

‘Julia Says’: The Spirit-Writing and Editorial Mediumship of W. T. Stead

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‘If I am remembered at all a hundred years hence, it will be as Julia’s amanuensis!’¹

In 1909, W. T. Stead converted his old offices in Norfolk Street, just off the Strand, into a public office for communication between the living and the dead. ‘Julia’s Bureau’ was the realization of a long-held belief of Stead’s that the future of Spiritualism lay in the establishment of a formal infrastructure for maintaining correspondence across the barrier of death. In keeping with Stead’s plans for a fully cooperative project, the Bureau was allegedly staffed by skilled workers from both sides of the grave. In all his accounts of the undertaking Stead was adamant that the chairperson and chief decision-maker was not Stead himself, but his long-term spirit-correspondent Julia Ames, a young American journalist who had been dead for seventeen years. In his invocation of a spirit guide, whom he described as the ‘invisible author who used [his] passive hand as her amanuensis’, Stead was working within an established tradition of automatic spirit-writing.² However, by setting Julia up with her own office space, staff, and bureaucracy (including official application forms and other paper work) Stead took an unprecedented step in attempting to establish spirit collaboration as a demystified social project. He argued that this new space where dead people and living people could work together on a common project could ultimately change the world.

Julia’s Bureau represented the point at which Stead’s zealous consumption of the ideas of Spiritualism met his drive for creating public social networks.³ To understand what this venture represented it is necessary to look at how Stead’s Julia writings developed in the context of late nineteenth-century mediumistic practices, while also situating them within the broader scope of Stead’s work as more than a peculiar fringe interest. In championing ‘Julia’ Stead adopted and adapted key narratives about collaboration that Spiritualists had used for decades. Traditionally, such ideas served as a bulwark against charges of fraud and deceit. Earlier mediums developed a model of dual authorship in order to decentralize and obfuscate the source of their authority. Spirit collaboration offered a means of making lofty transcendental claims, hedged in with careful prevarications about the fallibility of channelled messages. Stead, I suggest,

repurposed arguments he learned from other spirit-writers and used them instead to explore the possibility that spirit interaction could become an organized part of public life.

An ardent believer in the possibility of spirit communication, Stead's interest in matters of the occult had frequently made its way into the pages of the journals that he edited.⁴ Stead was never shy about speaking out on behalf of Spiritualism in earnest and unironic tones, while the magpie-like tendencies that characterized so much of his editorial work spurred him to write broadly and eclectically about the many new schools of thought and occultist fads that schismed and grew as Spiritualism developed through the *fin de siècle*. While Stead's championing of those things he termed 'Borderland phenomena' was a consistent feature of his writing up until the time of his death, the apex of his literary career in Spiritualism was the publication in 1898 of his volume of spirit-written epistles, *Letters from Julia*. *Letters from Julia* offers an autothanatographical account of existence in the afterlife, mixed with a healthy dose of religious advice, from Julia, for those still living. These letters first appeared in the pages of the dedicated occult journal *Borderland*, which Stead edited from 1894 to 1897, and marked the beginning of his ongoing public references to his spirit guide. A review of *Letters from Julia* published in the *Bookman* hazarded that its publication might be 'the boldest thing' Stead had done in the course of 'a singularly crowded career'.⁵ In truth, the publication of the letters was the culmination of Stead's previous reading and writing on occultism, and marked a turning point in his Spiritualist thinking. Where previously Stead had attempted unsuccessfully to impose order on Spiritualism as an editor, Julia's voice emerged from the pages of *Borderland* as an anthropomorphic organizing principle with the authority to arbitrate between conflicting ideas. Julia was a literary creation, born of the diverse range of occultisms by which Stead was inspired, who became his personal avatar in the journalist's mission to democratize spooks.

