

**Subliminal Histories: Psychological Experimentation in the Poetry and  
Poetics of Frederic W. H. Myers  
Helen Groth**

I

The pursuit of poetry and the new science of the mind were inseparable strands of the seminal work of the late nineteenth-century poet, psychological, and psychical researcher Frederic W. H. Myers. An early passion for classical prosody translated in later life into a complex, nuanced poetry devoted to the performative externalization of intense psychological experiences of various kinds. Myers was a founding member of the Society for Psychical Research and co-authored the two-volume study of ghost sightings *Phantasms of the Living* (1886).<sup>1</sup> He also conducted extensive research into trance mediumship, telepathy, and automatic writing; immersed himself in contemporary continental work on hypnosis, dissociation, and secondary personality; and was the first to describe the early work of Pierre Janet and Sigmund Freud in English.<sup>2</sup> This work, in turn, inspired Myers's influential theory of the subliminal self that had a seminal impact on the psychology of William James.<sup>3</sup>

Myers described himself as a 'minor poet' and 'amateur savant', the latter referring to his psychical research.<sup>4</sup> Yet despite their minor status in the Victorian canon, two posthumous collections of Myers's poems and prose published in 1904 and 1921 provide a unique record of his psychological conception of poetic language as an intensification of private experience. Both volumes were edited by his wife Eveleen Myers (who also provided the photographic illustrations) and were prefaced by autobiographical fragments, retrospectively interspersed with private correspondence in the case of the 1904 collection. Myers was deeply influenced by the poetics of Wordsworth and Tennyson. What he admired in particular was their capacity to reinvigorate the classical contours of the poetic line with modern rhythms, metaphors, and motifs capable of rendering the invisible or subliminal aspects of everyday life visible, the most important of these being the laying bare of the mind in the acts of dreaming, mourning, reverie, and reflection. Myers's elegiac lyric to Tennyson, for example, written on the occasion of the poet's death, is a self-conscious stylistic homage to 'Crossing the Bar'. The motif of the immortal journey

of the soul is infused with Myers's belief in the eternal presence of the departed, to quote the final lines of the poem, 'Be stilled an hour, and stir from sleep / Reborn, re-risen, and yet the same'.<sup>5</sup> This resonates with Myers's assertion in the prefatory autobiographical fragment in the *Collected Poems* that serves as a prelude to this and the following poems, that 'all things thought and felt, as well as all things done, are somehow photographed imperishably on the Universe, and that my whole past will probably lie open to those with whom I have to do' (CP 1).

This article will argue that Myers's poetry and poetics sustains and develops a uniquely nineteenth-century poetic engagement with 'scientific' theories of mind that begins with Romantic poets such as Coleridge and Wordsworth, as Alan Richardson has so compellingly demonstrated.<sup>6</sup> Poetry created a space for Myers to dramatize the dynamic and evolving dialogue between conscious and unconscious states that extended beyond the confines of the mortal body. Poetic language evoked and explored the mind of the speaker in a dialogic or confessional style, representing a secret history of subliminal thoughts and impulses, rather than prosaically resolving epistemological paradoxes or diagnosing the various crises that haunt the individual psyche. This article will argue for Myers as a significant, rather than a minor, contributor to the Victorian poetic figuring of the mind as a 'double' phenomenon, to invoke the terminology of the new mental science.

## II

### Subliminal Poetics

Addressing the membership of the Society for Psychological Research on the occasion of Myers's death, William James narrated Myers's recreation of his psychological personality as a self-willed synthesis of an early interest in poetry and theology with the scientific techniques of evidence gathering, skilled hypothesizing, neurological, biological, and cosmological knowledge.<sup>7</sup> According to James, Myers's psychology derived from a 'classic-academic', 'romantic type of imagination' as opposed to the mechanistic psychology of associationists and animists (MS 148). Indulging in a slightly overworked architectural analogy, James described the latter's materialist abstraction of the human mind, taking its exercise on 'a sunlit terrace': 'but where

**Helen Groth, Subliminal Histories: Psychological Experimentation in the Poetry and Poetics of Frederic W. H. Myers**

that terrace stopped, the mind stopped' (*MS* 148). By contrast, 'romantic improvers' had transformed the terrace into a gothic parapet haunted by a 'mass of mental phenomena':

Fantastic, ignoble, hardly human, or frankly non-human are some of these new candidates for psychological description. The menagerie and the madhouse, the nursery, the prison, and the hospital, have been made to deliver up their material. The world of mind is shown as something infinitely more complex than was suspected. (*MS* 149)

James was nevertheless keen to distinguish Myers from the more pseudo-scientific extremes of this troupe of romantic improvers. Myers was a 'radical leader' of the romantic movement, James argued, who had bequeathed both an inventory of material and mental phenomena to his scientific colleagues, as well as a procedural method of bringing 'unlike things' together into a series in which analogous 'intermediary terms connect the extremes' (*MS* 153). The overarching theory arising from this series of 'scattered phenomena' and 'isolated curiosities'—such as unconscious cerebration, dreams, hysteria, genius, hallucination, trances, clairvoyance, and telepathy—was Myers's 'bold inclusive conception of the Subliminal Self' (*MS* 152). More recent historians of psychology concur with James's assessment: as Henri Ellenberger succinctly put it in his expansive history of the unconscious, Myers was 'one of the great systematizers of the notion of the unconscious mind'.<sup>8</sup> Few, however, share James's appreciation for Myers's unique capacity to weave delicate hypotheses, elegant analogies, and a love of human life in all its various and idiosyncratic formations into a deeply original approach to apprehending subliminal psychological phenomena.

