

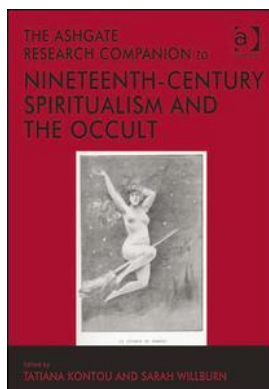
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William James: Belief in Ghosts

Christoforos Diakoulakis

I

*Can one, in order to question it, address oneself to a ghost? To whom? To him? To it ...?*¹

William James does not believe in ghosts; he does not believe in the survival of the spirit after death. His close friend and fellow psychical researcher, Richard Hodgson, makes yet another attempt to convince him otherwise in May 1906: 'I think you are very sceptical. If you can give up to it, William, and feel the influence of it and the reality of it, it will take away the sting of death.'² But James is unyielding. The fact remains: Richard Hodgson is dead; he passed away six months earlier, back in December 1905. And dead is dead. There is no such thing as spirit return. James tells him: 'I wish that what you say could grow more continuous. That would convince me. You are very much like your old self, but you are curiously fragmentary.'³ As much as he wishes it were true, James remains unconvinced that the words coming out of the medium's mouth actually belong to his deceased friend. He requires concrete proof and the only thing at his disposal is a jumbled text, whose origin is uncertain, whose truthfulness is unverifiable; a spectral voice, as such unbelievable. Hodgson insists: 'Yes but you must not expect too much of me, that I could talk *over the lines* and talk as coherently as in the body.'⁴ But James does not believe. He tells the ghost, unequivocally, he does not believe in ghosts, in him, in this. This is not happening.

It does not begin; it will never end: accepting and denying the ghost at once, striving to verify its existence, in order to dispel its ghostliness – indefinitely. Throughout his entire career, William James, the psychical researcher, the great

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (New York and London, 1994), p. 221.

² William James, 'Report on Mrs Piper's Hodgson-Control', in *Essays in Psychical Research*, ed. Frederick Burkhardt and Fredson Bowers (Cambridge and London, 1986), pp. 253–360, p. 326.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 336.

⁴ *Ibid.*

philosopher, will have done nothing else. Reasoning with the unreasonable, reckoning with the impossible, in disbelief before the unbelievable, all of his work is thus encapsulated, entrapped in this absurd, boundless little scene. In the first place, James will have been haunted.

It was only about a week after his death that Hodgson's spirit made its first (re) appearance during one of Mrs Leonora Piper's trances. By the time William James resolved to pay a visit to the famous medium, Hodgson had already manifested to plenty of their griefstricken friends and acquaintances, reminiscing on incidents from their common past, passing on messages to their common friends, supervising the handling of his private belongings, discussing the future of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) and overall convincing more or less everyone of his survival in death. As James writes, 'There was something dramatically so like him in the utterances of those earliest days ..., that those who had cognizance of them were much impressed'.⁵ James later recorded and discussed excerpts from a number of those sittings in what became his lengthiest and perhaps most interesting contribution to psychical research, the essay entitled simply 'Report on Mrs Piper's Hodgson-Control' and published originally in 1909 in the *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*. There, he also included, of course, a specimen of his own encounter with Hodgson's spirit. His report sets off thus: '(R.H. enters, saying: -) Well, well, well, well! Well, well, well, that is - here I am. Good morning'; William James exclaims: 'Hurrah! Richard Hodgson! Give us your hand!'⁶ An affectionate salutation, followed by a lively discussion, and just like that, the two men reunite across the greatest of distances.

But not quite. A ghostly shadow hangs over this reunion: that is, William James does not believe in ghosts. Even while addressing the ghost, James is not converted to the truth of its existence; the conversation that ensues is thus essentially haunted by his lack of faith in its very possibility. Derrida shrewdly observes: 'As soon as there is some spectre, hospitality and exclusion go together.'⁷ James is yet to be convinced. And so, after only a few minutes he interrupts his friend: 'But, R.H., listen a moment. We are trying to get evidential material as to your identity, and anything that you can recollect in the way of facts is more important than anything else.'⁸ The reunion is put on hold, as it progresses. The discussion is suspended while resuming; it resumes in suspense. As in the majority of Mrs Piper's sittings with a member of the SPR, the reunion of the living with the dead quickly regresses into an inquiry on its very possibility, into an effort to ascertain its own veracity. All that takes place thereafter is the impossible attempt to determine whether what takes place is actually taking place; impossible because it is already underway as such, as the questioning of its actuality, as the distrust of its eventness, already *there* as the search for itself - forever amiss. Trying and failing to arrest itself thus, the conversation with the supposed phantasm splits itself up and irrevocably

⁵ Ibid., p. 257.

⁶ Ibid., p. 323.

⁷ Derrida, *Specters*, p. 176.

⁸ James, 'Report on Mrs Piper's Hodgson-Control', p. 326.

phantomizes itself: at once present and non-present, actual and imaginary, living dead. Ghostly – *this* is not happening.

