

## ESSAY REVIEW

### “Denialism”: The New “Pseudo-Science”

**Denialism: How Irrational Thinking Hinders Scientific Progress, Harms the Planet, and Threatens Our Lives** by Michael Specter. Penguin Press, 2009. 304 pp., \$27.95. ISBN 9781594202308.

**Special Report: Living in Denial** by Michael Shermer, Debora MacKenzie, Richard Littlemore, Jim Giles, and Michael Fitzpatrick. *New Scientist*, 15 May 2010, pp. 36–45.

Bertrand Russell (among others) remarked on the sad fact that it takes ever so many more words to correct a false assertion than it takes to make that false assertion in the first place. Specter’s book and the Special Report series of articles in *New Scientist* illustrate that—for volumes could be filled with analyses of the ignorance displayed by these writers.

In a nutshell: These writers fit the category of self-styled “skeptics” whom Marcello Truzzi accurately described as *pseudo*-skeptics: They label as “pseudo-science” any view that they regard as wrong, without displaying any felt need to demonstrate why that label might be appropriate. That would have required defining pseudo-science and showing how the particular item being criticized satisfies the definition; and that has never been done, for one thing because neither philosophy of science nor any other pertinent discipline has ever been able to agree on how to define “pseudo-science”—or for that matter, “science.” Innumerable attempts have failed to establish criteria that distinguish science from other knowledge-seeking attempts, or that distinguish good, proper science from bad, improper or spurious science. For an authoritative account regarding that failure, Laudan (1983) is accessible as well as sound. For some unsuccessful attempts to define “pseudo-science,” see “Pseudoscientists, Cranks, Crackpots” (Bauer, 1984/1999). For discussion of a number of topics often called “pseudo-science” and a review of the lack of validity in that labeling, see *Science or Pseudoscience: Magnetic Healing, Psychic Phenomena, and Other Heterodoxies* (Bauer, 2001). Yet Specter claims that “the line between science and pseudoscience was deliberately blurred” (p. 160): What line? That non-existent, undefined, undefinable line?

Pseudo-skeptics are largely, perhaps always, unwitting defenders of scientism, the erroneous ideology which holds that science and science alone can capture objective truth; pseudo-skeptics attack true skeptics just because we

was brilliantly portrayed by artist John Everett Millais; his previous, strangely Dantesque love episode with the married Annie Marshall who, like Poe's Ligeia, dies and becomes the supreme icon in his inner sanctum, becoming perhaps the chief force that drove him to found a new science.

Hamilton is even-handed and fair-minded with a large quantity of controversial material. Myers drove some writers to attack him unfairly. When Myers' full biographical statement, *Fragments of Inner Life*, was published in 1961, Archie Jarman mounted a campaign of slander against Myers, arguing that Myers, the married author of "Honor," made Anne Marshall pregnant, which is what caused her to commit suicide. This was false, and Hamilton lays out the evidence; detailed, referenced discussion puts the issue in perspective. Much of the biography centers around Myers' work: his investigations of spiritualism, encounters with mediums; his role in founding the English Society for Psychical Research (SPR) in 1882; his networking with scientists of high caliber: William Crookes, Oliver Lodge, and William Barrett, philosophers Henry Sidgwick and William James, and psychologists such as Charcot and Janet, and Richet the Nobel Prize-winning physiologist. Myers was not a reclusive eccentric genius like C. S. Peirce but an inveterate socializer, traveler, and promoter who conducted numerous first-hand investigations, spoke in public, and presented his work at international science conventions (at a time when the internationality of science was coming into its own).

Chapters cover his personal and literary life, the founding and personnel of the SPR, the scientific ratification of telepathy, the crucial work on automatism and the "multiplex personality," research on hypnotism, and so forth. Chapter Six concentrates on some of the great mediums, the uncelebrated heroines of this Victorian new science of the soul. The next chapter examines some hurdles the new science had to face in haunted houses and in the personality of the Miss Goodrich Freer. The rest of the chapters consider Myers as a psychologist, the scientific status of Myers' project, and finally his legacy—still, an open question, unfolding.

Hamilton provides a reliable, often insightful, review of Myers' world, his social, intellectual, and amorous life, his mission to create a new science of spiritual consciousness, and his conviction that he had proven, at least to himself, that survival was a fact. Myers fought against the prevailing tide of reductive materialism for the increasingly suspect concept of postmortem consciousness. He seems to have had a precocious metaphysical imagination. His mother recorded a conversation with him at age five about heaven and hell. "But can you tell me Mamma, why God made only two places—one so very good as heaven, & the other so very bad as hell—& why not another, not *quite* so bad, for those who are a *little* good?" (p. 12). How thoroughly sane the five-year-old Myers sounds compared to so many adult fundamentalists who

promote an unforgiving moral dualism. Besides sanity, Myers possessed an intensity and sensitivity that sometimes worked against him. In *Fragments of Inner Life*, Myers recalls a shock he had when seven or eight years old. His mother, in one of their philosophical discussions, suggested that wicked people might simply be annihilated at death in lieu of being installed in hell. “I remember where I stood at the moment,” he writes, “and how my brain reeled under the shock” (p. 7). It was the first time he imagined the possibility of annihilation awaiting us after death. As a young man, he underwent a more profound disillusionment, passing through different philosophical moods, Hellenism, Christianity, Agnosticism (all found wanting), wrote poetry to console himself, and continued to suffer from want of “evidence.” Thus he lapsed into a “dull pain borne with joyless doggedness, (which) sometimes flashed into a horror of reality that made the world spin before one’s eyes—a shock of nightmare-panic amid the glaring dreariness of day” (p. 30). This is quickly followed by an equally dark sentiment, worthy of Leopardi: “In that foreseen futility of the life of individual and race, sympathy itself seemed a childish trifling thing with the universal despair.” This mood of nihilism, of existential depression, was coeval with the “first flush of triumphant Darwinism.” Myers felt himself being swept away by the “camp of negation.” A new constellation of active ideas and forces was rising: “It must be remembered that this was in the very flood-tide of materialism, agnosticism—the mechanical theory of the Universe, the reduction of all spiritual facts to physiological phenomena.” This existential crisis became the matrix of Myers’ conception of a new science—a science dedicated to exploring the limits of consciousness that came to be known as psychical research. The shock of disillusionment drove him to look at psychic phenomena as the one residual thread that might lead back to the fountain of spiritual re-enchantment.



