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Lentils Beyond the Veil

Spiritualism, Vegetarianism and Dietetics

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Abstract

On 15 July 1908 *The Times* advertised a talk on ‘personal experiences in spirit-photography and the scientific aspect of spiritualism’, due to take place that night at the Eustace Miles Restaurant. Attendees could look forward to not only ‘exhibitions of spirit writing’, but also to enjoying a ‘flesh-free’ meal afterwards. This entertainment speaks to confluence of spiritualist belief and vegetarian ideals that was played out elsewhere in societies, private seances and public demonstrations. Beyond a shared commitment to progressive causes, they held in common a belief in the purity of vegetable foods and the corrupting nature of flesh. Mediums were encouraged to avoid meat and disputes over the proper diet for believers raged through the movement’s periodicals. This article examines how the language of dietetics and the science of nutrition functioned in the séance, and what this reveals of the tricky negotiation of immateriality and corporality in spiritualist discourse.

Keywords

diet – dietetics – nutrition – vegetarianism – spiritualism – body

1 Introduction

The second edition of the *Report on Spiritualism of the Committee of the London Dialectical Society* (1873) opens with a compilation of the criticisms that had been levelled at the first edition. Established in 1867, the London Dialectical Society was the first professional organisation to dedicate itself to the systematic study of spiritualist phenomena. Having assembled a committee of thirty-

three prominent men, drawn from the fields of religion, science, medicine, engineering and publishing, an investigation was launched into the shadowy mysteries of the séance. After hearing from witnesses and closely observing several mediums at work, the commission eventually concluded that the possibility of spirit communication could not be completely discounted and recommended that more research be conducted. On publication, the report was widely condemned as methodologically flawed, evidentially unsound, and fundamentally biased. Vocal sceptics like the biologist Thomas H. Huxley refused to participate in the study and *The Times* dismissed it as a ‘farrago of impotent conclusions garnished by a mass of the most monstrous rubbish it has ever been our misfortune to sit in judgement upon.’¹ The best part of the extracted denunciations continue in a similar vein: charging the committee with pitiable self-deception, querying the value of their observations and pointing out the obvious tricks employed by canny mediums to fool gullible investigators. Only one comment, taken from *The Sporting Times*, diverges from the dominant line of critique to instead draw attention to the eccentric eating habits of believers. The author, we learn, knows of an ‘old gentleman who believes cold boiled cabbage and sago pudding to be the greatest gastronomical luxury possible’, odd convictions that are apparently entirely in line with most spiritualists who are ‘vegetarians, teetotallers and anti-smokers’. More than mere coincidence, the article insists, these strange dietary choices ‘help to explain the otherwise inexplicable folly of spiritualism.’² Yoking it to other earnest causes and wrong-headed enthusiasms, it was easy for *The Sporting Times* to dismiss spiritualism as a contemporary fad unworthy of consideration. However, the connections between vegetarianism and spiritualism extended far beyond the rhetorical flourish of newspaper columnists. Seeking to understand how faith came to be so entangled with food, this article takes seriously the role that ‘cold boiled cabbage and sago pudding’ might have played in the other-worldly adventures of British spiritualists.

2 Vegetarianism and Reform in Victorian Britain

The first Vegetarian Society was inaugurated in Manchester in 1847, one year before the Fox sisters set modern spiritualism in motion in upstate New York, and from the beginning there existed a good deal of sympathy between the

¹ *The Times* cited in *Report on Spiritualism*, 1.

² *The Sporting Times* cited in *Report on Spiritualism*, 7.

movements. Beyond a shared commitment to progressive causes like temperance, educational reform, and women's suffrage, the two converged over the long-standing association of religious radicalism with dietary unorthodoxy. One of the first known uses of the term 'vegetarian' was in an 1842 number of *The Healthian*, a magazine dedicated to alternative approaches to health that was produced by the publishing wing of the Alcott House Academy. Founded by James Pierrepont Greaves, an enigmatic socialist reformer and religious visionary, the Alcott House Academy operated as a co-operative where all animal products were banned and where raw vegetables were hailed as a path to spiritual purity. It was named in honour of Amos Bronson Alcott, an American philosopher and prominent abolitionist who led an agrarian commune in Massachusetts called Fruitlands, whose residents dressed in linen, worked the earth without the use of animal labour and lived on a spartan diet composed mainly of fruit and water. In 1847 the Academy welcomed a delegation from the Bible Christian Church, a Methodist denomination established in Salford by the Reverend William Cowherd in the early years of the nineteenth century. Cowherd preached the virtue of abstaining from meat, as well as from alcohol and other stimulants to his congregation. To adopt a meatless diet was, he urged, simply to follow the example set by the earliest Christians who had practiced vegetarianism for two centuries before being corrupted by the practice of flesh eating. This meeting of communitarian socialists and religious reformers laid the groundwork for the founding of the Vegetarian Society, enshrining the meat-free regimen as a kind of Edenic ideal or alimentary route to God.³ This pre-lapsarian vision was sustained through the nineteenth century by prominent Christian vegetarians and theologically inclined organisations like the Order of the Golden Age, but it was most fully realised under the aegis of modern spiritualism. Though vegetarianism was never universally adopted by believers, the connection between simplicity of diet and purity of soul was upheld by spiritualist thinking. Following the path set by Shakers, Primitive Methodists and Owenites, the movement foregrounded bodily wellbeing as a constitutive element of their religious practice.