Stead wrote as a commentator on, and as a practitioner of, Spiritualism. By the 1890s Spiritualism was, perhaps, on a diminuendo from its highest point in the 1870s.⁶ Nevertheless, it remained an active movement sustaining a number of dedicated periodicals. *Borderland* was Stead's editorial contribution to the mix. Much like the *Review of Reviews*, *Borderland* offered an overview of the current hot topics in other (Spiritualist) publications, alongside book reviews, biographical sketches, and original articles. Late-Victorian Spiritualism was not one formal creed, but a connected collection of movements. Daniel Cottom accurately observes that Spiritualism was 'so loosely

organized that it could not possibly recognize any heterodoxy except a total disbelief in the possibility of an afterlife'.⁷ Even there, new movements with roots in Spiritualism offered different first principles. Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society, for example, had swapped spirits for Mahatmas, but nonetheless shared much of the discourse and rhetoric of Spiritualism, and was active in Britain throughout the 1890s and into the new century. All of this was grist to Stead's mill. He collected, edited, and editorialized discussions of everything from séance to palmistry to the psychic transmission of poetry from Mars. In *Borderland* and its library, Stead attempted to taxonomize all the claims he encountered. His editorial work, he hoped, would act as 'a medium of connection between the scientific expert' and the 'multitude of witnesses scattered all over the surface of the earth' to whom 'the collection of evidence about phenomena must necessarily be entrusted'.⁸

Borderland was Stead's attempt at using the principles of his new journalism to investigate Spiritualism. Stead believed that journalism could augment and improve upon the investigative methods of groups like the Society for Psychical Research. *Borderland* was to be a collected body of evidence, a repository for reports of phenomena experienced by readers under test conditions (as outlined in the magazine). Collected together, these stories would represent a data pool from which researchers might draw in explaining the laws and rules of Spiritualism. As things stood, Stead complained,

a group of clodhoppers round a tea-kettle would be about as likely to discover how to build the engines of the Campania as most of the habitués of the modern séance to obtain a clue to the mastery of the laws governing [occult] phenomena.⁹

As early as the 1891 publication of his *Real Ghost Stories*, Stead had expressed his desire to 'democratise' the 'Science of Ghosts'.¹⁰ *Borderland* adopted some of the beliefs expressed by Stead in his 'Governance by Journalism' thesis that the press could serve as a court, at least insofar as it would provide a forum in which the arguments for and against Spiritualism could have a public airing. It could, therefore, be used to publicly investigate 'all psychic phenomena' with 'sympathetic common sense'.¹¹ Stead also hoped to make diverse collections of material as accessible as possible. In the pages of *Borderland*, a notice was frequently included to the effect that 'copies of all articles quoted in the index, and, where desired, translations of those in foreign magazines' could be obtained by contacting the editor.

Borderland boasted of its high circulation, but it was not the success that Stead had hoped. Stead's own editorial voice was ubiquitous in the periodical, though its appearance and cessation is not always clearly marked. Unless one pays close attention to typeface (as one who has read much of any of Stead's papers knows) one can suddenly find oneself wandering from quotation to paraphrase without any clear signposting. This, combined with Stead's catholic approach to gathering articles, made *Borderland* as indecisive as it was eclectic. Despite his attempts at taxonomical headers for Spiritualism, theosophy, psychometry, telepathy, astrology, etc., the tendency of various occultisms to share and subvert common tropes, and Stead's own intermittent editorial voice undermine attempts at order. Though his own preferred theory was a brand of Christian Spiritualism that emphasized the dualist nature of all men, Stead's coverage of occultism in *Borderland* was egalitarian and contradictory. The *Borderland* library he established for interested researchers contained everything from Helena Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine* to Edwin Abbott's *Flatland*. His gallery of noteworthy Borderlanders profiled people of many different schools of thought as to the afterlife. The result is polyphonic and garbled. *Borderland* worked as a way of demonstrating the wealth of occult and esoteric ideas in circulation. What it could not offer was consensus on the next step to be taken in furthering the social good that Stead hoped might be done by Spiritualism.

It was here that Stead's investment in Julia paid off. The spirit of Julia made her first public appearances in the pages of *Borderland*. This journal failed to live up to the hopes which Stead had initially entertained. Julia, made from a patchwork of its parts but imbued with a more authoritative voice than Stead as *Borderland*'s editor could ever muster, endured. It is impossible now to analyse with certainty the psychology of Stead's attachment to the idea of Julia. As with all Victorian mediums, trying to recreate forensically the specifics of fraud, credulity, wishful thinking, performance, spin, and sales pitch is a fruitless labour. As a rhetorical device, however, Julia offered Stead the necessary rationalization to do what he otherwise could not have done. It was the ethereal Julia, not Stead, who tried to instruct the world in correct policy for establishing relations with *Borderland*. Channelling Julia, Stead said, began as an experiment that he undertook 'with keen and sceptical interest' in *Borderland*'s investigative spirit (*Letters from Julia*, p. 12). Very quickly, however, she developed into the authorial voice necessary for Stead to unify the diverse mass of material under which *Borderland* foundered. The only response a dispassionate editor could offer to the jumbled anecdotes and counter-iterations of

Borderland was expectant silence. To Julia, however, fractured messages were no obstacle. They were ever the channelled spirit's stock-in-trade.

