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Connection Failure: War, Spiritualism and Communications Media in Violet Hunt's "Love's Last Leave."

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Abstract

An overlooked figure of modernist circles, Violet Hunt was a suffragette, novelist, and author of ghost stories. In her second collection of haunted narratives, *More Tales of The Uneasy* (1925), Hunt explores the ghostliness of the Great War, both for those on the front and at home. In this essay, we focus on the third story in this volume, "Love's Last Leave," and argue that Hunt includes both ghost story tropes and communications media to articulate the real deadliness of the Great War. Communications technology and spiritualism share a similar historical evolution, and in "Love's Last Leave" both types of mediums fail to connect those at home with those "who are gone." By re-narrating the shared history of spiritualism and communications media, Hunt implies the devastation and deadliness of war even when the plot fails to do so. In this essay, we use media theory and narratology to show how the gaps, absences, and uncertainties in the story's narrative structure are replicated by the communications technology in the story. The failure of narrative, technological, and spiritual mediums to transmit clear messages throughout "Love's Last Leave" emphasizes how deadly the disconnect between sender and receiver can be.

Keywords: Violet Hunt, ghost stories, World War I, communications media, spiritualism

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Violet Hunt was a prolific and well-known novelist, journalist, and critic, but is now largely remembered within Victorian and modernist studies for her literary connections and liaisons, most notably with Ford Madox Ford.¹ During her lifetime, Hunt helped establish *The English Review* (alongside Ford) and International PEN (alongside Catherine Amy Dawson Scott), and was an active suffragette. Her writing and social life connects Pre-Raphaelites, Edwardians, and modernists and includes figures such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, H.G. Wells, Henry James, Wyndham Lewis, Rebecca West, Ezra Pound, and Dorothy Richardson, among many others. Toward the end of her literary career, Hunt began writing ghost stories, which Victoria Margree rightly notes have been “overshadowed by the male figures with whom [she] was associated.”² These haunted tales were assembled into two collections: *Tales of the Uneasy* (1911) and *More Tales of the Uneasy* (1925).

Written after her hostile separation from Ford and the devastation of the Great War, Hunt's second collection of stories explores the themes of marital loss and the ghostliness of war, both for those in the trenches and at home. With their absent men and their focus on the uncanny, the short stories in *More Tales of the Uneasy* mark a break from both Hunt's first collection of uncanny tales, and her novels, reflecting Hunt's own personal trajectory away from investing in being a man's lover towards an interest, if a bitter one, in women's lives as lived alone. All four stories in *More Tales of the Uneasy* are what Hunt calls “uncanny” tales in the volume's preface, and all four have women as their central protagonists. Two of these tales, “Love's Last Leave” and “The Cigarette Case of the Commander,” are set during World War I; in both, Hunt uses the social and cultural instability produced by the Great War to amplify the uncanniness of the main

characters' experiences in the stories. "Love's Last Leave" and the first story in the collection, "The Night of No Weather," are more traditional ghostly tales, whereas "The Cigarette Case of the Commander" and "The Corsican Sisters" rely more on psychological terror to create the sense of unease advertised by the collection's title. Formal uncertainties, such as unreliable narrators and unresolved narrative gaps, pervade all of the stories in *More Tales* and amplify the uncanny content. In this essay, we focus on "Love's Last Leave," a uniquely media-laden story in *More Tales*. Set during World War I, "Love's Last Leave" tells the story of sisters Gussy and Aggie, who are married to the brothers George and Willy Leclerc. Gussy and Aggie have left London for the family's country estate, Ilvercote House. Ilvercote is known to be haunted, and the tale of the house's haunting is told in detail in "Love's Last Leave," offering a frame for the story's events. Part I of "Love's Last Leave" centers on plans being made for Christmas at Ilvercote, along with descriptions of the psychological impact of the war on the lives of those on the home front. The central focus of the first half of the story is whether or not Willy Leclerc (Aggie's husband) will return home for Christmas as promised. At the beginning of Part II, set in the first months of the following year, we find out that George (Gussy's husband) has died in the war, and Willy is missing and presumed dead. The story shifts its focus from the sisters and their soldier-husbands to Peter, Aggie and Willy's fifteen-year-old psychically-sensitive son and the new master of Ilvercote, as well as the gossip surrounding Aggie's unexplained (and potentially ghostly) pregnancy.

Throughout "Love's Last Leave," Hunt uses obvious tropes of the Victorian ghost story (troubled characters, spiritualism, a haunted house); however, it is the presence of communications media in Hunt's narrative (letter, telegraph, telephone, and wireless) that articulates the deadliness of the Great War. This is perhaps unsurprising as communications

technology and modern spiritualism share a remarkably similar historical trajectory, with spiritualism often taking its methods directly from the fashionable technology of the time. For example, the spiritualist practice of table rapping emerged after the invention of the telegraph, trance speaking followed the arrival of the telephone, and many spiritualists thought the radio itself could be used to contact those who had died. This shared history is on display in “Love’s Last Leave,” where both human and technological mediums fail to connect those at home with those “who are gone.” Hunt’s subtle re-narration of the shared history of spiritualism and communications media amplifies the war’s deadliness. Pulling from both media theory and narratology, we show how the gaps, absences, and uncertainties in the story’s narrative structure are replicated by the presence of communications media. The failure of these mediums (narrative, technological, and spiritual) to successfully transmit a clear message, emphasizes how deadly, *and* inevitable, the disconnect is between sender and receiver. The resulting fragmentation and absence marks “Love’s Last Leave” as a modernist ghost story, even when Hunt distanced herself from the newer literary movement.

