

**Keynote Speech:  
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# Truths Beyond Reason: Fluidité in the French fin-de-siècle

**M**atter, Matter, what a shadow you have cast over truth!  
– Louis Claude de Saint Martin

[S]piritism takes no more account of the barrier of space than of time.... It matters not whether it be by intuition, by clairvoyance, by telepathy, or by double personality that the soul is permitted to leave momentarily its terrestrial prison and make the voyage between this world and others in an instant of time, or whether the feat is accomplished by means of the astral body, by the reincarnation of disembodied omnisciences, by ‘fluid beings,’ . . . [A]ccording to spiritism, no serious objection would be offered to the possibility of such communication.

– Théodore Flournoy

In this discussion I contend that the mesmerist and spiritist concept of *fluidité* acted as fertile ground for the multiple discourses of the fin-de-siècle, most particularly occultism but also, because of their links to the occult, Symbolism and the Decadents. The latter part of this contention I have not fully proven but strongly suggest here. After exploring the ways *fluidité* functioned in mesmerism and flowered in spiritism, I turn to the fin-de-siècle to follow its fortunes

there. Spiritism and occultism popularized and made omnipresent the ghosts and ghost stories, the encroaching world of the spirits and the revival of hermetic knowledge that so fascinated much of the fin-de-siècle. Spiritists used the concept of *fluidité* to describe the soul’s existence in this world and its movement between worlds. *Fluidité* offered access between worlds; this opened the door to seeing the “beyond” as a “reality”. Spiritist mediums brought that beyond into the parlor and the lecture hall via the rapping and tapping of tables, “automatic” writing, and the ability to bring forth music and even roses from the spirit world beyond this one. The very “reality” of these otherworldly phenomena challenged realism as a movement and positivism as a science. By the 1880s, orthodox science, in the form of the new psychiatry, reacted to subsume and (attempt to) tame these phenomena. Spiritism and occultism, despite deep differences, banded together in claiming the magical/enchanted/more-than-material basis of these phenomena and contributed an important semi-mystical strain to modernist thought. The connections between spiritism/occultism and Symbolism/decadence suggest a more popular ancestry for the elite art movements, or at least a greater shared set of concerns and values, than has previously been considered.

As Théodore Flournoy pointed out (above), the soul could “leave its terrestrial prison” in myriad ways at the end of the nineteenth century. Mesmerists spoke of the “doubling” of the body, the ability to send a fluidic copy of the body outside the corporeal flesh. Spiritists theorized a *périsprit* which allowed the disembodied spirit to cross into and affect the earthly realm. Similarly, occultists spoke of astral bodies existing between the “world of things and [the] world of principles” (Papus) which allowed magicians to slip between realms, moving on the astral plane to affect the mundane one. Swedenborg, rediscovered by both Symbolists and mesmerists alike, also posited a universal fluid that linked the natural and the surnatural. All of these theories shared (at least) one common core concept – that of *fluidité* – that a fluidic material existed, allowing access of the solid material body to the immaterial truths beyond.

Each of these beliefs created a path to what I am calling here “truths beyond reason,” truths beyond the limited empiricism of modern science but outside the realm of traditional religion or philosophical logic. Mesmerists, spiritists, theosophists and many others sought to free both mind and matter from Max Weber’s “iron cage” of reason, and from the fixed limits of science. They allowed a re-enchantment of the fin-de-siècle world, insisting that the world of the spirit – be it “actual” spirits, dreams, astral planes, or hypnotic trance as a source of creative work – offered the means to reach a more fulfilling set of truths than those offered by science and reason.

The history of *fluidité* as a useful interpretive tool has yet to be written – and I won’t do so here – but that it played a key role in the myriad discourses at the end of the century can hardly be denied. *Fluidité* appeared first as “solid,” or at least quasi-material and this-worldly in Mesmerism early in the century. Spiritists inherited the concept and applied it to the envelope encasing the ethereal souls of

the dead. Spiritists used *fluidité* as a means to explain empirical events attributed to spirits and thus to prove, scientifically, the existence of the soul. Spiritism, especially in its early years, remained firmly linked to the positivist strain of thought. The recourse to positivism only furthered, perhaps ironically, the tools of the imaginary that would be available to later experimenters. In the fin-de-siècle, “fluidité” of doctrine also allowed the intermingling of a variety of groups interested in truths beyond reason – spiritists, occultists, rosicrucians, and others. Despite sometimes strong differences, this meant a fertile sharing of ideas and a coming together of alternative thought against the main currents of the late nineteenth century. The prevalence of these ideas at the end of the century came from the widespread popularity of spiritism throughout the second half of the century. The spiritist “fluidité” led, by an indirect path, to the centering of truth in a realm beyond that of matter and reason. These contemporary discourses offered fertile ground for literature and art to reject realism, to explore the mythical past, to find truth in the symbolic and to privilege the meaning coming from the worlds “beyond” the scientifically proven.