Myers's theory of the 'Subliminal Self' evolved out of experimental psychological research conducted throughout the 1880s and 1890s. Profoundly influenced by his erstwhile colleague Edmund Gurney's and Pierre Janet's research into the diagnostic and therapeutic potential of hypnosis, as well as by contemporary research by Freud and Breuer on hysteria, Myers reacted against the constraints of the prevailing neuro-physiological accounts of mind and embraced the 'double nature of man', to quote Elizabeth Blackwell's warm affirmation of *Psychical Research*.<sup>9</sup> Hypnotism was the key to Myers's revelation of the obscured contours and complexities of the subliminal self, a dynamic concept of mind that built on

**Helen Groth, *Subliminal Histories: Psychological Experimentation in the Poetry and Poetics of Frederic W. H. Myers***

previous theories of unconscious cerebration and involuntary psychological phenomena developed by William Carpenter and others. Myers argued that the supraliminal or conscious self was simply a privileged case of personality that veiled the existence of the far more extensive and profound subliminal self:

I suggest that the stream of consciousness in which we habitually live is not the only consciousness which exists in connection with our organism. Our habitual or empirical consciousness may consist of a mere selection from a multitude of thoughts and sensations, of which some at least are equally conscious with those that we empirically know. I accord no primacy to my ordinary waking self, except that among my potential selves this one has shown itself the fittest to meet the needs of common life. I hold that it has established no further claim, and that it is perfectly possible that other thoughts, feelings, and memories, either isolated or in continuous connection, may now be actively conscious as we say 'within me' in some kind of co-ordination with my organism and forming some part of my total individuality.<sup>10</sup>

In Myers's taxonomy, consciousness is not a privileged term nor is it a coherent rational state.<sup>11</sup> According to Myers, the appearance of conscious coherence is an illusion, a mechanism for surviving the everyday, while the multiple levels of the subliminal self remain concealed within, only surfacing in states of dreaming, hallucination, hysteria, possession, clairvoyance, ghost seeing, trances, obsessive thoughts, visions, or impulses. Indeed, it is only within the capacious domain of the subliminal self that the 'spectrum of consciousness' can extend, to quote Roger Luckhurst's reading of Myers's implicit spectroscopic allusion, 'down towards the automatic physiological functions', that is, the low infrared bands, as well as up to the ultraviolet bands of 'the sublime possibilities of clairvoyance and telepathy'.<sup>12</sup> The refracting mechanism of the spectroscope, which revealed previously invisible wavelengths of light, as Luckhurst indicates, aligns with Myers's wave-like configurations of the substrata of the conscious mind. Integral to Myers's post-theological evolutionary conception of the various substrata of the subliminal self is a psychological re-articulation of soul or spirit. To use Myers's terminology, the subliminal consciousness and memory extend beyond the physiological, psychological, and ontological reach of the supraliminal consciousness and memory of an individual personality. This idea is at the core of his study of *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death* (1903), as well as providing the

**Helen Groth, Subliminal Histories: Psychological Experimentation in the Poetry and Poetics of Frederic W. H. Myers**

theoretical impetus for his poetic practice and readings of the poetry of Shelley, Tennyson, and Poe to name just a few.

### III

#### Tennyson's Subliminal Self

In a letter to Tennyson's son Hallam, which was subsequently published in Hallam's biography of his father in 1897, Myers infused his account of the poet's legacy with his conception of the subliminal self.<sup>13</sup> Characterizing Tennyson's poetry as romantic, he accords to it an animating vitality that taps into a deeper poetic stream of consciousness transcending the limits of individual mortality. In Myers's account, Tennyson transformed the 'mere mechanism of verse, the scheme of English prosody' through a unique fusion of sound, line, rhythm, and colour. He thus achieves by sheer force of natural genius a technical brilliance that no classical education could provide (*CP* 38). Myers speaks of 'the hidden heritage of emotion which maintains the life of Art itself', a heritage which includes Wagner, Beethoven, Shakespeare, and Virgil (*CP* 38). Where the modern men of letters of 'this crowded age' are distracted by contemporary concerns, and critics informed by the scientific propensity for empirical systems turn to history and philology, Tennyson has access to the unmediated spirit of the classical past. His poetry exemplifies the 'highest use of language', an automatic emanation of 'the inmost structure and pre-potent energy of the onward-striving soul' (*CP* 39). Describing Tennyson's ode 'To Virgil' Myers effuses that 'almost every phrase recalls and rivals some intimate magic, some incommunicable fire', while 'Vastness' and 'Crossing the Bar' are ascribed with a prophetic sense of 'the infinity which men call death' (*CP* 40, 41).

Myers's own poem that follows moves through a series of questions and elliptical prophetic statements. While echoing the rhyme scheme of Tennyson's 'Crossing the Bar', 'To Tennyson' diverges from its calm elegiac tone and rhythm. The opening stanzas question the limits of Tennyson's conscious awareness of the sublime potential of his poetic vision:

Gussed he the pain, the lonely years,—  
The thought made true, the will made strong?

**Helen Groth, Subliminal Histories: Psychological Experimentation in the Poetry and Poetics of Frederic W. H. Myers**

Divined he from the singing spheres  
Eternal fragments of his song?

Hoped he from dimness to discern  
The Source, the Goal, that glances through—  
That one should know, and many turn—  
Turn heavenward, knowing that he knew?— (CP 42)

The subsequent stanzas answer these questions with a vision of Tennyson ‘reborn, re-risen, and yet the same’ (CP 43). In death he achieves the unity of personality that eluded him in life. Myers’s verse mediates the afterlife of Tennyson. His rhetorical questions probe the infinite, prompting his hand to trace a vision of the poet’s summoned soul merging with a suitably resonant afterlife. Tennyson remains part of a community of sensation to which Myers felt he was uniquely attuned. He feels Tennyson’s presence ‘at a distance’, to adapt his psychological definition of the derivation and permutations of telepathic communication in *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death*.<sup>14</sup> This is not to suggest that Myers is claiming a literal telepathic connection with Tennyson. It is rather to show that his poetry and poetics were so profoundly informed with the psychological terminology and the assumptions of his own psychical research that poetry in its more transcendent incarnations is enlisted as further conclusive knowledge of the unseen world and future life.

