nedarvet Tro er blevet udryddet, og ingen tænkelig Overtro savner Forsvarere”.⁵² Appearing in literature spiritualist faith is being literarily popularized and spread, by doing so initially working as a major medium of its genesis. In addition to occasional articles in newspapers spiritualist journals are set up (f. ex. “Psykologen eller Aande verden”, “Lysets banner”, “Budbringeren”, “Lys over landet”) allowing theoretical discussion as well as reports on the point. In Germany a remarkable number of those reports on séances are handed down by writers as Rainer Maria Rilke, Gustav Meyrink, Alfred Schuler and Ludwig Klages.⁵³ Thomas Mann wrote three reports on his experiences in the laboratory of Schrenck-Notzing in Munich in 1924. Actually revolted

⁴⁹ She actually contrives to draw the final inference “Man ser heraf tydeligt, at Jesus har hyldet den indiske Karmalære”, Clausen, p. 50.

⁵⁰ Nielsen, p. 170.

⁵¹ Nielsen, p. 169.

⁵² Rode, p. 16.

⁵³ The latter two are members of the circle around Stefan George in Munich. Some reports are compiled in: Pytlík, 2006, p. 365-452.

against this kind of “servant room metaphysics”⁵⁴ he gradually becomes nonplussed at the sight of strange things happening before his very eyes. Later on this experience went down in the chapter “Most questionable” in the novel *Der Zauberberg*. So there is obviously also a personal intersection between spiritualist and literary circles.⁵⁵ In Denmark Jacob Paludan commented on Thomas Mann’s bewilderment in *Den psykiske Gaade* (1934).⁵⁶ He was one of the few Danish writers involved. Paludan attended experiments in Alfred Lehmann’s psychological laboratory, reported sceptically broad-minded about séances and reviewed spiritualist Books in various newspapers.

Different types of literary adaptation which did not necessarily have to be affirmative served to shape the world of spiritualist ideas, to make its methods known and, in the end, to forward its spreading. With this in mind the boom of spiritualism, societies shooting up across all social classes, busy making tables float in the air or receiving otherworldly messages, stands to reason.

Beside literature pouncing at a fashionable and spectacular subject, vice versa spiritualism takes a great interest in literature, especially in the conditions for aesthetic productivity. The leading spiritualist theorist in Germany, Carl du Prel, who by the way wrote a “hypnotic-spiritualist novel”⁵⁷ himself, was particularly devoted to

⁵⁴ “Gesindestubenmetaphysik”, Mann, ‘Okkulte Erlebnisse’, 1924, p. 224.

⁵⁵ A prominent example for the intermingling between literature and spiritualism in Britain is the famous doctor and writer Sir Arthur Conan Doyle who joined the Society for Psychical Research in 1893, took part in a large number of séances and published broadly on the subject (f. ex. *The New Revelation*, 1919, and *The History of Spiritualism*, 1926).

⁵⁶ Paludan, *Søgende Aander*, 1943, p. 40-47. The account is part of a collection of essays in which Paludan discusses man’s cognitive powers, given nature’s bit by bit unveiling secrets as reflected in the works of several contemporary European writers.

⁵⁷ Du Prel, *Das Kreuz am Ferner. Ein hypnotisch-spiritistischer Roman*, 1920.

investigating poetry. In his essay *Die seelische Tätigkeit des Künstlers* (1894) he identifies subliminal activity of the mind as the source for a piece of art, giving vent to a conviction not far apart from modernism's approach to literature. Accordingly inspiration evolves within the subconscious before its results would be grasped and dealt with by the conscious parts of the mind. What poetics of inspiration formerly attributed to the muses or regarded as a gift of the gods, is now addressed as the "transcendental subconscious"⁵⁸, above all distinguished by its ability to bring to life. Du Prel derives his findings about the superior status of the subconscious from experimenting on somnambulism. Test subjects rose above their everyday abilities and are reported to have accomplished amazing things as to poetry, pictures and even dance.⁵⁹ Apart from being aimed at essential spiritualist creed, du Prel's investigations can be taken to imply an explicit criticism of reducing aesthetic potential to a positivist concept of reality, as well as of restricting it to the sensual world. Those positions are corresponding with the post- and anti-naturalist movement within modern literature.

