

‘Standing Upright Before the Heavens’: Metamorphoses of Customary Christianity

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In what sense can we call western European societies ‘Christian’ when for two centuries, at admittedly very uneven rates and with more or less violent conflicts, a general process of secularization has been moving their citizens away from confessional allegiance or non-allegiance, institutionalizing pluralism of religious or philosophical ‘opinions’ and defining legitimate forms for their expression in the public space? By emphasizing the cultural dimension of Christianity rather than its aspect as a dogmatic institution divided into rival confessions and churches, structuralist anthropology revealed the prominence, within local rural or urban societies, of symbolic logics in which it was possible to identify the working of a thinking and mode of transmission – a ‘Christian custom’ – adapted to the changes in the hierarchical relations between clerical competences and civil society. Creating and ordering the world, constructing the person and imagining a destiny after death, mobilizing a number of supernatural mediators in an economy of incarnation and redemption: all these subjects of dogmatic pronouncement and theological speculation are being tested, not only in the teaching, rites and acts of devotion prescribed or tolerated by the church but equally through naturalist or technical knowledge and social practices which are *a priori* alien to the domain of ‘religion’.¹ In the same way practices ensuring regular exchanges between living and dead as social beings are not restricted to funeral customs and their political ramifications. Narrative traditions and votive practices that are part of the homage paid to patron saints, bonds of spiritual kinship, dream experiences and games of chance: ethnographic exploration of these heterogeneous areas of social life has become necessary in order to restore the coherence, not so much of a salvation religion as of a system of reciprocal obligations that gives substance, in its own way, to the doctrinal inventions of Christian eschatology.²

In this everyday Christianity God is scarcely present; but Christ, the Virgin, the saints and the dead are ritually produced and ‘incarnated’ as a number of institu-

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tions, beneficent and malevolent by turns, that place each local society in a specific time and hierarchized space at the same time as they offer a panoply of 'roles' to order, through dramatized celebrations, biographical constructions that are differentiated according to gender. Of course ethnology encounters all the postures challenging the churches, whether they take the form of social criticism of clerical power, alternative ideas of God, militant materialism or that 'sacré gauche (holy left)' theorized for the first time by Robert Hertz. But within old village societies the forms of semantic logic he uncovered restored the locals' point of view as to special categories of 'bad Christians': the accusation of immorality that often accompanies the charge of atheism is here replaced by the identification of failures to observe custom in the construction of dual sexual and metaphysical identity, while the materialist challenge to the biblical model of the creation of the world looks like the other face of the technical know-how associated with the exercise of certain professions.³

But do the methods and conceptual tools used to liberate day-to-day Christianity from being classified as a folk religion full of 'pagan remnants' still work for describing analytically customs that are historically part of highly ideologized cultural movements of anticlerical struggle and active dechristianization, which, more than forms of philosophical or militant atheism, have fed a large number of spiritualisms that have broken away from dogmatic institutions?

I am referring to the various spiritualist societies that mushroomed in France in the second half of the 19th century and their metamorphosis in the 1880s into 'societies of psychic studies' then 'metapsychical studies'. The former developed active techniques of communication with 'spirits' in groups structured by a meticulously codified ritual practice. The latter explored the spirit's 'unknown powers' via protocols for psychological and social research. However, both in their time claimed categorically to be scientific, whether they made the dead visible and audible to supply proof of life after death or observed the effects of energies and forces that were presumed to transcend individual lives. Thus we cannot use as analytical categories generic terms such as 'science' and 'religion' through which experts and doctrinaire specialists confront one another. On the other hand describing these social practices on the basis of the same to-and fro between the ethnography of the present – since they are still active – and past usage means that we can identify the symbolic work that both do with opposite aims: the introduction of 'Science' as a metaphysical entity leading to new forms of learning the counter-empirical ideas at the heart of what we must recognize, at the end of the analysis, as a religious transmission.⁴

Celebrating astronomy?

In 1904, in the midst of the confrontation between clerical and secular, a new festival appeared in Paris, the *Fête du Soleil* (Sun Festival). Over a period of ten years this celebration brought together at the top of the Eiffel Tower every year for the summer solstice the directors of all the observatories in France, together with representatives from the scientific, artistic and political world, most of them, like Poincaré, committed to a moderate republicanism, which nonetheless had them supporting the

extremely radical separation between churches and state in 1905. Organized by the Astronomical Society of France, the initiative was part of an ambitious programme headed by its founder Camille Flammarion. A journalist, novelist and self-taught astronomer on the margins of academic institutions, Flammarion belonged to the second generation of scientific vulgarizers. He enjoyed international fame, which he had acquired through a huge effort in the area of popular education and production of materials for disseminating information that was intended to give everyone the chance to 'stand upright before the heavens': after the enormous success of his *Astronomie populaire* under Arago's patronage (1879) he founded, one after the other, a journal, *L'Astronomie* (1882), a personal observatory at Juvisy specializing in photographing the sky (1887) and in the same year a society for amateur astronomers.

