Specular Metamorphoses: Harriet Prescott Spofford's "The Ray of Displacement"

Asunción López-Varela

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/15139>

DOI: 10.4000/ejas.15139

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Asunción López-Varela, "Specular Metamorphoses: Harriet Prescott Spofford's "The Ray of Displacement"", *European journal of American studies* [Online], 14-3 | 2019, Online since 29 October 2019, connection on 08 July 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/15139> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.15139>

This text was automatically generated on 8 July 2021.

Creative Commons License

Specular Metamorphoses: Harriet Prescott Spofford's "The Ray of Displacement"

Asunción López-Varela

For now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. And now stays faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity. (1 Corinthians 13: 12-13, emphasis added)

- 1 Starting in the eighteenth century, the impact of empiricism in the Western world caused scientific pursuits to be directed towards rational and mechanist analyses of nature, disregarding organicist approaches to the natural world. Somewhat paradoxically, emerging studies such as phrenology and animal magnetism (mesmerism) received an impulse which was at odds with this empiricist orientation, and the nineteenth century saw a resurgence of esotericism, mysticism, alternative religions, as well as a belief in magic, themes that continued to enter twentieth-century modernity (see Winter). Electricity inspired stories such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus* (1818) in the first half of the century; in the second half, electromagnetic discoveries advanced the atomization of reality and the materialization of non-visible phenomena, stirring both great desires and profound anxieties regarding the paranormal. In the 1880s and 90s, the development of photography and cinematography, based on lenses and other optical instruments incorporated new inquiries.
- 2 The complicated relationship between technology and the supernatural is evident in the works of Harriet Prescott Spofford (1835-1921), one of the United States' most widely-published authors who deserves to be rescued as one of the pioneers of science fiction. I shall concentrate on her 1903 short story "The Ray of Displacement" which features two important symbolic tools: the optic (crystal) element, a diamond which belongs to the protagonist's acquaintance Judge Brant, and a depolarizing ray gun, with which the scientist-protagonist accidentally transforms the diamond into carbon. Hoping to restore it to its original form, the unnamed scientist sends Brant in search of the police and, in the meantime, succeeds in reversing the process. The protagonist

prefers to go to prison rather than reveal his secret experiments, but before being taken away by the police he has a quick chance to polarize himself partially so that he can, at times, become semi-transparent, which allows him to traverse walls. He goes to Brant's house in order to put the diamond in his pocket, hoping that when he finds it, he will clear him out of prison. But when Judge Brant realizes the possibilities of the secret weapon, ambition blinds him and he maintains his claim that the diamond has disappeared, keeping the scientist in prison in an attempt to blackmail him to secure further riches for himself.

- 3 This essay begins with a reflection on the impact of technological developments, particularly the role of optic instruments such as lenses and mirror, and their importance in enhancing human perceptual modes and instrumental power. One of the first stories in this regard is that of Archimedes who, using the sun's reflection, was able to destroy the Roman fleet that was invading Syracuse, thus creating one of the first heat-ray prototypes, similar to the lightning bolts used by the gods of Greek mythology, like Zeus, or the Norse god Thor. The inquiry into the impact of technology and optics which occupies the first part of this paper highlights the importance of speculative science parallel to the advancement of empirical science itself. This will be followed by a section on the relationship between the supernatural and its socio-cultural implications. In particular, it focuses on gender issues through the third protagonist of Spofford's story. St. Angel is an androgynous, sometimes child-like figure who appears to the protagonist in his prison-cell and opens up the possibility of boundary crossings between the male homosocial world and the ghost-like invisibility of women. But the story does not only invert the angelic rhetoric present in the conception of the "Angel in the house."¹ It also problematizes the role of the angel as a mystic inspirational body, introducing theosophical concerns that focus on the power of sympathy as a fundamental reformist ethos that, as in the case of other fraternities, revolutionized the "public sphere," to put it in the terms of Jürgen Habermas.²

1. Technological Advance, New Forms of Perception and the Supernatural

- 4 The rise of science fiction fantasy, a hybrid genre that fuses scientific fact and fiction, has been intimately connected with the emergence of new technologies and information transmitted through multiple coding systems (López-Varela and Sussman). In ancient mythological stories, technologies are both tools and activities that transform social and natural environments, affecting human as well as other species, and thus involving issues of power, communication, ethics, and so on. Very frequently, these technologies and weapons with secret and magic powers are reserved to divinities and a few chosen people.
- 5 Although literary critics such as Matthew Arnold in *The Study of Poetry* (1880), or later Northrop Frye in his monumental study on William Blake, enhanced the connection of literary fiction to spiritual and ethical underpinnings, attempts to unveil the complex role of the occult and hermetic forms of knowledge in social change have remained controversial, inevitably situated beyond rational scientific academic research and orthodox methodologies. Indeed, the secret patterns and unifying frameworks that would explain the connections between human life and the cosmos would seem to hide behind the expansion of the Gothic and the fantastic.

