

The Turmoil of the Unknown

Michel Pierssens

“Let us shine in peace, who light up the [darkness] ...
Who are the creations, islands of the unknown!”

Victor Hugo, *Contemplations*

The adverse report of the Academy of Sciences, published in 1784, failed to put an end to the proselytism of Mesmer's early followers, nor did it scale down their ambitions to gain scientific recognition.¹ The allure of mystery, the taste for wonders and the call of the unknown prevailed, and throughout that century numerous clashes occurred between the scientific establishment and those demanding its recognition. Their demand was founded not so much on a theoretical construct as on people's personal experiences as actors or witnesses, which were perceived to be true simply because they were nearly always profoundly disturbing. The fact is that, despite the observations of scientists such as Faraday,² anyone could put questions to an ecstatic in a state of trance, have a medium summon the dead, or communicate with the “other world” by table-turning. Insofar as it rejected the validity of the most commonly accepted “research programmes”, the challenge to the institutions that were the guarantors of received knowledge was a major one.

Faced with these repeated demands, the outcome would have been simple if the “official scientists” themselves had collectively refused to deal with the private experimenters who importuned them. In the event, many of them allowed themselves to be tempted, often in the hope of “putting an end to it once and for all,” and some—not always the least renowned or least influential—unexpectedly became champions of those spurned by their academy. Consequently, problems the mere statement of which ought to have been greeted with contempt by serious researchers (materializations, communications with the afterlife, levitation)

gradually became a focus of official scientific interest, since public pressure turned them into legitimate subjects of scientific inquiry. This process inevitably had certain consequences. The first of these was that the very notion of the “unknown,” which had initially served as the driving force of a whole literary dynamic inspired by the romantics, ultimately became accepted as a proper subject of scientific investigation, at the very time when literature itself was striving to become more “realistic.”³ The second consequence of this process was a rapidly growing public skepticism about the legitimacy of the “scientific establishment’s” monopoly of knowledge and truth. After decades of scientism and the worship of scientists as the infallible servants of Progress, science’s claims to be the supreme authority would soon be challenged on the basis of those very values which science had imposed. Thus, for a whole century up to just after the First World War, various groups calling into question, against the backdrop of an increasingly opaque Unknown, the legality of scientific knowledge and the social organization of the products of the scientific establishment, were formed in response to experiences which were all too readily dismissed as ridiculous or absurd (clairvoyance, table-turning, spirit writing, ectoplasms, etc.).

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Since the Romantics associated the unknown with fear, darkness, and the invisible, for them it belonged essentially to the realm of the imagination, even though its intellectual and cognitive dimension was not always neglected, as may be seen in Balzac’s “philosophical studies.” Contrary to this fascination with the attractions of the unknown—a fascination that was accepted or even demanded—modern science, in the first half of the 19th century, was built on the basic premise that there was no place for the unknown. This rejection was powerfully exemplified in the theories of Auguste Comte, who expressed a strong determination to reclose the “theologico-metaphysical” chapter of human history. By making the observation of facts and the discovery of the laws governing phenomena the object of positive science, he deprived of scientific legitimacy any vestiges of research into hidden causes and “substituted in all instances the simple investigation of *laws*

for the inaccessible determination of *causes* properly so called."⁴ Objections to this resolution to take the element of speculation out of scientific inquiry quite naturally bore upon objects less readily definable than molecular reactions. Such was the case, first and foremost, of the psychological sciences, which were not yet clearly distinguished from the philosophical psychology of the first half of the century. Some of the questions under discussion were: Of what is the spirit capable? What are its faculties? How does it act upon matter? What is the origin of its inspirations and abnormalities? What is its relationship to the body? What happens in communications with the spirit world?

In its efforts to answer such questions, science could not remain ignorant of the long line of experimenters inspired by Mesmer, those practitioners and theorists of animal magnetism, many of whom had become adepts of spiritualism, who were confronted day after day with phenomena which observers had to resign themselves to accepting as "unknown forces." In addition to the physical phenomena for which there was a likely rational explanation, there were "psychic phenomena" which were far more difficult to describe and define. However, the amateurs who studied these phenomena claimed that they were also accompanied by unexplained "physical effects." There is some irony in the fact that Allan Kardec, the founder of the spiritualist religion, used the vocabulary of phenomenalism to coin the positivistic maxim: "Every effect has a cause. Every intelligent effect has an intelligent cause."

