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Jonathan Koons and American Spiritualism[1]

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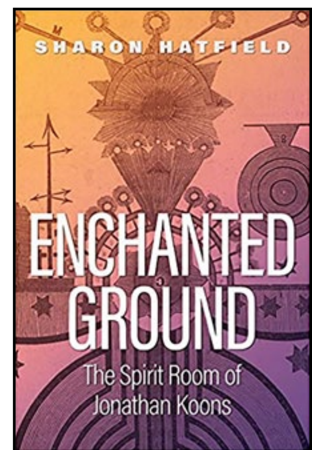
A review of *Enchanted Ground: The Spirit Room of Jonathan Koons*, by Sharon Hatfield. Swallow Press Book, 2018. 342 pp. $28.95 ISBN 978-0-8040-1208-9



Hatfield offers a solid detailed biography of one of the most famous and influential spiritualists of the nineteenth century. The unfolding history of Protestantism explored a Christianity increasingly independent of church hierarchies. An American society preoccupied with the value of the individual grappled with the intrinsic problem of personal death and the ongoing pain of widespread child mortality. After young girls began experiencing "rappings" attributed to spirits of the dead, as the events of midcentury eroded confidence in orthodoxies, increasing numbers began exploring claims that rappings associated with women, particularly young girls, represented attempts of the dead to communicate with the living. Large numbers turned to this radically democratic sense of who had access to the cosmic verities.

As with its predecessors, though, it rooted its claim to legitimacy on a certain respect for traditional institutions. Families, neighbors, and friends gathered to try their hand at spirit communication. Specific rules defined the *séance* where the most receptive participants served as a "medium" for the spirits of the departed. Most mediums were locally known amateurs, but a proliferation of movement newspapers advertised the work of hundreds who regularly toured to lecture and promote the new dispensation. The railroads and transportation system knitted together a movement capable of sustaining, often supporting, such spokespeople, even as the telegraph provided the model for communication by rapping. Editors and advocates constituted a new profession that molded and shaped the course of the wider phenomena.

Enchanted Ground presents the life and work of Jonathan Koons who—with his neighbor and relative John Tippie—found an innovative way to contribute to this process, filling a vital niche in the broader movement. Coming to maturity in a world of evangelical Christianity and ghost stories from his Pennsylvania German antecedents, Koons followed the growth of the movement from his rural home in a relatively isolated corner of Ohio, where young girls began emulating their peers back east. From his household, he sought to provide confirmations of more demonstrable communications through physical

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manifestations. Starting in 1852, what became his "spirit rooms" allowed the invisible to express itself through the kind of vocal and musical proof of what the believers desperately sought to find.

The appearance of spirit rooms—Tippie found enough interest to make it worthwhile to offer his own version in 1854—had a sweeping influence on the wider movement. These began functioning alongside serious movement efforts to establish professional standards. Believers never felt the need to believe every claim of spirit communication—or even most of them- and were well aware that the very assumptions of spiritualism invited opportunistic trickery. Although they accepted the idea that tricks demonstrated the validity of their claims, they sought, without success, to insulate the movement from those who used only tricks to defraud and mislead.

Most famously ravaged by the relentless and ruthless investigations of Houdini in the early 20th century, the problem of trickery had long preoccupied serious spiritualists, who regularly wrestled with the problem in the course of unsuccessfully trying to establish professional standards without imposing the orthodoxy they shunned. Before Houdini, spiritualists addressed the showmanship of performers such as the Davenport brothers, who would later be called magicians, as well as deliberate confidence tricksters such as Charles J. Colchester. By the late 19th century, one of the original mediums, Margaret Fox confessed that the entire movement originated in a youthful prank among gullible adults that had gotten out of hand [Editor's note: but she recanted her confession before dying]. To many, spirit rooms represented little more than a kind of spiritualist Disneyland that distilled piety into entertainment and showmanship.

Heavily influenced by Fred Nardis' *Wonder Shows* (2005), Hatfield is less concerned with the extent of trickery than the importance of its impact on those experiencing it, which was significant, even transformative. In a community sense, such exercises both expressed and shaped shared social sensibilities. Arguably, the same could be said for any kind of showmanship from sports through cinema to television. Indeed, everything from commercial advertising to politics communicates a commonality that leaves meaning up to the interpretation of the individual experience.

Hatfield's biographical narrative reflects an evocative appreciation of the rugged countryside of southeastern Ohio. Koons and Tippie belonged to a local mystical tradition that included the Swedenborgian John Chapman ("Johnny Appleseed"), and Edward P. Page who conducted his orientalized Masonic rituals in the shadow of the ancient Indian earthworks of Marietta. The Ohio valley beyond the mountains seemed to inspire new sightings of the old spirits in the woodland shadows. What spiritualism did was to give them more familiar names. The John and Katie King of the Koons spirit rooms kept reappearing in similarly dramatic settings, such as the Eddys farm in Vermont in 1874, which inspired the Theosophical Society.

Charles Partridge, Emma Hardinge Britten, and other eastern, urban spiritualists came to see Koons work as a great western curiosity, the product of a household closer to the spirits and the spirit of nature. For them—or believers from distant communities across the country—visiting the spirit rooms represented something of a medieval pilgrimage to a space made sacred by what people did and expected to experience there. Even after Koons left the area for Illinois, admirers built a tabernacle at Mount Nebo to commemorate his activities, choosing to build it as a distinctive octagon, reminiscent of contemporary preferences at the Modern Times and other communitarian experiments.

Harfield's well-written biographical narrative often misses one of the most essential features of spiritualism, its urgency—the spirits were hoping to reform the world, guided by their ability to see beyond immediate mortal concerns. She cites the diffusion of "free love" among Ohio spiritualists without exploring its significance. So, too, the belief in manifestations would be more comprehensible with a greater sense of the psychometry of the Buchanan and the Dentons, who had close ties to the spelling reformers and Fourierists Longley brothers. The entire sweep of the communitarian movements essential to spiritualism would explain the spatial physicality of the spirit rooms.

No coincidence conjured spiritualism as a mass phenomenon alongside the rise of a new Republican party, and the conflict between proslavery and antislavery forces in Kansas. Tippie, notes Hatfield, had gone to Kansas, as did Denton, and, as hoped Koons. There, the Wattles clan of Utopia, Ohio rode with John Brown. It was probably no accident that landed Koons in "Egypt," the contemporary description of southern Illinois, where Warren B. Chase moved in hopes of establishing a spiritualist community there, after his former neighbors at Ripon, Wisconsin had launched a new Republican party.

Koons sense of this insistence of the spirits on change was evident in a vision Hatfield recounted (pp. 218-219). In it, a laborer exposed the rottenness of a massive oak by girdling its base. Koons recognized him as Andrew J. Davis, the primary ideologue of the spiritualist movement. Although the tree should have fallen of its own weight, it did not. Koons recognized that the tree survived because it was braced by connections to various "airy castles" about it. Koons himself, then, severed those ties, bringing the Old Order crashing down.

Those interested in the hope and optimism spiritualism engendered will enjoy Hatfield's biographical appreciation of a fascinating figure.

References

Nardis, F. (2005). *Wonder shows: Performing science, magic, and religion in America*. Rutgers University Press.