Spiritualism and Modernist Feminism

Critics have not yet reached a consensus as to whether Hunt should be classified as a Victorian, Edwardian, or modernist author. Writing in the 1970s, Marie Secor firmly positions Hunt as an Edwardian, while Margree has more recently argued that Hunt’s ghost stories are a bridge between Victorianism and modernism in the ways they “respond to Victorian and Edwardian male storytellers” and use traditional ghost story tropes as “a means of interrogating contemporary notions of modernity.”³ According to Margree, Hunt’s writing challenges the common modernist “rupture” origin story and replaces it with a narrative of modernity that has

yet to reckon with its own ghosts. As Margree writes: “The ghost story in [Hunt’s] hands is Janus-faced, looking backwards to the nineteenth century with a sense that its demise may have been announced prematurely, while also participating in the modernist perception that real and significant changes, in both social environment and human knowledge, require the development of new ways of representing selfhood in fiction.”⁴

In her preface to *More Tales*, Hunt also stakes her own claim toward classification when she aligns herself with Wells, Conrad, and James and dismisses the recent literary experiments of the high modernists who she criticizes as “trying to express their own personality.”⁵ Hunt felt that her writing style differed from current literary trends, and her embracing of Victorian and Edwardian writers in this preface marks her as out of literary step with her own time. She is the Victorian ghost haunting the modernist literary scene. However, the excessive structural fragmentation in “Love’s Last Leave,” paired with the narrative reliance on mass communications media, suggests that after the Great War, Hunt dabbled with modernist forms and tropes more than she willingly acknowledged. In her book *Ghostwriting Modernism*, Helen Sword argues that spiritualist activity and interest in the paranormal flourished among modern writers. Sword writes,

Like modernist literature, popular spiritualism sought to embrace both authority and iconoclasm, both tradition and innovation, both continuity and fragmentation, both the elitist mystique of high culture and the messy vitality of popular culture. In particular, the figure of the spirit medium — with her multiple perspectives, fragmented discourse, and simultaneous claims to authority and passivity — offered a fertile model for the kinds of cultural and linguistic subversions that many authors were seeking to accomplish through their own poetics.⁶

Even the structure of the ghost story itself offered a model for modernist form. According to Luke Thurston, who writes about the role of ghosts within the works of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Elizabeth Bowen, “what the ghost story offered to the modernists was an exemplary *fracture* of narrative consistency.”⁷ Thus, the gaps and omissions in the ghost story (both literary and historical), are complementary to modernist form.

One reason Hunt may have aligned *More Tales* with Victorian and Edwardian writers was because she associated spiritualism with her mother. In her preface, Hunt writes about her mother attending séances in the 1860s with Rossetti and William Morris. According to Hunt, her mother was thought to be spiritually sensitive because she “was born in a haunted house [Crook Hall], *tempo* Edward II, and took her tub nightly in the haunted room with the chance of a ghost handing her the soap and towel.”⁸ Hunt’s biographer Barbara Belford expands upon Hunt’s connection with the ghostly and notes that beyond the nighttime stories about Crook Hall, her mother also translated Grimm’s *Household Tales* and the Scottish folklorist Andrew Lang told a young Hunt ghost stories at Tor Villa, her childhood home.⁹ Ghosts, according to Hunt, “were taken for granted [...] and permitted to cross the border-line till they became rather common.”¹⁰ It is noteworthy, however, that in the early 1920s, when Hunt was writing the stories for *More Tales*, she made a striking shift in the company she kept. Following her contentious split with Ford during World War I, Hunt began spending more time with women writers, including Dorothy Richardson, who helped pioneer the stream-of-consciousness form, and May Sinclair, who like Richardson was interested in spiritualism. Thus, while Hunt associated ghost stories with her literary past, she surrounded herself with the feminist modernist present.

That Hunt wrote a short story about spiritualism during this time of camaraderie with female writers is not surprising, given spiritualism’s long intertwined history with feminism and

authorship. According to John Durham Peters, the spiritualist movement “with its individualist emphasis on the capacity of anyone — including or especially women — to become a medium of spiritual life, was tied to reform efforts such as abolition, temperance, and women’s rights.”¹¹ Being a medium required one to become a conduit for the voices of absent specters while in a trance. As such, the medium was not responsible for what was said. This gave female mediums, in particular, the opportunity to speak on taboo subjects such as universal suffrage and marital rights. As a result, modern spiritualism “provided one of the first and most important forums for women’s voices to enter the public sphere.”¹²

In “Love’s Last Leave” Hunt introduces communications media from the letter and telegraph to the telephone and radio in evolutionary order. Each of these technologies was historically aligned with spiritualist practices that echoed the ways in which the communications medium worked. More than this though, the technologies themselves were understood to be portals to other realms. As Sconce writes, “In media folklore past and present, telephones, radios, and computers have been similarly ‘possessed’ by such ‘ghosts in the machine,’ the technologies serving as either uncanny electronic agents or as gateways to electronic otherworlds.”¹³ But while connection is the goal, Hunt articulates the ubiquity of transmission failure during the war by including electronic technologies that are unable to connect Gussy and Aggie with their husbands at the Front while they are alive, and then showing how the spiritually sensitive sisters cannot locate their husbands in the afterlife after they die. This connection failure motif is amplified through Hunt’s use of fragmentation, multiple narrative points of view, and unresolved plot elements. By forcing readers to experience their own connection failures, “Love’s Last Leave” illustrates how the Great War brought about a new kind of fractured experience, one that could not be mended by technological, spiritual, or even literary mediums.

