

Isis

BOOK REVIEW

Modern (Nineteenth Century to 1950)

BERTRAND MÉHEUST. *Un voyant prodigieux: Alexis Didier, 1826–1886*. x+486 pp., index. Paris: Empêcheurs, 2003. €21 (paper).

Bertrand Méheust is a professor of philosophy at the University of Picardie and the author of a twelve-hundred-page study of somnambulism and mediumship (*Somnambulisme et médiumnité* [Empêcheurs, 1999]). *Un voyant prodigieux* describes the nineteenth-century "hero of magnetic lucidity" Alexis Didier, "a sort of Icarus of the spirit who beats his wings and wants to break free of the human condition" (p. 21), the most complete and subtle somnambulist as well as the best documented. A famous picture from 1847 shows Alexis with his "magnetizer," Jean-Bon Marcillet, a formidable old Officer of the Guard, haughtily dispensing "magnetic fluid" upon a frail, blindfolded youth reading from a closed book held before his shrouded face. Everything about this picture is specific to the tumultuous period between the fall of the French monarchy and the start of the Second Empire, roughly the fifteen years of Alexis's public career. It was the second of three periods in which "somnambulism" (an umbrella term for such dissociative phenomena as hypnosis, hysteria, and mediumship) flourished.

The first period began in 1784, when the Marquis de Puységur entertained his troops with mesmerism and learned that a gifted subject could discover the origin and course of his illness while in "artificial (or magnetic) somnambulism." Hypnotic experimentation in those days was in the hands of aristocrats, and it fell out of favor with the onset of the Revolution. Taken up later as a topic of scientific study, it led to such incoherent debates that the Academy of Science closed the door to all discussion in 1842. This invited entrepreneurs like Marcillet, as well as writers, philosophers, and artists, to explore the phenomena unhindered by restraints of method. The new magnetizers, though not aristocrats, seemed to exercise aristocratic power over their clairvoyants, who "in a state of magnetic lucidity took ascendancy over their masters" (p. 173), expressing the political hopes and confusions of the day (1842–1858). Alexis Didier's public séances threatened a fledgling science only beginning to establish its goals and methods, while at the same time borrowing from the imagery of the latest technology: the telegraph's communication over great distances and the daguerreotype's optical precision. The third period of enthusiasm began in 1882, when Jean Martin Charcot reopened the Academy of Science to hypnotic explorations, this time painting somnambulism as pathological and indirectly setting off public excitement about communicating with the souls of the dead. "The singularity of Alexis' 'magnetic' clairvoyance resides in the fact that a fugitive equilibrium was realized between tendencies about to go their separate ways, between factual demonstration and a spiritualist approach to the world, between a reality that is human and one that has been purified and constructed in the laboratory" (p. 195).

Méheust presents Didier's career in detail and carefully analyzes everything his observers and commentators wrote, concluding, "It is very probable that Alexis had, at least in part, at certain moments, the powers he claimed to have" (p. 418). Méheust gives us a phenomenology of magnetic lucidity and takes to task the philosophers, anthropologists, and others who refuse to investigate "one of the greatest taboos in modern times; it has withstood the hunt for taboos that has been an essential part of the second half of the twentieth century, and is today stronger than ever" (p. 460). "If, indeed, *métagnomie* [lucid

trance] exists, we Westerners do not escape from illusion in rejecting it. ... [It] allows us to escape from our cultural dead end and envisage a richer and very different [psyche and world]" (pp. 472–473). Méheust's close attention to detail will satisfy the professional, while his passion and lively writing will delight the generalist.

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