

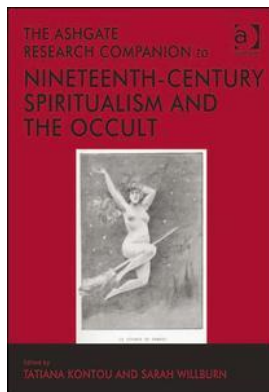
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'The Sublimation of Matter into Spirit': Anna Mary Howitt's Automatic Drawings¹

Rachel Oberter

Perhaps nowhere in the realm of Victorian art is the boundary between materiality and immateriality more vulnerable than in Anna Mary Howitt's drawings and watercolours on tracing paper (Fig. 16.1). These thin, translucent sheets attest to the porousness of matter, contrasting markedly with the presumption of solidity in the fine art world, where art exists as a finite object, capable of being bought, sold, possessed. In 1856 this professional artist turned spiritualist medium set aside the oil paintings she had been submitting to the Royal Academy and devoted herself to drawings and watercolours executed in spiritualist trances. Howitt's second artistic career pivoted around one question: 'How can art mediate between the material and immaterial realms?' This question resonated for Victorian spiritualists as believers in communication across different planes of existence, especially for Howitt's circle – members of London's artistic and intellectual middle class – for whom spiritualism was bound up with questions of representation. A drawing had to translate the intangible ideas of spirits into the concrete, visual language of humans, rewrite heavenly discourse as earthly discourse, without sacrificing its sublimity. With the stakes so high, the visual emergence of spiritualist belief carried enormous possibilities and hazards.

¹ This chapter began as a short paper for 'Victorian Materialities', a joint conference of the North American Victorian Studies Association and the Victorian Studies Association of Western Canada, held in Victoria, British Columbia in October 2007. I presented my paper as part of a special session called '(Im)materialities: Religion and Material Culture', organized by Joy Dixon, who also served as the chair and respondent. I am grateful to Joy Dixon for leading a dynamic panel, providing insightful commentary and giving me the opportunity to begin thinking through issues of materiality and immateriality, which I expand upon in the version of the paper published here. I would also like to thank Jay Garcia, Tatiana Kontou and Sarah Willburn for reading drafts of this project.

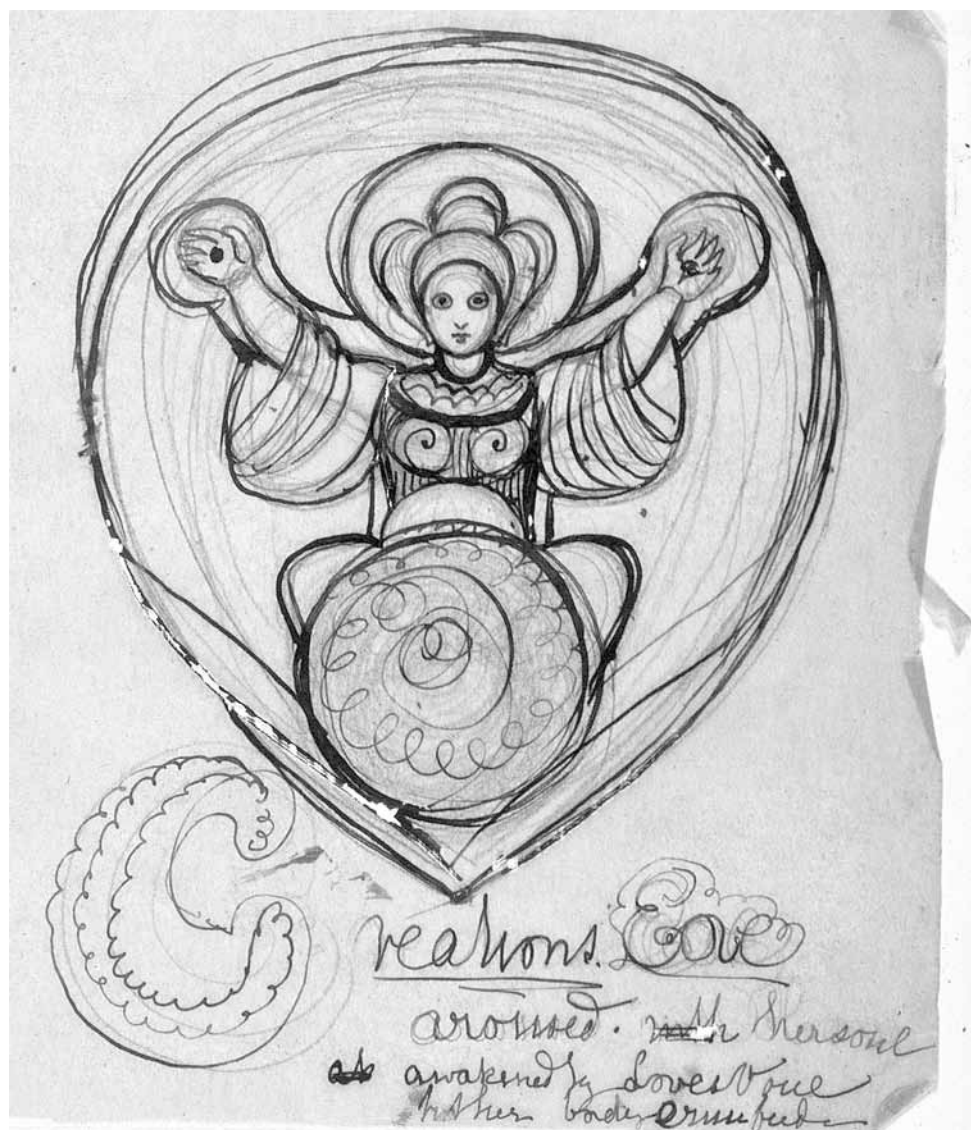


Figure 16.1 Anna Mary Howitt, *Creation's Eve*, c. 1856–72, pencil with pen and black ink on tracing paper; collection of The Society for Psychical Research, reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library, SPR MS 65.

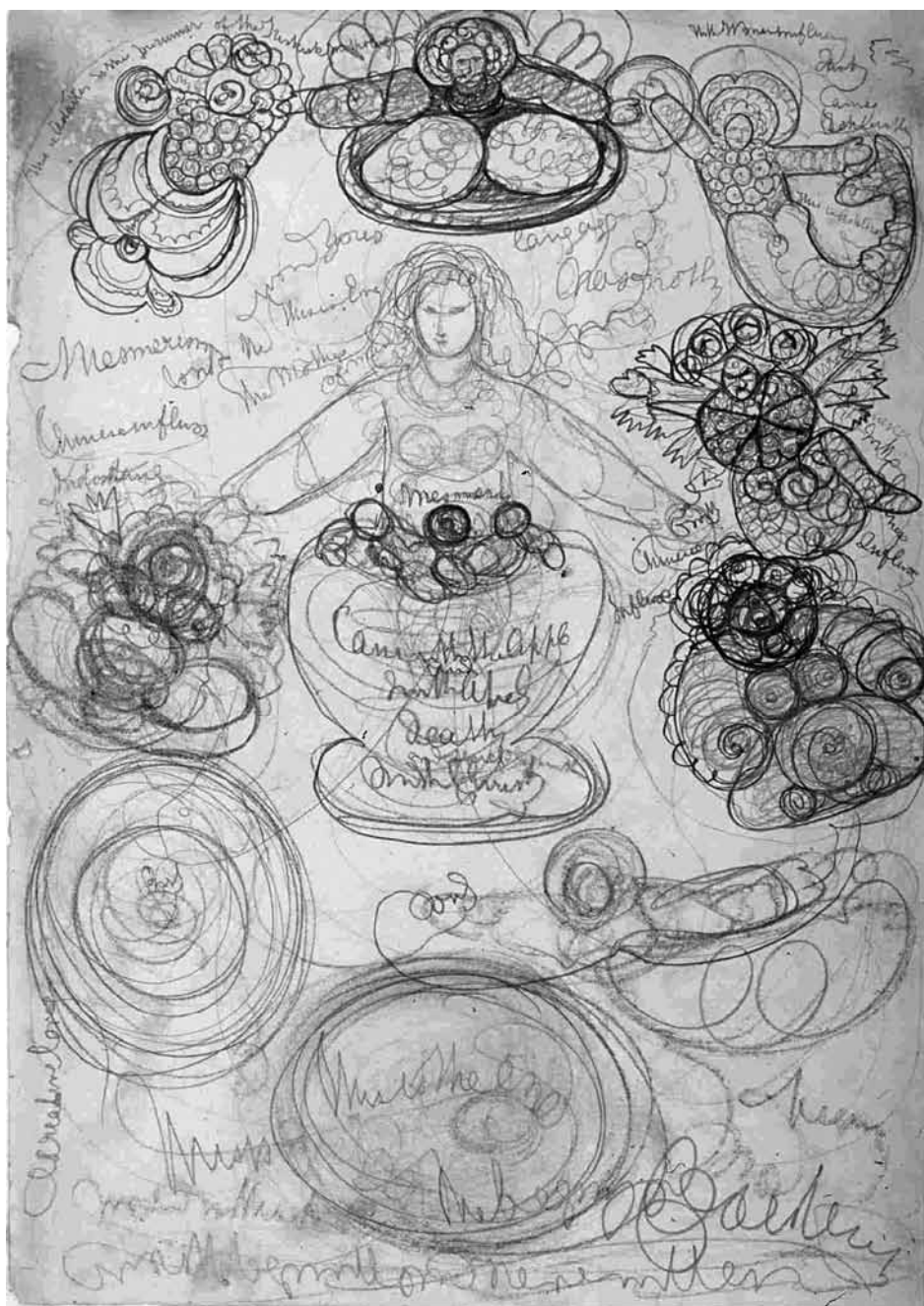


Figure 16.2 Anna Mary Howitt, *Untitled*, c. 1856–72, pencil on paper; collection of The Society for Psychical Research, reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library, SPR MS 65.