In his history of the vegetarian movement, *Fifty Years of Food Reform* (1898), Charles W. Forward reflected that one of its 'most notable features' remained its shared membership with other 'moral and social reforms'.⁴ In tune with this assessment, spiritualist believers encountered vegetarianism as not only a theological matter, but also as a moral and social question. This is clear from the

3 See Twigg, 'Food for Thought: Purity and Vegetarianism' on the close relation of temperance, vegetarianism, and spiritual purity in the nineteenth century.

4 Forward, *Fifty Years of Food Reform*, 62.

different constellations of food, politics and metaphysics that circulated within the movement. For instance, James Burns—publisher of the second edition of the London Dialectical Society’s report—cleaved to a non-Christian interpretation of spiritualism that incorporated the meat-free diet into its cosmology. Born in rural Ayrshire, Burns entered public life through the temperance campaign and was, by the time of his death in 1894, one of the most prominent representatives of working-class spiritualism in Britain. A committed socialist, in 1862 he founded a ‘Progressive Library and Spiritual Institution’ to produce and distribute spiritualist books, pamphlets and periodicals. The benefits of the fleshless diet were a frequent subject of discussion and his publications carried advertisements for vegetarian shops, hotels, and restaurants. Burns also founded a Progressive Food and Cooking School run out of an address in Clerkenwell, which featured a publishing house, club room and restaurant. The mission of the school was to promote vegetarianism among the city’s poor by providing free breakfasts for children and offering practical demonstrations of economical meat-free cooking.⁵ This charitable intervention was in keeping with the aims of the Vegetarian Society, which had long sought to convert the working poor to their cause, but Burns went further to incorporate the fleshless diet into what Logie Barrow has described as, the ‘democratic epistemology of plebian spiritualism.’⁶ Insisting that because it concerned the ‘knowledge of spirit as it manifests every human being’, he characterised ‘spiritual science’ as a truly democratic field of study.⁷ Moreover, the non-hierarchical structure of the séance authorised forms of autodidactic knowledge production that extended far beyond the question of spirit communication. As is evident from the sub-heading of his journal *Human Nature*, which promised to discuss ‘*Physiology, Phrenology, Psychology, Philosophy and the Laws of Health and Society*’, for Burns spiritualism represented only one aspect of a rigorous inquiry into the world that placed the human body—how to comprehend, manage and sustain it—at its centre.

Following his lead, this article positions the body—that eats, digests, and defecates—at the centre of the history of spiritualism and science. Decades of research into Victorian spiritualism has already unearthed the complex relations between science and the supernatural, psychology and occultism, laboratory and séance that upend any simple division of orthodox and heterodox

5 Gregory, ‘A Lutheranism of the Table: Religion and the Victorian Vegetarians’, 141–142.

6 Barrow, *Independent Spirits*, 102–105.

7 Burns, ‘The 44th Anniversary of Spiritualism’, 226.

knowledge in the nineteenth century.⁸ Foundational texts like Janet Oppenheim's *The Other World* (1985) and Ruth Brandon's *The Spiritualists* (1983) traced the participation of prominent men of science in the strange goings on of the séance; while more recent accounts from Roger Luckhurst, Jill Galvan, Pamela Thurschwell and Richard Noakes have offered more focused readings of the cross pollination of spiritualist belief with disciplines like psychology, anthropology, chemistry and physics. Much of this research has focused, productively, on the lives of famous mediums or on the investigations carried out by prominent figures like William Crookes and Alfred Russel Wallace, as well as on the formation of elite organisations like the Society for Psychical Research. Vegetarianism offers up several new lines of enquiry into spiritualism's relationship with scientific naturalism. Firstly, it brings the movement's food cultures—dining practices, cookery, and ideas about digestion—into focus and in doing so redirects attention from remarkable, singular events in the story of modern spiritualism to the materiality of its everyday practice. Fascinating as accounts of famed séances and public controversies are, they reveal only one aspect of how ordinary believers encountered spiritualism; the dailiness of eating offers insight into it as a quotidian and embodied experience. Secondly, the history of meat-free eating intersects, especially toward the end of the nineteenth century, with the rise of nutritional science and spiritualist vegetarians were particularly invested in the diet's perceived health benefits. The question of what eat was, and arguably remains so, a subject open to broad contestation, with home cooks and trained professionals making equal claim to jurisdiction over the hungry belly. As Corinna Treitel has observed, dietary knowledge has long been formulated in 'messy and non-hierarchical ways' through interdisciplinary conversations defined by 'dual dynamics of critique and co-optation'.⁹ By examining the presence of nutritional science within spiritualist discourse it becomes possible to muddy the line between trained observer and experimental subject in ways that complicate any straightforward understanding of scientific authority. Thirdly and finally, this article calls attention to the unexamined role of vegetarian restaurants in shaping and sustaining networks of believers. Where a great deal of attention has been paid to the importance of the domestic realm—private séances held in overstuffed drawing rooms—less has been said of the part played by public spaces like restaurants as sites for socialising, learning, and organising.