## Mesmerism

For our purposes, fluidity starts with Anton Mesmer and early mesmerists who took their ideas of “imponderable” substances from a line of thinkers going back to Newton and his “aether.” Mesmer described magnetic fluid as “universally diffused; it is the medium of a mutual influence between the heavenly bodies, the earth, and animated bodies.”<sup>1</sup> That influence, however, was not surnatural but natural, and Mesmer argued that the fluid existed within the human body. For Mesmer, illness resulted from fluid

imbalances; these could be cured by “realigning” fluids that somehow had jumped the banks of their proper stream. With the advent of spiritism, magnetism found its identity mixed, sometimes voluntarily, sometimes less so, with the more spiritually-oriented group. Materialist magnetists rejected the claim that spirits could communicate and continued to insist that the magnetic force was strictly earthly. But they had gifted the spiritists with a key idea that the latter group would popularize and carry forward into the fin-de-siècle.

## Spiritism

During its early years, in the 1860s, spiritism was highly positivist but anti-materialist. Spiritists insisted that spiritism was “scientific,” by which they meant empirical, rational, repeatable, and proven by effect. Yet they refused to give up the “enchantment” of a world of mystery beyond our own material world. The movement struggled to claim positive proof of the survival of the soul in offering new “scientific” knowledge based on the concept of fluidity. Spiritism’s alternative vision of science insisted that moral as well as physical facts could be discovered through scientific investigation. In an article titled “The Perpetuity of Spiritism,” the *Revue spirite* insisted that, “Spiritism will not deviate from the truth, and will not fear conflicting opinions, in so much as its scientific theory and its moral doctrine will be deduced from facts scrupulously and conscientiously observed.”<sup>2</sup> Spiritists argued that although other reform movements based only on systematic theories had failed (and here they were thinking both socialist and republican revolutionary movements, many of whose aims they shared), spiritism would succeed as knowledge of the facts it was based on spread. Growth of spiritism and its

new view of science meant more than just new ideas on the soul. According to the article's author, probably spiritist leader Allan Kardec, "the consequences [of the spread of spiritism] mean a complete revolution in ideas and in the manner of seeing the things of this world and of the other."<sup>3</sup>

Spiritist science engaged in what Michel de Certeau called the "art of doing." Rather than passively receiving new cultural knowledge (in this case scientific), spiritists appropriated it, merging it with their separate spiritist knowledge to create ideas that would challenge many of the assumptions of the dominant culture. De Certeau argues that "re-employment of an external power" (or knowledge) creates a new way of speaking that modifies function and meaning.

A way of speaking this received language transforms it into a song of resistance, but this internal metamorphosis does not in any way compromise the sincerity with which it may be believed nor the lucidity with which, from another point of view, the struggles and inequalities hidden under the established order may be perceived.<sup>4</sup>

Spiritists used the concept of *fluidité*, an external factor in de Certeau's sense, to reformulate scientific knowledge within their own sphere of thought. *Fluidité* functioned as an alternative "scientific" explanation and allowed spiritists to reject the conclusions science came to regarding the "facts" of spirit apparitions. Spiritists theorized a democratic version of science; knowledge did not belong to experts with the power to monopolize meaning. They firmly believed in the power of science itself (slightly redefined), and in their right to use it.

Spiritists adopted and adapted Mesmer's fluid for their own purposes. They located fluidity not in the material although unseen world, (as did magnetists) but in the "immaterial" world of the spirits. That world remained

nonetheless only partially immaterial. Or at least, the spirits, when they acted in the material world, made use of matter. Spiritists postulated a fluid "body" in which the soul or spirit was enveloped. They called that envelope the *périsprit* and argued that the spirit is not exactly immaterial. Rather, according to the spirit guides of Allan Kardec, "[I]ncorporeal would be nearer the truth. . . . Spirit is quintessentialised matter, but matter existing in a state which has no analogue within the circle of your comprehension, and so ethereal that it could not be perceived by your senses."<sup>5</sup> That meager materiality allowed the spirit to act in the material world. It was the *périsprit* that allowed for rappings on tables, the playing of tambourines, the turning of tables – even the movement of a medium's writing arm in trance writing. Spiritists did not see mediums as "possessed" by spirits, but argued for a collaboration between willing mediums and intelligent spirits. Both thought and universal fluid flowed freely in exchanges between spirits and their followers.

Spiritist emphasis on the fluid spirit found a paradoxical complement in an insistence on the materiality of what others might term "supernatural" or immaterial phenomena. The *périsprit* allowed spirits to assume a material form and move fluidly from one realm to another. They could be seen, measured, examined, and proven. This was, of course, tied to the need to make them scientific and empirical. I am not implying by saying spiritists "make the spirits scientific" any deliberate fabrication on the part of spiritists but only exploring the discourse they chose to discuss spirit phenomena in order to try to legitimate them. The result of this discursive move, however, was a clear gesture toward making natural the supernatural, making accessible the immaterial realm in which spirits move.