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There is, therefore, a definite epistemological and political affiliation⁵ between the studies on "induced somnambulism" conducted by the Marquis de Puységur around 1800 and the experimental research of Charles Richet, summarized in his *Traité de métapsychique* in 1922. In 1784, Puységur, a follower of Mesmer, had a chance meeting with a peasant by the name of Victor.⁶ This person was to become the first of all those wondrous "somnambulists" who were to cause such a stir throughout the century. The extraordinary thing in this case was the radical change that his "passes" seemed to bring about rather than their success. After being put into a state of "induced somnambulism" (Puységur was the one

who popularized these terms), he inexplicably became *somebody else*: "It is with this simple man ... that I learn, that I become enlightened. When he is in a magnetic state, he is no longer a simple peasant who can barely answer a question, he is a being that I am incapable of naming." The essential point was very clear: the identity of an individual could no longer be confined to his customary external appearance. It had to be assumed that he existed in an internal space that was normally inaccessible, as something which Maeterlinck would much later term the "unknown guest" of which anything may be expected.⁷

There were two distinct ways of responding to such bedazzlement. One way was to attempt to analyze the changes of mental state induced in the subject by magnetization, by keeping them within a theoretical framework defined by a psychology which would then be subject to revision. The other way could involve the exploitation of the new powers so discovered in an attempt to find in them a cognitive short cut, an accelerated grasp of the content of knowledge. The forms and conditions of induced somnambulism were the subject of the first approach. The second approach was only able to consider the content, the utterances, and the accounts of the "clairvoyants" and "mediums" put into a trance by the "fluid." Sometimes in disagreement and other times at one, the practitioners of these two approaches in reality showed the kind of difficulty that could arise. Most, including the most sceptical, asked whether the "laws of nature" were so well known that there was no place in them for psychic phenomena. They asked whether, alongside material nature, there was not a "spiritual nature," certain unsuspected laws of which could be glimpsed through such phenomena. If an "unknown guest" dwelt within us, were we not also guests in a universe about which we were largely ignorant. They wanted to know whether the effects of magnetism could open up the way to a twofold exploration, both within us and outside us.

In the wake of Braid (the first to offer a rigorous formulation of the principles of hypnosis), Charcot and Bernheim, Luys and Janet adhered very closely to a materialistic conception of the strange powers revealed through the exercise of animal magnetism. These physicians sought to remain within the strict framework of what

the emerging sciences of psychiatry, psycho-physiology, and experimental psychology permitted them to formulate by constructing a global and paradigmatic conception of psychic activity. They consistently dealt with somnambulism, which was always associated with hysteria or mediumship that often involved "spiritualistic madness,"⁸ by developing a psychopathology founded on a new representation of psychism in general. This movement led, through William James' and Frederick Myers' investigations into the "subliminal ego," to Janet's theories on psychological automatism and unconscious thought,⁹ and then to Freud. For these investigators, the unknown was merely that which had not yet yielded to scientific inquiry, and was not a distinct entity or indeed a separate world.

The same may not be said of all those amateur or licensed scientists, enthusiastic explorers of these new frontiers, who pushed to the limit those subjects most likely to go into a trance or become unrecognizable "ecstatics" at will. Puységur stopped along the way. Other experimenters, no less concerned about healing, went further and turned their "clairvoyants" into new pythonesses. Following the path first taken with "La voyante de Prévost"¹⁰ by J. Kerner, for whom the unknown was an overly misunderstood nature, whose voice we are incapable of listening to by creating an interior silence, one of Du Potet's most original disciples was the self-taught magnetizer, Louis Alphonse Cahagnet. His very status as a social outsider made him bolder than his predecessors, and there was a certain flamboyance in the way he combined the love of adventure and the more speculative aspects of psychic experience, associating it with the necromantic tradition. An account of his experiences is contained in the three volumes of *Arcanes de la vie future dévoilées*.¹¹ Cahagnet was an adept of an uncompromising spiritualistic vitalism, inspired by Swedenborg. For him, there was no question about the reality of the apparitions which he brought about through his "clairvoyant." He would, however, seek to maintain links with those whom he regarded as more learned than himself: "Gentlemen of science, I am only a poor worker who earns his living by the sweat of his brow, and reflects and writes at night. Help me, and do not stand in my way ..."¹² The fact is that, besides conducting an affective search for a community of the liv-

ing and the dead, Cahagnet wanted to acquire the knowledge that he lacked directly from the world of the spirits. Thus, the spirits themselves would reveal the secrets of the other world and explain the essence of the future life; however, they would also report what was on the moon or planets, or at the pole, and would provide information on the inhabitants of these places.