One especially inspiring detail about spiritualist methods with regard to literature was automatic writing which, as "écriture automatique", had decisive influence on André Breton and other exponents of French surrealism. A medium is ostensibly occupied with converting messages from the spirit world into writing, f. ex. either by using a planchette or a spirituscope, two devices designed to record movement on paper. This fascination with all sorts of gadgets might strike as being fairly alien to solemn religious practice but, as we have already seen, it actually belongs to modern spiritualism's technical inclinations. While thus receiving messages different

⁵⁸ Du Prel, 1910, p. 70.

⁵⁹ There was a famous dream dancer, Magdalene Guipet, to whom considerable influence is ascribed as to the development of modern character dance, cf. Pytlik, 2005, p. 63-68.

handwritings or languages would wondrously appear or lofty knowledge surpassing the medium's level of education would be proclaimed. At times ghosts would write entire books.⁶⁰ Paludan, however, deigns to sneer at "de ganske vitaminløse Digte, der angives at komme fra afdøde Storheder, for ike at tale om bibeltykke Værker, fulde af kuriøse Paastande og den fadeste Opbyggelighed".⁶¹ What actually happens during trance is the medium's consciousness recedes, while involuntary movements of the body produce writing. In Denmark's spiritualist circles the concept of automatic writing would – off the fields of serious narrative fiction – entail a rather weird habit of producing books which should not remain unmentioned. The spiritualist Michael Agerskov was supposed to have a mediumistically gifted wife who received poems by a. o. Grundtvig, Blicher and Paludan-Møller, which were edited by her husband in 1911 bearing the title *Hilsen til Danmark*, as well as a "corrected" version of the gospel instilled by converted Satan himself with the title *Vanderer mod lyset*. Those were some of the extravagant effects the idea of not being the author of a text but merely the intermediary between creator and public would bring forth.

This could be assessed, either – according to spiritualist orthodoxy – as veritable ghost messages or – in an animist way of thinking – as statements of the medium's subconscious. The latter is the more prolific assessment in terms of literature, because here an aesthetic production is assumed, which is independent of controlling rationality and the conscious will to create. Corresponding occurrences fall on literarily fertile ground in an era of scepticism towards the expressive powers of language, when new "authentic" kinds of expression, which were supposed not to be corrupted and

⁶⁰ This is the way Kardec's *The Spirits' Book* and Helena Blavatsky's initial theological work *Iris unveiled* (1877), were allegedly designed and received.

⁶¹ Paludan, p. 44.

eroded by convention, were sought after. A poetic theory of passively being written is to be found in Rilke's *Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, a work obliged to spiritualism on several levels of artistic and intellectual means.⁶² In this narrative the writer's hand acts disconnected from the writing subject's will to express itself. The unintentional writer observes that "my hand is to be far from me and when I am going to make it write, it will write words I did not mean".⁶³

Thus poetic theory based on writing from dictation with the writer merely being an executive vehicle of another authority, raises the question of authorship in a surprisingly modern way. By taking the view that writing represents a mediumistic act beyond rational control, a current scepticism towards the cognoscibility of the world and, consequently, towards its coherent description is given vent to, which made authors like Franz Kafka or Johannes Schlaf reason about "clairvoyant conditions" and "poetic trance"⁶⁴. That is to imply that within the complex cultural constellation of modernity's aesthetics, even the fascination with spiritualism may be rated as a starting-point for taking leave from the writing subject as a self-determined and controlled authority.