Commentary and observation did not long remain enough to satisfy Stead's occultist leanings and it was a natural progression for anyone dabbling in Spiritualism to try his or her hand at spirit-writing. In the same office in which he wrote with the authority of an editor, Stead practised passive automatic writing and soon became adamant that he possessed (or, perhaps, was possessed by) an 'automatic telepathic hand'.¹² By this means he first channelled Julia for private correspondence. However, when Stead as editor found he could not extract from the jumble of *Borderland* the 'laws governing phenomena' while still maintaining an open forum, he discovered the usefulness of having a spirit-voice already on hand. Julia could champion one version of occultism over another with an authority that Stead lacked. Immaterial and elusive, she could evade criticism while still resonating with the authority of the Spiritualist works in which she had her genesis. With Julia's occasional appearances as a correspondent to *Borderland* Stead joined his dual roles as editor and spirit-writer. Like all channelled spirits, Julia was a literary creation. Imbued by her creator with more meaning than a mere fictional character, she was nonetheless wholly constituted by the compositions of a medium. If *Borderland* was Stead's most concerted effort to editorialize Spiritualism, Julia's opus was his contribution to Spiritualism as a literary practice.

Writing was a crucial part of Spiritualism in the late nineteenth century. When one thinks of Spiritualist practices, one tends to picture the medium's cabinet, the rapping table, or the planchette. The mediumship of the séance room was bodily and theatrical. Of course these were essential elements of the performance of Spiritualism. However, the circulation of literature was the lifeblood of the Spiritualist movement. At the heart of every Spiritualist practice was an act of interpretation and an attempt at constructing a persuasive narrative around uncanny events. Spiritualist arguments circulated mimetically through publications. Readings, lectures, and reports helped their spread, building a body of tropes. For example, far from avoiding the subject of fraud, Spiritualist texts deal with it repeatedly. The narratives for countering charges of fraudulence that proved most potent were constantly reiterated and adapted. One sees similar ideas occur again and again across very different branches of occultism until they are so general and so generic that their original iteration is lost. It becomes common knowledge that bad vibrations ruin spirit communication, that mischievous 'elementals' will sometimes interfere with spirit

messages, that spirits can communicate more readily in the dark, and that challenging a sensitive too strictly can be injurious to their health. One thing common to all Stead's occult projects is a reliance upon the pre-existence of a body of occultist writing that has made its way into the public consciousness. *Borderland* and the *Letters from Julia* both played their part in the perpetuation of these ideas. The teachings of earlier Spiritualists seeped into Julia's work unattributed.¹³

The *Letters from Julia*, then, are not particularly original. Spend enough time reading nineteenth-century occultist publications and it becomes apparent that Julia's testimony and teachings were inspired by all kinds of other writings, mixed together with a strong strain of generic Christian Spiritualism. Detractors and believers in Spiritualism alike found the letters derivative. Ever sceptical, Walter Besant declared that 'Julia just repeats the ideas of the time. What "Julia" says is just what any person with spiritualistic leaning [...] would say.' The editors of *Light* (the Spiritualist paper) admitted 'we cannot say that Julia's message is entirely new'.¹⁴ A less cagey review in *The Times* noted that the work was 'neither novel nor surprising': 'Julia is somewhat of a bore — has nothing to tell and tells it diffusely.'¹⁵

