idea journal

**fictions, fantasies, and fabulations:
imagining other interior worlds**

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this issue's provocation

While the world reels, reconfigures, and recovers from the drama and trauma of 2020, wishing to thwart the effects of grief and comprehend what was once incomprehensible, there is all good reason to turn our imagination to 'what ifs', dreams, and other speculations as an antidote to hopelessness. This issue, *Fictions, Fantasies, and Fabulations*, calls for contributions that consider the unlikely, improbable, or downright impossible in spatial design. In recent history, fictions, fantasies, and fabulations have offered productive opposition to the rampant instrumentality of pragmatism and functional planning. Their impact has instilled optimism, sparked alternative visions, and been sites of countless critiques of conformity and the status quo. Loosely defined impulses towards the unrealisable and the most illogical of things approached in the most logical of ways have led to unparalleled episodes of creativity in drawings, poems, and material production. From Piranesi, Peter Greenaway, Kurt Schwitters, Dora Maar, Hans Op de Beeck, Ursula Le Guinn, John Hejduk, to Daniel Libeskind, explorations of the impossible have led to new interpretative frontiers that move the limits of interiority and spatial practices. Lest we forget or become complacent with the contributory and often unrecognised impact of contemporary social media, advertisement, and technological surveillance that continues to shape interior worlds, experiences, and values. In many ways, there is as much focus on unpacking, making sense of, and disproving the dangerous impacts of fictions, fantasies, and fabulations as there is on setting the scene for dreams and magical realities.

This issue recognises the complex story of fictions, fantasies, and fabulations in spatial design, not as counter-productive forces, but as the necessary counter-balances that offer liberty from convention, propriety, and rational assumptions about behaviour, space, time, and material — the core elements of interior worlds. Far from retreating into solipsistic escapism, fictions, fantasies, and fabulations serve as crucial sites for speculative invention, futuring, and critical reflection. Resistant to the reductive inertia of pragmatism, these generative properties reign in that mercurial shadow world of meaning and value not directly associated with cause and effect.

This call for papers and projects is intended to frame an open examination and exploration of the fictions, fantasies, and fabulations in spatial and interior practices. It prompts us to draw, write, perform, and record the critical edge of the unrealisable in an era that has literally experienced the limits of reason. As described by poet Franny Choi, there is no more time for poetry without stakes because 'people are literally dying'. There is no more time for creative practices that don't ask questions that we 'truly don't know the answer to'.[01] Choi's sentiments air a sense of urgency for relevance as much as they point to the value and agency of poetic meaning and making in artistic, spatial, and interior practices.

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01 https://www.youtube.com/watch?list=PLYUdgQtOLXIc7HW_Ic3nBH7VNNvt5hDTA&v=iwoS--CB7k8&ab_channel=PBSNewsHour

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tempering grief through the victorian home's furniture and objects: the emergence of spiritual comfort

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abstract

This essay describes the emergence of spiritual comfort in the home by exploring how Victorian spiritualists formed an intimate and meaningful connection to the home's furniture and contents. Through their contentious beliefs and practices, believers of spiritualism transformed their living rooms into fantasy realms where the souls of their deceased loved ones continued to dwell. Through otherworldly interactions, the bereaved found solace in the place they experienced grief most acutely: the home. As a part of the discussion, I undertake an analysis of Morrel Theobald's book, *Spirit Workers in the Home Circle* (1887). In addition, I consider how Theobald used his manuscript to present scientific proof of the supernaturalist occurrences in his home, and a public platform to authenticate spiritualism as a truth claim. His primary motive in *Spirit Workers* was for spiritualism to be accepted as a reasonable way of life for the greater good of all individuals. I describe how Theobald jeopardised his reputation as a rational, reputable human being to promote his spiritualist agenda and how his phantasmagoric interiors played a role in proving spiritualism to be a legitimate and beneficial way of life.

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the spirited interior

The Victorian spiritualist interior was a fantastical place where disembodied souls animated household furniture to communicate with the living during the mid to late nineteenth century. Believers of spiritualism imagined that the home, with its ordinary furniture and everyday objects, was not solely accommodation for living family members. It was also a place for the spirits of the dead. Tipping stools, rapping tables, and levitating armchairs typified the kinds of otherworldly exchanges that might occur in the home if the atmosphere were conducive and the occupants receptive. Individuals from all walks of life revelled in the prospect of such 'spirited interiors,' as I have termed rooms affected by spiritualist animations.[01] For some participants, spiritualist experiments and practices like séances provided a thrilling form of entertainment (see Figure 01). For others — particularly individuals who sought to temper the pain experienced in grief and mourning — spiritualism provided a way to commune with deceased loved ones in a way that was emotionally satisfying.

This essay considers how Victorian spiritualist beliefs and practices informed the interior's status as a place of emotional recuperation and material comfort in mourning. The focus looks beyond the arrangement of the darkened séance room to explain how the prospect of communication with deceased loved ones encouraged grieving inhabitants to fashion an extraordinary connection to their

Figure 01.
Reproduced from Henry Vizetelly, *Table Turning and Table Talking*, 2nd ed. (London: Clarke, Beeton and Co., 1853), Inner leaf. Public Realm.

home's ordinary furniture and contents.[02] The outcome produced a kind of *supra-interior* whereby bereaved individuals formed an intimate and meaningful bond with their living environment. For this reason, I argue that the spiritualist inhabitant's distinctive, fantastical connection with their interiors contributed to the home's wider significance as a place of emotional comfort.