Now when something is revealed to us we see it, and the response to this revelation is not faith in the unseen or hope in Divine promises but vision, seeing face to face after we have been seeing through a glass darkly. Vision is the end of religion, and the destruction of the physical universe is the clearing of our own eyesight. Art, because it affords a systematic training in this kind of vision, is the medium through which religion is revealed. (Frye 51)

- 6 As seen in the quotation above, the boundaries between the visible and the invisible, the transparent and the opaque, have unveiled the limits between the known and the unknown. Timothy Reiss has demonstrated the impact of discoveries such as the telescope and other optic elements upon the shift from theocentric to anthropocentric views during the Renaissance. However, the connections between magic and the occult, embedded in the perspective of art and fiction as forms of revelation and mediation, and their formulation in terms of optical perspective and Euclidean physics was only brought to public attention with the publication of Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871). Crossing the mirror threshold symbolized a radical alteration for the viewing subject, who became involved in "othering" effects by entering a sort of secret gateway that enabled the transcendence of limits and categories such as youth and adulthood, or life and death, as it happens in Alice's case (López-Varela). Traversing the looking glass or the magic crystal ball opened the way to alternative spatiotemporal dimensions.
- 7 With the emergence of psychoanalysis and the development of psychology, there was also much interest in the exploration of psychic states that defied rational positivism, with hidden or repressed stories restoring to public memory aspects of individual and communal beliefs (i.e. Carl Jung's archetypes) that may have been effaced by too much emphasis on empirical evidence. Thus, to a certain extent, it can be argued that occult movements and secret societies, such as the Theosophical Society, may have played a role in the *fin-de-siècle* crisis of culture and conscience (Kerr & Crow). In many cases, they enabled the comparative study of religions across a wide spectrum of cultures, providing cross-cultural arguments for connections among world regions (Eliade), reflecting the ideas of a growing secular society as well as challenging scientific materialism. This difficult coexistence of empirical and speculative science has not ceased. From Isaac Newton the alchemist to contemporary Nobel Laureate, Russian Viscount Ilya Romanovich Prigogine, noted for his work on thermodynamics and complex unstable systems as applied to socio-cultural aspects, the connection between the visible and the non-visible remains in the field of speculation.
- 8 In the 1870s, the expansion of electromagnetic theories and their technological application (i.e. James Clerk Maxwell) provided new explanations for phenomena such as perspective and colour. The idea that a whole spectrum of invisible waves could pass through solid substances and carry information, as it occurred in technologies such as telegraphy, photography, radio or film, drove spiritualists to toy with the idea that the human body was a kind of psycho-electromagnetic receiver and transmitter. Thus, two years before the publication of Spofford's "The Ray of Displacement," theosophist Annie Besant and Mahatma C.W. Leadbeater published *Thought Forms*, which explored colours in connection to emotions and thoughts, defined in Neoplatonic terms as mental projections reflected on the physical world as a ray traversing a mirror.³ The interest in optic instruments such as prisms, mirrors, lenses and conventional glass dates back to Ptolemy's work. In his *Optics*, he describes light properties such as reflection, refraction, colour, etc. Lenses and mirrors occupy a prominent place in

mythologies and superstitions in almost all cultures. Sometimes the reflected image was identified with the spirit/soul of the person (note that vampires do not project reflection on mirrors). In the *Golden Bough*, Sir James Frazer saw mirrors as both shadows and reflections of the other side, laden with divination powers (the term "divinari" addresses the inquiry into the divine). Mirrors have a prominent position in the Egyptian myth of Osiris, whose pieces are gathered by his sister Isis with the help of a mirror which reflects Horus' eye—a symbol of clairvoyance and spirituality. Other mythological figures, often female transgressors like the Mesopotamian goddess Lamashtu, or the Greek Lamias, were associated with mirrors as gateways to worlds beyond. Besides the story of Narcissus, in Greek and Roman cultures there are innumerable examples of narratives including mirrors and other reflective surfaces such as lakes. Just to give an example, Plotinus' *Enneads* mention how human souls are reflected in Bacchus' mirror (Dionysus acted as a divine communicant between the living and the dead, a passage facilitated by the unconscious state brought about by wine drinking). Mirrors are frequent in Gothic stories such as those by E.T.A Hoffmann's *The Story of the Lost Reflection* (1815), and in the tales of H. P. Lovecraft and of Henry St. Clair Whitehead, both contemporaries of Spofford. In the twenty-first century, Netflix series *Black Mirror* is also receiving much attention in relation to the use of digital screen technologies to supplant the real in their virtual mirror-images.⁴ Visual perspective was first discovered by Florentine architect Filippo Brunelleschi by painting directly on a mirror. Leon Battista Alberti expanded the use of these technologies to architecture, sculpture and painting. Curved lenses were also used in the development of the telescope by Galileo Galilei. One of the most important statements on the mirror as an instrument that contributes to visualizing the world occurs in Leonardo Da Vinci's *Trattato della pittura*, a collection of articles put together by his disciples around 1542 and published in 1651: "You see upon a flat mirror the representation of things which appear real; Painting is the same Both give the idea of something *beyond*" (216-217, emphasis added).

- 9 Optical instruments like lenses and mirrors have undoubtedly been at the heart of many technological and artistic advances. Spofford's contemporaries used them in the construction of machines, such as Nikola Tesla's particle beam weapon or William Roentgen's X-rays (see Tesla). The electromagnetic radiation used in these devices allowed light to be bent and reflected in new ways, interacting with matter to obtain several effects (among them its destruction or vaporization) and, through the manipulation of the electromagnetic spectrum, direct the flow of light around objects, like water flowing past a rock in a stream, so that without reflection, the object would become invisible.
- 10 Indeed, with regard to the topic of invisibility, one of the first allusions can be traced back to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and to Plato's story about the invisibility ring of King Gyges of Lydia (modern Turkey), who reigned from 716 to 678 BC and is mentioned in Book 2 of the *Republic* (2.359a–2.360d). The intertext allows Plato to consider whether an intelligent person would have natural ethical inclinations if he did not fear being caught and punished for committing a crime or injustice. This theme is also present in Spofford's tale. The ring, often magical, symbolizes both the community (as well as marriage) and the emotional agreement that holds its members together, thus providing an image that integrates ethical principles in other spheres of life through the sharing of sympathy and understanding (Ketterer). Ultimately, by depicting the