In fact, Julia was nothing if not generic. Her teachings were consistent with the ideas of other occultists whose writing Stead had collected, piecemeal, in the pages of *Borderland*. While Julia offered an alternative voice with which Stead might promote the idea of absolute or correct versions of Spiritualist ideas, that voice was complicated by constant echoes of the wording and sentiments of other occultists' writings. Nor are her parent texts all non-fiction. If one looks closely, there are traces of popular novels in *Letters from Julia*. For instance, Julia's account of her first day in *Borderland* is deeply reminiscent of the first journey the heroine takes on the astral plane in Marie Corelli's *A Romance of Two Worlds* (1886). Each begins with the disembodied soul observing the strangeness of her physical body. 'Did I dwell in that body?', asks Corelli's heroine, looking at the 'badly executed' clay.¹⁶ Julia similarly observes that 'the poor old body I had left behind [...] seemed so absurd I could not help laughing' (*Letters from Julia*, p. 16). Both then depart in the company of an ambiguously gendered winged guide. (Corelli avoids pronouns for a dozen pages, while Stead belatedly explains that 'Julia speaks of this Guide indifferently as he and she explaining, when I asked, that in our sense angels are neither male nor female' (*Letters from Julia*, p. 48).) Julia's guide begins their journey by telling her: 'I am sent to teach you the laws of the new life' (p. 176); whereas Corelli's

proactive heroine demands of her guide: ‘Tell me [...] what I must know’ (*Romance of Two Worlds*, p. 17). In Corelli’s novel the heroine then takes a vision quest through the universe. She finally finds herself ‘alone in a vast area of light’ where she hears ‘a voice, trumpet-clear and far-echoing’ that teaches her the secrets of Christ and creation (p. 181).

Once again, Julia follows suit:

I found myself in a great expanse of landscape where I had never been before. I was alone; that is, I saw no one [...]. Then I heard a voice. I did not see whence it came, or who spoke. I only heard the words, ‘Julia, He who saved thee would fain speak with thee.’ [...] Then I said, ‘Who is it that speaks?’ And, behold, a flaming fire. (*Letters from Julia*, p. 18)

If Corelli was not a direct influence, then Stead is at least writing within the same tradition of Christian-Spiritualist fantasy. At another point we know from Stead’s letters to Edith Harper that he was reading Algernon Blackwood’s *John Silence* (1908). Without making the connection himself, he writes in the same letter about his discomfort with the ‘grim’ tone of Julia’s latest missives. He mentions ‘her picture of the disembodied dead beating like moths at a lighted window-pain, against the barrier that separates them from survivors’, addressing themes of a threatening, haunted universe that are strikingly similar to Blackwood’s (quoted in Harper, p. 102). Ultimately, one cannot deny the evidence that Julia is largely a regurgitation of Stead’s own reading.

Whether or not Stead was fully conscious of the debt Julia’s letters owed to such a wide variety of sources from his own past reading, it is certain that in responding to charges of unoriginality he employed a number of rhetorical tricks with provenance in spirit-writing. Stead, after all, was not the first medium whose claims were met with incredulity. Spirit-writers had always faced accusations of fraud, plagiarism, and self-deception. In *Letters from Julia*, Stead responds to attacks that he has already received or that he anticipates from sceptics. He also rehearses his own doubts about Julia’s true nature. Why *has* Julia nothing especially new to say? Why *do* her words and thoughts so often resemble others whom he has read? In attempting to answer these questions, Stead (or Julia) borrows copiously from the stock arguments of other writing mediums. Julia’s voice repeats ideas about the technical weaknesses inherent in mediumship as a method of communication. It is important to understand that when Stead wrote for Julia, he was working within an existing literary tradition. Spirit-writing for publication was never more than a marginal practice and even the most successful or famous examples, like Lizzie Doten’s poems or T. P. James’s completed *Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1873), are long

forgotten. Nevertheless, the genre had its own intertextual corpus of tropes and devices. Many of these offered a pre-emptive defence against charges of inauthenticity. *Letters from Julia* directly addresses its own apparently derivative nature and reframes it as something other than a necessary indictment of Stead's powers.

Spirit-writing was a mode that frequently reflected upon its own compositional methods. By and large, spirit-writers did not just present a standalone narrative. Framing devices explaining the writer's experience of channelling the text were standard, and interpolations of the medium's own voice into the middle of the work were not infrequent. *Letters from Julia* is no exception. Stead discusses his own experiences and limitations, so that the text contains within it a record of the techniques of its own production.

