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Original Article

Seen through Deep Time: Occult Clairvoyance and Palaeoscientific Imagination

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ABSTRACT

Dating from the middle of the nineteenth century, prominent paranormal researchers in Britain and the United States began to claim that they could see through time. Using clairvoyant powers, they proposed to solve the mysteries of geology and palaeontology, not least by filling in the missing links in the evolution of life. This article explores the literary outputs of these figures, with an especial focus on the Anglo-American 'psychometers' William and Elizabeth Denton and selected members of the Theosophical Society, including Helena Petrovna Blavatsky. I argue that clairvoyants' narratives of exploration in the prehistoric past were heavily indebted not just to the technical concepts of mainstream palaeoscience, but also to the figurative language and visual iconography used by palaeoscientists and science writers, including their metaphors of necromancy and visual spectacle. The vivid language of Victorian palaeoscience, crafted to see the unseeable events of prehistory, has been studied in depth by students of literature and science; recently, literary scholars have paid increasing attention to the imaginative prose of occult science writing. I bring these bodies of scholarship together, contesting that Romantic conceptions of science motivated paranormal researchers to *literalize* the figurative language of time-travel deployed by more orthodox palaeoscientists. Examining the work of the Dentons, Blavatsky, and others, I show that that the vivid literature of palaeoscience inspired a realm where practitioners on the fringes of elite science could make bold if precarious claims, instilling individual agency into the abysm of deep time.

KEYWORDS: geology, palaeontology, occultism, Theosophy, literature and science, clairvoyance, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, Hugh Miller, Edward Hitchcock, psychometry, Denton family, William Scott-Elliot, palaeoart, *The Secret Doctrine*, dinosaurs

Towards the climax of Edward Bulwer-Lytton's Rosicrucian romance *Zanoni* (1842), protagonist Viola is spiritually projected into outer space. Above an 'embryo' planet she spots the astral body of the titular Zanoni, a superhuman figure who is broodingly inattentive to the planet's extra-terrestrial wildlife: 'the first reptile Colossal race that wreathe and crawl through the earliest stratum of a world labouring into life'.[1] A nearby footnote reveals the author's inspiration for this eerie scene by citing Gideon Mantell's 'eloquent and delightful' book of lectures, *The Wonders of Geology* (1838).[2] Although technically aliens, the crawling dinosaurians recall the subjects of Mantell's frontispiece, illustrated by John Martin and depicting a twilit landscape of Cretaceous Sussex (Figure 1). Significantly, Martin's mezzotint was one of the earliest 'scenes from deep time', a pictorial genre of glimpses into the prehistoric past.[3] In the

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1 [Edward Bulwer-Lytton], *Zanoni*, 3 vols (London: Saunders & Otley, 1842), III, pp. 80, 82.

2 *Zanoni*, III, p. 81.

3 Martin J. S. Rudwick, *Scenes from Deep Time: Early Pictorial Representations of the Prehistoric World* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

Figure 1. Mezzotint of John Martin's painting *The Country of the Iguanodon*. Frontispiece in Gideon Mantell, *The Wonders of Geology; or, A Familiar Exposition of Geological Phenomena*, 2 vols (London: Relfe and Fletcher, 1838). Reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library. Printed Material MF.31.4–5.

same book, Mantell also transported readers back through time in bravura prose, 'imagining' the changes seen by 'some higher intelligence from another sphere' observing Earth at various geological ages, much as immortal wanderer Zanoni would later hover over the distant primordial planet.[4] Thus the simulated time-travelling of *The Wonders of Geology* proved stimulating source material for Bulwer-Lytton's romance. He, in turn, promptly sent the geologist a presentation copy of *Zanoni*, the praise in which was itself quoted to promote new editions of Mantell's book.[5]

As not only a bestselling British author of fiction but also a student of the occult, Bulwer-Lytton may not have been surprised when certain figures began claiming that they could, quite literally, see the prehuman past. Widespread interest in mental powers and the scientific validation of religion prevailed from the mid-nineteenth century onward, when mesmerism and Spiritualism could appear hardly more incredible than recent technological innovations like telegraphy.[6] At febrile intersections of research on both sides of the Atlantic it seemed possible that extrasensory human sight, known as clairvoyance, would conquer time and distance. Visionary 'psychometers' and, subsequently, members of the occult Theosophical Society trained their

4 Gideon Mantell, *The Wonders of Geology; or, A Familiar Exposition of Geological Phenomena*, 2 vols (London: Relfe and Fletcher, 1838), I, p. 373.

5 E. Cecil Curwen, ed., *The Journal of Gideon Mantell, Surgeon and Geologist: Covering the Years 1818–1852* (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), p. 152; Gideon Mantell, *Geological Excursions round the Isle of Wight and along the Adjacent Coast of Dorsetshire* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1847), p. 429.

6 Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), esp. part two; Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

inner eyes on ethereal remnants of prehistoric happenings, their accounts apparently inspired by what Gowan Dawson calls 'the occult self-fashioning' of palaeontologists themselves – the clairvoyants 'making literal what was initially only used figuratively'.[7] Visionaries had reason to think their project not necessarily doomed to the fringes, given that eminent savants endorsed psychic phenomena.[8] Nonetheless, especially by the century's final decades, clairvoyant palaeoscience was chiefly addressed to what Mark S. Morrison describes as 'counter-public spheres' of occult publishing, rather than to the increasingly formalized and publicly secular world of elite transatlantic geoscience.[9] From this vantage-point, however, eye-witness reports of the primeval world proliferated, engrossing both believers and nonbelievers.[10]

By examining these occult investigations of palaeoscience I highlight an overlap between literature and science studies, earth science history, and esotericism studies. Scholars in the latter field are turning their attention to science fiction's relationship with esoteric literature: Aren Roukema demonstrates that early theorists of science fiction like H. G. Wells were indebted to occult writing, especially the romances of Bulwer-Lytton.[11] The voluminous body of literary scholarship on palaeontological and geological writing is, I argue, highly pertinent to this cause. Ralph O'Connor identifies a 'fantasy of total visibility' characterizing palaeoscientific media: a dedication to the simulation of seeing that made the earth sciences a site of literary innovation during the nineteenth century and a vital influence on science fiction.[12] Challenging the boundaries of nonfiction and pushing language to visualize the unseen were goals both of palaeoscientific writers and occultists, leading to suggestive connections: for example, both groups delighted in emulating the viewpoints of non- or superhuman beings, like Mantell's extra-terrestrial and Bulwer-Lytton's Zanoni, the key difference being that, for the former group, these beings were purely figurative devices.[13] As such, the extensive but largely overlooked overlaps embodied in occult palaeontological and geological writing, when the figurative became literal, are of significant interest.

With the key exception of Sumathi Ramaswamy's work on the lost continent of Lemuria, the burgeoning scholarly research on occult science in this period has not typically focused

7 Gowan Dawson, *Show Me the Bone: Reconstructing Prehistoric Monsters in Nineteenth-Century Britain and America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 356.

8 For example, see Efram Sera-Shriar, 'Credible Witnessing: A. R. Wallace, Spiritualism, and a "New Branch of Anthropology"', *Modern Intellectual History*, 17 (2020), 357–84.

9 Mark S. Morrison, 'The Periodical Culture of the Occult Revival: Esoteric Wisdom, Modernity and Counter-Public Spheres', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 31 (2008), 1–22. See also Christine Ferguson, 'The Luciferian Public Sphere: Theosophy and Editorial Seekership in the 1880s', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 53 (2020), 76–101. For elite science, see Thomas Broman, 'The Habermasian Public Sphere and "Science *in* the Enlightenment"', *History of Science*, 36 (1998), 123–49 (pp. 141–43). For religion and geohistory, see Nicolaas Rupke, 'Down to Earth: Untangling the Secular from the Sacred in Late-Modern Geology', in *Science without God?: Rethinking the History of Scientific Naturalism*, ed. by Peter Harrison and Jon H. Roberts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 182–96.

10 For influence on weird fiction, see Robert M. Price, 'HPL and HPB: Lovecraft's Use of Theosophy', *Crypt of Cthulhu*, 5 (1982), 3–9.