Sun and the Moon, the King and the Queen, the Husband and the Wife, the sphere-ring used in alchemy and hermetic creeds represents the blending of masculine intellect and autonomy with feminine sympathy and emotion, providing a radical criticism of the social division between the masculine and the feminine realms, "somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other" (Hawthorne 35-36).⁵ Such boundary crossings are also present in other secret societies (i.e. Theosophy) and occult philosophies. In spiritualism, for instance, it is believed that the living and the dead have access to one another across the boundary of death.

- 11 Although rings have often been held to have magical powers that enable invisibility or shape-shifting, as in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, crystals, mirrors and other optical instruments are also used. Before the publication of Spofford's "The Ray of displacement," H. G. Wells had serialized *The Invisible Man* in *Pearson's Magazine* between April and December 1897. "The Crystal Egg" was published the same year. Related to the topic of invisibility, other stories inquired into the existence of transparent beings, as in Fitz-James O'Brien's story "What Was It?" (1857) or Edward Page Mitchell's "The Crystal Man" (1881). In "The Damned Thing" (1893), Ambrose Bierce explored invisibility in relation to the spectrum of human chromatic scale and Besant's ideas about colours beyond human visual spectrum. H.P. Lovecraft also paid attention to this topic in "The Colour out of Space" (1927).
- 12 Communication issues between the dimension of the real and other dimensions or worlds can be inferred from the allusions to diverse language machines (telegrams, typewriters, telephones and even a phonographic diary) appearing in these novels (Bell's telephone and Edison's phonograph were patented in 1876 and 1877). Marconi's wireless telegraphy experiments can also be discerned in the desire to connect the voices and spectres that came from the machines, as in Jules Verne's *Le Château des Carpathes* (1892). Owen Oliver's "The Black Shadow" (1903) went beyond invisibility into sub-atomic life forms to fuse electromagnetism with demonic bodysnatching themes, drawing on Tesla's belief that he was receiving alien messages (Grove). Jack London's "The Shadow and the Flash" (1906) is yet another example. In many of these works, invisibility is linked to the idea of the existence of alternative dimensions and spatiotemporal folds, as Einstein's relativity theory also speculated.
- 13 More interesting for the purpose of this paper are stories of transparent women like *Stella* (1895), written by mathematician and spiritualist Charles Howard Hinton. Here the protagonists regains her self-image only after achieving financial and social equality, literally becoming a "New Woman" (Grove 141-173). In Wells' *The Invisible Man*, invisibility leads to masculine egomania and desires of excessive control. Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, published the same year, also explores masculine fears of the "New Woman" and the materialization of the undead, leading to allegorical issues of social control.

2. Engendering the Supernatural

- 14 There have been important contributions to the re-emergence of supernaturalism in the nineteenth century which trace connections between the Gothic genre and the development of modern psychological fiction. For instance, the work of Rosemary Jackson (1981) explored the fantastic as an interrogation of the real, which she traced

back to the Enlightenment. Nina Auerbach (1984) concentrated on dichotomies such as the angel/demon, the old maid, and the fallen woman in order to show that fear of these types contributed to the ideal of the dutiful family-bound woman, the "Angel in the House." In the case of the United States, authors such as Paula Bennett and Vernon A. Rosario explored the "Phantasmic" in American fiction in the nineteenth century, while Lynette Carpenter and Wendy K. Kolmar focused on feminist approaches to ghost stories alongside Dana de George, Marina Warner, and Andrew Weinstock. In spite of this large body of texts, the social function of these stories needs further exploration.

- 15 One early study on sociocultural aspects of the supernatural is that of Kate Ferguson Ellis who contended that male UK science fiction writers may have been struggling to redefine masculinity in the face of emerging forms of strong femininity. Back in the United States, Melanie Butler Holladay proposed the existence of supernatural marriage plots that peak between 1820 and 1870, the decades between the emergence of the "Angel in the House" and the rise of the "New Woman," the era during which the genre of domestic fiction also materialized. These domestic angels have often been described figuratively as disembodied spirits, suffering a sort of civil death upon marriage and a subsequent loss of rights and power in favour of their husbands'. Such depictions reinforced moral lessons of submission and self-sacrifice for female readers.
- 16 However, the emergence of other supernatural figures to depict female characters as rebellious, describing them as devilish and malignant elves or witches, had the purpose of fighting the angel myth. In many fictions written by female authors, particularly after the 1870s, ghostliness serves "as a way station between individualism (the realm of men) and angeldom (the realm of women), suggesting that traversing the boundary between the spheres involves a traumatic crossing over into a different state of being" (Holladay xxi). Both the angel and her devilish counterpart have to make sacrifices. The angel sacrifices her individuality at the cost of her social acceptance, becoming more human. The fallibility (notice the etymology of the word) of the witch, fairy or elf helps retain some humanity and individuality but, like the Satan of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, these figures are marginalized and isolated as outcasts.
- 17 The intense anxiety surrounding discussions on the "Woman Question" and the emergence of a "New Woman," associated with traditional malevolent supernatural types (i.e. the myths of Isis, Lilith, vampire women and so on) indicated the continued existence of ancient fears concerning woman's satanic alliances and, at least in the Western world, her responsibility in causing the Biblical Fall. However, the new alliance between hermetic secret societies and scientific knowledge visible in many supernatural plots may have also contributed to the re-evaluation of women's nature, role and status.
- 18 In "A Composite Wife," published in 1894 as part of the collection *A Scarlet Poppy and Other Stories*, Spofford had already touched upon the theme of women's invisibility by describing the dead wives of widower Mr. Chipperley as "pallid women" (228), "three ghosts" (229) who "must have lost all identity by this time" (229, 220). Chipperley is interested in the opinionated Honor Humphreys who, defying her parents' desires, tries to get rid of his unwelcome attentions and pair him with her cousin Marian Marcy, "pale and drab, just like all the women he naturally prefers" (235). Honor, who bears all the attributes of a malicious supernatural being, dressed with a "bewitching knot," holding "a diamond⁶ stick-pin" in each hand (223-224), and with "Four great Persian cats [who] haunted her every footstep in the house" (230) is presented as "a