Eveleen Tennant-Coombs Myers

Hamilton reminds us on more than one occasion that Myers was a snob and (although not bellicose) comfortably imperialist in outlook. Myers doubted that the lower classes could be relied on to give trustworthy testimony; so, we should not look to him for insight into the socially ravaging consequences of his crusade against materialism. His interests were private, esthetic, spiritual, (and as we shall see, romantic); so one is advised to turn to Dickens or William Blake for insight into the suffering of the lower classes.

Chapter Six dwells on Myers and the mediums. In this new science, as conceived by the English founders, *other people* become the instruments of knowledge, the vehicles of insight and perception, and sometimes of deception

and seduction. It was William James who discovered one of the great mental mediums, Eleanora Piper. Confounded by her intimate knowledge of his family life, James was convinced of her powers, and enlisted her to cooperate with psychical researchers such as Myers, Lodge, and Hodgson.

Forming the right kind of relationship between medium and researcher was key to the progress of psychical research. More than just critical intelligence is required. Since we are talking about human beings and not machines, emotional intelligence is also required. Based on extensive experimentation, Kenneth Batchelder (1979) has written about the special group dynamics that facilitates positive results in PK studies. Among the founders of psychical research, Myers (I would have to say implicitly) pursued a conception of science in which the balanced fusion of intellectual and emotional energies is required of investigators. (In this context, the inquisitorial language of the “investigator” and the “investigated” needs to be carefully reconsidered, especially in view of our increased understanding of the omni-influence of language. This implicit (sensitive to the nuances of emotion) methodology is crucial in working with mediums. Of course, any conception of science that recognizes feeling as part of the instrument will be suspect to the practitioners of sciences such as astronomy and chemistry, which are sciences of dead matter. In a science of living matter and human behavior, we must recognize the inevitable role of feelings and intuition.

Unfortunately, relationships between mediums and scientists were sometimes difficult because of clashes of temperament. For example, it must have been difficult for Myers and his refined Platonic eroticism to deal with the somewhat gross and forthright Eusapia Palladino. Eusapia was the one medium who different scientists kept returning to, and closely studied. Myers’ and Sidgwick’s first encounter with Palladino produced positive results, and Myers never backed down on his initial findings. Myers’ feeling functions might occasionally zone out, but he also had a powerful intellect and a well-honed Victorian “will power.” Hodgson, however, flush from his (alleged) triumphant exposure of Madame Blavatsky’s frauds, was convinced merely from reading the reports that Myers and Sidgwick had been imposed upon by Palladino. Hodgson thought Myers went soft on Eusapia.

Clearly, the English investigators found it hard to work with Palladino. No doubt cultural differences were in play, for the highly cultivated and fastidious English found it difficult to be with the short, stout, homely, vulgar, uneducated Italian orphan who was overtly sexual in her manner and (God save the Queen!) who cheated. Eusapia’s Continental investigators all knew that under certain circumstances, she would try to bring about effects with her hands (it was largely involuntary, occasionally playful, or just spite against ennui); they also knew that her best performances were typically executed under the most

stringent controls. The Continentals realized they had to adapt themselves to the vagaries of Eusapia's personality—as if she were, say, an opera star.

Myers realized the importance of the Palladino phenomena, and decided to lodge the medium in his house where he could observe her extraordinary effects. The prospect of this did not appeal to Myers and certainly not to his wife, Eveleen. Hamilton reports that although they were kind and hospitable, and duly astonished by Eusapia's paranormal manifestations, Frederic and Eveleen were terribly "bored" by the unsavory foreigner. They did their best to keep her occupied but at a safe distance; the Sidgwicks, in their home, fed her in the servant's quarters.

I am surprised by the bored indifference to the personality of the medium they were studying. Sidgwick is quoted as saying, "It [spending time with Eusapia] will be rather a bore, and I fear, tiring to my wife" (p. 215). In one sitting with Eusapia held at Richet's Ile Roubaud where conditions were tight, Myers witnessed some extraordinary phenomena, for example, the materialization of John King's hand ("a big, five-fingered, ill-formed thing it looked in the dusk" (p. 214). Myers wrote to Eveleen about this: "All so wonderful! Eusapia herself an intolerable bore" (p. 215). Granting the difficulties with English, and granted she was not up to the aesthetic or intellectual standards of the English aristocracy, Myers and Sidgwick might have been curious about the history, the beliefs, the inner world of the person who was producing these "wonderful" effects. It was as if their sole wish was to observe some strange kind of miracle-making machine, rather than behavior that could be correlated with a unique inner life.

The Continental investigators had the more sensitive and constructive approach to Palladino. Perhaps the best single book on her and also the keenest in understanding her peculiar psychology was by the American Hereward Carrington (1909). In 1908, Carrington, with W. W. Baggally and E. Feilding, carefully tested Eusapia in Naples, with ample positive results. Skilled in conjury, Carrington knew all about Eusapia's tricks. And yet, according to their unanimous testimony, the tighter the physical controls, the more extraordinary the phenomena. Now and then she unconsciously or perversely employed some legerdemain, and produced effects that were clearly pedestrian by comparison with her genuine, more spectacular feats. "We discovered that the more rigorous the control, other things being equal, and the greater the contact with the medium's body, the better the results" (Carrington, 1909:310). Most of her investigators knew how to handle her; as performer, she exhibited the quirks of a prima donna. She was practicing her art (Eusapia was famous on several continents), but she could not perform in a vacuum; she needed a responsive audience and other actors to play their parts.

Maxwell blamed Hodgson for Palladino's failure: ". . . he and his friends

were responsible for her frauds, and almost wholly responsible for the failure of the experiments. They appear to have neglected the psychological side of a medium's role, and forgot that a medium is not a mechanical instrument" (Carrington, 1909:55). The proper procedure was to gain the medium's confidence and sympathy and try to establish rapport. Subtle human variables, moods, and attitudes are crucial to results in this field of research. The challenge is how to effectively combine the requirements of science with due appreciation of the delicate dialectic of human relations. The latter needs to be looked at more closely.