There is yet another modern convergence: the poetics of dissolving boundaries within the concept of aesthetic modernity obviously tie up with the concept of mediumism. The boundaries of space and time are suspended, when the medium conjures up actually distant objects or persons passed away. This refers to a state of consciousness exceeding the positivist concept of reality. By aiming at reality behind the sensual world the authors of classical modernity become, in their own understanding, akin to seers and visionaries. On this behalf Rilke unfolds his scheme of "learning to see"

⁶² Cf. Pytlik, 2005, p. 167-194.

⁶³ Rilke, *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, 1982, p. 47.

⁶⁴ Cf. Pytlik, 2005, p. 97.

in his *Malte* novel, referring to a type of seeing that wants to leave external reality behind in order to reach the “interior of the world”⁶⁵. Albeit Rilke is obviously and explicitly influenced by its ideas, spiritualism’s theory and methods are not necessarily indispensable conditions for the new poetical potentialities modern literature yields. But divergent states of consciousness like dream, hallucination or insanity which contemporary literature took up are tied to special perceptive faculties, and suggested new modes of verbal replication akin to spiritualist experience and accounts. So there are conspicuous concurrences between mediumism, automatic writing, acknowledging an extra sensual world beside the sensually tangible one, promoting novel poetical means of expression.

Beside the said innovations, the years before and after 1900 bring forth a profusion of texts giving narrative evidence of the unreal permeating into realistically portrayed every day life, by creating a miraculous, enigmatic atmosphere that shatters the conventional sense of reality. Larsen’s and Jensen’s novels belong to these texts. Perhaps regrettably they do not acquire the dazzlingly new fields of literary impression and expression related to spiritualism, which make other texts by Rilke, Döblin, Carl Einstein or Schlaf demanding reading, renouncing a realistic account of the material world for the benefit of advanced narrative structures. By contrast, Jensen and Larsen but narrate conventionally along, in chronological and authorial order, far from being innovative. Their connection with spiritualism lies on the level of contents, the narrative motif or subject.

Spiritualism as literary subject: Anker Larsen and Johannes V. Jensen

⁶⁵ “Weltinnenraum” has become a catchword to describe Rilke’s poetic access to reality, originally coined in the fifth poem of *Fünf Gesänge* from 1914, cf. Pytlík, 2005, p. 185-187.

In Anker Larsen's novel *De vises sten* an advancement comparable to Rilke's concept of approaching the "interior of the world" is evidently intended. The title alludes to its prime subject – the quest for a modern religious belief which is partly inspired by spiritual psychotechniques but, anyhow, it does not succumb to its ideology in an affirmative way. The novel from 1923 uses spiritualist props and ideas as part of a larger theosophical scheme, the protagonist ruinously dallies with.⁶⁶ Larsen introduces a sphere called "the open", a momentary and spontaneous penetration between two dimensions of reality. Eternity and time become transparent to each other so that Larsen's protagonist becomes capable of talking to his dead brother, because there is no such thing as separation within this, virtually mediumistic, integrative and all-embracing awareness. In Larsen's novel this is metaphorically demonstrated with "standing open" and being able to look right into something, accordingly the protagonist sees his (dead) brother "ikke med øjnene, men med hele sig".⁶⁷ It transcends physical visual perception and does not select or distinguish between objects, but embraces every single thing in its universal context, leaving behind customary attributions of meaning and valuation.

In his confessional essay "At the open door"⁶⁸ Larsen thus uses the term "clairvoyance"⁶⁹ for this kind of non-dualistic awareness, which makes otherworld essentially accessible by a spontaneous

⁶⁶ In modern theosophy as outlined by Helena Blavatsky, spiritualist elements are incorporated in a comprehensive, syncretist system of thought amalgamating evolutionist, Buddhist, Hindu, alchemist and Christian traditions.

⁶⁷ Larsen, *De vises sten*, 1923, p. 51.