At first, the tracing paper was simply instrumental for Howitt's drawings. While in a trance, her hand would move involuntarily, supposedly channelling ideas from the dead and expressing them in visual forms. The results were so-called automatic or spirit drawings. Howitt's initial attempts were often spontaneous and incoherent, obsessively filling the space. In one early image (Fig. 16.2), circles multiply across the page, forming bizarre hybrid figures, emblems of fertility, surely, but not a programmatic design. These schematic, overlapping forms defy legibility; the heads of two female figures have even been drawn over. The chaotic nature of this image and others was a result of Howitt's design process: as she proceeded to execute a drawing, it would change before she could complete it. In some reflections on her experiences as a so-called 'drawing medium', later cited by her husband and spiritualist collaborator, Alaric Alfred Watts, Howitt recalled that she had trouble 'fixing' an idea because it was continually in flux. Frustrated, she experimented with the drawing process. When the design that she was working on started to change in character she intervened, tracing the part she was happy with in order to use it as a departure point for a new drawing.² Yet, rather than simply using the tracing paper as a tool to transfer a design onto another sheet of paper, she often turned the tracing paper designs into works of art themselves. She augmented her pencil sketches with watercolours to create richly coloured, jewel-like creations. While originally intended to make the immaterial more material, to fix a fleeting idea, the fragility of these works in fact underscores the idea of intangibility and tests the limits of objecthood. The tracing paper is thin, delicate, material without materiality; it is transparent, evoking the spiritualist metaphor of a window that lets light from the spiritual realm shine through to earth. These sheets of tracing paper have tears, the edges are curling, and it is only a matter of time before they turn to dust; they are only marginally of this world, and they will soon leave it.

In recent years, scholars have situated spiritualism as a locus for renegotiating boundaries between the natural and the supernatural, the material and the immaterial. Spiritualists' propensity for incorporating rather than refuting science, 're-enchanting' it rather than rejecting it outright, has become the prime example of spiritualism's ability to straddle the material and immaterial realms,³ 'reconcil[ing]

² Alaric Alfred Watts, 'A Contribution Towards the History of Spirit-Art. From the Unpublished Papers of the Late Mrs Howitt-Watts. Continued by Her Husband', *Light*, 9 (27 April 1889): 204–5.

³ See especially Richard Noakes, 'Spiritualism, Science, and the Supernatural in Mid-Victorian Britain', in Nicola Bown, Carolyn Burdett and Pamela Thurschwell (eds), *The Victorian Supernatural* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 23–40; and John Walliss, 'Spiritualism and the (Re-)Enchantment of Modernity', in James A. Beckford and John Walliss (eds), *Theorising Religion: Classical and Contemporary Debates* (Aldershot, 2006), pp. 32–43. On the complex

religion with positivism'.⁴ Yet Victorian 'materiality' was not limited to science and technology. Materiality involved the very stuff of artistic production – paper, canvas, paint, graphite – forms of embodiment that might seem to contradict the ideal of disembodiment that underlies notions of spiritual transcendence. Mediums took even these mundane materials and gave them a metaphysical charge. Claiming visual art as a manifestation of spiritualism was one more way in which spiritualists assimilated the natural into the supernatural during the second half of the nineteenth century.

Maintaining a balance between the natural and supernatural was not easy, and spiritualism did not always provide the simple solution it promised. In an age wrestling with the Enlightenment's legacy of positivism, physical evidence of immortality proved an alluring goal. If spirits could communicate with people on earth, enabling the living to see, hear and touch them, then many Victorians felt safe to conclude that there must indeed be an afterlife. As a contributor to the periodical *The Spiritual Magazine* declared in 1863: 'Immortality must be proved to materialists in material ways. Many a man can feel the force of an argument which appeals to his sense of sight or hearing ... and at last comes to believe in the invisible impalpable, because of the visible palpable.'⁵ This emphasis on the 'visible palpable' was at once spiritualism's strength and its weakness. Spiritualists had the difficult task of critiquing materialism – the theory that nothing exists except matter – at the same time that they internalized the idea that the immaterial must appear in material form to be believed. Many critics of spiritualism – both sceptics and believers – felt that the Modern Spiritualist Movement took materialism too far, to the point of absurdity and vulgarity.⁶ Spiritualism became an easy target for satirists like Charles Dickens, who ridiculed it, as well as for magicians, such as J.N. Maskelyne, who exposed many spiritualist practices as mere conjuring tricks.⁷

relationship between spiritualism and technology, see also Pamela Thurschwell, *Literature, Technology and Magical Thinking, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, 2001).

⁴ Walliss, 'Spiritualism and the (Re-)Enchantment of Modernity', p. 36.

⁵ M.N., 'Psychological Experience II (A Word to Catholics and Protestants)', *The Spiritual Magazine*, 4 (April 1863): 163. *The Spiritual Magazine* was an important journal in Howitt's circle. Her father, William Howitt, was one of its most prolific contributors and a poetic tribute to both Anna Mary and William Howitt ran in an 1876 issue. Thomas Shorter, 'Character Sonnets: AMHW', *The Spiritual Magazine*, 3rd series 2 (September 1876): 412.

⁶ 'Modern Spiritualism' was a term coined in 1852 by Horace Greeley, one of the first publicists of spiritualism in the US. This locution became common in both the US and England, giving the nineteenth-century occurrences of communicating with the dead a historical specificity. See Barbara Weisberg, *Talking to the Dead: Katie and Maggie Fox and the Rise of Spiritualism* (New York, 2004), p. 148; and Robert S. Cox, 'Spiritualism', in Eugene V. Gallagher and W. Michael Ashcraft (eds), *Introduction to New and Alternative Religions in America*, vol. 3: *Metaphysical, New Age, and Neopagan Movements* (Westport, CT, 2006), pp. 26–47, p. 44, n. 6.

⁷ See, for instance, 'Latest Intelligence from Spirits', *Household Words*, 11 (1855): 513–15, a satire in a periodical edited by Charles Dickens; and Lionel A. Weatherly and John Nevil Maskelyne, *The Supernatural?* (Bristol, 1891).

When people levitated, spirit hands appeared out of thin air and tables ‘spoke’ through a series of raps and movements, an atmosphere of child’s play could ensue, and it was easy to lose sight of the serious contemplation of religious questions.

Yet some spiritualists insisted that not all manifestations of spiritualism were the same,⁸ and Howitt was one of them. She distinguished between phenomena demonstrating the ‘spirit descending into matter’, in which the material taints the spiritual, and phenomena demonstrating ‘the sublimation of matter into spirit’, in which the spiritual elevates the material.⁹ Howitt associated the ‘spirit descending into matter’, above all, with the ‘materialization of the spirit-form’ – in other words, spirits becoming clothed in matter to appear as ghosts. For Howitt and others in her circle of middle-class intellectuals, this form of spiritualism seemed theatrical, vulgar and overly physical. They preferred phenomena that demonstrated the ‘sublimation of matter into spirit’, which encompassed clairvoyance and spirit drawing. At first glance, classifying art with clairvoyance as ‘mental’ as opposed to ‘physical’ phenomena might seem counterintuitive; yet as representations, spirit drawings were always at least one remove from reality. Spiritualists put into practice an understanding of art as tangible but encoded with a sense of mystique, or ‘aura’, which enables it to surpass its immediate physicality. Of course, art’s very origin is tied to ritual, and the connection between art and religion has endured across many traditions.¹⁰ The spiritualist interpretation of art was essentially a Neoplatonic one, where art is not an end in itself but rather a tool to elevate the viewer – as well as the artist – to an ideal plane. Important to Howitt’s version of spiritualism were the aesthetics of German Romanticism, especially the ideas of Heinrich Wackenroder and G.W.F. Hegel. In Hegel’s *Lectures on Aesthetics*, he

⁸ See Thomas Shorter [Thomas Brevoir, pseud.], ‘What it is to be a Spiritualist’, *Spiritual Magazine*, new series, 1 (January 1866): 27–30. Thomas Shorter was a friend of the Howitts and published sonnets to honour both Anna Mary and her father William (see fn. 5 above).