Conversely, the more material a being, the lower it was on the evolutionary scale of advancement set out by spirit-

ism. According to spiritist doctrine, the more advanced a soul is on the ladder of reincarnation, the less material its bodily incarnation, literally. Spiritists believed that reincarnation took place on myriad worlds; on other, less "material" worlds, beings enjoyed less heavy, gravity-bound lives.<sup>6</sup> Even while proclaiming the "materiality" of the spirit world, spiritists critiqued the contemporary scientific privileging of matter over spirit. They employed scientific evolutionary ideas to critique earthly materialist thought. Science's focus on the material, as such, pointed up the low point of scientists on the progressive scale of being. Spiritism thus challenged the monopoly of scientists over definitions of reality.

Despite this insistence on the semi-materiality of the immortal spirit, spiritists refused to integrate the *périsprit* into materialist thought. Matter was much despised by the spiritists, who blamed it, or at least the materialist position, for many of the ills they saw afflicting late nineteenth-century society. By rejecting religious teaching, materialism, they argued, shunned the promise and the responsibility carried by the immortal soul to improve and perfect the world. The doctrine strove to resolve the spiritual discomfort felt by so many nineteenth-century thinkers who valued science as a means of progress yet could not imagine a world without deep and meaningful belief. Spiritist use of fluid offered the antidote to too much matter and not enough faith. In spiritist doctrine, materiality was transformed from an either-or to a continuum.

The very nature of fluid, moving quickly across the boundaries of the perceptible and the imperceptible, challenged the staid fixity proclaimed by nineteenth-century empiricism. Spiritists took advantage of the permeability of these boundaries in many ways but most "miraculously" in terms of healing. An ailing patient (or her family) could consult a medium in a different town, even by letter. The

medium would consult with spirits and, with their aid, send healing fluids across great distances in order to effect a cure. The ability of the medium and spirit to act on the material world anywhere, not just at the point of the medium as intersection, dissolved the bounds of space. Although time was not so directly dissolved, the spirit could both speak to the medium and analyze the patient, nearly simultaneously, thus creating a blurring of time.

The spiritist use of the concept of fluidity to express the relationship between natural and supernatural meant thus a dilution of the fixed boundaries of this life and the next, of space, and of time. All of these offered a clear challenge to empirical and positivist science. They also presaged many of the ideas that Henri Bergson would formulate in a much more sophisticated manner at the end of the century. Spiritist belief in progressive, evolutionary reincarnation, of the soul as an evolving project rather than an unchanging entity meant that the soul, too, had lost its fixity. By using the tools of bourgeois rationality – the rational and empirical observation so important to the Enlightened mind, the spiritists ended by offering a strong alternative formulation of the world.

Spiritism's great popularity meant that these alternative ways of viewing the relationship between this world and the "beyond," of the relationship between truth and scientific reason, gained widespread attention. Granted, much of that attention aimed to discredit spiritism, but interest in the phenomena mediums produced simply did not wane. Occultists would shape these ideas into a much more direct challenge to contemporary views of both nature and of the self.

There is a second form of "fluidity", this time much more figurative, that I find in both spiritism and occultism. That is the fluidity of doctrine, the inability – I would argue refusal – to create a consensus among followers about what

constituted spiritist faith or truths. Other than the key doctrine of belief in spirits and thus in the survival of the soul, spiritists had no absolutely necessary beliefs. Most followed the founder of the movement, Allan Kardec, in his beliefs in reincarnation and in the progressive evolution of the soul, but Kardec was no pope and many spiritists argued with his interpretations, even before his death. After his death in 1869 the interpretive frame became even more diverse. Spiritists increasingly split into two groups. One continued to insist on the "scientific" nature of study of the spirits. The other, and perhaps more popular group, focused on the magic and wonder of contact between the worlds.

Contradictions in doctrine were thus one of the most prevalent features of the spiritist movement as a whole. They define in some sense its basic shape – or lack thereof. This syncretism meant the movement built membership through openness and an accumulation of meanings. The one attempt to formalize doctrine met with great hostility. One wealthy spiritist tried to call a conference on doctrine in the 1870s. The very idea caused furor in spiritist communities and great debate in their periodicals. The details of this are not important for our context, but the claims made to reject any effort to solidify doctrine reflect the importance of fluidity as a key structural concept for spiritists. Without any seeming irony, the spirit "Jean Darcy," clearly a male version of Jeanne d'Arc, insisted that "Spiritists will be always and above all free-thinkers, and will never believe anything except that which seems to them just and reasonable, that which they have understood themselves, not what it pleases someone to impose on them."<sup>7</sup>

As John Monroe has argued, the "decentralized, argumentative, exuberantly diverse Spiritism of the 1880s and 1890s attracted an unprecedented number of adherents."<sup>8</sup> Spiritist circles formed around mediums who could produce continued contact with spirits from more advanced worlds,

or more exotic ones. The narrative form of these episodic experiences allowed spiritists to imagine themselves into other realms. Mediums brought into bourgeois drawing rooms exotic, advanced beings, who shared both adventure and advice. The most famous of these mediums was Hélène Smith, chronicled by the psychologist Théodore Flournoy in *From India to the Planet Mars*.<sup>9</sup> Smith and her followers used exotic locale and invented language to create a more meaningful world than that offered them by contemporary, scientific society.

