

Testimony, Fiction, and the Science of the Mind: Occult Empiricism and A.P. Sinnett’s *Karma: A Novel*

Aren Roukema

Nineteenth-century mental science was open to a wide spectrum of hypotheses, supported by the testimonial evidence of an equally diverse group of researchers. A long arc can be drawn across the century, tracing the development of mental science from an investigation of soul as much as brain to a body of associated research fields dominated by empiricist research methods and epistemologies. Mid-to-late-century scientists of this latter persuasion rooted their research in expert knowledge and professional scientific methodologies. This discourse of professionalism frequently sought to strengthen itself by polemically rejecting the amateur, non-empirical approaches of esoteric or occult theorists: mesmerists, Spiritualists, Theosophists and, to some extent, psychical researchers. These groups vociferously opposed these attempts to push their knowledge and research to the margins of science. They proposed competing methodologies — an occult empiricism — which claimed scientific value for the subjective, experiential perceptions of the non-expert mind. This diverse group of occult empiricists embraced many of the methodological principles of empiricist mental physiology, or “psychophysiology,” including the principle that observed phenomena, however strange, must fit within the framework of natural law and have physical causes. However, the bounds of the natural and physical were typical of what Egil Asprem has identified as an “open-ended naturalism” common in occultism and psychical research of the period (*Problem* 9-10). This expanded naturalistic perspective readily incorporated phenomena that psychophysicologists might deem supernatural into experiments and theories. These competing empiricisms are part and parcel of what Rick Rylance calls the “first-person/third-person problem” in mental science (42), a spectrum of debate over the admissibility of subjective, interior experience within objective empirical research. The authority of the scientific expert, the reliability of the observing brain, and the trustworthiness of testimony loom large in this debate.

In the context of these contesting empiricisms, journalist and occultist Alfred Percy Sinnett (1840-1921) published *Karma: A Novel* (1885). This was a staunch defence, via fiction, of occult empirical methods of knowing the mind and knowing *with* the mind, using what Sinnett believed to be the untapped potential of psychic powers for scientific observation. *Karma* devotes much of its narrative energies to defending the reliability of the minds of non-experts and the authenticity of their testimonies, both core planks of occult empiricism. Sinnett’s attempt to use fiction to develop and communicate a scientific method for the study of the mind might seem to the modern mind both unusual and doomed to failure, but it is emblematic of a great number of similar confluences of fiction, occultism, and science in the period.

This article will analyse *Karma* in the context of all three currents in late-nineteenth-century Anglophone culture. I will argue that the novel is emblematic of the way in which the occult empirical emphasis on testimony as evidence mediated mental scientific methods and concepts between popular fiction, occultism, psychical research, and psychophysiology. My analysis has two main objectives. First, I want to interpret *Karma* and situate it in its intellectual and cultural context to show the key tenets of occult empiricism which the novel makes clear, both within itself and in the wider context of nineteenth-century mental science. Second, my analysis aims to explore the

impact of *Karma* and other occult fiction on the development of literary genre in the period. I will argue that fictional recreation of the occult empirical perspective had two central impacts; it created a new space for science in fantastic fiction, and it enabled fiction writers to create scientific verisimilitude for psychical phenomena by adopting the epistemological legitimacy of testimony. I will conclude by arguing that these two aims ultimately ended in cross-purposes that accentuated the divide between conventional and occult empiricism.

Karma was reviewed in the *Standard* and the *Times* and published four times between 1885 and 1887, indicating a moderate level of interest. However, it was not widely read outside of alternative religious audiences, unlike contemporaneous works of occult fiction like Marie Corelli's *A Romance of Two Worlds* (1886) or H. Rider Haggard's *She* (1886-1887). Nevertheless, I have chosen to focus on Sinnett's novel for two reasons. First, *Karma* is unique, for a work of fiction, in the sustained attention it pays to the methodological issues at stake in establishing knowledge about the hidden faculties of the mind. Many novels of the period create both literary verisimilitude and a unique space for science by recreating the subjective, testimony-based perspective of the occult empirical observer. *Karma*, however, is unusually explicit about this recreation. Sinnett uses the novel to join enthusiastically in the "first-person/third-person" debate, specifically advocating occult empirical methods. Second, neither *Karma* nor Sinnett have received attention from scholars of esoteric science and literature, let alone the wider study of history and culture. Yet, *Karma* and its author deserve attention. Sinnett was an influential figure in early Theosophy; he was President of the London Lodge from 1883 and his Theosophical writings in this period, particularly *The Occult World* (1881), *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883), and *Karma*, were widely read by audiences interested in alternative religions. As Lilian Whiting recalled in an 1892 discussion of *Karma* in *Daily Inter Ocean*, Sinnett was widely recognised in these circles. Not to know of Sinnett and *Esoteric Buddhism* in the years after its publication, wrote Whiting, "was to argue yourself unknown." Medium Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891), whose works and teachings were the focal point of Sinnett's advocacy, was the central figure in the Theosophical Society, but Sinnett was one of her most important lieutenants, and was most effective in spreading the teachings of Blavatsky and the elusive "Mahatmas" from which she claimed to receive her esoteric knowledge (Godwin, *Theosophical* 342-343). The Theosophical Society has, in turn, significantly influenced the development of alternative religion in a number of global contexts (Godwin, *Theosophical* 379; Hammer 81-82), amplifying Sinnett's historical importance.

More broadly, Sinnett and his novel are valuable subjects for analysis because they are illustrative examples of a great number of overlooked and marginalised voices which sought to undermine, complexify, or adapt conventional empiricist discourses in nineteenth-century mental science. Unlike canonical authors such as George Eliot, whose literary dialogues with mental science are often examined, Sinnett is more difficult to locate and qualify as a contributor to scientific debate. Yet, as Rick Rylance (147-48) and Edward Reed (12) have illustrated, it is insufficient to focus solely on figures and texts related to mental scientific discourses, concepts, and methods which appear most successful in hindsight. Without including figures like Sinnett – an influential thinker in the ultimately unsuccessful currents of occult empiricism – we develop skewed historical perspectives of how the mind was explored and understood in the period.

Recent histories of nineteenth-century mental physiology have done much to make up for the lack of attention to alternative knowledge spaces in the period (e.g. Stiles;

Willis, *Mesmerists*; Clifford et al; Luckhurst and McDonagh). However, many continue to assume that both fiction and occultism were as marginal to the mental sciences as opposing scientists of the day tried to claim (notable exceptions include Asprem, "Parapsychology" and essays in Karpenko and Claggett, *Strange Science*). Even Aileen Fyfe and Bernard Lightman's *Science in the Marketplace* (2007), which seeks to explore a wide spectrum of "sites and experiences" that enabled nineteenth-century individuals to engage in scientific debate, does not itself leave space for the séance, the trance lecture, or the gnostic space of the occult mind as venues for scientific discovery. Reed's and Rylance's histories of nineteenth-century mental science aim for inclusivity, but neither mention occult science nor spend much time on psychical research, perhaps in line with a general view of esotericism as, in Rylance's terms, "popular" and "delusive" (13).