Letters and Telegraphs

In the opening pages of “Love’s Last Leave,” Hunt introduces readers to the British home front setting, in which two sisters (Gussy and Aggie) carry on with their lives and support the war effort while their husbands fight abroad. The sisters, however, are very different. Gussy, the eldest and “the handsomest” of the two, is described as “bursting with health and happiness” in her youth. Aggie, on the other hand, is “pale, frail, [and] thin” and “possesse[s] an allurements whose area of dominion was unlimited.” Gussy lands on one word to describe Aggie and her unearthly charms: “psychic.”¹⁴ The war has exacerbated these differences between the sisters, which Hunt illustrates through their nightly apparel. Gussy’s is practical: her “lingerie was of the very plainest, so built that it would not tear in the terrible ‘wash’” made necessary now that much of the domestic help is working in factories; Aggie’s is delicate and alluring: her lingerie is described as both “a splendid peignoir” and an “indecent French nightgown.”¹⁵ (These divisions are also mirrored in the husbands: Gussy’s husband, George Leclerc, is hearty and a “thorough soldier” who joined the Expeditionary Force in the first month of war. Aggie’s husband (and Leclerc heir) is Willy, a “delicate” and scholarly man, who even while alive “used to slink about just like a ghost.”¹⁶) Although the divisions between the sisters are muddied later in the story, Hunt uses them here to set Aggie up as a potential spiritualist medium in the mold of the Victorian era: delicate, passive, and very traditionally feminine.¹⁷ As women on the home front, Aggie and Gussy are also “liminal beings,” who, according to Melissa Edmundson, “perpetually [occupy] an in-between space because they experienced the trauma of war but were apart from the actual fighting.”¹⁸ In the case of Aggie, Hunt amplifies this liminality by associating Aggie and her husband with letters and telegrams, which were historically tied to spiritualist communication.

Aggie's communication with her husband begins with Willy's letters from the Front, which Aggie claims arrive "nearly every day," despite the fact that Willy is stationed in the Dardanelles, and George, who writes infrequently, is "just across the Channel."¹⁹ Gussy, the point-of-view character in Part I of the story, notes that Aggie and her father-in-law (the General) spend hours trying to decipher the information in the letters Willy sends to determine his location and return date. One letter in particular, which promises a return at Christmas, is so revered that Aggie and the General "pasted [it] into a sort of silver reliquary, and on this they both gazed, as if it were a rite, every day for whole minutes at a time."²⁰ Despite insisting that her husband is still alive, Aggie invites reader suspicions of Willy's death by placing his letter in a "reliquary," a container used to hold artifacts like the bones and clothing of saints. Indeed, Aggie's and the General's "gaz[ing]" on the reliquary is described as a daily religious "rite." In Christianity, reliquaries represent the holy and spiritual power of the church, while at the same time hiding the material object from view. Power is thus gained through absence. Aggie likewise maintains domestic power by keeping Willy's letter hidden from Gussy. Aggie goes so far as to even intercept the mail to withdraw any letters from Willy before Gussy can see them. This behavior leads Gussy (and the reader) to question whether her sister is truly receiving as many physical communications from Willy as Aggie claims and also creates uncertainty as to whether Willy is still alive.

The ghostly connection between communications media and war is furthered on the following page when Aggie suggests her husband will send a telegram as he gets closer to home: "Willy would wire, of course, if or as soon as he knew ... that is, if he *could* wire."²¹ Like Willy's letters supposedly sent home from the Front, the viability of Aggie's communication with her husband via the telegraph is also questioned. But this time even Aggie is not convinced

this method of message transmission will work. The emphasized “could” implies an ambiguous obstacle to the telegraph’s success: perhaps the network is down, or there is limited time, or Willy is unable (due to injury or death) to send a message. The telegraph, like the letter, required an uninterrupted connection in order for the message to travel from sender to receiver. During wartime, such connections were anything but secure, which helps explain Aggie’s doubt about receiving a telegram from Willy and George’s infrequent letters to Gussy. But the inability of the sender to transmit the message due to death is also suggested by the historical connection between the telegraph and spiritualism. In fact, scholars tie the invention of Morse code and the telegraph in 1844 to spiritualism’s birth in 1848, when the famed Fox Sisters in upstate New York started to receive messages from the beyond in the form of table rapping. As Peters writes, “Spiritualism, the art of communication with the dead, explicitly modeled itself on the telegraph’s ability to receive remote messages.”²² The spirit messages, delivered through a human medium and staccato raps on a table, not only resembled the workings of Morse code, but took on the language of the new electronic medium and were called spiritual telegraphs. This, according to Sconce, moved beyond metaphor, as some people believed “the spiritual telegraph was [...] an actual technology of the afterlife, one invented by scientific geniuses in the world of the dead for the explicit purpose of instructing the land of the living in the principles of utopian reform.”²³ These telegraphs brought new voices into the material world, not only those of the deceased, but the many female mediums who served as intermediaries.

As mentioned above, the two Leclerc sisters differ in how they receive and interpret letters from their husbands. The narrative structure of this scene reflects not only how unreliable wartime communications were, but also destabilizes how the reader processes the information presented in the story. Aggie, according to her own reports, receives copious communications

from Willy and treats these physical letters reverently and secretively, preventing her “practical” sister from holding or even seeing the original texts:

Gussy wanted very much to hold the letter in her hands and read it right through to see if there was ‘anything practical.’ It was no use asking the General. When Aggie was in a fairly accommodating mood she would ply her with questions. Aggie manipulated the post-bag, but never in her presence, handing Gussy her letters and receiving her own, *if she got any*. Surely, Mrs George would hint, Willy mentioned dates, routes?²⁴

Here we see, from Gussy’s perspective, Aggie’s controlling capriciousness with regard to not only the letters from Willy, but of all letters that arrive in the Leclerc sisters’ house. The letters, and Aggie’s behavior around them, offer an elusive counter narrative to the story that is told through Gussy’s eyes. However, this passage also suggests that Gussy, as narrator, is not stable, switching between the personae of “Gussy” (the sister and equal of Aggie) and “Mrs George” (the younger brother’s wife, whose situation is dependent on her sister, Mrs Willy, the wife of the older brother and heir). Gussy the narrator could make something of the letters and receives communications of her own; Mrs George can only interrogate Aggie the medium, having no direct access to the messages herself.