The very fluidity and shapelessness of spiritist doctrine, the ability it offered to move into and back out of various interpretive rooms, countered the rigidity of natural, scientific law, and of ever-more controlling bourgeois society and morality. By opening its doors to all ideas that could be molded onto the two founding structures of a belief in the immortal soul and contact between living and dead, spiritism created an edifice for expression of individual ideas and interpretations that differed from those of official institutions. Their very plurality represented both their greatest challenge to the dominant consensus and the reason they could not create enough of an organized movement to make effective any of the specific challenges that were articulated by particular members of spiritism. It also offered an example and applicable concepts that other movements in the fin-de-siècle easily adopted and adapted.

## **Adopting fluidité**

Fluidity as a conceptual tool began to permeate both mainstream and other alternative discourses after 1870 and especially after the solidification of the Third Republic by 1880. In addition, the very phenomena of spiritism – mediums' results – became the subject matter of occultists, of psychol-

ogists, and of psychical research. Elsewhere I have argued that this was in many ways the death of spiritism as able to adapt to the main stream of French values.<sup>10</sup> Here, however, I want to focus on how these groups all borrowed and profited from the concept of *fluidité* in one way or another and how fluidity of ideas, of exchange, and of boundaries of space, time, and the supernatural were key to discourses on mysticism at the end of the century.

The 1880s saw a rapid rise in orthodox scientific study of medium-produced phenomena. The spiritist claim to being scientific had rested on the “facts” it could observe and the fluidic explanation of the *périsprit*. Spiritist “facts” were the phenomena obtained at séances. By the end of the century, phenomena such as table turning, trance writing, the ability to make objects move or instruments play without any clear material cause, and the materialization of objects, including the mysterious “ectoplasm” which spiritists claimed was the materialization of spirits themselves, drew the attention of scientists studying the brain and its abilities.

From 1885, a group of important psychologists and physiologists formed the new *Société de psychologie physiologique* (Society of Physiological Psychology) dedicated to the study of psychic phenomena by the scientific method of observation and experimentation. Jean-Martin Charcot presided over the group, which gathered together prominent investigators of the subconscious mind. Pierre Janet, Théodore Ribot, Charles Richet, and Charles Féré all numbered among the officers.<sup>11</sup> These scientists believed that mediumistic phenomena previously declared fraudulent or supernatural could in fact be traced to the physical body in one way or another, usually to abnormalities of the nervous system.<sup>12</sup> With the invention of the unconscious the qualities of somnambules and mediums to heal, to heal at a distance, and to act in “supranatural” ways during trances also became the subject of orthodox science. Hypnotic

trance reproduced much of the phenomena of mediums, as famously studied by Charcot and illustrated by his public demonstrations using hysterics. (Similar phenomena were also reproduced by some Symbolists, as Rodolphe Rapetti has shown.<sup>13</sup>)

More traditional physicians concurred with the burgeoning psychology. Among the most renowned of doctors to study spiritist phenomena was Dr. Joseph Grasset, from the University of Montpellier. He explained mediumistic phenomena as a process of “exteriorization” of the physical being, which then acted as an invisible force to move objects or play instruments.<sup>14</sup> Grasset also published a survey of early psychical research which included mental suggestion, clairvoyance, and telepathy along with spiritism. In it he listed spiritism as a historical predecessor to “the occultism of today” and called his work “a record of progress made in the reduction of occult phenomena to a scientific basis.” He categorized most mediumistic phenomena as false or very unlikely to be proven.<sup>15</sup> Grasset’s and other scientific works echoed spiritist explanations while rejecting its theoretical underpinnings; they accepted the possibility of a fluidic body but stopped at the point of looking for a source of fluid beyond the natural body.

The late-century interest in medium-produced phenomena also brought magnetism back into prominence and closer to spiritist thought. Mesmerists shared with spiritists the emphasis on both types of fluidity – that of refusing one single doctrine and that of the importance of fluid. Although in the 1840s jealousies and disagreements had formed between certain proponents of magnetism and of spiritism, most recognized their shared beliefs; by the 1870s many magnetists believed their fluids had an extra-natural source, and spiritist mediums often contacted their spirits through trances brought about by magnetists. Each group praised and published the other, and the mesmeric fluids

became less “material” than they had at first been.<sup>16</sup> Leading mesmerists Henri and Hector Durville, for example, emphasized the existence of a fluid body and its ability to step outside the corporeal body – the *dédoublement de corps*. Doubling allowed that fluid body to act on material objects while the body was in magnetic sleep, but also to achieve things not possible for the normal human body.<sup>17</sup> This doubled body resembles the spiritist *périsprit* by its material abilities; it is not quite the same as the occultist astral body, but its superhuman abilities echo the astral.