satanic black fiery thing with fiery eyes" (230). Marian, on the other hand, seems to be the perfect "angel" partner, even if "she knew next to nothing of politics, or theosophy, or music" (230). As Holladay has noted, the supernatural figure of the ghost or the semi-visible figure may represent a desire to metaphorically reclaim the female body and its agency, thus becoming a sort of political discourse.

3. "The Ray of Displacement" and the Blurring of Gender Differences through the Power of Sympathy

- 19 "The Ray of Displacement" represents another step in the unsettling association of women with the occult and the growth of secret societies, such as the Theosophical Society, which may have had a fundamental impact on the "public sphere." Spofford offers a hybrid narrative which fuses scientific forms of perceiving transcendence dominated by male consciousness with philanthropy and ethical concerns, typically attributed to the female gender (but also very important in the civil societies and brotherhoods that stood for what today would be called social networking). Spofford's technological account of invisibility has a very clear purpose: the re-establishment of moral goodness through the substitution of the negative character of Judge Brant by the obscure androgynous figure of St. Angel, who shows itself secretly to the scientist-protagonist while he is unjustly held in prison.

- 20 Spofford had already written a poem entitled "Two Angels" published in August 1898 in *The Temple Journal*, a monthly magazine devoted "to the fuller unfoldment of the divinity of humanity." The poem also shows traces of her theosophical inclinations.

Two angels out of darkness born,
All unaware of bloom or scathe,
Hung on the outer edge of morn,—
And one was Doubt, and one was Faith.
Doubt spread his gray and mighty plume
Beyond the bounds of space and night,
And round him depths and gulfs of glooms
Swept with an ever-circling flight.
But Faith, with eyes that only knew
Immeasurable light above,
Sprang upward through the quivering blue
And rested in the heart of Love. (*The Temple Journal* 1898: 49)

- 21 "The Ray of Displacement" uses the figure of the angel, a multifaceted disembodied being described in the story in ambiguous terms. Although angels have no bodies and therefore no biological gender, in Christian belief they are depicted as both masculine and feminine. In Judaism, however, they are often androgynous, blending masculine and feminine traits. In Spofford's story, the dual alchemic nature of the diamond, which is both bright and carbon-dark and becomes invisible by the manipulation of the protagonist's technology, parallels the description of the two angels in her poem, also echoing the hermetic tradition present in Milton's *Paradise Lost* as well as William Blake's poem "I Heard an Angel Singing." The figure of St. Angel is described in ambiguous terms as a male, sometimes with female attributes, and almost human:

It was here, practically, he came into my life—alas! that I came into his.
In the long nights of darkness and failing faintness, when horror had me by the throat, he was beside me, and his warm, human touch was all that held me while I hung over the abyss. When I swooned off again his hand, his voice, his bending face

recalled me. 'Why not let me go, and then an end?' I sighed.

'To save you from a great sin,' he replied. And I clung to his hand with the animal instinct of living.

- 22 In *States of Sympathy: Seduction and Democracy in the American Novel*, Elizabeth Barnes shows how the post-Revolutionary rhetoric of sympathy attempted to "reconcile conservative republican values of duty to others with a liberal agenda of self-possession" (Barnes 12). My argument is that this rhetoric had also a decisive influence on the "public sphere," propelled, in many cases, by the role of societies, associations and brotherhoods. Holladay has also explored the impact of sympathy on US literature in the second half of the nineteenth century, particularly in the case of supernatural fiction. The power of sympathy contributed "to a sentimental vision of union that eventually becomes the ideal for both men and women" (Barnes 13). I would like to point out that this empowering of society through the virtues of sympathy takes place in the context of emerging civil societies, often secret because of their revolutionary inclinations, that sought to give scientific explanations to transcendent phenomena previously viewed through the prism of religion. As a result, the importance of sympathy became so widespread that it was believed that men should "learn to be more like women" (Barnes xi). This translated into a greater emphasis on male sympathy towards women's disadvantages, a trend still in force today in the most recent wave of feminism.

- 23 In Spofford's text, St. Angel is the catalyst for the power of sympathy in securing the protagonist's ethical transformation. The unnamed scientist learns to empathize because his guardian angel is described as having suffered himself a similar situation of imprisonment:

I learned afterwards that St. Angel had given up the sweetness of life for the sake of his enemy. He had gone to prison, and himself worn the stripes, rather than the woman he loved should know her husband was the criminal. Perhaps he did not reconcile this with his love of inviolate truth. But St. Angel had never felt so much regard for his own soul as for the service of others. Self-forgetfulness was the dominant of all his nature.

