INTRODUCTION

Popular fiction as media histrionics

The body of this book is organized around four writers: George Du Maurier, Marie Corelli, Rosa Praed and Arthur Machen. Their work dramatizes the centrality of occult, or paranormal, experience to the production of popular fiction at a time when the market for novels was expanding towards a mass readership that would be measured in the hundreds of thousands. Two of them, Du Maurier and Corelli, wrote bestsellers that have made them central to recent discussions of popular literary aesthetics at the end of the nineteenth century. The other two, Praed and Machen, produced popularly oriented occult texts, only to find that the heterodoxy inherent in the genre could lead them well away from the norms and practices of commercial authorship. All four produced their most important work in the last decade or so of the nineteenth century. With the exception of Du Maurier, who died in 1896, they all lived on through the Edwardian period and the First World War, into a time that saw the literary forms they developed displaced by, or translated into, film. In this sense their decidedly "minor" status in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is partly indicative of the broader shifts in the popular media landscape – shifts that saw print-culture increasingly marginalized by new representational forms. Indeed the constant outpouring of scholarly articles on the *fin-de-siècle* Gothic belies the fact that even much better known writers, such as Robert Louis Stevenson and Bram Stoker, were really part of a twilight: the brief flourishing of a genre that began to lose its centrality once its powers of horror could be literalized in sound and image.

The designation of occult or paranormal fiction, however, is not an entirely accurate description of the texts in which I am interested. The terms themselves raise a number of interpretive problems for contemporary critics, not least because the historical experience they evoke was fragmented across discourses, disciplines and interpretive practices that actively disputed its provenance, meaning and credibility. That both terms, the occult and the paranormal, draw a border between empirically observable, or

scientifically verifiable, events and those events that can't be validated or proven by science, is partly indicative of this. They both designate a range of exceptional phenomena lying outside the scope of current epistemic frameworks, but they also suggest that as the boundaries of the scientifically observable change, so too does the boundary between the visible and the hidden, the normal and the paranormal, and the natural and the supernatural. They suggest, in other words, a set of distinctions that is only provisional. Stressing this point reminds us that in the nineteenth century research into the occult was much more proximate to various forms of scientific experimentation and technological innovation than it seems to be today. This proximity often hinged on the emphatically communicative character of occult practices, on their self-conception as networks connecting the corporeal and the incorporeal, the living and the dead, and the seen and the unseen. At a time when other, technology-dependent media were in the process of being developed or articulated, distinguishing between occult media and what we today recognize as scientifically verifiable forms of communication, data gathering and data storage could be much more idiosyncratic than we might expect. It often rested on a degree of credulity that could, at different times, apply to something like radio waves as readily as to the unconscious or to the realm of discarnate spirits.

Today the relationship between popular fiction and the occult has something self-evident about it. So many of the most obviously popular texts of the late Victorian period gravitate to the Gothic and to the supernatural. The texts in which I am interested here, however, cannot really be described as being simply *about* the occult, or the supernatural. Instead they assume a credulous kind of investment in their own status as the *outputs* of networks that occupy the grey zone between the occult, the technological and the psychological (or more accurately, perhaps, the psychophysiological). They are works of the imagination, but what they embody is, at least at moments, quite different from the type of "ironic imagination" that Michael Saler identifies as central to the playfulness of what he calls "new romance" at the turn of the century.[1] While the texts I'm interested in are adjacent to the romances of H. Rider Haggard, Robert Louis Stevenson, Bram Stoker and Arthur Conan Doyle, it is the moments at which irony seems to be lacking – or a concerted drift towards the erosion of irony – that enables me to distinguish them from the genre of romance more broadly conceived. Of course boundaries here are extremely porous. Stevenson, we

[1] See Michael Saler, *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 57–104.

will see, was invested in the power of dreams in a way that complicates his relationship to irony. Conan Doyle's developing interest in spiritualism also casts a new light on the psychological underpinnings of the Sherlock Holmes stories.[2] Popularly oriented writers with an unironic investment in occult or paranormal experience, however, offer us something quite different from the forms of entertainment or escapism usually associated with romance. Their conviction and their credulity, I argue, were central to their ability to formulate a claim to distinction in defiance of their popular, commercial orientation. This is not a claim that rests on aesthetic refinement, formal accomplishment or ethical orientation. It has very little to do with the way in which Pierre Bourdieu introduces the idea of cultural capital in his seminal work *Distinction*. In fact, if anything, it is oriented to a displacement of the very model of aesthetic education Bourdieu critiques. At a time when the commercialization of print-culture was consolidating a rationalized conception of the author as a possessive individual, a producer of property and a rational subject of contractual negotiation, the texts on which I focus based themselves on a kind of discursive alterity that might have been inherent in the emerging culture industry, but that also cut against the forms of instrumentalization that were coming to dominate commercial publishing.