Of course choosing to celebrate astronomy on the Eiffel Tower, that controversial monument for the centenary of the Revolution that was at the time threatened with destruction, meant siding with 'the modern spirit' against the 'timid Catholics', but also the 'positive minds' who misread all the aspirations symbolized by that 'exclamation mark' cast upwards into infinite space.⁵ For observation of heavenly phenomena was not only an education in the Copernican representation of the universe; it should lead to a feeling of wonderment as an introduction to the metaphysics that the stories and novels continually illuminated.⁶ Their writing combines several genres – fantasy narrative, imaginary journey, philosophical dialogue, meditation – in which romantic themes are recycled to free astronomy from the strictly rationalist programme and give it the status of a spiritualist philosophy: 'the religion of superior minds'. For instance *Uranie*, a planetary novel published in 1889, sets a love affair within a grandiose religious philosophy designed to make everyone a 'citizen of the heavens'. A statue – Uranie – comes to life to guide the narrator on a journey through space and time; the story ends with a spiritualist credo pronounced by a dead person's picture: the immortality of the soul, its journeys from one planet to another, the existence of a divine entity similar, not to a creator god, but an intelligent force – the 'Unknown' – that transposes Christian eschatology into the language of Darwinian selection. Offering a new version of cosmological proof as part of the exploration of the celestial bodies, this negative theology seems in fact to be haunted by death.

Equally the Fête du Soleil cannot be reduced to a simple anticipation of our modern festivals of science.⁷ The political context revives, in terms close to those used during the Revolution, the theme of a successor to religious enthusiasm in a festival intended to celebrate a knowledge that has a liberating quality. But the ambiguity of its status immediately becomes clear in the lexical hesitations: festival of the Solstice, festival of Astronomy or festival of the Sun? In the end the press fixed on the latter title and the passionate reactions it aroused reveal as much about contemporary political and religious divisions as about the perplexities of the keenest supporters of the new Science. 'It is not about reviving the ceremonies of defunct cults', explained *L'Aurore* on the eve of the opening event.⁸ But among its critics the 'clericals' accused the civil astronomical festival of paganism. On the other hand the many disciples of the Master, to whom they owed their 'rational education', saw in it their dream of a festival of Nature celebrating 'beneficent forces'. They offered many anthems and prayers to the Sun and some of them turned the climb up the

Eiffel Tower into a veritable counter-pilgrimage to Lourdes. All the same, the label 'pagan festival' disturbed the deists: 'Can we in all conscience, as upright and free citizens and thinkers, celebrate the Sun and push into the background the great master it obeys?' As for the rationalist minds who were concerned about this misuse of knowledge, they would have preferred to turn the Eiffel Tower into a people's observatory, introduce astronomy teaching from nursery school and organize annual festivals at which astronomy would be followed by physics, chemistry, biology, sociology. As it turned out not all the supporters of a scientific festival thought of it in the same simple terms. A musician imagined a choir of 'Pythagoreans' singing anthems to the rising sun as they walked round a temple. A doctor turned himself into an architect and stage director: 'In my imagination I see you on the vast terrace of a "Sunflower" palace (see the explanatory booklet), as big as the Trocadéro, announcing, to the applause of the crowd, the heavenly events that are so useful to humanity. The palace's revolving movement would make it easier for you to proclaim *urbi et orbi* the benefits brought by the rays of the king of planets, that great cost-free healer.' On '15 floréal 113', in other words 5 May 1905, a meteorologist from the Vaucluse sent 'Honoured Citizen Flammarion' the verse programme for a festival that was 'civil, secular, scientific and philosophical', to be celebrated yearly and, in particular, to be made democratic.⁹ These imaginary scenarios were never realized but, in forms less directly legible, something of the imaginary that inspired them runs through the successive moments of a festival designed to make up for the ceremonial austerity of the spiritualist movements just as much as glorify astronomical knowledge.

In the early years philosophical intentions were more to the fore than creation of aesthetic forms. The festival programme was overlaid with explicit rational meanings, backed up by speeches whose function was to establish meaning and codify the appropriate emotions. 'It is in the name of science that we are gathered together here . . . We are not deifying the sun', Janssen stressed in 1904 when he presented the publishing event that might finally mark photography's contribution to physical astronomy: the *Grand Atlas de photographies solaires*, which he had just brought out in 1903. The new image only broke through slowly as a measuring instrument and means of observation superior to the visual: it was necessary to wait till the 1880s for it to become the famous 'researcher's retina' Janssen hoped for.¹⁰ Of the 6000 shots taken at Meudon to observe daily solar activity, around 30 were published in the *Atlas* and projected during the festival. Actors and singers from the Opéra performed compositions borrowed from the romantic repertoire or created for the occasion to respond to detractors' criticisms. Then, in a very lengthy speech disclaiming any theology, and after reminding people of the astronomical definition of the solstice, Flammarion focused on legitimizing the ceremonial initiative, which should be part of a civil republican religion, placing it in a veritable genealogy stemming from the solar theory of religions, which however was heavily condemned. This festival, an enlightened version of St John's fires, of which he dug up a late 17th-century Parisian description, and also of all the Sun cults attested in Greece, Asia or among indigenous American peoples, meant a 'revival . . . of the idea that has so long been buried under the veil of all the religions': the existence of an 'eternal active cause' that governs the progress of souls in the infinite universe and of which the sun is the

perceptible manifestation.¹¹ Eventually at dawn all the participants were invited to carry out 'observations' according to a model borrowed, it is said, from the Koran: measuring the sunrise by noting, on the tower's different floors, the precise moment when writing became legible. And for this modernist version of revealed Scripture fragments of the Master's writings were handed round to all the observers.

