

InCarnations
Studi e prospettive
sull'Ottocento britannico

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La collana ospita monografie, raccolte di saggi, atti di convegni, edizioni critiche e traduzioni di testi che intrecciano un dialogo con il ricchissimo scenario letterario dell'Ottocento britannico. Se il termine allusivo *InCarnations* focalizza in primo luogo l'attenzione sul contesto dell'Estetismo e della *fin de siècle*, la collana accoglie studi che guardano al diciannovesimo secolo sia da un punto di vista storico-filologico, sia in ottica comparatistica, interdisciplinare, transculturale e legata alle sue molteplici rivisitazioni nella contemporaneità. Al fine di promuovere il dibattito critico e la disseminazione della ricerca, i contributi possono essere presentati sia in italiano, sia in inglese. La selezione e la valutazione delle proposte seguono le linee procedurali della blind peer review, condotta attraverso la collaborazione di esperti qualificati e membri della comunità accademica.

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Talking across Unbridgeable Distances

*Anglo-American Fiction
and the Theme of Supernatural Communication
in the Early Nineteenth Century*

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Introduction

In no time has Western society seemed to be more haunted by phantasmatic communication than throughout the nineteenth century. In 1848, in a small cottage in Hydesville, New York, the Fox family was spending yet another sleepless night due to the incessant rappings and knockings that had been relentlessly disturbing them for whole months, and whose origin they still failed to find out. On that particular night, however, the two young daughters, Kate and Margaretta, decided to adopt the communication style of the mysterious presences infesting the house and succeeded in establishing an interaction with them. When the clappings of the girls were answered by an equivalent number of rappings, they started to suspect that, behind these seemingly random noises, there might be an unseen intelligent entity whom they could engage in dialogue – and they did. It was the night of 31 March 1848 and it passed into history as the conventional ‘date of birth’ of Spiritualism.

In the following years, European and American societies witnessed a vertiginous spread of Spiritualist phenomena and practices – including table-turning, spirit possession of mediums, automatic writing, and even materialisations – and the desire to communicate with the dead turned into a real frenzy. People of the time were not unfamiliar with forms of communication across seemingly unbridgeable distances. Four years before the Hydesville manifestations, a wholly different kind of rappings had astounded the members of the Congress gathered in the chamber of the Supreme Court in Washington, from where on 24 May 1844 Samuel B. Morse sent his assistant Albert Vail (in Baltimore) the first message to be ever transmitted by electromagnetic telegraph. Besides directly influencing each other and the way they were conceived and presented to the public, Spiritualism and telegraphy both contributed to shape the nineteenth-century belief in the possibility of immediately

sending and receiving messages over the unfathomable gaps of geographically or metaphysically distant places, be they Washington, Baltimore, or the lands of the living and the dead.

The wish to stretch the boundaries of human communication and get in contact with the Other World, however, has been an aspiration of humankind since the dawn of time. From the oracles of ancient times to the ecstatic divine encounters of mystics, from shamanic soul journeys to demonic possessions, humans have always striven to find ways to reach beyond their world. The outbreak of enthusiasm for otherworldly forms of communication in the second half of the nineteenth century is less an exceptional, isolated phenomenon than a chapter of a much longer story that has its roots in customs, beliefs, and theories of the previous decades and centuries.

This book focuses on the fifty years preceding – and preparing the ground for – the advent of Spiritualism and, in particular, on the way in which communicating with the Other World was represented in coeval fiction. The emergence of the Gothic genre since the second half of the eighteenth century testifies to a particular interest in the interactions between the supernatural and earthly dimensions which predates the canonical year of 1848. Texts from English-speaking countries on both sides of the Atlantic, sharing a cultural and intellectual milieu, will be taken into account. Namely, *The Monk* (1796) by Matthew Gregory Lewis, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) by James Hogg, a number of tales by Edgar Allan Poe, and *Wuthering Heights* (1847) by Emily Brontë.

Like any communicative act, interacting with the Other World has its own obstacles and quandaries, made all the more challenging by the existence of a metaphysical gap between the ontological levels the interlocutors belong to. How can this abyssal distance be overcome, so that messages might be conveyed over the divide between different dimensions? How can contact with a being from ‘an-other order’ be established? And how can interaction occur when the assumed common ground is limited and the sharing of the same code doubtful? In order to answer these questions, and several others, two main methodological approaches will be applied.

First of all, the issues of otherworldly communication will be addressed from the general theoretical standpoint of linguistics. In order to see how this trans-dimensional interaction is made pos-

sible in the first place, particular attention will be devoted to the initial moment of the communicative exchange, that is, to the way in which a physical and psychological channel between the interlocutors is created through the 'phatic function' of speech, in Jakobson's well-known terminology. After compiling a list of the conditions that are a prerequisite to establishing phatic contact, I will point out the specific problems that might arise in the context of communication with the Other World. I will also provide a taxonomy of the different strategies employed in the literary representations of supernatural encounters to fulfil these conditions. Through the lens of pragmatics, the 'relation level' of the communication will often be seen to prevail on the 'content level', bringing about significant consequences on the overall purpose of the interaction, which will prove less informative and more 'phatic' (this time in line with Bronisław Malinowski's definition).

Once this theoretical framework has been outlined, a closer look will be taken at how these questions might have been answered in the period when the selected texts were written. By having recourse to a cultural approach, I will focus especially on the complex and multifaceted notion of sympathy, which occupied a prominent position in many early nineteenth-century discourses. With all its ramifications – from magical conceptions to mechanistic scientific thought and social and aesthetic theories – sympathy as the 'ability to feel what others feel' must have appeared to the writers of the time as the ideal means to bridge the distance not only between self and other, but also between self and the Other. Various kinds of sympathetic dynamics will emerge through the literary works selected here, from the reaching of a degree of commonality between the interlocutors to a fuller achievement of a state of 'togetherness'.

The approaches of communication theory and cultural history will be joined through the mediation of the history of communication. In his seminal book *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (1999), John Durham Peters traces the evolution of the concept of communication throughout the centuries and highlights how, before the advent of Spiritualism and telegraphy, nineteenth-century views of communication were shaped by beliefs and practices associable with Mesmerism. Stemming from the contemporary discussions on electromagnetism and sympathy, Mesmerism, also known as 'animal magnetism', was a precursor of

many Spiritualist outcomes and its influence (whether explicit or not) can be detected in a number of our texts.

In summary, the present study aims to show how, for the authors of the time, tackling the theme of communication with the Other World meant confronting issues and questions that were central to salient cultural debates of the first half of the nineteenth century, such as the possibility to transcend the boundaries separating 'us' from 'others', or the dangers deriving from an unrestrained exercise of influence. In this way, new light will be shed on an aspect of the literary production of the period that has usually been overlooked in favour of a crucial focus on the Spiritualist vogue of the second half of the century. My approach may then also help to deepen our understanding of this phenomenon by placing it within a wider frame.

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2. Greta Colombani, *Talking across Unbridgeable Distances. Anglo-American Fiction and the Theme of Supernatural Communication in the Early Nineteenth Century*, 2023, pp. 200.
 1. Laura Giovannelli e Pierpaolo Martino (a cura di), *Wilde World. Una tavola rotonda su Oscar Wilde*, 2022, pp. 222.

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