Mesmerism also shaded into the occult. Mme Louis Mond, “femme de lettres,” linked the two in her popular journal *Le Magicien* which ran from 1883–1890. (And was recommended as reading by leading occultists.) The masthead of this supposedly Mesmerist journal shows the importance of symbols in multiple discourses at the end of the century. The masthead refers to the occult idea of analogy: “That which is on high is like that which is below; that which is below is like that which on high.”<sup>18</sup> The image shows Death on one side, with the moon, trees, globes and crosses. He has a scythe over his shoulder and in one hand what looks like a mirror. The other side shows a magician, with the sun, a sheet with a star of David on it, a sword, a sickle, a big goblet, a book with pictures of the tarot and a smoking brazier. The mage raises a wand in his hand, perhaps about to act on the unseen realm. The journal at first emphasized accounts of mesmerist healings but later added teaching from Eliphas Levi, mid-century occultist. *Le Magicien* hoped to teach readers the “grand laws of nature” and to “raise the veil on the unknown, this sensation that both repulses and attracts at the same time.” The first issue described the journal as a work of propaganda and vulgarisation which worked to “spread knowledge that has been forgotten for too long a time.” The journal would be, said Mme Louis Mond, the “continuation and complement

of our popular teachings” and would publish everything that seems “useful, curious, and interesting, speaking to all and not only to the erudites.”<sup>19</sup> This journal, like the later *Initiation*, aimed to bring magnetism and occultism to a popular audience. These journals, and many others like them, promoted the popularity of the interwoven multiple discourses surrounding ideas of *fluidité* and research into “truths beyond reason” that gained prominence in the post-1870s era. Spiritism, still popular, increasingly shared its fame with the rising tide of occultism.

## Occultists and Fluidité

The two most important occultists of the fin-de-siècle were Dr. Gérard Encausse, generally known by his mystic name Papus,<sup>20</sup> and Stanislas de Guaita. Together they built direct paths of exchange between spiritism and its ideas of fluidity and the literary and artistic movements of the fin-de-siècle. Occultism never aspired to be “scientific” in the ways that spiritism had and it recruited a more educated following. However, the two groups had clear links, sharing both members and ideas. For occultists, arcane study led to the ability to reach and act on the “astral plane.” The astral body, the traveler on the astral plane, the source of magical action and occult knowledge, was a fluid body, a body that shared much with the theory of the spiritists’ *périsprit*. Occultism’s use of *fluidité* was always more free, less bound by the attempt to prove phenomena were empirically “true.” The truths beyond stale reason were the only real truths for the occultists, as for the Symbolists.

In practical terms, strong connections linked the movements. The mysterious phenomena that spiritist mediums produced were a means of recruitment for occultists and a way to make accessible many of their ideas about the astral

plane. According to occultism, mediums, without realizing it, interacted with beings from the astral plane. Occultists rarely made this argument directly, however, and the more elitist among them, such as Stanislas de Guaita, rejected spiritism as lowly, logical, and populist. That said, mediums who regularly contacted spirits or who acted as conduits for channeling fluid were a popular topic of exploration for occultists, especially Papus, and he refused ever to make a complete break between the two movements. In fact, Papus insisted in the journal *Initiation* that spiritism, like occultism, was a “society of initiation” and that spiritist study would lead thinkers directly into occult study.<sup>21</sup> He thus recommended to readers that one way to begin a study of the occult was to attend séances and study the writings of the spirits and the spiritists.

A flamboyant man, Papus flitted from idea to idea, synthesizing as many of them as possible. As Dr. Gérard Encausse he worked at the Hôpital de la Charité and promoted explorations into hysteria and hypnosis. Unlike Charcot, who influenced him, Encausse and those surrounding him promoted fluid theory and occult connections as a way to explain hysteria and other trance symptoms.<sup>22</sup> He poured his energy into the new occult movement, forming a number of occult groups. At his urging Lucien Chamuel founded the *Librairie Merveilleux* (around 1890), the bookstore that both published numerous occult texts and acted as a gathering place for all manner of artistic, literary and occultist thinkers.<sup>23</sup>

The most extensive occultist circle that Papus formed was that of the *Ordre Martiniste*. Both Papus and de Guaita belonged to the Martinists and Guaita was its “dominant intellectual presence”<sup>24</sup> but the spirit of Papus animated its outlook. This is seen most clearly in its outright search for publicity. The Martinist order proposed to bring occultism to the masses. To promote this, Papus founded the

journal *l’Initiation* in 1888 (published by Chamuel’s *Librairie Merveilleux*) and in 1890, the *Groupe indépendant d’études ésotériques* which specifically aimed “to publicize Occultism”. The group’s goals included cultivating members for secret societies, training Occultist lecturers, and the study of “the phenomena of ‘Spiritism, Mesmerism, and Magic.’”<sup>25</sup> One occultist promoter claimed that the *Groupe* had registered 50,000 occultists.<sup>26</sup> *l’Initiation* shows the potent and popular mixture of movements that prevailed in the late nineteenth century. Articles on spiritism and mesmerism sat side by side with discussions of Blavatsky’s theosophy and articles on “symbolism in Free-Masonry” or predictions for the future.<sup>27</sup> The literature section of the journal regularly featured symbolist poetry by Joséphin “Sar” Péladan.