In the course of Hamilton's account of Myers' work, two important themes come up, psychological automatism and multiplex personality. Myers' range of interests was immense, but these two were central for him. Although the spectrum of his research topics led insensibly to the issue of post-death, automatism and multiplex personality are areas of research with independent value. They represent possible domains for further development in their own right, and lead us toward exploring the depth of our present being rather than the extent of our future being. We could say that like Columbus, in seeking the most expeditious route to the Other World, Myers stumbled on new worlds that beg for exploration.

Myers was convinced that a more comprehensive and powerful self was in principle open to human consciousness. This greater form of potential consciousness he stipulated to be the *subliminal self*. Myers inferred this enlargement of the concept of the self from thousands of case studies that illustrate experiences of expansion. Human evolution, he speculated, was about exploring the little known world of the subliminal mind; shamans, poets, and prophets have in the past led the way—Myers was convinced science had to pick up the gauntlet.

In 1933, Andre Breton, a physician and leading theoretician of Surrealism, wrote: "Among Freud's antecedents I continue to think that, in spite of unfortunately widespread ignorance of his work, we remain more indebted than we generally believe to what William James so aptly called the *gothic psychiatry* of F. W. H. Myers" (Breton, Eluard, & Soupault, 1997). Surrealism's debt to Myers is twofold. First, there was the emphasis on new forms of "nondirected expression," in short, automatic writing, drawing, and other forms of involuntary expression. The second point is more radical. For Breton the surrealist project entailed a revolution of consciousness; in brief, its stated aim was to somehow achieve a concrete fusion of dream and reality. This concrete fusion, in Myers' language, was the essence of creative genius; a state in which supraliminal and subliminal mental life interact, interfuse, and regenerate each other. This connection with Myers' psychology raises surrealism from the status of just another art style or movement; there are possibilities here for further development.

The second idea often discussed by Myers I want to mention as containing the seeds for greater development is his idea of the multiplex personality. A close student of Janet's work on psychological automatism, Myers invented the term "secondary personality" to describe what may seem to emerge during emotional crisis, hypnotic induction, or mediumistic trance: an intelligence, a voice, a set of talents and mannerisms, phenomenologically different from, and sometimes functionally superior to, one's customary personality. Myers understood that the formation of these new patterns of personality might be pathological (dissolutive) *or* something new, *more* functional, or (what he called) *evolutive*. In short, going against the prevailing tendency (Freud, Janet, etc.), he chose to *depathologize* the notion of multiple personality; instead, he saw these multiplex manifestations as opportunities to recreate the personality. Myers, quite apart from pathology, suggested that normal human beings could learn to awaken and assimilate new creative elements from the subliminal mind, while also learning to discard, or, at any rate, dismantle the old and harmful traits. Myers' view of the human personality was not only richer and more many-layered than Freud's or even Jung's, his prospectus for human development was more optimistic and challenging. In an original book by Adam Crabtree (1985), we see Myers' multiplex self come to life in contemporary psychotherapy.

In the broad field of twentieth-century self-help and spiritual transformation studies we may also see evidence of Myers' legacy, as Hamilton notes in some useful detail. See also, along Myers' lines, another recent paper that explores the notion of self-creation in art and therapy (Grosso, 2010). Myers' theory of the multiplex self provides the raw materials for a new type of psychotherapy. It does not set its sights merely upon the goal of adjustment to everyday life; it seeks rather to furnish the tools for evolving the personality toward Myers' regulative ideal of genius as co-ordination of all one's gifts and talents, known and latent. In short, Myers offers an unfashionably romantic, heroic, and optimistic take on what is humanly possible and realizable.

Trevor Hamilton provides a wide-ranging assessment of Myers' career. The impression I got from the author, without it being altogether explicit, was that here is an open (by no means discredited) field that may yet reach something like its hoped-for goal.

In assessing Myers' work, one question needs to be raised about Myers' idea of the "subliminal self," an idea that has been criticized for different reasons. Myers used it in different ways, always oriented around the possibility of some type of creative advance in consciousness. Myers inferred the idea of a larger subconscious or subliminal identity of self from the extraordinary experiences he investigated. Sometimes he used it as a scientific hypothesis, or more rhetorically as an image with psychically releasing effects. It could be formulated as the basis of a program for experimentation. For me the concept of

a *subliminal self* is a reminder that I am probably underestimating my internal resources. I might also think of it as a rationale for lowering my psychic defenses and becoming more receptive to those untapped internal resources.

One critic Hamilton cites said that the subliminal self was just a throwback to the guardian angel. There is this truth in the remark. The subliminal self, understood as the undefined storehouse of human psychic potential, is a construct that allows us to understand how people might interpret paranormal events as the work of guardian angels. Benvenuto Cellini was in prison, and in despair he set up a device to commit suicide when something physically stopped him and appeared in the guise of a beautiful angel. Flournoy argued that this event was explainable in terms of a teleological automatism produced by Cellini's subliminal mind (Flournoy, 1911). If this is correct, we have here the basis of a new psi-mediated hermeneutics for interpreting various "miraculous" phenomena. In my opinion, such an approach to interpretation would serve to deconstruct the attached religious myth but preserve the transcendent character of the experience.

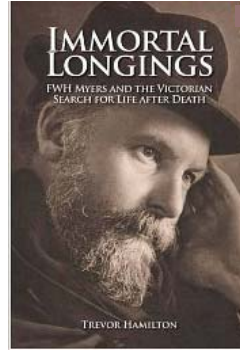
Myers' subliminal self also has experimental potential. Myers understood scrying, dowsing, automatic writing, drawing, and speech as techniques for lowering the supraliminal threshold and facilitating the influx of subliminal consciousness. It is by means of more careful penetration into realms of the subliminal mind that we can begin to assess the utility of this theoretical construction of Myers. As an overly abstract, somewhat nebulous idea, the explanatory value of the subliminal self may be slight; but as a hypothetical springboard for experimental exploration of exotic regions of mental life, the concept could prove to be useful. Its value is not a given, but something we have to be clever enough to use in a way that becomes valuable. Something like this seems true of any scientific or speculative hypothesis; we have to be ingenious at testing it to reap its potential benefits. It seems especially so in this hypothesis. In Myers' romantic psychology, every experiment is an initiation; rather unlike normal science, it must be prepared to honor (and benefit from) the rare, the exceptional, the singular, perhaps the unrepeatable. We will never know, or be able to assess, what convinced Myers of Anne Marshall's survival. But it was of crowning importance to Myers. The Romantic psychology of Myers is a psychology of creative breakthrough, of singularities, of evanescent events; of necessity it is awash in the whirlpool depths of subjectivity.