This tension between instrumentalized conceptions of literary culture – linked to property, profit and commodification – and the alterity that disturbs them is at the center of this book, and guides its broader account of how the experience of the occult intersects with the development of popular literary aesthetics at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. The tension between instrumentality and alterity is important, I argue, because it facilitates a rereading of the idea of literary democratization at a time when the relationship between cultural value and a mass reading public was being constantly debated. If instrumentalized conceptions of authorship, for example, assumed the "average reader" and a thoroughgoing mythology of the market, the alterity that troubled those conceptions of authorship often pointed to forms of experience largely effaced by the commercialization of literary culture: the experience of the colonies, of the Celtic fringe, of patriarchy, and of a creaturely disposition that was, increasingly, the object of narrative's psychological orientation.

This book, then, does not try to approach popular fiction by way of dichotomies that juxtapose it with the consecrated literature that would

[2] For a reading of Arthur Conan Doyle that develops along these lines, see Anna Neill, "The Savage Genius of Sherlock Holmes," *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 37.2 (2009), 611–626.

form the basis of the canon, or the experimental literature associated with a twentieth-century avant-garde. On the contrary, I argue that popular texts at the end of the nineteenth century could emerge partly by articulating the difference inherent in their own discursive and institutional conditions. This difference, I argue, hinged on their credulous relationship to forces that apparently lay beyond the processes of literary commerce and of the marketplace. The sense of alterity in play here is nicely captured in the phrase the "*differentia* of literature," which was coined, as far as I know, by Arthur Machen in *The Hill of Dreams*.[3] Machen uses the phrase to evoke "great" literature's ability to distinguish itself from forms of discourse governed by commercial or communicative pragmatism. The phrase could apply to the mystical qualities of Romanticism or symbolism, but also to the symbolist qualities of supernatural or Gothic fiction. It points to a form of distinction that seems remarkably capacious when placed against contemporary denigrations of the popular. It may well anticipate the largely institutional modes of validation and evaluation that will inform modernism and the theories of aesthetic autonomy that draw upon it, but it certainly isn't reducible to them. What I want to highlight here is a moment that was prior to that sense of consecration that literary studies has tended to take for granted throughout much of the twentieth century: a moment at which popular fictional forms could articulate claims to value that cut against both the elitism of emerging modernism and the leveling effects of commerce. These claims are not simply interchangeable from one text to the other. Nor are their political stakes constant. As we will see there is a world of difference between, for example, Corelli's Christian Romanticism and Praed's theosophical interest in colonial experience. What they share is a mimetic relationship to the forms of mediatization they imagine. The novels that emerge here aren't merely works of entertainment, or commodities on the market. They aren't merely didactic. And they aren't achievements in stylistic refinement. In albeit different ways, they orient to systems of communication that enable them to imagine, or to act out, the displacement of that notion of authorship that was integral to the commercialization of literary culture. In this way they assert their difference in regard to the material structures that govern them. In her first novel, *A Romance of Two Worlds*, Corelli clearly grasped this idea: "as far as the arts go, it is a bad sign of poet, painter or musician, who is arrogant enough to call his work his own. It never was his and never will be. It is planned by a higher intelligence than

[3] Arthur Machen, *The Caerleon Edition of the Works of Arthur Machen*, 9 vols. (London: Martin Secker, 1923), III.146.