The crux of the matter lay here, revealing a distinction between the curious yet incredulous “scientists” and the simpletons, who were eager for knowledge but lost their way in a labyrinth of hallucinations that were beyond them. In their case, scientific inquiry—for the latter had no hesitation about invoking scientific principles—took a wholly new form. Its foundation was nothing short of an epistemic wager, the radicalization of the idea that knowledge is incomplete yet contrives a short cut straight to the unknown, through the amplification of unused powers or a direct link to the source of authentic absolute knowledge, that of “disembodied scholars.” Everyone was fully entitled to explore the fluidic memory of these privileged members of the spirit world. This power was readily likened to photography, which was still regarded as a wondrous new invention. “The clairvoyant,” wrote Cahagnet, “can go back to the very infancy of this spiritualized being, with the aid of a kind of daguerreotypy, which constitutes the domain of what we call *memory*.”¹³ This curious chasm made it possible to search in bygone lives for facts that had not yet entered our store of knowledge: the future would become the present through the past. This led to the invention of something along the lines of a “popular” science (and not a popularized science, even though based on the latter), which would alone be able to continue where official science could only stop. The bold, optimistic science of the unknown would stand out against the fearful, skeptical science of the known. Popular science would concern itself with things as yet unknown, whilst fossilized knowledge would be the subject of official science.

Such a position could easily take on certain political connotations. In those “days of the prophets” described by Paul Bénichou, it even went as far as a symbiosis between a particular spiritualist group and a particular more or less utopian socialist movement, taking the more general form of what Philippe Muray has called

"occulto-socialism."¹⁴ This encounter raised a serious issue, concerning the relationship between the right to know and the duty to make and publish discoveries, the dissemination of which official science was always suspected of wishing to suppress. The evangelism of the spiritualists was first and foremost an epistemic imperative, since their concern was to make up for the shortcomings of institutional science. The conflict between the "self-styled scientific scholars" and the "parascientists" ended in the nomadization of knowledge in the name of the Republic and democracy. As science ceased to be distilled authoritatively from the top down by an Academy that was guilty of obscurantism, faith in the possibility of approaching the unknown could diffuse, in the manner of a giant root, into what could only be termed networks of "unofficial knowledge." This would take place through a kind of uncontrolled social percolation, which was overseen from a distance by a police force inclined to leniency towards the "enlightened ones." This process involved alternative laboratories, publications which were more or less confidential yet were fervently circulated by zealous militants, various groups, obscure associations, discreet or clamorous religious denominations. In the early twentieth century, the Douai spiritualist group would thus seek to spread a form of "popular education," which would in some way complement the compulsory free school education that had been recently introduced but was in this case aimed at destitute adults.¹⁵ For example, it sought answers on the vast mysteries of astronomy from Laplace.

Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, when astronomy was very much the queen of the popular sciences, all the forms of fascination with the unknown concerned questions such as life on the other planets, the nature of comets, and the correspondence between the spirit world and the universe scattered with heavenly bodies. It is not surprising, therefore, that the astronomer Flammarion was able to impose himself as one of the most authoritative guarantors of the legitimacy of spiritualistic speculation. His numerous publications¹⁶ gained him recognition as a model of the genuine scientist devoted to the universal dissemination of science. Moreover, spiritualists were all the more inspired and fascinated as Flammarion himself pursued his investigations into *Les forces naturelles inconnues* (The unknown natural