In the years that followed, the omnipresent references to a religious primitivism, which this scientific celebration seemed to revive, gave way to a concern to renew aesthetic forms. And so the festival had some ardent defenders that one would not expect to meet here, if one ignored the fascination Flammarion exerted over some very different audiences. His stellar imagination and his research into the physiological effects of coloured light inspired the very well known Loïe Fuller, who brought to Paris the rippling luminous serpentine dance in which the body disappears and leaves luminous traces of fluid moving forms:¹² on the eve of war the Sun festival was enriched by a ballet of the planets performed by the symbolist dancer's young students. Then Raymond Roussel expressed his 'frenetic'¹³ admiration for the Juvisy master, who shared with Canterel, the scholar of *Locus Solus*, the same passion for the paradoxes of time and death. However, unlike the American dancer, the writer was not at all identified with Flammarion's spiritualist programme, even though his plays occasionally combine astronomical contemplation with amorous encounters, in the manner of *Uranie*, which he read aloud at the Leiris house.¹⁴

But at the century's end scientific initiation and aesthetic transpositions were not enough to structure experiences of belief that might replace the rites that, in Christian practice, facilitated fashioning or refashioning of the soul. As the novels suggest, making someone experience concretely a new form of individual immortality, the corollary of the infinity of worlds, mobilizes other places and knowledge: between the narrative of the hero's cosmic voyage and the posthumous message his dead friend sends him, *Uranie* unexpectedly offers a brief presentation of 'psychic studies' that invites readers to carry out, at one and the same time, astronomical observation and 'telepathic' communication. This enigmatic science itself requires an apprenticeship that takes the paradoxical form of a piece of research designed to gather 'observed' events and in doing so transforms readers into witnesses subject to most precise instructions as regards writing.

'Coincidences' and photographic modernism

This pedagogic model was inaugurated in March 1899 in *Annales politiques et littéraires*, a republican weekly that drew its readership from among the Parisian and provincial middle classes: civil servants, judges, doctors, primary and secondary teachers. It continued in May of the same year in a local paper, *Le Petit Marseillais*. The 8000 subscribers to *Annales* were invited to answer these two questions: 'Have you at any time had the clear impression, when awake, of seeing a human being, or hearing them, or being touched by them, but of being unable to connect this impression with any known cause? Did this impression coincide with a death?' It was explained that negative replies were just as important as positive ones, and that

dreams could be included if there was the ‘coincidence of death’. The research was part of a series of collections of ‘events’ initiated in England by the Society for Psychical Research and carried out in Europe and the USA between the 1880s and 1930s in order to draw up an inventory of modes of knowledge that went beyond the empirical constraints of ordinary communication. With a few modifications it repeated the one on ‘true hallucinations’ conducted by Dariex in *Annales des sciences psychiques* in order to take part in the London experimental psychology conference in 1892.¹⁵ Telepathy, ‘ghosts of the living’, ‘true hallucinations’ or more simply ‘coincidences’: this diverse vocabulary depending on institutions, places and actors reveals the diversity of interests, explicit or implicit, that were involved in the objectivization of the complex mental processes which were, at the same time, at the centre of a vast rebalancing operation between the natural sciences, which were in the midst of being transformed, and the human sciences, which were in the process of starting up. But Flammarion’s initiative is exactly contemporary with debates around the legitimate powers and uses of photography, which in turn illuminate the symbolic logic underlying his project.

The translation of Aksakoff’s book – *Animisme et spiritisme*¹⁶ – rehabilitated ‘transcendental photography’ among French spiritualist movements 20 years after the condemnation of the doctrinaire follower of Kardec, Pierre Leymarie, and the photographer Jean Buguet, who supplied posthumous pictures to readers of *Revue spirite*. Doctors and soldiers embarked on photographic demonstrations of the human body’s invisible components, to which the discovery of radiography in 1895 gave a new legitimacy. For them it was about authenticating the old magnetic medicine by recording on a sensitive plate the ‘fluid’ that gives life to every living being, and also the mental images and emotions making up the stream of consciousness, or even the ‘externalized’ soul in various forms of radiation. Those images were minutely examined by professional photographers and the Academy of Sciences expressed its opinion on the controversy involving the supporters of ‘fluids’ and ‘emanations’. Some wanted to identify the as yet little-known properties of the new sensitive substances used by the operators; others wished to define a property of living beings – sensitivity – as a relational process and not a mere physiological state. But this revealing power also penetrated Catholic circles: in 1898, on the initiative of an Italian jurist and photographer, Secondo Pia, Christ’s holy shroud, preserved in Turin, became once again a controversial object that was subjected in its turn to photographic assessment. More than a convergence of interests and uncertainties between spiritualists and physicists, these were socially differentiated realizations of the photographic paradigm as anthropological model.¹⁷ Thus, in the debate on photos of ‘psychic radiations’ (1899–1909), the spiritualists were themselves divided, not between believers and non-believers, but between those who were involved in scholarly circles developing knowledge and those who, because they were socially outside those circles, questioned their rules for rendering empirical data coherent and overstepped the ethical norms of scientific communication. The former, ‘as enlightened psychics’, could do without photographic proof; the latter, on the other hand, used it increasingly for polemical purposes. As for Flammarion, he supported, as a talented cultural mediator, the appropriation by the greatest number of this model of authenticating a metaphysics by liberating it – and

that was his discovery – from photographic technique and handing it over to a writing practice.