⁶⁸ Larsen, *Bei offener Tür*, 2005. Already the title points out to Larsen's crucial conviction, the inseparable unity of both worlds. Unlike in Denmark, Larsen's confessional essays have recently been reprinted in Germany, however exclusively by esoteric publishers. Thus, unfortunately, the German translation quoted from was the only edition available.

⁶⁹ Larsen, *Bei offener Tür*, 2005, p. 30.

self-inclusion into supernatural reality.

In his comment on the text, Larsen insists on its not being tantamount to “spiritualist communication”,⁷⁰ because the question of individual continuation after death is irrelevant in this context. The important thing is the idea of essentially not being separated by death which is, however, in keeping with spiritualism’s basic assumptions. Larsen judges spiritualism to be an eccentric blossom of a timeless ineradicable need for eternity which makes itself felt “in hectic religious deliriums and restless tablelegs”.⁷¹ Also Larsen’s view on death advocated here proves to be related to spiritualist creed: “Death does not exist any more”, life and death are “to sides constantly present in this existence of mine in time”⁷². Besides these general points of convergence, Larson is intrinsically critical of spiritualist methods – in fact his protagonist in *De vises sten* misses his idea of self-cultivation exactly due to his syncretic mixture of techniques including spiritualist experiments because “they bear the character of life in time” instead of opening up eternity.⁷³ Saying this, Anker Larsen obviously advocates a widely-held opinion against spiritualism’s popular practise, with technical means or scientific evidence overgrowing cross-religious numinous experience and thereby involuntarily excluding oneself from the intended spiritual wholeness: “Whoever looks for proof of eternity on the outside does not have eternity within himself”.⁷⁴ His protagonist trips over his overambitious exercises with his astral and physical existence and ends up in a huddle of dream, hallucination, autosuggestion and alleged extracorporal experience.

To the same extent that reality consists of material and immate-

⁷⁰ Larsen, 2005, p. 36.

⁷¹ Larsen, 2005, p. 51.

⁷² Larsen, 2005, p. 59.

⁷³ Larsen, 2005, p. 60.

⁷⁴ Larsen, *Vom wirklichen Leben*, 2004, p. 86.

rial sphere, man also makes a multidimensional being: he comprises body, soul and a semi-material third element connecting both – the astral body. Those three dimensions Larson’s protagonists experiment with. Thus he is not occupied with producing scientific evidence in order to justify spiritualism’s assertions (or in order to leave the reader nonplussed as Jensen does), but he deals with spiritualist psycho-techniques and their potential of putting personal development at risk. According to the teaching about the two worlds and man’s share of both, the self is in danger of becoming its own measuring instrument, observer and object to be observed at the same time. Violent spiritual exercise in order to gain enhanced consciousness by force, destroys the religious sense and finally leads to paranoia and disintegration with oneself. So it becomes clear that the main criticism is directed at a misuse of spiritual techniques on behalf of zealously manipulating and forcibly drilling one’s mental powers.

With the other novel we return to the text at the beginning that initiated these reflections (see above). Johannes V. Jensen’s *Madame D’Ora* is published in 1904, thus prior to Danish spiritualism reaching its prime after the First World War. Jensen does not claim to fathom eternity quite as solemnly or existentially as Larson does. In this case spiritualism makes a motif in the course of a detective story and provides it with a flamboyant air, shrouding the aberrations of a scientist smitten with spiritualist ideas. The physicist Edmund Hall, whom we have met at the beginning, is busy experimenting with radium in his “witches’ kitchen”, spectacularly demonstrating x-rays with great appeal to his awestricken audience⁷⁵ – all of those instances evidently belong to the classical inventory of scientific methods used in order to vindicate spiritualist doctrine. After some theoretical reflection on somnambulism, he intends to embark on practical work with a new gifted medium. The young

⁷⁵ Jensen, p. 49ff.

girl, Mirjam, brings about a quite satisfactory performance: “hun havde faaet et Bord til at danse og svæve i Luften, havde fremkaldt Aandeskrift og talt i forskellige Tungemaal under en halvt bevidstløs Tilstand”.⁷⁶ With these new experiments Hall is publicly (the newspapers don’t miss a single step he takes) bent on spiritualist studies with the intention “til at overbevise Videnskaben, som holdt sig saa skeptisk til Spiritualismen”⁷⁷, thus rephrasing the zealous purpose of his actual counterpart William Crookes.