There is another basic question we have to ask about Myers' romantic—or shall we say quixotic?—quest to solve the riddle of life after death with the aid of science. Trevor Hamilton points out that the intense research, and new science that he helped launch, did leave *him* with the conviction of survival. Myers went to his death fully convinced he would survive and meet Annie Marshall in a next world. William James witnessed the death of Myers, and spoke in glowing



terms of the man's courage, confidence, and apparent joy. Myers' death in a way surpasses Socrates'; Myers died beautifully in the pain of illness; Socrates from a painless poison.

But, beyond personal heroics, did Myers persuade—or even make a strong impression on—the scientific world? We have little hard data on this, but we can be sure that the research has not made much impression on the scientific world. But that is not because the evidence is lacking; it is because the evidence is ignored, or dismissed, more or less a priori by the prevailing scientific world.



We can distinguish four possible positions on the survival question.

- 1) Conscious survival is not a coherent idea; there can be no evidence for it; it is impossible.
- 2) Survival is logically possible, but there is no good factual evidence for it.
- 3) There is good evidence for survival, but it is not compelling.
- 4) The evidence is compelling; not to affirm survival is irrational.

I think most critically informed people believe 2) or 3), though I am sure some people subscribe to 1) or 4).

In my view, the evidence en masse from Myers and company supports 3): There is evidence, but it's not compelling. Position 3) is two steps forward from the null start point. That should count as something. Myers also advanced the survival hypothesis by helping to create a scientific society designed to investigate phenomena that directly and indirectly relate to survival. This, in turn, furnished a cornucopia of counterexamples for the deconstruction of materialism. While we cannot say that Myers (and his progeny) have made much impression on the scientific consensus about life after death, the kind of systematic research he launched provides an enormous variety of psychophysical phenomena that render the metaphysical conceit of materialism very difficult to sustain. There is certainly something romantic about the Davids of psychical research battling against the bloated behemoth of materialism.

As to the romantic coloring of Myers' project, some further comments on the following seem in order. Before marrying Eveleen Tennant, Myers had a profound emotional encounter with Annie Marshall, a troubled married woman. To savor the uniqueness and complexity of this story, read the pertinent chapters in Hamilton's biography. Suffice to note that Myers was smitten by this woman in a way that became a turning point in his life. In *Fragments of Inner Life*, he wrote: "In 1873 there dawned upon me a new knowledge of what divineness can lodge in a woman's soul" (Myers, 1961:17). The effect of meeting this woman produced a "buoyancy which lifts beyond the clutch of fate; the sheer exultation that in the Universe such a creature could breathe and live. Then,

as love grew . . .” (Myers, 1961:17). The two of them sustain an on-and-off relationship for about three years, honorable and consciously modeled after the Platonic ideal, or so one gathers from written accounts, when suddenly an ugly fate intervenes and the unfortunate Annie Marshall, under general family pressure (as Hamilton suggests), commits suicide.

This dramatic and extraordinary loss propelled Myers’ quest for evidence of survival. It was no abstract possibility of knowledge that lured him onward in his research, in his wish to achieve certainty. It was intensely personal. Myers was passionate about reuniting with Annie Marshall. Hamilton suggests that Myers’ essay on Mazzini reveals something of Myers’ feelings about himself. Invoking Dante as a model of love that will not be crushed by contingency, Myers wrote after the death of Annie: “. . . a love like Dante’s . . . grows more pervading through self-control, and more passionate through the austerity of honor, and only draws a stronger aliment from separation, anguish and death” (Myers, 1921:281). Through the eyes of cold reason, of course, this can only appear as madness. In a letter to Sidgwick, Myers even imagines that this lofty honor-shaped form of love will transcend possessiveness. Myers seems to have discussed these ideas with his wife, and suggested to her that in death he and she would meet up with Annie in a place “where no loves are mutually exclusive, but each intensifies all” (p. 56). Indeed, a heavenly prospect. Myers, in short, tried to coax his wife into entertaining the idea of a *ménage a trois* in the world to come.

But Eveleen Myers would have none of it; she was jealous of his intense attachment (however spiritual) to the memory of Annie Marshall and jealous of the mediums who claimed to be in touch with her after death. As we know from Lodge and James, Mrs. Myers tried to interfere with anything involving Annie in Myers’ life becoming public. It wasn’t until 1961 that the original memoir, *Fragments of Inner Life*, saw the light of day. Mrs. Myers could not bear to have her husband’s exalted feelings about the long-deceased Annie published for all the world to pry into. Also, she apparently destroyed the written reports of Myers’ late experiments with Mrs. Piper and Mrs. Thompson, both of whom produced evidence *convincing* him that Annie survived death. Could Myers have convinced himself on feeble evidence in the last act of a desperate imagination? I don’t see how it’s possible for anyone to know. If we had the documents, it would be easier to determine.

Myers’ afterdeath persona lived on for about thirty years in the guise of what are known as the “cross-correspondence” materials. These documents represent a prolonged exercise in group mediumship. According to one interpretation, Myers survived death, exactly as he, on the basis of his research, predicted. If Myers did survive he would want the world to know it; so he would attempt to prove it. Moreover, he and his colleagues whom he presumably joined after

death knew all about the problems of survival research. So maybe they did come up with a new and clever idea. On the other hand, one never knows if the medium(s), combining histrionic talent and ESP, made up the whole survival show. According to the correspondence cases, Myers and company figured out a way to deal with the histrionic subconscious of the medium. The experimenters, residing in the next world, convey information to several mediums pretty much at the same time. They give bits and pieces to each medium, puzzling teasers. It dawns on researchers that patterns of meaning seem to be coming from a single intelligence outside the circle of mediums. To see how that works in detail can only be a difficult challenge, requiring various specialized skills, such as knowledge of classical languages and their literature, along with considerable intuitive, symbol-sensitive, and acutely logical thinking abilities. It is an interesting game these disembodied scholars would play with us. Their meaning at first escapes being noticed. Eventually, the pattern, message, quote, image, reference, etc., become apparent. These were the cross-correspondence tests, and they went on for three decades.