The reader will probably regret the continual interruption of the narrative by the interpolated objections and questions. On reflection, however, he will probably agree that the reproduction of the letters just as they were received, with the contemporary record of the conscious mind of the writer [...] was necessary, if only in order to show how far it is from the truth to assert that the Julia letters were the outcome of my conscious mind. (p. 13)

This allows Stead to pre-empt likely challenges from sceptics. *The Times* was quick to identify Julia's authorial voice with Stead's own past writings. Its review of *Letters from Julia* noted 'with regret' Julia's 'acquaintance with catch-phrases familiar to emotional journalism' (5 February 1898, p. 4). Stead is adamant that, on the contrary, there is enough in Julia's voice that is unique to her to assuage his own doubts that she might be the work of his own unconscious. He emphatically declares that she has a 'strongly marked and unvarying personal idiosyncrasy,' that 'is certainly not my own — is, I am afraid, in many respects much superior to my own' (*Letters from Julia*, p. 13). Yet elsewhere Stead freely admitted that 'my spook writes Steadese'.¹⁷ Within his inserted commentary in *Letters from Julia* his doubts occasionally recur. In a section entitled 'My Message or Julia's?' he interrupts Julia to complain: 'This is what I have said already myself' (p. 98).

An explanation for these relapses of doubt, whether real or affected, lies in understanding how the authorial voice of the channelled spirit had traditionally been explained in spirit-writing. The medium-poet Lizzie Doten argues in her *Poems from the Inner Life* that the affinity of mind necessary between a spirit and a suitable medium (for not every medium would suit every spirit) means a certain confusion of ideas is inevitable: 'I attract influences of a kindred nature [...]. It is often as difficult to decide what is the action of one's own intellect and what is the spirit-influence.'¹⁸ Henry Horn, who wrote

the introduction to his wife Susan's book of channelled writing, offered that 'the difficulties attending the transmission of ideas through the medium of another mind [...] must be apparent to all'.¹⁹ Those familiar with spirit-writing were also familiar with the argument that the writing medium was not a passive vehicle and that any message received by spirit communication was bound to be inflected by the mind through which it had passed.

The idea that the communicating voice was altered by the medium, yet had its own identifying markers that could not be faked by the medium, thus had considerable history. Writers like Doten and Horn channelled famous dead authors and mimicked their writing styles. Pastiches of Poe, Shakespeare, Dickens, and others figure in their work. These mediums argued that if the authorial voice in their works was not good enough to seem immediately authentic, it was often too good to be entirely *inauthentic*, for 'the unprejudiced reader' would surely 'perceive a marked resemblance in style to that of the authors named' (Horn, p. vii). The spirit message that is not persuasive enough to be deemed pure spirit production is nonetheless disclaimed as too good to be the medium's independent work. The channelled voice is always a clumsy collaboration. Critics are thus encouraged to redirect their scrutiny away from the voice's origin and towards its seams. This is evidently also the position advocated by Stead (and Julia). Whatever his protestations that Julia's voice is distinct, Stead is emphatic in positioning himself as an imperfect, non-passive medium: the unfortunate but necessary buffer between Julia and the world. He may hinder her mission, for she complains that 'when your mind is so excitable and runs along so many of its own channels, I cannot trust Your [*sic*] hand as the instrument whereby to transmit my message' (*Letters from Julia*, p. 62). However, it was just such spoiled messages on which spirit-writers traditionally pinned much of their defence.

A more difficult question for Stead to explain — to himself and to his readers — is why Julia can tell him nothing completely new. It is one thing for Julia's language to be inflected by Stead's voice, but if her entire message is compromised by his biases, how can he trust the reliability of her teachings or defend her calls for activism as actual demands from the dead? Stead needed Julia to provide a stable iteration of how communication between the living and the dead might work, upon which he could build a practical plan for furthering the Spiritualist cause so that his Julia project might succeed where *Borderland* had fallen short. Here Stead makes his most deft use of the old

arguments about the fallibility of channelling. He returns to the idea of the necessarily synthetic nature of spirit-writing to explain why Julia's desires for cross-world activism so often echo his own thoughts. In doing so, he simultaneously recasts Julia's generic, constructed, literary status into a defining element of her spirit nature as viewed from the material world.