A jumbled detective story is built around this scheme: on account of supernatural events Hall gets into vital bewilderment (see initial quotation) and becomes passionately obsessed with Eld, the ethereal spirit (later on she turns out to be the medium herself in disguise) and with an English woman, appallingly enough, just recently murdered. Madly attracted to Eld, Hall desires to be united with her, ready to give the boot to his mistress Madame D’Ora. Therefore he muses on the two possibilities for mortals to achieve unity with a spirit: “Jeg maa gøre Materialisationen stabil. Det stiller sig for mig som et kemisk Problem. [...] Og den anden Mulighed [...]. Det er den at jeg gaar over paa Elds side”⁷⁸, that means heading for the hereafter. During a most spectacular séance, at the very moment an intermediate creature between man and monkey emerges, somebody shouts “fraud”, there is turmoil, Eld disappears and Hall wants to kill himself. A preacher (the medium’s patron) in his apeman costume is being unmasked and convicted of having used disguise and cinematography as a ploy to deliberately deceive the spiritualist congregation. A detective who had dogged Hall’s footsteps for months, now convicts Hall of having murdered the English woman. She had earlier on appeared during a séance, bloodstained and with her throat slit. Hall, the outstanding physi-

⁷⁶ Jensen, p. 60.

⁷⁷ Jensen, p. 61.

⁷⁸ Jensen, p. 136.

cist, is supposed to be the victim of carefully designed deceit in his own laboratory, which got mixed up with genuine spiritualist phenomena. Therefore deceit and mystery do not entirely cancel each other out. Certainly spiritualism compromises itself just in its scientific bearing, but there remains an inexplicable, unresolved rest which belongs to the uncanny inventory of this story about murder and deceit.

In Anker Larsen's novel spiritualism has a different purpose because it gets more substantially involved in the plot's structure of meaning (the portrayal of a spiritual quest that fails in the end). Spiritualism is presented, in this case, within the scope of a theosophical view of life. Theosophy tends to imbibe spiritualism into a holistic worldview, moreover amalgamating even more different religious traditions. Still this subject seemed to have been ascribed enough relevance as to the novel being rewarded the Gyldendal literary award in 1923. Beside single elements of spiritual practise in *De vises sten* (mediumism, clairvoyance, telepathy etc.) the protagonist's entire educational ideal is based on the idea of evolutionist progression, in developing one's personality by means of examination and passing several incarnations. Neither Larsen nor Jensen adopt an affirmative attitude towards spiritualism in their respective novels. While Larsen demonstrates how, by manoeuvring between the two worlds, personal development is inevitably doomed to failure, Jensen uses it on a more external level as a lurid prop within the framework of a sensationalist detective story, with scientific attitude making a special feature in order to accentuate the physicist's delusion and self-alienation.

Notwithstanding their different treatment of spiritualism's ideology and practical employment, those two literary samples actually highlight its significance within the cultural discourse at the time of their origin. However obfuscated or even naïve spiritualism, as presented in the two non-fictional texts, may appear – in retrospect it has to be considered as a mental feature to be reckoned with in the

early 20th century's history of ideas, as it intends a symbiosis of two essential opposite tendencies of the time. On the one hand spiritualism can be read as protest against the loss of influence European religious tradition suffered in the triumphant progress of modern science becoming the sovereign interpretation of reality. In this perspective it helps to resuscitate the religious sense by modern means. On the other hand spiritualism can be read as protest against technical modernism's sheer secular materialism emphatically charging it by religious means with a potential of meaning, orientation and comfort.

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