

## HISTORICAL NOTES ON DOUBLES AND TRAVELLING SPIRITS: VIII: FREDERIC W. H. MYERS

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OF ALL THE EARLY RESEARCHERS of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) Frederic W. H. Myers (1843-1901) was the one who addressed the topic of the current series of papers in greatest detail.<sup>1</sup> At the time the excerpts presented below appeared Myers was already known for his publications in the SPR *Proceedings*. Among these were his articles about the subliminal mind (Myers, 1892b) and about such topics as automatic writing (Myers, 1885) and apparitions of the dead (Myers, 1892a).

Myers (1886) started discussing the topic of the present excerpt as an alternate explanation to Edmund Gurney's telepathic model of apparitions of the living, particularly of collective apparitions (Gurney, Myers & Podmore, 1886). In what follows I will present Myers' ideas as he expressed them in his *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* (1903). Here, and to some extent in the context of the phenomenon of apparitions of the living,<sup>2</sup> he referred to psychical excursion, an experience "involving some kind of perception as from a new standpoint, which perception may or may not include material objects in its purview" (1: p. 230).<sup>3</sup> Assuming this could take place, Myers suggested that "it is conceivable that this should involve not only the migrant spirit's perception *from* that point, but also perception of that point by persons materially present near it" (1: p. 232). Such space would be a phantasmogenetic centre, which was

different from a double. The centre was seen by Myers as a modification of "a certain portion of space, not materially nor optically, but in such a manner that specially susceptible persons may perceive it" (I, pp. xix-xx).

### Myers on psychical invasions, psychical excursions, phantasmogenetic centres and the psychorrhagic diathesis

Now one advantage of the conception of *psychical invasion or excursion* ... is that it is at any rate sufficiently fundamental to allow of our arrangement of all our recorded cases—perhaps of all possible cases of apparition—in accordance with its own lines. And even though there be many cases for which the metaphor of invasion seems needlessly strong, and the older metaphor of "telepathic impact" quite sufficient, yet these cases also, although in some sense less complete, will arrange themselves naturally in the same divisions.

Let us take A for the "agent", or the spirit supposed in each case to be invasive or excursive: P for the "percipient", the spirit which plays the more passive role, receiving and sometimes observing the visit of A. Naturally the agent is often—perhaps in reality *always*—a percipient also. He goes forth to acquire information as well as to give it; but his subliminal self, which makes this excursion, cannot always report the results to his supraliminal self—from whom we outsiders are forced to make our inquiry. His power of giving us information, indeed, is ... particularly liable to be cut short by his death.

We want, then, a scheme which is to include, on the lines of this conception of *invasion or excursion*, all observable telepathic action, from the faint currents which we may imagine to be continually passing between man and man, up to the point ... where one of the parties to the telepathic intercourse has definitely quitted the flesh. *The first* term in our series must be conveniently vague: the *last* must lead us to the threshold of the spiritual world. ...

I must begin with cases where the action of the excursive fragment of the personality is of the weakest kind—the least capable of [1: p. 254] affecting other observers, or of being recalled into the agent's own waking memory.

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<sup>1</sup> Myers has received some attention in recent years, as seen in Hamilton's (2009) biography, and in other writings (e.g., Alvarado, 2004; Kelly, 2007). I have summarized Myers's views about OBEs and apparitions of the living in a previous paper (Alvarado, 2009c).

<sup>2</sup> See a previous paper in this series (Alvarado, 2010a) as well as Gurney, Myers and Podmore (1886).

<sup>3</sup> This, and later similar indications, refer to the volume number of Myers' *Human Personality* (1903).

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Such cases, naturally enough, will be hard to bring up to evidential level. It must depend on mere chance whether these weak and aimless psychical excursions are observed at all; or are observed in such a way as to lead us to attribute them to anything more than the subjective fancy of the observers.

How can a casual vision—say, of a lady sitting in her drawing-room,—of a man returning home at six o'clock—be distinguished from memory-images on the one hand and from what I may term “expectation-images” on the other? The picture of the lady may be a slightly modified and externalised reminiscence; the picture of the man walking up to the door may be a mere projection of what the observer was hoping to see.