8 See, for instance, Galvan, *The Sympathetic Medium*, Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy*, Thurschwell, *Literature, Technology and Magical Thinking*, and Noakes, *Physics and Psychics*.

9 Treitel, *Eating Nature in Modern Germany*, 95.

3 Spiritualist Vegetarianism

Vegetarianism was only one element of a surprisingly rich food culture that grew up around the spiritualist movement in Britain. In his *History of Modern Spiritualism* (1926) Arthur Conan Doyle described the need for a new religion, the collective longing that sparked it, in culinary terms: ‘the clergy’ he complained ‘are so limited in their ideas and so bound by a system which should be an obsolete one. It is like serving up last week’s dinner instead of a new one. We want fresh spiritual food, not a hash of old food’.¹⁰ Beyond metaphor, food played an integral role in the everyday practice and performance of belief. While in traditional Christian service consumption is confined to the taking of holy communion, its function within spiritualism was far more expansive. Perhaps because communication with the spirit world was so often sought around kitchen tables or in dining rooms, séances were usually accompanied by refreshments that ranged from afternoon tea to multiple-course dinners. Repast was offered to not only living guests, but also to those who had passed over to other side. A medium might request food from the spirits and, with lights dimmed, piles of fruit would appear; or the spirits might be encouraged to partake in the delights of the table, draining wine glasses, nibbling on cake, and commenting on the host’s cooking. Such domestic enchantments were, Marlene Tromp has argued, particularly transformative for the women of the house. Food management allowed women to ‘gain spiritual control and authority’ that afforded them a ‘voice in the faith’ but also opportunities to craft ‘new articulations of acts like eating, touch and the use of their bodies’.¹¹ These shared meals also provided valuable evidence of the world beyond, as Tromp has observed, ‘one of the most dazzling things the spirit could do was eat. If the spirit could chew, swallow, and show evidence of teeth, it could prove both its presence and materiality beyond a doubt’.¹² Mastication and digestion rendered ethereal bodies strikingly corporeal, a transformation that, by this account, produced a disruptive version of middle-class dining in which etiquette gave way to ghostly interventions and transgressive possibilities. In her brief discussion of vegetarianism in the context of spiritualist dining, Tromp draws on the work of James Gregory, who has conducted the fullest exploration to date of the confluence of religious and dietary heterodoxy within the movement. Tracing the connections between organisations and individuals, he provides a detailed

¹⁰ Doyle, *History of Spiritualism*, 217.

¹¹ Tromp, ‘Eating, Feeding, and Flesh: Food in Victorian Spiritualism’, 286–287.

¹² Tromp, 305.

illustration of the intellectual, social, and political space shared by vegetarians, non-conformists, spiritualists, theosophists, and occultists. Highlighting the contributions made by figures like George Dornbusch, secretary to the Vegetarian Society and keen believer; William Theobald, the president of the Northern Heights Vegetarian Society who hailed from a prominent spiritualist family; and Chandos Leigh Hunt Wallace, a dietary reformer who met her 'future husband at Burns' phrenological meetings', Gregory exposes significant ideological and personal overlaps.¹³ Though distinct, these two accounts share in an understanding of spiritualism and vegetarianism as fundamentally oppositional practices, revolutionary re-imaginings antithetical to orthodox thinking on everything from gender and family, to the health of the body and the fate of the soul after death.