⁹ Anna Mary Howitt, *The Pioneers of the Spiritual Reformation* (London, 1883), p. 313. This book was a joint biography of Justinus Kerner – the German Romantic writer, poet and mesmerizer – and William Howitt. Anna Mary Howitt’s discussion of ‘the spirit descending into matter’ and ‘the sublimation of matter into spirit’ appeared in the section on her father. Anna Mary remarked that her father ‘had but little sympathy’ with a new generation of spiritualist manifestations tending towards ‘the spirit descending into matter’. Note that Anna Mary Howitt signed her books and articles with many variations on her maiden and married names (Howitt and Watts respectively). In her early writings, her name appears as Anna Mary Howitt, and in her later writings as Anna Mary Howitt-Watts (with a hyphen) or Anna Mary Howitt Watts (without a hyphen), or alternatively as Mrs A.M. Howitt-Watts or simply A.M.H.W. For the sake of consistency, I have used ‘Anna Mary Howitt’ for all of the footnotes and bibliography entries; this is how her name appears in WorldCat, even when the title-page of the book gives a different variation on her name.

¹⁰ See Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, in *Illuminations* (New York, 1968), pp. 217–51; and Richard Francis (ed.), *Negotiating Rapture: The Power of Art to Transform Lives*, exh. cat. (Chicago, 1996), especially essays by Homi Bhabha, Georges Didi-Huberman and David Morgan.

gave art a 'mediating function', claiming that the 'work of art occupies a midway ground, with the directly perceived objective world on one side and the ideality of pure thought on the other'.¹¹ Howitt's phrase 'the sublimation of matter into spirit', as it applies to art, echoes Hegel's notion that 'the sensuous is spiritualised in art'.¹² Again using language inflected with Hegelian ideas, Howitt warned:

... it should be borne in mind that Spirit seeks to spiritualize man's ideas, not to hold them bound in the outer form of things, and that although all communications clothe themselves in the garments of natural language, that language is but as the body to an idea, the idea itself alone proceeding from spirit, and being itself the spiritual message given from mind to mind.¹³

For Howitt, both pictorial and verbal language served as vehicles for communicating ideas, an objective that had to be preserved amid the sensuality of form.

Howitt's privileging of art as a spiritualist manifestation followed from her own background. Before becoming a medium in 1856, she had trained as an artist, both in London and Munich, first studying at Henry Sass's Art School, which at the time provided the best art education available to women in England, and later working in the studio of the German painter Wilhelm von Kaulbach. Back in London, she exhibited paintings at the Royal Academy and National Institution while developing friendships with members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, especially Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and a number of progressive female artists around the Brotherhood, such as the landscape painter Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, one of the leaders of the Victorian women's movement.¹⁴ Howitt severed her connections to the art world in 1856, discouraged by a caustic assessment

¹¹ G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, vol. 1, trans. F.P.B. Ostmason (London, 1920), p. 52, cited in Brendan Cole, 'Jean Delville's *La Mission de l'Art*: Hegelian Echoes in Fin-de-Siècle Idealism', *Religion and the Arts*, 11 (2007): 330–72, p. 347. On 'art's mediating function' for Hegel, see Eva Geulen, *The End of Art: Readings in a Rumour After Hegel* (Stanford, 2006), p. 20.

¹² Hegel, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, vol. 1, p. 53, cited in Cole, 'Jean Delville's *La Mission de l'Art*', p. 347.

¹³ Anna Mary Howitt, 'Preface', in *Glimpses of a Brighter Land* (London, 1871), p. xvii. The notion of ideas being clothed in form most likely derives from Hegel. As Gene Blocker points out, the clothes metaphor was recurrent in Hegel's writings. See Gene Blocker, 'Hegel on Aesthetic Internalization', *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 11.4 (1971): 341–53, p. 352.

¹⁴ Howitt worked with Bodichon on petitioning for the Married Women's Property Act; Bodichon went on to campaign for women's labour and suffrage, to lead the Langham Place Group and to help found Girton College, Cambridge, the first university college for women in Britain. Bodichon also inspired Howitt's notion of an artistic sisterhood, planting the seed for her novella 'Sisters in Art', serialized in *The Illustrated Exhibitor and Magazine of Art* in 1852.

of her work from John Ruskin, the foremost art critic of her time.¹⁵ Yet while Howitt stopped publicly exhibiting her art and shifted her energies to spiritualist pursuits, her art education stayed with her, shaping the way she conceptualized her production of spirit art. The spiritualist turn, as it were, in Howitt's life is notably absent from art historical scholarship, buried as an embarrassing end to an otherwise promising career that had no bearing on her previous accomplishments. Yet art and spiritualism were intertwined for Howitt. Her mediumship was a wellspring of art, and her artistic training informed her conception of mediumship. In fact, Howitt framed the practice of spirit drawing as a so-called 'higher' form of mediumship partially because she was steeped in Renaissance ideas of artistic inspiration filtered through Romanticism.¹⁶ Howitt believed that Fra Angelico was divinely inspired. He, in turn, inspired her, as did other artists such as Raphael and Blake. The spirit of the 'Great Mother', the 'female manifestation of the divine', also gave her guidance.¹⁷ This pedigree was at once artistic and spiritual, male and female, combining energies that were strong enough to perform alchemy and 'sublimate matter into spirit'.

The word 'sublimate' is critical here. Before Freud, sublimate meant to exalt or elevate to a higher state, to transmute into something nobler, more sublime or refined. Yet an alternate definition served as a warning: sublimate also meant to

¹⁵ Ruskin wrote Howitt a letter referring to her history painting, *Boadicea Brooding over Her Wrongs*. He admonished her, 'What do you know about Boadicea? Leave such subjects alone and paint me a pheasant's wing.' Cited in Amice Lee, *Laurels and Rosemary: The Life of William and Mary Howitt* (London, 1955), p. 217. On this encounter between Howitt and Ruskin, see also Pamela Gerrish Nunn, *Victorian Women Artists* (London, 1987), p. 56; Deborah Cherry, *Painting Women: Victorian Women Artists* (London, 1993), pp. 187–9; Clarissa Campbell Orr, 'Introduction', in Clarissa Campbell Orr (ed.), *Women in the Victorian Art World* (Manchester, 1995), pp. 1–32, p. 19; Jan Marsh, 'Art, Ambition and Sisterhood in the 1850s', in Orr, *Women in the Victorian Art World*, pp. 33–48, p. 41; Jan Marsh and Pamela Gerrish Nunn, *Pre-Raphaelite Women Artists*, exh. cat. (New York, 1999), p. 104; Elizabeth Prettejohn, *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites* (London and Princeton, 2000), pp. 69 and 281. I try to complicate this history in 'Spiritualism and the Visual Imagination in Victorian Britain', (PhD thesis, 2007), pp. 97–98 and 205–6. Ruskin's harsh words notwithstanding, his advice to abandon history painting in favour of the study of nature was typical of his advice to young artists, whether female or male. Howitt's second career as a spiritualist artist is either not mentioned in the art historical literature or else relegated to footnotes. Only literary scholar Linda H. Peterson has mentioned, albeit briefly, Howitt's spiritualism and spirit art in the body of her book, *Becoming a Woman of Letters: Myths of Authorship and Facts of the Victorian Market*, (Princeton, NJ, 2009), pp. 123–30.

¹⁶ Especially important were the ideas of Romantic theorist Wilhelm Wackenroder. Anna Mary's father, the writer William Howitt, discussed Wackenroder's *Confessions from an Art-Loving Friar* in his book, *History of the Supernatural* (London, 1863; American edn, Philadelphia, 1863), vol. 2, p. 125. See also my brief discussion of Wackenroder later in this chapter.

¹⁷ Anna Mary Howitt, 'A Contribution Towards the History of Spirit-Art: From the Unpublished Papers of the Late Mrs Howitt-Watts', *Light*, 9 (13 April 1889): 176–7. Howitt wrote this essay in May 1875 and her husband had it published posthumously.

refine away into something non-existent, to reduce to unreality.¹⁸ For spiritualist artists, one challenge of 'the sublimation of matter into spirit' lay in not over-refining, not forgetting to leave a few threads intact to remain attached to the earthly world. A member of Howitt's circle, Camilla Crosland, echoed Howitt's idea of 'sublimation' in her 1857 book *A Light in the Valley: My Experiences of Spiritualism*. In response to sceptics' objections that the communications from the spiritual world never transcend the intelligence of human beings, she replied:

... if these communications did completely transcend the power of our understanding, they would of necessity be incomprehensible, and consequently valueless; ... I leave it to the candid judgment of my readers to decide whether the specimens of spiritual communications which I have already presented and am about to offer, do or do not, in the majority of instances, quite touch on the highest point of sublimity which the popular mind is prepared to comprehend or appreciate.¹⁹

These specimens' to which Crosland refers are in fact some of Howitt's own drawings, which are reproduced in *A Light in the Valley* under the pseudonym 'Comfort'.²⁰ By the 'highest point of sublimity', Crosland means the loftiest concepts accessible to the human understanding.²¹ She draws on Edmund Burke's and Immanuel Kant's conception of the sublime as that which is awe-inspiring, obscure and always just out of reach. Yet Crosland contends that spiritualist communications bring sublimity just *within* reach of mortals so that they are still able to relay a message. Following the 'principle of correspondences' developed by the eighteenth-century mystic Emanuel Swedenborg, spiritualists in Crosland and Howitt's circle believed that the summit of the earthly imagination is simultaneously the base of angelic

¹⁸ See the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. 'sublimate, v.', at <http://dictionary.oed.com> (accessed 3 August 2007).