[R.H.] *William can't you see, don't you understand, and don't you remember how I used to walk up and down before that open fireplace trying to convince you of my experiments?*

[W.J.] *Certainly, certainly.*

[R.H.] *And you would stand with your hands in your trouser pockets. You got very impatient with me sometimes, and you would wonder if I was correct. I think you are very sceptical.*⁹

Richard Hodgson believed in spirit survival and spirit return long before he passed away. Before he became one, he already believed in ghosts. His conversion was in fact the result of his long-lasting investigation of the same Mrs Piper, dating from 1887, the year he moved to the United States from England and took over the American branch of the Society for Psychical Research. A specialist in exposing frauds, Hodgson was reluctant at first, thinking that the apparently supernormal knowledge that Mrs Piper demonstrated during her trances was attributable to some kind of trickery. Ultimately, however, he was persuaded that Mrs Piper had been transmitting messages from the dead all along. Ever since his conversion, Hodgson would tirelessly strive to convince William James of the spiritualist truth and gain his invaluable support; just as he does now. But James refused to share his enthusiasm, his unconditional faith; he would always get impatient with his friend. In his mind, all the evidence gathered by the Society, even if so often astonishing, was essentially inconclusive from a rigorous, 'scientific' point of view. In the absence of some tangible, concrete proof, James would elect to remain sceptical with regard to the existence of supernatural phenomena. Now, once on the other side, Hodgson is eager to meet with his old friend and present *himself*, the existence of his own spirit after his bodily death, for what should be his conclusive argument – finally, the proof that James had always asked him for. On his behalf, Mrs Piper writes:

*Now I want, – William, I want one thing ... I want you to feel intuitively and instinctively the spiritual truth, and when you do that ... you will find that I was not idling and was not spending my time on nonsense; and as I thought over all, as it came to me after I entered this life, I thought 'What folly! If I could only get hold of him!'*¹⁰

Now, he has finally gotten hold of him. Now, he thinks, James must believe. But James remains unconvinced. What is this, after all, but a mere text that replays,

⁹ Ibid., p. 325.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 336.

mimics, re-presents the past? Yet another living dead text, as such unverifiable, falsifiable: a phantasmal text. A ghost, it does not exist. *This* is not happening; not now.

II

Highly respected and influential as he was in his lifetime, William James could have hardly foreseen the impact of his work posthumously. Indeed, the scope of his legacy is incalculable: *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) constitutes one of the landmarks of modern psychology and, without a doubt, twentieth-century American philosophy would not have been itself without James's *Pragmatism* (1907). Never out of print, his books form an indispensable part of library catalogues and university curricula, supplemented by a constantly increasing number of critical studies. And yet, James's committed, lifelong preoccupation with the investigation of so-called supernatural phenomena and his many publications on all things spiritual, in the form of essays, addresses, reviews and letters, has never attracted as much attention. For many years, in fact, these publications were virtually inaccessible. As Robert A. McDermott reports in his insightful introduction to the *Essays in Psychological Research* (1986):

During his lifetime and for fifty years after his death, 'What Psychological Research Has Accomplished', a twenty-page essay written from 1890 to 1896 and published in The Will to Believe (1897), was the only publication by James on psychological research that a student of philosophy or psychology would have encountered. Most of James's other writings on psychological research were published within the semiprivate world of the Society, and consequently the controversial contents of these writings were little known even to the scholarly community.¹¹

Even in full view, however, James's *Essays in Psychological Research* remain obscured; his book on phantoms remains a phantom book. While the abundant recent research into the popular spiritualism of the *fin de siècle* highlights unfailingly James's prominent role in the formation of the American branch of the Society for Psychological Research and the legitimization of its pursuits,¹² very little effort has been put into reading his 'controversial' writings themselves and thereon considering their bearing on the Jamesian oeuvre as a whole. Generation upon generation, James's disciples have consistently regarded his involvement in the Society as a

¹¹ Robert A. McDermott, 'Introduction', in James, *Essays in Psychological Research*, pp. xiii–xxxvi, p. xxxiv.

¹² Interestingly, the most comprehensive review of James's career as a psychological researcher comes from a science journalist. See Deborah Blum, *Ghost Hunters: William James and the Search for Scientific Proof of Life After Death* (New York, 2006).

trivial caprice, unworthy of serious consideration.¹³ Even the foremost among them, who cannot but acknowledge the earnestness and the rigour with which James always treated the issue, devote disproportionately little space and effort in presenting and comprehending his viewpoint.¹⁴ Instead, they routinely confine themselves to reassuring us of James's overall scepticism, and to excusing him, absurdly enough, for occasionally falling victim to a few skilful charlatans and what was a fashionable trend among intellectuals of his time.¹⁵ Eugene Taylor's extensive research on William James's writings on psychical research is certainly a notable exception; however, in striving to demonstrate their supplementarity to James's more 'orthodox' psychological essays, instead, Taylor, too, ultimately undermines their significance.¹⁶