Other readings of the relationship between ghost-seeking and meat-free eating are, however, possible. Beyond an expression of progressive politics or religious radicalism, spiritualist vegetarianism was driven by a commitment to health and informed by the language of nutritional science. Of relevance here is the work of Christine Ferguson, who has traced the surprising proximity of spiritualist and eugenicist thinking in terms of their shared belief in the moral value of the physically perfect body and common commitment to 'biological determinism'.¹⁴ As Ferguson points out, while postmodern readings of the séance have typically hailed it as a site in which individual identity could be radically destabilised and disembodied, in practice spiritualists were deeply invested in the 'physical world and its chief phenomenological unit, the body'.¹⁵ This was manifest both in the belief that the spirits of the dead worked through the living to improve the species, but also in the movement's general preoccupation with health, fitness and diet. Reading against Tromp's description of the joyous sensuality of otherworldly dining, this article argues that spiritualist consumption was shaped, not by the language of pleasure and decadence, but by emerging nutritional knowledge and the scientific claims of popular dietetics. Part of what is revealed in the movement's close relation to vegetarianism is a discomfort with the messiness of the body and an investment in dietary purity as a means of disciplining its unruly potentials. Beyond policing earthly habits, the meat-free diet also, as this article will explore, offered a framework for negotiating the tricky kinship of material body to immaterial soul by couching guidance on the great unknown in the language of proteins, calories, and carbohydrates.

13 Gregory, 143.

14 Ferguson, *Determined Spirits*, 4.

15 *Ibid.*, 3.

On 15 July 1908, *The Times* reported on an event that had taken place the previous night at the Eustace Miles Restaurant in Charing Cross. There had been a lecture on the 'scientific aspect of spiritualism' followed by a live demonstration of 'spirit writing' and a discussion of 'recent personal experiences in spirit-photography'. After the evening's entertainment, attendees sat down to enjoy a 'fortifying' and entirely 'flesh-free' meal.¹⁶ This kind of gathering was by no means unusual at this London establishment: on 9 March the 'Cosmos Society' met to debate 'What Spiritualism Is', in October of 1908 the restaurant hosted a series of afternoon talks on the topic of clairvoyance, a medium known as Madame Alexander Campbell delivered 'short lectures on spiritual life', and in November 1914 a programme of 'occult talks' were accompanied by music arranged by the London Dramatic Arts Society.¹⁷ Spiritualism has typically been characterised as a domestic pursuit, one staged in private homes between friends and family, but these events expose the limitations of this view and point to the existence of different forms of sociality within the movement. Vegetarian restaurants, which proliferated in London and other large cities like Glasgow, Manchester, and Liverpool through the closing decades of the nineteenth century, were key sites of spiritualist organising, education and interaction. This is perhaps unsurprising given the long-standing entanglement of dietary and religious heterodoxy, but it is significant that the Eustace Miles Restaurant proved particularly popular. Opened in 1906 and located at the western end of Covent Garden, it was operated by Eustace Hamilton Miles, a Cambridge-educated classics scholar, champion tennis player and respected authority on physical fitness. Adopting the term 'simple foods', he dismissed vegetarianism as the preserve of over-zealous cranks and advocated meat-free eating based on health rather than morality. Alongside figures like Arnold Frank Hills, the millionaire businessman and football enthusiast who set up the London Vegetarian Society in 1888, Miles pioneered a kind of muscular vegetarianism framed by the language of physical culture and nutritional science. Wholesome, natural and moderate, the fleshless diet was, he insisted, the best way to fuel the active body.¹⁸ His patrons were offered a uniquely didactic dining experience, with menu items organised according to their nutritional value, improving literature available to buy from the counter and lectures on the chemical properties of food held weekly.¹⁹ Open for nearly thirty years and

16 'Christian Occult Society', 12.

17 'Cosmos Society', 1; 'Eustace Miles Restaurant', 1; 'Occult at Homes', 2.

18 Miles, *Muscle, Brain and Diet: A Plea for Simpler Foods*, v.

19 Miles, 'A Restaurant With Ideals', 1.

serving over 1500 meals a day, it was the centre of hygienic and dietary reform in the capital.

The presence of spiritualists at the Eustace Miles Restaurant speaks to the movement's investment in a common culture of the body that was animated by notions of dietary purity and grounded in the language of nutritional science. Prior to the discovery of vitamins in 1912, which drew attention to trace minerals and micronutrients, most work in the field was dedicated to the careful chemical analysis of fats, carbohydrates and calories.²⁰ Developed through the early decades of the nineteenth century—with the William Lambe's codification of food into sugars, starches, oily bodies and albumen, Gerrit Jan Mulder's coinage of the term protein in 1838 and Carl Schmidt's identification of carbohydrates in 1844—this new approach to diet emphasised experimentation, measurement and classification.²¹ As the century progressed, the science of alimentation moved into closer proximity with the world of work and the demands placed upon the labouring body. Couched in the imagery of supply and demand, investment and return, debt and repayment, excess and waste, it emphasised the need to balance resources consumed with energy expended and structured its analysis of fats, proteins and carbohydrates around the needs of different professions. With the result that, as Joyce L. Huff has articulated, the body 'became continuous with other forms of labour within the overall economic system of the nation' and the well-managed body came to constitute an essential aspect of civic virtue.²² Shaped by the same biopolitics of efficiency and standardisation, the spiritualist movement looked to diet as a way of preparing the body for physical work, but also for its full participation in a thriving spiritual economy. Writing in *Arcana of Spiritualism: A Manual of Spiritual Science and Philosophy* (1871), the American seer Hudson Tuttle warned his readers that an 'improper diet [...] saturated with stimulants' would create in the eater 'physical conditions' that were certain to deter the attentions of 'pure spirits'.²³ In other words, within the movement the question of what to eat had implications beyond the earthly.