- 24 In the paragraph above, it seems clear that St. Angel had lived a human life before becoming an angel, a "watcher" over humanity. As in the account of Noah's grandfather, the Book of Enoch, one of the earliest accounts of supernatural phenomena, various angels, sons of the divinity, would have fallen for human women while on earth. Indeed, St. Angel describes himself as unable to reconcile his human love for a woman with "his love of inviolate truth." However, feminine traits such as his "self-forgetfulness" which "was the dominant of all his nature" create an ambiguity in his description which becomes extended to the plot by means of several events and incidents.

- 25 As in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the protagonist and St. Angel are enthusiastic about the medical and ethical possibilities behind a discovery that could help to improve the world. The following paragraph brings the protagonist close to Christian imagery with its final allusion:

What wonders of energy would follow this ray of displacement. What withdrawal of malignant growth and deteriorating tissue was to come. 'To what heights of succor for humanity the surgeon can rise with it!' said St. Angel, as, full of my enthusiasm, I dilated on the marvel.

'He can work miracles!' I exclaimed. 'He can heal the sick, walk on the deep, perhaps—who knows—raise the dead!'

- 26 Seeking to perform such miracles, St. Angel convinces the scientist to perfect his discovery. He suggests the exchange of clothes so that the scientist can abandon the cell at night to go to his laboratory. As we mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the scientist had already polarized himself before entering the prison and was able to traverse walls in a semi-transparent state: "You are my size We will exchange clothes. I will remain here," insists the angel.
- 27 This episode of cross-dressing parallels the shape-shifting and invisibility that takes place under the impact of the Y-ray:
- I had now found that molecular displacement can be had in various directions. Going further, I saw that gravity acts on bodies whose molecules are on the same plane, and one of the possible results of the application of the Y-ray was the suspension of the laws of gravity. This possibly accounted for an almost inappreciable buoyancy and the power of directing one's course. My last studies showed that a substance thus treated has the degenerative power of attracting the molecules of any norm into its new orbit—a disastrous possibility. *A chair might disappear into a table* previously treated by a Y-ray. (emphasis mine)
- 28 The apparent casual reference to the chair plays an important role at the end of the story when, in the final metamorphosis, St. Angel becomes Brant: "Brant fell back into his chair exhausted, *the purple color fading till his face shone fair as a girl's, sweet and smiling as a child's, white as the face of a risen spirit*" (emphasis mine). Thus, the ghostly lack of materiality that affects anything having been touched by the Y-ray parallels the obscure ambiguous descriptions of St. Angel, and his final transformation into Brant, a description where his face takes the tints of a "girl's" face. But the story hides other references to clothes and their importance for identity and embodiment. For example, St. Angel convinces the protagonist to speak to Brant once more and explain the situation: "'At any rate,' he continued, 'come out with me now and see the Governor, and see the world and the daylight outdoors, and *be a man among men a while!*' With the stipulation that I should return, I *put on a man's clothes again* and went out the gates" (emphasis mine).
- 29 First, the protagonist wants to show St. Angel just how despicable Brant is. "Seeing is believing," he tells St. Angel, "Sometimes not seeing is the naked truth," and he goes on to add that "there is no one on earth with eyes to see you but myself." The strong sympathetic connection between the two, to the point of cross-dressing as shown above, helps protect their self-esteem. Their invisibility serves as a metaphor of their individualism and isolation: "'Have no fear. You hear me now,' I said. 'I am in perhaps the Fourth Dimension. I am invisible to any one not there—to all the world, except, presently, yourself. For now you, you also, pass into the unseen. Tell me what you feel'." This invisible realm is a magic zone in which the two outcasts can find comfort in one another's sympathy.

4. Hauntologies: Gender Inquiries beyond the Visible

- 30 From the above discussion, it might be possible to conclude that the supernatural metaphors that appear in "The Ray of Displacement" are associated with seemingly opposing components: on the one hand, isolation, imprisonment (recalling domesticity) and secrecy, all of which might be a positive aspect for recovering self-possession; on the other hand sympathy which allows others to accept one's individual self. Both the

ghost and the protagonist in Spofford's "The Ray of Displacement" are no longer trapped in a netherworld limbo, alone in their suffering and haunting sense of injustice. Their capacity to sympathize allows them to reach out to the other.

- 31 When following Judge Brant, the two friends witness the judge's dubious lifestyle and the negative perception people have about him: "The Judge has gone to the races, and he's left word that Tuesday morning your goods'll be put out of the house if you don't pay up! The woman went her way weeping." In particular, the text compares Brant's dark side to St. Angel's luminous personality, providing more examples of his compassionate behaviour, as when he slips a dime into the driver's pocket on their way to the races: "he felt that even the invisible ... carried a right." More eloquent is the following description as the two follow Brant to his club:

With more cunning than ability, he had achieved some success in his profession, and he secured admission to a good club, recently crowning his efforts, when most of the influential members were absent, by getting himself made one of its governors.

It would be impossible to find a greater contrast to this wretch than in St. Angel — a man of delicate imagination and pure fancy, tender to the child on the street, the fly on the wall; all his atmosphere that of kindness. Gently born, but too finely bred, his physical resistance was so slight that his immunity lay in not being attacked. His clean, fair skin, his brilliant eyes, spoke of health, but the fragility of frame did not speak of strength. Yet St. Angel's life was the active principle of good; his neighborhood was purification.