Julia says:

Whatever there is in your mind that I can use to impress this idea I use without hesitation. It is easier working with familiar tools. When I try to make you write words with which you are not familiar, I fail at least as often as I succeed. Hence, I am always more pleased when I can revive an old idea, or use a metaphor that would be familiar to you, than if I were to laboriously try to move your fingers to trace words which you had never seen before. (p. 64)

A new explanation is thus brought into play for Julia's lack of original information. In this key development of the Julia narrative, Stead now argues that Julia's stash of potential metaphors is actually circumscribed by her medium's existing store of ideas. The idea that Julia is constrained to communicate through Stead's pre-existing thoughts helps to reconcile Julia's obvious roots in generic occultist texts. It offers an excuse for her lack of new answers, while reinforcing the usefulness of her intervention. After all, if Julia is merely reusing old ideas, at least her interference means they are likely to be the right ideas, plucked in the right order from the seething and often contradictory mass of Spiritualist thought. This offered Stead a model by which he might escape aporia and defend his desire to move beyond reading and spirit-writing into a new arena of Spiritualist collaboration. Julia's reassurances authorized him to believe there was a teleology beyond the maelstrom of interpretative writings that fuelled Spiritualism. If the truth is obscured, it is simply a temporary failure of communication because, Julia says, 'the great established ruts in which the truth has embedded itself cannot be destroyed without injuring for a time the truth itself' (p. 74). Julia must begin with the familiar and move on from there only gradually.

Triggering a sense of the familiar, I argue, is one of the most crucial strategies of spirit-writing. It is at the heart of Spiritualism. Today modern fairground fortune-tellers or stage psychics still rely on the practice of cold-reading. This involves throwing out a glut of suggestion and guesswork until one of them evokes a response of recognition upon which the medium capitalizes. A similar effect was a genre trick embedded in *fin-de-siècle* writing on Spiritualism and the occult. The constant reiteration of tropes, the borrowing of

narratives to counter fraud, the memetic movement of names, quotations, ideas, teachings, and interpretations functioned as a kind of mass cold-reading of the implied audience, always hoping to win new adherents and believers by building upon a vague sense of recognition. While alleging to offer new insight, writers threw out metaphors, allusions, familiar names, or myths in the hope of striking a chord with the reader. This is why, for example, Blavatsky wrote about wisdom allegedly gleaned from lost esoteric texts, but often turned to writers like Edward Bulwer-Lytton or Robert Louis Stevenson for the heavy lifting in her metaphors and allegories. It is why Horn, Doten, and T. P. James mimic the voices of famous dead literati when preaching Spiritualism, and why the pages of occultist periodicals like *Light*, *Two Worlds*, *Medium and Daybreak*, and *Lucifer* are filled with unattributed references and quotations.

There is a certain compelling naivety to the manner in which Stead draws attention to Julia's reliance on the background reading that exists in Stead like 'letters inside a typewriter', and her understanding of the use of familiar metaphors to induce belief (*Letters from Julia*, p. 64). In the same scene that, as I argued, bears striking resemblance to Corelli's work, Julia explains why angels have wings:

The Angel Guardian who came to me had wings, as I said. It is not usual, but if we please we can assume them. They are no more necessary than any of the contrivances by which you attempt to attain the mastery of the spirit over the burden of matter. We think and we are there. Why, then, wings? They are scenic illusions useful to convey the idea of superiority to earth-bound conditions, but we do not use them any more than we use steam-engines. But I was glad my Guide had wings. It seemed more like what I thought it would be, and I was at once more at ease than I would otherwise have been. (p. 42)

Letters from Julia here draws attention to the use of the familiar to trigger trust and faith in potential believers. Julia tips her hand and makes the kind of trickery that might be used against a medium as evidence of fraudulence part of the narrative of how communication networks between the living and the dead must necessarily begin. Julia's Angel Guardians are an example of the kinds of teaching experiences that will be involved in collaborations across the grave. From being her greatest flaw, the generic nature of Julia's teaching becomes empowering for Stead. Perhaps for a woman explaining the nature of an immaterial and deathless world where thought is power she has remarkably little to say that is novel. To Stead this need no longer be any reason for doubting that what she says is true. The necessity of abiding temporarily by the 'ruts' saves Julia from having to say anything new and gives Stead new impetus for spreading communication of her testimony.