William James notes this symbiosis of the methods of science with a literary sense of life ‘as an emotional problem’ in a review of *Science and a Future Life*, an 1893 collection of Myers’s essays previously published in the *Nineteenth Century* and *Fortnightly Review*. They included ‘Charles Darwin and Agnosticism’, ‘Tennyson as Prophet’, ‘Modern Poets and Cosmic Law’, and ‘Science and a Future Life’.<sup>15</sup> As a contrast to Myers, James cites Charles Darwin’s confession that his mind could no longer ‘endure to read a line of poetry’ after years of ‘grinding general laws out of large collections of facts’.<sup>16</sup> While quick to distinguish Darwin as the superior scientist, James praises the expansive futurism of Myers’s method which positively embraces the agnostic questioning and curiosity of Darwin and contemporaries such as Alfred Wallace and Thomas Huxley, whilst urging scientists, poets, and artists alike to utilize ‘aesthetic emotion and mystic sentiment’ to press

**Helen Groth, Subliminal Histories: Psychological Experimentation in the Poetry and Poetics of Frederic W. H. Myers**

against the ontological and epistemological limits of the present.<sup>17</sup> Myers argues in ‘Charles Darwin and Agnosticism’ that the future of science and art lie beyond the limits of the ‘visible universe’ and the reach of present technologies such as ‘telescopy’ and ‘microscopy’, both of which ‘are already approaching ominously near to their theoretic limit’ (S 72). Retinal sensitivity and the percipient part of the brain are, according to Myers, like the human body that encases them, rude and clumsy instruments ‘for the apprehension of abstract truth’ (S 73). The future lies in the exploration of ‘the psychical side of things’ and communication with ‘intelligences outside our own’ (S 74).

Myers expands on poetry’s role as a unique medium of the ‘psychical side of things’ in another essay reprinted in the same volume, ‘Tennyson as Prophet’. Initially published in 1889 in the *Nineteenth Century* this essay begins with a reflection on the visual mediation of the poet’s personality.<sup>18</sup> Tracing the contours of Tennyson’s face as revealed by the startling verisimilitude of John Everett Millais’s famous portrait, as well as ‘many a photograph’, Myers notes the divergence from the ‘popular conception’ of the refined idyllic poet – ‘the chanter of love and friendship, the adorer of half-barbarous legends with a garb of tender grace’ (S 127).<sup>19</sup> Unlike the faces of other poets, such as ‘the ethereal Shelley, the sensuous Keats, the passionate Byron, the benignant Wordsworth’, whom all apparently correspond ‘well enough to our notion of what they ought to be’, Tennyson’s face subverts expectations (S 127-28). His features express ‘not delicacy but power’ (S 128). ‘Grave even to sternness; [his countenance] is formidable in the sense which it gives of strength and wisdom won through pain’ (S 128). Both painted and photographic portraits reinforce the concept of Tennyson’s poetic personality as a medium of ‘the psychical side of things’. Moreover, the multiple senses of medium in this context are symptomatic of more general ‘occult reformulations of community and communication’ that, as Pamela Thurschwell has noted, inaugurated new ways of thinking about the permeability and suggestibility of bodies and minds at this time.<sup>20</sup>

The ensuing pages intensify this stress on permeable borders and lines of communication, opening up an intimate space in which Myers proceeds to access the poetic spirit beyond the material words on the page. Myers identifies a protean clash

**Helen Groth, *Subliminal Histories: Psychological Experimentation in the Poetry and Poetics of Frederic W. H. Myers***

of ‘unknown energies’ even in the poet’s immature work that establishes ‘a channel for the emergence of forces which must always have lain deep in his nature’ and achieves full realization in the sublime visions and trance-like reveries of later poems such as ‘De Profundis’ and ‘Vastness’ (*S* 128). In a secular reformulation of prophecy that pointedly diverges from Christian mysticism, Myers elaborates a dynamic psychological version of the poet as sage. Filling in the invisible details suggested by the faithful mimesis of Millais and his photographic counterparts, Myers describes Tennyson’s gradually evolving subliminal consciousness culminating in an eloquent visionary wisdom invested ‘with the authority of a great personality’ and ‘weighted by words of power’ (*S* 129).

To substantiate his case, Myers appropriately begins with the agitated self-consciousness of ‘Supposed Confessions of a Second-rate Sensitive Mind’ with its aqueous metaphors of vexed seas and tranquil inland tarns, before reading ‘Two Voices’ as a pre-figuration of the ‘multiform pre-existence of the Soul’ that finds its apogee in ‘De Profundis’ and ‘Vastness’ (*S* 134). Citing the following lines from ‘Two Voices’, Myers concludes that Tennyson’s poetic evocation of trance-like states has received ‘much reinforcement from the experimental psychology of recent years’ (*S* 134):

It may be that no life is found,  
Which only to one engine bound  
Falls off, but cycles always round.

As old mythologies relate,  
Some draught of Lethe may await  
The slipping thro’ from state to state.

As here we find in trances, men  
Forget the dream that happens then,  
Until they fall in trance again. (*S* 134-35)

Myers reads these lines as psychological data, assuming the reader’s consensus that they align with the hypothesis that ‘our survival of death must logically suggest our existence before earthly birth’ (*S* 135). Given Tennyson’s co-founding of the Metaphysical Society with James Knowles, the recurring motifs of trans-corporeal communication, dreams, and spiritual communion in his work, and his personal

**Helen Groth, Subliminal Histories: Psychological Experimentation in the Poetry and Poetics of Frederic W. H. Myers**



preoccupation with trances, this is hardly a radical leap.<sup>21</sup> It was, however, later modified: as Robert Bernard Martin notes, Tennyson's diagnosis of his trances became increasingly prosaic once he stopped his hydropathic treatment for epilepsy in 1848, when they were attributed 'to gout or to his passing voluntarily into an extra-sensory state through a form of self-hypnotism or meditation'.<sup>22</sup>