- 32 Structured around the stories of lonely men and their obsessions (science in the case of the protagonist, money, sports and the club in the case of Brant, and a married woman in the case of St. Angel), Spofford's text reveals how homosocial networks may constitute a barrier to gender integration, a boundary that the author surpasses by introducing the supernatural as a civil realm of almost alchemic completion. The doubling of material and spiritual that takes place in the fusion of the protagonist and the ghost, and eventually in his atomization with Brant himself, may call attention to the liberating blurring of gender differences (all the men in the story are imprisoned in their own ways) and to the disintegration and atomization of pathological social boundaries through Spofford's hybrid rhetoric.
- 33 Spofford's experiment in sympathy turns upon itself when Judge Brant, who stands for the legal system, gradually becomes invisible and is allowed to see what others secretly think about him, which shows that he is also imprisoned in his world. The situation is very similar to Scrooge's experience in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. Brant's outrage and anger at the expressions of people's unconscious disapproval increases the effects of the Y-ray on his body, and his shape grows vaguer and vaguer. At the club, he "falls" on an apparently empty seat, where St. Angel is also sitting:
- He had closed his eyes, and perhaps *fallen* into a light doze when he must have been waked by the impact of Brant's powerful frame, as the latter took what seemed to him the empty seat. I expected to see Brant at once flung across the rug by St. Angel's natural effort in rising. Instead, Brant *sank* into the chair as into down pillows.
- I rushed, as quickly as I could, to seize and throw him off, 'Through him! Pass through him! Come out! Come to me!' I cried. And people to-day remember that voice out of the air, in the Kings County Club. (emphasis mine)
- 34 The description of Brant's "fall" and his subsequent metamorphosis is described as a struggle in which the two bodies become one:

It seemed to me that I heard a sound, a sob, a whisper, as if one cried with a struggling sigh, 'Impossible!' And with that a strange trembling convulsed Judge Brant's great frame, he lifted his hands, he thrust out his feet, his head fell forward, he groaned gurglingly, shudder after shudder shook him as if every muscle quivered with agony or effort, the big veins started out as if every pulse were a red-hot iron. He was wrestling with something, he knew not what, something as antipathetic to him as white is to black; every nerve was concentrated in rebellion, every fiber struggled to break the spell.

- 35 Thus, St. Angel takes Brant's bodily shape and Brant acquires the ghost's ethical characteristics, imbued with feminine traits. The story ends with St. Angel's possession of Brant's masculine body, and with the Judge embodying the ghost's feminine and sympathetic personality as he engages in a number of philanthropic pursuits in order to improve his lifestyle. The scientist returns to his laboratory and after depolarizing himself, he destroys all vestiges of his work. Then he goes back to his purgatory in the prison where he later receives Brant's visit who, in "a singular sweet overtone" explains that he has come for reparation.

'If I did not know who and what you are,' I said, 'I should think the soul of St. Angel had possession of you!'

The man looked at me dreamily. 'Strange!' he murmured. 'I seem to have heard something like that before. However,' as if he shook off a perplexing train of thought, 'all that is of no consequence. It is not who you are, but what you do'....

'Come,' he said. 'We will go together. We will carry light into dark places—there are many waiting—'

'St. Angel!' I cried, with a loud voice, 'are you here?'

And again *the smile of infinite sweetness illuminated the face* even as the sun shines up from the depths of a stagnant pool. (emphasis mine)

5. Conclusion

- 36 One could argue that in "The Ray of Displacement" female protagonists are invisible. The women in the story only exist in the minds of their male counterparts. St. Angel's hauntings are caused by the obsessive memory of a married woman through whom he learns the power of sympathy. And in his solitary confinement, the protagonist's scientific and ethical concerns are also transformed through the ghost's sympathetic powers, adding to the myth of the scientist who, by means of technology, wishes to show not only potential for material metamorphosis but also an expression of social, political and ethical change. Ultimately, Judge Brant, who represents the legal establishment, is possessed by the feminized phantom.
- 37 The emphasis on sympathy suggests the idea of regeneration through a sort of feminized other, but the radical forms of gender alterity and heterodox conceptions that appear in the story go even further. In "The Ray of Displacement," all three male protagonists seem to coalesce in novel expressions of hermaphrodite manhood, crossing the boundaries between the male homosocial world and the domestic realm of invisible women. Such forms of metamorphoses embody the limitations of gender politics ascribed to the body and dramatize the crisis of masculinity that haunts the text by portraying the masculine desire to possess (someone else's wife, scientific recognition, money and power, in the case of each of the protagonists), and also be possessed by ideal feminine forms embodied in sweet St. Angel and the invisible unnamed wives.