I have assumed that these phantoms coincided with no marked event. The lady may have been thinking of going to her drawing-room; the man may have been in the act of walking home;—but these are trivial circumstances which might be repeated any day.

Yet, however trivial, almost any set of human circumstances are sufficiently complex to leave room for coincidence. If the sitter in the drawing-room is wearing a distinctive article of dress, never seen by the percipient until it is seen in the hallucination;—if the phantasmal homeward traveller is carrying a parcel of unusual shape, which the real man does afterwards unexpectedly bring home with him;—there may be reason to think that there is a causal connection between the apparent agent’s condition at the moment, and the apparition [1: p. 255]. ...

In these *arrival* cases,<sup>4</sup> there is, I say, a certain likelihood that the man’s mind may be fixed on his return home, so that his phantasm is seen in what might seem both to himself and to others the most probable place. ...

But there are other cases where a man’s phantasm is seen in a place where there is no special reason for his appearing, although these places seem always to lie within the beat and circuit of his habitual thought.

In such cases there are still possible circumstances which may give reason to think that the apparition is causally connected with the apparent agent. The phantasm of a given person may be seen *repeatedly* by different percipients, or it may be seen *collectively* by several persons at a time; or it may combine both these evidential

characteristics, and may be seen several times and by several persons together.

Now considering the rarity of phantasmal appearances, considering that not one person in (say) five thousand is ever phantasmally seen at all; the mere fact that a given person’s phantasm is seen even *twice*, by different percipients (for we cannot count a second appearance to the *same* percipient as of equal value), is in itself a remarkable fact; while if this happens *three or four times* we can hardly ascribe such a sequence of rare occurrences to chance alone [1: p. 257]. ...

Impressive as is the *repetition* of the apparition in these cases, it is yet less so to my mind than the *collective* character of some of the perceptions [1: p. 260]. ...

The question of the true import of collectivity of percipience renews in another form that problem of *invasion* to which our evidence so often brings us back. When two or three persons see what seems to be the same phantom in the same place and at the same time, does that mean that that special part of space is somehow modified? or does it mean that a mental impression, conveyed by the distant agent—the phantom-begetter—to one of the percipients is reflected telepathically from that percipient’s mind to the minds of the other—as it were secondary—percipients? The reader already knows that I prefer the former of these views. And I observe—as telling against that other view, of psychical contagion—that in certain collective cases we discern no probable link between any one of the percipient minds and the distant agent.

In some of that group of collective cases which we are at this moment considering, this absence of link is noticeable in a special way. The agent may indeed be acquainted with the percipients. ... But there is nothing to show that any thought or emotion was passing from agent to percipients at the moment of the apparition. On the contrary, the indication is that there is no necessary connection whatever between the agent’s condition of mind at the moment and the fact that such and such persons observed his phantasm. The projection of the phantasm, if I may so term it, seems a matter wholly automatic on the agent’s part, as automatic and meaningless as a dream.

Assuming, then, that this is so—that these bilocations do occur without any appreciable stimulus from without, and in moments of apparent calm and indifference—in what way will this fact tend to modify previous conceptions?

It suggests that the continuous dream-life which we must suppose to run concurrently with our waking life is potent enough to effect from time to time enough of dissociation to enable some element of the personality to be perceived at a distance from the organism. How much of

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<sup>4</sup> For an arrival case see a previous paper in the current series (Alvarado, 2010a, p. 6). I have presented references for many other cases (Alvarado, 2003).

consciousness, if any, may be felt at the point where the excursive phantasm is seen, we cannot say. But the notion that a mere incoherent quasi-dream should thus become perceptible to others is fully in accordance with the theories suggested in this work. For I regard subliminal operation as *continuously* going on, and I hold that the degree of dissociation which can generate a perceptible phantasm is not necessarily a profound change, since that perceptibility depends so largely upon idiosyncrasies of agent and percipient as yet wholly unexplained. [1: p. 263]

One of Myers' most interesting ideas was that of a predisposition to produce apparitions of oneself while alive, which he speculated could be both physiological and psychological. "Psychorrhagy" was defined by him in his glossary as: "A special idiosyncrasy which tends to make the phantasm of a person easily perceptible; the breaking loose of a psychical element, definable mainly by its power of producing a phantasm, perceptible by one or more persons, in some portion of space" (I, p. xx). Some elements of this idea were presented before by others. For example, Jung-Stilling, who I discussed in a previous paper (Alvarado, 2009a), stated that there could be individuals "to whom this detachment is a very easy matter" (Jung-Stilling, 1808/1834, p. 79). He also speculated on a particular case in which the appearer may have had "the capability, either from nature, or by some secret means, or by both, to detach his soul at pleasure" (p. 80).

