

## **Book review: Des Savants Face à l'Occulte**

***Des Savants face à l'Occulte 1870-1940*, collection of essays under the direction of Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent and Christine Blondel. Paris: La Découverte , 2002. Trade paperback of 233 pages. 17.50 € ISBN 2-7071-3616-6.**

Every few years reputable publishers feel the urge to take a walk on the wild side, exploring topics on the margins of their usually drab and scholarly pursuits. French academic editors are no exception, witness this collection of nine essays by a group of social scientists who were sent slumming into the dark alleys of occultism under the auspices of the “Cité des Sciences et de l’Industrie” (combination museum, lecture venue and research center North of Paris) and returned to reassure us that Science -- or, at least, French Science -- had nothing to fear from ghosts, goblins, mediums and dowsers. This book is the product of their explorations over two years of historical and archival research into the turn-of-the century era, which they wisely stretched to the early days of World War Two -- the most controversial and occasionally scandalous period of confrontation between self-described “rationalists” and explorers of the paranormal in France.

The fact that the team of eight authors and two editors included neither a practicing occultist nor a hard scientist creates both an opportunity and a problem: As a team of social scientists, they bring welcome objectivity to a discussion that centers on documents and reports rather than the personal interpretation of experiments; but this also weakens the debate, because social science lacks the ability to penetrate those insights that are only glimpsed in the laboratory, and are difficult to explain to anyone who wasn't there. The result leaves the reader with the same feeling one gets when reading commentaries about sumo wrestling written by skinny sports journalists.

Having said this, the objectivity itself is very valuable, in an area too often left to diatribe, preconception and bad faith. The book opens with an introduction by the two editors, who observe that around 1900 science operated in an exciting, idealistic context that authorized, and indeed encouraged, cohabitation with the pursuit of the mysterious. Following the researches of British, Russian and German scientists, notable French scholars began exploring the physical phenomena of spiritism, telepathy and dowsing under the general term of “métapsychique.” The editors argue that the study of the occult is an important element of epistemology because it forces us to define the borders of

science. It unmaskes the mechanisms through which our understanding of the universe is rationalized.

In Chapter 1 Pierre Lagrange and Patricia d'Andréa tackle the problem of defining occultism. They refer to Marcello Truzzi's recommendation to draw up such definitions carefully, in terms of WHO is calling a belief "occult," in WHAT social context, and in WHICH historical period. Indeed, one is always someone else's "occultist." When you get up in the morning, watch the live television news from overseas, speak to colleagues across the country on the telephone and exchange electronic mail with friends you are performing feats of remote viewing and thought transmission that would have sent you to the gallows in a not-so-distant era. No wonder, then, that scientists of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were viewed with suspicion in their work with mediums, and that Lagrange and d'Andréa are still struggling today to provide a clean definition of occultism.

In Chapter 2 Michel Piessens discusses occultism in stories, French literature and theater, placing it in the context of the popular culture of the time. This is followed in chapter 3 by Bertrand Méheust's analysis of the interaction between Robert Houdin and medium Alexis Didier, which left the great magician puzzled. Robert Houdin testified in writing that the phenomena he had witnessed were not among those that could be duplicated by prestidigitation or the magician's art – a fact that is seldom cited by opponents to spiritualism.

In Chapter 4 Nicole Edelman discusses French specificity in spiritism and neurology research between 1870 and 1890, with a very useful reminder of the role of Charcot and his research into hypnosis and hysteria. This is followed in chapter 5 by Patrick Fuentès' review of the career and researches of Camille Flammarion. He first observes that the 19<sup>th</sup> century was one of "intellectual boiling over" of ideas and inventions that authorized innovation "without scientific censorship" (page 105). So what happens when idealistic Camille Flammarion, as a young astronomer at Paris Observatory, publishes a book on *Plurality of Inhabited Worlds?* The director of the observatory, Urbain Le Verrier, fires him immediately (page 107). This obvious contradiction, which seems to have escaped the scrutiny of the book's editors, would have been worthy of development, because the same forces of innovation on one hand and censorship in the name of "rationalism," on the other, still characterize French science today. Perhaps French intellectual opinion at

the time of *La Belle Epoque* was not as idealistic and open as the authors suppose. Not only was there a great deal of opposition to innovation, as the firing of Flammarion indicates, but the powerful French Catholic church must have watched the proliferation of séances and ghostly manifestations with some misgivings. Indeed this book comes on the heels of a best-selling essay against parapsychology by two prominent French scientists, Georges Charpak and Henry Broch. Entitled *Devenez Sorciers, Devenez Savants* their all-out attack on paranormal observations suggests that psychical research is not far removed from sorcery. It is having a devastating effect on the efforts of the few French scientists who are attempting to revive such research today.