11 Aren Roukema, 'The Esoteric Roots of Science Fiction: Edward Bulwer-Lytton, H. G. Wells, and the Occlusion of Magic', *Science Fiction Studies*, 48 (2021), 218–42.

12 Ralph O'Connor, *The Earth on Show: Fossils and the Poetics of Popular Science, 1802–1856* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), pp. 406–7, 432, 436–37. See also Ralph O'Connor, 'Victorian Saurians: The Linguistic Prehistory of the Modern Dinosaur', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 17 (2012), 492–504.

13 For nonhuman beings in geoscientific writing, see Adelene Buckland, 'The World Beneath Our Feet', in *Time Travelers: Victorian Encounters with Time and History*, ed. by Adelene Buckland and Sadiah Qureshi (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2020), pp. 42–64 (pp. 45–46). For cosmic tourism in occultism, see Christopher Keep, 'Life on Mars?: Hélène Smith, Clairvoyance, and Occult Media', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 25 (2020), 537–52.

on the earth sciences, even if we take into account the disciplinary fluidity between these sciences and related fields like archaeology.[14] Indeed, even Wouter J. Hanegraaff's authoritative discussion of psychometric clairvoyance does not discuss how the geological career of eminent Anglo-American paranormal researcher William Denton may have shaped his practice.[15] I argue that literalized geological and palaeontological metaphors infused clairvoyant narratives, while data from these fields were enthusiastically appropriated to build occult cosmogonies. Examining the work of the Denton family and various Theosophists, we shall see that the vivid literature of palaeoscience inspired a realm where practitioners on the fringes of elite science could make bold if precarious claims, instilling individual agency and intuition into the inhuman abysm of deep time.

1. FANTASIES OF TOTAL VISIBILITY

Early in the nineteenth century, French savant Georges Cuvier declared that the new sciences of the earth would 'burst the limits' of time.[16] The proper role of the imagination in expanding the knowability of the deep past was a hotly debated subject. Speculative geotheories were often condemned as delusive even while geology was vaunted for its almost unparalleled imaginative scope.[17] These extremes of opinion could be expressed by the same person, such as Charles Lyell, the most influential British geologist of the century. Lyell's *The Principles of Geology* (1830–1833) rejected geohistorical grand narratives, puncturing the terrestrial bias of anthropocentrism by juxtaposing it with the equally restricted view of geological processes that would be available to a 'dusky' subterranean gnome (to be specific, the Rosicrucian spirit Umbriel from Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*).[18] Despite these chastisements he nonetheless exalted the imaginative muscle used by cosmopolitan savants to conceptualize deep timescales in the face of these difficulties. As Gillian Beer points out, Lyell decentred humanity but still insisted on the time-transcending 'power of man's imagination' at the 'humanistic core' of his work.[19]

Notwithstanding its routine denigration, imagination was central to the popularity of palaeoscience. Long before science fiction became a recognized genre, time travel was simulated by authors and artists who, usually with less caution than Lyell, packaged palaeontology and geology for general audiences. These authors generated a legion of metaphors, often promiscuously adopted from other discourses and wilfully mixed into recurring conventions. Seeing through time was reading nature's book, translating hieroglyphs, shining light into darkness; resurrecting the dead, travelling to the underworld, experiencing reincarnation; visiting a gallery, diorama, theatre; rambling, voyaging, exploring; or experiencing phantasmagorical dreams and hallucinations.[20] Extinct animals and geological cataclysms also appeared in the aforementioned illustrated scenes from deep time or as lantern slides, models, posters, and panoramas.[21]

[14] Sumathi Ramaswamy, *The Lost Land of Lemuria: Fabulous Geographies, Catastrophic Histories* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), esp. chapter 3. For another exception see Dawson, *Show Me the Bone*, pp. 350–57.

[15] Wouter J. Hanegraaff, 'The Theosophical Imagination', *Correspondences*, 5 (2017), 3–39 (pp. 22, 24).

[16] Quoted in Martin J. S. Rudwick, *Bursting the Limits of Time: The Reconstruction of Geohistory in the Age of Revolution* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 506.

[17] O'Connor, *Earth on Show*, pp. 18–19, 207.

[18] Buckland, 'The World Beneath Our Feet', pp. 45–46.

[19] Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 3rd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 17, 39.

[20] O'Connor, *Earth on Show*, passim.

[21] For instance, see James A. Secord, 'Monsters at the Crystal Palace', in *Models: The Third Dimension of Science*, ed. by Soraya de Chadarevian and Nick Hopwood (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 138–69.

The enchanting appeal of the subject was enhanced by almost the paranormally perceptive feats of reconstruction performed by celebrity savants. Cuvier and his English successors William Buckland and Richard Owen relished their reputation as pseudo-necromancers and scientific prophets, especially regarding their purported ability to identify an animal from a single bone.[22] For George Winslow Plummer, Imperator and Supreme Magus of the Societas Rosicruciana in America, such uncanny abilities could only be an 'inherited cosmic memory' from the 'Atlantean Epoch' when humans lived alongside 'gigantic reptilia'.[23] Recalling Owen's transcendental notion of a quasi-Platonic archetypal form underlying all vertebrate skeletons, Theosophist Annie Besant approvingly observed that the savant 'builded truer than he knew'.[24] Most strikingly, Harvard palaeontologist and polygenist Louis Agassiz, who was influenced, like Owen, by *Naturphilosophie* (a Romantic scientific philosophy with esoteric elements), saw dreams and intuition as guiding his ability to reconstruct fossil fish.[25] Even when they did not attribute their insights to paranormal means, hard-nosed palaeontologists like Edward Drinker Cope were nonetheless wont to drift into reveries in the field, picturing the scene before them in former ages, while Adelene Buckland aptly characterizes Lyell's description of geological method as visionary '*insight*', albeit of a strictly 'empirical' species.[26]

This combination of spectacular and preternatural connotations was part of geology's religious grounding. Especially between the 1850s and the 1880s, many evangelicals, among them the Scottish geologist Hugh Miller, asserted that the author of the Book of Genesis had somehow witnessed the six days of Earth's creation. The days, it was often contended, represented vast geological periods, the fifth day usually representing the Mesozoic Era.[27] As such, the seer's visionary experience became a subject of scientific interest. Miller influentially speculated that God had presented the vision in a manner akin to six scenes of a divine panorama or diorama.[28] Even secular work could partake of the language of religious rapture: eminent Austrian geologist Eduard Suess compared the global bridging of deep time to Rama's bridging of the ocean in the Hindu epic *Rāmāyana*.[29] This orientalist romanticization of geoscience was conventional: even Mantell's extra-terrestrial was putatively inspired by 'the metaphor of an Arabian writer'.[30] Given that the biblical creation story was sometimes explained as deriving from Egyptian wisdom, it could be triangulated with orientalist and esoteric perspectives: in H. Rider Haggard's romance *Cleopatra* (1889), the veil of prehistory is lifted in a scene inspired by Christian popular geology (Figure 2).[31]

22 Dawson, *Show Me the Bone*, pp. 351–52.

23 [George Winslow Plummer], *Rosicrucian Fundamentals: An Exposition of the Rosicrucian Synthesis of Religion, Science and Philosophy in Fourteen Complete Instructions* (New York, NY: Flame Press, 1920), p. 226.

24 Annie Besant, *The Pedigree of Man* (Benares [Varanasi]: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1904), p. 55.

25 Dawson, *Show Me the Bone*, pp. 352–53. For *Naturphilosophie*, see Olaf Breidbach and Michael Ghiselin, 'Lorenz Oken and *Naturphilosophie* in Jena, Paris and London', *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences*, 24 (2002), 219–47.

26 Thanks to Chris Manias for this observation on Cope; Buckland, 'World Beneath Our Feet', p. 60.

27 Andrew J. Brown, *The Days of Creation: A History of Christian Interpretation of Genesis 1:1–2:3* (Blandford Forum: Deo Publishing, 2014), chapter 6.