Students of this material disagree on interpretation: one group regards cross-correspondence cases as perhaps the best evidence for survival (for two reasons): 1) by conveying messages proving identity through several mediums, in a way that suggests the operations of an external intelligence and avoids the superpsi unconsciously motivated argument; 2) The evidence of identity, the peculiar classical erudition and linguistic esoterica, seem characteristic of Myers and his buddies now on the other side.

Others take a less optimistic view of this material. The meaningful information that seems to emanate from beyond is the product of imagination, or at best the product of an intricate unconscious group process orchestrated by living mediums; so that the interactive collective unconscious of the mediums is what creates the appearance of an over-riding intelligence. Myers and company only *seem* to be speaking; in fact, there's nobody there. The dead are dead. Hamilton provides enough details for both points of view and skillfully leaves the big question open, whether Myers made it to the other world, or not. One thing is certain: A Myers-persona, a wandering soul, or literary ghost, keeps showing up postmortem in the automatic writings of mediums. One wonders if we are here witnessing certain semi-mythical, ontologically hybrid beings, in the process of being created, entities with dubious status like Moses, Orpheus, or Pecos Bill.

I find it useful to describe Myers as a type—rare and perhaps unrepeatable—of *romantic* psychologist. The word has many meanings, popular ones as in “Isn't this romantic?” followed by “More candlelight, please!” The term is also academically worked over, parsed, and analyzed, describing a literary and artistic movement from the last half of the eighteenth century through the first

question a contemporary mainstream consensus in science.

Of late the vigilantes of scientism have adopted the term “denialism” rather than “pseudo-science” to describe the questioning of received scientific wisdom, and they have taken to calling the questioners “deniers” or “denialists.” This change in terminology was spurred plausibly because “denialism” carries more emotional charge than “pseudo-science,” since “denialism” first came into popular usage in connection with denials that the Holocaust was a deliberate and not-far-from successful attempt to eradicate from the planet all those of Jewish descent. “Denialism” is as intellectually barren and invalid a term as “pseudo-science.”

Michael Specter’s book, and the article series in *New Scientist*, illustrate all this admirably, which is to say sickeningly: They are intellectual garbage.

Bear in mind Bertrand Russell’s cited insight: It’s impossible to demonstrate everything that’s wrong in these writings short of many hundreds of pages. So I can only illustrate, which leaves me open to the charge of taking out of context or over-generalizing. To such a charge, I can only say: “Be my guest. Read all of that book and those articles.” If you do that, you will declare me innocent of any deception or exaggeration.

Specter’s book is a muddle, a mish-mash, unfocused, incoherent, and intellectually shallow to say the least. He doesn’t define “denialism,” but his remarks about it show that it is the questioning of anything that Specter believes to be true. Most of the book is a paean to the wonders of science. Periodically he acknowledges reality, for instance by admitting that genetic engineering and genetically modified (GM) foods are not without risk: But then he immediately muddles that admission by labeling as denialists those who, because of those real risks, have argued and acted against widespread deployment of GM foods and seeds.

Specter is an award-winning science writer, yet he commits such rubbish as “unmistakable connection between ‘conventional’ plant breeding and genetic engineering” (p. 118). What true skeptics about GM foods point to is the unmistakable *disconnect*. Conventional plant breeding works via whatever results hybridization and mutation bring about *by means of naturally evolved mechanisms that we do not fully understand*; genetic engineering by contrast is a hit-and-miss injecting of genetic material in hopes that it will somehow lodge in a place where it can be “expressed” in the intended manner. That procedure ignores just about everything that’s been discovered about genetic mechanisms since the elucidation of DNA structure (Ast, 2005), namely: that “genes” aren’t single entities that always do the same thing (make the same protein); that intricate signaling determines when “genes” are switched on and off and how they divide themselves into sub-units that coordinate with sub-units of other “genes” to do the right thing at the right time; that “junk” DNA—which constitutes the

half of the nineteenth. Myer was *romantic* in the popular *and* the academic sense. In the popular sense, Myers was an amorous man who as Hamilton likes to remind us truly savored the company of attractive women. In his memoir, Myers reports that he was “converted” to Plato’s philosophy of love and death. Myers’ Platonizing *eros* taught him to spiritualize and (hopefully) eternalize the passions by focusing on the beautiful. The *Phaedo* teaches that one must “practice for death,” in short, learn to liberate one’s soul from the passions of the body. In Plato’s philosophy of love, one’s soul is also drawn upward from physical beauty to the realm of the immortals. By worshiping the beauty in other human beings we practice separating our psyches from the more binding passions of the body. The Platonic practice of death and the Platonic ladder of *eros* lead to the same place, perhaps the key to Myers’ psychological quest: ecstatic release from the lower passions and the ignominious mortality of the flesh. Divining this ecstatic state as possible, Myers imagined a next world where bliss was an anonymous possession, a feature (as it were) of the very atmosphere of consciousness itself.

Something hinging on this idea came together for Myers in his probably unconsummated love affair with Annie Marshall. He wrote in his brief but extraordinary memoir: “My history has been that of a soul struggling into the conviction of its own existence, postponing all else to the one question whether life and love survive the tomb” (Myers, 1961:36). Myers here refers to “love” in a general way; but we know from the *Fragment* that he has one particular love in mind, the love that taught him how the “divine” could lodge in a female body. One sees why Mrs. Myers fought to prevent this memoir from reaching the public. She must have been humiliated at the thought of it being published. The reason was not to prevent the public from supposing that Myers was carrying on with a married woman. The hurt would have been deeper and subtler. Myers describes a love for Annie that, however “honorable” and “Platonic,” might make the most secure, self-possessed woman furious with jealousy. It’s clear from his prosaic utterances and his poetic effusions that Myers’ whole life work was built around the hope of reunion with his deceased lover. This linkage of high-minded love with death is of course an old romantic motif.