This section sets up a tension between Aggie and Gussy that destabilizes the narrative throughout the story. Is Aggie a true medium, receiving spirit messages from her “ghostly” husband, or is she a charlatan, posing to the Leclerc household the threat of trickery that accompanied Victorian spiritualism? In this section Hunt confirms Aggie’s role in the story as “an enchantress of men,” similar to a certain type of Victorian medium, whose receptivity is erotic and who welcomes and desires “psychical invasions.”²⁵ Gussy, on the other hand, is the receiver of practical messages from the absent Leclerc brothers, getting brief letters from them,

and also telephone calls and telegrams.²⁶ The way in which Hunt has her point-of-view characters share, withhold, and desire the letters is an important mirroring of the fragmented information that the reader collects in the latter parts of the story.

Telephone

The representation of Gussy as the practical (non-spiritualist) receiver of messages evolves as the setting of the story moves to Christmastime at Ilvercote House. The large inherited estate is haunted by Wild Darrell, who had, centuries before, put a curse on the male Leclercs so that they will never die in their beds. But Wild Darrell is not the only ghost; in fact, Hunt describes the house itself as ghostly: it is both of and out of its time, with only some rooms being modernized. In her preface, Hunt acknowledges the innate ghostliness of houses: “The house where one lives, quietly and respectfully for very many years, has relations in Time and Space of which we know far less than we apprehend. Existence may subsist in it on far other planes, that we do not recognise till we come to slip up on them unexpectedly.”²⁷ Ilvercote House serves as this sort of conduit between different temporal and spatial worlds: on one hand, the house connects the home front to the front lines, and on the other hand, it connects the current material realm to the historical, spiritual one of Wild Darrell. One way Hunt symbolizes the role of the house as conduit is through the telephone.²⁸

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the telephone was still rarely found in private British homes, but the technology's influence was already widespread. According to Stephen Kern in his study of culture and literature at the turn of the twentieth century, the telephone had an even larger impact than the wireless on our reimagining of time and space. The telephone “made it possible, in a sense, to be in two places at the same time. It allowed people to talk to

one another across great distances, to think about what others were feeling and to respond at once without the time to reflect afforded by written communication.”²⁹ Due to its ability to seemingly shrink temporal and spatial distances, the telephone quickly became a wartime communications tool. Its ability to cross thresholds also fascinated spiritualists. In “Love’s Last Leave,” Hunt uses the telephone for two main purposes: to blur the boundaries of time and space, as the family phone connects modern Europe (the Great War) to history (the haunted family estate), and to complicate character divisions established earlier in the story. Within Ilvercote House, the telephone itself is described as ghostly: it is a modern tool in a not fully modernized space. Hunt exacerbates the telephone’s “out-of-timeness” when she describes the old butler, Dawson, as unable to use the phone:

The furniture was shoved aside all except, in a corner, the little table that supported the telephone, the links that connected Ilvercote House with the battlefields of Europe.

Poor old Dawson was still inexpert at its manipulation and always would be. He could not, somehow, accommodate himself to this modern ‘contraption’ which, so far as he could see, never seemed to ring except to announce some trouble or other.³⁰

Dawson, a stand-in for the old country estate, cannot “accommodate” himself to the modern technological times, symbolized by the phone. The telephone, which literally brings bad news from the Front, also represents modern technological innovation, which has led to a massive loss of life in the trenches and fundamental economic changes for the aristocracy. Both literally and metaphorically, the telephone represents “trouble.” But it is the telephone’s liminality — its connecting of the ghost house past to the deadly front line present — that also gives it a position of privilege in the house, as unlike the other furniture, the telephone and its table were not “shoved aside” for the Christmas party.

On the night of the party, Dawson's inability to use the telephone and Gussy's reputation for earthly practicality collide and fuel the story's remaining plot. As family and guests enter the drawing-room for some dancing, Gussy remains behind to blow out the candles on the Christmas tree. While there, she hears the telephone ring and asks Dawson to answer it. Dawson then reports the message that Willy and George will arrive later this evening: "Standing at attention he repeated the message he had received in an uninterested sort of way that, considering its nature, was not like him: 'Mr George and Mr Willy will be at Hungerford by the 10.12 and will you please send the car.'" ³¹ The narrator describes Dawson's message as both soldier-like ("standing at attention") and as automatic speaking ("he repeated the message he had received in an uninterested sort of way"), a common séance technique. Thus, even in her description of Dawson's delivery, Hunt connects the telephone to both the war and spiritualism. Gussy, however, assumes that Dawson has "made a mistake" and blames his mishearing on "The noise of that gramophone!" ³² It is perfectly plausible that Gussy is correct and that the phone (or Dawson's hearing) did not work correctly. During the Great War, phone lines were not secure and often malfunctioned. These malfunctions were noted frequently in wartime and modernist literature. As David Trotter writes, "Modernist phones simply do not work, in the most basic technical sense; even when they do work, they don't, because their working is itself an estrangement, a disconnection." ³³ But Hunt suggests that it is also equally plausible that this phone message came from the spirit world. With the invention of the telephone, spiritualists were increasingly turning away from table rapping in favor of trance speaking. This oral method of relaying spirit messages had the benefit (like the telephone) of directly communicating a message from sender to receiver in real time. Hunt further invites a psychic reading of Dawson's phone message with her reference to the gramophone. During séances it was common practice to

have a gramophone playing softly in the background. Some thought the music helped people remain quiet and focus on spiritual transmission, while others believed it helped receive messages from the spirit world.³⁴ Thus while Gussy suggests the gramophone has obstructed Dawson's comprehension, the history of spiritualism suggests otherwise. Instead, the presence of the gramophone in "Love's Last Leave" serves to enhance the reliability of the phone communication.