#### IV

#### Towards a Synthetic Poetics

Myers clarifies his particular take on poetic prophecy, while implicitly justifying his own synthetic poetics through a close reading of Tennyson's 'De Profundis' and 'The Ancient Sage' in the concluding pages of his essay on Tennyson. Deferentially distinguishing his humble and 'careful registration of residual phenomena in all directions', he asserts the scientific insights to be gleaned from the prophet's 'imaginative appeal' that pushes past the 'instinct of system' to a 'conception of a double, a synchronous evolution' (*S* 155, 156). Reading Tennyson's joyous reflections on the birth of his son Hallam in 'De Profundis', Myers finds a poetic justification, not of a spiritualist epistemology as Alison Chapman contends, but of his own psychical research into the multiplex nature of human personality.<sup>23</sup> Tennyson's evocation of his child emerging from 'that great deep, before our world begins', from that 'true world within the world we see', is fluidly integrated into Myers's speculative contention that 'an invisible world may antecede the visible, and an inconceivable world the conceivable; while yet we ourselves, here and now, are living equally in both' (*S* 157). Myers then concludes by invoking Tennyson's 'The Ancient Sage' to answer the twofold question of whether there is any possibility of 're-attaining the clearness which is blurred and confused by the very fact of our individuation? of participating in that profounder consciousness which, in Tennyson's view, is not the "epiphenomenon" but the root and reality of it all?' (*S* 158).

The subsequent psychological analysis of Tennyson's self-induced ecstasy in 'The Ancient Sage' further draws together the complex strands of Myers's research on hypnosis, telepathy, and hysteria:

**Helen Groth, *Subliminal Histories: Psychological Experimentation in the Poetry and Poetics of Frederic W. H. Myers***

And more, my son! for more than once when I  
 Sat all alone, revolving in myself  
 The word that is the symbol of myself,  
 The mortal limit of the Self was loosed  
 And past into the Nameless, as a cloud  
 Melts into heaven. I touch'd my limbs, the limbs  
 Were strange not mine—and yet no shade of doubt,  
 But utter clearness, and thro' loss of Self  
 The gain of such large life as match'd with ours  
 Were sun to spark—unshadowable in words,  
 Themselves but shadows of a shadow-world. (S 158)

In a culture where 'external systems of theology crumble away', Myers insists on a secular diagnosis of ecstatic states as 'state[s] higher than normal life', rather than as pathological forms of delusion or disease (S 158-59). This redefinition also sheds light on the ecstatic states of hysteric patients suggesting, at the very least, that all instabilities of the nervous system are not of 'a degenerative kind' (S 159). Enlisting the evidence of the contemporary experiments on sensation and memory in abnormal states such as hysteria, Myers suggests that the 'nerve-storm, with its unwonted agitations, may possibly lay bare some deep-lying capacity in us which could scarcely otherwise have come to light' (S 159). Drawn through this associative diagnostic web, Tennyson's ecstatic 'loss of Self' in the felt presence of a larger life merges by analogy into an affirmation of the existence of 'some power of communication between human minds without sensory agency' and the corresponding assumption 'that these centres of psychical perception should be immersed in a psychical *continuum*' (S 160).

Notably in the context of his diagnosis of ecstatic states in 'The Ancient Sage', one of Myers's undisputed contributions to the history of nineteenth-century English psychology is his integration of the work of Pierre Janet, Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud into his psychical research and his systematic critique of the ascription of degeneracy to perceived psychological abnormalities. Myers argued that 'abnormal' visionary experiences, as well as other instances of the mind *in extremis* could not be accounted for within the limited confines of contemporary neurological approaches in British psychology. One of his targets was Henry Maudsley's influential account in *Body and Will* (1883) of hysteria as a degenerative

**Helen Groth, Subliminal Histories: Psychological Experimentation in the Poetry and Poetics of Frederic W. H. Myers**

progressive unspooling of ‘the finest, most delicate, most intricately woven and last completed threads’ of the ‘confederated nerve-centres’ that constitute ‘moral feeling’.<sup>24</sup> Invoking Janet’s therapeutic application of hypnotic suggestion to supplant distressing memories in hysteric patients with positive associations, as well as Freud’s cathartic confessional cure in the case of Anna O that ‘cleared away the morbid products and strengthened the coherence of the sane personality’, Myers polemically revalued so called degenerate personalities in *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death*:

Who shall say how far we desire to be susceptible to stimulus? Most rash would it be to assign any fixed limit, or to class as inferior those whose main difference from ourselves may be that they feel sincerely and passionately what we feel torpidly, or perhaps only affect to feel [...]. Our “degenerates” may sometimes be in truth *progenerate*; and their perturbation may mask an evolution which we or our children needs must traverse when they have shown the way.<sup>25</sup>

Poetic geniuses, such as Tennyson, Wordsworth and to a lesser extent Shelley and Poe, exemplify the limits of normative approaches to the ‘fugitive bright lines referable to our subliminal strata’ that heightened sensitivities to sensation and psychic phenomena could trace to guide and instruct the less inspired or uninitiated.<sup>26</sup> Elaborating the intensification of ‘cerebral circulation’ that the creative process requires, Myers argued that the ‘man of genius’ achieves a spontaneous convergence of sleeping and waking thoughts that can only be achieved in a hypnotic subject by deliberate artifice.<sup>27</sup> In so doing, he also implicitly reinforced the potentially illuminating synthesis of psychical research and poetic mediations of mind, particularly in the case of an inspired medium such as Tennyson, whose work so persistently blurred the boundaries between inner and outer life.