The study by *Annales politiques et littéraires* was preceded by the publication of accounts that were to act as a guide to identifying 'coincidences'. More than 4000 readers replied to the astronomer, who first selected 250 stories for publication the following year in two thick volumes, *L'Inconnu et les problèmes psychiques*, which went through many editions. A long introduction set out the nature and objectives of 'psychic studies': 'To show that the soul exists and that hopes of immortality are not illusions' (p. viii); their link with astronomy; 'Immortality in the stars seems to me the logical complement of astronomy. Why should the heavens interest us if we live for only a day on earth?' (p. xii). Establishing a corpus combined a judicial practice of evaluating the validity of the evidence, depending on witnesses' intellectual and moral qualifications, with a highly democratic concern for parity: the stories came equally from male and female witnesses and were perfectly evenly divided between waking visions and experiences in dreams, though this distinction was hardly relevant for the writers.

Already settled orally by going round the family and among close friends or acquaintances, these written accounts form a kind of ethnography of the self that is contrasted with the problematic of relics through which early ethnography explored, at the same time and using the same objects, the religious life of rural societies. Indeed it suggests a modernization of the reading of signs that help us think of death through a new category of dream experience: the 'premonitory' dream, labelled as such on the model of predictive knowledge coming out of the observation of natural phenomena. The typical model of 'coincidence', its ideal form so to speak, is seeing or hearing a relative who is geographically distant and who, one learns the next day or a few days later, died quite unpredictably at the very same instant as the vision and in the same circumstances. Similar to a copy of reality, the dream image is equivalent to a photo. Comparing images from dreams with photos had already been common in studies on the psycho-physiology of sleep and dreaming from the second half of the 19th century. But here it is obeying a requirement that is in a sense the reverse: naturalizing, not the source of the dreaming activity, but its divinatory/predictive function, which is equivalent to desymbolizing dream interpretation and thus eliminating cultural specificities.

This redefinition was appropriated by the astronomer's correspondents via a wide variety of narrative procedures in order to construct in writing the dream experience and the waking experience as a dual reality: two faces, night and day, of the world. And so narration became the exercise of judgement as to truth that was to cut out any work of interpretation. Of course the reported accounts could not fully conform to the photographic model, which began to compete with other divinatory expertise based in particular on images codified by keys to dreams with the aim of treating misfortune symbolically. Some perceived the 'coincidences' as the learned recognition of what, according to region, were called 'warnings', 'glimpses' or 'inter-signs', which were attributed to God or Providence. Some old priests revealed the powers of their 'travelling soul'; some pastors, 'receivers of omens', gave details of their recurring circumstances. Others argued about the compatibility of the 'telepathic' explanation with Catholic doctrine: it did not account either for appearances

of saints or the effectiveness of prayers in calming souls in torment. Others claimed it was part of an enthusiasm for magnetism or spiritualism.

Though it defended itself against this, the pedagogic project, which included giving back the accounts gathered to a far wider audience via the press, thus required a meticulous task of correcting, selecting and even rewriting. To see evidence of this it is necessary to go back to the original accounts as well as the mass of evidence excluded from the early publications.¹⁸ While not strictly speaking constituting rewriting, correction of the signs of oral delivery or the accounts' time structure produces an initial effect of homogenization. The systematic suppression of forms of address leads to the disappearance of other elements which however are essential for judging the account's value: a negative response for oneself to a reported account or efforts of memory stimulated by reading *Annales* (recalling one's memories, hesitating, changing one's interpretation). More radically the editor selects from each letter the account that most fits the suggested model and cuts out all those that depart from it as well earlier interpretations than the recently adopted one. Finally the arrangement of the accounts under headings far from one another results in the explosion of the family specialist in the interpretation of signs. This rewriting thus aims to make the accounts resemble as far as possible statements of observation and above all unambiguous proof, dismissing the plurality of meanings the narrators give them. Continually including accounts from other European or American collections, obtaining evidence not only in Catholic and Protestant but also in Jewish and Orthodox cultural milieux, this editorial work is affected by the universalist ambition of those spiritualist movements.

A new contract of persuasion is being developed here: against the dogmatic imposition of the churches and the doctrinaire, the astronomer constructs a community of believers on the model of a research community. Subject to the dual authority of the Master and the printed word, narrators' dream adventures were metamorphosed into objectivized facts, which in their turn were to feed other readers' 'observations' and whose similarities transposed the experimental imperative of reproducibility. Like a number of intellectuals of his period Flammarion, who was initially destined by his family for the priesthood, distanced himself from the church because he rejected the 'dual truth' regime adopted by Catholic scholars. But far from leading to loss of belief, the astronomy of observation, through the virtue of the 'psychic sciences', revived, for literate circles, links with divinatory learning that had loosened in the mid-17th century.¹⁹ Designed to dechristianize the Heavens and rewrite the soul, this system in fact only adapted a form of writing – correspondence – that since the late 18th century had accompanied the reciprocal construction of writers and readers. And as was to be expected, the initial project was continually shifting. While continuing to publish, up to his death in 1925, accounts taken from the imposing correspondence he carried on soliciting and receiving, Flammarion gradually abandoned the anticlerical struggle in order to explore, at his readers' request, unforeseen social experiences and increasingly direct the ideological fight for what he strangely labelled an 'ontological theism' against the various categories of atheism.²⁰ And so, at one remove from the media confrontation between divergent socio-political interests, the writing space opened up by the Master welcomed a vast questioning in which everybody, no matter what social and cultural group they belonged to, could

become a metaphysician by objectivizing their doubts and beliefs. Short spiritual autobiographies set out the moments and circumstances of losing faith, moving away from the church, then rediscovering it after reading Flammarion's latest books. Others sent him transcriptions of spiritualist séances conducted by mediums, and lone attempts at communicating with their dead. Long essays discussed points of interpretation of the Master's writings in order 'to help convince the incredulous'. Catholics wondered about the appearances in Lourdes, the compatibility of his teaching with Christian doctrine and the inadequacies of this 'experimental science'. In exchange for 'rational' explanations women readers prayed for the scholar's salvation so that he might return 'to the tabernacle': 'Sir,' writes a humble cobbler, 'I sincerely believe, I would like so much to help you share my belief especially as, from one moment to the next, you too could enter into your eternity.'