28 O'Connor, *Earth on Show*, pp. 411–14.

29 James A. Secord, 'Global Geology and the Tectonics of Empire', in *Worlds of Natural History*, ed. by H. A. Curry, N. Jardine, J. A. Secord, and E. C. Spary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 401–17 (p. 405).

30 Pratik Chakrabarti, *Inscriptions of Nature: Geology and the Naturalization of Antiquity* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020); Mantell, *Wonders of Geology*, I, p. 373.

31 H. Rider Haggard, *Cleopatra: Being An Account of the Fall and Vengeance of Harmachis, the Royal Egyptian, as Set Forth by His Own Hand* (London: Longmans, Green, 1889), pp. 58–59.

Figure 2. Initiation into knowledge of prehistory. Illustration by Richard Caton Woodville in H. Rider Haggard, *Cleopatra: Being An Account of the Fall and Vengeance of Harmachis, the Royal Egyptian, as Set Forth by His Own Hand* (London: Longmans, Green, 1889), facing p. 58. Reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library. Printed Material Z725.d.88.6.

The possibility of a near-godlike understanding of the past ameliorated humanity's apparent insignificance within it. Utilizing the theoretical concept of the 'trace', an object signifying both lost past and accessible present, Virginia Zimmerman argues that prominent Victorian authors assembled fossil traces into 'a path for the individual through time's roar'.[32] Rather than deflating the palaeoscientist's time-bursting power, the knowledge that the deep past was ultimately inaccessible could even generate a thrilling sense of the sublime.[33] Despite widespread insistence on humanity's imaginative dominion over time, however, for some this dominion was insufficiently direct. Among this group was geologist Edward Hitchcock, Congregationalist scholar of Amherst College, Massachusetts, and famous for his research on the mysterious fossil bird footprints of the Connecticut valley. In *The Religion of Geology* (1851), Hitchcock brought his experience in recovering geology's faintest traces together with other speculations, setting forth a 'Telegraphic System of the Universe'.[34] Since rocks could preserve footprints, photographs capture moments, and telegraphs link distant individuals, might invisible forces and fluids pervading the physical world be recording every moment in a 'vast panorama'?[35] And might these superfine recordings be accessible? Hitchcock cited a startling thought experiment by German astronomer Felix Eberty: given the limitations of the speed of light, Eberty observed, individuals on distant stars must see our Earth in the past. Using this '*microscope for time*', an alien could answer all our 'problems of geology and the creation'.[36] The frustratingly provisional aspect of geohistorical reconstruction could, theoretically, be bypassed.

Direct access to prehistory germinated alongside modern Spiritualism in 1840s New York state, when Jacksonian democracy fuelled scientific and religious individualism.[37] Many of the resultant developments displayed what Egil Asprem calls 'open-ended naturalism': in short, these practitioners of theistic or heterodox science insisted on their empiricism.[38] Among them was the young mesmeric subject Andrew Jackson Davis, subsequently a leading Spiritualist. In 1845 Davis began delivering a divine revelation while in clairvoyant trance. This was published as *The Principles of Nature* (1847). As Dana Luciano has pointed out, geology held thematic pride of place in these *Principles* as an exemplary science, both 'illustrating and making possible the progression of knowledge'.[39] Moreover, endowed with heightened clairvoyant insight, Davis improved upon palaeoscientists' shaky steps: the English dinosaur *Megalosaurus*, for instance, was actually equipped with 'wings', 'fins', and 'a tortoise shell-like coating', while, in an echo of the then-recent *Zanoni*, the wildlife of the planet Saturn included an animal resembling Mantell's *Iguanodon*.[40] Although the seer claimed to be poorly read

[32] Virginia Zimmerman, *Excavating Victorians* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008), p. 23.

[33] O'Connor, *Earth on Show*, pp. 439–43.

[34] Edward Hitchcock, *The Religion of Geology and Its Connected Sciences* (Boston, MA: Phillips, Sampson, 1851), p. 409

[35] Hitchcock, *The Religion of Geology*, p. 417. For panorama as occult metaphor, see Erkki Huhtamo, *Illusions in Motion: Media Archaeology of the Moving Panorama and Related Spectacles* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), pp. 348–49.

[36] [Felix Eberty], *The Stars and the Earth; or, Thoughts Upon Space, Time, and Eternity, Part II* (London: H. Bailliere, 1847), pp. 12, 14. See also O'Connor, *Earth on Show*, pp. 429–30.

[37] Daniel Patrick Thurs, *Science Talk: Changing Notions of Science in American Popular Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), pp. 30–31, 33–41.

[38] Egil Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment: Scientific Naturalism and Esoteric Discourse, 1900–1939* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), p. 79.

[39] Dana Luciano, 'Sacred Theories of Earth: Matters of Spirit in *The Soul of Things*', *American Literature*, 86 (2014), 713–36 (p. 719).

[40] Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Principles of Nature, Her Divine Revelations, and A Voice to Mankind* (New York, NY: S. S. Lyon and William Fishbough, 1847), pp. 179, 261, 263–64.

outside his clairvoyant state, the New York *Christian Examiner* suspected that 'the bulk of the work' was a 'generalization' of Scottish journalist Robert Chambers's sensational evolutionary epic treatise, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844).[41] The winged *Megalosaurus* and Saturnian *Iguanodon*, however, were original to Davis.

In the meantime, another American maverick was establishing a working theory for seeing through time. In 1849, Joseph Rodes Buchanan announced that he had developed a new science called 'psychometry' or 'mind-measuring'.[42] Working at the Eclectic Medical Institute in Cincinnati since 1846, Buchanan's wide-ranging interests included mesmerism and phrenology.[43] Thinking along the same lines as Hitchcock, Buchanan's psychometry was based on the idea that people unknowingly impress traces of their mind and actions upon physical objects, like a '*mental daguerreotype*', and that a person of sufficient psychic sensitivity can recover these invisible scenes and sensations.[44] Buchanan's psychometers chiefly investigated the personalities of the senders of unopened letters, but his rhetoric drew upon the necromantic register of geology. The geologist's 'magic power' had allowed 'huge Saurian monsters' to 'rise before the eye', and now psychometry's 'mental telescope' would similarly 'pierce the depths of the past' to extract 'mental fossils'.[45] If geology focused on times before humanity, psychometry opened human history for empirical investigation. Buchanan implied that his discoveries were no harder to believe than the astonishing narratives geologists extracted from rocks trodden underfoot.

2. ENTER INTO THE SOUL OF THINGS

The century's most prolific psychometers, the family circle around geologist William Denton, did not, like Buchanan, limit their research to human history. Denton was born, in 1823, to an English Methodist family of what an adulatory biographer called 'comparatively humble circumstances' in Darlington.[46] The young Denton devoured cheap educational periodicals like the *Penny Magazine*, attended Shildon Mechanics' Institute, read the works of Lyell, and found inspiration, as Davis allegedly did, in Chambers's evolutionary *Vestiges*.[47] Denton's particular enthusiasm for geology would have been encouraged by that science's growing reputation as one in which proletarian practitioners could make meaningful contributions to knowledge.[48] Frustrated by British intolerance of his political radicalism and religious heterodoxy, however, he emigrated to the United States in 1848, where he was subsequently joined by his family.[49] There he maintained a precarious living across North America by teaching geology

41 W. S., untitled review of *The Principles of Nature*, by Andrew Jackson Davis, *Christian Examiner*, 43 (1847), 452–55 (p. 453).

42 Joseph Rodes Buchanan, 'Psychometry', *Buchanan's Journal of Man*, 1 (1850 [1849]), 49–62, 97–113, 145–56, 208–27 (p. 62).

43 Greg L. Hester, 'Into the Celestial Spheres of Divine Wisdom: Joseph Rodes Buchanan and Nineteenth-Century Esotericism' (MA thesis, University of Amsterdam, 2015), pp. 9–10, 33, 37.

44 Buchanan, 'Psychometry', p. 58. See also Cameron B. Strang, 'Measuring Souls: Psychometry, Female Instruments, and Subjective Science, 1840–1910', *History of Science*, 58 (2020), 76–100.