The ease with which *Arcana of Spiritualism* slips from describing intricately structured worlds beyond our own and the wonder of communication across the veil, into issuing mundane advice on nutrition and digestion, illustrates

20 On the discovery of vitamins see Apple, *Vitamina: Vitamins in American Culture*.

21 See Kamminga and Cunningham, 'Introduction: The Science and Culture of Nutrition', 1–14.

22 Huff, 'Corporeal Economies: Work and Waste in Nineteenth-Century Constructions of Alimentation', 31.

23 Tuttle, *Arcana of Spiritualism*, 304.

both the all-encompassing vision of spiritualist philosophy and the multivocal nature of dietary discourse. Even as the science of nutrition developed, alimentary knowledge remained the subject of an integrative public conversation in which specialist research and household wisdom played equal part. This lively digestive discourse was conducted across multiple sites: in medical textbooks and physiological treatise, but also in cookery books, novels, periodicals, and advertising. Popular dietetics, published in dedicated tracts and disseminated in middle-brow periodicals, were a particularly important source of information and guidance. Presented as hybrid texts, composed of treatises outlining the functioning of different parts of the digestive system and lifestyle guides advising on diet and physical exercise and warning against the cultivation of bad habits, literature on nutrition occupied a space between medical science and self-help. At the Eustace Miles Restaurant it was possible to purchase books like *Builders of the Body: or Lessons on Food Values* (1910) and *Muscle, Brain and Diet: A Plea for Simpler Foods* (1900), which schooled readers in the topics as diverse as the ideal timing of daily meals, the mineral breakdown of common foods, the dangers of uric acid, the digestibility of some fruits over others and the benefits of calcium. Cookery books like *What Foods Feed Us* (1905) combined recipes for meat-free fare with detailed breakdowns of the dish's nutritional components and calorific content. As with the restaurant's menus, the experience of eating that emerges from these accounts has little to do with sensory pleasure or gratification, rather it is framed as a scientifically verified route to self-improvement. To borrow a term from Michael Hau, these texts contributed to a 'popular hygienic culture' that was shared by physicians, scientists, health reformers, consumers and crucially, spiritualist believers.²⁴ Examining their participation in this complex cultural space allows for a more nuanced reading of the movement's relationship to the medical establishment. While it is certainly true that, as Alex Owen has it, the 'antipathy with which believers regarded orthodox medicine was matched only by their enthusiasm for alternative methods of cure', this is complicated by boundary disputes over where exactly the line between 'orthodox' and 'alternative' forms of knowledge should be drawn.²⁵ Spiritualists committed themselves to a range of marginal health practices—from hydropathy and homeopathy, to temperance and vegetarianism—but these were usually held in dialogue with more conventional approaches to the body.

24 Hau, *The Cult of Health and Beauty*, 2.

25 Owen, *The Darkened Room*, 107.

This dynamic informed the treatment of diet in the spiritualist press, where vegetarianism emerged as an occasional topic of interest. When the issue of whether to eat meat or not arose, the discussion was often framed in physiological terms. For instance, an 1889 issue of *Light* featured an article titled 'Vegetarianism Scientifically Defended' that argued that while meat was liable to remain undigested and putrefying in the gut for days, vegetables were 'more easily assimilated into the gastric system' and in 1887 the same publication described vegetarianism as a 'successful dietetic experiment'.²⁶ Elsewhere, a letter submitted to *The Spiritualist* in 1875 reported that 'vegetarians derive the necessary amounts of phosphorous from peas, lentils, wheat, barley and Indian corn, all of which are rich in that element as food for brain and nerve power' and that 'according to some chemists, potatoes, parsnips, carrots and turnips also contain that element'.²⁷ Written to reassure a previous correspondent to the magazine who had worried at the potential deficiencies of the meal-free diet, the letter demonstrates its author's familiarity with the terminology of nutritional science and the ease with which it could be brought to bear on the practice of spiritualism. The original letter had queried what the influence of an 'exclusively vegetable diet' might be on not only 'health', but more specifically on 'mediumship'. The question arose because of the experience of a friend who had given up meat and found that, though he grew physically 'weaker', his 'medial' powers increased dramatically so that he was suddenly able to perceive 'the most beautiful visions of the world to come'.²⁸ Here vegetarianism is likened to the fasting practiced by religious ascetics, a way of mortifying the flesh to cultivate higher faculties, but the diet's association with mediumship went beyond mere privation.