¹⁹ Camilla Crosland, *A Light in the Valley: My Experiences with Spiritualism* (London, 1857), p. 171. Crosland wrote more directly about the idea of sublimation earlier in her book when discussing Moses receiving the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. She quotes a passage in the Bible that states that after Moses descended from Mount Sinai his face was so bright that he had to cover it with a veil. Crosland then comments, 'might it not have been in reality that the saintly soul of the Hebrew law-giver was so sublimated by his recent conference with the Most High, that his spirit atmosphere became visible to all gazers, instead of remaining in the normal state of being only recognizable by Introvisers or spirit-seers?' This passage is particularly interesting in that 'sublimated' simultaneously means elevated, transformed and made visible. Here, to refine means to make *more*, not less, material.

²⁰ 'Comfort' was Howitt's 'spirit name'. Crosland refers to mediums by their spirit names to protect their identities.

²¹ Both Howitt and Crosland are using variations on the word 'sublime'. Howitt's term 'sublimate' is the past participle stem of the Latin word meaning 'to sublime', while Crosland's term 'sublimity' means the 'state or quality of being sublime'. See the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. 'sublimity', at <http://dictionary.oed.com> (accessed 3 August 2007), especially the etymology and definition no. 3.

knowledge.²² For Crosland, a successful spiritualist manifestation was one situated at this intersection of the mortal and immortal planes. She provides Howitt's art as an example of such a manifestation, although ultimately leaves it up to her readers to judge for themselves if they find these drawings compelling.

Spiritualists in Howitt's and Crosland's circle saw automatic drawings as attempts to translate a foreign tongue, the language of spirits.²³ In this view, spirits and humans had to meet halfway in order to understand each other, and the result of this compromise was richly symbolic art that joined earthly form with spiritual inner meaning. Howitt emphasized how mortals had to stretch their imaginations in order to comprehend the lofty, abstracted concepts of the spirits. The 'translations' themselves had to be translated. Literal meanings were useless and even misleading; only grasping the figurative import of words, images and ideas could lead to insight. The figurative meanings were not always obvious, and, as Howitt experienced first-hand, a novice could make painful mistakes while trying to master this new language.²⁴ Yet suffering was part of the process of spiritual growth and enlightenment. Interpretation was about struggle, trying to understand the hidden meanings of symbols, even if it meant confronting the problem of the untranslatable. Howitt had help in managing this task; sometimes a medium referred to as 'The Rose' translated Howitt's drawings orally, while Camilla Crosland recorded the exegesis. Filtering the drawings through multiple interpreters further destabilized meaning, as new translations built upon previous attempts.

Translation was a common metaphor during the second half of the nineteenth century – Baudelaire frequently referred to art 'translating' nature²⁵ – but it had particular resonance for spiritualists, for whom it had multiple valences. Not only did it mean to decode, to mediate between different systems of meanings, but it also meant to change state, to transmute, to leave the mortal self behind. Spiritualist inscriptions on graves often listed dates when people were 'translated', not when they 'died', to signify that after life was not death but rather change and spiritual rebirth.²⁶ 'Translate' was thus a dynamic term for the spiritualists,

²² For more on the interest in Swedenborg among middle-class spiritualists in Britain, see Oberter, 'Spiritualism and the Visual Imagination', pp. 136–46. For Swedenborg's impact on American spiritualism, see Bret E. Carroll, 'American Spiritualism and the Swedenborgian Order', ch. 2 in *Spiritualism in Antebellum America* (Bloomington, 1997), pp. 16–34.

²³ See Anna Mary Howitt's letter to Camilla Crosland in Crosland, *Light in the Valley*, esp. p. 118.

²⁴ Howitt experienced an emotional crisis when she received messages forecasting 'death'. Eventually she realized that 'death' in fact meant 'birth into higher knowledge' and her inner turmoil gave way to exhilaration. Howitt, 'A Contribution Towards the History of Spirit-Art', p. 177.

²⁵ See Michelle Hannoosh, 'Painting as Translation in Baudelaire's Art Criticism', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 22.1 (January 1986): 22–33.

²⁶ For inscriptions on spiritualist graves, see Anne Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*, 2nd edn (Bloomington, 2001), p. 54. This meaning of 'translated' derives from the Christian sense of 'translate' as in to convey to

implying a creative act, one filled with hope for transformation.²⁷ To translate the spirit language into terms that humans could understand was thus less about debasing the message and more about elevating the messenger.

How could images come close to transcending their earthly nature, straddle the divide between the material and immaterial? There are several ways in which Howitt's drawings defy their materiality: multiplicity, erasure, absence and inscrutability.

Above all, Howitt's images lack concreteness because they are often in flux, offering ever newer variations on the spirits' messages. They exist in a temporary state, always on the verge of being transposed into another realm or image, endlessly open to reinvention and retranslation. Howitt did not create individual drawings but rather a 'succession of symbolic designs', a kaleidoscopic vision that evolved, causing her to erase and not merely revise, but rather completely redraw.²⁸ Sometimes her vigorous erasing left the paper so thin that she had to abandon her design,²⁹ sometimes she shaded over elements she wished to hide. The process began, according to Howitt, with a group of spirits combining

... to form in coloured light a picture upon a blank sheet of paper, laid before the medium. The hand of the medium feels itself impelled – guided, as it were, by some magnetic attraction – to rapidly outline with a pencil, or colour, the form of the spirit picture on the paper. As the pencil traces the form, the spirit-picture dissolves rapidly, to re-form in some fresh variation of the design, these spirit-pictures being of the nature of dissolving views.³⁰

The origin of spirit drawings in light is notable, for light is immaterial even as it is visible. Howitt was attempting to make permanent that which was transient –

heaven without death. One of Howitt's drawings, *Christ Without Hands*, referred to this usage of the term. The 'translation' of the spirit-writing around the drawing read: '[The Virgin Mary] lived seven epochs, or years, according to your calculation of time; after that she was translated, but her spirit descended in various ways to help in the Christianizing or polarizing of the earth and its inhabitants to God' (Crosland, *Light in the Valley*, p. 137).

²⁷ See Howitt's use of the term 'translation' in 'A Contribution Towards the History of Spirit-Art', p. 177.

²⁸ Anna Mary Howitt, cited in Crosland, *Light in the Valley*, p. 158.

²⁹ Watts, 'A Contribution Towards the History of Spirit-Art', p. 204.

³⁰ Anna Mary Howitt, 'Thoughts Concerning the Mystical Death of the Insane: No. VI', *The Psychological Review*, 5 (August 1882): 130–40, p. 133. Howitt begins this paragraph by stating that the description of automatic drawing that follows is the experience of 'certain drawing-mediums', but she ends the paragraph by revealing, '[t]his is an experience known to the writer'. The phrase 'dissolving view' also features in Howitt's more explicitly autobiographical writing. In the notes on her personal experiences later quoted by her husband, Howitt wrote, 'each drawing was, as it were, a series of dissolving views. The forms changed continually ...' (Watts, 'A Contribution Towards the History of Spirit-Art', p. 204).

pictures in light – much like the inventors of photography, literally ‘light-writing’. Furthermore, the story of tracing light on a sheet of paper both gives new meaning to Howitt’s use of tracing paper and recalls Pliny’s myth that art was born through the tracing of shadows. While Howitt reverses the story, turning darkness into light and ushering in a host of more positive connotations, particularly that of truth and purity, there is much that Howitt’s story of origins has in common with Pliny’s. Howitt’s tale also speaks of absence and presence, of attempting to turn an inchoate form into a distinct entity through delineation, and of projection.³¹ Yet, what makes Howitt’s narrative distinctly Victorian is her focus on movement and change, as encapsulated in her term ‘dissolving view’.³²

Here and elsewhere, Howitt invoked dissolving-view lantern shows, one of the most beloved forms of popular entertainment in the pre-cinematic age. In these stunning displays of light and motion, one image would gradually fade away at the same time that a second picture gradually materialized in its place on the screen.³³ Lanternists achieved this effect first by employing two magic lanterns placed side-by-side or on top of each other and later by creating specialized magic lanterns with two lenses. Using devices such as a pair of metal shutters that could be raised and lowered through a rack or lever, the lanternist would slowly cut off the light from one lens as he allowed light from the other lens to begin to appear on the screen, carefully coordinating these actions. The second magic lantern slide was always a slightly altered version of the first – a day scene would give way to a night scene, for instance. Smooth but dramatic transitions were at the core of dissolving views. In this form of popular entertainment, the image was never still and complete, but always shifting, melting away and then reforming into an altered version of itself. In the words of Isobel Armstrong, the dissolving view ‘performs a state of “becoming”’. Invoking Heidegger’s definition of becoming as ‘both arising and passing away’, a temporality in which ‘the “nows” of time are either no longer or not yet’, Armstrong describes the dissolving view as the very epitome of a state of flux, a sense of time where nothing stands still.³⁴

³¹ Victor I. Stoichita, *A Short History of the Shadow* (London, 1999), p. 7.