One passage would surely have galled Eveleen: where he reviews his life, marriage, family, splendid home, and exquisite Lake District—his whole world—as *not* where his heart or destiny truly lay. His true hope is “elsewhere,” in the next world, the world after death, basking in the glorified presence of Annie (whom he calls Phyllis), his divine inamorata. She it was who inspired him to believe in Platonic love as the *eternal* begetter of beauty. Myers actually had counted the number of days he and Annie had met face to face (426, to be exact), days that to him were nothing less than a “prelude of Love’s unimaginable

day” (Myers, 1961:40). How painful it must have been for Eveleen to read this part of her husband’s memoir.

In calling attention to some romantic motifs driving Myers’ complex personality, I in no way mean to imply that they undercut the intellectual virtues of his work. Far from undercutting, I believe they inspired, propelled him forward, and made him more daring and dauntless—but not less critical. I disagree with Hamilton who cites “narcissism” as possibly tainting Myers’ scientific intelligence. I think the evidence carried him to his conclusions, not just his hopes or desires (which doesn’t rule out that he was wrong). Still, we might ask: If Myers was so passionate about proving survival, can we trust his judgment? My reply: Myers would have been a Spiritualist if he were merely an enthusiast and could be satisfied with mere faith. In fact, he chose the unemotional, witheringly logical Sidgwick to join him in his quest for scientific knowledge in the great questions. Myers and Sidgwick both thought science was the last hope of saving some remnant of their collapsing spiritual universe. Myers was moved by his metaphysical passions; but he was also weaned on the Greek and Roman classics. And he had a snobbish sense of truth and honor he couldn’t get rid of even if he tried. Aggravated by Sidgwick’s corrosive questionings, he recalls periods of doubt, the thought that survival of death is an illusion. He resigns himself to his duties and tries not to think about “the blackness of the end.” He then adds, “As I have implied, the question was for me too vital to admit of my endeavoring for a moment to cheat myself into a false security” (Myers, 1961:41).

My sense is that Myers’ romantic science bifocally honors the rules of reason and as well the depths and heights of feeling. (Most of us favor one or the other.) The romantic domain of consciousness embraces intuition, feeling, sentiment, intense subjectivity; ecstasy, rapture, manic-depression—all the polarities of mental experience, all the possible altered states: genius, artistic inspiration, psychosis, paranormal group dynamics, dreams and somnambulism, visions and apparitions; all the anomalies, and indeed all the ontological outlaws and hybrids. This edgy stuff, the wild flirtations with love and death, is part of the funky tonality of Myers’ romantic psychology. (Not everybody will like it—but so what?) It is not less science, it is richer, more complex, albeit elusive, science. It is also democratic science, for it favors the altered, the multiple, the outcast, the outlaw, the different, and the alien.

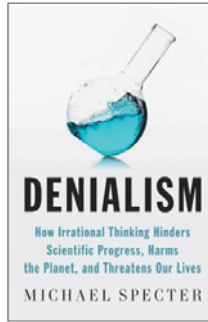
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largest part of the human genome—has something to do with the signaling, as well as incorporating evolutionarily acquired “fossils” of retroviruses (human endogenous retroviruses, HERVs) that may protect against exogenous viruses (and which have likely been responsible for the mistaken “identification” of “HIV” as the cause of AIDS). Genetic engineering has yet to understand all these things well enough to know what bits of DNA need to be placed exactly where if they are to do what’s wanted, nor has a means even been found to place bits of DNA exactly where intended. And yet Specter asserts that “Genetics and molecular biology are simply tools to help scientists choose with greater precision which genes to mix (and how to mix them)” (p. 117).



So Specter knows his science as little as he knows his philosophy of science. The shallowness of Specter’s understanding of science might be epitomized by this: “Francis Bacon invented what we have come to regard as the scientific method (and Galileo began to put it to use)” (p. 9). It was painful to read this book, which is replete with such nonsense: “we are either going to embrace new technologies, along with their limitations and threats, or slink into an era of magical thinking” (p. 16). “Science and religion have always clashed and always will” (p. 17). On topics where a reader is informed, Specter’s ignorance is likely to be manifest all too clearly. For example, I know quite a lot about HIV/AIDS, including that after nearly three decades it remains a mystery how HIV purportedly destroys the immune system, since all of the suggested mechanisms have so far been disconfirmed: “It is not clear how much of the pathology of AIDS is directly due to the virus and how much is caused by the immune system itself. There are numerous models which have been suggested to explain how HIV causes immune deficiency” (Cann, 2005); yet Specter writes: “Without the tools of molecular biology, we wouldn’t have a clue how the AIDS virus works” (p. 20). In fact we don’t have a clue, and perhaps that explains why all attempts to make vaccines or microbicides have failed.

At any rate, the book is about “denialism” only as part of an obsequious obeisance to “Science”: Anything that questions current dogma is thereby “denialism.” Even the titles of the book’s chapters expose Specter’s prejudices: “Vioxx and the fear of science”; “Vaccines and the great denial”; “The organic fetish”; “The era of Echinacea”; though the last two, “Race and the language of life” and “Surfing the exponential,” are somewhat obscure until you’ve scanned their texts.

The book is muddled everywhere. Eric Topol is described as someone who was right about the dangers of Vioxx and who became thereby “an outcast in his own profession, shunned for his warnings and eventually driven from the



department he made famous” (p. 31). In other words, Topol was a denialist who was right when the mainstream was wrong! Nowhere does Specter try to explain why “denialism” is bad when denialist Topol is good and should have been attended to. To muddle things even further, Specter concludes the Vioxx chapter with this rather monumental non sequitur: “When we compare the risk of taking Vioxx to the risk of getting behind the wheel of a car, it’s not at all clear which is more dangerous” (p. 55).

In the chapter on vaccines, Specter fails to make the crucial distinction between two quite different matters: vaccination in principle on the one hand, and on the other the use in practice of preservatives such as organic-mercury-containing thiomersol and such non-specific allergenic or toxic “adjuvants” as squalene. Many “denialists” question the latter, not the former, but Specter tars them all with the same brush. He also lauds Gardasil (p. 100) as an effective cancer vaccine, when we are decades away from being able to assess that.