As the embodiment of the link between this world and the next, the health of the medium was subject to intense scrutiny, and they were encouraged to carefully regulate all elements of their consumption. Positioned as an instrument of cross-world communication, the contents of the medium's stomach helped to shape the experimental conditions of the séance. In reply to a reader's query to *The Unseen Universe* regarding the 'diet most conducive to the development of medium powers', Emma Hardinge Britten recommended 'flesh eating for physical manifestations and magnetic operations' and the 'vegetable and fruit diet as a promoter of clairvoyancy'. Though vegetarianism is, she continues, the diet 'far preferable for all of humanity', certain forms of spirit communion necessi-

26 'Vegetarianism Scientifically Defended', 102 and 'A Better Way in Diet', 174.

27 'Spiritualism and Vegetarianism', *Spiritualist*, 80.

28 'Vegetarianism and Spiritualism', 80.

tate the consumption of meat.²⁹ Drawing on one of the key tenets of dietary science, that different jobs require different kinds of nutriment, Britten pictures the medium as a body that labours, requiring care and fuel to fulfil its function. Other commentators emphasised the need for temperance and purity. According to a lecture by W.J. Colville, successful mediumship entailed the cleansing of the body: only by avoiding alcohol, tobacco and polluting stimulants like caffeine could one hope to become a ‘fit candidate for communion with those who had passed on to the world of spirit’.³⁰ Alongside intoxicants, meat was frequently characterised as an impediment to communication with the spirits. Remarking on the dietary habits of healing mediums, an 1893 article in *Borderland* reflected that ‘some have been abstemious and used little flesh food, some no flesh food at all except at long intervals, and when not doing much healing work. The excuse is that they would not come under spirit control when meat is any considerable part of their diet’.³¹ The medium who indulges in a diet rich in animal flesh was also likely—according to the spiritualist writer William Stainton Moses—to attract ‘noisy and objectionable manifestations’ to the séance.³² Much better that the medium stick to fruits, vegetables and legumes, a correspondent to *Human Nature* urged, as the ‘love of flesh is the result of deteriorated nature’ an ‘unclean thing’ and a ‘morbid craving’ that diminishes their standing in the spirit world.³³ Muddying morality with alimentary, in spiritualist dietetics everyday food choices had consequences beyond the veil. This policing of eating habits speaks to a broader tension within spiritualist practice between immateriality and corporality. What made the séance so appealing was that it made tangible something intangible and transformed belief into empirically verifiable reality, but in doing so it also brought the fleshy body into proximity with the immortal soul. The demand that mediums detoxify themselves before communing with the spirits betrays a discomfort with the messiness of the body and the sensuality of food.

The condemnation of meat as corrupt was a key tenet of early vegetarian politics, underpinned by a reading of the Book of Genesis in which flesh-eating signified the Fall and dietary purity was hailed as a route back to God. This narrative was sustained in spiritualist discourse on the nature and trajectory of the soul’s post-death development, in which the daily consumption of animals was characterised as an accrual of debt to be repaid further down the

29 ‘Questions Department’, 371.

30 Colville, ‘The Necessary Conditions’, 759.

31 ‘Healing Mediums’, 161.

32 ‘Notes by the Way’, 561.

33 Answers to Question 8’, 74.

line. In *Vegetarianism and Occultism* (1913), the theosophist Charles W. Leadbeater agitated for dietary reform based on its physical and astral benefits. Not only was the vegetarian diet superior in terms of its nutritional value, it also eased the eater's evolutionary progress after death. In contrast, the consumption of meat introduced 'loathsome impurities into the physical body', which would in turn produce a 'course and unclean astral body' where the unfortunate glutton would be condemned to 'spend the first part of his life after death'.³⁴ Vegetarianism flourished in the Theosophical Society, where it was pioneered by prominent figures like Annie Besant and Anna Kingsford as a means of both honouring our responsibility to other sentient creatures and of purifying the body ahead of its travel in the astral plane. This was in keeping, Gauri Viswanathan has argued, with the 'Theosophical view that living organisms are joined in a progressive chain of development' and the conviction that the 'soul passes through a series of incarnations from plant to animals to human beings'.³⁵ As Viswanathan has uncovered, belief in the spiritual continuity of animal with human life led theosophists to campaign against scientific vivisection and to recognise such practices as part of a shared system of oppression that also persecuted women, colonial subjects and the working classes. For committed vegetarians like Kingsford, the meat-free diet represented the duty of the strong to protect the weak and marked the progress of civilisation toward greater enlightenment.³⁶