³² The focus on movement and change is distinctly Victorian, both because of the obsession with evolution and its metaphorical implications in the second half of the nineteenth century and because of the developing of pre-cinematic technologies at this time. See Lynda Nead, *The Haunted Gallery: Painting, Photography, Film c. 1900* (New Haven and London, 2007) for the relationship between the moving picture and haunting.

³³ For the discussion of the dissolving view that follows, I am indebted especially to Isobel Armstrong’s book *Victorian Glassworlds* (Oxford and New York, 2008), pp. 258–66 and ch. 11. Also useful was Joss Marsh, ‘Dickensian “Dissolving Views”: The Magic Lantern, Visual Story-Telling, and the Victorian Technological Imagination’, *Comparative Critical Studies*, 6.3 (October 2009): 333–46.

³⁴ Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, p. 296. Here, Armstrong is referring to Heidegger on Hegelian time. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (1927), trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (London, 1962), pp. 482–3. Yet it is also important to note a source of the idea of ‘becoming’ within German Romanticism: Friedrich Schlegel. Marsha Morton points out how Schlegel ‘proclaimed the “romantic genre” to be in a state of “eternally becoming”’.

'Becoming' also defined Howitt's artistic practice. Her pencil sketches and watercolours unfold over time, creating a narrative about change and development. Spirit drawing, for Howitt, was more a process than a final product. What we see of the 'finished image' is really just one particular state – a film still before film – which Howitt still perceived as imperfect. The visible traces of all previous states are gone, so all we have are Howitt's words to reconstruct what was there before and is now irrevocably lost. Memory must recover what exists in a physical state only as a fragment, an incomplete work. This very incompleteness is what challenges the idea of objecthood, gives immateriality to even this material thing. Returning to the metaphor of the dissolving view is useful here. Since the dissolving view is an ensemble of lenses, mirrors and screen, Armstrong commented that 'the "picture" could not be located at any one point. It did not exist as an entity.'³⁵ The same is true of Howitt's drawings – what appears on the page at any one moment is not the picture but only 'a provisional frame';³⁶ the picture would encompass the moments before and after, as well as the images that may never have made it onto the page, the vision disappearing before Howitt could record it. At a certain point, the comparison between dissolving views and spirit drawings breaks down; whereas the dissolving view is the product of multiple physical media working together, Howitt's drawings purport to traverse both physical and psychic space. Nevertheless, what is important is that the drawings Howitt left behind are only partial works of art; her archive is made up of fragments alone. In *The Work of Art: Immanence and Transcendence* (1994), the French theorist Gérard Genette wrote that when a work of art is incomplete to its viewers – meaning that some aspect of it is inaccessible – then this work 'exceeds its immanence', becoming transcendent.³⁷ In other words, the 'object' and the 'work of art' are not synonymous. The object that viewers encounter does not contain the entire work of art – the work spills beyond its physical limits. Genette uses 'transcendence' in an etymological sense rather than in the metaphysical sense that Howitt favoured,³⁸ yet he casts light on the ways in which works of art could emerge from both material and immaterial realms in the eyes of Victorian spiritualists.

Howitt's textual account describing the creation of *Christ Among the Spheres* (Fig. 16.3), dated April 1857 and reproduced in Crosland's book, details how much

See Marsha Morton, 'German Romanticism: The Search for "A Quiet Place"', *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies*, 28.1 (2002): 8–23, 106–7, p. 11.

³⁵ Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, p. 262.

³⁶ Bruno Latour, 'How to be Iconophilic in Art, Science, and Religion?', in Caroline A. Jones and Peter Galison (eds), *Picturing Science, Producing Art* (New York and London, 1998), pp. 418–40, p. 421. Here, Latour advocates a form of looking or an attitude towards images he calls 'iconophilia' in which we 'resist the temptation inherent in all images, that is to freeze-frame them' and 'pay even more respect to the series of transformations for which each image is only a provisional frame'.

³⁷ Gérard Genette, *The Work of Art: Immanence and Transcendence* (1994), trans. G.M. Goshgarian (Ithaca and London, 1997), p. 211.

³⁸ *Ibid.*; see n. 19 on p. 11, where Genette introduces his concept of transcendence.

her image changed during the process of drawing. Despite Howitt's initial frustration that her designs would not remain stable, she eventually realized that *how* and *why* a particular image shifted in appearance conveyed a message in and of itself; the very sequence of designs was telling.³⁹ In her exegesis, Howitt describes how her drawing began as a portrayal of an unhappy child sitting in a cage (on the left) as a stern angel locked the door (on the right). She was so distressed by this image that she lost her capacity for drawing mediumship for two months. When her drawing powers returned, Howitt took up this particular design once more and watched the pencil in her hand move and transform the drawing before her eyes. The girl, now referred to as Eve, changed first into a series of heads representing 'undeveloped states of woman'⁴⁰ and then into a single figure representing 'Changes in Woman's Spiritual and Natural State',⁴¹ before transforming into a winged woman emerging like a butterfly from a chrysalis, which is how she appears in the reproduction in Crosland's book. *Christ Among the Spheres* is clearly a narrative of the evolution of the spirit, tracing the progress from spiritual darkness and captivity to spiritual enlightenment and freedom. Howitt thus thematized the idea of flux, change and growth at the core of her process of artistic creation.

As the imprisoned girl in *Christ Among the Spheres* transformed into the winged woman, the angel yielded to a representation of Christ. The lily is a reminder of the figure's previous incarnation as an angel, suggesting the angel of the Annunciation, an interpretation furthered by the vignette of the Mother and Child just behind the lily. Yet, simultaneously the lily symbolizes Christ's resurrection, forming an Easter Cross when juxtaposed with what Howitt perceived to be a cross with rounded ends in the background. The lily is thus both an attribute of the angel and of Christ. Once the angel transformed into Christ, the figure continued to undergo many other changes. Most notably, the Christ figure was 'sometimes drawn like that of a woman, and the countenance being represented without a beard'. Howitt asked her spirit guide why these changes occurred and 'the inward voice' informed her that:

... our Lord would reveal Himself to the world now through spiritualism, as the Bride as well as the Bridegroom; and that, therefore, in the symbols about to be given forth of Himself in art, He would be constantly represented as uniting the two characters of this mystic and glorious union promised in the New Jerusalem.⁴²

What is interesting in the final drawing is what is absent. Although in some earlier versions of the drawing, Christ took on female traits, Christ does *not* appear as

³⁹ Howitt's husband, Alaric Alfred Watts, wrote: 'These changes, painful though they were, were not without their uses in the development of the spiritual experience of the medium, and the enlivenment of her spiritual being.' He quotes his wife as stating, 'ideas were conveyed to the mind through these changes and their sequence' (Watts, 'A Contribution to Towards the History of Spirit-Art', p. 204).

⁴⁰ Anna Mary Howitt, cited in Crosland, *Light in the Valley*, p. 153.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 155.



Figure 16.3 Anna Mary Howitt, *Christ Among the Spheres*, c. 1856–57; as reproduced in Camilla Crosland, *Light in the Valley* (London: Routledge, 1857), from the copy in the Rare Book Collection, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

female in the published version of the drawing.⁴³ According to the feminist millenarian theology of Howitt, Crosland and their circle,⁴⁴ the feminine side of Christ is still subsumed within the male at this point; she will eventually be fully revealed as part of the Second Coming, becoming independent and visible. Once the female within is released, Christ and his female counterpart will come to earth as a pair of saviours. Yet, the spirit messages warn, the world is not yet ready for this dramatic event. Howitt thus showed restraint by not illustrating a Christ figure with female characteristics. During her first years as a spiritualist, absence and the veiling of truth was a constant theme in her work – the female Eye of God that is not yet present, the female Messiah who has not yet arrived. Her early spirit drawings suggest spiritual revelations, without fully manifesting them, thereby retaining some of the mystery of the intangible world and making her work all the more inchoate and open to future translations.