## V

### Autobiographic Confession and the Poetic Mind

Eveleen Myers’s editorial decision to frame her first posthumous collection of her husband’s prose and poetry with a series of fragments of inner life, drawn from letters, diary entries, and Myers’s own autobiographical writing makes the link

**Helen Groth, *Subliminal Histories: Psychological Experimentation in the Poetry and Poetics of Frederic W. H. Myers***

between his life and literary work explicit. Myers's detailed account of the growth of his poet's mind, to adapt Wordsworth, reveals the convergence of his psychological research with his emerging aesthetic sense.<sup>28</sup> There is something implicitly Wordsworthian in Myers's account of his early years and education as a series of epiphanic revelations or shocks that dramatically accelerate his cognitive development. This rhetorical affinity may be, in part, a register of a mutual interest in psychology. While it is difficult to track the extent of Wordsworth's immersion in contemporary debates about the mind and sensation, as Alan Richardson concedes, the poetry is nevertheless consistent with a new naturalistic psychological approach to infant development that sought to balance the empiricist stress on sensation with an emphasis on the child's active social interaction with the world from the moment of birth.<sup>29</sup> Richardson argues that this was a radical departure from the passive mechanistic psychology of Locke, Hartley, and Condillac which 'places Wordsworth, at least for a few crucial years, in the midst of one of the most daring intellectual ventures of his era – the reinvention, along naturalistic, physiological, and ecological lines, of the study of human nature'.<sup>30</sup>

In contrast to Wordsworth's oblique engagement with contemporary psychological debates, Myers's autobiographical prose fragment makes no apologies for his retrospective analysis of the history of his 'inner life' in terms of his psychical research. The opening paragraph begins polemically with a series of statements that bear witness to his fervent belief 'that we live after earthly death' and must therefore be accountable to those who live in both the seen and 'unseen world' (*F* 1). Extending beyond the limits of his individual life, the sum of his thoughts, feelings and actions 'are somehow photographed imperishably upon the Universe', a permanent record fixed and exposed to all (*F* 1). Metaphors of visual exposure are sustained throughout the fragment as part of a systematic privileging of figurative impressions over the language of 'scientific memoir', explicitly correlating poetic and literary writing with a deeply personal revelation of self (*F* 2). Myers identifies his reader as necessarily 'psychologically minded' and thus sympathetically predisposed to 'the spectacle of a man of sensuous and emotional temperament, urged and driven by his own personal passion into undertaking a scientific enterprise, which aims at the common weal of men' (*F* 2). This mutual investment of reader and

**Helen Groth, Subliminal Histories: Psychological Experimentation in the Poetry and Poetics of Frederic W. H. Myers**

author in new epistemologies indicates a shared recognition of the uniquely modern crisis that requires the combined skills of ‘a minor poet and an amateur *savant*’ to pierce through ‘the world-old, never-penetrated veil’ between the supraliminal and subliminal levels of existence (*F* 2).

The first in a series of revelatory moments takes place in the garden of his childhood home, the parsonage of St John’s, Keswick, Cumberland. In a highly Wordsworthian scene Myers’s account of when ‘my conscious life began’ is suffused with lyrical associations and pastoral images (*F* 5). Reliving whimsical childhood reveries, impressions ‘swim and sparkle’ with ‘the fresh brightness of a great clump and tangle of blush roses’, while the sublime prospect of Skiddaw looms in the background (*F* 5). Myers’s first experience of the ‘horror of a death without resurrection’ draws the reader back to earth, when his mother informs him that the little mole crushed by a cartwheel on the road outside has no soul (*F* 6). This shock however, is quickly dissipated by the next autobiographical account of his father initiating him into the pleasures of Virgil – a reading scene ‘stamped upon my mind’ and vividly fixed on the page: ‘the ante-room at the Parsonage with its floor of bright matting, and its glass door into the garden, through which the flooding sunlight came, while I pored over the new revelation with awe-struck joy’ (*F* 6). Pleasure is soon disrupted once again by his mother who informs him of ‘the hideous doctrine of hell’ (*F* 7). As with the previous scenes, these intense moments of ontological insight are associated with particular sites and scenes: ‘I remember where I stood at the moment, and how my brain reeled under the shock’ (*F* 7). The passage into adulthood is equally marked by unique ‘spots of time’, to evoke Wordsworth once more. These include his encounters with Sappho and Pindar at the age of sixteen, which initiated him into the philosophy and aesthetics of Hellenism: ‘That tone of thought came to me naturally; the classics were but intensifications of my own being’ (*F* 18).

Despite his resistance to the idea of writing a ‘scientific memoir’ there is a forensic aspect to Myers’s self-observation that positions him as a spectator watching the climactic moments of his life unfold, such as the extraordinary description of swimming across Niagara at night during an American tour in 1865. ‘One scene’, he

**Helen Groth, *Subliminal Histories: Psychological Experimentation in the Poetry and Poetics of Frederic W. H. Myers***

notes, ‘comes back to me with vivid insight into a state of mind which for the most part I have observed only from the outside’ (*F* 21):

As I stood on a rock, choosing my place to plunge into the boiling whiteness, I asked myself with urgency, “What if I die?” For once the answer was blank of emotion. I have often looked back on this apathy in the brief interspace of religions as my only subjective key to the indifference which I observe in so many of mankind. I plunged in; the cliffs, the cataract, the moon herself, were hidden in a tower of whirling spray; in the foamy rush I struck at air; waves from all sides beat me to and fro; I seemed immersed in thundering chaos, alone amid the roar of doom. (*F* 21-22)

Soon after his return to England this literally sublime experience informs his conversion to Christianity, which he describes coming to him in ‘a potent form—through the agency of Josephine Butler’ (*F* 22). Mystifying Butler’s role still further to justify the religious nature of his early poetry, Myers claims she introduced him to Christianity via ‘an inner door; not to its encumbering forms and dogmas, but to its heart of fire’ (*F* 22). Myers then refers his ‘psychologically minded reader’ to two poems, ‘Saint Paul’, and ‘Saint John the Baptist’, as an ‘intensely personal’ albeit ‘sufficient record of those years of eager faith’ (*F* 23). This autobiographical narration retrospectively constructs his poetic re-enactments of Paul’s conversion and John the Baptist’s reverential witnessing and prophetic vision as symptoms of an immature poetic mind under the influence of a now jettisoned faith. Not content with Myers’s diminishing assessment of his early poetic efforts, Eveleen Myers followed the eventually published account with a series of letters from Ruskin praising both poems on the subsequent pages (*F* 23-25). In a letter of 1872, Ruskin characterizes Myers’s poetry as ‘Wordsworth with a softer chime’. He also makes the following critical yet positive assessment:

The “John Baptist” seems to me entirely beautiful and right in its dream of him. The “St Paul” is not according to my thought,—but I am glad to have my thought changed. I wish the verses were less studiously alliterative, but the verbal art of them is wonderful. (*F* 24)

While, as Ruskin notes, Myers’s prosody was hardly original and often strained, particularly in these two poems, they both exemplify an enduring preoccupation with liminal psychological states—the mind *in extremis*.<sup>31</sup> As Myers rightly observes, their lasting value is psychological rather than aesthetic. They survive as records of

**Helen Groth, Subliminal Histories: Psychological Experimentation in the Poetry and Poetics of Frederic W. H. Myers**

the parallel development of his poetic sensibility and psychological preoccupations. Haunted by the spectres of the past in the opening stanzas of the poem, Myers's St Paul, for example, lays bare his tortured psyche in a manner reminiscent of Browning, although without the double-edged self-reflexivity. Exclamation after exclamation literally enacts Paul's desire for a dialogue that transcends the material limits of everyday life: 'Oh the days desolate and useless years! / Vows in the night, so fierce and unavailing!' (*CP* 110).

Myers's relish for visionary figures also informs his account of his own conversion to psychical research after his first encounter with Henry Sidgwick. From that moment on he pitched his intellectual path against a 'very flood-tide of materialism, agnosticism,—the mechanical theory of the Universe, the reduction of all spiritual facts to physiological phenomena' (*F* 33). Continuing with his typical relish for intellectual drama Myers reminds his readers that it 'was a time when not the intellect only but the moral ideals of men seemed to have passed into the camp of negation. We were all in the first flush of Darwinism' (*F* 33). Conscious of positioning her husband in the midst of these debates to insure his legacy, Eveleen Myers inserts a series of letters between George Eliot and Myers on the subject of agnosticism at this juncture in the 1904 edition of Myers's autobiographical fragment. This exchange reveals the mutual respect both writers felt for one another despite their philosophical differences, but it also signals Myers's increasing intellectual alienation. With the exception of his close alliances with Sidgwick and Edmund Gurney, Myers presents himself as an outsider in the wake of his ultimate conversion, a secular St Paul or St John the Baptist transported into a new sphere of uncanny and incommunicable phenomena. He describes himself moving through 'a strange panorama of scenes of solitary exaltation, of bewildering introduction into incommunicable things' (*F* 38).

**Helen Groth, *Subliminal Histories: Psychological Experimentation in the Poetry and Poetics of Frederic W. H. Myers***

## VI

## Psychical Poetry

The poems in *Fragments of Prose & Poetry* could be characterized as just such a ‘strange panorama of scenes of solitary exaltation’. A poem like ‘From Brute to Man’ typifies the convergence of emotionally charged epistemological reflection and spectacular cosmic visions that shapes Myers’s poetry (*F* 176). As the title suggests, the poem draws on a Darwinian conception of the descent of man, while developing on subsequent debates driven by Alfred Russel Wallace surrounding the inadequacy of the principle of natural selection as a means of resolving the mysteries of the human mind and the origins of intellect. Predictably, Myers finds the answer for the primitive development of intellect and divergence between human and animal in the subliminal realm of consciousness that transcends material body and mind, the ontological continuum that interlinks the full spectrum of conscious and unconscious life across time and space. The poem begins with the ‘nameless Creature’, the solitary brute who pushes forward away from his savage origins onto a new level of self-consciousness – the protean beginnings of civilization:

That nameless Creature wandered from his kin;  
Smote his broad breast, and, when the woods had rung  
To bellowing preludes of that thunderous tongue,  
With hopes half-born, with burning tears unshed,  
Bowed low his terrible and lonely head;  
With arms uncouth, with knees that scarce could kneel. (*F* 176)

Like Wallace, Myers resists the ontological constraints of various development hypotheses that sought to identify stages of evolution from the primitive to the enlightened, choosing instead to dramatize an individual moment in which man presses through into the infinite and is rewarded by the blessing of divine logos:

His thronging cry came half articulate,  
And some strange light, past knowing, past control,  
Rose in his eyes, and shone, and was a soul. (*F* 176)

This poem emanates from Myers’s drive to reinvigorate religious concepts of the soul, moral and social responsibility, and self-transformation from the perspective of contemporary scientific debates. Myers returns again and again to the role of poets as

**Helen Groth, Subliminal Histories: Psychological Experimentation in the Poetry and Poetics of Frederic W. H. Myers**



privileged mediators of the ‘religion of mankind’, to quote his essay on Shelley.<sup>32</sup> Looking back to poets such as Shelley and Wordsworth, Myers gathers allies in his mission to supplant the prevailing skepticism of modern science with the combined forces of an optimistic rhetoric of experimental enquiry and a Romantic aesthetics of spiritual immanence and subliminal unity with nature. As he argues in the context of Shelley:

We should surely desire that poetry should become ‘the universal concern of the world’ at least thus far; that those who delight in its deeper mysteries should also be ready to meet plain men on the common ground of plain good sense; should see what they see, listen to what they say, and explain their own superior insight in terms intelligible to all.<sup>33</sup>

Poets like Shelley or ‘master minds’ owe it to readers to mediate ‘high ideas and noble emotions’ that reveal a new truth, an argument that assumes a model of reading that is an aesthetic variation on his theory of psychic connection.<sup>34</sup> Indeed Lisa Brocklebank has argued that Myers first articulated his concept of telepathy in a public lecture entitled ‘Books to Read: A Lecture’, which was delivered in response to an invitation by the Dublin Afternoon Lectures Committee.<sup>35</sup> In that lecture Myers argued that books ‘bear the impress’ of the soul of the author and that the aim of reading should be ‘to elevate and strengthen our mind’, as well as to help others.<sup>36</sup> A sign of a successful sympathetic reading of the author’s mind, according to Myers, is if ‘the thoughts in the book we have been reading still surge in our heads, and make us walk at first as if in a dream’.<sup>37</sup> A short poem entitled ‘Sleep’ in *Fragments of Prose & Poetry* exemplifies the interplay of the intimate and universal in Myers’s own experiments with eliciting a sympathetic reading of an otherwise everyday experience:

How greatly good to fall outspread  
Full length at last upon my bed  
And bid the world farewell!  
Without a sound, without a spark,  
Immersed and drowned in pitchy dark  
And silence inaudible!