Occult empiricism has, correspondingly, also received little attention. Alison Winter has explored the use of the trance state as a research tool in early-century mesmerism (61-62, 79-81), and several scholars have explored the methodological valences through which psychical research made its case for scientific legitimacy (Luckhurst 58-59; Asprem, *Problem* 293, 303; Richardson 165-68, 204-09; Noakes). Most histories of heterodox religion and science, however, focus on philosophical and discursive patterns and exchanges. The lack of attention to methodology is particularly acute in the study of esoteric movements, with the notable exception of the "programme of occult chemistry" inaugurated by leading Theosophists Annie Besant and C.W. Leadbeater (Asprem, "Parapsychology" 158. Cf. 154-57). This lack of attention may stem from the assumption that, as Alex Owen's influential history of *fin de siècle* occultism concludes that sciences like psychology and psychical research "parted company with occultism when it came to epistemology and method" (5), despite their shared anti-reductionist ontologies. Figures like Sinnett, however, show that it is not so simple to divorce occultism (or fiction) from other mental sciences on the level of methodology.

Analysis of the occult empirical backdrop with which *Karma* is in continuous dialogue, thus offers a unique perspective on the history of mental science in the period. It also offers new angles on the relationship between occultism and literature, supplementing important studies by scholars like Robert Lee Wolff, Andrew McCann, Leigh Wilson, and Christine Ferguson (e.g. *Beyond Belief*; "Popular Fiction"). This article assesses two areas in which occult fiction's impact has not been properly addressed. First, while a number of studies have productively examined occult sciences in genre fiction of the period (e.g. Scarborough (251-80); Willis, *Mesmerists*; Wolff; Alder), they have tended to pay more attention to ideas and discourse than to methodology. Second, my argument regarding the relationship between genre fiction and testimonial evidence contributes to a longer-term project. This article joins several others in illustrating the impact of esoteric science and religion on the development of genres including science fiction and the gothic. ("Esoteric Roots"; *Esotericism and Narrative*; "Naturalists"). Influenced by leading occultists like Sinnett, authors infused their fiction with occult knowledge and practice in a manner that created impactful, long-lasting tropes and stylistics that have been transported to the present day through the reiteration of genre. Though individual texts like *Karma* are now obscure, nineteenth-century occult fiction continues to reverberate through contemporary culture, mediated by the widespread adoption of mechanisms like the recreation of the perspective of the occult empirical observer.

Contesting Empiricisms in Nineteenth-Century Mental Science

Post-Enlightenment research of the mind and its capabilities had long been defined by conflict between knowledge acquired from observation and the subjective methods and hypothetical speculations commonly relied upon by those tasked with researching inaccessible areas such as the distant past, outer space, or consciousness. This distinction was amplified by the methodological successes of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century researchers working in the tradition of British empiricism inaugurated by Francis Bacon, which did not assume a particular ontology, but did insist on careful induction from observable facts rather than simply the unsupported deduction of classical Enlightenment rationalism (Garratt 16-37). Empiricism provided the basis for the materialist methodologies of Comtean positivism and scientific naturalism, but the nineteenth century saw the relationship between sensible observation and physical reality become more and more unstable. As George Levine observes, the discoveries enabled by the empiricist tradition had themselves opened the universe wider than inductive observation could manage (275-76). In this context, as George Lewes argued, if "Truth is the conformity of Inferences with Sensation, all Science must be false" (1:319).

Immersed in this potentially counterfactual research environment, mental physiologists disagreed on how far past the limits of sensible observation one could proceed in establishing facts about the mind. The occult empirical belief that the mind could encounter and reliably report on aspects of nature not accessible to conventional experimental methods was, to some extent, an ontological holdover from the "discourse of the soul" dominant in earlier mental science (Rylance 21-22. Cf. Reed, esp. 2-9). At this point a neo-Kantian "faculty psychology" attributed the mind with faculties considered irreducible to mere matter, including will, reason, imagination, and various moral senses (Rylance 46-51). A less dominant Romantic tradition of Idealist, imagination-powered mind was also influential. The discourse of the soul was challenged by empiricist traditions including phrenology and associationism in this period; and later by experiments establishing the neurological basis of movement and sensation. These discoveries served to embody thought and behaviour, leading to a late-century view of mind and body as machinic, automatist, and entirely materialist (Rylance 80-100; Danziger). In parallel, psychophysicists emphasised their research as a third-person, objective study of universal physical qualities. These positions were bolstered by evolutionary biology and scientific naturalism. As empiricist methods and perspectives became more dominant, the place of first-person testimony to subjective experience diminished.

As recent histories of mental science in the period have emphasised, however, the discourse of the soul, the Romantic idealism of imagination, and the psychic powers of esotericism maintained an impactful presence (e.g. Ryan; Lamont; Luckhurst; Neill; Anger; Stiles; Reed). Many researchers continued to incorporate non-physical elements of mind or consciousness alongside the known physical processes of the nervous system (Pecere 92-95). In general, the boundaries between fields and approaches were far from clear; nor were the ontologies and methods in any one field consistent across the board. In this fluid context, space remained for those uncomfortable with the diminishment of subjective experience. Mental science in the period was marked as much by attempts to bridge the gaps between first- and third-person observation and evidence as it was by efforts to entrench them. The empirical inaccessibility of the mind left many mind scientists, of necessity, reliant on verbal accounts of feelings, attitudes, and perspectives (Lamont 23, 58). Paranormal events or mental powers that violated known natural laws, but which were upheld by the testimony of tens of thousands of witnesses, were often

at the core of debates over the continuing evidentiary power of individual experience. What was at stake was not the desirability of acquiring sensible data regarding these phenomena – even occultists agreed on the necessity for this – but the extent to which it was possible to do so, the methods used to acquire and to report such data, and the identity of those doing the experiencing.

The latter issue was of particular importance. As part of ongoing mid- to late-century processes of professionalisation and institutionalisation, psychophysicists frequently clarified their methods and disciplinary boundaries by opposing them to research performed by untrained amateurs. This distinction was particularly common in debates over the reality of paranormal events and the methods by which they might be substantiated or denied (Sommer; Puglionesi 7-9). For many psychophysicists, experiences of ghost seeing, pre-cognition, or psychic communication were the result of minds not properly trained to encounter unfamiliar phenomena or alternative mind-states. From the mid-century, mental physiologists including William B. Carpenter and James Braid illustrated that the mind is highly suggestible and the memory fallible. As such, Carpenter argued, it could easily be led to experience what the subject expected to experience, rather than what it actually encountered (112-13). Braid felt that the mind's capacity for delusion explained "the whole of the well-ascertained apparent marvels of Magic, Witchcraft, Animal Magnetism, Hypnotism, Electro-Biology, Crystal-seeing, &c [...] without violating any of the recognised laws of physiology and psychology" (118. Cf. Carpenter 6-7, 56-70). This provided a materialist explanation for occult experience which did not call the integrity of its witnesses into question, but did question their capacity for observation and their ability to reliably frame testimonial evidence.