Another idea along these lines came from English spiritualist and publisher William H. Harrison. He suggested that some individuals "are so physiologically constituted, that their spirits are not infrequently seen in the place to which their thoughts are directed" (Harrison, 1879, p. 161). Interestingly, German philosopher Carl du Prel (1888) referred to a "disposition of the nervous system" (p. 211) related to these phenomena.<sup>5</sup>

That special idiosyncrasy on the part of the agent which tends to make his phantasm easily visible has never yet, so far as I know, received a name, although for convenience sake it certainly needs one. I propose to [1: p. 263] use the Greek word ψυχόρραγῶν, which means strictly "to let the soul break loose", and from which I form the

words *psychorrhagy* and *psychorrhagic*, on obvious analogies. When I say that Mrs. Beaumont or Mr Williams,<sup>6</sup> ... were born with the *psychorrhagic diathesis*, I express what I believe to be an important fact, physiological as well as psychological. ... That which "breaks loose" on my hypothesis is not (as in the Greek use of the word) the whole principle of life in the organism; rather it is some psychical element probably of very varying character, and definable mainly by its power of producing a phantasm, perceptible by one or more persons, in some portion or other of space. I hold that this phantasmogenetic effect may be produced either on the mind, and consequently on the brain of another person—in which case he may discern the phantasm somewhere in his vicinity, according to his own mental habit or prepossession—or else directly on a portion of space, "out in the open", in which case several persons may simultaneously discern the phantasm in that actual spot.

Here Myers analyzed the case of Canon Bourne (I: 651-653). This involved a father and two daughters who went out hunting. The daughters went back to the house without the father. Then, at one point the daughters (and a coachman) saw the father at a distance riding his horse and waving his hat at them. The coachman believed Bourne had an accident because the horse looked muddy. One of the sisters said that her father waved his hat at them and she saw the mark of the hat's make inside it, something that was not possible at a distance. On approaching Bourne they lost sight of him and only encountered him later when they went back to their house. The father assured them he had not been where he was seen and that he had not waved at them and had not had an accident of any sort. Myers stated:

Let us apply the view to one of our most bizarre and puzzling cases—that of Canon Bourne. ... Here I conceive that Canon Bourne, while riding in the hunting-field, was also subliminally dreaming of himself (imagining himself with some part of his submerged consciousness) as having had a fall, and as beckoning to his daughters—an incoherent dream indeed, but of a quite ordinary type. I go on to suppose that, Canon Bourne being born with the psychorrhagic diathesis, a certain psychical element so far detached itself from his organism as

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<sup>5</sup> I owe du Prel's reference to Michael Nahm.

<sup>6</sup> These are the presumed agents in cases cited by Myers (I, pp. 646-651).

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to affect a certain portion of space—near the daughters of whom he was thinking—to affect it, I say, not materially nor even optically, but yet in such a manner that to a certain kind of immaterial and non-optical sensitivity a phantasm of himself and his horse became discernible. His horse was of course as purely a part of the phantasmal picture as his hat. The non-optical distinctness with which the words printed inside his hat were seen indicates that it was some inner non-retinal vision which received the impression from the phantasmogenetic centre. ...

That explanation, indeed, suffers from the complexity and apparent absurdity inevitable in dealing with phenomena which greatly transcend known laws; but on the other hand it does in its way colligate Canon Bourne's case with a good many others of odd and varying types. Thus these appearances ... are in my view exactly parallel to the *hauntings* ascribed to departed spirits. There also we find a psychorrhagic diathesis—a habit or capacity on the part of certain spirits of detaching some psychical element in such [1: p. 264] a manner as to form a phantasmal picture, which represents the spirit as going through some dream-like action in a given place.