With Julia's work through Stead thus reinforced, Stead's work through Julia could begin. Where others used the fallibility of mediumship to escape too close a scrutiny, Stead took the conclusions of this logic as permission to take another step in his campaign to move Spiritualism into the public sphere. From Julia's letters, Stead moved on to Julia's Bureau.

Stead was not the first to establish a séance room or a fixed experimental 'circle'. This was a standard model earnestly promoted by, among others, Emma Hardinge Britten.²⁰ Stead was unique because of his attempt to make Julia's circle a public institution. In many ways, the power Stead gleaned from his Julia work was an inversion of the traditional relationship between medium and control. In her book *Possessed Victorians*, Sarah Wilburne discusses the 'authorizing principle' that allowed mediums to speak publicly: 'Spirit possession is the authorizing principle of the possessed individual just as the ownership of private property is the authorizing principle of the liberal individual.'²¹ Mediumship offered those who had no other platform for engagement in the political world the prospect of a third sphere. Stead, in contrast, had hugely privileged access to the public sphere. Yet still he relied upon tropes derived from marginalized mediumship to get his message across. He also had the financial means and a level of personal fame that offered him unique opportunities to create his new Spiritualist forum howsoever he wished. However, it is evident from the development of Julia's ideas through his writings that he needed a spirit collaborator, with all the tropes and shared narratives she drew with her, to legitimize his new venture.

Where Stead must hedge his bets Julia could issue a call to arms. She says:

I am more and more convinced that the establishment of the fact, and the certainty of communication between this world and yours may be described without exaggeration as the most important thing in the whole range of possible achievements of mortal man. There is nothing like it for the far reaching influence which it will exercise over all things. For it will modify thought, and thought makes the world in which you live. (*Letters from Julia*, p. 72)

Julia's Bureau was the realization and reification of Stead's Spiritualist mission. From the first time he wrote in Julia's voice, his spirit guide had called out for 'a bureau of communication between the two sides' (p. 24). For over a decade, lack of time and money curbed Stead's enthusiasm, and over time Julia calmed her pleas as Stead's attention wandered to other projects. In later letters, Julia is far less panicked in her plea for the Bureau, though the idea is never laid to rest. It was not until 1908 (crucially after Stead

had lost his own son) that he seriously tried to make the Bureau a reality. Julia's Bureau was a social rather than an evangelical project. It did not just require the inspiration of a voice in the wilderness. It needed a formal infrastructure, floor space, a shop front, an internal organizational structure, and its own bureaucracy. The best accounts we have of how the Bureau ran come from Estelle Stead's and Edith Harper's biographies of Stead. To a modern audience, it may be surprising just how hands-on Stead claimed Julia was. It was allegedly she who ran the morning staff meetings. It was she who made the final decision on which cases to take. She was the chief of a staff made up of the living and the dead. When Stead was not available to channel her messages, Julia made use of the hand of one of his secretaries instead and the work of the Bureau continued.²²

Nevertheless, the infrastructure of the Bureau Stead created was designed to minimize the need for Julia to be tested too strenuously. The majority of those accepted by the Bureau were bereaved friends and family members, arguably the demographic most willing to suspend their disbelief. The purpose of the Bureau was 'to minister to the aching heart, *not to satisfy the inquisitive brain*' (Estelle Stead, p. 292, emphasis in original). There was no longer any room in Stead's Julia project for the spirit of curiosity that had first led Stead himself to experiment with automatic writing and which had underpinned his original Spiritualist plans in *Borderland*. Despite this, it would be wrong to ignore the sophisticated development of Spiritualist theories of which Julia's Bureau was the culmination, and by which it was so deeply informed. To vet would-be clients, Stead turned once again to a reliance on a catalogue of shared reading. Those who wished to use Julia's Bureau had to sign the following declaration:

I _____, having done my best to study the subject of communications with the other world, hereby make application for the use of the Bureau [...]. I have read the pamphlet entitled 'Julia's Bureau and Borderland Library', and also the first series of 'Letters from Julia'. (Estelle Stead, pp. 302–03)