It is worthwhile noting that the inception of the modern spiritualist movement in America involved a claim by two young sisters, Maggie and Kate Fox, in 1848. They believed the tapping sounds they heard coming from their rooms were the communications of a salesperson who was rumoured to have been murdered in their home five years

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earlier.[03] The girls' assertion is significant because it highlights two important shifts in conventional thinking of the period. The first is that the soul or spirit could remain in the material world after death, rather than directly ascend to heaven — or hell — as conventional Christians believed. The second is that the contents of ordinary households, specifically the dining table, had taken on a new and fascinating role as conduit to an immaterial world of spirit life.[04] Spiritualist Morell Theobald's retrospective monograph *Spirit Workers in the Home Circle* (1887) reveals how the author called upon his home interior to heal his afflicted soul.[05] Theobald's *Spirit Workers* chronicles the supernatural experiences that occurred within his home over the twenty years prior to publication. In an elaborate account of his daily life, Theobald describes communication between the family's living members and their four disembodied spirit children. Like ordinary children, the *other* Theobalds enlivened their family home through their unpredictable yet welcomed activities. Their exploits included communication in séance, writing on ceilings and walls, cheerful play, and, most remarkably, household work.

Importantly, Theobald's story is a 'provocation' because he adopted a supernaturalist understanding of domestic life in mourning over a materialist one. His conduct refuted conventions of rational thought and the proper everyday running of his household. While his privatisation of grief conformed

to societal expectations, the phantasmagorical experiences he describes did not. Furthermore, he exposed his grief to a public stage by publishing his strange consolatory practices in *Spirit Workers*.

It is notable that Theobald invited public ridicule to prove that the practice of summoning spirits of the dead had the potential to '*benefit mankind*.'[06] Theobald's repudiation of normative domesticity was by means of 'truth telling' — a form of free speech that Foucault describes as *parrhesia*.[07] This verbal activity individualised Theobald, because the beliefs and practices he posited as truth stretched the limits of what was a possible way of engaging with the domestic interior within conventional culture. Theobald's divergence from hegemonic relations of power, knowledge, and subjectivity in the home was marginalising to himself, his family, and their supporters. Yet, he believed so strongly in the Spirited Interior's analgesic property that he placed his reputation at risk as a moral, rational being. Theobald's *parrhesiastic* condition as marginal speaker underscores his status as a visionary character. He looked to benefit the wellbeing of a family in mourning by extending the limits of credible domestic life through his spiritualist interior. In doing so, Theobald engaged in a normalising discourse of a different kind, one that sought to promote a 'fantasy life' as a reasonable one.

To explain what drove Theobald to defy social conventions, one should take into account the circumstances that made spiritualism appealing to him and other believers who shared his sensibility. Most notably, death in the Victorian family was a common occurrence, and the sentiment of pain in grief was experienced more intensely than it had been before.[08] This concentration of feeling, as historian Philippe Ariès has explained, 'led to an almost fanatical cult of remembrance.'[09] Commemorative practices made death more palatable for those at particular risk of sickness and death, as well as survivors.

The Victorian culture of commemoration allowed the private interior, as the prime setting for spiritualist experiences, to enter the public discourse on consolation, memory, and fashion. The development was buoyed by an attitude toward death that romanticised dying and constrained the experience and memory of death along certain lines. Enactments of *the good death*, which involved 'dying surrounded by one's family in a Christian home'; *the beautiful death*, which 'aestheticised' it; and *the theatre of death* whereby 'profound last words were uttered in the final moments of life', are common Victorian motifs. In addition, material artefacts provided individuals with reminders of the deceased. For instance, locks of hair spun into jewellery provided portable mementos of loved ones, and a solemn reminder of one's own mortality.[10] Spiritualism adapted these kinds of performative and material aspects of conventional bereavement to produce an enhanced consolatory experience in séance and daily life at home.

Victorian spiritualism was ultimately pushed aside by a pragmatic way of knowing and conceiving of the world, the home, and oneself, which was distanced from domains of spirituality and Christian faith.[11] This, however, did not occur without resistance from believers like Theobald. He noted that 'scientific men', particularly, had little tolerance for his spiritualist claims.[12] So, Theobald employed what he thought to be empirical measures to ensure his spirited home's recognition and acceptance by sceptics. In a culture that increasingly privileged reason, Theobald strove to prove the certainty of what was inevitably dismissed by many as a fantasy life. Despite the scientific community's opposition to spiritualism and the psychiatric approach to bereavement that eventually prevailed, Theobald may have been reassured to know that the spiritualist attitude to the interior as a place of emotional comfort survived.