But the social claim on 'Science' could not avoid the ritual utterance that sleepwalkers, clairvoyants and mediums, one after the other, have made. However, we must turn to the current observation of the public activities offered by the 'societies of psychic studies' that persisted in large urban centres, in order to identify the cognitive properties of a religious transmission based, not only on a magic of image and writing, but on the power of words.

The medium and the lecturer

Attendance at public rooms run by associations²¹ follows the common model of the sceptic introduced by a third party, who is credited with an authority based on experience. But other accounts, in which it is possible to recognize transposition of narrative traditions designed to describe the nature and value of the dream experience, affirm in their own way the dream structure of that new place beyond this world: in Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris two people meet who do not know one another, but each one holds a fragment of the knowledge that gives access to the place where the dead speak.²² In its turn that place is founded on a doubling of functions and modes of utterance: that of the lecturer and that of the medium.

Nowadays the function of lecturer no longer involves an institutional academic position, and the associations do not guarantee the veracity of what is said. This deals with a large number of philosophies from the Asian East; Christianity's relations with these philosophical and religious systems; a great diversity of healing arts and divinatory techniques; founding figures of historical spiritualism. However, like all speakers, the lecturers must make what they say credible by using a diversity of speech contracts that mime utterance scenarios that are recognized in our society as appropriate for transmitting a body of knowledge. They polarize around two opposing figures – the school teacher and the student of a life master – but a common feature unites them: enacting an intellectual posture. For instance, presentations that encourage the audience to adopt as a funeral rite prayers called 'Tibetan' fluctuate between an ethnography class and a lesson in theology: how Tibetans see the world beyond, the uses of the rite, why the practice should be included in western usage, why this form rather than another, how to proceed, with what objects, in what frame of mind, what effects can be expected, etc. A regime of truth is affirmed

here, the very one the writing contract proposed by Flammarion ended at and the basis of the republican political bond: seeing the religious domain as similar to the domain of opinion and the plurality of individual opinions, based on a diversity of sources of knowledge and cultural traditions.

Monthly programmes put out by the associations are still presenting mediums' activity as 'experiment': appearing in the early 19th century to affirm the therapeutic effectiveness of magnetism and moving in the 1860s into spiritualist vocabulary to demonstrate the existence of 'spirits', adopted from the 1890s to identify 'coincidences' and 'premonitions', this manner of labelling the mediums' activity places it in a history that provides presenters with a large number of ritual variants. Each session, lasting an hour or an hour and a half, comprises about ten individualized consultations in which those present, sitting facing the platform on which lecturer and medium succeed each other, take part one after the other in the position of client, spectator and witness. Whether men or women – but the latter are more numerous – the mediums open the session with an explanatory address briefly defining the aim, the method and the benefits that can be expected: 'what we want you to understand is the survival of the soul', 'don't think we shouldn't disturb the dead'. The audience is socially very heterogeneous, also distinguished by a greater female presence, but especially by urban anomie: they all come from very distant neighbourhoods, some from the provinces, each is unknown to all the others even if a few regulars can be identified who meet here very sporadically.

At the start of the session participants are invited to 'put something on the table', photos, personal items, jewellery. The medium takes a picture or object she says she is 'drawn' to, asks its owner to identify herself, then after a brief series of interactions with the client, 'transmits' what 'those from the other world' have shown and told her, before passing on to the next person using the same process. The dead seem to be knowledgeable about all areas of social life: changing job or flat, being unlucky in love, assessing the risks involved in surgery, settling family disputes, planning a trip, etc. It is not so much a question of discovering what rites must be performed in order to alter one's destiny but of getting practical advice on successfully executing plans. And it would be possible simply to apply to this mode of divination a strictly functional reading: a way of regulating social relations or producing objectivity for a judgement or decision in a situation of uncertainty. However, more attentive observation reveals a great variety of practices which disturb the simplicity of this schema. In this dream place not all the séances are equal, some are more fascinating to the audience than others depending on the medium's virtuosity and also the clients' *savoir-faire*.

Putting oneself in the position of client is not in the least spontaneous. What is normally reserved for confidential communication (with friends or various specialists) must be spoken aloud. At the end of the session, 'those who have received a message' are distinguished by the fact that fragments of their private lives have become public: events that in ordinary life define the intimate sphere have been turned into a story through a very fast succession of interactions between medium and client, which is followed all the time with close attention by the audience. So a séance can be defined as an interweaving of biographical fragments that deal with both common situations and dramatic events. But this is not, as people often say, a

socialization of suffering. Just as certain therapeutic practices transform normal modes of communication by requiring, for example, the inversion of the socially established separation between what we entrust to speaking and what we keep for writing, the exchange with the medium leads temporarily to a reversal of the division between private and public by applying new, implicit rules for defining the sayable and unsayable. But once the session is over each participant becomes a private person again.