forces, 1865), publishing his findings towards the end of his life in the three volumes of *La Mort et son mystère*, a genuine “summa,” which appeared between 1920 and 1922. His conviction at that time had not changed from that expressed in his address at the tomb of Allan Kardec in the Père-Lachaise cemetery in 1869: “Spiritualism is a science, not a religion.” Such beliefs, consistently restated for half a century by one of the best-known popularizers, could only strengthen the syncretistic aspirations of all those who found, in the messages laboriously spelled out letter by letter by their planchette, both religious comfort and a kind of scientific information, the sublimated counterpart of which appeared in the imaginary journeys of poets who wanted to take mankind, lock, stock and barrel, into the unknown. In *La Légende des siècles*, Hugo was more successful than Jules Verne and his imitators ever were in creating a visionary picture of mankind plunged into a space and time fought over by God and Satan. It was he who predicted, in the section which he entitled “twentieth century,” that man would be able to depart “up into the sky,” “into the invisible,” “into the unknown.”¹⁷

Rejecting such poetics, scientists such as Charles Richet adopted an approach that was, at least in its principles,¹⁸ more rigorous. His magnum opus of 1922, the huge *Traité de métapsychique*, was both the outcome of a whole psychic research movement that first appeared in England and the United States in the late 1870s and the starting point of parapsychology, a new chapter in the history of the unknown.

“I wanted to write a book of science, not a book about dreams,” he wrote in the foreword to his treatise. In his opinion, a variety of facts, which he considered unchallengeable, emerged from all the experiments conducted by magnetizers for a century or so. Richet spared no effort to put in place the technical and institutional machinery capable of supporting the experiments in question. Emulating his peers at the Royal Society who founded the Society for Psychical Sciences (Sir Oliver Lodge and William Crookes among others), he was responsible for the foundation of a French Society for Psychic Studies and, in 1891, the *Annales des sciences psychiques*, which was modelled on the growing number of major scientific journals being published at that time. In this publication

he stated: "We are firmly convinced that forces unknown to us mingle with those forces that are known and described." Of all the instruments thought likely to provide clear evidence of these forces, the camera was to arouse the greatest hopes and lead to the greatest disillusionment. It was reasonable to hope that, by placing "physical mediums" in front of a camera in a confined space, the reality of the materializations, "raps," levitations and similar phenomena could be demonstrated. However, that did not allow for the whole range of possible optical illusions and the kinds of accidents that typically occur with devices and the physical and chemical processes in question. If we take naive objectivism and the idealistic nature of the materialization as two extremes, what does photography really enable us to see? Despite repeated attempts over decades, these experiments led only to scandals or insoluble perplexities. In the end Richet was to conclude: "What the eye does not see will rarely be recorded on the photographic plate."¹⁹

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Thus, we cannot be certain about the reality of anything that we see in the medium's "cabinet." Moreover, our uncertainty is only accentuated by all the technical equipment of modern science. The world about us is again becoming a phantasmagoria, just as our interior world is incessantly turning more opaque. The moment in history when it was believed that everything, from the phenomena of the visible world to those of the beyond, was capable of being known, was perhaps no more than an interlude in which Illusion made fun of even the greatest investigators, by making believe that it could be conquered. There was a time when it was possible for the legitimacy of the conditions of knowledge to appear to be the central issue in the range of problems suddenly opened up by the proliferation of magnetic phenomena since the end of the eighteenth century. However, the question of the unknown broached in this way, and a sense of the wondrous awakened in this way, call for something quite different from technical answers or positive statements. "Clairvoyants" offered observers more than slightly marginal new facts capable of being simply reincorporated in one or other of the prevailing paradigms: they represented the massive eruption of profoundly

destabilizing forces into the modern subjective equilibrium. They called into question again both the received models of the subject, of what constitutes its interiority or its system of relations with external objects, and the nature of intersubjective communication or the status of beings in a universe characterized by states of affective and cognitive turmoil. For this reason, clairvoyants, mediums, and spiritualists have, contrary to every expectation, not remained a mere passing curiosity but have been able to keep the still unresolved question of knowledge of the unknown disturbingly alive for some two centuries.