45 Buchanan, 'Psychometry', pp. 147–48.

46 J. H. Powell, *William Denton, the Geologist and Radical: A Biographical Sketch* (Boston, MA: J. H. Powell, 1870), p. 5. For the Dentons, see Luciano, 'Sacred Theories of Earth'; Dawson, *Show Me the Bone*, pp. 354–57; and Hanegraaff, 'The Theosophical Imagination', pp. 22–26.

47 Powell, *William Denton*, pp. 8, 12, 15–19.

48 Simon J. Knell, *The Culture of English Geology, 1815–1851: A Science Revealed through Its Collecting* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), pp. 36–37. For labourers' access to geology, see William Denton, *Our Planet, Its Past and Future; or, Lectures on Geology* (Boston, MA: William Denton, 1868), p. 14.

49 Powell, *William Denton*, pp. 21–22, 25.

and promoting controversial causes like Spiritualism, antislavery, mesmerism, and psychometry. The expatriate Denton did not himself possess clairvoyant powers, but such powers, it emerged, were surprisingly widespread. His most receptive psychometers were women and children, especially his American wife Elizabeth Melissa Foote Denton, a typesetter and feminist, and their artistic son Sherman.

William and Elizabeth compiled their psychometric findings into *The Soul of Things* (1863), a monograph published by the Unitarian firm Walker and Wise of Boston. The epigraph, 'Enter into the soul of things', and thus also the title, was attributed to William Wordsworth, adapting a line from his poem *The Excursion* (1814) in which the speaker imagines a time when the formerly 'dull Eye' of 'Science' will enhance 'the Mind's *excursive* Power', thereby 'deeply drinking-in the Soul of Things'.[50] This pantheistic, intuitional sentiment would have found sympathetic auditors in Massachusetts, where the Dentons themselves eventually settled, home territory of Ralph Waldo Emerson, beside whom William Denton would lecture in 1869.[51] Wordsworthian pseudo-pantheism had already been united with even more heterodox Shelleyan politics in William's *Poems for Reformers* (1856), although, in an attempt to play down its radicalism, the retitled British edition of *The Soul of Things* was edited by 'A CLERGYMAN OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND'.[52] The Dentons self-published two illustrated sequels, styled volumes two (1873) and three (1874).

Given his geoscientific background, William Denton's theorization of clairvoyance incorporated the comments of various geologists regarding the power of visual memory. Hugh Miller was famous for eloquent descriptions of prehistoric landscapes, but Denton instead cited the Scottish geologist's ruminations on how photographic records were unconsciously stored in the mind and could re-emerge in states of disorientation (pp. 17–20). He also quoted Hitchcock's experience of phantasmagorical hallucinations (p. 263). Strikingly, William pointed to a personal communication from Hitchcock's son, the geologist Charles Henry Hitchcock, claiming that, while delirious, his father had accurately visualized the Connecticut valley sandstone, enabling him 'to clear up some doubtful points' about its fossil footprints (pp. 264–65). Tapping into an association between the marvels of palaeoscience and dreams or opium visions, William's implication was that the vaunted imaginative power employed by geologists was in fact psychometric.[53] Elizabeth supported the notion with reference to Agassiz's aforementioned intuitions (pp. 329–30).

Beyond these methodological sections, *The Soul of Things* consisted of edited transcriptions of psychometric experiments. Typically, the psychometer held an object, preferably one unknown to them, to their head, and described the visual memories and sensations implanted upon it. Although all manner of objects were tested, William's predilections favoured fossils and rocks. After all, psychometry revealed that each 'radiate and mollusc of the Silurian era,

[50] William and Elizabeth M. Foote Denton, *The Soul of Things; or, Psychometric Researches and Discoveries* (Boston, MA: Walker, Wise and Company, 1863), title page. Subsequent references included in text. William Wordsworth, *The Excursion, being a portion of The Recluse, a Poem* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1814), p. 197. For Wordsworthian pantheism and scientific naturalism, see Robert M. Ryan, *Charles Darwin and the Church of Wordsworth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 57–59, 65–67, 71.

[51] 'Address of Professor William Denton', *Proceedings at the Second Annual Meeting of the Free Religious Association* (Boston, MA: Roberts Brothers, 1869), pp. 37–42. See Patrick J. Keane, *Emerson, Romanticism, and Intuitive Reason: The Transatlantic "Light of All Our Day"* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2005), esp. chapters 1 and 2.

[52] William Denton, *Poems for Reformers* (Dayton, OH: William and Elizabeth Denton, 1856), e.g. p. 20; William and Elizabeth M. Foote Denton, *Nature's Secrets or Psychometric Researches*, ed. by [W. L. Thompson] (London: Houlston and Wright, 1863). The editor's identity is provided in Powell, *William Denton*, p. 33.

[53] For geological dreams and hallucinations, see O'Connor, *Earth on Show*, esp. pp. 180–81, 72–73, 440.

every ganoid of the Devonian, has sat for its portrait' (p. 31). Object in hand, 'the history of its time passed before the gaze of the seer like a grand panoramic view; sometimes almost with the rapidity of lightning' (p. 36). As his family's visions became increasingly impressive, William's adopted home in the New World seemed to promise not only more religious freedom than had the Old, but also even more spectacular scientific insights. With mental training, Elizabeth became able to 'pause' the 'flying scenes', transforming their 'fragmentary' nature into continuity (p. 313), or even to enter them. She guided listeners through her sensations in real time, as in the following example, when examining a glacially striated pebble, its nature purportedly unknown to her:

> I feel as if I were below an immense body of water, – so deep that I cannot see down through it, and yet it seems as if I could see upward through it for miles. Now I am going, going, and there is something above me, I cannot tell what. It is pushing me on. It is above and around me. It must be ice; I am frozen in. (p. 51)

When even William did not know the object's identity he verified the psychometers' descriptions, in true autodidact style, with the *Encyclopædia Britannica* (pp. 170–71).

Elizabeth and her collaborators psychically visited all the conventional showpieces of the geological picturesque, including Fingal's Cave on Staffa (p. 133), the Temple of Serapis at Pozzuoli (p. 177), and Mount Vesuvius (p. 187). As such, the British *Athenæum* scathingly suggested that the descriptions were actually based on engravings and novels like Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834).[54] The periodical's critic did not discuss the complicated logistics of describing prehistoric scenes, which would have required even more literary and scientific priming. Significantly, the psychometric visionary experience was characterized by disjointed perspectival and temporal transitions. These recalled the 'shifting scene' passages penned by British geological lecturers (whose published writings were widely accessible to American readers in official and unofficial editions), inspired by theatrical scene changes and magic lantern dissolving views. This rhetorical technique, usually employing the present tense, was used by palaeoscientific authors to dazzle, to disguise gaps in geohistorical knowledge, and to replicate the experience of the seer of Genesis, whose account of creation, argued Miller, was based on a somewhat baffled eye-witness description.[55] The psychometer's experience could be similarly bewildering: exploring Kentucky's Mammoth Cave, Elizabeth found herself '[a]ll at once' teleported to 'the surface' (p. 84); exposed to conflicting psychometric influences, she seemed 'to oscillate between the far past and a more recent period' (p. 203). 'The pictures come up in such abundance, I cannot disentangle them', she lamented (p. 213).

We might compare *The Soul of Things* more closely to the works of Miller, probably the most popular geological author in Britain and the United States during the 1850s, when the Dentons began their psychometric research. At the end of an Edinburgh lecture posthumously published in 1859, for instance, Miller took his listeners on 'a short walk' in the Jurassic, situating them spatially ('We stand on an elevated wood-covered ridge'), cautiously deciphering the sights ('cycadaceæ, whose leaves seem fronds of the bracken'), gesturing to

[54] '*The Soul of Things*', *Athenæum*, 1871 (1863), 295–97.