Yet, these same scientists held faith that this mental weakness could not affect what neurologist George Beard called the "trained intellect" of the "expert" scientist (5). The trained expert encountered phenomena and filtered valid experiences from impossible illusions with a faculty Carpenter called an "an enlightened 'common sense'" (63). Similar to the contemporary use of the term, this was a trained habit, an "automatic sense of what was right and sensible" (Winter 302). The expert was thus not just a source of knowledge and hypothesis, but an instrument of observation, one which could provide reliable evidence and analysis of experiences encountered at séances or public displays of clairvoyance. Testimonies from non-experts that challenged what psychophysicist Henry Maudsley called the "uniformities of experience" (13) – established by common sense and enshrined in natural law – could be summarily rejected without further inquiry. The first step in the development of any proper science, Beard argued, was "the rejection of average human testimony. If we accept what people say, there can be no scientific knowledge of any kind" (42).

For a range of other nineteenth-century theorists of the mind, however – from respected evolutionary biologist A.R. Wallace to amateur, esoterically-inclined researchers like Sinnett, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, and Arthur Conan Doyle – the wealth of testimony attesting to paranormal experiences and abilities suggested that the "uniformities of experience" thus far established were incomplete. These dichotomies – between amateur and professional, individuality and uniformity, subjectivity and objectivity – were frequently contested, with occult experiences and methods of knowing often providing the battleground. Non-expert testimony continued to be gathered as evidence, particularly in the mind sciences where testimony provided irreplaceable access to interior mental processes. In this locus of testimony and diffuse authority, esoteric theories of mind continued to marshal epistemological respectability. The continued vitality of these theories is indicated by the eagerness of

psychophysicologists to debunk not just esoteric theories and experiences, but the very reliability of the minds and persons who framed them.

Some of these minds and people were unconcerned with such polemics, but others, Sinnett included, recognized the threat they posed to further scientific research of paranormal mental abilities. Many of Sinnett's occultist colleagues were unconcerned with methodology, preferring to claim scientific legitimacy for the paranormal with discursive or rationally deductive approaches. Indeed, Olav Hammer specifically identifies Sinnett's guru Blavatsky as an influential example of "esoteric spokespersons [who] often implicitly understand 'science' to be variously [a] body of statements...terminology and/or...technical applications" (204). Sinnett, however, saw a need to grapple with the methodology-based arguments of psychophysicologists and other scientists who sought to push occult knowledge to the margins. The ability of the mind to experience reliably and report back on those experiences was at the core of his defence of Blavatsky and Theosophy and is a central theme of *Karma*.

The Testimony of Alfred Percy Sinnett

Karma is a staunch defence of the esoteric knowledge and experiences Sinnett encountered with Blavatsky and other mediums in the early 1880s. Sinnett was unimpressed with Blavatsky's mediumship when she and Colonel Henry Steel Olcott first visited Alfred and his wife Patience at their home in Allahabad (Prayagraj) in 1879. He reflected later that Blavatsky must have been under some unknown restriction at this time which limited her power (*Incidents* 222; *Occult World* (OW) 49). When she visited again in 1880, however, this time at Simla (Shimla), her abilities were unlocked. The Sinnetts witnessed a variety of feats; Blavatsky duplicated a teacup, filled a bottle with water, and found a lost brooch with "psychological power" (OW 59). The most consistent phenomena produced, however, were letters received from the Mahatmas. These missives – also delivered to other members of Blavatsky's circle, particularly Allan Octavian Hume – were either "impressed, or precipitated" on paper via Blavatsky's mediumship (OW 59. Cf. Godwin, "Mahatma Letters" 128), or were delivered on the astral plane. Sinnett theorised that in the latter process they were first disintegrated by the Mahatmas through "some process of which Western science does not yet dream," then "passed through other matter [and restored to] original solidary, the dispersed particles resuming their precise places as before" (OW 101. Cf. Hammer 380-86; Godwin, "Blavatsky" 19-23). Teleported through the instant communication space of the astral realm, these letters appeared in cushions or fell from ceilings, facilitated by Blavatsky's occult powers and social network. Sinnett communicated with the Mahatmas through other channels as well, including American medium Laura C. Holloway (Sinnett, *Autobiography* 27), but his experiences with Blavatsky were at the core of his belief in these occult masters and the knowledge communicated in their letters. The letters provided "scientific explanations" (*Esoteric Buddhism* (EB) xiii) for phenomena including reincarnation and spiritual and psychical evolution. Sinnett made this esoteric wisdom exoteric in the *Occult World* and *Esoteric Buddhism*, instrumentally systematising, popularising, and legitimating the knowledge which shaped the intellectual and epistemological core of the Theosophical Society (Godwin, *Theosophical* 342). These texts provided Sinnett himself with significant authority and prestige in esoteric circles, allowing him to popularise Theosophy worldwide, and take a "conspicuous part" in establishing its social roots in London following his return to Britain in 1883 (Sinnett, *Early Days* 46-48. Cf. Maitland 122; Godwin, *Theosophical* 342-44).

He did not, therefore, lack motivation to defend his testimony regarding the events at Simla when they came under attack from the Society for Psychical Research (SPR). The SPR, the period's flagship organisation for research of the paranormal, was a vivid example of the complex subjective-objective, expert-amateur dialectics in late-century mental science. It was founded and led by respected scientists including Cambridge intellectuals Eleanor and Henry Sidgwick, chemist William Crookes, physicist Oliver Lodge, and psychologist William James. Unlike psychophysicists, SPR researchers tended toward open-ended naturalism and believed it likely that future scientific discoveries would empirically prove the reality of psychical phenomena. Indeed, in many ways the society's researchers typified occult empiricism. They validated the reliability of the non-expert mind and viewed testimonies of esoteric experience as valuable scientific evidence. The SPR's socio-cultural standing in mental research was more complex than that of the Theosophists. The respect gained in other research fields by figures like Wallace, Lodge, and Crookes spilled over into the SPR, weakening attempts to reject their research interests and methodologies as amateur or untrained. Moreover, like psychophysicists they differentiated their research as methodologically distinct from occultism (see Luckhurst 57-58).

Initially this differentiation was less pronounced. Sinnett, like other influential psychical researchers of the period, including Edmund Gurney and Frederic Myers, was involved with both the Theosophical Society and the SPR in the period leading up to the writing of *Karma*. At this time, Sinnett thought the two movements "almost destined to coalesce" (*Early Days* 48). However, the SPR became sceptical of Blavatsky and her society, as indicated by the founding of a committee to investigate Theosophical claims in May 1884. In November 1884 the SPR dispatched Richard Hodgson to India to investigate claims by Emma and Alexis Coulomb that they had been involved in fraudulently creating and delivering the Mahatma letters. The damning result was the 1885 "Hodgson Report," which identified the letters as Blavatsky forgeries and critiqued Sinnett's accounts in *The Occult World* (Godwin, "Mahatma Letters"). Sinnett responded indignantly to the report in a number of publications of 1885-1886, including a lengthy pamphlet, "The 'Occult World Phenomena' and the Society for Psychical Research" (January 1886), with rebuttals from himself and Blavatsky and reports from a variety of other witnesses confirming their accounts. Such testimony is at the heart of Sinnett's defence. Hodgson's purpose, said Sinnett, was to "discredit the testimony I have myself given of the occult phenomena that have passed under my own observation," an account he felt to be "a plain and unvarnished tale" (Sinnett and Blavatsky 12). Hodgson had erred by implicitly trusting the "false testimony" of the Coulombs and others (Sinnett and Blavatsky 12), while entirely failing to consult him and Blavatsky. The debate between the Theosophists and Hodgson thus rested on the intricacies of testimony; who was reporting, what social authority and/or trustworthiness did they possess, and how did the testimony compare with Carpenter's "common sense" (63) and Maudsley's "uniformities of experience" (13)?