The phantasmogenetic centre may thus, in my view, be equally well produced by an incarnate or by a discarnate spirit.

These psychorrhagic cases are also, I think, important as showing us the earliest or feeblest stages of self-projection—where the dissociation belongs to the dream-stratum—implicating neither the supraliminal will nor the profounder subliminal strata. ...

And now let us pass on from these psychorrhagic cases, which hardly concern anybody beyond the phantom-begetter himself—and do not even add anything to his own knowledge—to cases where there is some sort of communication from one mind to another, or some knowledge gained by the excursive spirit.

It is impossible to arrange these groups in one continuous logical series. But, roughly speaking, the degree in which the psychical collision is *recollected* on either side may in some degree indicate its *intensity*, and may serve as a guide to our provisional arrangement.

And following this scheme I shall begin with a group of cases which seem to promise but little information,—cases, namely, where A, the agent, in some way impresses or invades P, the percipient,—but nevertheless neither A nor P retains in supraliminal memory any knowledge of what has occurred.

Now to begin with we shall have no difficulty in admitting that cases of this type are likely often to occur. The psychical *rapprochement* of telepathy

takes place, *ex hypothesi*, in a region which is subliminal for both agent and percipient, and from whence but few and scattered impressions rise for either of them above the conscious threshold. Telepathy will thus probably operate far more continuously than our scattered glimpses would in themselves suggest.

But how can we outside inquirers know anything of telepathic incidents which the principals themselves fail altogether to remember?

In ordinary life we may sometimes learn from bystanders incidents which we cannot learn from the principals themselves. Can there be bystanders who look on at a psychical invasion?

The question is of much theoretical import. On my view that there is a real transference of something from the agent, involving an alteration of some kind in a particular part of space, there might theoretically be some bystander who might discern that alteration in space more clearly than the person for whose benefit, so to say, the alteration was made. If, on the other hand, what has happened is merely a transference of some impulse “from mind to mind”;—then one can hardly understand how any mind except the mind aimed at could perceive the telepathic impression. Yet, in *collective* cases, persons in whom the agent feels no interest, nay, of whose presence along with the intended percipient he is not aware, do in fact receive the impression in just the same way as that intended [1: p. 265] percipient himself [1: p. 266]. ...

Myers then went on to discuss cases in which the agent remembered having an experience.

And here I note a gradual transition to the next large class of cases on which I am about to enter. I am about to deal with *telaesthesia*;—with cases where an agent-percipient—for he is both in one—makes a clairvoyant excursion (of a more serious type than the mere psychorrhagies already described), and brings back some memory of the scene which he has psychically visited. Now, of course, it may happen that he fails to bring back any such memory, or that if he *does* bring it back, he tells no one about it. In such cases, just as in the telepathic cases of which I have just spoken, the excursive phantom may possibly be observed by a bystander, and the circumstances may be such as to involve some coincidence which negatives the supposition of the bystander's mere subjective fancy [1, p. 270]. ...

The cases which I have lately been recounting can be called *telaesthetic* only by courtesy. There has been a psychical excursion, with its possibilities of clairvoyance; but the excursive

element has not brought home any assignable knowledge to the supraliminal personality [1: p. 275].

Myers discussed cases of this type.

We now come ... to that class of cases where B invades A. and A perceives the invasion; but B retains no memory of it in supraliminal life. From one point of view, as will be seen, this is just the reverse of the class last discussed—where the invader remembered an invasion which the invaded person (when there was one) did not perceive.

We have already discussed some cases of this sort which seemed to be *psychorrhagic*—to have occurred without will or purpose on the part of the invader. What we must now do is to collect cases where there may probably have been some real projection of will or desire on the invader's part, leading to the projection of his phantasm in a manner recognisable by the distant friend whom he thus invades—yet without subsequent memory of his own. These cases will be intermediate between the *psychorrhagic* cases already described and the *experimental* cases on which we shall presently enter [1: p. 286]. ...