his, only he happens to be the hired laborer chosen to carry out the conception."[4] The absence of a proprietary notion of authorship directly correlates with the legitimacy of the communicative network being described here. A few years later, Rosa Praed would write that "Art is the door through which the undying dead ones can come into our lives and teach us how to move our world as they themselves once moved theirs."[5] Both statements assume a broadly religious framework that underpins the significance of the works they describe. And both statements see literary texts as the end products of broader networks of inscription, related to notions of mediumship, that orient to the non-empirical as surely as they do the non-commercial. As Daniel Cottom writes of nineteenth-century spiritualism, "the workings of language look like spontaneous ritual rather than systematic reason, symbolic exchange rather than progressive understanding, improvised gesture rather than indwelling essence – an emotional social drama rather than a disciplined and responsible means of identification." This departure from language as a "neutral medium of communication," Cottom goes on to say, stemmed from the ability of spiritualist practice to "materialize" language, to take it "from the ghostly realm of ideality into the world of historical invention, physical objects, institutions, social power and unpredictable personality."[6] One way of developing Cottom's insight is to imagine that credulity implies something like a network oriented to a point of alterity located outside of empirically verifiable, material processes. Texts oriented to this notion of alterity could present their own production as driven by forces at variance with the pragmatic, commercial realities that were increasingly central to debates about literature at the end of the century. These networks, I argue, facilitated political and aesthetic sensibilities that pushed against the dominant forms of an emerging, and predominantly metropolitan, culture industry.

But as Praed would also emphasize, a medium is only as good as the spirits she channels. If the idea of mediumship helps secure the auspiciousness of a text – the differentia of literature – there is nothing in the mere content of mediated texts that guarantees legibility or meaning. What seems to be at stake is simply the alterity inherent in the networked character of creativity, an alterity that thus also risks lapsing into unintelligibility as claims to distinction approach a threshold beyond which the production,

[4] Marie Corelli, *A Romance of Two Worlds* [1886] (New York: Optimus Publishing Company, 1894), 103.
[5] Rosa Praed, *The Soul of Countess Adrian: A Romance* (London: Trischler and Company, 1891), 19.
[6] Daniel Cottom, *Abyss of Reason: Cultural Movements, Revelations, and Betrayals* (Oxford University Press, 1991), 110.

transmission and reception of signs succumbs to an otherness that refuses translation. At this point distinguishing between the plenitude of the word, nonsense and madness becomes a matter of interpretive or disciplinary bias. This threshold lingers close to Du Maurier's 1891 mnemonic romance, *Peter Ibbetson*. The fact that this novel purports to emerge from the narrator's "unconscious memory," which is structured like a data storage device, isn't necessarily a claim about the importance of its contents, but about a process that bypasses the limits of a conscious self. The text's relationship to the psychological network that produces it, in other words, is what underlines its claim on the reader's attention. Arthur Machen's sense of his own affinities with the "bards, magicians, seers, prophets, and madmen . . . who spoke and worked miracles, things unintelligible to the 'common sense,' to the understanding which regulates and arranges the affairs of common life," assumes something very similar. It doesn't quite lay the stress on mediumship in the way that Corelli and Praed do, but it just as surely dissolves the idea of the author as the embodiment of a "common" consciousness in order to articulate a claim to value that consists not in the idea of style, entertainment or edification, but in the idea of something beyond their reach.[7] For all of these writers, the viability of authorship depends on difference: on a heterodoxy that troubles or even subverts the conceptions of subjectivity that were increasingly associated with the commercialization of literary culture.

My sense of a tension between commercial conceptions of literary culture and the alterity they harbour already assumes, as the above examples indicate, a particular reading of the relationship between occult practices and a physiologically grounded conception of the mind that enables me to treat them both as communicative networks, as media. This conflation is one of the things that is contested in recent scholarship on mediumship, especially when it maintains an investment in the cultural importance of specifically spiritualist practices. From my point of view, the slippages between the occult, the psychological and the technological establish the protean character of the alterity that troubles and in some senses motivates rationalized conceptions of authorship. This is an important part of its historicity, and of its ability to mobilize different political impulses around the popular forms in which it is embedded. For the remainder of this introduction I want to set up the conceptual and theoretical framework that establishes these possibilities. The chapters that follow can be read independently of this theoretical apparatus, but it seems important to

[7] Machen, *The Caerleon Edition of the Works of Arthur Machen*, v.121.

articulate it here, if only to concentrate in one place many of the assumptions that are dispersed throughout the body of the book.