Historian Judith Flanders recognises that today's home is a place 'where we find emotional sustenance' and where we can 'find literal, as well as spiritual, comfort.'[13] The examination of Theobald's book might contribute to the explanation of why we conceive of home in this way. I argue that the contemporary, emotionally sustaining interior described by Flanders as comforting was established in part through the historically specific practice of '*Spiritualism at Home*.'[14] I posit that the altered conception of the soul and future life as played out though the reception and handling of Victorian domestic furniture establishes a genealogical

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connection between the spiritual comfort of the bereaved in spiritualism, and the secular peace and contentment of the modern interior. Importantly, spiritualism's fantastical convictions about the home comprise a particular kind of self-nurture that draws not only on the resources of interior spaces, furnishings, and objects, but also on the inhabitant's own imagination. I believe the sanguine and personal connection spiritualists formed to their household furniture offers a significant contribution to the notion of physical comfort that is synonymous with the domestic interior of the nineteenth century and continues today.[15]

defining oneself through grief's misery: *making up* the spiritualist subject

> My wife and I had passed through years of sorrow; and as I look back upon the time I wonder at the unbroken hearts which we carried with us through various consecutive chambers of sickness, worldly trials, and bereavements. The darkest hour precedes the dawn; and while we two, after burying three little ones, sat wondering if these three whom we had lost, one after another, were lonely, and what was really the future into which they had entered [...][16]

It was not unusual that the Theobalds should lose three, and eventually four, of their children, two of them stillborn. Death among infants and children was a common

occurrence in the nineteenth century.[17] Although mortality rates were lower among the privileged classes, there was a certain democratic character to death. Death affected all people equally, particularly in terms of its impact on surviving family members. The 'unsettling effects of grief', as Reverend Henry Ward Beecher described them, did not distinguish between social status or religious denomination.[18] Of these non-discriminating circumstances, a consolatory article, written in 1846, explained, 'From the throne to the cottage, and from the monarch to the mendicant, through all the intermediate grades of society, all must enter the furnace of affliction, and be chastened by the rod of pain.'[19]

Enduring the loss of a family member, and especially a child, was most acutely and privately experienced at home. The Reverend Henry Ward Beecher wrote:

> Who ever gave an idea of the workings of grief in a parent's heart when for the first time Death comes and takes away a child? [...] The alternation of anguish and of utter stupidity, the outburst of grief or the deep inward pain that yield no tears and on which all words fall as the dust falls on flowers, to disfigure and burden; the calling voices in the night awakening one as in a trumpet, the troubled dreams, the dull and heavy mornings — who can delineate these?[20]

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The adversity of bereavement transformed the sufferer's emotional state and demeanour. Grief converted a contented soul into a sorrowful one. Another article observed that 'A great grief often changes the character so wonderfully that we are unable to recognise it again.'[21] Overwhelming sadness impaired mourners' capacity to partake in daily life. A grieving husband still had a responsibility to provide for his family; a bereaved mother had surviving children to care for, yet grief overrode the concern for oneself and others. The bereaved family member was a new type of inhabiting individual who was unable to bear the load of suffering.

Importantly, the Victorian sentiment of pain in grief was the signal by which individuals recognised themselves as objects of affliction. Attaining a state of 'happiness' or consolation to counter the experience of pain in grief was a goal for the home's new inhabitanting subject.[22] Grieving Victorians were counselled that '[n]ot the most afflicted but the most feeble 'die of a broken heart.'[23] Yet, surviving bereavement was a challenge for all. For the heart to remain strong, the soul to heal, and one's life to continue in a normalised way, grief needed to be managed.

While grief did not discriminate, the quest for solace reflected denominationally varied perceptions of death, the soul, and future life.[24] For example, evangelicals had been long counselled that 'God afflicts us for our benefit.'[25] Protestants commonly believed that 'time' was required to heal the soul.[26]

Meanwhile, Ariès explains that Catholic survivors were 'content to cultivate the memory of the deceased', and took solace in 'the conviction that they would be reunited in heaven with those whom they had loved and venerated on earth.'[27] Spiritualists, by contrast, did not wait for their own deaths to reunite with their departed kin. Rather, they sought them out through séance, mediumistic experiments with rings, puppets, hats, and music stools, as well as clairvoyant readings and other more spontaneous interactions in the home. The prospect held persuasive appeal for the bereaved. One believer explained that 'the anxieties and sorrows consequent on sickness and bereavement have been entirely removed by a knowledge of spiritualism.'[28] Knowing that a deceased loved one had re-entered the material world, as evidenced by animated household furniture and objects, offered a tactile and therefore superior form of consolation to grief-stricken inhabitants.

The expedient, comforting relation to the home's furniture and objects that the belief and practice of spiritualism provided was a compelling antidote to a sentiment of irreplaceable loss. Theobald explained that it was his 'privilege — sometimes a sad, sorrowful, and perplexing one — to have received an unusually extended range of spiritual phenomena in my own household.'[29] Spiritualism had made an anguished but timely entrance into the nineteenth-century home.

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comforting oneself at home through a belief in spirit life and work

Among spiritualism's fantastical convictions was the belief that household furniture was a conduit for communication with spirits. The thought enabled grieving spiritualists to draw on the resources of the interior and their own imaginations to craft a contented inner state for themselves and their homes. For sceptics, a belief that spirits exist and can occupy the home was replete with fiction and imaginative self-deceit. Yet, for believers, it offered welcome assurance of a loved one's continued presence in their earthly home and welfare in their future life. Home was the place in which a deceased family member's absence was most intensely experienced by those remaining. A spiritualist engagement with the interior, its furniture, and contents offered comfort, and provided a form of consolation par excellence in bereavement.