Karma, first published in the spring of 1885, is another response to those who would deny Sinnett's testimony. The novel was written in the period of upheaval caused by the Coulomb letters. Sinnett began writing in August 1884. Word of the Coulomb letters reached London in October, and Hodgson was dispatched in November. In March, Frederic Myers showed Sinnett some of the letters Hodgson had gathered, and even this most ardent of Blavatsky supporters was forced to admit that "the handwriting and the style" were those of Blavatsky (*Autobiography* 27-31). *Karma* and the Hodgson report were published at roughly the same time, but it seems likely that the emerging Coulomb scandal and the ongoing Hodgson investigation influenced Sinnett's priorities in the

novel, leading him to communicate explicitly not just his belief in karma, reincarnation, astral travel, and psychic powers, but his reasons for believing these things and a method for how to substantiate them. Indeed, even before the Coulomb affair Sinnett sensed the need to increase the empirical verifiability of phenomena like the Mahatma letters. He had already stated in *Occult World* that while he was assured of the authenticity of the Mahatmas and trusted Blavatsky's mediumship, he did not share their approach to substantiating knowledge. He found Blavatsky "intractable and excitable as an experimentalist" and noted that she, when "left to herself in such matters, is always the worst deviser of tests imaginable" (81). He also suspected that the Mahatmas did not grasp "the necessity of rendering their test phenomena quite perfect and unassailable in all minor details" (81). The plot, characters, and themes of *Karma* are centrally designed to represent an experimental apparatus through which these weaknesses could be addressed.

Occult Empiricism and *Karma*

Karma focuses upon a group of English intellectuals and socialites who, having "shown some intelligent leaning towards inquiry into psychic matters" (2), are invited to the castle of Heiligenfels for a sustained period of psychical research by Austrian Baron Friedrich von Mondstern. The Baron is an elevated member of a global occult society representative of Theosophy's "Brotherhood" of ascended masters. Like the Mahatmas, he has advanced through a combination of physico-spiritual evolution and occult training to the point where he is able to travel and communicate on the astral plane. He has come so far that he is on the verge of ascending to a higher plane of existence. Before he departs, he wants to display his occult power in order to convince the world of the reality of psychical phenomena. The first half of the novel describes his displays of astral travel, telepathy, and telekinesis. In the second half the Baron makes way for Mrs. Lakesby, a medium who displays her psychic power by describing experiences on the astral plane (including an encounter with the Baron (52)) and by viewing through clairvoyance the past lives of the other guests. These successful clairvoyant displays substantiate occult knowledge and experience within the world of the novel and support the doctrine of reincarnation which Sinnett clarified and promulgated in works like *Esoteric Buddhism*. This connection reflects Sinnett's belief that any possibility for empirical proof of reincarnation lay in first substantiating and developing a science of psychic ability ("Occultism in Fiction," 378).

The Baron and Lakesby are the producers of occult phenomena, but those witnessing and experiencing their abilities are *Karma*'s ultimate focus. The task of observing and analysing occult events is spread across a spectrum of expert and amateur authorities. The principals are Willy Blane, a "studious" amateur psychical researcher (25), and Professor Arthur Massilton, a well-respected scientist in whom the Baron (and Sinnett himself) has invested much of the respectability of his project. Massilton guides the party's psychical research carefully. He commits to observing the Baron's and Lakesby's demonstrations before he determines that these phenomena are "worthy of systematic record, and of presentation in some shape or other to the world" (109). For this record to have any effect he identifies the need for a well-designed empirical approach. Individual testimony alone will not be enough to persuade the world, he insists: "You must have something to show, to secure the kind of interest I should like to secure" (110).

Blane and Massilton thus take steps "to forecast all the objections that might ultimately be raised by critics who might distrust their narration of what might occur" (126). First, the professor insists that all experiences be written down to create "a

complete record, as far as their memory enabled" (211). To counteract accusations based in the fallibility of memory these accounts are to be checked by four or five others who shared the relevant experience (44-46). Massilton also argues the importance of repeatability; the group's task should be to discover an ability or experience "that can be reproduced as an experiment as often as we please" (110). Despite its framing of psychical phenomena as governed by simple natural law, the novel does not treat this as a simple task. Though the Baron and Lakesby consistently achieve repeatable effects, both caution that their psychical abilities are not always repeatable because they are of a different degree and sort than external, physical phenomena (53, 88-94). This was (and remains) a common defence of paranormal abilities and experiences which proved elusive to experimental testing. Unreliability would not seem a strong platform for a methodological argument but, as Peter Lamont illustrates, such experimental caution is often used as a discursive strategy to align extraordinary phenomena with empirical science (96-100).

Without access to easily repeatable experiments consistent with natural law, Blane and Massilton are forced, like Sinnett himself, to rely on the evidential strength of testimony. In this they mirror the contemporaneous efforts of the SPR. The Society's Literary Committee was tasked with collecting and analysing observer accounts of paranormal events, experiences, and abilities, both from pre-existing textual accounts and from contemporary testimony solicited from the public via advertisements in "leading London and provincial journals" ("Report of the Literary Committee" 116). This method was much criticised. Psychologist G. Stanley Hall, for example, called it a "gross and preposterous methodical error" (677; cf. Luckhurst 74; Delgado 246). Like Blane and Massilton, the Committee was very aware of the contested nature of this testimonial evidence. In a January 1887 statement, Myers and Gurney, writing on behalf of the Committee, acknowledged in language similar to that of the psychophysicists that it was necessary to ensure that witnesses had the competence to "observe an event and record with correctness," and to "resist the influence of a person skilled in particular forms of deception" (4-5). Yet, the SPR remained as "anxious as ever" to receive and analyse accounts of ghostly apparitions, telepathy, and trance phenomena (6).

The novel illustrates a number of interrelated aspects of this reliance on testimony, as part of its representation of the challenge of scientifically testing psychic phenomena. I will now analyse Sinnett's defence of occult empiricism in the novel, both to illustrate its value as a historical text which can help to understand this late-century methodology and to illustrate occult empiricism's contributions to the tropes and styles of genre fiction. I will describe and contextualise several aspects of the novel's advocacy for testimonial evidence: (1) the strength of group corroboration, (2) a reliance on social and intellectual authority, (3) a corresponding privileging of the psychically gifted as advanced tools of scientific research, (4) the expansion of spaces for science away from the laboratory or field site, and (5) fantastic literature's emergence as a space for science because of its recreation of the perspective of the occult empirical observer. I will conclude by analysing occult empiricism as a mediating agent of psychical concepts between fiction, occultism, and psychophysiology.