In her groundbreaking study of female literary collaboration, Bette London discusses a fascinating case that came before the court of Chancery in 1926. The case, *Cummins* v. *Bond*, centered on the issue of copyright. The plaintiff, Geraldine Cummins, claimed to have transcribed a text dictated to her by the spirit of an early Christian scribe during a session of automatic writing. Her case sought to prevent Frederick Bligh Bond, an assistant, from reproducing parts of this material. The court found in her favour. The transcribed text was subsequently published as *The Scripts of Cleophas: A Reconstruction of Primitive Christian Documents*, with Cummins not as the author, but the "recorder."[8] Bond "had not dictated or written a word of these scripts," Cummins insists in her autobiography. He had merely typed them and helped with their punctuation. His case rested on the claim that the communications of the spirit had been addressed to him all along. The dispute was examined by Arthur Conan Doyle and the Society of Authors, but no agreement was reached. By finding in her favor, Cummins writes, the court established an important precedent that protected literary property from the claims of those employed to type it.[9]

The way Cummins lays the emphasis here guides us away from what makes the case so topical: that is, its ability to evoke the radically different conceptions of authorship that had existed in a state of latent tension since at least the early 1880s, when Walter Besant (who founded the Incorporated Society of Authors in 1883) articulated a rationalized, commercially oriented vision of the author as, primarily, the producer and the owner of literary property. Of course writers had imagined themselves as the owners and producers of property since at least the early part of the eighteenth century. What was different about this moment was the overwhelming sense in which this vision took on a normative value linked to the emergence of a mass readership and, with it, a new, democratic conception of literary culture. For Besant, this shift also demanded the marginalization of a range of other conceptions of authorship that insisted on highlighting the friction between creative practice and the everyday experience of metropolitan life. These

[8] See Bette London, *Writing Double: Women's Literary Partnerships* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 150–154. Helen Sword also touches on the case in *Ghostwriting Modernism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 25. Geraldine Cummins's own account of the case appears in *Unseen Adventures: An Autobiography Covering Thirty-Four Years of Work in Psychical Research* (London: Rider, 1951), 112–115. The case was also covered by the London *Times* (July 22, 1926), 5 and (July 23, 1926), 5.

[9] Cummins, *Unseen Adventures*, 112.

residual conceptions of authorship crystallized in a bohemian resistance to the marketplace, to the monetization of literature and to the emergence of a mass reading public. This resistance, Besant believed, was anachronistic, impractical and emphatically undemocratic in its elitist disdain for the desires of the ordinary readers who were increasingly turning to fiction as a source of both instruction and distraction. Bestselling authors like Marie Corelli and Hall Caine tended to agree although, as we will see, Corelli's popularity also drew on her simultaneous repudiation of commercial pragmatism. Both advocated changes in the book trade that had as their goal an unimpeded relationship between author and consumer that would apparently facilitate a democratic fidelity to the tastes of the average reader. Despite these developments, however, one of the most obvious features of the popular literature of the period was the insistence with which it posited forms of experience, conceptions of authorship among them, that were apparently at odds with the proprietary, commercial model that formed one of the conditions for the integration of literature into the culture industry. The Chancery case Bette London examines draws our attention to one way in which this resistance is evident: the author as medium, as a scribe taking "dictation" from the spirits of the dead, implies a form of production – a mode of textual inscription – in which the assumption of agency underpinning the assumption of ownership is radically destabilized.

Cummins v. *Bond* was resolved with an astoundingly literal interpretation of what it meant to author a text: it was Cummins's hand that held the pen, Cummins who wrote the words, and with no ability to adjudicate issues of ownership across the divide separating the living and the dead, the court concluded that ownership of the resultant text resided with her.[10] As London points out, the apparent reconciliation of the proprietary model of authorship with modes of inscription demanded by automatic writing belies the ways in which the case raised a series of questions that, while legally resolvable, continued to haunt literary production. These questions center on the kind of agency inherent in the notion of mediumship. Here's how London puts it, in a passage that has had a significant influence on recent understandings of the role of the paranormal in literary production:

> To what degree ... does any claim to authorship require the "author's" conscious participation? Is literary property a corporeal or incorporeal entity? Is it a product of cerebral inspiration (the state of the author's mind) or of manual labor (the work of the author's hands)? What work counts as

[10] As Cummins writes, her counsel had joked that taking the property rights of the dead seriously was like vesting the copyright of Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" with the bird. *Ibid*. 112.

> intellectual labor? Are all authors, in effect, mediums – the instruments through which discarnate voices achieve materialization?[11]

As London goes on to say, this point about the slippery relationship between mediumship and authorship takes on additional force in the context of a culture that was increasingly permeated by new technologies of textual inscription – such as typing and telegraphy – that seemed to literalize the notion of automatism inherent in the paranormal.[12] Indeed, as Cummins's point about typists makes clear, technology and the roles it created (typist, secretary etc.) were also at or near the center of the dispute. What mediumship and technologies of inscription like the electrical telegraph and the typewriter have in common is that they displace the idea of the author as the sole entity responsible for the production of a text, and posit instead a much more complicated, expansive and decentered network of information transfer and storage.