The following excerpt is taken from a book entitled *The Soul of Things* (1863) and is worthy of lengthy citation.[30] It forms a part of a wider discussion of *psychometry*, which involves the scientific study of the paranormal ability to discern information about an object's history, often pertaining to its owner.[31] The characterisation and tone of the passage communicate how rhetoric and writing style express the pain of grief, and, furthermore, how the interior, its familiar objects, and personal effects connect the bereaved to their loved ones:

Can you tell me, my friend, why it is that the room in which the loved one breathed out the last ray of earthly, organic life is still so very dear to you? What it is you so distinctly feel within those walls that reminds you of the loved and lost? Why, when you pass within its portals, your eye instinctively turns toward sofa, bed, and chair, as if you expected the same fond gaze to greet you now as it has often done before? [...] Nor are these sensations confined to the room alone. The clothing our loved ones have worn, the books they have handled, and, I may add, even the objects on which they have gazed with fondness and pleasure, have all a kindred power to reproduce sensations of their presence.[32]

Despite the author's interest in psychometry, the passage appears to be framed through spiritualist ideology. It describes the hyper-sensory quality of rooms, furniture, and personal items formerly associated with the deceased that could revive their presence in a way that was emotionally sustaining.

Spiritualists believed that such a visceral association with the home's furniture and contents provided disembodied spirits with the most logical and convenient means of communication.[33] After all, having previously resided in the home, the spirits knew the items well. As previously mentioned, the table particularly had become the spiritualists'

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primary means of communication. While any table would do, Henry Vizetelly's guidebook *Table Turning and Table Talking* (1853) offered advice about the most effective kinds:[34]

> The tables which have hitherto produced the best effects are those called drawing room tables, of moderate size, and an oval form [...] Tables having only one leg are also so much the better [...] The table should be wooden, no matter of what wood or what form, for experiments on mahogany, deal, oak, or fir tables, round or oval, have all equally succeeded. It is indifferent whether it be a folding one or not. Its weight is also a matter of no consequence [...][35]

Yet, experienced spiritualists found that interactions were not limited to tables, commonly featured in séances and occasionally levitating, as many Victorians had been led to believe. Vizetelly also described experiments with puppets, rings, hats, and music stools (see Figures 02, 03, and 04).[36]

Left, Figure 02.
Vizetelly, The Turning Table, p. 99.

Right, Figure 03.
Vizetelly, The Oscillating Puppet, p. 140.

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Figure 04.
Vizetelly, The Music Stool, 147.

In her monograph *There is No Death* (1891), prominent British spiritualist Florence Marryat described the intimate nature of spirit contact she had experienced through her varied personal effects such as 'a cardboard box, a gentleman's hat, a footstool, the strings of a guitar, and on the back of my chair, even on the pillow of my bed.'[37] Marryat describes the convenience, spontaneity, and intimacy of ordinary household items as a means of communication with departed loved ones.

Likewise, a substantial portion of the spirit communications Theobald experienced and recorded were integrated seamlessly into his family's daily life. Theobald considered these impromptu interactions differently from the variety that was encouraged through séance. Of the natural quality of these easy exchanges he wrote:

> About this time it was no unusual thing, when I stood up to carve the joint at the dinner-table, to have the table suddenly moved completely away from my reach and, upon my asking for it to be brought back to me, for it to return and push me back with it until I was tightly pinned to the wall! Frivolous? Very! [...] and we must bear in mind that this all mingled in naturally and *unsought* with daily life.[38]