More often than not, complete studies of James's oeuvre make no reference whatsoever to spiritualism and the supernatural. Even more problematic, however, is that when they do, it is typically buried within their customary chapter devoted to his extensive work on religion, in effect conveniently and uncritically assimilating his views on the experience of ghosts with his respective views on the experience of God, even though James himself was cautious enough not to make a single explicit reference to spiritualism in the main text of his seminal *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). As a matter of fact, nothing is more important for an understanding of James's fascination with psychical research than the demarcation between the religious and the spiritual hypothesis. What they have in common, indeed, is that both are substantiated by subjective experience alone. What separates them, however, according to James, is that whereas the former is necessarily

¹³ Characteristically, none of the essays included in the authoritative *Cambridge Companion to William James* deals with James's 'controversial' writings. See Ruth Anna Putnam (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to William James* (Cambridge, 1997).

¹⁴ Setting the tone, Ralph Barton Perry, one of James's most loyal students, writes: 'James's interest in "psychical research" was not one of his vagaries, but was central and typical.' Of course, Perry already undercuts his own claim by enclosing psychical research in quotes. No wonder he ends up devoting a total of fourteen pages on James's 'central' and 'typical' interest in psychical research, out of his 1,600 pages comprehensive presentation of James's career. Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, 2 vols (Boston and Toronto, 1935), vol. 2, p. 155.

¹⁵ Jacques Barzun's otherwise brilliant introduction to William James typifies this tendency within the three pages it devotes to psychical research. His opening sentence introducing the subject reads as an abrupt, defensive retort to some phantom accusation or to the author's own embarrassment: 'James worked with "psychics" because he had no preconceived ideas about what the mind could or could not do.' Also, about Mrs Piper, Barzun comments: 'She convinced James and his wife that she possessed information that could not have been acquired in the ordinary way, but how she managed it was never resolved.' Now, whether Barzun means that it was never resolved how she managed to 'possess information that could not have been acquired in the ordinary way' or how she managed to 'convince James and his wife' that she did, that will never be resolved. Jacques Barzun, *A Stroll with William James* (New York, 1983), p. 239.

¹⁶ Eugene Taylor, *William James: On Consciousness Beyond the Margin* (Princeton, 1996).

unverifiable as such, and thus ultimately dependent on a moral judgement, the spiritual hypothesis lies rather in the hands of science, in wait of a resolution. Characteristically, in the essay 'The Will to Believe' (1897), James defends religious faith by replaying 'Pascal's Wager':

We cannot escape the issue by remaining skeptical and waiting for more light, because, although we do avoid error in that way if religion be untrue, we lose the good if it be true, just as certainly as if we positively chose to disbelieve. ... To preach skepticism to us as a duty until 'sufficient evidence' for religion be found, is tantamount therefore to telling us, when in presence of the religious hypothesis, that to yield to our fear of its being error is wiser and better than to yield to our hope that it may be true. It is not intellect against all passions, then; it is only intellect with one passion laying down its law.¹⁷

In his concluding remarks of the 'Postscript' to *The Varieties of Religious Experiences*, James reiterates precisely this justification of religious faith on hope.¹⁸ Now, it is in accordance to the same logic that one should rather remain sceptical with regard to the spiritual hypothesis. The existence or inexistence of supernatural phenomena remains, for James, a scientific question, and it is vital that it be treated as such. Regarding ghosts, the fearful passion must prevail:

But in our dealings with objective nature we obviously are recorders, not makers, of the truth; and decisions for the mere sake of deciding promptly and getting on to the next business would be wholly out of place. ... The attitude of skeptical balance is therefore the absolutely wise one.¹⁹

Indeed, James never stops appealing to this sort of serene scepticism throughout his *Essays in Psychological Research*. For instance, in the 'Confidences of a "Psychical Researcher"' (1909), he writes: '[M]y deeper belief is that we psychical researchers have been too precipitate with our hopes, and that we must expect to mark progress not by quarter-centuries but by half-centuries or whole centuries.'²⁰

William James does not believe in ghosts – no more than his discomfited disciples at least. Hence, the spectralizing marginalization of James's *Essays in Psychological Research* cannot be simply attributed to an all-too-familiar scholarly conservatism. That is to say, his work as a psychical researcher has been calculatedly and systematically outlawed despite the fact that he was never converted to spiritualism. While he so often reproached the orthodox scientific spirit for its dogmatic refusal

¹⁷ William James, 'The Will to Believe', in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York and London, 1897), pp. 1–31, pp. 26–7, emphasis in original.

¹⁸ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York, London and Bombay, 1902), pp. 526–7.

¹⁹ James, 'The Will to Believe', p. 20.