The objects placed on the table become a metaphor for the client's question but there is no shared code: sometimes the picture is of the deceased from whom a 'message' is expected, sometimes it is of the living person for whom the consultation is sought, sometimes the object seems to have no relationship with the client's desire to know. Certain mediums reject all material images, but call directly on a member of the audience and offer them what they see and hear as being intended for that person, or else they simply pick out the person to whom the message is addressed in part of the room. Mediums distinguish two methods of working – 'being in a clairvoyant state' and 'being in the situation of medium' – depending on whether they verbalize, in the manner of sleepwalkers of the past, visual images given by their 'guide' or pass on a deceased's words direct, like spiritualists. For the observer another distinction is needed that does not cover these traditional oppositions between seeing and speaking, going out of oneself and being visited. Some practitioners are above all concerned with making clients talk, exploring their situation on the basis of pre-established categories – work, health, family relationships – whereas others, by contrast, ask them not to speak so that they can hear, they say, the words coming from 'the other world'. But those who are continually prompting the client also interrupt using a formula – 'do you have a question to ask?' – to which they do not expect an answer. However, all the practitioners make use of coded systems of signs – letters of the alphabet, first names, figures, astrological signs, etc. – which are randomly employed to produce a message, at the end of the interaction, which always shifts the client's question.

Over and above the diversity of their methods, practitioners always use the vocabulary of photography – 'take pictures of the deceased', 'bring snaps via the deceased that the medium can grasp' – to describe their demonstrative power. Could it be that the messages transpose the photographic experiments suggested in the late 19th century to reinforce persuasion with image? Indeed, like the old materializations fixed on the sensitive plate, objects and pictures serve first of all to verify the power of the medium, who has to identify the person represented from a few recurring criteria: whether they are alive or dead, their relationship to the client, notable features of their character. This test takes up most of the exchange. It is only after verifying the practitioner's abilities that the client can formulate her request. On the other hand practitioners who refuse photos render 'those from beyond' present by verbalizing mental images that are equivalent to the images supplied by the old photographers. Based on generic features – age, sex, character traits, circumstances of death – the task of recognition assigned to clients is the same as the old procedures of activating remembered images using a visual object. Authentication of the medium's power will then occur after the transmission of the message in the form of a feature identifying deceased or client. This 'signature' transposes the old proce-

dures of recognition of the 'images of spirits' from a close relationship; its main feature is to cause surprise or laughter. And so, as in the past, medium and client make up a complex optical machine for communicating with the other world, but nowadays it must in addition make the dead audible. How are the voice and the tone of words that are now inaudible produced?

The authentication test that the client subjects the medium to is in fact rapidly reversed by the lecturer, who makes it his job to what I have provisionally called 'get the client to talk'. This consists of formulating at speed a great variety of assertions in a half-questioning tone which the medium reformulates, amplifies or corrects as information, voluntary or involuntary, verbal or non-verbal, given by the client in order to link her state with that of the beneficial or harmful organization of a social group wider than the family. But the medium is continually intent on confusing the relational configuration of what is, to the audience, very like a therapeutic exchange: far from behaving like a benevolent interlocutor, the practitioner introduces a more or less agonistic dimension that tends to produce a state of uncertainty and confusion in the client and especially so because nothing she says must be invalidated as false since it is not she who is speaking but 'those from beyond'.

Of course 'those from beyond' do not speak a foreign language, a secret language that mediums are experts in. Nevertheless their language is not immediately decipherable. The alterity that typifies its morphology stems from the fact that it juxtaposes all sorts of signs among which articulated speech is not pre-eminent and that furthermore the words supplied belong, as is very often the case with oracular speech, to the regime of ambiguity. It is a language made up of images of places and objects, gestures and colours, numbers and letters, isolated words, common or enigmatic phrases, periphrases and metaphors, chants and tunes. All this requires translation, a job that is carried out jointly by practitioner and client in accordance with a strict division of tasks. It is the client's responsibility to translate the verbal and non-verbal elements that make up a stable repertoire, similar to keys to dreams, and whose presence the medium stresses with an 'it's symbolic'. Just as with dreams, this work is not decoding symbols but an unpredictable linking that transforms symbols into signs in order to bring forth into memory living and dead people you were not thinking of, forgotten events, biographical elements and preoccupations you did not have in mind at the time.²³ And so 'getting the client to talk' does not mean extracting information from her, as we might presume when we make 'clairvoyance' the paradigm of illusion. As with the Freudian rule of free association, it is a question of suspending control of the succession of thoughts to induce a speech that is unburdened by intentional meaning.

The words articulated by 'those from beyond' require in their turn an interpretive act carried out under the medium's direction either by ignoring the literal meaning and replacing it with another, or by adding a second meaning to the literal one. In the same way images are subjected to a dual reading, descriptive as regards the image of an empirical object, and symbolic as regards an element of a metaphorical expression. Thus medium and client are subject to the same injunction: experience another way of inhabiting language. But in addition the practitioner must be able to mobilize a wide variety of techniques of *mise en abîme* of the utterance in order to get both the client and the spectator-witnesses to hear a plurality of speakers, real or

fictive, in a subordinate position, but without her discourse tipping over into spectacular performance. Paradoxically it is by accentuating moments of mimetic play designed to indicate that 'this is acting' that she can create in every listener brief moments of indecision as regards recognition of the speaker, moments that lead one, literally, to hear 'another' voice, speech without a speaker, the voice of 'those from beyond'.