Group Corroboration

Karma frequently turns to the evidential strength of corroborating accounts of experience. It is, indeed, for this purpose that the Baron has brought his visitors to the castle. The Professor expresses doubt that his account of the Baron's powers will be enough to convince the wider world of their validity, but the Baron assures him, "I have enabled you to fortify your own evidence by that of several others. You are not alone at

the castle" (110). The Professor embraces this as a core aspect of his occult empiricist methodology (132), and though he never quite feels that he has designed a "scientific method of dealing with a new discovery," he does feel that he and his fellow observers will be able to honour the Baron's intent of provoking scientific research: "Our report cannot be pooh-poohed; and it must have a great effect upon thought if not upon knowledge" (126).

Karma thus responds to psychophysicist claims that paranormal experiences were merely the result of hallucinations sprung from the easily misdirected mind of the non-expert. Occult empiricists frequently turned to group corroboration to enhance testimony's status as evidence. James Thomas Knowles, founder of the Metaphysical Society, presented testimony from Robert Browning and sculptor Thomas Woolner as evidence of paranormal events in an 1869 letter to the *Spectator*. "The mere collocation" of such accounts he said, "Might bring out features suggestive of a law" (11). Oliver Lodge felt that the balance of cumulative evidence of telepathy "induces belief," though he cautioned that more empirical proof was required (12). Psychophysicists were impatient with such arguments. Beard retorted that "no process of addition can make knowledge of out ignorance; a million ciphers are worth no more than one cipher" (30). Carpenter attacked the problem with more rigour, finding evidence that the "power of suggestion" could be shared, resulting in group hallucinations (4-5). Nevertheless, the corroborative power of group testimony continued to carry evidential weight. The SPR's Literary Committee argued that the "overwhelming quantity" of testimonies it had gathered should put to rest any doubt as to the reality of a range of supernormal phenomena ("Report of the Literary Committee" 117).

Individual Authority

Psychophysicists argued that the intellectual authority of the trained expert was central to determining who could be trusted to reliably observe and analyse occult events and experiences. In the period, however, this was a zone of contestation rather than consensus as scientists did not yet have the epistemological and social authority they would later possess (Warwick 6-7). The SPR formed itself around leading thinkers in fields including physics, mathematics, and the mental sciences, clearly aware of the need to speak from a position of social authority to lend gravitas to methods and subjects previously left to esoteric researchers. This opened an avenue to intellectual authority for amateur occultist researchers as well. The recognised authority of psychical researchers like Wallace, Crookes, and Lodge was frequently channelled by their amateur compatriots when legitimating a range of theories and experiences, many of them quite beyond what these authorities themselves would have considered likely or possible. Aligned with these appeals to recognised authority, esoteric thinkers commonly claimed to have discovered new, authoritative sources of knowledge like the Mahatmas. Indeed, "Koot Hoomi," Sinnett's most frequent Mahatma correspondent, made clear that he also understood the social dynamics behind the evidential power of testimony. In a letter to Hume, he noted that he and the other Mahatmas corresponded with Hume and Sinnett because, "it would be a decided gain to have even a few Englishmen, of first-class ability, enlisted as students of Asiatic psychology" (OW 111). Sinnett's plans for promoting Theosophy in England in the Society's early days echoed this colonialist, class-based structure, as he sought to enlist "the upper levels of society" in drawing room meetings and social events so that, "it should take root that way to begin with, its influence being left to filter downwards with social authority behind it, instead of beginning on lower levels" (*Early Days* 47-48).

In a similar vein, *Karma* gathers members of the intelligentsia and elite social class to Heiligenfels. It takes care to reinforce the authority of each of the novel's knowledge sources; the Baron, Lakesby, and Massilton. The Baron, as both ascended occult master and aristocrat, is particularly well placed in this regard, but since empirical legitimation is primarily Massilton's role the novel pays corresponding attention to validating his character and social standing. "He has ability and energy both," Blane tells others in the party, "Wide culture and a facility for absorbing fresh information from all sides at once. [...] The fact that Massilton is of this party is one of the indications to me that Baron von Mondstern has some serious objects in view" (28). Once established as the novel's trained expert, Massilton substantiates the trustworthiness of his research subjects. He is initially sceptical of Lakesby but quickly comes around, swayed both by her psychic demonstrations and the quality of her character. He reaches a similar conclusion regarding the Baron, who he trusts to "have somehow and somewhere got behind some secrets of Nature that remain insoluble enigmas for most of us" (33). Later in the novel, Massilton's social standing is weakened by a well-publicised extra-marital affair. The other characters fear that the aim of stimulating wider scientific research will be compromised. It is not much of a stretch to see reflected here Sinnett's own fears for Theosophical knowledge and method following the Coulomb affair and Hodgson's investigations. The novel's characters thus reflect the social processes behind the construction of knowledge; the role of trustworthiness and position in decisions to accept or reject the testimony of others.

Subjectivity, Objectivity, and the Epistemological Authority of the Exceptional Psychic

Occult empiricism's discovery of alternative authority in psychics and ascended masters also contested the conventional scientific method by representing the psychic mind as a superior instrument of empirical observation. Theosophy, Spiritualism, and other esoteric currents undermined the expectation, based in natural law, for uniformity of human ability and experience. Some esoteric scientists and psychical researchers upheld the expectation for universality by arguing that occult abilities were latent in all humans, or that they were proscribed by natural laws not yet discovered. Others, however, saw in them an evolutionary exceptionalism which undermined the principle of universality (Bhattachary 208). Theosophy's concept of hierarchies of ascended or psychically evolved masters implicitly assumed non-universal abilities and capacities for experience, though it was widely believed that such powers would be more uniformly distributed in future evolutionary stages (e.g. Wright 89). In this vein, Sinnett believed that the knowledge of the Mahatmas was so valuable precisely because it had been accumulated by "investigators [...] qualified for their task by the possession of spiritual faculties and perceptions of a higher order than those belonging to ordinary humanity" (EB v).

This claim reflects the belief of many esoteric thinkers that the value of psychical abilities and experiences was enhanced rather than invalidated by their exceptionalism. As Sinnett phrased it, "qualified witnesses" with capabilities for mediumship, clairvoyance, and astral travel provided a new form of scientific authority based on "powers of observation" not possessed by conventional empirical technology or methods (EB 16, vi). In the unconscious mind, where psychophysicologists found a fallible and suggestible subjectivity prone to erroneous hallucination, occultists found an irreplaceably valuable instrument for scientific research. In some cases, as with Spiritualist mediums, these instruments were viewed as objective recorders of information delivered from the spirits and other elemental or astral authorities (Taves

178, 197-200). This is the model attributed to Lakesby, who is portrayed in the vein of the typically passive (and usually female) medium of the period. Her psychic abilities are thoroughly tested by Blane and Massilton and then relied upon to substantiate phenomena including reincarnation, divination, ascended masters, and the astral plane. Lakesby's mind is thus seen as an advanced mental technology able to sense and observe past the known boundaries of the natural. In other cases, psychic powers were viewed as active, guided by the empowered will of the (usually male) occultist. This is the mould in which von Mondstern is cast. In addition to conventional empirical observation, the Baron is able to access otherwise inaccessible psychical and spiritual spaces. He does this with the senses of his astral body, a psychical self that occultists believed could be, as Olcott described it, "separated from the living body at will, projected to a distance, and animated by the full consciousness of the man" (191). Thus, actively projected through occult mental capabilities, the "developed psychical senses" could "acquire an actual perception" of spiritual truths inaccessible to physical science (198).