²⁰ William James, 'The Confidences of a "Psychical Researcher"', in *Essays in Psychological Research*, pp. 361–75, p. 362.

to even acknowledge the countless reports of ghostlike experiences and the vast, transcultural literature of the occult,²¹ James also – and as categorically – always dissociated himself from those who all too lightly, according to him, embraced these reports and these experiences as proof of higher forces at work in earthly affairs or of the spirits’ survival beyond death. On the contrary, up until his death James merely kept on calling for the unbiased, rigorous, empirical study of the entire field of experiences. His driving force was none other than his unlimited faith in the potential of psychological research, himself a leading pioneer in its gradual establishment as a distinct discipline on an equal footing with every other scientific department. Enthused by some of its recent achievements, such as the demystification of hysteric and hypnotic states, and especially inspired by what he always liked to call the most important ‘discovery’ in psychology, that of the subconscious,²² James joined the newly founded Society for Psychical Research as early as 1884, with the conviction that all the reportedly supernatural experiences were actually attributable to concrete and identifiable, albeit exceptional, states of consciousness and ultimately reducible to a reasonable explanation. ‘The Society for Psychical Research has been one means of bringing science and the occult together in England and America.’²³ Ghosts, he believed, had been haunting reason for too long; the time had now come to finally demonstrate that the paranormal is truly normal, the unbelievable believable. All in all, James’s phantom book reads in truth as one extended attempt to naturalize supernatural phenomena, to put the occult back on view. It constitutes, uncannily enough, an ardent forewarning against the very marginalization it would eventually fall victim to, a protest against its own destiny. For twenty-five years, James worked tirelessly to prove that ghosts do not exist as such; he worked tirelessly towards the despectralization of the spectres and their integration under the aegis of an unafraid, unprejudiced science. And yet, all that this work ever amounted to was the spectralization of itself. This is why James’s example is extremely instructive: it is a singular testament to an essential unreadability which characterizes unexceptionally every text written on, about and by ghosts – an unreadability which transcends the decree of a positivist refusal to seriously consider their existence – an unreadability that presupposes but is not identifiable with the sheer disbelief in ghosts. James’s example bears witness to the paradoxical economy of ‘belief’, to its ghostly effects.

Jacques Derrida writes:

There has never been a scholar who really, and as a scholar, deals with ghosts. A traditional scholar does not believe in ghosts – nor in all that could be called the virtual space of spectrality. There has never been a scholar who, as such, does not believe in the sharp distinction between the real and the unreal, the actual and the inactual, the living and the non-living, being and non-being

²¹ For example, see William James, ‘What Psychical Research Has Accomplished’, in *The Will to Believe*, pp. 299–327, pp. 300–302.

²² For example, see James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 233.

²³ James, ‘What Psychical Research Has Accomplished’, p. 303.

..., in the opposition between what is present and what is not, for example in the form of objectivity. Beyond this opposition, there is, for the scholar, only the hypothesis of a school of thought, theatrical fiction, literature, and speculation.²⁴

In order to uphold the limits of the 'real', the 'actual', the 'living', and in this manner preserve the possibility of knowledge, truth, identity and so forth, a scholar cannot, must not believe in ghosts. That ghosts do not exist constitutes, indeed, no less than reason's very foundation. What Derrida reminds us here, however, is that the disbelief in ghosts is insufficient in itself. What matters, above all, is that one does not *deal* with ghosts. No scholar 'really', no scholar 'as a scholar', ever 'deals with ghosts' – no scholar 'as such'. 'Scholars and phantoms make strange bedfellows', in Nicholas Royle's words.²⁵ If perchance one ever alludes to or even proposes some kind of ghostly experience, a scholar 'as such' must always assume that it is only from the virtual space of a meaningless, innocuous fiction; a figure, a metaphor, by definition outside the limits of – other than – serious discourse; indifferent to reason because in defiance of reason. Not without some irony, for sure, Roger Luckhurst concludes his admirable study on the history of 'telepathy' reassuring us: 'But no, in case you're asking, I don't believe in telepathy.'²⁶ Even if one happens to find oneself haunted by a ghost, 'as a scholar' one must always carry on pretending one hears nothing, sees nothing. Like Orpheus walking away from the underworld, he must never turn his head to look back at the living-dead Eurydice, but must carry on staring straight ahead and act as if she is not *there*. For his discourse to safeguard its limits, to be and to participate as such, a scholar 'as such' must maintain the absolute inexistence of ghosts at any cost. As soon as one opens oneself up to the ghosts, gives them speech and responds to their call, even if it is only to assert one's disbelief in them and order them to silence, it is already too late. Derrida exclaims: 'Of course they do not exist, so what?'²⁷ As soon as one opens oneself up to the ghosts, the 'I' that speaks will have always already turned into a spectral figure, a text of indefinable origin, repeatable, falsifiable, living dead, *in deconstruction*. To address and be addressed by ghosts is to become one.

This is then the principal lesson of William James's singular adventure into psychical research. His attempt to naturalize the supernatural, to despectralize

²⁴ Derrida, *Specters*, p. 12.