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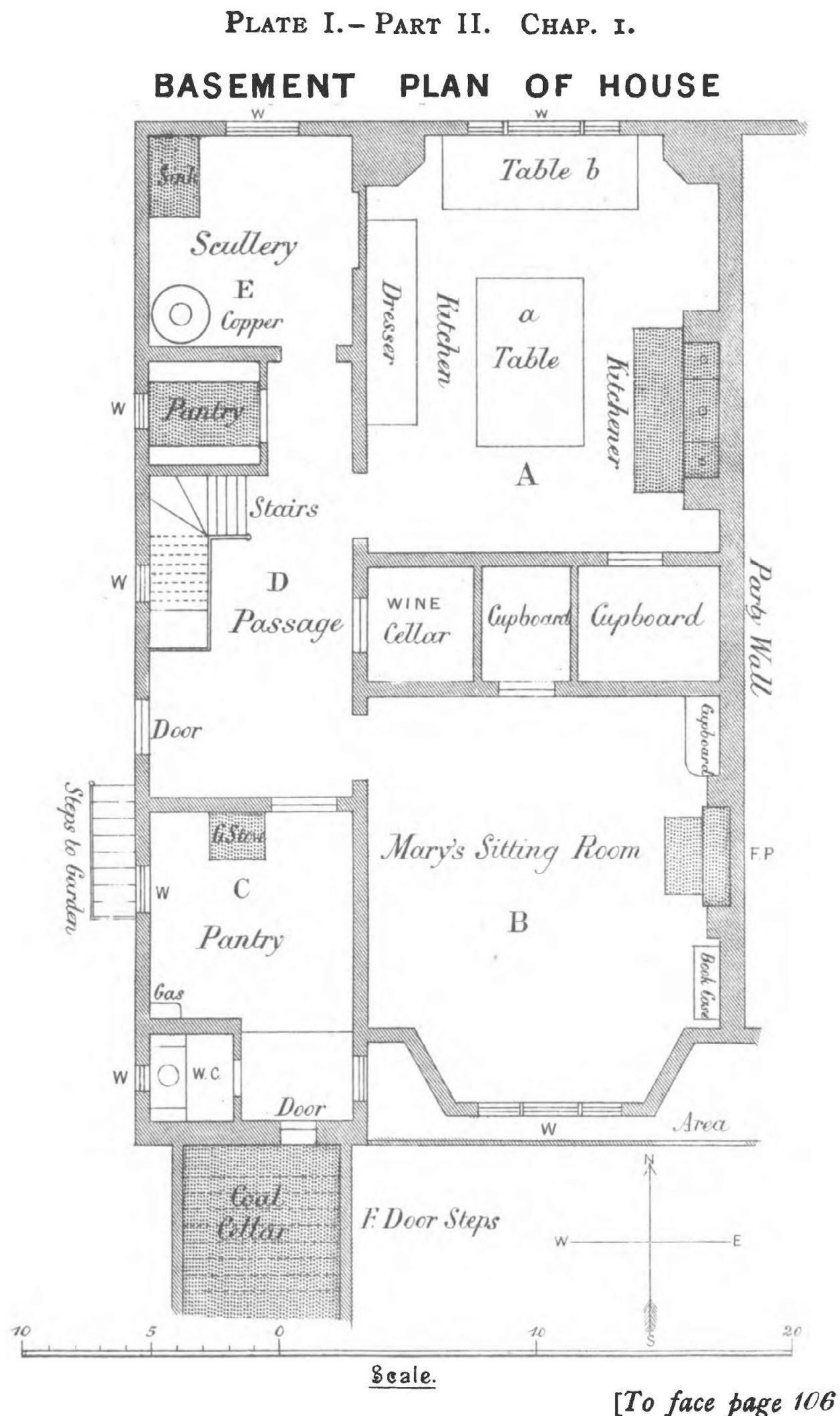home's furniture and objects: the
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Despite the sometimes frolicsome day-to-day activities among spirits that Theobald recalls in the preceding example, the spirit children's endeavours extended beyond childish play. As the book's title, *Spirit Workers in the Home Circle* suggests, housework undertaken by the spirits comprises a substantial component of the recorded events. Among the family and spirits alike, it was understood that the spirit children would contribute to household chores to assist the Theobald's mediumistic housekeeper, Mary. Mary would become physically exhausted by her mediumism, which rendered her unfit for her domestic duties. The spirits' undertaking of household work allowed Mary to rest and recuperate. She could then expend her energy on mediumism in séance, and enhance communications between the Theobalds and the spirits of their children. Theobald explains,

> Again we all — visible members and invisible — fell into our regular work. Household duties were often divided pretty equally between the two groups. The spirit friends seemed to take any amount of trouble to help, and especially so when physical strength had been exhausted [...] Invisible help was persistent, and real as the ordinary domestic help.[39]

However, the spirit children accomplished more than ordinary tasks in the household. By creating a 'condition of domestic peace and harmony', as Theobald described his home's atmosphere under the influence of spirit life, the spirits also provided emotional consolation and physical comfort.[40] Not only were the spirits making themselves visible to their grieving parents by animating household furniture and objects, but through household chores, they were reducing the toil of daily life and even indulging the Theobalds in small domestic comforts. Theobald explained that '[n]early every day was marked by acts of domestic service done by unseen friends, while not unfrequently puddings have been entirely *made and cooked* when all the family were sitting together on Sunday evening *en séance*.'[41] To further his point to his readers, Theobald traced '[o]ne week's phenomena (or rather a portion of them, for other phenomena and much writing also occurred).'[42] This was 'only a sample of what is now continually going on in our house, and I have reason to believe that similar phenomena are to be found in other private families.'[43]Theobald included a basement plan of his home to show the layout of the interior in relation to the paranormal activities he documented.

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Figure 05.
Morell Theobald, Plate I, Part II,
 Ch. 1, Basement Plan of House,
in *Spirit Workers in the Home
Circle: An Autobiographic Narrative
of Psychic Phenomena in Family
Daily Life Extending Over a Period
of Twenty Years* (London: T Fisher
Unwin. 1887), pp. 106–07.
Public Realm.

In *Spirit Workers*, Theobald contextualises the ordinary household duties his spirit children undertook, by situating them relative to the floor plan of his home.[44] In doing so, Theobald connects the comfort that came with knowing his spirit children were with him to the domestic interior, its contents, and the daily life within it.