The novel's occult empirical suggestion that individuals like the Baron and Lakesby could be useful research technologies returns us quickly to questions of trustworthiness, authority, and mental fallibility. Internal psychic observations needed to be shared through testimony, which would quickly be dismissed because it contradicted the uniformity of experience. The Baron is aware of this problem. He predicts that, "any statement, however well authenticated, of any occurrence of an abnormal character" is unlikely to receive much attention without "the discovery of a new principle in Nature" to account for it (56-57). He thus displays clear, repeatable evidence of his psychic power to the party at Heiligenfels. During demonstrations observed and analysed by Massilton, Blane, and others, he knocks over a tree via telekinesis (133) and makes drinking glasses ring via smaller applications of "psychic force" (59-62). Here would seem to be repeatable proofs of paranormal mental abilities that establish (within the novel's world at least) the need for expanding both natural law and the principle of universality. Even after witnessing these displays, not everyone at the castle is convinced; minor phenomena like the glass tinkling are attributed to fraud or legerdemain, while the shocking power of the tree felling leads several people to accuse the Baron of fraternising with the devil.

Still, von Mondstern believes that his occult empirical combination of testimony and demonstration should be enough to convince the scientific community of the enormous reward to be gained from bringing psychic states within the scope of empirical research. In dialogue with George Annerly, a character whose background echoes that of Sinnett, the Baron explains that the goal of his demonstration-based project is to provide empirical science with a new set of extra-physical research tools, without which the spiritual and psychical cannot be understood (124-25). So instructed, Annerly realises that, "a new departure" in empirical method is required (69). "The knowledge stretching out before the psychic understanding," proclaims Annerly of this expanded empiricism, is "vast compared to that which has been acquired by the teaching of the senses" (69). This is the manifesto of a psychical researcher eager to unravel the greatest secrets of the universe through the techno-methodological potential of the occult mind. It is an occult empiricism through which psychic power can be both verified and used for further scientific research.

Alternative Spaces for Science: The Mind Outside the Laboratory

Just as it recognises the sociality of knowledge construction in appealing to authority and ensuring the credibility of witnesses, *Karma* advocates for alternative social and

cultural spaces in which to carry out empirical research and share its results. Occult empiricism's heterodox solutions for the acquisition and substantiation of knowledge expanded the scope of empiricist research outside of the laboratory. Connected to the institutionalisation of empirical research, scientists argued that the careful testing possible in the lab trumped observations made in fieldwork and "country-house science" (Rankin and Barton 60-62; Willis, "Unmasking" 208-10). As Rylance observes, the emphasis on laboratory spaces is married to the prioritisation of objectivity over subjectivity: "The shift towards the laboratory marks a shift in the public presence of the subject. Psychology now tends to address more localised areas of knowledge, in more expert language, and as part of an international traffic of communication between companion centres" (6-7).

Karma is representative of an occult empiricist tradition in which the physical setting of experiment was only relevant to the extent to which it enabled the possibilities of psychical power and experience. For example, the darkness of the séance room was often decried for the obstacles it presented to empirical observation and its potential advantages for fraud (Oppenheim 14). More broadly, those displaying psychic powers or using them for research did not require a particular location in which to carry out demonstrations or experiments. Amateur spaces such as homes, community halls, or periodicals were the primary location in which Spiritualists, Theosophists, mesmerists and other occultists conducted research using the capabilities of the psychic mind. In such country-house spaces, anyone with psychic faculties or a willingness to observe their results could participate in the formation of knowledge. In setting the experiments and observations of *Karma* in the rooms of Heiligenfels, Sinnett follows the general trend of occult empiricism, spatially refuting the rejection of interior experience and testimony which accompanied the emphasis on institutional scientific spaces.

Alternative Spaces for Science: Fiction

Karma is also an example of a particular space for science in which occult empiricism prospered. This is the extra-institutional space of fantastic fiction. Literary historians have shown that nineteenth-century fiction was a particularly popular and effective space for the sciences of the mind (e.g. Ryan, Rylance, Stiles). This is unsurprising for a period in which literary and scientific expression were so intermingled. In this "one culture" context (White 78), certain works of fiction can be viewed as motivated by an alternative scientific method which approached various "subject-matters [...] to know them from the inside, rather than from a predefined vantage point outside of them" (Erchinger 13. Cf. White 85-87). This literary-empirical method was particularly common in the mind sciences, where, as neurologist Henry Holland observed, the exceptionally large number of "inscrutable problems" resulted in the "science in which the dominion of words is largest and most uncontrolled" (245). The emergent disciplines of the mental sciences were, as a result of the empirical inaccessibility of their research subjects, more reliant on speculation and narrative than established fact or clear observation; hypothesis, imagination, and discursive reasoning were in the ascendant. This epistemological climate provided nurturing conditions for open-ended naturalism and the methodologies of occult empiricism. It also created room for a literary venue of scientific debate which verged into fiction. As Vanessa Ryan argues, focusing on the indicative examples of George Eliot, Wilkie Collins, Henry James, and George Meredith, fiction "came to be seen as a rare epistemological tool and a medium that could reveal the dynamic and functional aspects of the mind, aspects that were posited, if not definitively proven, by empirical research being conducted during this age" (9-10).

Karma is emblematic, however, of fiction's additional capacity to provide space for ideas and debates beyond the bounds of conventional empirical research. Indeed, the relationship between occult empiricism and the genres of fantastic fiction may be the most overt and reciprocally influential example of the period's entanglements between literature and scientific method. This close relationship was the result of a number of factors, particularly a shared history of imagining the unknown, the occult, and the paranormal. However, the tie that most binds occult empiricism and the fantastic is the testimonial evidence of the esoteric experimenter.

Karma is a particularly illustrative example of this dynamic because its author was motivated to write fiction as an alternative means of sharing and defending occult experiences. The novel is, on its most superficial level, a work of literature that adopts the methods and stylistics of contemporaneous genre romances. However, it is unlike most romances in its close degree of relationship to the experiences and belief system of its author. There is close overlap between the empirical observer of fiction – the narrator or focalising character – and testimony intended as occult empirical evidence. Indeed, Sinnett disdained anything but such an entwined relationship between life and fiction. In a 1905 article for *Broad Views*, he argued that the images and themes of a *fin de siècle* boom in supernatural fiction owed their genesis to "the serious literature of modern occultism," specifically Theosophy. However, he was offended that authors rarely "condescend to take the trouble to understand the teaching in question sufficiently to handle it with intelligence." Rather, he grumbled, the fashion was to fasten on "some single idea suggested by that teaching, and then let their own untrained imagination surround it with an environment of circumstance that is an outrage on [its] real natural possibilities" (372-73). This creation of a marvellous fictional world surrounding an already improbable real-world concept would seem to be the expected role of a fiction writer. That Sinnett felt the need to repudiate this method emphasises that *Karma* is not intended primarily as entertainment, unlike the bulk of occult fiction produced in the period. It is intended as evidence; testimony aimed at transforming religious knowledge and experience along with Sinnett's other works.