²⁵ In response to the same excerpt from *Specters of Marx*, Royle discusses the often misunderstood 'ascholarly' dimension of deconstruction: 'Derrida looks towards a new notion of scholarship, other spaces of intellectual thinking, spaces that can be called affirmatively spectral or phantomatic.' Royle's astonishing book itself exemplifies, in fact, this other 'kind' of scholarship of which he speaks, the kind of scholarship that Derrida's work as a whole has made possible. See Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester and New York, 2003), pp. 277–9.

²⁶ Roger Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy: 1870–1901* (Oxford and New York, 2002), p. 278.

²⁷ Derrida, *Specters*, p. 219.

the spectral, to reason the unreasonable, was bound to backfire. One cannot simply include within reason that which lies precisely beyond reason, and thus circumscribes reason. One cannot do so, unless one first takes a leap of faith outside reason, dissolves the 'distinction between the real and the unreal' and joins the ghosts in a boundless theatre of simulacra. But from there, one can no longer return. The disbelief in ghosts is equivalent to a fundamental, originary adherence to reason as such, and it is therefore impossible to validate *through* reason; that is, the disbelief in ghosts is an act of faith, as unjustifiable as the belief in ghosts. One cannot disprove the supernatural anymore than one can prove it. And to fearlessly confront the ghosts, as James did, is as unreasonable as to guilelessly venerate them. James himself ultimately did recognize the hopelessness and the absurdity of the 'scientific psychical research' he had once envisioned. After two and a half decades of diligent study on the supernatural, James was forced to concede that to disbelieve in ghosts is no less impossible than to believe in them; because, to deny that ghosts exist, to refuse that they are really there, is at the same time and by the same token to admit that they are there – invisible, absent; *there*, haunting.

James submits:

For twenty-five years I have been in touch with the literature of psychical research, and have had acquaintance with numerous 'researchers'. I have also spent a good many hours (though far fewer than I ought to have spent) in witnessing (or trying to witness) phenomena. Yet I am theoretically no 'further' than I was at the beginning; and I confess that at times I have been tempted to believe that the creator has eternally intended this department of nature to remain baffling, to prompt our curiosities and hopes and suspicions all in equal measure, so that although ghosts, and clairvoyances, and raps and messages from spirits, are always seeming to exist and can never be fully explained away, they also can never be susceptible of full corroboration.²⁸

In his short essay entitled 'The Confidences of a "Psychical Researcher"', written only a few months before his death, William James reviews his experiences as a member of the Society for Psychical Research and admits that, despite all the effort he has put into the study of supernatural phenomena, he has failed to arrive at any positive conclusions. His aspiration to dis/prove the existence of ghosts and reason with them has fallen flat: he could not 'explain them away' – get rid of them once and for all. A perpetual 'bafflement' then, an infinite undecidability, is his final verdict: ghosts do not exist, but neither do they not exist; they are there, without being there; there are ghostly effects; but there is no such thing as ghosts. James does not believe in ghosts; but he remains haunted. Thirteen years earlier he was writing:

Any hypothesis [is] either live or dead. A live hypothesis is one which appeals as a real possibility to him to whom it is proposed. ... The maximum of

²⁸ James, 'The Confidences of a "Psychical Researcher"', pp. 361–2.

*liveness in an hypothesis means willingness to act irrevocably. Practically, that means belief; but there is some believing tendency wherever there is willingness to act at all.*²⁹

So, the hypothesis of ghosts, of what is both alive and dead, neither alive nor dead, oscillates exactly at the very middle of this scale, both alive and dead, neither alive nor dead; just like a ghost. *There*, in reason's blind-spot, no willingness to act ensues, yet an uncanny premonition persists; *there* remains a belief 'in something', in quotation marks, that is, in nothing. Indeed, only a few pages after he has affirmed his firm indecisiveness, James now confesses he actually can't help but 'find myself believing that there is "something in" these never ending reports of physical phenomena, although I haven't yet the least positive notion of the something'.³⁰ Before the hypothesis of ghosts' existence, against one's will – or, more accurately, irrespective of one's will – one can only surrender to a cold belief. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James writes: 'All we know is that there are dead feelings, dead ideas, and cold beliefs, and there are hot and live ones.'³¹ The curious syntax of the sentence with the double conjunctive is revealing: as if 'cold beliefs' lie in between the 'dead' and the 'living', neither the one nor the other. James concludes, the spectral remains spectral; ghosts remain ghostly, the normal still parasitized by the supernormal. James remains haunted: his 'bafflement' is in fact the mirror image of a spectre. 'The very possibility of haunting is haunting', as Marc Redfield writes.³² James's proclaimed resolute irresoluteness *is* essentially an unreserved, unqualified affirmation. James does not believe in ghosts; and he declares: 'I wish to go on record for ... *the presence*, in the midst of all the humbug, of *really supernormal knowledge*.'³³ There is his final word within his final word, the timeless echo of a plea that always returns, always comes back – now.³⁴

Always ignored. Another spectral voice pleads to be trusted, to be taken *at its word*; but the scholar remains unconvinced. Just like James himself when addressed by Hodgson's spirit, the scholar, 'as a scholar', resolves that this is nothing but a text, its intent and its bearing unverifiable: *this* is not happening. Unlike James, however, he is wise enough not to interrogate the ghost; instead he rather would not give speech to the ghost at all. He can hear it talking to him, for sure; he is well haunted by the ghost, but he still refuses to acknowledge it; everything is still as it

²⁹ James, 'The Will to Believe', pp. 2–3.