Although Gussy responds practically to the message, Hunt also hints that she may be spirit sensitive. When the telephone originally rings in this scene, Gussy is described as "agitated," even though she admits that she has no reason to be because the phone had been ringing all day.³⁵ Gussy's reaction suggests that this call is more unusual than the others and that she has sensed its importance. That Gussy is both practical and psychic, however, falls in line with spiritualism's scientific turn in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. According to Sconce, during this time, "psychic phenomena became more empirical and systematic" with "organizations such as the Society for Psychical Research emerg[ing] in England and the United States to assess the validity of paranormal communications through the protocols of the 'scientific method.'"³⁶ It is also significant that despite Gussy's disbelief in the accuracy of the message, she sends the car to the station anyway. Later we see Gussy meet George outside Ilvercote House. George claims he did not phone and does not mention his brother Willy. Aggie, on the other hand, calls to Willy when the car arrives outside the house, but the reader (and Gussy) never sees him. On the surface, this suggests that Aggie is still the spirit-sensitive sister. But when read alongside the telephone scene, the text also implies that Gussy, too, has psychic abilities, as she (and not Aggie) is the intended receiver of the message.

The first part of “Love’s Last Leave” concludes with a frenzy of calls. On Christmas morning, as the family assembles for breakfast, both Leclerc brothers are absent. George is reported by his wife Gussy as having cut himself shaving and taking some time to “repair the disaster” before coming down; Aggie descends alone, without her husband. When Gussy enquires about him, Aggie states that Willy has been “Called away. Yes. Back to Suvla Bay.”³⁷ Aggie’s phrasing is important in the context of the previous night’s confusion around the telephone call. Her response suggests that Willy’s absence is not voluntary, but at the will of the army — hence the mention of “back to Suvla Bay,” a divulgence of Willy’s previously unknown location. The phrasing also suggests there has been another call placed into Ilvercote, like the telephone call received by Dawson the previous night; but where Aggie was unaware of that call *from* Willy, only she is aware of this call *to* Willy. However, Aggie’s “Yes” in the middle of this statement suggests that she is making up the message as she delivers it; that there either has been no “call,” *or*, that he is not going back to Suvla Bay. The ambiguities around calls and calling deepen as the story continues. Dawson enters the breakfast room to summon Gussy to General Leclerc, the ailing patriarch of the family, who has been waiting, with Aggie, for Willy’s arrival. As the family waits for the doctor to arrive, Hunt writes that “the General, speaking suddenly quite clearly, said that his dear son Willy had called him and that he had gone to him.”³⁸ We later learn that the General died that day, and that Christmas Eve was the night that Willy was declared to have gone missing. Looking back at this passage from the vantage point of the second part of the story, we see the ambiguity of “call” tip away from its possible telephonic meaning, towards its spiritualist one of calling up or calling back the dead. The reader comes to understand that, through Aggie, Hunt has been playing with the ambiguity of the word “call” since Willy’s supposed summoning back to the Front.

The events at the end of Part I transition the story from a focus on the unreliable communications from the living brothers to the (im)possibility of communication with the dead. At this point, Hunt introduces Aggie and Willy's son Peter as a ghostly, liminal focal character, who was not present at his grandfather's deathbed because he had been taken seriously ill. The focus on Peter, who Gussy already sees as spectral — "Mrs George would have much rather he did not go, for then she would lose sight of him until he chose to revisit them"³⁹ — brings a more uncertain and more deathly era to Ilvercote, such that the Leclerc sisters call in their friend, Lady Maisry, to help them understand what has happened, and is happening, at the house.

Wireless

In Part II of "Love's Last Leave," the story shifts its focus to Lady Maisry and Peter Leclerc. Lady Maisry, the only confirmed spiritualist in the story, is directly tied to ghostly media forms, from letters and automatic writing, to spirit messages sent via dream and the wireless. Part II opens with Lady Maisry's thoughts of Peter, and a revisiting and confirmation of General Leclerc's death at Christmas. The narrative, now told from Lady Maisry's point of view, renames both Leclerc sisters as widows, though in the following paragraphs Hunt offers information that leads the reader, and her characters, to challenge that designation. As in Part I, Hunt quickly affirms that any narrative certainty available in this second part of the story is contingent, constantly shifting as more information is delivered, again through various communications media, and by the mediumistic women characters of the story.

In a scene set the following March, we see Lady Maisry at her London home awaking to find a physical letter from Gussy on her bedside table, after having just received what she believes is a dream message from Gussy. At first, Lady Maisry considers the letter unimportant;

rather, the dream message sent from Gussy through the spiritual ether is the focus of the first pages of the section. In these pages, Lady Maisry works, drawing on her spiritualist experience, to recall the dream message, which she renders as: “George is Dead of his wounds, Willy is Missing, and Aggie is going to have a baby.”⁴⁰ Through this message, the reader learns of the events that occur in the unwritten space between Part I and Part II. The factuality of the first two parts of this message is confirmed by other sources, but the last clause — “and Aggie is going to have a baby” — remains unverified throughout the story. The elaboration on the dream sets the scene for the rest of this part of the story, reminding the reader of events from the first part, and contextualizing them. Hunt’s focus on spirit communication through the dream shares much in common with one-way wireless transmission, to which we will return later in this section.

However, when Hunt finally discusses the physical letter on the bedside table, we discover that it is a “veritable S.O.S.” from Gussy.⁴¹ She invites Lady Maisry to come to Ilvercote, as a medium, to speak with Peter, who “wanted so much to talk to her about Spiritualism, which he had taken up after his illness.”⁴² Peter, the fifteen-year old heir to Ilvercote, needs someone to listen to him.