Theobald's suggestion that readers look beyond proper 'household routine' to seek spiritualism's 'meaning and value' for themselves is tied to the spiritualist home's consolatory aspects.[45] Spiritualism undermined a number of cultural certainties, ranging from religious and domestic concerns to practical logic.[46] Yet, Theobald believed the personal benefits of consolation outweighed the socio-cultural risks that accompanied the unorthodox belief in spirit life. Those who challenged forms of domestic culture — as those who believed in spiritualism inevitably did — put themselves at risk of disapproval.

the medicalisation of spiritualist beliefs and practices

The previous section described how the spiritualist home serviced the bereaved soul but in doing so compromised normative standards of domestic life. This section explains how a spiritualist understanding of the home — where tables 'talked', tipped, and turned, was interpreted as medical grounds for a diagnosis of insanity. The spiritualist's quest for inner contentment through the home interior diverged from a long experience of Christian asceticism that

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was closely tied to the proper running of households. It is my opinion that spiritualist self-care as a practice was a critical step toward seeing the sentiment of wellness as a fundamental requirement in household design, which we still embrace today.[47] I argue this because the spiritualist mode of self-nurture entailed a secularising shift from the puritanical 'Know yourself' toward what Foucault describes as the more self-indulgent commandment 'Take care of yourself.'[48] The object of spiritualism had a lesser focus on the eschatological question of one's death, moral judgment, and prospects for a heavenly future in favour of one's welfare in daily life.[49]

As a religion of 'survival,' as Ariès has described mid nineteenth-century spiritualism's consolatory aspect, spiritualism was analogous to the medical science of patient recovery.[50] Yet the incompatible nature of medical and spiritualist knowledge systems in the Victorian period prevented their union. A key issue was the idea of evidence and the apparent lack of empirical basis for spiritualist belief. For pragmatists, individuals inhabiting what seemed to be an imaginary domestic world were irrational or even mad. In contrast to spiritualist convictions about the other world, medical practitioners saw spiritualism as a fantasy life of the 'gravest nature.'[51]

In his publication *Spiritualistic Madness* (1877), Dr Lyttleton Forbes Winslow explains that the spiritualist individual becomes 'a visionary alien to the real world, a denizen of his adopted country, and an outlaw to those around him; he lives and breathes an imaginary atmosphere of his own, to the exclusion of everything else.'[52] Forbes Winslow was describing the spiritualist's inhabiting relation to their domestic surroundings. He regarded the spiritualist's illusory home life as a primary cause of 'superstitious madness' or 'religious insanity, associated with melancholic and suicidal symptoms, rendering many of its victims dangerous to be free agents for their own protection, and that of societies in general.'[53]

As part of the medico-spiritualist debate, Susan Elizabeth Gay responds to Winslow's publication in 'Spiritualistic Sanity,' published in 1879.[54] The difference of opinion presents a point of epistemological upheaval centred on the spiritualist self and home. Gay explains that scepticism about spiritualism was an inevitable course of all new claims to truth, pending normalisation and acceptance.[55] Gay writes about what would be lacking from human experience, and by extension the home, if 'materialism were ever to become the "dominant idea" of mankind':[56]

> Mere science, in the sense of a knowledge of the external facts of visible nature, is cold, negative, isolating. It does not inspire; it has no vast outlook on the future; it brings no comfort to the bereaved; it solves no problem of suffering.[57]

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A spiritualist home and way of life was a cause and measure of insanity. Rationalists like Forbes Winslow could not see reason in the spiritualists' fantasy world of animated household furniture, whereas believers like Gay did not want to conceive of a domestic world without these consolatory benefits. Caring for the self by forming an imaginary relation to the home's material culture was a process that was tied to the spiritualist's self-formation. Spiritualists fought for the recognition of their domestic practices and their self-hood through indefatigable efforts to convince the scientific community, and to seek validation from them. Theobald's book is an example of such efforts. In an age of increasing pragmatism, the sanctioning of spiritualism by the scientific community and the acceptance of spiritualism by the wider community was a deeply significant prospect for believers. Accordingly, much spiritualist literature is aimed at justifying the spiritualists' relation to household furniture to non-believers, as the following section illustrates.

'rationalising' oneself through the spiritualist home and theobald's *parrhesiastic* condition