³⁰ James, 'The Confidences of a "Psychical Researcher"', p. 371.

³¹ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 197.

³² Marc Redfield, 'Spectral Romanticisms', *European Romantic Review*, 9.2 (Spring 1998): 271–3, p. 271.

³³ James, 'The Confidences of a "Psychical Researcher"', p. 372, emphasis in original.

³⁴ The question of belief is ultimately the question of the 'last word': when does one's belief, James's for example, become itself present to itself, solid and permanent, recognizable as such 'from this time forth' – a fact? When does the text, William James's text for example, ceaselessly reread, arrest itself, arrive as the truth of itself? The 'last word' is all that matters to the scholar 'as such' when all is said and done.

is supposed to be. William James does not believe in ghosts. He does not believe that he believes in ghosts.

III

Discussing James's writings on the supernatural in relation to 'his entire system of thought', Janet Oppenheim insightfully observes:

James's relationship with the SPR was very much a reciprocal one. In general, his sweeping rejection of determinism, as applied to humanity, strengthened the Society's theoretical position when it insisted that mechanistic doctrines could not fathom all the secrets of the Universe. ... His acquaintance with Mrs Piper convinced him of the reality of supernormal powers. That minds could communicate telepathically became for him a demonstrated fact, and it was critically significant for his entire system of thought that he believed the insufficiency of 'mechanical categories' had thus been revealed by empirical proof.³⁵

Certainly, the allure of spiritualist experimentation during the latter half of the nineteenth century was not unrelated to the then prevalent scientism and positivism and its pronounced aversion to spectrality. In place of the superstitious and oversimplifying resignation before the unknown, the scientific orthodoxy of James's day posited with ever-increasing stringency the uniformity of natural law and the lawful coherence of the universe; and, in place of abstract and obscure speculation, it advocated the almighty aptitude of systematic empirical research. A sovereign, enlightened reason dictated: nothing is inexplicable – no more ghosts. During his studies in the 1860s and while in search of his own calling, William James found it nevertheless extremely difficult to abide by such a maxim unconditionally. His reluctance, however, was neither in the name of ghosts, as was indeed for many of his contemporaries, nor in the name of God – the ghost of all ghosts according to Marx – but actually in the name of reason as such. In the promise of an all-encompassing, omniscient science in command of a presumably deterministic universe, his astute spirit sensed a threat instead to the very authority and autonomy of reason. The problem tormenting young James was not new, of course; in fact, it went all the way back to Aristotle and Epicurus. At its most concise, Lucretius put it thus:

Moreover, if all movements are invariably interlinked, if new movement arises from the old in unalterable succession, if there is no atomic swerve to initiate movement that can annul the decrees of destiny and prevent the

³⁵ Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychological Research in England, 1850–1914* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 265.

*existence of an endless chain of causation, what is the source of this free will possessed by living creatures all over the earth?*³⁶

In light of the rapid scientific advancements in the Western world and the Darwinian demystification of existence, Lucretius's question was now returning, ever more pressing, like a ghost one could no longer ignore: insofar as everything is reducible to a calculable cause, then human consciousness must be likewise externally determinable; insofar as existence in its entirety conforms to natural law, then human beings too are nothing but mere spectres, living dead in a predetermined world; and insofar as nothing can alter the shape and the course of this world, then free will is an illusion and one's every act and deliberation is futile after all. As his diary confirms, James was haunted precisely by thoughts of this sort: 'When I have felt like taking a free initiative, like daring to act originally, without carefully waiting for contemplation of the external world to determine all for me, suicide seemed the most manly form to put my daring into.'³⁷

In light of all this, to say that Charles Renouvier was a major influence in the formation of James's thought would be a major understatement. The impact of the French philosopher's work on his young American partisan back in 1870, while in a 'state of philosophic pessimism and general depression of spirits about [his] prospects',³⁸ was actually more akin to a religious conversion. James acknowledged his incalculable debt to Renouvier, dedicating to him his posthumous *Some Problems of Philosophy*: 'He was one of the greatest of philosophic characters, and but for the decisive impression made on me in the seventies by his masterly advocacy of pluralism, I might never have got free from the monistic superstition under which I had grown up.'³⁹ Although James's work is far too intricate to allow for sweeping generalizations, it would not be wholly out of place to identify Renouvier's writing as the determinative catalyst of James's thought and the faith that Renouvier inspired in him as the very foundation of his multifaceted oeuvre, from the 'Are We Automata?' of 1872, and all the way to the *Pluralistic Universe* of 1909 and beyond. James's long diary entry on 30 April 1870, which Robert D. Richardson so vividly reconstructs in a distinct chapter of his *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism*, reads indeed as the inauguration of that remarkable intellectual journey undertaken by one of the most innovative thinkers in American history:

I think that yesterday was a crisis in my life. I finished the first part of Renouvier's 2nd Essay and saw no reason why his definition of free will – the sustaining of a thought because I choose to when I might have other thoughts – need be the definition of an illusion. ... My first act of free will

³⁶ Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, ed. and trans. Martin Ferguson Smith (Indianapolis and Cambridge, 1969), p. 41.