[55] O'Connor, *Earth on Show*, e.g. pp. 281, 397, 403, 406, 414; Adelene Buckland, *Novel Science: Fiction and the Invention of Nineteenth-Century Geology* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013), pp. 203–5.

points of interest ('there is a noble Araucarian'), simulating soundscapes ('Tramp, tramp, tramp, – crash, crash'), detailing anatomy (*Iguanodon* 'has his jaws thickly implanted with saw-like teeth'), or finding it obscured ('The body is but dimly seen'), surrounding the audience ('Reptiles, reptiles, reptiles, – flying, swimming, waddling, walking'), and even seeming to threaten its safety ('the night grows dangerous').[56] Despite her truth claims, Elizabeth's accounts are similarly immediate, modal, deictic, and descriptive:

> I begin to get the outline of objects moving, some on this flat and some among bushes that grow near there. One that I see attracts my attention much by its great singularly; it is without exception the strangest-looking being I ever saw. (When I go back so far, there is a difficulty in seeing objects at a distance, which I think is owing to the thick, heavy atmosphere of those early times.) (pp. 57–58)
>
> Here is a large monster that looks as if it might devour all these [others]; but it is sluggish in its movements. It is a reptile, with a head like a crocodile, but larger . . . (I feel as if I should be swallowed alive, with so many rapacious monsters around me.) (p. 61)

Here, Elizabeth's vision encroached upon her just as Miller's word-painted reptiles had threatened to devour his Edinburgh audience.

On occasion, the psychometer's appropriation of ideas from prior reading seems indubitable. Miller had opined about the literary possibilities of an 'autobiography of a single boulder', and Elizabeth obligingly provided '*The Autobiography of a Boulder*', a sensory narrative of a volcanic boulder absorbed into glacial ice (pp. 114–21).[57] The inanimate object biography was a standard genre of popular science, but the psychometer's ability to feel 'all that was felt' by a specimen seems particularly indebted to geological literature (p. 50). Thus, Elizabeth's experience of life as a mastodon had precedent, for instance, in John Mill's *The Fossil Spirit*, narrated by a Hindu fakir who is reincarnated as extinct animals (1854).[58] If Elizabeth Denton's visionary narratives hint at frameworks fashioned by prior reading, this reading was obligatory for her geologist husband. William was raised in England on a diet of classic geological works and his subsequent lectures and (ostensibly non-psychometric) book, *Our Planet, Its Past and Future* (1868) cited the likes of 'Lyell, Owen, Mantell' and was punctuated with virtual tours through prehistory, including an invitation to take 'the wing' of a distinctly Lyellian 'dusky demon' and 'descend with me into the nether regions'.[59] In 1872, moreover, he satirized the awkward implications of Miller's notion of God as prehistoric panorama showman.[60] By this point, William had attended countless visions, and Miller's explanation of Genesis must have seemed logistically impossible.

Psychometry allowed the Denton family not only to deride religious orthodoxy but also to improve upon palaeontological accuracy. When Elizabeth saw a Tertiary mammal capable of 'lengthening its neck at will' (p. 105), her husband examined an 'engraving of the skeleton of

[56] Hugh Miller, *Sketch Book of Popular Geology: A Series of Lectures Read before the Philosophical Institution of Edinburgh*, ed. by Lydia Miller (Boston, MA: Gould and Lincoln, 1859), pp. 198–202. Also compare with William Denton, *Our Planet*, pp. 136–38, 162–63.

[57] Hugh Miller, *The Cruise of the Betsey; or, A Summer Ramble among the Fossiliferous Deposits of the Hebrides* (Edinburgh: Thomas Constable, 1858), p. 322.

[58] O'Connor, *Earth on Show*, pp. 253–54.

[59] William Denton, *Our Planet*, pp. 3, 41, 51. For Denton's knowledge as 'unscientific' and 'gained mainly by reading', see untitled review of *Is Darwin Right? Or, the Origin of Man*, by William Denton, *Scientific American*, 44 (1881), 250.

[60] Huhtamo, *Illusions in Motion*, p. 347.

the megatherium' and concluded that this extinct giant ground sloth 'had the power of protruding the head' (p. 107). Psychometry was, moreover, happily unrestrained by humanity's surface bias. Defying Lyell's bounded Rosicrucian gnome, Elizabeth actually found it easier to travel 'under the surface through the rock' than above it (p. 141). Even more empowering was the psychometer's ability to fill in the imperfections of the fossil record, famously described by Darwin as a shredded book.[61] This provided an ideal opportunity for the Dentons' young son Sherman, whose artistic skills allowed him to sketch what he saw psychometrically, often in real time; engravings considered '*facsimiles* from his drawings' were printed in the third volume of *The Soul of Things* (1874) (Figure 3).[62] He helpfully drew the evolutionary missing links back into sparse lineages like those of birds, including the notoriously elusive species that left footprints in Hitchcock's Connecticut valley sandstone (Figure 4).

We can sometimes trace visual aids used for these psychometric scenes from deep time, as in Sherman's apparent borrowing from Louis Figuier's *The World before the Deluge* (1863; 1865) (Figure 5). The posture of Sherman's pterodactyl strongly resembles that depicted by Figuier's artist, Édouard Riou, and was, in fact, intended to act as a correction. Sherman considered it 'preposterous to represent one of these catching a spindle', which his father explained by referring to 'engravings of the pterodactyl . . . chasing a dragon-fly'.[63] A psychometrically equipped individual could solve palaeontological problems where Darwin feared to tread, but this boldness was necessarily scaffolded by familiarity with palaeoscientific art. William was even able to show his son's findings to the most eminent restorer of extinct animals, the English artist Benjamin Waterhouse Hawkins, then working in the United States. Visiting Boston in June 1873, William was introduced to 'the man who made the restorations of the iguanodon & other animals for the crystal palace [sic]', upon which he whipped out Sherman's sketches and 'surprised him very much'.[64] He spent half a day with Hawkins, showing him 'sketches' which left his fellow expatriate 'astounded'.[65] It was, presumably, the meeting with Hawkins that led William to ask if Elizabeth would consider making 'clay and plaster' models of the 'Connecticut Valley ghosts' then being summoned up by Sherman.[66] This new evolution of the Dentons' psychometric palaeontology does not seem to have taken place, not least because a frustrated teenage Sherman, apparently buckling under the pressure of promoting psychometry and obtaining reliable readings, soon renounced his powers. In November he told his mother that 'I will never try another specimen for any soul on this planet'.[67]

3. THE PAST IS THE PRESENT

In the final quarter of the nineteenth century, the psychometric framework pioneered by Buchanan and the Dentons was metamorphosed into a potent tool for writing the deep history of humanity itself. While palaeoscience remained an important ingredient, its role had decisively changed. The Theosophical Society, a religious organization dedicated to the syncretism of esoteric lore and

61 Zimmerman, *Excavating Victorians*, p. 31.

62 William Denton, *The Soul of Things; or, Psychometric Researches and Discoveries*, vol III (Boston, MA: William Denton, 1874), p. 36.