Howitt's drawings allude to the idea of the infinite in other ways. While Howitt's images could metamorphose from one shape into another, one symbol into another, unfolding diachronically, they could also simultaneously evoke multiple ideas at once, existing synchronically. One example of this is an image mentioned at the beginning of this chapter (Fig. 16.1). The words beneath the picture identify the female figure as Eve, yet the image itself tells a different story. Clearly, this figure is a female counterpart to Christ: with her arms outspread in a V, nails penetrating her palms, her body is crucified. Yet rather than dismissing the text as incompatible with the image, it is possible to read the text in dialogue with the image. In doing so, a typological relationship emerges, with Eve prefiguring the revelation of a female version of Christ. In the text accompanying another spirit drawing, Howitt had asserted that, just as Eve was hidden within Adam, only emerging from his rib when 'the conditions in the outer world were ready for her reception', the 'woman manifestation of the Divine' was hidden within Christ.⁴⁵ Again, the emphasis is on veiled truth, that which remains unseen. Howitt is suggesting a parallel between humanity and divinity. As humanity is both male and female, she contends, so is divinity; as the female part of humanity had been secret and submerged until the world could welcome her, the female part of divinity is invisible until the Second Coming, when she will appear as a female messiah. Returning to the drawing in question (Fig. 16.1), it becomes evident that Eve and a female messiah do eventually

⁴³ While Christ does not appear female, the winged woman does have Christ-like attributes (a crown of thorns); the female side of Christ is thus displaced onto this second figure.

⁴⁴ For the roots of Howitt's theological ideas in the socialist millenarianism of the 1840s as well as connections between her ideas and those of the Theosophists, see Oberter, 'Spiritualism and the Visual Imagination', pp. 270–86; and, for a discussion of *Christ Among the Spheres*, pp. 251–3.

⁴⁵ Crosland, *Light in the Valley*, pp. 133–4. Crosland is quoting from a 'translation' of the spirit-writing found within Howitt's spirit drawing *The Christ Without Hands*. It is unclear if Howitt dictated this translation herself or if another medium in her circle, such as 'The Rose', provided it.

come together in the inscription, for three lines under the words 'Creation's Eve', we read, 'her body crucified'.

In addition to Eve and a female messiah, there is also a third figure represented in this drawing. The circle between the figure's legs seems at once to symbolize her womb and allude to the head of a baby emerging from the birth canal.⁴⁶ Thus this figure is simultaneously a female version of the redeemer and the mother of the redeemer, Christ's Bride and the Madonna. Female divinity has two faces. Still, this does not exhaust the possibilities of this pairing of word and image. Even the automatic writing beneath the image can seem chameleon-like, with the pentimento of previous pencil lines and the fluid cursive script making the message ambiguous. What happens, for example, when we read the inscription, not as 'Creation's Eve', but as 'Creation's Love'? Indeed, looking more carefully at the word 'Eve', the space between the 'E' and the 'v' might contain an 'o'. Seeing one word as simultaneously 'Eve' and 'Love' would mean that this first line of the inscription foreshadows the second line of the text: 'aroused with her soul / awakened by Love'. This reading also makes sense when interpreting the image of Eve/The Crucified Woman intertextually alongside her male counterpart: Howitt's nearly identical image of Christ who bears the inscription 'Creation with Love'.

Texts frequently appear at the bottom of Howitt's drawings, but rather than explicate the images, they often only complicate any attempt at interpretation. For Howitt, a spirit drawing was not a picture but 'a page of hieroglyphs'.⁴⁷ Hieroglyphs are figures that stand for words, sometimes representing them directly, but more often employing an oblique form of symbolism ripe with hidden meaning.⁴⁸ Deriving from the Greek term for sacred carvings, hieroglyphs can both express and veil spiritual ideas. Historically, the metaphor of the hieroglyph has been reinvented many times, with different emphases placed on the hieroglyph's tendency to reveal and to conceal.⁴⁹ Swedenborg, the eighteenth-century Swedish mystic so influential to the spiritualists, was a product of the Enlightenment, insisting on the fixity and universality of symbols. He emphasized the possibility of decoding and characterized his work as a 'hieroglyphic key' to the Bible, confident

⁴⁶ In this sense, Howitt's image is reminiscent of Ford Madox Brown's painting *Take Your Son, Sir!*, begun in 1851 – when both he and Howitt were part of the circle of the Pre-Raphaelites – but never finished. In Brown's modern-life take on the *Madonna and Child*, a mother thrusts her baby out in front of her, presumably presenting him to his father. A ring of fabric encircles the baby, evoking the womb. Howitt's image lacks the baby, and in her version the circle is lower down, implying passage through the birth canal. Brown's image is currently located at Tate London. For a reproduction, see Prettejohn, *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites*, fig. 171.

⁴⁷ Anna Mary Howitt cited in Crosland, *Light in the Valley*, p. 158.

⁴⁸ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. 'hieroglyphic, *a.* and *n.*', at <http://dictionary.oed.com> (accessed 12 May 2010). See especially definitions B.1 and B.2, as well as the etymology.

⁴⁹ See Liselotte Dieckmann, 'The Metaphor of Hieroglyphics in German Romanticism', *Comparative Literature*, 7.4 (Autumn 1955): 306–12.

in his ability to reconstruct past meanings.⁵⁰ Although the symbolism of the Bible had been misunderstood for many years, he believed it had been transparent at one time (a Christian version of the 'Golden Years'), and, with his help, could become understood once again. Swedenborg intended his books to function like a dictionary, which would help people translate the figurative language of the Bible.⁵¹ His writings revealed, for instance, that the word 'garden' connotes wisdom in the Bible, while 'trees' are the knowledge of the good, and 'bread' means affection.⁵² Thus what Swedenborg called a symbol was not the multivalent signifier that later generations embraced, but rather functioned more like a traditional allegory, where signs and referents have a one-to-one relationship. Swedenborg's doctrine of correspondences was a semiotic system based on consistent meanings rather than the shifting meanings of Baudelaire and the Symbolists.⁵³ Even the deciphering of the Rossetta Stone by Jean-François Champollion in 1822 did not rob the hieroglyph of its air of mystery for figures such as Charles Baudelaire.⁵⁴

On the level of the detail, Howitt often seems to follow Swedenborg's model. An individual symbol, or hieroglyph, frequently had a very precise meaning for Howitt and could recur in multiple works. As we have seen, for example, the life cycle of the butterfly signified the development of the spirit. Yet Howitt's spirit art is more than just a collection of parts; the seemingly static, knowable parts come together to produce dynamic, intrinsically unknowable works whose components often shift and collide. Howitt may have aspired to the clarity of Swedenborg's allegories but unwittingly produced art that anticipated the opacity of Symbolism.

Perhaps the closest parallel to Howitt's aesthetic can be found in German Romanticism, particularly in Wilhelm Wackenroder's *Confessions from the Heart of an Art-Loving Friar* (1797), an important book in the Howitt household.⁵⁵ Wackenroder declared:

⁵⁰ This is most explicit in *An Hieroglyphic Key to Natural and Spiritual Mysteries, by Way of Representations and Correspondences*, trans. R. Hindmarsh (London, 1792). I first learned of this text from Dieckmann, 'The Metaphor of Hieroglyphics in German Romanticism', p. 308 and Moshe Barasch, *Modern Theories of Art*, vol. 1, *From Winckelmann to Baudelaire* (New York, 1990), pp. 371–2. Barasch discusses Swedenborg as a starting point for Baudelaire's idea of the hieroglyph.

⁵¹ See Ernst Benz, 'The Doctrine of Correspondences', ch. 24 in *Emanuel Swedenborg: Visionary Savant in the Age of Reason*, intro. and trans. by Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke (West Chester, PA, 2002), pp. 351–62.

⁵² Anna Balakian provides these three examples in *The Symbolist Movement: A Critical Appraisal* (New York, 1967), p. 14.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 14; Lynn R. Wilkinson, *The Dream of an Absolute Language: Emanuel Swedenborg and French Literary Culture* (Albany, NY, 1996), p. 18; and Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA, 2000), pp. 209–10.

⁵⁴ See Dieckmann, 'The Metaphor of Hieroglyphics'; and Wilkinson, *Dream of an Absolute Language*.