³⁷ William James quoted in Robert D. Richardson, *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism* (New York, 2007), p. 120.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

³⁹ William James, *Some Problems of Philosophy* (New York and London, 1911).

*shall be to believe in free will. ... Not in maxims, not in Anschauungen, but in accumulated acts of thought lies salvation.*⁴⁰

James's commitment to the primacy of individual experience over objective knowledge, of faith over absolute truth, is evident throughout his revolutionary *Principles of Psychology* (1890). However, it was in the essay entitled 'The Dilemma of Determinism' that his fundamental intellectual breakthrough eventually found its most faithful expression. Originally written in 1884, the same year he joined the Society for Psychical Research, this is undoubtedly James's ghostliest, most audacious essay, grounding his intuitive rebellion to scientific dogmatism into a groundbreaking philosophical thesis. James sets off outright dismissing the entire history of philosophy on the problem of free will as 'a quagmire of evasion under which the real issue of fact has been entirely smothered'.⁴¹ And the 'fact', he affirms, is that from reason's standpoint free will is simply untenable. The fundamental principle of reason – namely, that nothing happens by chance – negates the ipseity of human consciousness, the notion that man is the origin of his own thoughts and can thus independently determine his own fate and intervene in the course of the universe. Of course, 'chance is something the notion of which no sane mind can for an instant tolerate in the world'.⁴² But 'indeterminate future volitions do mean chance. Let us not fear to shout it from the house-tops if need be.'⁴³ What is one left with then, James asks us now, echoing Renouvier, but the will to defy reason, to murder reason instead, in order to save oneself? What is one left with but the will to believe, in chance, in the irrational, in the paranormal, to believe in the unbelievable?

*That 'chance' whose very notion I am exhorted and conjured to banish from my view of the future as the suicide of reason concerning it, that 'chance' is – what? Just this, – the chance that in moral respects the future may be other and better than the past has been. This is the only chance we have any motive for supposing to exist. Shame, rather, on its repudiation and its denial! For its presence is the vital air which lets the world live, the salt which keeps it sweet.*⁴⁴

Of course, James will be the first to admit, chance/free will does not exist as such. It is impossible to demonstrate and substantiate what goes against reason: 'But you will remember that I expressly repudiated ... the pretension to offer any arguments which could be coercive in a so-called scientific fashion in this matter.'⁴⁵ Chance is

⁴⁰ Richardson, *William James*, pp. 120–21.

⁴¹ William James, 'The Dilemma of Determinism' in *The Will to Believe*, pp. 145–83, p. 149.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 153.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 178–9.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

ghostly; and man is a spectre. All one can do is believe, believe in ghosts: 'the most anyone can do is to confess as candidly as he can the grounds for the *faith* that is in him, and leave his example to work on others as it may'.⁴⁶

Bold and provoking, one easily understands why James enjoyed such great popularity and quickly distinguished himself among his contemporaries. Even when, or especially when, the subject matter of his treatise was enormous and the stakes extreme, common sense was always his primary reference-point. For all his unparalleled eloquence, he was straightforward like no other philosopher was, and his arguments, as complicated as they occasionally might have been, would always shine with his charming, mesmerizing conviction. Most of all, however, it was James's consistent condemnation of a sterile intellectualism which resonated with his audiences. And to this – his uncompromising opposition to a self-absorbed philosophical rigidity, detached from individual experience – he also owes his recognition as one of the most prominent precursors of twentieth-century philosophy. But to this, of course, are also directed most of the negative criticisms that his work has received. Because, let us not forget, an even greater number of James's readers have always been particularly unsympathetic to his seemingly unsophisticated fideism. For the same reasons, ironically enough, that his devotees have chosen to repress his work on psychical research, his philosophical essays have been consistently met with fierce accusations of subjectivism, solipsism, relativism, nihilism and so forth. Reasonably disturbed, the academic world protests: what safeguards the limits of reality, of presence, once one lets the ghosts in? What becomes of the very notion of truth once one concedes the right to believe in the unbelievable, even worse, once one posits its inevitability? And, most importantly, what becomes of scholarly discourse as such, of the purveyor of truth? What separates philosophy from mere fiction, if its reach now extends to the unknowable, the unreasonable?