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, theosophy and vegetarianism had become intertwined to such a degree that a huffy contributor to *Medium and Daybreak* was provoked to remind upstart theosophists keen to educate the 'Western mind' on the value of fleshless dining, that spiritualists like James Burns 'had been vegetarian for over thirty years' and had already witnessed the 'results of many experiments in diet on spiritual work, in the spirit circle [and] in personal communion'.³⁷ As this prickly refutation of theosophy's 'Oriental assumptions' insisted, spiritualists had long theorised that the consumption of animal flesh might impede spiritual communication and evolution. Writing in *The Fountain* (1870), the American seer and spiritualist philosopher Andrew Jackson Davis imagined the problem in terms of a kind of digestive reincarnation. What most meat eaters do not appreciate, he wrote, is that 'swine' and 'fowl' are 'gastronomical machines for rooting up and eating, and thus forwarding for the similar use of higher organisms, a great mass of otherwise poisonous

34 Leadbeater, *Vegetarianism and Occultism*, 31.

35 Viswanathan, "Have Animals Souls", 443.

36 See Kingsford, *The Perfect Way in Diet*.

37 'Notes and Comments', 8.

and disgusting material'.³⁸ In other words, to consume the flesh of an animal is to imbibe matter that has already been digested and in doing so risk slipping down the species hierarchy. His point, then, is not that it is wrong to eat animals because they are sentient beings deserving of care, but rather because they are inferior creatures whose gross and soulless materiality threatens the celestial ascent of the eater.

The notion of spiritual progress, the extension of individual development and racial improvement into the afterlife, was a key tenet for many believers. In his *Stellar Key to the Summerland* (1867), Davis described a higher sphere of existence towards which humanity was slowly moving towards. Influenced by the writings of the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg, he outlined a highly detailed and intricately imagined 'inhabitable sphere or zone among the suns and planets of space', aimed at providing a 'solid, rational, philosophical foundation on which to rest [...] hopes of a substantial existence after death'.³⁹ For Davis, who elsewhere described the gut as governed not by 'peristaltic movement' or 'organic matter called pepsin' but by the 'soul principle acting through the filaments of the sympathetic system', the perfection of the spirit rested on the careful management of the body.⁴⁰ Charting a causal path from everyday choices over what to eat, when to exercise and how to abstain from tempting intoxicants, to the fate of the soul after death, spiritualists framed the pursuit of health in transcendental terms. As an 1895 article in *Borderland* spelled out, 'spiritualistic teaching as to another life enforces upon us that our condition and happiness in the future life depends by the action of strictly natural law on our life and conduct here'. The equivalence drawn here, between 'cleanliness, exercise and wholesome food' as sure routes to bodily wellbeing and the pursuit of a 'moral life' as the only path to 'happiness in the spirit-world', reveals the biological determinism at the heart of the spiritualist imaginary.⁴¹ In line with the broader 'hygienic culture' of the period, spiritualist guidance on health emphasized the virtues of personal responsibility, determination and temperance.⁴² Sometimes this advice was issued from beyond the grave: in *Modern Spiritualism* (1902), the psychical investigator Frank Podmore recalled attending a séance in which a visiting spirit prescribed a different regimen to each guest and elsewhere the ghost of the American vegetarian reformer Sylvester

38 Davies, *The Fountain*, 60.

39 Davis, *A Stellar Key to the Summerland*, 1.

40 Davis, *The Temple*, 439.

41 'Immortality and Mortality', 11.

42 Hau, *The Cult of Health and Beauty*, 2.

Graham regularly returned to dispense dietary guidance.⁴³ These otherworldly interventions were underpinned by what Ferguson describes as a form of ‘popular utopianism’: the belief that ‘natural selection alone was no longer a sufficient mechanism for bringing the human race to its optimal stage’, but that the spirits of the dead could ‘improve the species and enable its biological perfection’.⁴⁴ In common with other forms of eugenic discourse, this vision of glorious perfectibility balanced optimism at the wonder of evolutionary progress with pessimism regarding the ability of all humankind to join in this grand onward march.

After all, if the post-death development of the soul depended upon the maintenance of a fit body, then those unable or unwilling to meet that standard were placed at significant disadvantage. Certain people, warned the spirit of the departed journalist Julia Amis in an automatic message to the publisher W.T. Stead, are unlikely to progress far in the otherworld. The odds, she cautioned are, ‘heavily against the diseased or the infirm, in this as in all pursuits requiring attention, energy of mind and courage’.⁴⁵ Implicit in this statement is the ‘biofatalism’ that Ferguson has exposed in the workings of spiritualist conceptions of race, sexual reproduction, criminality and madness; the condemnation of significant portion of the population as not only physically deficient or mentally defective, but more profoundly as spiritually unfit.⁴⁶ In *Borderland*, Amis’ damning judgement from beyond is, however, immediately tempered by the injunction to simply ‘practice the laws of health’, ‘wash and stay clean’, to ‘take exercise’ and ‘eat what makes you more efficient’.⁴⁷ These contradictory positions—grim determinism on the one hand and cheerful self-improvement on the other—were legitimised not only within the spiritualist movement, but also by a broader shift in the way health was conceptualised in medical discourse and the public imaginary. The end of the Victorian era witnessed a paradigm shift in imaginaries of the body and illness. As Treitel has noted in relation to the rise of the vegetarianism in Germany, if ‘control of infectious disease had been the story of the nineteenth century, the story of the twentieth became one of preventing chronic conditions and, increasingly, promoting a quasi-utopian state of total well-being—more often than not via diet’.⁴⁸ By the turn of the century, the pursuit of this ‘state of total well-being’ had helped