- 38 In her famous correspondence with Thomas Wentworth Higginson, her mentor as well as Spofford's admirer, Emily Dickinson wrote about "Circumstance," one of Spofford's most successful and strange short stories, and mentioned that she read it and that it followed her in the dark [L261]. Spofford's stories have indeed been described as dark and florid. In 1865 Henry James wrote a famous critique of her novel *Azarian* in terms of its queer florid poetics, a trend that James contemplated as a dangerous form of writing perhaps voicing a longstanding cultural anxiety about social feminization (Douglas). Indeed, in her chapter on Spofford, Dorri Beam demonstrates how her florid style functions as both figure and theme to create a textual space of transgression and alternative ontologies of gender, emerging "as the *seat* of expression" (Beam 5, emphasis mine).
- 39 In "The Ray of Displacement," florid poetics blends with scientific rhetoric in a hybrid alchemic hermaphrodite narrative that presents an organic scenario of process where the visible becomes invisible and vice versa. The story not only questions gender categories; it also interrogates possible connections between the human realm and non-human dimensions. In endless surreal shape-shifting the diamond is carbon, the table a chair (the seat of expression and possession), the embodied individual a ghost, and the feminine is masculine. The story transforms and deforms, *displacing* physical space and metaphysical time in a scenario of specular metamorphosis, where the mimetic looking glass becomes a distorted black mirror. In Spofford's words: "Sometimes not seeing is the naked truth."

40

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Auerbach, Nina. *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1982.
- Barnes, Elizabeth. *States of Sympathy: Seduction and Democracy in the American Novel*. New York: Columbia UP, 1997.
- Beam, Dorri. *Style, Gender, and Fantasy in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing*. Cambridge UP, 2010.
- Bednarowski, Mary Farrell. "Women in Occult America." *The Occult in America: New Historical Perspectives*. Eds. Howard Kerr and Charles L. Crow. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1983. 177-95.
- Bennett, Paula. "'Pomegranate Flowers': The Phantasmic Productions of Late-Nineteenth-Century Anglo-American Women Poets." *Solitary Pleasures: The Historical Literary and Artistic Discourses of Autoeroticism*. Eds. Paula Bennett and Vernon A. Rosario. New York: Routledge, 1995. 189-213.
- Bierce, Ambrose. "The Damned Thing." *Complete Short Stories of Ambrose Bierce*. Ed. Ernest Jerome Hopkins. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1970. 97-105.
- Braude, Ann. *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989.

- Carpenter, Lynette and Wendy K. Kolmar (Eds.). *Haunting the House of Fiction: Feminist Perspectives on Ghost Stories by American Women*. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1991.
- Da Vinci, Leonardo. *Trattato della pittura*. Translated by John Francis Rigaud for the Royal Academy of Painting. London, 1835. <https://archive.org/details/davincionpainting00leon>
- Del George, Dana. *The Supernatural in Short Fiction of the Americas: The Other World in the New World*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001.
- Dickinson, Emily. *Letters from Dickinson to Higginson*. 25 April 1862. <http://archive.emilydickinson.org/correspondence/higginson/l261.html>
- Douglas, Ann. *The Feminization of American Culture*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977.
- Eliade, Mircea. *Patterns in Comparative Religion*. New York: Sheed & Ward, 1958.
- Ellis, Kate Ferguson. *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1989.
- Enoch, Jay M. "History of Mirrors Dating Back 8000 Years." School of Optometry: University of California at Berkeley, 2006. http://journals.lww.com/optvissci/Fulltext/2006/10000/History_of_Mirrors_Dating_Back_8000_Years.17.aspx
- Frye, Northrop. *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1947.
- Grove, Allen W. "Röntgen's Ghosts: Photography, X-Rays and the Victorian Imagination." *Literature and Medicine* 16 (1997): 141-173.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Trans. Thomas Burger. 1962. Cambridge: MIT, 1989.
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter*. Vol. 1 of *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*. Eds. William Charvat, Roy Harvey Pearce, and Claude M. Simpson. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1962.
- Hinton, C. H. Stella. *Scientific Romances*. Second Series. London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1895.
- Holladay, Melanie Butler. *Individualism Possessed: The Supernatural Marriage Plot 1820-1870*. Nashville, Tennessee. PhD dissertation. 2006.
- Jackson, Rosemary. *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. New York: Methuen & Co., 1981.
- Jacob, Margaret C. *Living the Enlightenment: Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Europe*. New York: Oxford UP, 1991.
- Kerr, Howard, Crowley, John W., and Crow, Charles L. (Eds.). *The Haunted Dusk: American Supernatural Fiction, 1820-1920*. Athens: The U of Georgia P, 1983.
- Kerr, Howard, and Crow, Charles L. (Eds.). *The Occult in America: New Historical Perspectives*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1983.
- Ketterer, David. "'Circle of Acquaintance': Mistress Hibbins and the Hermetic Design of *The Scarlet Letter*." *English Studies in Canada* 9.3 (1983): 294-311.
- López-Varela Azcárate, Asunción. "El futuro de las narratologías híbridas en Alicia en el país de las maravillas." 1616: Anuario de la Sociedad Española de Literatura General y Comparada. Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca, 2015. 137-162. http://revistas.usal.es/index.php/1616_Anuario_Literatura_Comp
- López-Varela Azcárate, Asunción and Sussman, Henry (Eds.) *Technopoïesis: Transmedia Mythologisation and the Unity of Knowledge*. Icono 14 Revista Científica de Comunicación y

Tecnologías Emergentes 15.1, 2017. <https://icono14.net/ojs/index.php/icono14/issue/view/15-1-17>

Melchior-Bonnet, Sabine. *Histoire de miroir*. Paris: Imago, 1994.

Mitchell, Edward Page. *The Crystal Man*. Ed. Sam Moskowitz. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973.

Prigogine, Ilya and Stengers, Isabelle. *La Nouvelle alliance. Métamorphose de la science*. Paris: Gallimard, 1979.

---. *Order out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue with Nature*. London: Flamingo, 1984.