“Race and the language of life” interested me because it recognizes that the markedly different tendencies to be asthmatic between West-Coast Hispanics and East-Coast Hispanics obviously has a genetic basis—just as does the tendency to test “HIV-positive” (Bauer, 2007). But then the chapter becomes unfocused, like the rest of the book, and it’s not clear what Specter is getting at. He even fails to criticize the extraordinary albeit widespread foolishness of presuming that all “Latinos” or “Hispanics” share a common cultural or “ethnic” heritage. Unlike Ruth Benedict (Benedict, 1942/1983), Specter and those he cites don’t appear to understand that “race” is a matter of biology whereas racism is a matter of culture, and there’s nothing racist about investigating genetic aspects of race, indeed it can improve medical treatment, for example by appropriately varying drug dosages.

“Surfing the exponential” is about synthetic biology and presumably is meant to suggest speeding along a wave into the future. Synthetic biology seeks to create entirely new, human-designed organisms by putting together strings of DNA that Nature never put together, in order “to redesign the living world.” Here Specter illustrates what he means by denialism: “Synthetic biology provides what may be our last chance to embrace science and reject denialism” (p. 226). In other words, to call “Halt” to even the most far-fetched experimenting that has unforeseeable, enormously far-reaching consequences—experimentation by people who literally don’t know what they’re doing—is denialism, just so long as those experimenters could be said to be doing science. Here are some other examples of Specter’s lack of clarity as to what denialism is supposed to be: “Denialism is at least partly a defense against that sense of helplessness” in the face of “highly sophisticated technology we can barely understand” (p. 33); “denialism [is] at the core of nearly every alternative approach to medicine” (p. 158). “Denialism provides a way to cope with medical mistakes like Vioxx and

to explain the technical errors of Chernobyl or Bhopal” (p. 47); I wondered, “How does that work?” but Specter didn’t enlighten me.

Or, denialism results from disappointed high expectations (p. 51); “willful ignorance . . . [is] the driving force of denialism” (p. 118)—as in the case of Topol, above, perhaps?

“When people decide that science can’t solve their problems, they reject its principles.” Where does that generalization come from? “Denying the truth becomes a habit” follows that sentence immediately (p. 127). So Specter is asserting that rejecting the principles of science—whatever that might mean—is a denying of truth. The book is brim-full of such silly assertions and non sequiturs.

“Denialists shun nuance and fear complexity, so instead of asking how science might help resolve our problems, they reject novel strategies even when those strategies are supported by impressive data and powerful consensus” (p. 4). Doesn’t he know that “impressive” data are in the eyes of the beholder, and that even the most “powerful” consensus has often been wrong?

“Holocaust deniers and AIDS denialists are intensely destructive—even homicidal—but they don’t represent conventional thought and never will” (p. 4). Of course, neither does breakthrough science represent conventional thought.

The “most remarkable act of denialism” by President George W. Bush was “to devote one-third of federal HIV-prevention funds to ‘abstinence and marriage’ programs” (p. 8). Stupid, perhaps; ineffectual, probably; but denialist?! Just because Specter says so?

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The essays in *New Scientist* are of a piece with Specter’s ignorant muddle. The lead author is Michael Shermer, who introduces the series by proclaiming, “I am a sceptic, but I’m not a denier.” The difference, he says, is that Shermer takes “a scientific approach to the evaluation of claims.” This is the Shermer who dismissed my book *without having read it* because the overwhelming majority of medical scientists regard the connection between HIV and AIDS as overwhelming; apparently he doesn’t even know that hundreds of medical scientists and medical practitioners have expressed their disagreement with that “consensus.” Shermer continues by asserting that climate skeptics have looked at the evidence whereas climate deniers had their position staked out in advance—an egregious, atrocious calumny on the thousands of true climate skeptics—competent and appropriately qualified climatologists and meteorologists and atmospheric scientists and geologists, and the like—who have signed petitions asking for the evidence to be looked at properly, that is, the actual evidence and not the outputs of computer models that mainstream

dogmatists of human-caused global warming keep pushing on gullible policy makers and media pundits.

Among Shermer's more amusing assertions is that "good scientists are sceptical." No! The greatest achievements in science have come from strong-willed individuals who paid little or no attention to ideas or claims that conflicted with their own pet notions. They were skeptical just as Shermer is, toward everything except their own notions.

I am among those who have been called a denialist as to HIV/AIDS. According to Shermer, that means that I am "automatic[ally] gainsaying . . . a claim regardless of the evidence"; because, if I'm a typical denialist then I'm "driven by ideology or religious belief." Had he read my book, he would have learned that I was driven by a collation of the mainstream data on "HIV" tests to deny the HIV–AIDS connection, *to my own initial astonishment* (Bauer, 2009a).

What Shermer has written here is a just-so story describing his firm belief that he can see the truth when others cannot, and feeling therefore at liberty to call those with different views "deniers" or "denialists." At the same time, Shermer asserts that science is not a matter of belief but of facts: Evolution or Big Bang either happened or they didn't, and "both matters can, in principle, be solved with more data and better theory." As to "evolution" he's wrong because that word needs to be defined very precisely before anything can be said on that score, much of the disputation being the result of a lack of such precision; as to Big Bang, of course that can never be finally decided by human beings no matter how much data might be accumulated or how many abstruse theories might be thrown into the mix.

"Sceptics," Shermer concludes, "change their mind. Deniers just keep on denying." But most of those I've met and heard from who deny the connection between HIV and AIDS were converted from a prior acceptance of such a connection, whereas "sceptics" like Shermer just keep on denying the plain evidence that has accumulated over more than two decades since that connection was first asserted on the basis of highly dubious inferences.

Shermer's nutshell illustrations of "True Disbelievers" further illustrate his ignorance of what he presumes to write about. AIDS denialists, he says, call themselves "AIDS truthers"! Utterly wrong, as the most rudimentary attempt to fact-check would have discovered. We call ourselves AIDS Rethinkers or HIV Sceptics. "AIDStruth.org," by contrast, is the website of the most intemperate vigilantes for the mainstream view.