Notes

1. Dr. J.S. Morand's study, *Le Magnétisme animal. Étude historique et critique*, Garnier Frères, 1889, is still the most comprehensive work on the history of these debates.
2. Alan Gauld, *The Founders of Psychical Research*, New York, 1968. Faraday's articles (*L'Illustration*, 2 July 1853) were re-published in a booklet brought out by Éditions Le Daily-Bul, La Louvière, Belgium, in 1976 together with several other documents which also appeared in *L'Illustration*.
3. The "fin-de-siècle" atmosphere would again encourage esotericism and occultism. Scientists who were involved or who had got themselves lost in the study of "mediumship" would then quite naturally be of interest to the surrealists. See: Daniel Cottom, *Abyss of Reason: cultural movements, revelations and betrayals*, Oxford, 1991.
4. *Discours sur l'esprit positif* (1844), republished by U.G.E 10/18, 1963, p.75
5. Certain aspects of this affiliation are discussed in M. Pierssens, "Le syndrome des tables tournantes," *Les Temps Modernes*, no. 528, 1990 and "Le Merveilleux psychique au XIXe siècle," *Ethnologie française*, XXIII, 1993,3, "Science/Parascience."
6. Armand Chastenet de Puységur, *Mémoires pour servir à l'établissement du magnétisme animal*, facsimile edition, Bordeaux, 1986 (1786). Clara Gallini's work *La Sonnambula meravigliosa. Magnetismo e ipnotismo nell' Ottocento italiano*, Milan, 1983, provides a very complete social and cultural history of somnambulism in Italy. There is no equivalent work dealing with the corresponding aspect of French history.
7. *L'Hôte inconnu*, Eugène Fasquelle, 1917. Published in English as: *The Unknown Guest*, Tr. Alexander Teixeira de Mattos, London, 1914.
8. Sollier and Boissier, "Médiumnité délirante," in *Archives de neurologie*, 1904.
9. Paul Janet, *L'automatisme psychologique. Essai de psychologie expérimentale sur les formes inférieures de l'activité humaine*, Paris, 1889. This whole aspect of the question is discussed in Marcel Gauchet's excellent study, *L'Inconscient cérébral*, Paris, 1992, and L. Chertok and I. Stengers, *Le cœur et la raison. L'hypnose en question, de Lavoisier à Lacan*, Paris, 1989.

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10. Justinus Kerner, *La Voyante de Prévorst*, translated by Dr .Dusart, Lucien Chamuel and Librairie Spiritualiste, 1990.
11. Publication of the first edition was spread over the period 1848–1854. On Cahagnet's life, cf. M. Pierssens, "Le merveilleux psychique au XIXe siècle," *Ethnologie française*, XXIII, 1993, 3.
12. *Arcanes*, Vol. 2, p.11.
13. *Arcanes*, Vol. 3, p. 373. The idea had also been expounded since 1842 by Marcillet, one of the star magnetizers of the period, who had become a salon celebrity through the feats of his clairvoyant, Alexis: "Magnetism is the daguerreotype of thought." Cf. J.-A.Gentil, *Initiation aux mystères-secrets du magnétisme (...) suivie de la biographie de J.-B. Marcillet*, Paris, 1848.
14. *Le 19e siècle à travers les âges*, Denoël, "L'Infini," 1984.
15. Pillaut et Béziat, *La Vie. Travaux de nos chers amis de l'espace*, Douai, 1910. This group is discussed in M. Pierssens, "Fictions célestes," *Revue des sciences humaines* (in press).
16. See *La Pluralité des mondes habités* (1861), his articles in *Cosmos* or *Magasin pittoresque*, his columns in the newspaper *Le siècle*, *Les Merveilles célestes* (1866) — first volume of the famous *Bibliothèque des Merveilles* launched by Hachette and, above all, *L'Astronomie populaire*, published in instalments from 1879.
17. *La Légende des Siècles*, NRF, "Pléiade," 1967, p. 721. The poet and novelist Jean Rameau made this the central theme of his work, from *La Chanson des étoiles* (which included a poem dedicated to Flammarion), Ollendorf, 1888, to *L'arrivée aux étoiles*, a spiritualist novel, Paris, 1922.
18. Charles Richet (1850-1935), discoverer of anaphylaxis, winner of the Nobel Prize for Medicine (1913), member of the Academy of Sciences, and author of numerous works of physiology, was one of the greatest figures in French medicine at the turn of the century.
19. *Traité de métapsychique*, p. 617. On the more general conditions of a technology of vision in the 19th century, cf. J. Crary, *Techniques of the Observer. On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge, Mass., 1992. However, the problems posed go back much further, as shown by H. Damisch in *L'Origine de la perspective*, Paris, 1987.