...

Then from my wearied brain decay  
The feverous fragments of the day.  
The thoughts that dance and die;

**Helen Groth, Subliminal Histories: Psychological Experimentation in the Poetry and Poetics of Frederic W. H. Myers**

From life's exhausted cells they flow,  
 They throng and wander, whirl and go,  
 And what is left am I. (*F* 135)

This simple poem evoking the familiar sensation of lapsing into sleep succeeds aesthetically where many of Myers's more grandiose or sentimental poems, such as 'Retrospect' and 'A Cosmic History' fail (*F* 119, 177-9). The rhyme scheme is not so insistent and intrusive. The vision is not so strained with overcharged metaphors and overwrought classical allusions. Splayed on the bed the sleeper undergoes what Myers would characterize in his scientific register as the 'organic recuperation' of the subliminal self in 'the sleeping phase of personality'.<sup>38</sup> But this does not jar with the lyrical evocation of thoughts dancing and dying, flowing out from 'life's exhausted cells' so that all that is 'left am I' (*F* 135). Myers positively redefined sleep as a secondary incarnation of personality, arguing that the 'abeyance of the supraliminal life may be the liberation of the subliminal'.<sup>39</sup> Sleep liberates the subliminal self to 'throng and wander, whirl and go', as he puts it in 'Sleep', leaving behind the supraliminal I to regain the 'spent secretion of the brain' (*F* 135). Citing the precedent of Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan' in *Human Personality*, Myers exemplifies the psychological lessons to be learnt from reading the subliminal emanations of sleeping genius as a heightened analogy of one's own personality. He contends that the 'very imperfection of *Kubla Khan*—the memory truncated by an interruption—reminds us how partial must ever be our waking knowledge of the achievements of sleep'.<sup>40</sup> He then insists on the analogical potential and therapeutic insights to be gleaned from the famous instance of Coleridge's 'obscuration of waking sense':

May I not, then, claim a real analogy between certain achievement of *sleep* and the achievements of *genius*? In both there is the same triumphant spontaneity, the same sense of drawing no longer upon the narrow and brief endurance of nerves and brain, but upon some unknown source exempt from those limitations.<sup>41</sup>

Arguing for Myers as a seminal figure in the history of British psychology I will concede is a far easier task than defending his poetry's aesthetic legacy. However, given the current critical interest in the history of neural and cognitive

**Helen Groth, *Subliminal Histories: Psychological Experimentation in the Poetry and Poetics of Frederic W. H. Myers***

theories of mind in literary studies, Myers's convergence of his poetic practice with his psychical research takes on a new relevance reinforcing the claims of recent critics, such as Alan Richardson and Nicholas Dames, to name only two, that the science of mind informed processes of writing and reading in the nineteenth century.<sup>42</sup> Inspired by Romantic literary and scientific representations of mind, Myers moved fluidly between his poetic and psychological enquiries into the nature of human personality. Like Wordsworth and Coleridge his poetry is concerned with sensation, the brain and nerves, the universal and the local, the organic as opposed to the mechanical. Where Myers differs from his precursors is in what he would characterize as his life-long oscillation between his roles as 'minor poet' and amateur scientist or 'savant' (*F* 2). Myers's systematic research into the phenomena of unconscious life was unprecedented, as William James acknowledged. It shaped his aesthetics and informed every facet of his writing from his literary and review essays, his prolific accounts of psychical phenomena and the multiplex nature of human personality, to his uneven yet considerable body of verse. Writing on the cusp of modernism, Myers's prosody may be stylistically nostalgic, but his thematic engagement with the nature of consciousness was novel, experimental, and multivalent.

---

<sup>1</sup> Edmund Gurney, Frederic W. H. Myers, and Frank Podmore, *Phantasms of the Living*, 2 vols (London: Trübner, 1886).

<sup>2</sup> Myers discussed both Freud and Janet in the context of hysteria and the latter's work on automatism in *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*, 2 vols (London: Longmans, Green, 1903), I, 43-53, 299-300; II, 117-88. See also Frederic W. H. Myers, 'Janet's Psychical Automatism', *Nineteenth Century*, August 1889, pp. 341-43; and 'The Drift of Psychical Research', *National Review*, October 1894, pp. 190-209.

<sup>3</sup> Amy Kittelstrom traces the influence on James of Myers's *Human Personality* in the broader context of the convergence of spiritualism, psychology, and religion in the late nineteenth century, in 'Dedicated Spirits: Religious Mediators and Romantic Ideas in the Late Nineteenth Century', *European Legacy*, 9.1 (2004), 31-42.

<sup>4</sup> Frederic W. H. Myers, 'Fragments of Inner Life', in *Fragments of Prose & Poetry*, ed. by Eveleen Myers (London: Longmans, Green, 1904), p. 2. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text, and are prefixed by *F*.

**Helen Groth, Subliminal Histories: Psychological Experimentation in the Poetry and Poetics of Frederic W. H. Myers**

<sup>5</sup> Frederic W. H. Myers, *Collected Poems with Autobiographical and Critical Fragments*, ed. by Eveleen Myers (London: Macmillan, 1921), p. 117. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text, and are prefixed by *CP*.

<sup>6</sup> Alan Richardson, *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> William James, 'Frederic Myers' Services to Psychology', in William James, *Memories and Studies* (London: Longmans, Green, 1911), pp. 145-70 (p. 146) (first publ. in *Proceedings of the Society of Psychical Research*, 42 (1901), 17-30). Further references to this work are given after quotations in the text, and are prefixed by *MS*.

