

Alexis Didier, “the most amazing clairvoyant in modern times”.

In april 1784, marquis de Puységur, a french aristocrat and an officer of high rank in the royal army, was magnetizing a young man according to the principles of Mesmer’s “animal magnetism” when he triggered quite unwillingly a new kind of trance which he called “magnetic sleep”, in which surfaced new psychic abilities such as clairvoyance. This discovery became a challenge for mainstream psychology and philosophy. It was assumed that magnetic sleep was “nothing but” a kind of erratic dream, and that the so-called “magnetic powers” were just an illusion induced by suggestion into the somnambulist’s mind. But further observations demonstrated that these psychic powers are probably real, and that, if magnetic sleep is a kind of dream, it is a dream endowed with special powers – *a divinatory dream*. In this paper, I will document the case of the celebrated somnambulist Alexis Didier (1826-1886), who disclosed the most striking clairvoyant abilities ever observed in France.

The French magnetic scene in mid-19th century

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

At the same time, and for identical reasons, the mesmeric practice underwent changes. Before the French Revolution, mesmerizers were following very strict rules. According to one of them, public demonstrations were prohibited as unethical. After the Academy of medicine's official dismissal, the practice changed. Mesmerists such as Lafontaine or du Potet de Sennevoy gave public demonstrations as they felt they had no other choice. They performed on stage in order to show what they were able to do with their somnambulists and to prove the

facts denied by 'Official Science'. Against the rejection of the Academies, for the first time (but surely not the last!) they used the new power of public opinion.

Alexis' career

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

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

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

In May 1844, while touring in the North of France, Alexis and Marcillet gave seances in Calais. Upon seeing the British coast across the channel, Marcillet had the sudden conviction that they must cross over and conquer England. Actually, they were totally unprepared for such a trip, as neither spoke a single word of English; but they had a contact in London in the magnetic circles, who introduced them to Dr Elliotson, the leading figure of animal magnetism in England. Elliotson organized a private seance with a very sophisticated audience. The first session began with some difficulties, as Alexis was intimidated by this new audience, who spoke a language that he did not understand. Gradually, however, he gained confidence, and the meeting turned into a triumph. The people were completely stunned by what they had seen. Some newspapers, in the following days, including the *Lancet*, celebrated the young somnambulist. They stayed two months in England, and Alexis convinced most of the observers that his powers were genuine.

Meanwhile, back in France, Alexis' fame kept growing. In 1847 he gave demonstrations for the royal family. The same year, he was confronted with Robert-Houdin, the most celebrated conjuror of the time, and the spiritual father of all modern conjurors. The conjuror admitted frankly that he could neither produce, nor explain the feats he observed. In one of his letters, he wrote: 'The more I reflect upon the facts I observed, the more I am convinced that they cannot be produced by my art'.

Alexis kept demonstrating his powers until 1855. But his health deteriorated and impaired him from continuing his demonstrations. He died in 1886, probably from a liver cancer, and was celebrated “as the most amazing clairvoyant in modern times”.

Alexis’s alleged magnetic powers

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

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

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

If you discuss these matters with intellectuals in France, they will advise you not to waste your time with all these old-wives tales. For them, Magnetic lucidity is nothing else but a myth. Scientific investigations, they will tell you, proved that somnambulists were just simulators or crooks.

I can prove that, as far as Alexis is concerned, these official investigations never took place in France. Alexis’ alleged powers were investigated by jurists, writers, philosophers, theologians, or whoever you want, but never by ‘official’ scientists. He was also investigated by physicians, who probably were as good observers as their colleagues; but these physicians could not speak in the name of an institution. They could only speak for themselves. For, in France, (as well as everywhere else, undoubtedly, but, I think, more than everywhere else) when it came to these matters, one had to take into account two levels of truth. A common or popular level of truth which came from informal researchers; and official truth, emanating from authorities who spoke from their prestigious positions, e.g. le Collège de France, les Hautes études, la Sorbonne, etc. The critics who wrote up their studies on animal magnetism between 1855 and 1860 (Littré, Maury, Lévêque...) had this symbolic power. Their function was more ideological than scientific. They had to pronounce the official truth regarding the

limits of human faculties; *they had to define the frontiers of human knowledge and human potentials*. So there were dozens of them writing studies on animal magnetism, in order to prove that magnetic lucidity was nothing but a myth, a remnant of the 'metaphysical age' (according to Comte's *Théorie des trois états*). For them, the higher mesmeric phenomena could all be explained away as mere conjuror's tricks.