63 William Denton, *Soul of Things*, III, pp. 90, 92.

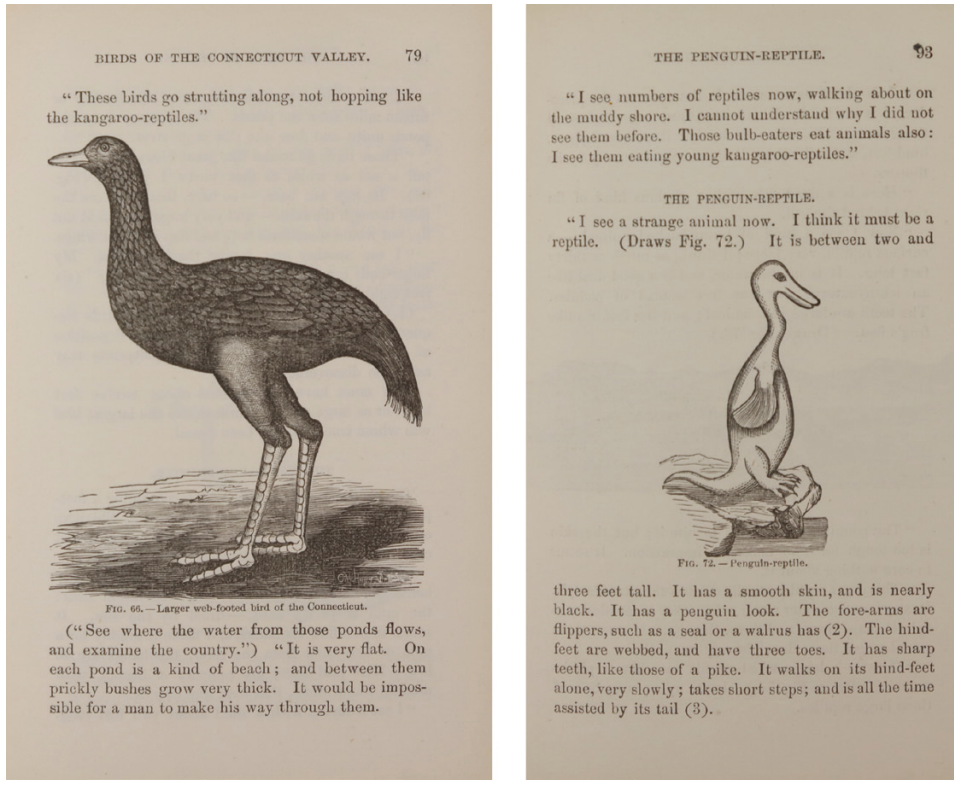
64 William Denton to Elizabeth M. Foote Denton, 2 July 1873, William Denton Papers, Box 9, Folder 3, Denton Family Papers, Wellesley Historical Society, MA [hereafter WHS].

65 William Denton to Elizabeth M. Foote Denton, 4 July 1873, William Denton Papers, Box 9, Folder 3, WHS.

66 William to Elizabeth, 4 July 1873, WHS.

67 Sherman Foote Denton to Elizabeth M. Foote Denton, 5 November 1874, Elizabeth M. Foote Denton Papers, Box 9, Folder 2, WHS.

Figure 3. Sherman Foote Denton refines the sketches of the prehistoric animals from his visions in preparation for publication. Sherman F. Denton Papers & Artwork, Box 1, Folder 9, Denton Family Papers. Courtesy of the Wellesley Historical Society, MA.



BIRDS OF THE CONNECTICUT VALLEY. 79

"These birds go strutting along, not hopping like the kangaroo-reptiles."

FIG. 66.—Larger web-footed bird of the Connecticut.

("See where the water from those ponds flows, and examine the country.") "It is very flat. On each pond is a kind of beach; and between them prickly bushes grow very thick. It would be impossible for a man to make his way through them.

THE PENGUIN-REPTILE. 93

"I see numbers of reptiles now, walking about on the muddy shore. I cannot understand why I did not see them before. Those bulb-eaters eat animals also: I see them eating young kangaroo-reptiles."

THE PENGUIN-REPTILE.

"I see a strange animal now. I think it must be a reptile. (Draws Fig. 72.) It is between two and

FIG. 72.—Penguin-reptile.

three feet tall. It has a smooth skin, and is nearly black. It has a penguin look. The fore-arms are flippers, such as a seal or a walrus has (2). The hind-feet are webbed, and have three toes. It has sharp teeth, like those of a pike. It walks on its hind-feet alone, very slowly; takes short steps; and is all the time assisted by its tail (3).

Figure 4. Two engraved facsimiles of Sherman Foote Denton's illustrations of unfossilized prehistoric birds, sketched during psychometric investigation. William Denton, *The Soul of Things; or, Psychometric Researches and Discoveries*, vol. III (Boston: William Denton, 1874), pp. 79, 93. Courtesy of the Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham.

modern science, was behind this ambitious new clairvoyant project. Established in New York in 1875, chiefly by the Russian occultist Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and her American companion Henry Steel Olcott, the Society formed important bases in Adyar and London as it became increasingly interested in Buddhism and Hinduism.[68] The leadership of charismatic Theosophists like Blavatsky and former Anglican priest Charles Webster Leadbeater was predicated on their extraordinary ancient knowledge, much of it absorbed clairvoyantly, both through access to immaterial tomes and through time-transcending visions.

As recent scholarship has demonstrated, Theosophical clairvoyance was heavily based on psychometric methods. Indeed, in Wouter Hanegraaff's words, 'Theosophical clairvoyance is just another word for psychometry'.[69] These origins were somewhat occluded: in line with the Theosophical Society's orientalist vocabulary, what began as psychometric readings had, by the 1880s and 1890s, become communion with the so-called *akashic* records, an omnipresent ethereal archive of everything that has ever happened. A suitably powerful Theosophist could

[68] Overviews of Theosophy are provided in Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein, eds, *Handbook of the Theosophical Current* (Leiden: Brill, 2013); or in Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994).

[69] Hanegraaff, 'The Theosophical Imagination', p. 35. See also Hester, 'Into the Celestial Spheres', p. 41.

Figure 5. *Above*: Engraving of Édouard Riou's Liassic landscape in Louis Figuier, *The World before the Deluge*, trans. by W. S. O. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1865), facing p. 210. Reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library. Printed Material MA.14.21. *Below*: Engraving of Sherman Foote Denton's psychometric scene in *The Soul of Things*, III, p. 88. Courtesy of the Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham.

consult these records and gaze upon the past without even needing to examine a relevant object (a development foreshadowed by Sherman Denton's precocious ability to visit other planets by sight).[70] If an advanced clairvoyant 'desires to see the earth before its crust has

[70] Denton, *Soul of Things*, III, p. 147.

solidified', explained Curuppumullage Jinarājadāsa, '[t]he Book of Time is spread out before him' and 'the past is the present'.[71] Olcott was honest about the *akashic* records' theoretical debts. He advised anyone who desired 'a complete understanding' of Theosophy's clairvoyant 'revelations' to 'familiarise himself with the principles and history of psychometry', not least because Buchanan, who was an early convert to the Theosophical Society, had been Olcott's friend since the 1850s.[72] Dentonian psychometry was also highly esteemed by the Society: in 1883 the journal *Theosophist* boasted of encouraging psychometric research by 'putting more than seventy copies of the *Soul of Things* [sic] into circulation in India' and it hoped to circulate 'seven hundred more' as well as to invite William Denton to lecture.[73] This latter arrangement was prevented only by his premature death the same year.

The purpose of the new Theosophical clairvoyance was to place anthropology at the centre of cosmic history. Consulting *akashic* visuals and texts that preserved every moment since the dawn of time, Theosophical clairvoyants revealed that the geohistorical narrative known to naturalists was just a fraction of the occult truth.[74] Not only were humans capable of mentally travelling deep into the past, but humans had *existed* in these remote periods as well. In the elaborate Theosophical cosmogony, human beings, divided into 'Root Races', had taken ethereal invertebrate forms in the planet's earliest epochs, later materializing as three-eyed giants during the Jurassic period on the Indo-Pacific continent of Lemuria, a theorized location described by German naturalist Ernst Haeckel as the birthplace of anthropoid apes.[75] Humanity became anatomically recognizable around the time of the Cenozoic Era, when Atlantis was centre of civilization. Crucially, rather than humans evolving from animals, animals were the 'cast-off clothes' of earlier forms of humanity.[76]

The Dentons, too, attended to human cultures in some of their visions, but this had not overshadowed careful investigations into palaeontological matters like the behaviour of ground sloths and the evolution of birds.[77] In Blavatsky's monumental work *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), palaeontological data took on a more subservient role as collateral evidence for the esoteric truths hidden in exoteric (public) religion. In particular, palaeontology propped up the anthropological emphasis of the Theosophical cosmogony by providing support for human civilizations far antedating recognized history. For instance, when the kabbalistic *Zohar* obscurely stated that 'a kind of *flying camel*' had tempted Eve in Eden, the fact that Cuvier himself had described 'a *flying* saurian, "the Pterodactyl"', was shown to have 'vindicated' the *Zohar*'s prescientific intent.[78] The circumstantial nature of the evidence, from a material perspective, was freely confessed. This was apparent in an exchange about the third eye,

[71] Curuppumullage Jinarājadāsa, 'First Principles of Theosophy II', *Theosophist*, 40 (1919), 129–44 (p. 134).