Debra MacKenzie, the *New Scientist* correspondent in Brussels, contributes a piece that is even worse than Shermer's. As an example of "denial" she cites the proposition that the swine flu pandemic was a hoax; yet it has become quite plain that the dangers of swine flu were vastly overstated and that no pandemic

eventuated despite the lack of widespread vaccination. She notes that “denial finds its most fertile ground in areas where the science must be taken on trust.” This from a correspondent for a science journal? When and why should any “science” ever be taken on trust? And, MacKenzie holds that “all denial is essentially the same”; when in reality one can only judge any specific issue on its own merits and the arguments over evolution, human-caused global warming, HIV/AIDS, Big Bang, etc., have to do with quite different sorts of evidence and different reasons for doubting the mainstream dogmas. MacKenzie cheerfully cites a vaccinologist who diagnoses the mental and emotional character of vaccine deniers, as though he were a psychologist or sociologist. She asserts that Seth Kalichman spent a year infiltrating denialist groups when he did nothing of the sort (Bauer, 2009b). Many denialist movements “originate as cynical efforts by corporations”: an apt description rather of HIV/AIDS activist groups, most of them funded by pharmaceutical companies and which campaign for widespread use of antiretroviral drugs. “[D]enial is often driven by an overtly political agenda”; but then, of course, so are “mainstream” assertions. That “HIV deniers . . . have massive but mysterious funding” will come as a shock to us “HIV deniers” who have yet to see any of it, say, as we pay our own way to conferences while pharmaceutical companies pay mainstreamers to go to their conferences. MacKenzie also keeps suggesting a commonality among all “denialisms,” namely, conservatism, while paying the usual lip-service to not committing that innuendo of guilt by association.

Jim Giles’s essay, “Giving life to a lie,” follows the usual course of simply assuming the mainstream consensus to be always right, fleshing that out with such banalities as “we seldom bother to check the veracity of what we are told,” which actually describes precisely what Giles himself and other unthinking groupies of mainstream views do habitually.

The last essay, by Michael Fitzpatrick, promised to be different: “Don’t mention the d-word.” Labeled “Opinion”—unlike the other essays!—this “argues that branding your opponent a denier is a convenient way of ducking difficult questions.” YES! At last an independent and thoughtful piece!

Indeed, Fitzpatrick criticizes Michael Specter for his assertion that denialists “replace the rigorous and open-minded scepticism of science with the inflexible certainty of ideological commitment” and points out that “the concept of denialism is itself inflexible, ideological, and intrinsically anti-scientific . . . used to close down legitimate debate by insinuating moral deficiency in those expressing dissident views. . . . crying denialism is a form of ad hominem argument.” Bravo!

I wish Fitzpatrick had stopped there. Unfortunately, he continues that



“the popular appeal of pseudoscience is undoubtedly a problem,” and as one example cites Peter Duesberg’s claim that HIV doesn’t cause AIDS, and makes the following errors about that:

- ◆ that Duesberg couldn’t substantiate his hypothesis, whereas in reality he has documented it copiously;
- ◆ that his supporters include “disaffected scientists, credulous journalists, charlatans, quacks and assorted conspiracy theorists and opportunistic politicians.” No doubt there are some of those, but defenders of the mainstream also include demonstrably some “credulous journalists, charlatans, . . . assorted conspiracy theorists and opportunistic politicians”;
- ◆ that mainstream scientists made “a comprehensive rebuttal of Duesberg,” albeit only five years later. But where is that rebuttal? Fitzpatrick doesn’t cite it, and we dissidents haven’t seen it despite innumerable requests to mainstream-adherents that it be cited to us.

To cap that off, Fitzpatrick cites as authoritative, Kalichman’s book.

But perhaps his essay is redeemed by its last two paragraphs. Using the terms “pseudoscience” or “denialism” amounts to labeling certain views as “a secular form of blasphemy,” and it is “illiberal,” “intolerant,” “ineffective.” “What we need is more debate, not less.” Amen.

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## ESSAY REVIEW

### Reflections on Frederic Myers' Romantic Psychology

**Immortal Longings: F. W. H. Myers and the Victorian Search for Life After Death** by Trevor Hamilton. Imprint Academic (Exeter, England), 2009. 300 pp. £16.96. ISBN 9781845401238.

History is what contingencies allow us to record and remember. Great things from the world of art and thought are probably routinely lost in time, vanished without a trace, or lying in dustbins, unnoticed and forgotten. It is often one person who pulls a genius from oblivion, as Thomas Wentworth Higginson seems to have done with Emily Dickinson. Melville's *Moby Dick* almost vanished before it was rescued from oblivion. Sebastian Bach's work hovered at the edge until Felix Mendelsohn recalled him to music lovers. The name and the work of Frederic Myers have by no means vanished from educated consciousness; in most history books, however, reference to him is rare. Outside the small community of psychical researchers, Myers has been largely forgotten. Now and then he was acknowledged in the twentieth century; Colin Wilson wrote a chapter about Myers' "forgotten masterpiece," *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* (1903). Andre Breton called attention to Myers as one of the inspirations of Surrealism, which relies on automatism, Myers' great domain of expertise. And importantly, Henri Ellenberger gives a good account of Myers' role in the discovery of the unconscious (Ellenberger, 1970). Myers introduced the writings of Freud to the English-speaking world, discussing his work and publishing an important essay of Freud's on the unconscious. The new century has produced two major books about Myers, one that reviews mainstream psychology in light of Myers' ideas and data, in considerable detail, and concludes that by comparison mainstream psychology looks deficient and inadequate (Kelly, Kelly, Crabtree, Gauld, Grosso, & Greyson, 2007).

The second volume is the subject of this review, the first full-length biography of Frederic Myers, by the historian Trevor Hamilton. We are indebted to the author for placing the career of Myers in the context of his social and historical world, a period of convulsive transition. We get to see Myers in his early years, his relationship to a rather forbidding mother, his career as a student, as a swimmer and runner, and as a poet who for a while had grown a national reputation; his ardent friendships with fellow researchers, a dalliance with homosexuality; his upwardly mobile marriage to Eveleen Tennant, who