Chapter Six, written by Jacqueline Carroy, describes the investigation of medium “Léonie” by Pierre Janet and Charles Richet, all the more interesting that it came at a time when psychology was struggling with an assessment of the nature and relevance of hypnosis in diagnosis and therapy. This is followed in Chapter Seven by the story of a series of psychical experiments with the celebrated medium Eusapia Palladino. Here Christine Blondel describes how scientific attempts to document the full range of mediumistic phenomena brought the techniques of laboratory testing to their knees, leaving the scientific world intrigued by all the reports of sensational results but unconvinced about their objective validity. Chapter Eight, written by Pascal Maléfan, gives us yet another example of the confrontation between a scientist and the World Beyond: this time it is Nobel Prize winner (1913) Charles Richet who becomes fascinated with, and fooled by, the ghosts that manifest at villa Carmen in Algiers. The episode is sobering, if only because it shows to what extent the belief system of the experimenter can become intertwined with that of the practitioners and their believers.

The book ends with a chapter by Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent. It deals with dowsing, which the French call “radiesthésie,” and details its development in the thirties. She observes that the scientific thought police, under the guise of self-proclaimed “rationalists” managed to convince French opinion that dowsing was not only a false science but a public danger! She mentions in passing that professor Rocard dared to challenge this negative establishment in the 1960s with his own series of experiments on dowsing. I had the privilege of meeting Yves Rocard at the time, and can attest that he

was well aware that his attempt to reawaken an interest in the phenomenon was costing him a well-deserved seat at the French Academy of Sciences.

Thus the volume ends with no other conclusion than the observation that such a confrontation “triggered a fracture among the French scientific community and revealed the weakness of some scientists, incapable of following the sacrosanct rule of the science game: the free exercise of the critical mind.”

Much more could have been said. The researches of René Warcollier at the Institut Métapsychique International, which this reviewer has had the opportunity to discuss with Pierre Lagrange and Bertrand Méheust, are only mentioned in passing in this book, although they anticipated the contemporary work of the Stanford Research Institute in “remote viewing.” Similarly, the authors fail to cite the experiences of Capitaine Tizané, a special investigator of the French Gendarmerie, who was entrusted with numerous police cases that involved reported hauntings. He gathered first-hand testimonies involving multiple witnesses of poltergeist phenomena and other physical manifestations, including phenomena he himself observed. In 1936 his superiors discouraged his attempt to publish his observations because (as Pascal Maléfan has related in Chapter 8) professor Richet had been sorry for being waylaid into a study of ectoplasms... After his retirement Capitaine Tizané published his reports under the title *L’Hôte Inconnu dans le Crime sans Cause*.

The editing of the book is excellent. It even includes an index, a rare treat in French publishing. Many readers will regret the fact that the background of the authors is nowhere listed: such information would have helped in understanding the book’s point of view. The overall writing follows a style that is scholarly without being ponderous or convoluted. Some passages do remain a bit obscure; witness this commentary on the impact of early psychical research on the definition of science:

If “la métapsychique” was a failure, this failure is the product of the construction of a frontier that defines more clearly the limits of the scientific field through a series of exclusions. This excluding process therefore had a counter-effect upon science and was accompanied by the creation of a tension inside the paradigm itself, always susceptible to relax itself for a recomposition.

Such tentative statements, awkwardly balanced between respectability and the temptation to confront the stalwarts of conservative “rationalism,” only lead to more

questions and are not especially helpful. No wonder, then, that the reader gets to the end of the book without a satisfactory definition of “L’Occulte.” In spite of valiant efforts early in the volume to come to grips with definitions, terms such as “esotericism,” “occultism” and “hermeticism” are sometimes used interchangeably, although they describe very different historical, physical and social phenomena. The problem of the possible relevance of occultism in science, and of the continuing confrontation within French science between students of the paranormal and their “rationalist” opponents, remains open for a new generation of experimental innovators to tackle.

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