Of still greater interest is the class which comes next in order in my ascending scale of apparent *intensity*; the cases, namely, where there is recollection on both sides, so that the experience is *reciprocal*. ... They deserve study, for it is by noting under what circumstances these spontaneously reciprocal cases occur that we have the best chance of learning how to produce them experimentally. ...

It is plain that just as we are not confined to noting small spontaneous telepathic transferences when they occur, but can also endeavour to reproduce them by experiment, so also we can endeavour to reproduce experimentally these [1: p. 291]. ... more advanced telepathic phenomena of the invasion of the presence of the percipient by the agent. It is to be hoped, indeed, that such experiment may become one of the most important features of our inquiry. The type of the experiment is somewhat as follows. The intending agent endeavours by an effort at self-concentration, made either in waking hours or just before sleep, to render himself perceptible to a given person at a distance, who, of course, must have no reason to expect a phantasmal visit at that hour. Independent records must be made on each side, of all attempts made, and of all phantoms seen. The evidential point is, of course, the coincidence between the *attempt* and the

*phantom*, whether or not the agent can afterwards remember his own success.<sup>7</sup> ...

Now the *experimental* element here is obviously very incomplete. It consists in little more than in a concentrated desire to produce an effect which one can never explain, and seldom fully remember. I have seen no evidence to show that any one can claim to be an adept in such matters—has learned a method of thus appearing at will ... We are acting in the dark. Yet nevertheless the mere fact that on some few occasions this strong desire has actually been followed by a result of this extremely interesting kind is one of the most encouraging phenomena in our whole research. The successes indeed have borne a higher proportion to the failures than I should have ventured to hope. But nowhere is there more need of persistent and careful experimentation [1: p. 292]. ...

It will be observed that in all these instances the conditions were the same—the agent concentrating his thoughts on the object in view before going to sleep. ...

In these experimental apparitions ... we naturally wish to know all that we can about each detail in the experience. Two important points are the *amount of effort* made by the experimenter, and the degree of his *consciousness of success*. The amount of effort in [two cases cited] ... seems to have been great: and this is encouraging, since what we want is to be assured that the tension of will has really some power. It seems to act in much the same way as a therapeutic suggestion from the conscious self ... It is therefore quite in accordance with analogy that a suggestion from without, given to a hypnotised person, should be the most promising way of inducing these self-projections. It should be strongly impressed on hypnotised subjects that they can and must temporarily “leave the body,” as they call it, and manifest themselves to distant persons. ...

That subsequent memory should be an eminently *educable* thing. The carrying over of recollections from one stratum of personality into another—as hypnotic experiment shows us—is largely a matter of patient suggestion. It would be very desirable to hypnotise the person who had succeeded in producing an experimental apparition ... and to see if he could then recall the psychical excursion. Hypnotic states should be far more carefully utilised in connection with all these forms of self-projection.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> I have presented an example of an experimental case in a previous paper (Alvarado, 2010a, p. 5)

<sup>8</sup> Myers mentioned the studies of Backman (1891). In this context it is also relevant to remember the

In the last section reprinted here Myers related self-projection to death.

In these self-projections we have before us, I do not say the most useful, but the most extraordinary achievement of the human will. What [1: p. 296] can lie further outside any known capacity than the power to cause a semblance of oneself to appear at a distance? What can be a more *central* action—more manifestly the outcome of whatsoever is deepest and most unitary in man's whole being? Here, indeed, begins the justification of the conception ... that we should now see the subliminal self no longer as a mere chain of eddies or backwaters, in some way secluded from the main stream of man's being, but rather as itself the central and potent current, the most truly identifiable with the man himself. Other achievements have their manifest limit; where is the limit here? The spirit has shown itself in part dissociated from the organism; to what point may its dissociation go? It has shown some independence, some intelligence, some permanence. To what degree of intelligence, independence, permanence, may it conceivably attain? Of all vital phenomena, I say, this is the most significant; this self-projection is the one definite act which it seems as though a man might perform equally well before and after bodily death [1: p. 297].<sup>9</sup>

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- <sup>9</sup> In his comments about a "vital faculty" Myers included a section about "Death; as an Irrevocable Self-projection of the Spirit" (II, p. 524). On the issue of death see one of the papers in the current series (Alvarado, 2010b).
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