⁵⁵ William Howitt, Anna Mary's father and intellectual interlocutor, quoted from Wackenroder's *Confessions from the Heart of an Art-Loving Friar* in his *History of the Supernatural*. While Howitt may have come to Wackenroder through her father, she had many first-hand encounters with German Romanticism when she studied art in Munich, working in the studio

*Art is a language ... [that] makes use of a hieroglyphic script, whose symbols we know and understand in their external aspect. But it fuses spiritual and supersensual qualities into the visible shapes in such a touching and admirable manner that, in response, our entire being and everything about us is stirred and affected deeply ... The teachings of the philosophers set only our brains in motion, only the one half of our beings; but [nature and art] ... affect our senses as well as our minds.*⁵⁶

As in Howitt's art, there is a disjuncture between the knowability of the detail and the overwhelming nature of the whole; our mind can process only the 'external aspect' of symbols – what Howitt would re-label the 'outermost' – but our senses can intuit much more. Wackenroder was writing about the emotional experience of the viewer before the work of art; for Howitt, it was the experience of creating art that transported her spiritually. At a certain point, Howitt's ideas deviated from Wackenroder's. Wackenroder was comfortable with the notion that, even if the inner meaning of symbols is not accessible to our logical mind, we can glimpse their essence through feeling, whereas Howitt longed to grasp meanings through the rigours of the intellect, however elusive that goal. Ultimately, for both Wackenroder and Howitt, revelation was incomplete; the message never became completely transparent. Yet this opacity was not necessarily a hindrance, for it left the seeker on a perpetual quest for truth.⁵⁷

The focus on art as language is something that Howitt shares with Wackenroder, with her emphasis on translation, spirit drawings as a foreign tongue and composite

of the painter Wilhelm von Kaulbach. Indeed, German Romanticism was a key ingredient in her intellectual and artistic formation. Her diptych, *The Sensitive Plant* (1855) – the only surviving paintings by Howitt that pre-date her conversion to spiritualism – evokes 'arabesques' by Philipp Otto Runge in which a decorative design fills the outer frame while an allegorical scene occupies an oval-shaped inner frame. Howitt reworks Runge's prototype using a Pre-Raphaelite idiom – her decorative border is much more naturalistic – yet the debt is clear. Runge, too, used the trope of the hieroglyph. See Frances Connelly, 'Poetic Monsters and Nature Hieroglyphics: The Precocious Primitivism of Philipp Otto Runge', published first in *Art Journal*, 52.2 (Summer 1993): 31–9, and later as Chapter 2 of her book, *The Sleep of Reason: Primitivism in Modern European Art and Aesthetics, 1725–1907* (University Park, PA, 1995). Runge's *Arabesque: The Joys of Hunting* (1808–09) (fig. 17 in Connelly's book) provides a particularly useful point of comparison to Howitt's *Sensitive Plant* (fig. 53 in Prettejohn, *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites*).

⁵⁶ *Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder's Confessions and Fantasies*, translated and annotated with a Critical Introduction by Mary Hurst Schubert (University Park, 1971), pp. 119–20. Since this English translation was the first ever, Howitt would have read the original German version.

⁵⁷ See Moshe Barasch's brief discussion of this passage in *Modern Theories of Art*, p. 304. For more on the discourse around the hieroglyph in Romanticism, see Hilmar Frank, 'Arabesque, Cipher, Hieroglyph: Between Unending Interpretation and Loss of Meaning', in Keith Hartley (ed.), *The Romantic Spirit in German Art 1790–1990* (London, 1994), pp. 147–54. Frank devotes only a single sentence to Wackenroder (p. 147), but this essay is useful for the broader context of the Romantic movement.

verbal–visual works of art. This passage from Wackenroder’s book is the precedent for a conception of art that focuses on making the invisible visible, cloaking the immaterial in material forms in a way that retains the powerful emotional effect of the concepts represented. Wackenroder not only states that art ‘fuses spiritual and supersensual qualities’, but also declares that art and nature are the two languages ‘through which the Creator has permitted human beings to perceive and to comprehend heavenly things in their full forces, as far as this ... is possible, namely, for mortal creatures’.⁵⁸

Howitt’s early spirit drawings were about incomplete revelation, about the anticipation of revelation. They expressed the mystery of the still unknown; they were often dark, heavy, full of frustration. Her later drawings, by contrast, reveal the much-anticipated Second Coming, involving the realization of a female manifestation of the divine. No longer does she focus on the crucified Christ but, as her husband writes, ‘the New Liberty – the Gospel fulfilled and triumphant, the risen Saviour; – and the figures by which it is represented are almost exclusively female’.⁵⁹ There is lightness, freedom and joy to these works, filled with buoyant figures and outstretched arms. In one work (Fig. 16.4), there is a diagonal line and a suggestion of flight. There were still moments of hesitancy, incompleteness and revision; this drawing exists in multiple drafts, and the version featured here has a bizarre grey-blue square, part window, part void. These works were still fragile; you can see that the sheet of tracing paper needs to be bound to a support. Nevertheless, above all, these were exquisitely wrought works, combining the influence of Blake, medieval manuscripts and textiles. But their exquisiteness was their undoing.

According to Howitt’s husband, Alaric Alfred Watts, ‘as the grace and beauty in expression of these studies became more and more developed the mediumship involving power to produce them became more and more delicate ... Her own desire to produce became also less strong, and her solicitude about the outer in all things less and less active’.⁶⁰ There was a limit as to how material the immaterial could become without losing all semblance of divinity. External perfection could distract from inner meaning, threatening to turn symbolic spiritual exercises into pleasing decorative designs. Furthermore, the elegance of these drawings and watercolours indicates a lack of struggle; creating spirit art now came easily to Howitt. Yet it was struggle that had provided Howitt with a challenge, encouraging her to delve further into her inquiries into the numinous. With less at stake, there was no need to continue with the drawings. In 1872, Howitt stopped creating spirit art. Instead, she went one step further towards eliminating material constraints by redefining herself as a clairvoyant. She now explored visions in her mind without recording images on paper. In the words of Alaric Alfred Watts, the ‘faculty to see and to know’ supplanted her desire ‘to do and to produce’.⁶¹ Howitt was embracing

⁵⁸ Wackenroder, *Confessions and Fantasies*, p. 118.

⁵⁹ Watts, ‘A Contribution Towards the History of Spirit-Art’, p. 204.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

a more passive form of mediumship, one based on spectatorship rather than creativity and thus further from the residual traces of artistic agency that lingered with her drawing mediumship. With clairvoyance, Howitt liberated herself from both the materiality of drawing and at least some of the materiality of her own mediumship, leaving behind the paper, the pencil and the movements of her hand.



Figure 16.4 Anna Mary Howitt, *Untitled*, c. 1856–72, reed pen with red ink, watercolour and gouache on tracing paper; collection of The Society for Psychical Research, reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library, SPR MS 65.

Watts's account of his wife's abandonment of visual art as ultimately too material a practice brings to mind Hegel's prediction of the end of art. The focus on aesthetic evolution as intertwined with spiritual evolution in Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics* would have appealed to Howitt and Watts. Hegel distinguished between three stages of art, each representing a successive step in the 'unfolding' of the 'Idea'. In the Symbolic stage, there is a gap between the external form and the spiritual content of the work of art; they function independently of each other, with more focus on the form. In the Classical stage, form and content are not only in sync, but inseparable, supporting one another. Finally, in the Romantic stage, the union between the Idea and its external shape is severed as the content tries to break free from the form. From there, the next step, according to Hegel, can only be pure thought and hence the end of art.⁶²

Howitt's art may have evolved so fully that it came to an end, yet the end of materiality did not necessarily follow. When Howitt's mediumship turned to clairvoyance, the spiritual remained infused with the material, for even the images and words in her mind were embodied. Howitt recounted that the first time she repressed the urge to write automatically, the words that would have found their 'natural outlet through the hands', instead became bottled up inside her head and body, together with white or grey figures. She recalled, 'I could not wake in the morning without these figures instantly being drawn within my brain, over and through my heart, or within my hands.'⁶³ Her body served as a 'fleshly tabernacle',⁶⁴ or, we might say, a sheet of drawing paper. She did not stop having visions; she simply internalized them in a particularly literal way. The images that remained in Howitt's head were actually more concrete than those she expelled on paper. She noted that the figures did not appear as flat outlines, but rather 'were composed of an outline to each external surface of the figure, the result thus being that every position of these figures was gradually brought to the view of my mental eye, the front, back, profiles of each side, the entire rounding of the limbs – the whole figure, thus standing forth although in outline, perfectly completed, as though wrought out by the hand of a sculptor as well as by that of a draughtsman'.⁶⁵ In Hegelian terms, Howitt's visions correspond to the second or Classical stage, the one associated with sculpture. In this reversal of expectations, the material is fleeting and insubstantial, but the immaterial is static and solid. Although Howitt wrote less about her later clairvoyant experiences, it is likely that she continued to think about them in equally visceral terms. The phrase 'mental eye' serves here as a term that both distinguishes internal visionary experiences from external vision and yet creates an analogy between them. The nineteenth-century Scottish physicist and inventor Sir David Brewster, an expert on optics, went so far as to propose that

⁶² See the summary in Blocker, 'Hegel on Aesthetic Internalization', pp. 341–5. Hegel's four series of lectures on aesthetics took place during 1820–21, 1823, 1826 and 1828–29; they were published posthumously in 1835–38 as *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*.

⁶³ Anna Mary Howitt, cited in Crosland, *Light in the Valley*, p. 125.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

⁶⁵ Howitt, 'A Contribution Towards the History of Spirit-Art', p. 176.

“the mind’s eye” is actually the body’s eye, and that the retina is the common tablet on which both classes of impressions [internal and external] are painted’.⁶⁶ Not unlike the spiritualists, Brewster saw visuality itself as the interpenetration of the material and immaterial realms.

