

***Servants of the Supernatural: The Night Side of the Victorian Mind,*
Antonio Melechi. London: Arrow Books, 2008 (304 pages)**

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Servants of the Supernatural is a very interesting study of mesmerism, spiritualism and psychical research, the three nineteenth-century movements that were outside the hegemonic rules of science and were never recognized as part of the official canon, whose representatives considered them as “epidemic delusions” or “marginal cults”. Antonio Melechi's analysis follows the birth and chronological development of these three pseudo-sciences in England through the decades from the end of the eighteenth century to the 1890s. Similarly to the major critical interpretations on the subject previously published (such as Alex Owen's and Janet Oppenheim's acclaimed and most exhaustive works *The Darkened Room* (1989) and *The Other World* (1985)), Melechi expresses no explicit verdict on the reality of spirit existence or on the veracity of the physical phenomena occurring in the séance rooms. Indeed, he attempts to balance the opposite positions of believers/practitioners on the one hand and detractors/sceptics on the other. The book thus well recreates the post-Enlightenment appetite for miracles as set against the rigorous discipline of the official sciences, the dualism of reality and faith, and the oscillation between the twin worlds of spirit and matter characterizing the Victorian age. However, the voice of the detractors and the unfaithful sometimes seems to emerge with major strength over that of these movements' promoters. This is evident, for example, in the choice to name Chapter 2 “Magnetic Mockeries” (reviewer's emphasis), but is also exemplified by the fact that Melechi often reports that “most experiments remained rather more doubtful”, that they were seen as “fantastic tricks”, and that the majority of mediums were discovered as frauds on several occasions.

Nevertheless, the result is an undeniably interesting “gallery of contrasting thumbnail portraits” of nineteenth-century figures—also visually presented in the rich series of illustrations inserted in the middle of the volume and explained by very useful captions—that include Dr. John Elliotson and Michael Faraday (the English physicians who were most enthusiastic in promoting animal magnetism), the mediums Daniel Dunglas Home and Florence Cook (who could respectively levitate and materialize a spirit) and Reverend William Stainton Moses (a High Church convert to spiritualism). In the title, Melechi defines them as “servants of the supernatural”, whereas the volume rather seems to suggest that they were servants of their own beliefs, eager to prove their speculations, although these

were based on little factual evidence. In this way, the author faithfully recreates the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century atmosphere of both belief and doubt: the pseudo-sciences here analysed are an excellent example of the rupture of boundaries often present during the Victorian age, which could be finally epitomized by the ghosts appearing during the séances as liminal figures neither dead or alive, neither corporeal or immaterial, neither belonging to the past or the present. Mesmerism, spiritualism and psychical research were indeed practices on the threshold between faith and science, personal feelings (such as the affection for the lost loved ones) and the detachment required by the scientific method.

The volume initially analyses the promoters of animal magnetism, focusing on the theories of Franz Anton Mesmer. It then examines in detail its various early practitioners and converts as well as their patients, but also skilfully moves from Vienna and Paris to London to follow these people's geographical movements. In the same respect, the debate between the pseudo- and the official sciences is portrayed in all of its different locations, from the salons and studios of the learned societies constituting and reuniting the British intelligentsia to the lectures and stage demonstrations involving the public at large. Precise addresses, streets and buildings are mentioned: this helps the reader to imaginatively portray the various situations in his/her own mind as they actually occurred throughout the United Kingdom.

The same is true in regard to the social and intellectual rank of the various personages mentioned by Melechi. He closely observes both people of social standing and domestic servants or housemaids, convinced Christians and freethinkers, self-taught plebeians as much as literary exponents (such as Coleridge, Trollope, Dickens, Doyle and George Eliot—the opinion of them all being meticulously reported). By means of the use of precise quotations (whose reading is not delayed or distracted by footnotes) from the works of both believers and their critics, from the period's mainstream and local journals and magazines (such as the *Lancet*, the *Medical Gazette*, the *Zoist* and the *Spiritual Magazine*) and from medical works, Melechi manages to transcribe a faithful and interesting record of the history of these movements and the evaluation of them by contemporary Victorians. Furthermore, and similarly to previous critical works, Melechi recreates the in-betweenness of women's position in respect to these practices. Indeed, as the author recognizes, by having a voice which was often denied to them in the period's society (indeed, the majority of mediums were women), women used the séance as “a place where alternative roles and identities could be explored with impunity”.

Melechi then shifts his focus on the practice of phrenology (the pseudo-science based on a neurological study of the brain as the centre of human mind), initially summarizing Franz Josef Gall's theories. He then keenly lingers on the description of the very physical actions and different procedures enacted during phrenological trials and experiments as much as on the depiction of the physical reactions of the experiments' subjects. Melechi usually introduces an author's work and then sums up his or her life, main studies and influences. In this way, especially in the first three chapters, he tends to reconnect to previous centuries to explain the birth of the various phenomena and practices, but also lingers on the biographical accounts of the movements' founders and promoters or of the

latter's patients. This actually slows down the fluency of the narration and could be confusing for a reader who is not specialized in Victorian studies.

By the third chapter, however, the order of the events becomes chronological, proceeding through the decades of the Victorian period in a clearer way. The book analyses trance sittings, mesmeric operations and public demonstrations of phrenology, explaining the promoters' urge to propagandise their beliefs and promote their practice as a possible agent of physical and moral regeneration. This analysis almost "logically" leads to an examination of the most popular among such Victorian fascinations: spiritualism, which developed into a very mania and became a supernatural refuge for many people shaken by scientific affirmations such as Charles Darwin's and Thomas Henry Huxley's. Unfortunately, Melechi does not indulge on the details of the mediums' practices and of the apparitions occurring during the séances: he only peeks inside the dark cabinets of the mediums, but refuses to finally turn on the light in the darkened parlours in order to reveal the actual presence or absence of the spirits. The night side of the Victorian mind thus seems to have been less mysterious and nightly than we could have imagined from the work's title, more open to the public at large than restricted to elitist circles or scholars. Mesmerism and spiritualism (the analysis of psychical research actually receives no lengthy consideration, alas!) are mainly observed in their daily circulation among the masses, independently of social or sexual distinctions.

While the end of mesmerism is clearly explained as due to the introduction of chemical anaesthesia in medical cures, the brief epilogue does not present a conclusive ending or an illustration of the future progress (or gradual disappearance) of spiritualism. However, although not exhaustive, the bibliography is quite informative, drawing material from both nineteenth-century sources and the major critical works of the entire twentieth century, and only partially demonstrating the extent of the research behind this work. I would definitely recommend Melechi's book to all those readers interested in an examination of these liminal and alternative areas trespassing the conventional limits and boundaries of faith and science during the Victorian age.