Thus 'societies of psychic studies' today keep alive a day-to-day *cult of the dead* that partly links up with forms of exchange between living and dead belonging to the customary rites of Christian France. This revival appears in the reminder of the customary calendar, for instance November as the month of the dead, for whom one should pray and have masses said. It underlies the identity of the beings from the other world, who have again become deceased family members, but who are neither beggars nor evil-doers and never appear as wicked dead. They come to moralize relations between the living, to ask forgiveness for suffering they may have inflicted on them or assure them of their protection. And above all they come to authenticate a quite simple doctrinal statement: the other world exists, it is a beyond where networks of solidarity between relatives and friends are reconstituted to 'go forward into the light'. This idea of progress reminds us of a doctrinal pronouncement that, since the 19th century, has been contrasted with Christian representations of the Last Judgement and the metaphysical places associated with it: the affirmation of reincarnation as a spiritual progress through a number of existences. But though some lecturers, like the 19th-century doctrinaire groups, define this post-mortem destiny as a return to the original meaning of the Bible, citing the ancient opposition between literal and mystical, figurative or allegorical meanings, mediums place it quite concretely in biographical experience by reactivating the old representation of the person who dies prematurely and who must be 'remade'. It is their job to 'make' a reincarnation within the kinship network by teaching the relatives to 'recognize' in a new child the return of a child who has passed on.

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It was by doing astronomical observation and photography that, from the late 19th century, it was possible to 'stand upright before the heavens', that is move away from the church to think about death and how to reproduce order in local societies. The ethnography of these practices, which at first sight seem eccentric, reveals the symbolic logic that was then closely linked to technical knowledge to supply statements of belief with their appropriate objects, in other words *polemical* objects. Nowadays attending a 'séance' means temporarily joining a group of anonymous mourners deciphering the enigmatic words of dead people who may equally well wish for a Catholic mass or succour from the spiritual master of a pagoda or 'Tibetan' rites. Faced with priests 'who no longer believe', mediums have the job of turning opinions that claim allegiance to 'Science' or practices objectivized as a cultural tradition, into a traditional knowledge in the pragmatic sense of the term, that is to say, part of a biographical episode for each individual. And whereas the old customary knowledge was based on a divinatory reading of the liturgical rites of the

church, contemporary divinatory utterance, far from being associated with an esoteric mysticism, quite logically takes on board secular societies' new demand for religious pluralism.

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Notes

1. On the theoretical thinking that accompanied this research, see D. Fabre (1989), 'Le symbolisme en question', in M. Ségalen (ed.), *L'Autre et le semblable*, Paris: CNRS, pp. 61–78; J. P. Albert (1990), 'Destins du mythe dans le christianisme médiéval', *L'Homme* 113: 53–72; G. Charuty (ed.) (1995), *Nel paese del tempo. Antropologia dell'Europa cristiana*, Naples: Liguori, pp. 1–14; G. Charuty (2001), 'Du catholicisme méridional à l'anthropologie des sociétés chrétiennes', in D. Albera, A. Blok and C. Bromberger (eds), *L'Anthropologie de la Méditerranée. Anthropology of the Mediterranean*, Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, MMSH, pp. 359–85.
2. See for example *Études rurales*, 'Le retour des morts', 1987, no. 105–6, and *Hésiode. Cahiers d'ethnologie méditerranéenne*, 'La mort difficile', 1994, no. 2. A new contextualization of E. De Martino's pioneering work is suggested by C. Gallini (2000) in her introduction to the new edition of *Morte e pianto rituale. Dal lamento funebre antico al pianto di Maria*, Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, pp. vii–li (1st edn 1958 under the title *Morte e pianto rituale nel mondo antico: dal lamento pagano al pianto di Maria*).
3. This is the case, for instance, of the miller whose expertise as far as measurement is concerned makes him question the church's teaching. This figure of the 'unbeliever' and people who fail to produce a Christian identity are analysed in G. Charuty (1997), *Folie, mariage et mort. Pratiques chrétiennes de la folie en Europe occidentale*, Paris: Seuil.
4. Too frequently cultural history claims for itself ideas that crop up everywhere in debates and which, because of this, should be deconstructed, which is not the same as doing a relativist reading of research in the sociology of science. I have unpacked the methodological implications of an ethnographic description of these social practices in (2001) 'Le retour des métapsychistes', *L'Homme* 158–9, pp. 353–64.
5. Flammarion leaped to the defence of the monument 'rising amid light and freedom' in *L'Astronomie*, 1886, pp. 361–2.
6. The best study is by D. Chaperon (1998), *Camille Flammarion. Entre astronomie et littérature*, Paris/Lausanne: Imago. Themes related to Fourier are analysed by M. Nathan (1981), *Le Ciel des fouriéristes. Habitants des étoiles et réincarnations de l'âme*, Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon.
7. However, the ethnography of these festivals probably has some surprises in store for us . . .
8. *L'Aurore*, 9 June 1904, p. 1.
9. This correspondence is preserved in the Fonds Flammarion, dossier 'Fête du Soleil' at the Juvisy Observatory. I am grateful to the officers of the Astronomical Society of France, who are continuing the work of exploiting these archives, for facilitating my access to them. Especially J. Pernet and P. Fuentes, who is co-author, with P. Cotardièrre, of a biography (1994), *Camille Flammarion*, Paris: Flammarion, and 'Camille Flammarion et les forces naturelles inconnues', in B. Bensaude-Vincent and C. Blondel, *Des savants face à l'occulte. 1870–1940*, Paris: Editions La Découverte, pp. 105–23.
10. On the technical and cultural history of astronomical photography, and the respective positions of Janssen and Flammarion, see the presentations by Q. Bajac, F. Launay and D. Canguilhem (2000) in *Dans le champ des étoiles. Les photographes et le ciel, 1850–2000*, the catalogue for the exhibition at the Musée d'Orsay (16 June to 24 Sept. 2000) in Paris and the Staatsgalerie (23 Dec. 2000 to 1 Jan. 2001) in Stuttgart, Paris: Editions de la Réunion des musées nationaux.
11. In referring to E. Burnouf, *La Science des religions*, Flammarion was opting for Max Muller's mytho-