Reiss Timothy. *Knowledge, Discovery and Imagination in Early Modern Europe: The Rise of Aesthetic Rationalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997.

Spofford, Harriet Prescott. "A Composite Wife." *A Scarlet Poppy and Other Stories*. New York: Garrett Press. The American Short Story Series, Vol. 76, 1894. Reprint 1969.

---. "The Ray of Displacement." *The Ray of Displacement and Other Stories*. Project Gutenberg Australia. n.p. <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks06/0606581h.html>.

Tesla, Nikola. "Tesla's Latest Results: He Now Produces Radiographs at a Distance of More than Forty Feet." *The Electrical Review* (March 18th, 1896).

<https://teslaresearch.jimdo.com/articles-interviews/tesla-s-latest-results-he-now-produces-radiographs-at-a-distance-of-more-than-forty-feet-electrical-review-march-18th-1896/>

The Temple. The International Association for the Preservation of Spiritualist and Occult Periodicals. <http://www.iapsop.com/archive/materials/temple/>

Warner, Marina. *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds: The Clarendon Lectures in English 2001*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002.

Weinstock, Jeffrey Andrew, ed. *Spectral America: Phantoms and the National Imagination*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2004.

Winter, Alison. *Mesmerized: The Power of Mind in Victorian Britain*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998.

NOTES

1. The term is taken from a narrative poem by Coventry Patmore which was first published in 1854 and which became very popular in the United States.
2. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas sees the public sphere arising from the growing role of the bourgeoisie in critical debate, first in the extended family realm through the gatherings they celebrated in their salons and, later, in the form of communities and societies where discussions on art, education, economics and politics began to articulate the interests of civil society in the form of pamphlets, journals and other publications that served to shape the concept of public opinion and eventually shift social conditions. Many fraternities lodged themselves within the social structure of civil society, and a growing number of liberal top army officers, politicians and influential people became freemasons. This community model, which had expanded during the Middle Ages to religious orders and cavalier warriors, grew among guilds of tradesmen, particularly builders and engineers who, in the absence of welfare measures and trade unions, gathered as professional equals for mutually beneficial purpose and networking. Masonic lodges appeared in several European countries as early as the eleventh century, coinciding with the huge workload of cathedral construction all over Europe. The

adjective "free" came to be added to the term "mason" in order to emphasize that these workers were not feudally bound. Under the Enlightenment, the principles of Freemasonry entered academic institutions such as the Royal Society as well as the army (Napoleon gave it semi-official status in 1802). Margaret Jacob has also explained that these fraternities, which declared themselves open to all religious beliefs and political views, may have had a very important role in developing the public sphere, which functioned independently from state institutions, becoming a platform for revolution and reform.

3. For a collection of papers that show how the interest in the occult forms a distinctive pattern in the history of the United States, see Howard Kerr and Charles L. Crow. In the same volume, see Mary Farrell Bednarowski's "Women in Occult America" (177-195). See also Braude.

4. In *Histoire de miroir*, Sabine Melchior-Bonnet gives a comprehensive account on the history of the mirror. See also Jay Enoch.

5. The "Mystic marriage" metaphor was first elaborated by ascetic scholar Origen of Alexandria, and later by the Franciscan Bernard de Clairvaux. The soul was compared to a bride and the groom of the divine logos, an interpretation that tends to effeminate man's soul through the power of sympathy.

6. Although the space of this paper does not allow me to explore the importance of jewels, particularly "stones" in Spofford's stories, I would like to draw attention to their symbolic presence in "In the Cellar" and "The Amber Gods," among many others.

ABSTRACTS

This paper focuses on Harriet Prescott Spofford's short story "The Ray of Displacement" which appeared in *The Metropolitan Magazine* in October 1903. The story deals with a crystal structure and the adventures of an unnamed scientist falsely accused of stealing it. The scientist's invention of a Y-ray, capable of separating atoms and molecules so that solid bodies can penetrate one another, leads him to the discovery of disembodiment and invisibility. The story indirectly refers to St. Paul's Letter to the Corinthians where Revelation is shown as a riddle or enigma reflected on a looking glass. Spofford offers a hybrid narrative which fuses philanthropy, ethical concerns, and the power of sympathy, typically attributed to the female gender, with scientific forms of perceiving transcendence dominated by male consciousness. Inverting the angelic rhetoric present in the conception of the "Angel in the house," Spofford displays a complex story that *engenders* the supernatural.

INDEX

Keywords: Harriet Prescott Spofford, theosophy, science fiction, the Angel in the House, gender hybridity, the power of sympathy

AUTHOR

ASUNCIÓN LÓPEZ-VARELA

Asunción López-Varela is Associate Professor at the Department of English Studies, Universidad Complutense de Madrid. Her research interests are Comparative Literature, Cultural Studies, as well as Cognitive and Intermedial Semiotics. She coordinates the research program Studies on Intermediality and Intercultural Mediation (SIIM). López-Varela is currently Deputy Head of the Department of English Studies at UCM and member of the Executive Committee of the Association of Alumni of the Real Colegio Complutense at Harvard University and of the Marie Curie Alumni Association MCAA. Between 2017 and 2019, López-Varela was President of the European Society of Comparative Literature. In order to strengthen relations between Europe and Asia, López-Varela coordinates an annual Seminar Series on Cross-cultural dialogue funded by the One Asia Foundation. She is honorary member of the Poetry Award Committee of Beijing Literature and ArtNetwork and editor and a member of the scientific committee of various academic journals.