<sup>8</sup> Henri F. Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), p. 314.

<sup>9</sup> Letter from Elizabeth Blackwell to Henry Sidgwick, 24 October 1889, cited in Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850 – 1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 245.

<sup>10</sup> Frederic W. H. Myers, 'The Subliminal Consciousness', *Proceedings of the Society of Psychical Research*, 7 (1891-2), 301.

<sup>11</sup> Ian Hacking discusses the history of the coherence test in distinguishing between conscious and unconscious or dreaming states in 'Dreams in Place', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 59.3 (2001), 245-60.

<sup>12</sup> Roger Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy, 1870-1901* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 109.

<sup>13</sup> This letter was reprinted in Myers, *Collected Poems*, pp. 37-41.

<sup>14</sup> Myers describes telepathy thus: 'The *distance* between agent and percipient which the derivation of the word—"feeling at a distance"—implies, need, in fact, only be such as to prevent the operation of whatever known modes of perception are not excluded by the other conditions of the case. Telepathy may thus exist [...] between one man in England and another in Australia, or between one man still living on earth and another man long since departed'. (*Human Personality*, I, p. xxii).

<sup>15</sup> William James, 'Review of *Science and a Future Life*, by Frederic W.H. Myers' (1893), in William James, *Essays in Psychical Research*, intr. by Robert A. McDermott (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 107-09 (p. 108).

<sup>16</sup> James, *Essays*, p. 108.

<sup>17</sup> Frederic W. H. Myers, 'Charles Darwin and Agnosticism', in *Science and a Future Life* (London: Macmillan, 1893), p. 69. (first publ. in *Fortnightly Review*, Jan 1888, pp. 99-108). Further references to this collection of essays are given after quotations in the text, and are prefixed by *S*.

<sup>18</sup> Frederic W. H. Myers, 'Tennyson as Prophet', in *Science and a Future Life*, pp. 127-65 (first publ. in *Nineteenth Century*, March 1889, pp. 381-96). The editor of the *Nineteenth Century*, James Knowles, was a friend of Henry Sidgwick. Both men had been members of the Metaphysical

**Helen Groth, Subliminal Histories: Psychological Experimentation in the Poetry and Poetics of Frederic W. H. Myers**

Society, as had Tennyson. Roger Luckhurst analyses these networks in detail in Chapter 1 of *The Invention of Telepathy*. Tennyson was also associated with the *Nineteenth Century*, publishing ‘De Profundis’ in the May 1880 issue, a poem that Myers would later align with his own experimental psychological approach.

<sup>19</sup> Alison Chapman discusses this essay in the broader context of Tennyson’s engagement with the supernatural and Julia Margaret Cameron’s photography in “‘A Poet Never Sees a Ghost’: Photography and Trance in Tennyson’s “Enoch Arden” and Julia Margaret Cameron’s Photography”, *Victorian Poetry*, 41.1 (2003), 47-71.

<sup>20</sup> Pamela Thurschwell, *Literature, Technology and Magical Thinking, 1880 -1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> Founded in 1869, the membership of the Metaphysical Society included Gladstone, Tennyson, Huxley, Ruskin, Maurice, Bagehot, Froude, James Martineau, Tyndall and other prominent figures across the scientific and theological spectrum. The mission of the society was ‘to collect, arrange, and diffuse knowledge (whether objective or subjective) of mental and moral phenomena’, cited in Oppenheim, *The Other World*, p. 127.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Bernard Martin, *Tennyson: The Unquiet Heart* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 279.

<sup>23</sup> Alison Chapman argues that ‘Myers clearly has an agenda in his discussion of Tennyson’s trances and, by implication, he associates the states with experiments in mesmerism and hypnosis, which, for advocates of spiritualism, were a potential channel of occult communication between medium and spirit’. See ‘A Poet Never Sees a Ghost’, p. 49. For a detailed account of the divergence of the Society for Psychical Research from the Spiritualist cause, see Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy*, pp. 9-59.

<sup>24</sup> Henry Maudsley, *Body and Will: Being an Essay Concerning Will in its Metaphysical, Physiological & Pathological Aspects* (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, 1883), pp. 266, 259.

<sup>25</sup> Myers, *Human Personality*, I, 56.

<sup>26</sup> Frederic W. H. Myers, ‘The Subliminal Consciousness’, *Proceedings of the Society of Psychical Research*, 8 (1892), 334.

<sup>27</sup> Myers, *Human Personality*, I, 90.

<sup>28</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prelude; or, Growth of a Poet’s Mind: An Autobiographical Poem* (London: Moxon, 1850).

<sup>29</sup> Richardson, *British Romanticism*, p. 67.

<sup>30</sup> Richardson, *British Romanticism*, p. 67.

<sup>31</sup> Myers, *Collected Poems*, pp. 105-26; pp. 154-68.

<sup>32</sup> Frederic W. H. Myers, ‘Percy Bysshe Shelley’, in *Collected Poems*, pp. 22-33 (p. 25).

<sup>33</sup> Myers, ‘Percy Bysshe Shelley’, p. 26.

<sup>34</sup> Myers, ‘Percy Bysshe Shelley’, p. 30.

**Helen Groth, Subliminal Histories: Psychological Experimentation in the Poetry and Poetics of Frederic W. H. Myers**

---

<sup>35</sup> Lisa Brocklebank, 'Psychic Reading', *Victorian Studies*, 48.2 (2006), pp. 233-39.

<sup>36</sup> Cited in Brocklebank, 'Psychic Reading', p. 235.

<sup>37</sup> Cited in Brocklebank, 'Psychic Reading', p. 235.

<sup>38</sup> Myers, *Human Personality*, I, p. xxxviii.

<sup>39</sup> Myers, *Human Personality*, I, p. xxxii.

<sup>40</sup> Myers, *Human Personality*, I, 135.

<sup>41</sup> Myers, *Human Personality*, I, 135.

<sup>42</sup> Nicholas Dames, *The Physiology of the Novel: Reading, Neural Science, and the Form of Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).