Among spiritualist believers, the Christian home's status as a site of sanctity and truth validated, to a certain extent, the phantasmagoria of spirit life. By drawing on conventional themes of truthfulness, familiarity, and privacy, spiritualists like Theobald viewed the home as a means of achieving personal and domestic integrity or wholeness. Furthermore, Theobald found
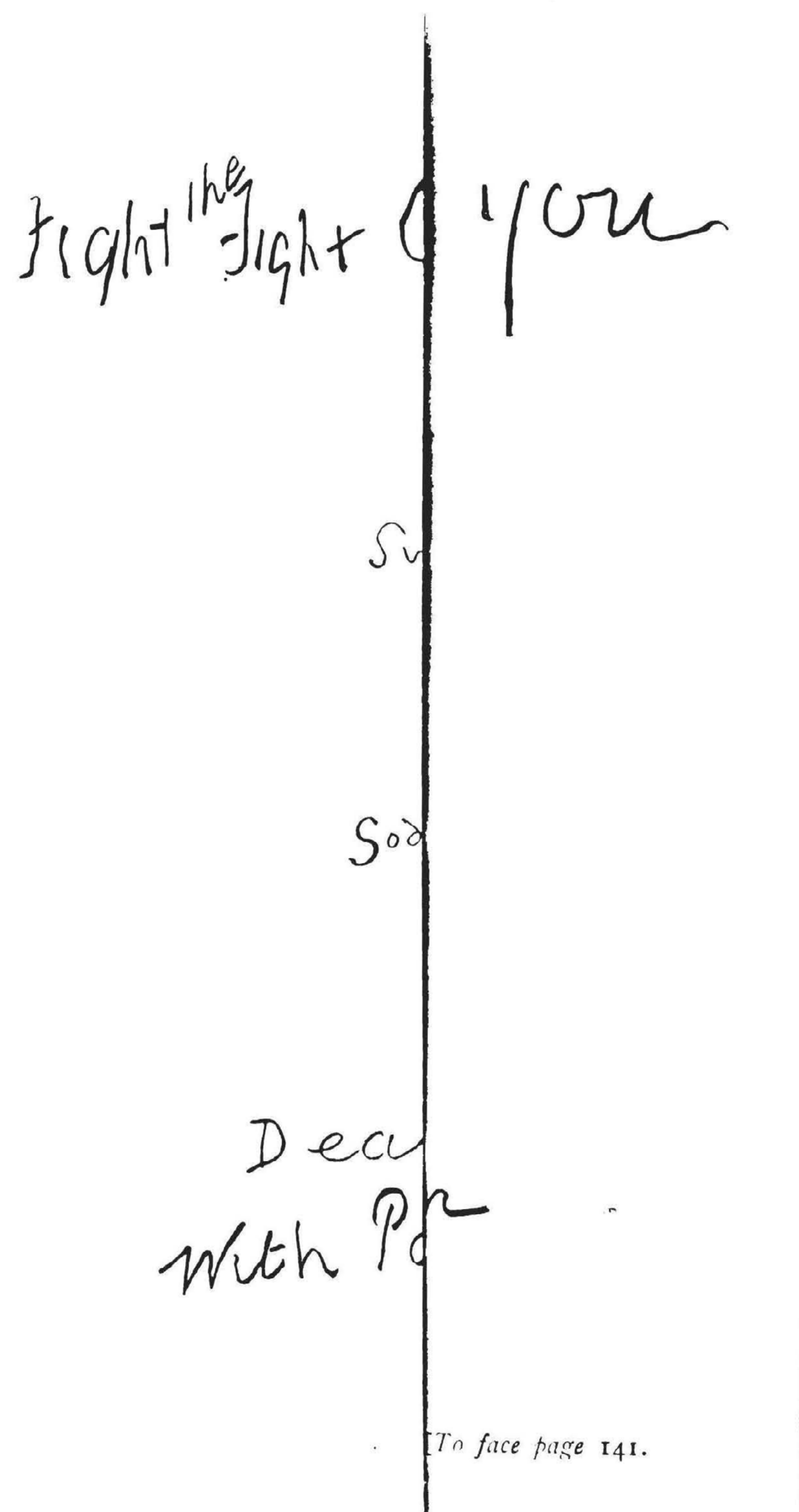
that events occurring in his home's interior provided authentication for his claims. He wrote of fires that were lit in unoccupied rooms, the appearance of letters in locked drawers, and the mystery of spirit writings that appeared on ceilings and cornices in the bedroom, the hall, the study, and the drawing room.[58] These happenings produced compelling evidence of spirit activity, or so he thought.[59]

Theobald verified acts of spirit writings on walls and ceilings by taking tracings, where possible, and including them as evidence in his book (see Figure 06).

Theobald, like other spiritualists, looked to his home and family for credibility. However, by exposing his family's testimony to public censure, the publication of his private life violated the Christian (and Victorian) understanding that the husband's primary responsibility was to the family. By publishing *Spirit Workers*, Theobald willingly disclosed what were for many implausible household experiences. These shortfalls were exacerbated by his disregard for the public's acute concern for domestic privacy.[60]

Importantly, Theobald had a motive for conveying his minority view of domestic life. Theobald was willing to risk condemnation in pursuit of a truth he believed would benefit both himself and others. He explains that when 'vital truth is concerned, it is right to make some sacrifice of personal feeling, and allow outsiders to share some of the

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Figure 06.
Theobald, Plate II, Part II, Ch. 1,
Facsimiles of (some) *Writings on
Ceiling, in Spirit Workers in the
Home Circle*, p. 141.

privileges we so much value.[61] In the passage, Theobald emphasises the obligation he felt to communicate his opinion to an unreceptive audience.

Theobald's *parrhesiastic* testimony addresses his concern for the welfare of other domestic inhabitants. He shapes his vision for the home through his marginalised or eccentric beliefs, values, and choices that are centred on the emotional needs of both himself and a community of people who shared in the burden of grief. His vision supports a formative connection to the home's material culture that has continued to frame our affinity to our homes as a place of comfort.

In conclusion, this essay has analysed Theobald's book *Spirit Workers* to describe a connection between household furniture, spirit work, and consolation that contributed to the spiritualist home's significance as a place of emotional comfort. A belief in spirits and their occupation of the home inevitably raises the question of imaginative pretences. Spiritualism's phantasmagorical aspect drew normalising discourses of inhabitation into the public domain. Sceptics suggested there was a more sensible, rational, or reasonable way to inhabit the home. Counterpoising spiritualism as a kind of domestic fiction, with empirical bases for understanding and managing the domestic environment, opens the door to other kinds of methodological explorations for studies of the interior, for example, the play of fact and fiction in the home, and the subjective, psychological, and social contexts for the divide.

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acknowledgements

author biography

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notes

01 Vanessa Galvin, 'The Soul-Crafted Interior: Governing the Domestic Inhabitant in Victorian Britain and America 1855–1885' (unpublished thesis, University of Western Australia, 2019), pp. 65–96.