Language rather than science played the crucial role in defining occultism. Occultists claimed as precursors mid-century mages like Eliphas Levi (Alphonse-Louis Constant) and St. Yves d’Alveydre.<sup>28</sup> These thinkers shared with spiritists a skepticism of modern science, and a very broadly-defined Christian focus, but added an emphasis on the word. Levi drew from and adapted Swedenborg. Similar to Swedenborg’s “correspondances,” analogy posited two corresponding realms: the Macrocosm of the universe and the Microcosm of humanity. Each element of the visible world has an analog in the invisible world of which it is the symbolic reflection. The analogy between the two reveals the secrets of the macrocosm and allows the microcosm to act on the macrocosm. Only an interior vision (and much study) would enable the student to understand these connections. Unlike Swedenborg who searched for already-existing harmonies, Levi’s theory drew on “the ability of the initiate to control and manipulate language in such a way that it might transform the world around him.”<sup>29</sup> And thus create real magic.

Analogy argued that the natural (empirically observable) world was always an emblem for the hidden, metaphysical world. Thus by observing nature you could be studying both science and religion, reaching knowledge in both realms. Occultists, building on Levi, emphasized the importance of analogy as the key explanatory factor of the material world. (Versus the spiritist emphasis on reincarnation and human solidarity.) The Occultists, unlike the spiritists, saw themselves not as correcting science but as using language to go beyond it. The emphasis for occultists remained on the unseen world, the truth that lay beyond the visible.

The analogy between the seen and the unseen worlds meant that action on the unseen, or astral, plane could directly affect events and individuals on the seen, material plane. Papus offered a popular, easily accessible version of these teachings through his *Traité élémentaire des sciences occultes* (1887) and Guaita a more elitist one through his *Au seuil des mystères* (1886). Both of these texts became best-sellers, spreading and popularizing the notion of the fluidic world's connection to this one. Both Guaita and Papus argued that the ability to indirectly affect the material realm could be achieved through mastery of the fluid, astral, body. Universal fluid was a key part of practicing magic. Astral bodies existed between the “world of things and world of principles” (Papus); the universe was filled with astral fluid and elemental beings. The secret to magic was the use of this fluid – the magician materializes in the astral sphere and, from there, manipulates the fluid of the universe, thus affecting the world.

The most infamous example of fluid affecting the world lay in the accusations made by Jules Bois and J-K Huysmans that Guaita used his fluidic body to murder the dark mage, the ex-abbé Boullan (1893), an event I am sure my audience is aware of, so I won't recount in detail here. (Two duels resulted: Jules Bois and Guaita with pistols; Bois and

Papus with swords. No one died.) Huysmans' experience of the event, however, shows how “real” the fluidic world could be. Huysmans claimed that Guaita also attacked him physically: the “Paris Rosicrucians ... struck my head every night with fluidic fists; even my cat was afflicted by these blows....”<sup>30</sup>

Most fluidic activity remained significantly less deadly. Instead it was creative in one sense or another. The highly trained “adept” could use his (or her) skills, and especially his or her *will* to transform the very production of matter. Thus the imagination could then produce the real in the sense of creating tangible entities capable of acting at a distance in material ways.<sup>31</sup> Like the Spiritists before them, occultists put *fluidic* activity at the center of their doctrine; in this case, they were the very matter of magic.

Here we arrive at the most direct link between occultism and Symbolism – the occult insistence on the use of symbols as the means to practice magic, to reach a truth beyond reason. The occultist channeled his will, through the use of symbols and talismans, to influence the astral world. Both strains of thought insisted on the ability of individuals to overcome materialism. For the occultists, most symbols came through the Hermetic tradition and represented a looking-back, a rejection of positivism and an attempt to rediscover a mystical tradition. The newspaper *Le Matin*, in 1899, described an occultist meeting room, celebrating its Hermetic symbols, mysterious inscriptions along the walls, astrological signs and Hebrew and Sanskrit letters, all of which created “an atmosphere of miracle and prophecy.”<sup>32</sup> The most mysterious part of occultism was this ability to cross worlds. Guaita insisted that this was dangerous and could not be taken lightly. The world was made up of elemental spirits, some of them malignant beings called *larves* that could move from the astral to the material plane to work mischief (or good.) These elementals, Guaita said, are

able to become visible, and even tangible, by condensation: thus they assume the form of the beings who approach them. The occultist (who attracts them, dominates them and directs them with his own astral body) can give them the appearance of any object at will, provided he determines the nature of that object mentally, and forcefully sculpts its contours in his imagination.