Lady Maisry confirms that Peter moves between spiritual and material planes. She refers several times to Peter’s sickliness and offers descriptions of his future, as owner of Ilvercote, contingent on his living to his majority. So Gussy’s written invitation to Lady Maisry, the practiced medium who is often called upon by other grieving families “in their hour of trial,” is specifically an invitation to come and visit Peter and allow him to “get it, whatever it was, off his chest to her.”⁴³ Importantly, though, the letter comes from the wrong person: though the author was Gussy, it should have been Aggie, as Peter’s mother and therefore de facto mistress of Ilvercote, writing to ask Lady Maisry to Wiltshire. While the letter clearly comes from the “wrong” sister, Lady Maisry spends considerable time trying to understand who sent her the

dream message, vacillating in her interpretation of which sister was responsible — the “psychic” Aggie, or the sensitive Gussy:

That London dream of a week ago would explain all Aggie's queerness, supposing it represented a message from her tormented Geist to beg her old friend to come to her and stand by her. But it came from Gussy! Aggie, soft but utterly materialistic, would not be a persona grata in the spirit world. She was too thin, mentally and physically, to be able easily to communicate. Her sister, businesslike and sentimental at the same time, full-bosomed, moist-eyed, and plastic, was much more likely to have got a message through.⁴⁴

This passage reflects the evolving status of Gussy as spirit-sensitive, which we first see emerging during the events of Christmas Eve. Hunt also calls into question Aggie’s psychic ability by repeatedly using the term “materialistic,” as though to cast doubt over anything Aggie might offer to explain events, even as Lady Maisry, our point-of-view character, is also described as such.⁴⁵ This passage foreshadows the narrative instability of the ending — what is the reader to believe? How can the reader construct a coherent narrative, when we do not even know whose point-of-view we can trust?

Peter is increasingly apparitional in Part II, especially in relation to his mother and his aunt and cousins. He joins the family in the main house only fleetingly, and instead spends most of his time in his own house, which is on the other side of a small lake. He also speaks in a spiritualist way, incorporating classical references and snippets of poetry throughout his conversations with Lady Maisry, including a scene in which Peter quotes poetry from John Webster’s *The White Devil* and discusses Sophocles’ *Antigone*.⁴⁶ Tatiana Kontou describes references such as these as two important features of the automatic writing produced by

nineteenth-century spirit mediums.⁴⁷ We may also consider Hunt's focus on the ghostly Peter in this section as emblematic of the disruption that has come to Ilvercote after the events of Christmastime. Thurston writes that "the advent of the ghost is often associated with the disruptive return of buried secrets or repressed truth."⁴⁸ In "Love's Last Leave," the narrative increasingly builds on a suggestion of "buried secrets," especially between the Leclerc sisters, whose decaying relationship is marked by Gussy's suspicion and jealousy of Aggie on one side, and Aggie's contempt for, and fear of, Gussy on the other. Against the backdrop of this emotional landscape, the ghostly Peter is determinedly trying to find a way to reach his missing father, whose liminal spiritual positioning he sees as worse than death.

Unlike the women in "Love's Last Leave," who are directly tied to specific communications media, Peter's connection is metaphorical. With his father missing, Peter not only shows an interest in spiritualism, but also aviaries. According to Gussy, Peter "has been most successful — with sparrows; as far as I can tell they are just sparrows — like London ones but much cleaner. He says it is the kind that live abroad in the winter and that's the sort he cares for. Swallows, perhaps?"⁴⁹ Although Gussy is uncertain about the type of bird, textual and historical evidence suggest that Peter would have kept swallows. Peter explains to Lady Maisry that his aviary "isn't made of wire or shut up but free to the air from Pole to Pole. There is nothing between my birds and Mespot, if they like to go there.... I don't stop them ... I tell them to."⁵⁰ Here Peter hints at the migratory pattern of the birds, that they travel from "Pole to Pole." Swallows are known to migrate twice a year from Britain to South Africa, thus meeting Peter's description of cross-hemispheric travel. Swallow migration was also closely followed by those in the trenches and at home. In a newspaper diary entry originally published in the *Manchester Guardian* on 27 April 1917, the author writes on the increasing number of reports about

swallows migrating across continental Europe into Britain. The article was written to assuage people's fears that "the course of Continental migration [had been] disturbed or deflected" by the ongoing war.⁵¹

Peter's interest in swallows should also be read as a stand-in for wireless communication, as his aviary "isn't made of wire" and is "free to the air."⁵² Wireless, the final medium discussed in this essay, can, like swallows, cross the globe unattached to a physical network, as required by the telegraph and telephone. Invented in the 1890s, the wireless became a staple of British war communication toward the end of the First World War. It was also a medium filled with spiritual possibilities. As Peters notes, "Early radio history is inseparable from daring imaginings about the flight of souls, voices without bodies, and instantaneous presence at a distance. Dreams of bodiless contact were a crucial condition not only of popular discourse but of technical invention as well."⁵³ Many spiritualists hoped that the wireless, with its ability to communicate through the open air, would facilitate strong connections to the dead. In "Love's Last Leave," Lady Maisry makes a similar link between the wireless and death when she muses that the confusion of time and space by Willy's "Soul's Wireless" led him to mistake a "premonition" of his own death for a return home to Aggie.⁵⁴

But there is also something especially eerie about wireless communication that makes it a fitting media metaphor for Peter, whose father is labeled *missing* and not dead. The wireless, according to Sconce, "evoked [... a] more melancholy realm of abandoned bodies and dispersed consciousness."⁵⁵ More than any previous electronic medium, the wireless offered a chance to communicate freely across time, space, and national boundaries. It was thought that spirits and lost souls could be found in the wireless ether. Lady Maisry, who believes Peter's aviary "was connected in some way with his father," refrains from making a direct spiritualist connection.