[72] Henry Steel Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves: The Only Authentic History of the Theosophical Society, Fifth Series: January, 1893–April, 1896* (Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 1932), pp. 398–99; Hester, 'Into the Celestial Spheres', p. 37.

[73] '*The Soul of Things*', *Theosophist*, 4 (1883), 239–40 (p. 240).

[74] For the evolutionary epic, see Peter J. Bowler, *Life's Splendid Drama: Evolutionary Biology and the Reconstruction of Life's Ancestry 1860–1940* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996). A summary of the Theosophical cosmogony is found in Joscelyn Godwin, *Atlantis and the Cycles of Time: Prophecies, Traditions, and Occult Revelations* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2011), pp. 77–87.

[75] Ramaswamy, *The Lost Land of Lemuria*, chapter 3. For the racist underpinnings of this system, see the same author, pp. 67–69.

[76] Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy*, 2 vols (London: Theosophical Publishing Company, 1888), II, p. 290.

[77] For a psychometric vision of ancient humans, see Denton, *Soul of Things*, III, pp. 305–8.

[78] Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine*, II, p. 205.

a traditional Asian symbol of clairvoyance supposedly possessed by Lemurian humans, that various naturalists, including Richard Owen, had detected in certain reptiles and amphibians. In 1889, an anthropologist wrote to Blavatsky's periodical *Lucifer* to celebrate 'the light that comparative anatomy and palæontology are beginning to throw on the formation of the Third Eye' in 'the colossal Triassic reptile of South Africa' and 'the great fish lizards of the Mesozoic', while appealing to the editor for further evidence.[79] Blavatsky's reply was irritable: 'As three-eyed men are no longer extant, what evidence can be expected other than of a circumstantial character?'[80]

Theosophists' frequent citations of Owen's work, including his theory of the transcendental vertebrate archetype, which I referred to earlier in this article, demonstrate that Theosophical palaeontology, while subservient to anthropology, was not superficial. Indeed, it often simply extended ideas seeded in mainstream palaeontology. In her early work *Isis Unveiled* (1877), Blavatsky had pointed triumphantly to Owen's research into the gigantic New Zealand moa as validating the existence of 'the *Ruc* (or Roc)', that 'monstrous bird of the *Arabian Nights*'.[81] Theosophy's use of palaeontological evidence to scientize Asian culture and religion had legitimizing precedent in the Indian research of British geologists like Hugh Falconer, who had sought physical origins for mythic animals and locales referred to in Hindu texts.[82] The orientalism running through nineteenth-century palaeontology appealed to Blavatsky and she enthusiastically imagined the interactions between gigantic prehistoric humans and animals like 'the monstrous *Sivatherium*', an extinct mammal named by Falconer after the Hindu god Shiva.[83] Significantly, C. Mackenzie Brown suggests that Blavatsky, in *Isis Unveiled*, was 'quite possibly the first to proclaim the avataric evolutionary theory', an argument that the animal incarnations of the god Vishnu should be understood as an allegory of evolutionary history.[84]

The anthropological and orientalist leanings that distinguished Theosophy's exploration of deep time from its Dentonian antecedents were also accompanied by a change in literary strategy. Although Blavatsky's private descriptions of clairvoyance were made in her characteristically rambunctious style, invoking the panorama and hallucinatory vision, Theosophical publications on prehistory were usually characterized by the general occult mode that Alex Owen calls a 'matter-of-fact language of realism'.[85] Dentonian psychometers and Theosophists alike used a scientistic vocabulary, but the latter also employed urbane and academic literary stylings not found in the Dentons' books.[86] This reflected the assertive confidence of their version of clairvoyance: Theosophists rejected passive, mediumistic methods of seeing behind the veil, such as the trance undergone by Davis, and combined the roles of the knowledgeable naturalist William Denton and his psychically sensitive wife in one authoritative figure.[87] Elizabeth Denton had pushed back against conventional associations of spirituality

79 C. Carter Blake, 'The Third Eye', *Lucifer*, 4 (1889), 341–45 (pp. 343–44).

80 Blake, 'The Third Eye', p. 345.

81 Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled: A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology*, 2 vols (New York, NY: J. W. Bouton, 1877), I, p. 603.

82 Chakrabarti, *Inscriptions of Nature*, esp. chapter 3. For Theosophical orientalism, see the essays in Tim Rudbøg and Erik Reenberg Sand, eds, *Imagining the East: The Early Theosophical Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

83 Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine*, II, p. 218.

84 C. Mackenzie Brown, 'The Western Roots of Avataric Evolutionism in Colonial India', *Zygon*, 42 (2007), 425–49 (p. 437).

85 Hanegraaff, 'The Theosophical Imagination', pp. 4, 13–14; Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, p. 158.

86 For Theosophical scientism, see Olav Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 218–29.

87 Hanegraaff, 'The Theosophical Imagination', pp. 17, 28–29, 31.

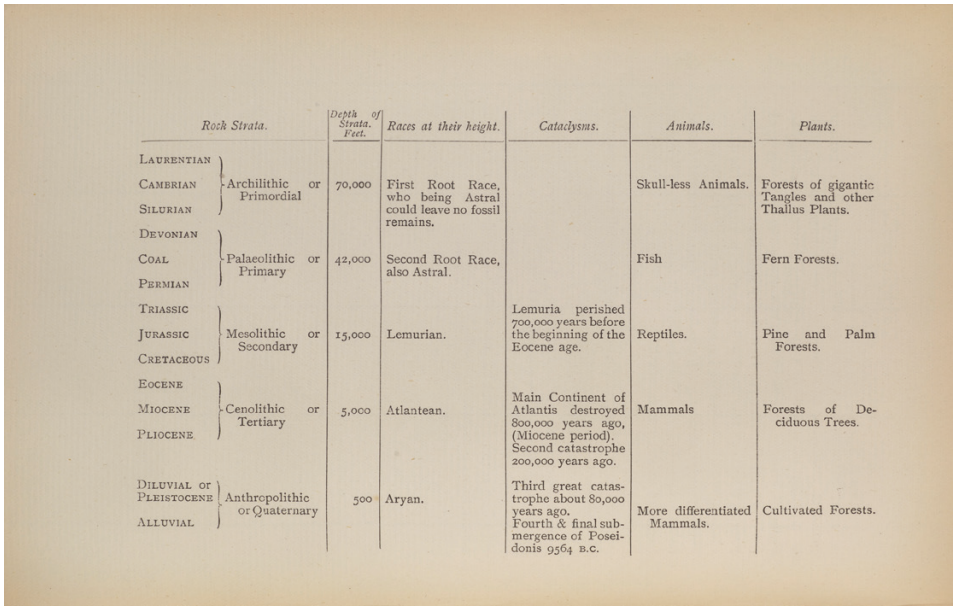
with feminine receptivity (p. 353), but her husband's methods nonetheless relied on the alleged sketchiness of her scientific learning. After all, if Elizabeth had prior knowledge related to the geological objects she examined, then this compromised the neutrality of her clairvoyance. In Cameron Strang's words, the gendered or infantilized authority of psychometers was more that of 'sensitive instruments than that of human experts'.[88] The result was that *The Soul of Things* transcripts courted credibility through tentative, consciously amateur scientific investigations punctuated with melodramatic exclamations: 'Oh, what shells!' (p. 37); 'Mercy!' (p. 115); 'It thrills me, and I fairly tremble' (p. 218).