43 Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism*, 30 and McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past*, 48.

44 Ferguson, *Determined Spirits*, 10.

45 ‘A Message from Julia’, 119.

46 Ferguson, *Determined Spirits*, 12.

47 ‘A Message from Julia’, 119.

48 Treitel, *Eating Nature in Modern Germany*, 7.

to create a thriving consumer market for patented digestive tonics, fitness aids and protein preparations. It allowed Eustace Miles to build what he described as an 'Empire of Well-Being', which encompassed a restaurant, cookery school, publishing house, advice bureau and shop selling cookery books, magazines and a product called 'Emprote'—a preparation of dried milk and cereal that promised the consumer 'extra staying power and energy'.⁴⁹ Undergirding this business empire was a philosophy of health that drew the mind and body together, as Miles explained in a pamphlet on 'Easy Cures for Indigestion' (1910):

The poisoning of the body, largely through wrong foods, wrong drinks, tobacco, strong tea and other narcotics or stimulants, wrong thoughts, and other causes, makes all work, even the unseen and often unappreciated work of circulation and digestion and elimination, and of thinking, much harder and more expensive.⁵⁰

In this corporeal economy, the work of the body is hampered by not only the ingestion of 'wrong foods' and 'wrong drinks', but also by the thinking of 'wrong thoughts'. Health could only be derived by the disciplining of both, through the observance of simple diet, regular exercise and 'mental hygiene'.⁵¹ With the shift from infectious disease to chronic conditions, came an insistence on the power of the individual to cultivate complex interior lives through adoption of better daily habits.

4 Conclusion

To conclude, a similar dynamic clearly helped to structure spiritualist practice. By recasting quotidian habits in a transcendental light, believers bound the health of the material body to the fate of the soul. The question of what to eat structured the relation between this world and the next, so that in his musings on the afterlife Arthur Conan Doyle was prompted to ask: 'does the Resurrection or after-death body require food to nourish and sustain it, as is the case with the earth body?'. In answer he ventured that perhaps just as 'without food the physical [...] body would decay and perish', so too 'for its health and development' the soul requires 'food for the mind'.⁵² To illustrate

49 Miles, *Self-Health as Habit*, 25.

50 Miles, 'Easy Cures for Indigestion', 3.

51 *Ibid.*, 4.

52 Doyle, 83.

he asks the reader to imagine a scene in Summerland: the weather is warm and you are stood in an ancient orchard surrounded by ‘fruits, beautiful to behold and luscious to the taste’ that contain ‘in concentrated form, mental and spiritual essences. Though seemingly eaten, they are not swallowed as is food on earth, but are dissolved in the mouth cavity, then imbibed into the system.’⁵³ In the heaven imagined by Doyle, the pleasure of consumption is entirely disconnected from the operations of the digestive system: spirits might eat but they certainly do not shit. As we have seen, this discomfort with the messier aspects of the body informed spiritualist thinking on health and diet. Against the picture of otherworldly indulgence and sensuous decadence offered up by some séance accounts, spiritualist dietary discourse emphasised the need to exert control over the demands of the fleshy body. Vegetarianism, as a philosophy grounded in ideas of corruption and purity, aligned itself closely with this disciplinary project. Beyond the long-standing association of dietary unorthodoxy with religious radicalism, the two movements were invested in a common ‘hygienic culture’ that framed eating in the language of self-improvement, personal responsibility, and civic duty.⁵⁴ Drawing from a burgeoning science of nutrition, spiritualists recast the vegetable regimen as not only a route to better health, but also as a means of priming the soul for its post-death evolution. Part of what the science of diet offered was, as we have seen, a way of smoothing the delicate relationship between materiality and immateriality navigated in spirit communication. To go further, the entanglement of vegetarianism with spiritualism also reveals something of the complex positioning of the body as an instrument through which knowledge about this world and the next might be obtained. Eating habits, taken seriously, suggest new ways to think about questions of rationality, objectivity and witnessing that remain so integral to the history of science and spiritualism.

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53 Ibid., 83.

54 Hau, *The Cult of Health and Beauty*, 2.

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