Guaita's presentation of the astral world was emotional and emphasized the danger:

High science cannot be an object of frivolous curiosity ... the sacrilege of capriciously importuning the Sphinx never goes unpunished. When faced with your indiscreet query, the Unknown will furnish an unexpected response, one so troubling it will obsess you forever. The veil of mystery has piqued your curiosity? Woe to you for raising it! It suddenly drops from your trembling hands, and what you believe to have seen fills you with panic.<sup>33</sup>

This strong emotionality that surrounded the contact with the fluid meant that occultism offered a deeply emotional experience of the mystical – far removed from the mundane psychical researchers and even the spiritists with their emotional but more pragmatic approach.

Occultism, Symbolism, and decadent writers circled around similar ideas and they met together to discourse both the occult and the artistic. Guaita discovered the Hermetic tradition through Péladan's 1884 novel *Le Vice suprême* and introduced young Papus to the symbolist writer. Both Guaita and Papus also gave credit to Eliphas Levi and Saint-Yves d'Alveydre as the sources linking fin-de-siècle occultism to earlier Hermetic traditions. Together Péladan, Guaita, and Papus promoted intertwined mystical visions. Papus and Guaita gathered both Symbolists and Decadents around them at the Librairie merveilleux and in general in their occult circles. According to a detractor,

“Occultism recruits its adepts in France principally in the world of letters and among the bands of snobs who make up the retinue of the decadent authors.”<sup>34</sup> Symbolists Carlos Schwabe and Eugène Grasset joined those “clustered around Sâr Péladan.”<sup>35</sup>

Péladan’s neo-Rosicrucian occult society of the Rose-Croix, of which both Stanislas de Guaita and Papus were early members, offers the most direct connection of these ideas to Symbolism. Symbolist painters who exhibited at Péladan’s Salon de la Rose + Croix, (1892–97) worked with and made visible the ideas of *fluidité*, partly through their use of water as a key symbol (obviously, water has many meanings and has long been symbolic) and partly through their very rendering. Carlos Schwabe’s posters for the Salon de la Rose + Croix develop images that are very mediumistic, and very reminiscent of both occultist and spiritist ideas. Using women as his “medium,” he symbolized the veiled otherworld as a veiled woman. In his first Salon poster the woman is pictured rising up, becoming increasingly more ethereal, less bestial, as she rises into the increasingly fluidic realms. She thus embodies the evolution of the soul from material to mystic through study of or travel upon the astral planes.

## Conclusion

The symbolists drew off a century of thinking about *fluidité* in France. From Mesmer and Swedenborg in the early century, the ideas of *fluidité* had mutated in spiritism and occultism and come back into prominence. August Strindberg wrote, in an 1896 letter from France, “Swedenborg is much in vogue here and is regarded as the first theosophist in modern time, ahead of Allan Kardec.”<sup>36</sup> Alphonse-Louis Constant was a romantic socialist and egalitarian thinker –

the strain of thought so crucial to spiritists – before he took the name Eliphas Lévi, consorted with spiritists and spiritual magnetists, and wrote his books on *Haute magie* which would so influence the occultism of the later nineteenth century.

These nineteenth-century movements offered a strange mix of semi-mystical individualism. They spread belief in things from ghosts and spirits to a deep mystical connection with the world as a whole through fluid. Spiritism and occultism fought against the materialism and positivism by which psychiatry tried to harness and muzzle the invisible and mystical forces in the world. Fluidity functioned to create an image and a sense of openness, of crossable boundaries. Fluidity of doctrine and beliefs left open the path of interpretation. Each person’s dreams, symbols, thoughts, could be seen to reflect the fluid world and to affect the material world in ways particular to that person. The individual could reach forces unknown and not fully knowable, and even participate in those forces. He or she could be an active participant in the making of magic and in the ancient forces of knowledge that were unchanged by the modern world. This re-enchantment of the world was a key facet of Modernism in general and especially important to the questions that we have been looking at in this conference.