- logical school despite the criticisms of Sylvain Lévi and the French sociological school. A. Van Gennep (1949) in his turn rejected the 'solstice' explanation of St John's fires, *Manuel de folklore français*, part 1, vol. 4.
12. A friend of Flammarion, the American dancer introduced a new dance aesthetic, celebrated by the Symbolists. See G. Lista (1994), *Loïe Fuller. Danseuse de la Belle Époque*, Paris: Stock.
 13. In an undated note Raymond Roussel apologized for being unable to attend the festival, dossier 'Fête du Soleil'.
 14. As in the last scene from *La Poussière de Soleils* (1926). On the poetic transpositions of theories of time, see M. Tani (1988), 'La mort et le temps. Raymond Roussel et Camille Flammarion', *Europe*, no. 714, pp. 96–105, and especially A. Le Brun (1994), *Vingt mille lieues sous les mots, Raymond Roussel*, Paris: J.-J. Pauvert.
 15. Dariex (1892), 'Le recensement des hallucinations et le congrès international de psychologie expérimentale', *Annales des sciences psychiques*, p. 136. This journal (1890–1920) was founded by Charles Richet to combat the lack of interest in medical circles as regards 'metapsychic' research. The second question, which was missing from Dariex's study, was inspired by the English research by E. Gurney, F. Podmore and F. Myers (1886), *Phantasms of the Living*, translated into French in 1891 with the title *Les hallucinations télépathiques*.
 16. 1895, Paris: Librairie spirite (1st German edn 1890). A Russian imperial counsellor, A. Aksakoff became known as an international expert in 'transcendental photography'.
 17. I analysed the experience of belief based on the use of photos of spirits in (1999): 'La boîte aux ancêtres. Photographie et science de l'invisible', *Terrain* 33, pp. 57–80. The explanation in terms of 'convergence of interests and uncertainties' is adopted by B. Bensaude-Vincent and C. Blondel (eds), *op. cit.* P. Geimer (1999) has done a magnificent job of reconstructing the photographic story of the holy shroud: 'L'autorité de la photographie. Révélation d'un suaire', *Études photographiques*, no. 6, pp. 67–99. The similarity between electric, magnetic and photographic processes as an anthropological paradigm of sensitivity was introduced by M. Frizot (1998), 'L'image inverse. Le mode négatif et les principes d'inversion en photographie', *Études photographiques*, no. 5, pp. 51–71.
 18. Dossiers 'Études psychiques', Fonds Flammarion, Observatoire de Juvisy. Out of this whole correspondence, which continued until Flammarion's death, around 5000 letters are today preserved, classified according to year.
 19. H. Drévilion (1996) has demonstrated the importance of editorial practices in the 17th century in discrediting astrology: *Lire et écrire l'avenir. L'astrologie dans la France du grand siècle (1610–1715)*, Paris: Champ Vallon. It is remarkable that in contrast the legitimization of new divinatory customs was once again effected via editorial practices.
 20. *Dieu dans la nature*, vol. II, p. 522. In 1886 Flammarion joined the Ligue nationale contre l'athéisme, which participated in the fight within the ranks of 'free thinkers' between deists and atheists: G. Minois (1998), *Histoire de l'athéisme*, Paris: Fayard, p. 459.
 21. The history of the Paris associations among which I carried out this ethnography can be found in M. Aubrée and F. Laplantine (1990), *La Table, le Livre et les Esprits*, Paris: J. C. Lattès, pp. 273–319.
 22. This refers to the story type 1645, which is particularly widespread in western Germany, and some versions of which have been collected in France, England, Spain and Sicily. The meeting between two travellers in a foreign place gives access to the dream's meaning by reuniting the two fragments of their respective dream experiences. See V. Chauvin (1897), 'Le rêve du Trésor sur le pont', *Revue des traditions populaires*, pp. 399–402 (and 1898, pp. 193–6).
 23. The choice of these visual or linguistic signs fits the principle, revealed by T. Todorov (1978) with regard to patristic exegesis, for identifying the segments of a text that are susceptible to interpretation: *Symbolisme et interprétation*, Paris: Seuil. The poorer the linguistic meaning and the more limited its understanding, the more the evocation grafts itself on to it and so the richer the interpretation. In the language of 'those from the other world' are found the same elements that patristic exegesis selected: proper nouns, numbers and technical nouns.