Compare the above with an influential 1895 paper, 'The Lunar Pitris', delivered before the Society's London Lodge by elite British Theosophists Patience Sinnett and William Scott-Elliot. The paper, which referred in its title to one of the cosmogony's various superhuman orders, communicated secretive *akashic* explorations undertaken by Leadbeater and by Scott-Elliot's wife Maude (*née* Boyle-Travers).[89] It was published in the *Transactions of the London Lodge of the Theosophical Society*, a production the title of which connoted the hoariest models of scientific publication (unlike more accessible periodicals such as *Lucifer*).[90] In line with the journal's august image, the named authors adopted the terse, passive language of judicious scientific argumentation, announcing that 'it is proposed now to trace – of course in very rough outline – the process of evolution through the past ages on this earth'.[91] The authors obliquely explained that they were 'given to understand' the facts that they related using understated scholarly distance: 'it may be interesting to note', '[f]or greater ease of reference', 'as it were'.[92] Astonishing prehistoric lifeforms were described with the precision of comparative anatomy. A clairvoyantly accessed 'astral image' of a human of the Second Race was described as 'jelly-like in substance', floating, with 'two centres of force', namely the 'pineal gland' and primitive 'spleen', and conveying 'rudimentary feeling'.[93] At the end of the paper was appended 'a tabular summary of Ernest [*sic*] Haeckel's *History of Creation*', featuring occult columns that boldly inserted humans into every geological period in the German naturalist's secular framework (Figure 6).[94] This abridgement and revision of Haeckel's authoritative book was a succinct visual statement both of the Theosophical authors' anthropocentrism and of their confident appropriation of the stylings of late Victorian scientific publishing.

4. CONCLUSION: DEEP CLAIRVOYANCE

The earth sciences constituted just one aspect of the vast project of esoteric science, but their importance to this project was profound. After all, bursting the limits of time appeared to legitimize the bursting of other, stranger limits. Ramaswamy argues that the reconstruction of prehistoric lost worlds was an 'empowering' response to 'modernity's preoccupation with loss' and disenchantment: whereas mainstream palaeoscientists pursued 'dispassionate enchantment' in their marvellous but secular research, occultists re-enchanted a geohistory 'rendered incomplete, unmanned, and a-theized' by materialist science.[95] Clairvoyants' direct access to the deep past solved otherwise unanswerable scientific questions and inserted humanity

88 Strang, 'Measuring Souls', p. 88.
89 Godwin, *Atlantis*, pp. 88–90
90 Ferguson, 'Luciferian Public Sphere', pp. 92–93.
91 Patience Sinnett and William Scott-Elliot, 'The Lunar Pitris', *Transactions of the London Lodge of the Theosophical Society*, 26 (1895), 3–30 (p. 4).
92 Sinnett and Scott-Elliot, 'The Lunar Pitris', pp. 6, 8, 11.
93 Sinnett and Scott-Elliot, 'The Lunar Pitris', pp. 16.
94 Sinnett and Scott-Elliot, 'The Lunar Pitris', p. 13.
95 Ramaswamy, *The Lost Land of Lemuria*, pp. 7, 8, 54, 93.



Rock Strata.		*Depth of Strata. Feet.*	*Races at their height.*	*Cataclysms.*	*Animals.*	*Plants.*
Laurentian, Cambrian, Silurian	Archilithic or Primordial	70,000	First Root Race, who being Astral could leave no fossil remains.		Skull-less Animals.	Forests of gigantic Tangles and other Thallus Plants.
Devonian, Coal, Permian	Palæolithic or Primary	42,000	Second Root Race, also Astral.		Fish	Fern Forests.
Triassic, Jurassic, Cretaceous	Mesolithic or Secondary	15,000	Lemurian.	Lemuria perished 700,000 years before the beginning of the Eocene age.	Reptiles.	Pine and Palm Forests.
Eocene, Miocene, Pliocene	Cenolithic or Tertiary	5,000	Atlantean.	Main Continent of Atlantis destroyed 800,000 years ago, (Miocene period). Second catastrophe 200,000 years ago.	Mammals	Forests of Deciduous Trees.
Diluvial or Pleistocene, Alluvial	Anthropolithic or Quaternary	500	Aryan.	Third great catastrophe about 80,000 years ago. Fourth & final submergence of Poseidonis 9564 B.C.	More differentiated Mammals.	Cultivated Forests.

Figure 6. A tabulation of Theosophical geohistory in Patience Sinnett and William Scott-Elliot, 'The Lunar Pitris', *Transactions of the London Lodge of the Theosophical Society*, 26 (1895), 3–30 (p. 30). Reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library. Printed Material CUL00289386.

back into the foreground of prehistory. Building upon the vaunted accessibility of geology and palaeontology to diverse levels of society, clairvoyance allowed radicals and women to attempt high-level contributions to knowledge, as well as valorising Asian religions, especially Hinduism (albeit while utterly transforming their concepts). The price of this agency in the scientific public sphere was credibility, as clairvoyant geohistorical narratives rarely satisfied contemporary scientific standards of virtual witnessing.[96] Moreover, as Asprem points out, occult scientism opened itself up to the falsifiability of claims.[97] Even as Sherman Denton was sketching the birds that had left footprints in Connecticut valley sandstone, palaeontologists had begun to attribute the footprints to dinosaurs.

As I have argued, we should attend to how not only the technical concepts but also the literary and artistic stylings of palaeoscience shaped occult thought. It is well known that fringe sciences commonly emulate the technical jargon of mainstream science.[98] In the cases I have examined, practitioners emulated, or rather enacted, the imaginative language and visuals of these sciences too. By the mid-nineteenth century palaeoscientific authors had pieced together a suggestive literary language for seeing the unseeable. This was precisely the time when occult research began to expand, and these ingredients blended in the works of Davis, the Dentons, and many others. A clue to the meaning of this exchange is found in the Wordsworthian title of the Dentons' book: the Romantic notion of the imagination, or the 'imaginal' organ, as

[96] Sera-Shriar, 'Credible Witnessing', pp. 383–84.

[97] Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment*, p. 79.

[98] For pseudoscience, see Michael D. Gordin, *On the Fringe: Where Science Meets Pseudoscience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

capable of poetically intuiting truth became a core tenet of nineteenth-century esotericism, which itself Olav Hammer calls 'a radicalization' of anti-materialistic Romantic science.[99] As we have seen, palaeoscience was deeply interfused with transcendental *Naturphilosophie*, orientalism, and visionary self-fashioning. By 'radicalizing' these susceptibly Romantic ingredients, paranormal researchers simply took the extra step that mainstream savants would not take. Edward Bulwer-Lytton, with whom this article began, posited that everyday acts of literary and scientific imagination are unacknowledged forms of clairvoyance – a notion underlying Theosophists' characterization of occult novels like *Zanoni* as at least partially true.[100] By the same logic, palaeontologists' rapturous reconstructions of lost worlds are potentially yet another unacknowledged example of clairvoyance.

There is also an interesting juxtaposition to be made here with Michael Saler's concept of the 'ironic imagination'. For Saler, authors of detective stories and fantastic fiction in the late nineteenth century crafted a teasing facsimile of scientific credibility, encouraging 'delight without delusion' as an antidote to the disenchantments of modernity.[101] The clairvoyants' response to modernity was equally to embrace the allure of science, but otherwise to employ not an ironic but an *earnest* – and empowered – imagination, and to remain, ostensibly, in the prestigious realm of nonfiction. In the minds of freethinking occult readers, the resplendent deductions and word-paintings of the likes of Cuvier, Mantell, and Miller hid deeper insights than the authors realized. If such things could be imagined, they could also be seen. Trusting in the imagination's capacity for intuition and deemphasizing its capacity for delusion, the authors I have examined stepped into the fantasies of total visibility provided for them, transcending the provisional access to reality claimed by scientific predecessors and seeing the past with their own eyes.

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[99] Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, p. 329. See also Wouter J. Hanegraaff, 'Romanticism and the Esoteric Connection', in *Gnosis and Hermeticism from Antiquity to Modern Times*, ed. by Roelof van den Broek and Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), pp. 237–68; and Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, pp. 128–32. For the 'imaginal', see Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010), pp. 82–83. For a useful review essay, see Jennifer J. Baker, 'Natural Science and the Romanticisms', *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance*, 53 (2007), 387–412.

[100] Simon Magus, 'Rider Haggard and the Imperial Occult: Hermetic Discourse and Romantic Contiguity' (PhD diss., University of Exeter, 2018), pp. 199–206.

[101] Michael Saler, *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), chapter 2.