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- 1 Anton Mesmer, *Mémoire*, quoted in Christopher McIntosh, *Eliphas Lévi and the French Occult Revival* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1972), 33.
  - 2 *Revue spirite* 1865: 40-41. This article is unsigned but was most likely written by Kardec, as editor of the *Revue*. Kardec wrote the majority of articles during the 1860s.
  - 3 *Revue spirite* 1865: 40.
  - 4 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 17-18. Certeau refers here to religion, but his terms are easily transferred to the scientific world.
  - 5 Kardec, *The Spirits' Book* (Albuquerque, NM: Brotherhood of Life, 1989 [1857]), 89.
  - 6 For more on spiritist doctrine, see my *Secular Spirituality: Rein-carnation and Spiritism in Nineteenth-century France* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006), especially chapter two.
  - 7 *La Lumière*, 1884: 157. These multiple directions meant spiritists took a variety of political positions, on socialism and gender especially. For more on this, see Sharp, *Secular Spirituality*, 91-110.
  - 8 Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith*, 220.
  - 9 Originally published as *Des Indes au planète Mars*, 1900.
  - 10 Sharp, *Secular Spirituality*, chapter 5.
  - 11 In the 1890s, the society was known as *Société des phénomènes physiologiques* but it retained the same members.
  - 12 For example, see Jean-Martin Charcot, *Clinical lectures on diseases of the nervous system*, ed. Ruth Harris (London: Routledge, 1991[1889]) and “La foi qui guérit,” (Paris: Alcan, 1897); Pierre Janet, *Etat mental des hystériques: les stigmates mentaux* (Paris: Rueff, 1893); Charles Richet, *La personnalité et la mémoire dans le somnambulisme* (Paris, 1883); and *Possession, l'homme et l'intelligence*, (Paris, 1897). Richet later came to believe in the reality of spirit manifestation, but he was a rare case among scientists.
  - 13 Rodolphe Rapetti, “From Anguish to Ecstasy: Symbolism and the Study of Hysteria” in *Lost paradise: Symbolist Europe* (Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1995): 224-34
  - 14 Joseph Grasset, *L'hypnotisme et le suggestion* (Paris: Doin, 1903); and *Le Spiritisme devant la science* (Paris, 1904).
  - 15 Joseph Grasset, *Marvels Beyond Science* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1910) [originally published as *L'Occultisme Hier et Aujourd'hui; le merveilleux présicientifique*] quote is from title page of English edition.
  - 16 For instance, MM. Robert et Durville, both popular professors of magnetism in Paris, speaking at the Congrès spirite of 1889, expressed faith in spiritism, arguing that it sprang from the same source as magnetism. *Compte rendu du Congrès spirite et spiritualiste internationale 1889*, (Paris, 1889), 209. Earlier, spiritist theorist Jean Rouxel described Durville's Institut Magnétique in his *Théorie du spiritisme*, encouraging followers to take the course and learn to understand the use of fluids. Rouxel (pseudonym of Auguste Leroux) also published frequently in G. Delanne's *Revue scientifique et morale du spiritisme*; this further illustrates the link between the two movements.
  - 17 *Le Matin*, 7 août, 1913.
  - 18 This is the same phrase that appears in Papus' *Traité élémentaire de sciences occultes* (1887) It comes from the “Emerald Table” a text attributed to the mythical Egyptian magician Hermes Trismegistus. (Part of the Hermetic tradition.) For this, see John Warne Monroe, “Evidence of Things Not Seen: Spiritism, Occultism, and the Search for a Modern Faith in France, 1853-1925,” (Ph.D. Thesis: Yale University, 2002), 335.
  - 19 *Le Magicien*, vol. 1, (1883): cover page, 2.
  - 20 Papus is the name of the génie de médecine in Apollonius de Thyane's *Nuctéméron*. Victor-Emile Michelet, *Les Compagnons de la biérophanie: Souvenirs du mouvement hermétiste à la fin du XIX siècle* (Paris: Dorbon, 1977 [1937]), 32.
  - 21 *L'Initiation*, April 1889: 15-16.
  - 22 Anne Harrington, “Hysteria, Hypnosis, and the Lure of the Invisible: The Rise of Neomesmerism in Fin-de-siècle French Psychiatry Neo-Mesmerism,” in *Anatomy of Madness*, ed. W.F. Bynum, Roy Porter, Michael Shepherd (London: Routledge, 1988), 232, 236.
  - 23 Michelet, *Les Compagnons de la biérophanie*, 40.
  - 24 David Allen Harvey, *Beyond Enlightenment: Occultism and Politics in Modern France* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University: 2005), 95.
  - 25 John Warne Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith: Mesmerism, Spiritism and the Occult in Modern France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 240.
  - 26 Georges Vitoux, *Les Coulisses de l'au delà* (Paris: Librairie du Merveilleux, 1901), 2.
  - 27 *L'Initiation*, vol I, 1888. The eclecticism of the journal continued throughout the century.
  - 28 Harvey, *Beyond Enlightenment*, 24.
  - 29 Lynn Wikinson, *The Dream of an Absolute Language: Emanuel Swedenborg & French Literary Culture* (Albany: SUNY University Press, 1996), 32.
  - 30 Quoted in Harvey, *Beyond Enlightenment*, 113.
  - 31 For more on this, see Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith*, 247.
  - 32 *Le Matin*, Nov. 6 1899, quoted in Monroe, “Evidence of Things Not Seen,” 346.
  - 33 Guaita, *Au Seuil des mystères*, quoted in Monroe, “Evidence of Things Not Seen,” 338, 339.
  - 34 Pierre Boudou, *Le Spiritisme et ses dangers: quatre conférences* (Bordeaux: np, 1921), 176.
  - 35 Rapetti, “From Anguish to Ecstasy,” 226
  - 36 Quoted in Inge Jonsson, “Some Observations on Swedenborg's Influence in Western Literature,” in Arnold T. Chadwick and G. Roland Smith, eds, *The Tricentenary of the Birth of Emanuel Swedenborg*, (London: Swedenborg Tricentenary Committee, 1988), 61-62.