

A historical approach to psychical research: the case of Alexis Didier (1826-1886),

Colloque : SECRET STATES : ALTERED STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND WESTERN ESOTERICISM.

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Psychical researchers have sustained more criticism than researchers in any other field. This is probably why they tend to increasingly reject qualitative studies, and underestimate the early history of their field. For instance, for them, the data gathered in the middle of the 19th century, in France and in England, are difficult to interpret, insofar as the requirements of modern laboratory were little understood and controls were inadequate. For the most part, conjurers were not systematically invited to control the somnambulists, descriptions of the sittings were not taken verbatim, and of course, investigators didn't have the luxury of tape recorders or cameras.

Nevertheless, I think that it is a mistake to underestimate the prehistory of psychical research. Many of our precursors were far more competent than we typically give them credit. The real difference between early researchers and a modern laboratory worker is that the latter adheres to standardized procedures, whereas the quality of the 19th century experiments essentially depended on the quality of the people who conducted them. Thus, in some cases, researchers clearly intuited the standards of modern laboratories: conditions were varied to note their effect on the phenomena, conjurers were invited to assist the demonstrations, real-time notes were taken, with descriptions covering the sessions in considerable detail. I could readily cite comments and observations written around 1840, which could have been written today.

In any case, even if they did not yet know how to conduct impeccable experiments – impeccable according to our standards – in the 19th century, investigators had a very rich base of phenomena at their disposal, and have left us an incredible amount of data to question and analyze, to sift and sort through. These old cases could reveal much more if we knew how to ask the right questions. We are still very far from having extracted and interpreted all the material left behind. Indeed, I think we have hardly begun to explore the richness of these materials.

French mesmerizers, for instance, have gathered thousands of reports on magnetic lucidity. Some are very good, some are totally unusable, and the average quality is rather low. But it is true for historical work in general: historians often work with the debris of the past, and they would be more than happy to have as much data as we have at our disposal when we study animal magnetism.

The difficulty is that, to develop such a field of investigation, we must, at the same time, develop an epistemology which makes it acceptable for our peers. I would like to give you an example of what could be done in this area. But, first, let me underline two points.

- 1) I am not, of course, against quantitative experiments. Who could argue against the value of experimental research? But I think psychical research is slipping onto

dangerous grounds if we give up all the qualitative analysis and experiments. A balance must be found between these two approaches. For instance, quantitative dice and random-number generator experiments may prove ‘à bas bruit’, as we say in French, that psychokinesis or precognition exist as a potential power, common to every human being, gifted or not. But these experiments tell us very little of the extent and modus operandi of these alleged abilities. Only qualitative studies with gifted mediums may give us an idea of the full potential which the human mind may develop in a given historical context.

- 2) It is well known that psychic abilities adapt themselves to the evolution of societies, and sometimes anticipate these. To give you an example, no surgeon to day would take the risk of cutting the leg of a patient under hypnosis, as French and British physicians did with mesmerized people in the mid-19th century. Special psychic abilities develop under quite specific sociological and historical conditions, specific ‘biotopes’; these conditions are far too complex to reproduce in a laboratory. The solution is to let the process of life develop and evolve as it will, and observe it from the sidelines. This is why historical approaches must not be neglected: the historical record of different psychic phenomena is the only way for us to have a sense of the full spectrum of possibilities of the human mind. We cannot reasonably come up with a theory of the psychic phenomena if we ignore the range of their manifestations throughout history. Moreover, as I hope to demonstrate, the historical approach allows us sometimes to draw factual conclusions which are not accessible to those involved at the time of the occurrences. Thus, I believe that a systematic survey of the old cases should be undertaken.