Indeed, the novel is self-referential about this advocacy. We have seen that the Baron hopes his guests will return to England and deliver their testimonies of experience and observation, thereby increasing public belief in occult faculties and motivating scientific research (52). Upon his return to London, Annerly resolves to carry out the Baron's purpose. "Books are to be written," he declares; moreover, "some society" is to be formed "for the propagation of the ideas the Baron has been communicating to us all" (256-57). Here Annerly echoes Sinnett's own project, as expressed in *Esoteric Buddhism*, where Sinnett declares that he has been chosen to share the Mahatmas "secret doctrine" with the world (EB xii). *Karma* represents a spoke in this grand wheel, a work of fiction written in service to Koot Hoomi and other masters, out of a deep conviction that Sinnett had observed occult phenomena with an analytical mind as reliable as that of any trained expert. The novel reaches an uneasy equivalence between the spheres of fictional and real-world knowledge, one with parallels to the subjective/objective tension in contemporaneous scientific methodology.

Karma thus openly brings together the testimony of the occult empiricist with the authorial voice of fiction. This relationship is enhanced in Sinnett's novel, but it also drove the plots and themes of many other works of fiction in the period and, more importantly, impacted the development of several genres which defined and differentiated themselves in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Edward Bulwer-Lytton is an influential earlier example. Allen Fenwick, the hero of Bulwer-Lytton's *A*

Strange Story (1861-1862), is a medical doctor who begins the narrative utterly sceptical of the claims of mesmerists and clairvoyants. Forced, however, to witness a variety of occult events which he cannot explain without expanding his range of inquiry, Fenwick finds himself no longer able to reject the historical mass of testimony to witchcraft and sorcery (II, 211). Fenwick's shift reflects Bulwer's personal belief, expressed in an essay on scientific method, that any scientist is a "bigot" who refuses to investigate a phenomenon, however incongruous with the "known laws of nature," that is supported by "fact deposed by numerous witnesses" ("On the Spirit" 137, 140). More contemporaneous with *Karma*, Marie Corelli's best-selling romances display a similar ethic, particularly *A Romance of Two Worlds* and *The Life Everlasting* (1911). Both novels contain prologues which frame the fictional occult events and experiences they depict as personal experiences of the author. The *Two Worlds* prologue acknowledges the difficulty of proving supernatural events and powers in the modern positivist climate but aims to let the "facts speak for themselves" in the novel, narrated by a character with a biography and perspective purposefully adjacent to Corelli's. The testimonial heft of the occult empirical observer is thus attributed to this otherwise unnamed narrator and used to add verisimilitude to scenes of mesmerist healing, hypnosis, and astral travel. As fantastic as these phenomena might seem, the result seems to have been an unusually persuasive work of fiction, as Corelli claimed to have received masses of fan mail desiring to know more about the real-life experiences depicted in the novel. Corelli's affectation of the occult empirical perspective thus creates a fictional space in which radical theories of the mind and its powers are evaluated and transmitted.

Other esoterically affiliated or aligned authors of the period, including H. Rider Haggard, Bram Stoker, Florence Marryat, and Arthur Machen, deployed the occult observer perspective in similar ways. These authors provided a model for combining science and fiction by exploiting the subjective, testimonial evidence of the occult empiricist, in a manner that could provide verisimilitude for any setting or phenomenon no matter how apparently supernatural or unbelievable. This model had an enormous impact on the development of emerging genres of popular fiction. Anne Stiles argues that "psychological depth" and "greater narrative possibilities" were superimposed upon the theories and discoveries of late-century mental physiology by gothic writers, thus adding an interior, subjective dimension to the de-personalised, objectivist automatism of late-century neurology (15-16). Emily Alder illustrates how empiricism is "reconstructed out of a commingling of spiritual and physical sensory capacities" in *fin de siècle* weird fiction (79). Perhaps most relevant for my current discussion, L. Anne Delgado shows that the modern ghost story developed in a reciprocal feedback loop with the testimonial accounts of hauntings and spirit manifestations published by the SPR, as well as the "real ghost stories" of Spiritualism advocates like Catherine Crowe and W.T. Stead (236-53).

The most significant beneficiary of the occult empirical testimonial mode, however, may have been science fiction. It might seem less likely to emulate occult empiricism, particularly since SF authors, readers, and editors have frequently framed the genre as a de-magicked, positivist form of the fantastic, but, as I have illustrated elsewhere, many of the genre's key tropes, priorities, and ways of writing can be traced to dialogues between esoteric science and a hybrid form of science fiction which emerged in the latter half of the nineteenth century ("Esoteric Roots"; "Naturalists"). Science fiction, perhaps more than any other genre, strives to make impossible events, concepts, and technologies verisimilar. Among a variety of strategies borrowed from occultism to achieve this task, the genre emulates the testimonial voice of the occult empirical

investigator. An early, influential example is H.G. Wells, often called the father of modern science fiction. Wells investigated the claims and methods of psychical research before denouncing them in an 1894 article in *Nature* ("Peculiarities"). He specifically draws on this context in tales like the "The Story of the Late Mr. Elvisham" (1896), in which the narratorial voice of a trained expert scientifically legitimates the swapping of consciousness between minds. "The Plattner Story," also published in 1896, emulates the structure of the methodological debate between conventional and occult empiricists. Gottfried Plattner's testimony of a visit to the spirit world is framed by the narrative of a sceptical scientific observer, who calls Plattner's account "preposterous" and dismissively leaves it up to "any reasonable man" to "believe or reject" it (107). Yet, this very act of scepticism is designed to reinforce the integrity of the frame narrator, whose account contains a number of further astonishing events, including Plattner's disappearance from this dimension and the inversion of his organs on his return from the Other-World. Both narrators thus principally rely on an occult empiricist viewpoint to lend believability and scientific prestige to the story.

As a result of impactful early authors like Wells – and, in a more hybrid form, like Bulwer-Lytton, Sinnett, and Corelli – science fiction has continued to exploit the observing perspective and testimonial evidence of the occult empiricist. The impact of this cultural transmission of occult empiricism cannot be understated: science fiction has become the pre-eminent modern heuristic for grappling with expectations and anxieties regarding advances in technology and encounters with currently unknown crises, cataclysms, and beings. Mediated by science fiction, the methods and perspective of the occult empiricist have become a primary means of knowing the future, the sublime, and the strange.