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

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

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

Arguments for Alexis

If we cannot, strictly speaking, prove that Alexis' alleged powers were genuine, using an historical approach, at least we can weaken or even falsify the arguments of the skeptics. Skeptics always considered that all the somnambulists who claimed to be able to read through letters, through boxes, etc., were conjurors, and/or worked with accomplices. And when they are found to be sincere, their feats are supposed to be explainable as the result of subliminal processes. Unwillingly, the consultants gave clues to the somnambulists, who succeeded to decipher them, utterly convinced that they were endowed with special powers. It follows that this should have been especially true for Alexis, the most amazing somnambulist. But what do historical records actually tell us?

1. They tell us that, when Alexis shows up in 1842, at the age of sixteen, he already has all his alleged powers. If he was a conjuror, he must have been the greatest ever, since he was able to outsmart Robert-Houdin, although he was only 21 years old. We must not forget that, at the age of fourteen, he became an apprentice, that his father was shoemaker, that he was born in a poor family, etc. Where and when would he have found the opportunity of learning his art, and mastering it to such a degree?
2. They tell us that Robert-Houdin, the king of the conjurors, observed him and concluded that he was not a conjuror.
3. They tell us that he was never caught cheating, not even suspected on factual basis, although he practiced almost every day for thirteen years.
4. If conjuring was involved, most of his feats could not have been performed without accomplices. Considering the number of demonstrations he gave, and the number of

consultants in each sitting, he would have needed help from so many accomplices, that one of them should have ended up confessing the fraud. But this never happened.

5. In some cases, for instance when Alexis succeeds in reading “a déchiré d’un jet toute ma sympathie” in Lamartine’s poem, the targets were too sophisticated to be guessed by chance or by deciphering subliminal processes. In this case, there was only one possible explanation: *Reverend Townshend, a british aristocrat, was an accomplice.*

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

This is a good example of the possibilities introduced by an historical approach. Such an approach enables us to sometimes reach conclusions which could not even have been reached by those involved. The phenomena produced by Alexis were so unique, that each of those who participated in any group of sessions could see only a small section of his skills. They could thus have recourse to the assumption that Alexis and Marcillet must have been cheating somewhere and somehow. A well known british skeptic, Dr Forbes, who attended only one or two seances, was somewhat justified, after all, to make this assumption. But this same assumption becomes untenable once one is familiar with all the data of Alexis case. I know – we know – much better the feats of Alexis than the people involved.

Magnetic lucidity as a modern divinatory dream

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

The feats of Alexis oblige us to consider another dimension of the human personality, another dimension of the universe. They compel us to consider the processes of divination as a reality, and not as an myth of the ages of superstition. More precisely, they compel us to take at face value the reality of divinatory dreams. His unable us to undertake a reinterpretation of the past, as I suggested it in my last book *Les miracles de l’esprit*. (La Découverte, 2011).

Bertrand Méheust

References

Charles Lévêque, 'Du sommeil et du somnambulisme au point de vue psychologique', *La Revue des deux mondes*, Paris, 1856, tome II.

Émile Littré, 'Des tables tournantes et des esprits frappeurs', *La revue des deux mondes*, 1856, tome I

Mabru, *Les magnétiseurs jugés par eux-mêmes*, Paris, 1857.

Alfred Maury, 'Le somnambulisme naturel et l'hypnotisme', *La Revue des deux mondes*, 1860, tome I.

Bertrand Méheust, *Somnambulisme et médiumnité*, deux tomes, Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond-Le Seuil, Paris, 1999.

Bertrand Méheust, *Un voyant prodigieux*, Alexis Didier, Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond-Le Seuil, Paris, 2003.

Bertrand Méheust, *Les Miracles de l'esprit*, La Découverte, 2011.