Reading Julia's letters was mandatory to participation in Stead's new venture. A failure to have read any of the classics of Spiritualism — and here Stead suggested a range of writers including William Crookes, Alfred Russel Wallace, Frederic Myers, and Stainton Moses — was also seen as '*prima facie* evidence that the desire to communicate was not very keen' (Estelle Stead, p. 294). In this we can see the same Stead who was behind the 'Penny Poets' and 'Books for the Bairns' projects — a man keen on the use of a common syllabus. The set reading that Stead instituted as the criterion for entry into the

Bureau is indicative of the emphasis he placed on the importance of shared reading as a basis for building an informed community. However, these were also the books that were formative to his own Spiritualist beliefs and therefore literally formative to Julia. Shared reading was no longer about offering a body of evidence to would-be researchers as it had been in *Borderland*. It was now a means of making sure one was possessed of the right store of ideas to follow in Stead's path. Reading provided one with the right metaphors to allow the spirits to communicate.

In its philanthropic aim and desire to create a social network the spirit Bureau was a typical Stead project, however odd or misguided. As a piece of Spiritualist work, it participated in a long tradition of obfuscation of authority through literature. In *Letters from Julia*, Stead presented himself with a challenge. If Spiritualism is true, if the letters are real, then the Bureau is the most important work there is to be done on earth. It would constitute a Copernican turn in human society. Julia offered Stead an opportunity to combine his Spiritualism and his activism in the public sphere in a unique way, a way that was saturated in, but distinct from, his editorial writing practices. When he wrote of the Bureau that 'I would not assume the responsibility of making the attempt if Julia had not assured me that she will personally decide which cases the Bureau shall take in hand', he was speaking with absolute honesty.²³ In his final Spiritualist project, Stead had the strength of Julia's convictions.

¹ Edith K. Harper, *Stead: The Man* (London: Rider, 1918), p. 59.

² W. T. Stead, *After Death; or, Letters from Julia* (Chicago: Cadwallader, 1917), p. 5.

³ For a persuasive account of Stead's networking models, see Roger Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 117–31.

⁴ Grace Eckley, *Maiden Tribute: A Life of W. T. Stead* (Philadelphia: Xlibris, 2007) offers a biographical account of Stead's development as a Spiritualist.

⁵ *Bookman*, February 1898, p. 164.

⁶ Alex Owen argues persuasively for the 1870s as the 'golden age' of Spiritualism. See Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (London: Virago, 1989), pp. 1–5.

⁷ Daniel Cottom, *Abyss of Reason: Cultural Movements, Revelations, and Betrayals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 3.

⁸ 'Seeking Counsel of the Wise', *Borderland*, July 1893, pp. 7–9 (p. 7).

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- ⁹ ‘How We Intend to Study Borderland’, *Borderland*, July 1893, pp. 3–6 (p. 5).
- ¹⁰ W. T. Stead, *Real Ghost Stories* (London: Richards, 1897), p. x.
- ¹¹ *Borderland*, July 1893, p. iv.
- ¹² ‘Telepathy’, *Borderland*, October 1894, pp. 506–10 (p. 506).
- ¹³ The movement of such ideas through the Spiritualist press is perhaps more accurately described as ‘memetic’. See, for example, Susan Blackmore, *The Meme Machine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
- ¹⁴ Both quoted in ‘Life on the Other Side’, *Borderland*, April 1895, pp. 102–09 (p. 107).
- ¹⁵ *The Times*, 5 February 1898, p. 4.
- ¹⁶ Marie Corelli, *A Romance of Two Worlds* (London: Methuen, 1910), p. 175.
- ¹⁷ ‘My Experience in Automatic Writing’, *Borderland*, July 1893, pp. 39–49 (p. 40).
- ¹⁸ Elizabeth Doten, *Poems from the Inner Life* (Boston: White, 1868), p. xi.
- ¹⁹ Susan G. Horn, *The Next World* (London: Burns, 1890), p. vi.
- ²⁰ See, for example, the final page of any issue of *Two Worlds*, edited by E. H. Britten between 1887 and 1892, which includes Britten’s instructions for forming circles.
- ²¹ Sarah Wilburne, *Possessed Victorians: Extra Spheres in Nineteenth-Century Mystical Writings* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p. 7.
- ²² See, for example, Harper; and Estelle Stead, *My Father* (London: Heinemann, 1913).
- ²³ ‘Julia’s Bureau’, *Review of Reviews*, May 1909, p. 433.