These congruences between the technological and the paranormal have given rise to a considerable and complex body of scholarly work that places notions of mediumship, telepathic communication, automatism and new writing technologies at the center of late nineteenth-century literary studies. In focusing on the relationship between the paranormal and the technological, this work has opened up some stunning interdisciplinary vistas at the crossroads of literary studies, media studies and the history and philosophy of science. Lisa Gitelman, Pamela Thurschwell, Laura Otis, Roger Luckhurst, Richard Menke, Jill Galvan and Hilary Grimes have all produced major studies that work in this territory.[13] What is at issue here is not just an interest in how literary texts understand the new media environment developing alongside the information technologies of the nineteenth century, or an account of how literary texts become incorporated into what

[11] London, *Writing Double*, 151. [12] *Ibid.* 172.

[13] See Lisa Gitelman, *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines: Representing Technology in the Edison Era* (Stanford University Press, 1999); Pamela Thurschwell, *Literature, Technology and Magical Thinking, 1880–1920* (Cambridge University Press, 2001); Laura Otis, *Networking: Communicating with Bodies and Machines in the Nineteenth Century* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2001); Roger Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy, 1870–1901* (Oxford University Press, 2002); Richard Menke, *Telegraphic Realism: Victorian Fiction and Other Information Systems* (Stanford University Press, 2008); Jill Galvan, *The Sympathetic Medium: Feminine Channeling, the Occult, and Communication Technologies, 1859–1919* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010) and Hilary Grimes, *The Late Victorian Gothic: Mental Science, the Uncanny and Scenes of Writing* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011). See also Anthony Enns, "The Undead Author: Spiritualism, Technology and Authorship," in Tatiana Kontou and Sarah Willburn, eds., *The Ashgate Research Companion to Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism and the Occult* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012), 55–78. Enns argues that spiritualist writing practices "provided the earliest evidence of the impact of mechanical writing on subjectivity and authorship" (68).

Richard Menke describes as an emerging information society. Far more centrally, this work invites us to treat literary production and the practices of authorship it assumes as constituents of what, after Friedrich Kittler's groundbreaking work, we could call a "discourse network," literally a network of inscription, an *Aufschreibesystem*. It is no coincidence that Kittler plays a role in the work of all of the scholars I have just mentioned, even though his hostility to hermeneutics makes him a problematic figure for the kind of literary studies that is still interested in doing "readings" of texts. What Kittler means by the phrase discourse network is, to begin with, "the network of technologies and institutions that allow a given culture to select, store, and process relevant data."[14] From the perspective opened up by the phrase, it is no longer possible to talk about an author as a sovereign subject who originates his or her own thought and manifests it in the self-conscious movement of a pen across a page. Even Romantic conceptions of authorship, Kittler shows, involved a complicated relay between a feminized educational apparatus, centered around mothers teaching alphabetized reading, and the men that would emerge from it to translate the voice of nature into poetry, and then interpret it in philosophy. As Kittler puts it, "the Mother enters the channel of Poetry as input and, upon exiting at the other side, is collected in the storage medium of Philosophy."[15] The language of information technology here is clearly meant to trouble the complacency of literary studies. If this is supposed to be bracing in its ability to defamiliarize, the arc of Kittler's analysis leads us to a more thoroughgoing sense of a disciplinary shift. By the time we arrive at the end of the nineteenth century, a new media environment has displaced this classical-Romantic model and rendered it largely anachronistic. Processes of inscription centered on the bare materiality of writing have largely emptied the author function of the normative dimension it enjoyed in Romantic culture. Instead of interiority – the space in which the poet hears and then reworks the voice of nature – we are left with what Kittler calls a "histrionics of media" in which the body that writes is one point in a relay system that can't secure the truth-value of its message or the meaning of the data it processes. At this point literature and the hermeneutic-philological apparatus it inspired also lose their topicality in the face of new technologies that can literalize the powers of the imagination in recorded sound and image.

[14] Friedrich A. Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, trans. Michael Metteer with Chris Cullens (Stanford University Press, 1990), 369.
[15] Friedrich Kittler and S. Banz, *Platz der Luftbrücke: Ein Gespräch* (Berlin: Oktagon, 1996), 45. Quoted in Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, *Kittler and the Media* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), 46.