Conclusion: The Mediations of Occult Empiricism

Occult methodologies thus contributed to the development of various tropes, stylistics, and reader expectations in the genres of popular fiction. It is important to emphasise, however, that this influence was multi-directional. Occult empiricism was a locus in which fiction, occultism, and institutional/professional science overlapped as disparate but always dialogically interrelated spaces in which to study and theorise the mind and its abilities. Occult empiricism has additionally played an important cultural function in mediating between these spaces. As noted, there is a longstanding tradition of mutually impactful engagement between occultism and fantastic fiction. As *Karma* makes clear, however, when mediated by occult empiricism the relationship between esotericism and fantastic fiction invariably includes a third partner: the scientific theories, methodologies, and institutions to which the first two partners frequently appeal for legitimation.

Occult empiricism's emphasis on testimony reveals a narrative contingency and intersubjectivity which is important not only in fiction and religion, but in sciences like mental physiology that deal with inaccessible research subjects. I have described the psychophysiological argument that only the trained expert was equipped with the common sense to properly frame observation and testimony regarding paranormal events. However, common sense was not simply a habit of mind. It was a body of knowledge compiled from the testimony of generations of scientists, what Carpenter called "the great body of scientific men" (70). As contemporary historians and philosophers of science have observed, however, very little knowledge can actually be acquired or verified through the direct experience of the scientific observer (e.g. Shapin 24-25; Popper 28-31). The "great body" of testimony regarding previous observation must be consulted, and inherently trusted, for further hypothesis, experimentation, and

discovery to take place. In this sense, the compilation of scientific knowledge reveals itself as a network of testimonies. Scientists like Beard and Carpenter could not possibly observe and evaluate the plausibility of each instance of occult, experience-based knowledge, and were thus forced to rely upon what Shapin calls "schemes of plausibility," structures of previous observations and conclusions "built up by crediting the relations of trusted sources" (21-22). The trained scientist's ability to deliver trustworthy testimony of their observations and experiences, and, most crucially, the quality and trustworthiness of these narrative accounts, thus emerge as core elements of the scientific process. Of course, hindsight allows us to see that the experimental training and epistemological caution of psychophysiology ensured a body of testimony that has been more empirically reliable and successful than that of psychical researchers and occultists. However, when we attend more closely to the inherent narrativity of the scientific process it is much easier to understand the epistemological validity which occult empiricists achieved, in some circles, through their appeals to testimony, individual authority, and group corroboration.

The testimonial basis of occult empiricism also provides a new perspective from which to think about the relationship between fiction and science, both the wider scientific project and Victorian mental physiology specifically. Fiction offers clear advantages to those who want to disseminate scientific ideas to a wider audience. It also lacks the gatekeepers of institutional publishing environments, resulting in a more hospitable setting for marginalized theories and concepts. Sinnett – like Bulwer-Lytton, Corelli, and others – took advantage of these features, along with fiction's ability to reproduce the testimonial evidence of the occult empiricist observer. For Julian Hawthorne, son of Nathaniel and a psychical research advocate, these efforts were successful. "Marie Corelli, Mr A.P. Sinnett, and perhaps a few more," he said, had promoted psychical research and advocated for a "wider more synthetic outlook" more influentially than the staid psychical researchers of organisations like the SPR (3). A review of *Karma* in the *Graphic* found similar virtue in Sinnett's novel. Indeed, the review suggested that the combined efforts of psychical researchers and occult fiction writers had begun to reduce the fantastic appearance of paranormal phenomena. "Seeing how much readier the novel-reading public now is to accept spiritual phenomena as possible," the *Graphic* opined, "[T]he power of blasting a great tree with invisible lightning will not appear a creature of such pure Dreamland as would have been the case a few years ago" ("New Novels"). Some readers thus appeared ready to accept fictional contexts as legitimate spaces for the straight-forward communication of knowledge and experience.

Turning to fiction to engage in serious occult empirical debate also risked the opposite reader response. Occult empiricist authors hoped to use fiction to reduce the fantastical appearance of paranormal powers and events, but the reverse was also possible. Taking another example from early reviews of the novel, the *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel* felt that while occultists "will probably be interested in Mr. Sinnett's story and find in it confirmation of their faith [for] unbelievers [...] it will rather tend to strengthen them in their unbelief" ("Some New Books"). Contemporary readers would very likely fall into this latter category as well, unlikely to receive the fiction of Sinnett, Corelli, and Doyle as straight-forward testimony. Indeed, recent cognitive narratological research has shown that modern-day readers approach fiction and non-fiction with different assumptions and reading strategies, expecting fiction to be an immersive engagement of the imagination rather than a factual narrative (Hartung et al. 2). As Michael Saler argues, late-nineteenth-century readers "who were unused to distinguishing among different modes of writing" (115), did not always differentiate so

easily. Just as it was a period in which readers might judge the Baron's telekinesis believable, it was also a time in which Haggard's readers believed the world and events of *King Solomon's Mines* to be true, while fans wrote to Arthur Conan Doyle wondering if they might contract the services of Sherlock Holmes (Saler 61, 113-15). These examples, along with Corelli's fan mail and the naïve reception of Sinnett's novel, indicates that there seems to have been a transformation over time in the nature of fictionality. A modern-day reader will identify true themes or concepts in fiction, and some might even see popular culture as source material for consciously fictional alternative religions (see Cusack, Davidsen), but there seems to be less readiness to accept fiction as veracious testimony.

Considering that esoteric events and experiences constituted much of what authors like Haggard, Corelli, Doyle, and Sinnett attempted to make verisimilar, it is worth asking what role the occult empiricist narratorial voice has played in making fiction less trustworthy. Nineteenth-century psychophysicists frequently defined their research as the diametric opposite of occult knowledge, experience, and research methods. Given the frequent use of fiction by occult empiricists to explore and communicate ideas, and the resulting influence on various fictional forms, how might fiction itself have been imbricated in this bifurcation of expert, objective mental science from amateur, subjective research? The establishment of narratorial trustworthiness remains a vital part of the author–reader game. It seems likely, however, that using popular fiction as a space in which to share occult testimony participated in a dynamic shift in which fiction has, for at least the last century, been viewed as a place in which testimonies and narratives cannot be trusted to communicate real-world knowledge in a literal manner.

Indeed, by remaining closely entangled, it is likely that esoteric science and fantastic fiction (of all media and genres) reciprocally perpetuate ongoing epistemological distrust and marginalisation. The fantastic and the paranormal are natural bedfellows in that neither are established outside of dreams, imagination, and hypothesis. However, the occult empirical reliance on subjective testimony continues to wed the two even more closely together. Indeed, this relationship is so pronounced that it might also play a role in solidifying an array of scientific discourses which make it more difficult for contemporary (para)psychologists to investigate occult experiences and abilities and remain respected (and funded) within professional research institutions. It is difficult to establish concretely that occult empiricism pushed fiction and science apart even as its advocates tried to bring them together. It is likely, however, that attempts like Sinnett's to defend the methodologies of occult science and share testimonies to paranormal experience ultimately backfired. *Karma* may have helped to reinforce the status and legitimacy of occult knowledge within Theosophy and related esoteric movements, but outside these circles its occult empiricist conflation of fiction and science seems to have been part of a wider fantasticisation of esoteric science and psychical research.

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