The theoretical implications of the Jamesian gesture, characteristically encapsulated thus in the 'Dilemma of Determinism', were cataclysmic to say the least. But if truth be told, as it turned out they were also more and more uncanny than James himself could have foreseen, graver than he would ever manage to contain. This is not to say that James ever denounced the essential premise of his thought, his gut instinct so to speak. On the contrary, his entire oeuvre may be read as an indefatigable, almost compulsive, elaboration of his proposed solution to that critical dilemma of determinism. Nevertheless, all his subsequent takes on it, formalized successively under an equally long list of '-isms', such as pluralism, humanism, meliorism and, most notably, pragmatism and radical empiricism, unfold indeed as one painstaking and often awkward response to this overarching charge of ghostliness by his critics, an ingenious, no doubt, yet fairly desperate attempt to somehow ground 'belief' *on* reason and not against it – in other words, to reassure his readers of his philosophy's thoroughness and scholarliness.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 176.

⁴⁷ Richard Gale's extensive research on William James illuminates the inherent and constitutive tensions in the Jamesian corpus. As Gale convincingly demonstrates, James's

Most noticeably, in the essay entitled 'The Will to Believe', written in 1896, James all too prudently backtracks from the radicalism of 'The Dilemma of Determinism'. His impassionate appeal to an unconditional faith in the ghost that is chance, in the name of free will itself, in the name of Man, is now amended and reinscribed as no more than a defence specifically of religious faith. Wrapping things up, James asserts: 'We have the right to believe at our own risk any hypothesis that is live enough to tempt our will.'⁴⁸ Of course; no scholar 'really', no scholar 'as a scholar', ever 'deals with ghosts' – no scholar 'as such'. And, renowned scholar that he has now become, James reassures us that his espousal of the 'believing attitude' is only pertinent to hypotheses 'live enough to tempt our will'. By all means, James comforts his discomfited readers, he does not advocate the belief in anything whatsoever, in superstitions and fictions, in ghosts and the paranormal; he does not abide by what goes against reason, what contradicts reality as we know it, facts as we experience them. If ever we were under that impression, we were simply wrong.

*The freedom to 'believe what we will' you apply to the case of some patent superstition; and the faith you think of is the faith defined by the schoolboy when he said: 'Faith is when you believe something that you know ain't true'. I can only repeat that this is misapprehension. In concreto, the freedom to believe can only cover living options which the intellect of the individual cannot by itself resolve; and living options never seem absurdities to him who has them to consider.*⁴⁹

Is it by chance that James evokes a literary character as the epitome of that regrettable misapprehension of his claims? Indeed, the aphorism he (mis)quotes, in order to quickly dismiss as untruthful, stems from 'Pudd'nhead Wilson's New Calendar', one of Mark Twain's fictive creations.⁵⁰ Once again, in order to ascertain that he does not believe in ghosts, James calls in fact upon a ghost. He gives the

work is an impossible attempt to devise a 'have-it-all' ethical scientism grounded on individual experience and belief, to reconcile an active and a passive orientation towards the world, to unify the 'Promethean Pragmatist' with the 'Anti-Promethean Mystic', as he puts it. See Richard M. Gale, *The Divided Self of William James* (Cambridge, 1999).

⁴⁸ James, 'The Will to Believe', p. 29.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Entries from Pudd'nhead Wilson's Calendar are used as epigraphs in each chapter of Twain's novel *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894), where Wilson figures as a minor character. Like a ghost, he returns, however, and his New Calendar now introduces in the same manner the chapters of Twain's non-fictional(!) *Following the Equator* (1897). Chapter XII's epigraph reads: 'There are those who scoff at the schoolboy, calling him frivolous and shallow: Yet it was the schoolboy who said "Faith is believing what you know ain't so."' The schoolboy to whom the quote is accredited is, of course, Wilson's own fictive creation. See Mark Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894; London, 1986); and Mark Twain, *Following the Equator* (1897; New York, 1989). It is worth noting that Twain was also an avid supporter of the Society for Psychical Research. For a discussion of his interest in telepathy, see Pamela Thurschwell, *Literature, Technology and Magical Thinking: 1880–1920* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 20–23.

ghost speech, and as if the ghost could listen, as if it really existed, James tells the ghost that it has got it all wrong. In yet another improbable encounter, James trustingly dissolves the distinction between fact and fiction, the real and the unreal, life and death, with the intention again to re-establish precisely the limit that keeps them apart. But by then it is already too late. To disbelieve in the ghost, to argue against the ghost, is at the same time to admit that it is *there* – haunting. And especially this ghost, whose words forever return, forever respond: ‘Faith is when you believe something that you know ain’t true.’ Yes, James knows, and once more he affirms, *this* ‘ain’t true’; *this* is not happening. He repeats to himself, indefinitely: this is nothing but a text, living dead, fabricated, unreal, untrue: nothing but a ghost. William James believes in ghosts. There:

Can one, in order to question it, address oneself to a ghost? To whom? To him? To it? ... The question deserves perhaps to be put the other way: Could one address oneself in general if already some ghost did not come back? ... they are always there, spectres, even if they do not exist, even if they are no longer, even if they are not yet. They give us to rethink the ‘there’ as soon as we open our mouths.⁵¹

⁵¹ Derrida, *Specters*, p. 221.