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Before introducing the case of a gifted somnambulist whom I studied in depth, I would like to make some general comments on the magnetic scene in mid-19th century France. Between 1821 and 1842, animal magnetism, and especially clairvoyant powers, had provoked a fierce controversy that turned the Academy of medicine into a battlefield. From the study of magnetic lucidity, the pro-magnetic side expected a great progress in the understanding of human nature. But on the anti-magnetic side, the physicians were afraid that such a study might encourage a return to the dark ages of ignorance and superstition, and dismissed all the facts as mere tricks. In 1842, after a vote, the Academy of medicine decided that, from now on, any study on animal magnetism would be systematically rejected. It signed a death warrant on all this field of research. Of course, such an official decision was unable to hinder the magnetic current, which kept on developing in French society. But the physicians who wanted to study somnambulistic states did so at their own risk. Rejected by official science, and by those who should study it, the magnetic powers were appropriated by jurists, writers, theologians, philosophers, left-wing agitators, right-wing nostalgists. This strange state of consciousness, that psychology could not understand in the mid-19th century, and is still unable to decipher, became an exciting subject for those who rejected the current state of human knowledge and French society. The Revolution of 1848 was drawing near, and the French society was becoming the proverbial powder keg ...

At the same time, and for identical reasons, the mesmeric practice underwent changes. Before the French Revolution, mesmerizers were following very strict rules. According to one of

them, public demonstrations were prohibited as unethical. After the Academy of medicine's official dismissal, the practice changed. Mesmerizers such as Lafontaine or du Potet de Sennevoy gave public demonstrations as they felt they had no other choice. They performed on stage in order to show what they were able to do with their somnambulists and to prove the facts denied by 'Official Science'. Against the rejection of the Academies, for the first time (but surely not the last!) they used the new power of public opinion.

Such was the atmosphere when, for the first time, in 1843, during a demonstration, a young Parisian, aged fourteen, went on stage and accomplished feats never witnessed before.

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I would like now to turn to the case of a young somnambulist that I have been working on for the past few years.

By the middle of the 19th century, Alexis Didier has become the most famous somnambulist of his time. Indeed, when he died in 1886, he was celebrated by several magnetic reviews as 'the greatest clairvoyant in modern times'.

Alexis was born in Paris in march 1826, from a poor family. His mother had ten children, and his father repaired shoes for a living. He was thinly built and his health, it seems, was frail. But he was a very clever man, and, at the time he practiced, did not suffer any particular psychological disorder. He first became an apprentice, because his family could not afford to pay his studies. As he suffered fits of epilepsy, at the age of fourteen, his mother sent him to a mesmerist, who succeeded in restoring his health. But, during the process of the cure, he became a somnambulist, and he discovered his powers. Then, probably in 1842, he met a well-known mesmerist, Jean Marcillet, a former officer of the Royal Guard. Marcillet understood that this youth had exceptional magnetic powers, and decided to work with him. The two men went on tour in the northeast of France, especially in Normandy, giving both public and private demonstrations. They also had a cabinet in Paris, where people could come for private consultations.

In 1843, at the age of sixteen, Alexis was already famous. People came from everywhere to consult him, sometimes from England, where his fame had spread into certain circles of the aristocracy. Indeed the British were even the first to discover him as a research subject. For instance, the first report ever written on Alexis was by a British physician, Dr Edwin Lee, who had heard of him in London, and came to Paris to consult him. At first skeptical, he quickly was convinced that Alexis' abilities were genuine. He wrote a report on his observations, which he sent on June 1843 to the President of the Parisian medical society. Predictably, perhaps, this report was never published in France, but Lee published it in London.

In may 1844, while touring in the North of France, Alexis and Marcillet gave seances in Calais. Upon seeing the British coast across the channel, Marcillet had the sudden conviction that they must cross over and conquer England. He was not the first. Dupotet came first in 1837, and Lafontaine in 1840, but Marcillet and Alexis had something very different in mind for their neighbors. Actually, they were totally unprepared for such a trip, as neither spoke a

single word of English; their only contact in London was Baillière, a French publisher established in London, and specialized in medical books. But through Baillière, who was well introduced in magnetic circles, they managed to convince Dr Elliotson, the leading figure of animal magnetism in England, to give them a chance. Elliotson organized a private seance with a very sophisticated audience. The first session began with some difficulties, as Alexis was intimidated by this new audience, who spoke a language that he did not understand. Gradually, however, he gained confidence, and the meeting turned into a triumph. The people were completely stunned by what they had seen. Some newspapers, in the following days, including the *Lancet*, celebrated the young somnambulist.