But the swallows, like the wireless, are Peter's answer to finding his father lost somewhere on the Eastern Front. Thus, Peter's remark that "There is nothing between my birds and Mespot, if they like to go there.... I don't stop them ... I tell them to" is not solely a comment on his birds' freedom, but his spiritualist command that the swallows will locate his father (possibly in Mesopotamia, which is notably a different location than that given by Aggie on Christmas morning) via the air.⁵⁶ In *Understanding Media*, Marshall McLuhan makes his well-known argument that media are an extension of the human body — the eye, the ear, the hand, for example — and that the radio, more than any other medium, is an "extension of the central nervous system."⁵⁷ If the swallows are a physical stand-in for wireless radio communication, then as such their ability to travel across the globe serves as an extension of Peter's mental (and psychic) desire to find his father. The swallows can go where Peter cannot go, performing the recovery task that Peter psychically asks of them.

The reader, however, never sees Peter receive a message about his father from the birds. Instead, "Love's Last Leave" ends abruptly and tragically with a separated four sentences that disclose the drowning of Peter and his mother and the subsequent entailment of Ilvercote to an Australian relative. The text implies that Aggie's drowning is intentional as it occurs after her confrontation with Gussy and Lady Maisry about the circumstances of her pregnancy in Part II. We can see the confrontation as an attempt from within the story to resolve the ambiguities and narrative gaps that Hunt creates. However, it is significant that this attempt at resolution fails. Gussy is convinced that Aggie's pregnancy is a result of George visiting Aggie's room on Christmas Eve. Lady Maisry, on the other hand, considers the pregnancy to be a ghostly one, until she comes to Gussy's line of thinking at the end of the story, citing Aggie's "soppy state of erotic free-thinking" as the source of her susceptibility to George on Christmas Eve night."⁵⁸ But

despite airing both of these possibilities, the point-of-view characters of this section offer no decisive explanation for this state of affairs.

Indeed, Aggie angrily dismisses Gussy's and Lady Maisry's presumption that George is the father of the child, declaring that Willy did indeed come to her on Christmas Eve, "all of him that mattered,"⁵⁹ rather than as a ghost, as Lady Maisry suggests earlier. Hunt again draws upon aspects of spiritualist speech, specifically trance speaking, in her description of Aggie's voice during this confrontation: "But her voice had gained a sort of shaking, piercing, penetrating *timbre*, as if the inside of some delicate machine, stripped, taken to pieces, was speaking."⁶⁰ Aggie then threatens to take her own life — "if you don't take care, [my soul] shall go to [Willy]" — and goes off to find her son, Peter, rejecting Lady Maisry and Gussy's explanations for her pregnancy. The short story's sudden ending, not with a depiction of *how* Aggie and Peter drowned, but with a textually-separated report that their bodies were only found after the lake was dredged, denies the reader any resolutions. Instead, we are left with unresolved questions: How had Aggie become pregnant, if she was indeed pregnant at all? How did this pair come to be drowned, especially when Peter had previously been described as a strong swimmer?⁶¹ What will happen to Gussy and her four daughters, all now disinherited by the entailment of the property to an Australian cousin? The future of the surviving Leclerc women remains unknown, because following the discovery of Aggie's and Peter's bodies, they too are severed from the narration. Gussy's point-of-view and voice is cut off and the third-person narrator provides only the briefest facts of the bodies being found and the entailment to the cousin. The narrative's disconnection from Gussy marks her as a final ghost in this text: she is distanced from, but still connected by name to, the haunted ancestral home, and her ability to speak within the text has been abruptly shut down just like a medium losing the connection.

Throughout “Love’s Last Leave,” Hunt uses spiritualism and media as twinned communications technologies, creating a narrative whose plot points can be neither unified nor resolved. These narrative gaps reflect the deadly fragmentation and failure caused by World War I, not only of individual messages between soldiers at the Front and their families at home, but also of the ways in which current events could be understood, locally and globally. Instead, through its triple “connection failure” shown by references to media, the presentation of female characters as mediums, and elliptical narrative structure, Hunt’s short story demonstrates what Luke Thurston describes as “the ‘cryptic withdrawal of authorial presence in modernist writing.’”⁶² Like a visit to a spiritualist medium, the reader of “Love’s Last Leave” is left unsure whether the character narrations are trustworthy and is left to fill in information that remains undisclosed by the characters and the text in order to make the narration whole. Hunt’s use of communications technology (letter, telegraph, telephone, and wireless) throughout the narrative reflects and refracts the communicative failures of its main characters, both within the house and between the Front and Ilvercote. Paired with the story’s abundant spiritualist tropes, Hunt creates a “Janus-faced” narrative in which, in the end, both its characters and its readers do not know where to look.

¹ In her 1976 article, Marie Secor notes that little recovery work has been done on Hunt and that if “[she] is remembered at all today, it is as Ford Madox Ford’s self-proclaimed wife and only vaguely as a novelist in her own right” (25). A look for scholarly work on Hunt today reveals that very little has changed. In the past twenty years, most articles and books that include Hunt’s name do so alongside a male author with whom she is associated. A clear exception is Victoria Margree’s *British Women’s Short Supernatural Fiction 1860-1930*. See: Marie Secor, “Violet Hunt, Novelist: A Reintroduction.” *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* vol. 19, no. 1 (1976): 25-34.

² Victoria Margree, *British Women’s Short Supernatural Fiction, 1860-1930* (New York: Springer, 2019), 148.

³ Secor, “Violet Hunt, Novelist,” 33 and Margree, *British Women’s Supernatural Fiction*, 148. It is worth noting that during the 1970s and 1980s, there was a need to classify women writers in order to recover their work. While it is not within the scope of this essay to determine why Hunt’s recovery failed, it is worth asking if an author needs to be categorized to be recovered. It is our contention that while categorization can be initially helpful, many women authors blur and complicate the temporal and genre boundaries first set up under a patriarchal academic system that originally excluded these female authors in the first place.

⁴ Margree, *British Women’s Supernatural Fiction*, 185.