02 For a more detailed discussion of the dining room's careful arrangement in séance, see Vanessa Galvin, 'Bridging Death's Distance Via the Victorian Spiritualist Home', in *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand: Distance Looks Back,* ed. by Victoria Jackson Wyatt, Andrew Leach, and Lee Stickells (Sydney: SAHANZ, 2019), pp. 162–71.

03 The Fox sisters' story prefaces many spiritualists' histories, including Henry Vizetelly, *Table Turning and Table Talking*, 2nd ed. (London: Clarke, Beeton, and Co., 1853), p. 7.

04 Daniel Cottom, 'On the Dignity of Tables', *Critical Inquiry,* 14 (1988), 765–83.

05 'Spirit Workers in the Home Circle: An Autobiographic Narrative of Psychic Phenomena in Family Daily Life, Extending over a Period of Twenty Years. By Morell Theobald (Book Review)', in *The Spectator* (London: The Spectator (1828) Ltd., 1887), p. 1546.

06 Morell Theobald, *Spirit Workers in the Home Circle: An Autobiographic Narrative of Psychic Phenomena in Family Daily Life Extending over a Period of Twenty Years* (London: T Fisher Unwin, 1887), pp. 255, emphasis in original.

07 Foucault describes parrhesia in Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001).

08 Phillipe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), p. 385.

09 Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, p. 385.

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11 Cottom, 'On the Dignity of Tables', 773. See also, Daniel Cottom, *Abyss of Reason: Cultural Movements, Revelations, and Betrayals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

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17 Pat Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 120; Audrey Linkman, *Photography and Death* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013), p. 19.

18 Henry Ward Beecher, 'Unsettling Effects of Grief', *Bow Bells: A Magazine of General Literature and Art for Family Reading,* 13 (1870), 501.

19 'On Affliction', *The Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine,* 2 (1846), 568.

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23 Hon. Mrs Norton, 'Grief and Sickness', *The London Reader: Of Literature, Science, Art and General Information,* 1 (1863), 251.

24 *There Is No Death* (New York: National Book Company, 1891), p. 16.

25 'On Affliction', p. 570.

26 'A Balm for Grief', *The London Reader: Of Literature, Science, Art and General Information,* 5 (1865), 726.

27 Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, pp. 454, 458.

28 Susan Elizabeth Gay, *Spiritualistic Sanity. A Reply to Dr. Forbes Winslow's 'Spiritualistic Madness'* (London: E.W. Allen, 1879), p. 24.

29 Theobald, *Spirit Workers in the Home Circle*, p. 8.

30 William Denton and Elizabeth M. Foote Denton, *The Soul of Things, or, Psychometric Researches and Discoveries* (Boston: Walker, Wise and Co., 1863).

31 Denton and Foote Denton, *The Soul of Things*, pp. 267–87. Through discussions of these areas, the book also describes psychometry's value for understanding historical ruins, lost cities, and conceptions of inhabitable spaces. See also pp. 160, 170, 176, 189, and 360.

32 Denton and Foote Denton, *The Soul of Things*, pp. 356–57.

33 For examples, see Theobald, *Spirit Workers in the Home Circle*, pp. 255–56; Florence Marryat, *There is No Death.* New York: National Book Company, (1891), p. 25.

34 Vizetelly, *Table Turning and Table Talking*.

35 Vizetelly, *Table Turning and Table Talking*, p. 133.

36 Vizetelly, *Table Turning and Table Talking*, pp. 138–47.

37 Marryat, *There is No Death*, p. 25.

38 Theobald, *Spirit Workers in the Home Circle*, p. 21, emphasis in original.

39 Theobald, *Spirit Workers in the Home Circle*, pp. 206–07.

40 Theobald, *Spirit Workers in the Home Circle*, p. 149.

41 Theobald, *Spirit Workers in the Home Circle*, p. 207, emphasis in original.

42 Theobald, *Spirit Workers in the Home Circle*, p. 110.

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44 See Theobald, *Spirit Workers in the Home Circle*, Plate I, Part II, Ch. I, pp. 106–07.

45 Theobald, *Spirit Workers in the Home Circle*, p. 112.

46 Cottom, 'On the Dignity of Tables', 773.

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48 Foucault, 'Technologies of the Self', p. 22.

49 See Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, pp. 459–460, as he describes the changing nature of spiritualism toward secularity. See also Michel Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', *Critical Inquiry,* 8 (1982), 784.

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53 Forbes Winslow, *Spiritualistic Madness*, pp. 12–13, 19–20.

54 Gay, *Spiritualistic Sanity*.

55 Gay, *Spiritualistic Sanity*, p. 1.

56 Gay, *Spiritualistic Sanity*, p. 2.

57 Gay, *Spiritualistic Sanity*, p. 2.

58 Theobald, *Spirit Workers in the Home Circle*, p. 149.

59 Theobald, *Spirit Workers in the Home Circle*, p. 141. See further examples on pp. 142, 234, and 235.

60 Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), p. 43; for a great example of the concern for privacy, read 'Tittle-Tattle', *Bow Bells: A Magazine of General Literature and Art for Family Reading,* 10 (1869), 395.

61 Theobald, *Spirit Workers in the Home Circle*, p. 10.