Alexis and Marcillet stayed in London until the end of the summer, and were invited for private sessions by aristocrats; Lord Adare was one of them. They met skeptics too, convinced some of them, but needless to say, they could not convince Dr. Forbes, the leading skeptic figure, and Dr Elliotson's greatest enemy. In fact, Alexis was never caught cheating – he was not even suspected on the basis of tangible facts. Forbes' arguments relied upon what we call in French '*une pétition de principe*', that is, the assumption that such phenomena are impossible, and must therefore be considered as mere tricks.

Meanwhile, back in France, Alexis' fame kept growing. In 1847 he gave demonstrations for the royal family. The same year, he was confronted with Robert-Houdin, the most celebrated conjuror of the time, and the spiritual father of all modern conjurors. I have devoted a long chapter of my book (Meheust, 2003) to decipher what exactly happened during this confrontation of giants. The problem arises from the fact that Robert-Houdin never mentioned this episode in his *Memoirs*. It would be too long to go into the details here, so I will summarize my conclusions. There is little doubt that these two seances really took place, and that the two letters given by Robert-Houdin, and published at the end of the year by the Marquis de Mirville, are genuine. The conjuror admitted frankly that he could neither produce, nor explain the feats he observed. In one of his letters, he wrote: 'The more I reflect upon the facts I observed, the more I am convinced that they cannot be produced by my art'.

Alexis kept demonstrating his powers until 1855. But his health deteriorated and impaired him from continuing his demonstrations. He died in 1886, probably from a liver cancer.

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Let us consider now Alexis' alleged abilities. If we accept the reports, his abilities covered all magnetic powers and extended them to such a point that it challenges not only skeptics, but psychical researchers themselves. While thoroughly blindfolded, he would read texts or words enclosed in boxes, sealed envelopes, or simply people's pockets. He would read sentences in an uncut book taken at random in a library. People would just give him the number of a page, and he could read a sentence of this page. He could 'travel' to a remote place, visit the consultant's office, and read the title of a book left on purpose on the table. He could give a diagnosis of another person's health problem. Based on an object having some link with a person, he could give the name of this person, or her address, or her dog's name.

I will give you just one example. In 1851, reverend Chauncey Hare Townshend, a friend of Dickens, a well known painter and poet, who wrote two books on animal magnetism, friend of Dickens, met Alexis in Paris. This is one of the feats he reports:

‘Alexis now seemed rather fatigued. I made him a few passes over him to relieve him, and then proceeded to test his power of reading through obstacles. I brought out of the next room Lamartine’s Jocelyn, which I had bought that day, I opened it, and Alexis read some lines with closed eyes. (...) Then, suddenly, he said: “How many pages further down would you wish me to read?”. I said “eight”. I had heard of this faculty, but never witnessed it. He then traced with his fingers slowly along the page that was opened, and read: “a dévoré d’un trait toute ma sympathie”. I counted down eight pages from the page I had first opened, and found, exactly where his fingers had traced, the line he had read. It was correct, with the exception of a single word. He had read “déchiré” au lieu de “dévoré”. Human incredibility began to stir in me, and I really thought perhaps Alexis knew Jocelyn by heart’.

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If you discuss these matters with intellectuals in France, they will all shrug, and advise you not to waste your time with all these old-wives tales. Magnetic lucidity is just a myth. Scientific investigations proved that somnambulists were just simulators or crooks. And so on.

I can prove that, as far as Alexis, the king of the somnambulists, is concerned, these official investigations never took place in France. Alexis’ alleged powers were investigated by jurists, writers, philosophers, theologians, or whoever you want, but never by ‘official’ scientists. He was also investigated by physicians, who probably were as good observers as their colleagues; but these physicians could not speak in the name of an institution. They could only speak for themselves. For, in France, (as well as everywhere else, undoubtedly) when it came to these matters, one had to take into account two levels of truth. A common or popular level of truth which came from informal researchers; and official truth, emanating from authorities who spoke from their prestigious positions, e.g. le Collège de France, les Hautes études, la Sorbonne, etc. These prestigious places, of course, are never officially and clearly defined as such; but any well educated person knew what this was all about. It was not the quality of observers and observations that mattered, per se; the issue was more one of power and prestige. The critics who wrote up their studies on animal magnetism between 1855 and 1860 (Littré, Maury, Lévêque...) had this symbolic power. Their function was more ideological than scientific. They had to pronounce the official truth regarding the limits of human faculties; they had to define the frontiers of human knowledge and human potentials. So there were dozens of them writing studies on animal magnetism, in order to prove that magnetic lucidity was nothing but a myth, a remnant of the ‘metaphysical age’ (according to Comte’s *Théorie des trois états*). For them, the higher mesmeric phenomena could all be explained away as mere conjuror’s tricks.