As metaphysical language inflected even optical theory, optical language could penetrate spiritualist writings, as in Howitt’s metaphor of the dissolving view. Comparing internal, spirit-inspired images to images projected by an optical device during lantern shows involves a conceptual leap and a willingness to conflate inspiration with technology. Yet Howitt was certainly not alone in using the dissolving view as an analogy for internal vision.⁶⁷ In 1857, a contributor to Dickens’s journal *Household Words* commented, ‘The mind is a wizard chamber of dissolving views. In dreams, the pictures pass of themselves, the dissolving views roll on, the images of the imagination shine and mingle uncorrected by the sensations and uncontrolled by the will.’⁶⁸ As described here, the progression of images in dreaming is automatic, much like Howitt’s spirit drawings, which she eventually began to call automatic drawings, a term appropriated first by psychologists and later by the Surrealists. ‘Automatic’, in fact, can suggest both the instinctual and the mechanical, two seemingly opposite terms which come together in these uses of the dissolving view. The juxtaposition of the instinctual and mechanical is also apparent in Charles Baudelaire’s comparison of the *flâneur* to ‘a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness’ and later in Walter Benjamin’s discussion of the camera as the ‘optical unconscious’.⁶⁹ Whereas Howitt’s metaphor turns the mind into an optical device, Baudelaire’s and Benjamin’s metaphors give an optical device the qualities of a human mind. Howitt’s internalization of the dissolving

⁶⁶ D.H. Tuke, ‘Hallucinations and the Subjective Sensations of the Sane’, *Brain*, 11 (1889): 457, cited in Rae Beth Gordon, ‘Poe: Optics, Hysteria, and Aesthetic Theory’, *Cercles*, 1 (2000): 49–60, p. 58. Brewster is most famous for inventing the kaleidoscope (1816), writing *A Treatise on Optics* (1835), and popularizing and perfecting the stereoscope (1849).

⁶⁷ Terry Castle demonstrates that the precursor to the Victorian dissolving view – the early nineteenth-century phantasmagoria – became associated with the ‘ghosts of the mind’ and a metaphor for the poetic imagination. See her ‘Phantasmagoria: Spectral Technology and the Metaphor of Modern Reverie’, *Critical Inquiry*, 15.1 (Autumn 1988): 26–61.

⁶⁸ ‘My Ghosts’, *Household Words*, 15.360 (14 February 1857): 165–8. Howitt herself had contributed to *Household Worlds* several years earlier when her mother edited her letters from Munich, publishing them as ‘Bits of Life in Munich’ in eight issues of *Household Words* between 2 November 1850 and 14 June 1851. The Howitt family’s sympathy towards this publication surely waned once Dickens began publishing satires of spiritualism (see fn. 6 above), but the dissolving-view metaphor in this chapter demonstrates that convergences between *Household Words* and the Howitts remained.

⁶⁹ Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne (London, 1964), p. 9; and Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version’ (1936) and ‘Little History of Photography’ (1931), both in Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA, 2008), p. 37 and p. 278, respectively.

view and Baudelaire's and Benjamin's externalization of consciousness disrupt the opposition of exterior to interior, realizing Coleridge's greatest hopes for the poetic ('secondary') imagination: to 'make external, internal, the internal external, to make nature thought, and thought nature'.⁷⁰ Sublimating matter into spirit may have been an elusive goal for Howitt and other spiritualists, but by troubling binary notions of the material and immaterial, she nurtured a practice with wider implications.

Whether art can overcome its material nature to visualize the invisible became a central problem animating European artistic production from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. Howitt's opposition between the 'spirit descending into matter' and 'the sublimation of matter into spirit' foreshadows artistic debates between Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin over how to mediate divinity, with Van Gogh favouring 'naturalizing divinity' and Gauguin preferring the 'dematerialization of nature'.⁷¹ 'Dematerialization' would become a key goal of Symbolist art, and, taking this idea even further, Wassily Kandinsky arrived at abstraction.⁷²

As with Howitt's 'sublimation of matter into spirit', the process of dematerializing art was always fraught with contradictions and second-guessing. For instance, while Jean Moréas's 1886 Symbolist manifesto is best remembered for his definition of Symbolist poetry as that which 'seeks to clothe the Idea in tangible form', it is important not to overlook Moréas's unease with his own formulation, a formulation indebted to Hegel, much like Howitt's similar pronouncement. Like Howitt, Moréas warned his readers that such tangible form, 'while serving to express the Idea, [should] remain subordinate'. Yet Moréas then took a step in the opposite direction, declaring, 'Nor must the Idea itself be seen stripped of the sumptuous robes of external analogy; for the essential characteristic of symbolic art is never to go so far as the conception of the idea in itself'.⁷³ As Sharon Hirsh

⁷⁰ Coleridge, *Miscellaneous Criticism*, cited in Blocker, 'Hegel on Aesthetic Internalization', p. 352. Many spiritualists saw Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* as a precursor to spirit writing, including Sophia De Morgan, William Howitt and Anna Mary Howitt herself. When she first became a spiritualist in 1856, Howitt wrote a letter to Dante Gabriel Rossetti in which she compared herself to Coleridge (Angeli-Denis Papers, Rare Books and Special Collections, The University of British Columbia Library, Box 3, Folder 5).

⁷¹ These are not the words of the artists themselves, but rather a framing device coined by the scholar Debora Silverman in 'At the Threshold of Symbolism: Van Gogh's *Sower* and Gauguin's *Vision after the Sermon*', in Pierre Théberge (ed.), *Lost Paradise: Symbolist Europe*, exh. cat. (Montreal, 1995), pp. 104–15. She later expanded upon these ideas in her book, *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Search for Sacred Art* (New York, 2000).

⁷² See Sharon Hirsh, 'Editor's Statement: Symbolist Art and Literature' and Peg Weiss, 'Kandinsky in the Symbolist Heritage', both in *Art Journal*, 45.2, Symbolist Art and Literature (Summer 1985): 95–7 and 137–45, respectively. 'Dematerialization' would later become a key term for Conceptual Art, as first articulated by Lucy Lippard in *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object* (New York and London, 1973).

⁷³ Jean Moréas, 'Un Manifeste Littéraire – Le Symbolisme', *Le Figaro*, 18 September 1886, as trans. in Robert L. Delevoy, *Symbolists and Symbolism* (New York, 1978), p. 71, and cited in Hirsh, 'Editor's Statement', p. 97.

has noted, these qualifications signal what a difficult balancing act artists and poets were striving to maintain between an inner message and an outer form.⁷⁴ Proceeding too far in either direction would upset the equilibrium, yet it was difficult to know how exactly to maintain a sense of harmony.

Even Kandinsky had doubts about dematerialization – the dissolving of material form or, as Kandinsky later put it, 'the path from the external to the internal'.⁷⁵ When writing his 1911 treatise, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, shortly before experimenting with abstraction himself, he concluded that society was not yet ready for art stripped of all traces of mimesis: 'Purely abstract forms are beyond the reach of the artist at present; they are too indefinite for him. To limit himself to the purely indefinite would be to rob himself of possibilities, to exclude the human element and therefore to weaken his power of expression.'⁷⁶ Thus Kandinsky, like Victorian spiritualists, faced the problem of sublimation: refining away into something non-existent, reducing to unreality or going farther than the mortal mind can comprehend. With the sublimation of matter into spirit, art nears the limits of representation.

Kandinsky's internal conflicts – not only about the path his painting was taking towards abstraction, but also about the way he framed this transformation theoretically – become further apparent from a footnote in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*:

*Frequent use is made here of the terms 'material' and 'non-material', and of the intermediate phrases 'more' or 'less material'. Is everything material? or is everything spiritual? Can the distinctions we make between matter and spirit be nothing but relative modifications of one or the other? ... The discussion lies beyond the scope of this little book; all that matters here is that the boundaries drawn should not be too definite.*⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Hirsch, 'Editor's Statement', p. 97.

⁷⁵ Wassily Kandinsky, 'Point and Line to Plane', in ed. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo, *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art* (Cambridge, MA, 1994), pp. 524–700, p. 671.

⁷⁶ Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. M.T.H. Sadler (New York, 1977). This treatise was first published in German in late 1911 but dated 1912.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9. The similarity between Kandinsky's language and that of the spiritualists may be due to the fact that Kandinsky was reading British Theosophical texts – namely, Annie Besant's and C.W. Leadbeater's *Thought-Forms* (1901) – and Theosophy was a movement that emerged out of spiritualism. For Kandinsky's interest in Theosophy, see the now classic article by Sixten Ringbom, 'Art in "The Epoch of the Great Spiritual"', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 29 (1966): 386–418. While Kandinsky's art may look very different to Howitt's, another Victorian spiritualist medium, Georgiana Houghton, created abstract watercolours. On Houghton, see Tom Gibbons, 'British Abstract Painting of the 1860s: The Spirit Drawings of Georgiana Houghton', *Modern Painters*, 1 (Summer 1988): 33–7; and Rachel Oberter, 'Esoteric Art Confronting the Public Eye: The Abstract Spirit Drawings of Georgiana Houghton', *Victorian Studies*, 48 (Winter 2006): 221–32.

If Howitt's tracing paper serves as a visual embodiment of how permeable the barrier between matter and spirit can be, then Kandinsky puts words to this notion. While the spiritual served as a horizon of possibility that radically changed the course of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century art history, artists – Howitt among them – could not accommodate the spiritual without acknowledging their debts to materiality.