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- ⁵ Violet Hunt, *More Tales of the Uneasy* (Ashcroft, British Columbia: Ash-Tree Press, 2005), 4. Hunt also mocks *Ulysses* and of modernism writes, “Life — the literary life — is not long enough to pursue a single train of thought to its legitimate conclusions, and Modern Literature, too, prefers to travel light” (Hunt, “Preface,” *More Tales*, 5).
- ⁶ Helen Sword, *Ghostwriting Modernism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2002), x.
- ⁷ Luke Thurston, *Literary Ghosts from the Victorians to Modernism: The Haunting Interval* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012), 128. Hunt’s Great War ghost stories should also be considered a precursor to Elizabeth Bowen’s World War II collection *The Demon Lover and Other Stories*, which not only considered the haunting of British civilians following World War I, but also the current ghostly environment of World War II.
- ⁸ Hunt, *More Tales*, 13.
- ⁹ Barbara Belford, *Violet: The Story of the Irrepressible Violet Hunt and Her Circle of Lovers and Friends — Ford Madox Ford, H.G. Wells, Somerset Maugham, and Henry James* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 258.
- ¹⁰ Hunt, *More Tales*, 13.
- ¹¹ John Durham Peters, *Speaking Into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 96.
- ¹² Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2000), 12.
- ¹³ Sconce, *Haunted Media*, 4.
- ¹⁴ Hunt, *More Tales*, 74.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 73, 96.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 74, 79.
- ¹⁷ Alex Owen writes, “Passivity, or the lack of masculine will-power, might have been construed as that which made the women the gentle, retiring creatures of prescriptive literature – but it was also, for spiritualists, the very quality which facilitated spirit communication” (Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2004), 10).
- ¹⁸ Melissa Edmundson, “‘The Cataclysm We All Remember’: Haunting and Spectral Trauma in the First World War Supernatural Stories of H. D. Everett.” *Women’s Writing* 24 (1): 56.
- ¹⁹ Hunt, *More Tales*, 85.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 80.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 80-81.
- ²² Peters, *Speaking Into the Air*, 94-95.
- ²³ Sconce, *Haunted Media*, 12.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 80.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*; Tatiana Kontou, *Spiritualism and Women’s Writing: From the Fin de Siècle to the Neo-Victorian*. (London: Springer, 2009), 57.
- ²⁶ Alex Owen, in *The Place of Enchantment*, suggests that the coming of the First World War marked the end of a period where Victorian ideas about fixed gender roles were giving way, and where “the spiritual” and the secular stood in “unresolved tension” with each other. Aggie and Gussy Leclerc, and the differences in their spiritual sensitivity, might represent the conflict that was taking place between Victorian spiritualism and fin-de-siècle incorporation of rationality and imagination, Gussy’s perhaps-more-reliable sensitivity reflecting Hunt’s rejection of Victorian versions of femininity and passivity, and the type of mediumship that was associated with it. See Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern*. (University of Chicago Press, 2007), 87, 257.
- ²⁷ Hunt, *More Tales*, 12.
- ²⁸ In combining this ghost house with the electronic communications media, Hunt is engaging with current cultural conversations about the separation of the “planes” of ether and reality. See Richard Noakes, “Thoughts and spirits by wireless: imagining and building psychic telegraphs in America and Britain, circa 1900–1930,” *History and Technology* 32, no. 2 (2016): 137-158.
- ²⁹ Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003), 69.
- ³⁰ Hunt, *More Tales*, 86.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 89.
- ³² *Ibid.*
- ³³ David Trotter, *Literature in the First Media Age: Britain Between the Wars* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2013), 47.

³⁴ For example, in his essay “An Experience in the Occult,” Thomas Mann notes that “a medium needs music, almost continuous music, for his demonstrations” (234). In *The Magic Mountain*, Mann translates this into a series of séances performed with the aid of a gramophone, because “musical accompaniment facilitated these exercises” (658). See Mann, *Three Essays*. Trans. H.T Lowe-Porter (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1932), 219-261. *Magic Mountain*. Trans. John E. Woods (New York: Vintage, 1996). See also Jane Lewty, “Word Electric, So Finite: Radio, Poetry and the séance in World War I,” In *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century British and American War Literature*, edited by Adam Pietter & Mark Rawlinson (Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 415 for discussion of the important role that gramophones played in early 20th century spiritualism.

³⁵ Hunt, *More Tales*, 89.

³⁶ Sconce, *Haunted Media*, 59.

³⁷ Hunt, *More Tales*, 97, 98.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 99.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 100, 102.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁴⁵ Again, in making this contrast Hunt seems to reject Victorian modes of passive, traditionally-feminine mediumship in favor of the more active kind of spiritualist practice that was popular in the fin-de-siècle era (see Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, in particular Chapter 2).

⁴⁶ For example, Hunt, 108.

⁴⁷ Kontou, *Spiritualism in Women's Writing*, 49.

⁴⁸ Thurston, *Literary Ghosts*, 6.

⁴⁹ Hunt, *More Tales*, 102.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁵¹ T.A.C. “A Country Diary” *Manchester Guardian*. 27 April 1917. (Reprinted in *The Guardian* on 27 April 2017).

⁵² Hunt, *More Tales*, 103.

⁵³ Peters, *Speaking Into the Air*, 104. Peters also notes that inventors used language common to spiritualism to explain wireless communication, including “ether” and “spectrum” (103).

⁵⁴ Hunt, *More Tales*, 101.

⁵⁵ Sconce, *Haunted Media*, 14.

⁵⁶ Hunt, *More Tales*, 103.

⁵⁷ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 264.

⁵⁸ Hunt, *More Tales*, 117.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁶⁰ Hunt, 119. See also Richard Noakes’ work on the role of machines in spiritualists’ activities. Richard Noakes, “‘Instruments to Lay Hold of Spirits’: Technologising the Bodies of Victorian Spiritualism,” In *Bodies/Machines*, edited by Iwan Rhys Morus. (London: Berg, 2002), 125-164.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁶² Luke Thurston, “The Gothic in Short Fiction,” *The Cambridge Companion to the English Short Story* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2016), 181.