The interesting point there is that no one seemed to have ever heard of Alexis, the king of the somnambulists. None of these learned investigators once mentioned his confrontation with Robert-Houdin, nor the magician’s conclusions, although they had been widely publicized. And yet – and this is even more difficult to believe – they kept on invoking Robert-Houdin as the ultimate resource of endangered reason! And they could not have ignored that Marcillet, in several public letters published in Parisian newspapers, in 1844 and 1857, suggested (to no avail) that official investigators should be conducted on Alexis, in order to ascertain if his alleged powers were genuine or not.

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So, of what interest is it to return to these old cases of the mid-19th century?

First, it can be established that the trial which is supposed to have dismissed animal magnetism as a myth never took place. The institutions managed to ignore the somnambulist. At the very least, the question of his real capacities remain opened.

If we cannot, strictly speaking, prove that Alexis' alleged powers were genuine, using an historical approach, at least we can weaken or even falsify the arguments of the skeptics. Skeptics always considered that all the somnambulists who claimed to be able to read through letters, through boxes, etc., were conjurors, and/or worked with accomplices. It follows that this should have been especially true for Alexis, the most amazing somnambulist. But what do historical records actually tell us?

1) They tell us that, when Alexis shows up in 1842, at the age of sixteen, he already has all his alleged powers. If he was a conjuror, he must have been the greatest ever, since he was able to outsmart Robert-Houdin, although he was only 21 years old. We must not forget that, at the age of fourteen, he became an apprentice, that his father was a bricklayer, that he was born in a poor family, etc. Where and when would he have found the opportunity of learning his art, and mastering it to such a degree?

3) Robert-Houdin observed him and concluded that he was not a conjuror.

4) he was never caught cheating, not even suspected on factual basis, although he practiced almost every day for thirteen years.

5) If involving sleight of hands, most of his feats could not have been performed without accomplices. Considering the number of demonstrations he gave, and the number of consultants in each seance, he would have needed help from so many accomplices, that one of them should have ended up confessing the fraud. But this never happened.

Let us just consider the British tour in 1844. If we assume that Marcillet and Alexis were frauds, to perform their feats during their two-months stay in London, they would have had to receive help from dozens of accomplices. For, during an average session in England, dozens of people would apply with their boxes, sealed envelopes, etc. It seems absurd to me that these two Frenchmen who did not speak a word of English and had no acquaintance in London, could have found so many accomplices on such short notice, from within the British aristocracy. One of them would have been Lord Adare, another Lord Normanby, her Majesty's ambassador in Paris...

This is a good example of the possibilities introduced by an historical approach. Such an approach enables us to sometimes reach conclusions which could not even have been reached

by those involved. The phenomena produced by Alexis were so unique, that each of those who participated in any group of sessions could see only a small section of his skills. They could thus have recourse to the assumption that Alexis and Marcillet must have been cheating somewhere and somehow. Dr Forbes, for instance, who attended only one or two seances, was somewhat justified, after all, to make this assumption. But this same assumption becomes untenable once one is familiar with all the data of Alexis case. I know – we know – much better the feats of Alexis than the people involved.

If we accept that Alexis cannot be dismissed as a fraud, we are obliged to consider the feats he produced as pointing to the broad spectrum of human potentialities. It is exactly what Dr Osty wrote in 1936: 'N'assignons pas de limites aux phénomènes paranormaux', let us refuse to put limits to the paranormal phenomena.

The feats of Alexis oblige us to consider another dimension of the human personality, another dimension of the universe. Most modern laboratory procedures do not even begin to address this other dimension in an adequate manner.

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