

Symbolism, Mediumship, and the “Study of the Soul that has Constituted Itself as a Positivist Science”

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Article abstract

Alors que la majorité des recherches sur la médium Héléne Smith s'intéresse à ses exploits linguistiques et à leur célébration dans les cercles surréalistes, cet article situe ses peintures réalisées en état de « transe » entre le surréalisme et le symbolisme et soutient que la créativité médiumnique a contribué à transformer la théorie symboliste en pratique visuelle. Vers la fin des années 1890, avant de faire l'objet de la fascination d'André Breton, Smith a « collaboré » avec le psychologue expérimental Théodore Flournoy qui fondait sa théorie de l'« imagination créative » sur les capacités extraordinaires de Smith. Lors de son étude du cas Smith, Flournoy a opéré entièrement à l'intérieur des paradigmes de la psychologie expérimentale française, qui a été institutionnalisée en France par le truchement d'une méthode pathologique. Les médiums et leurs phénomènes concomitants sont devenus des espaces critiques d'expérimentation, dans un esprit similaire à la triade tristement célèbre de sujets psychologiques—« les primitifs, les fous et les enfants »—préconisée par Théodule Ribot. Les phénomènes médiumniques dont fait partie la créativité inhabituelle étaient donc considérés comme une voie scientifique menant à la vérité sur la vie intérieure de l'être humain, en d'autres mots comme un moyen d'« objectiver le subjectif ». S'il n'est pas possible d'établir des liens directs entre l'oeuvre de Smith et celle d'artistes symbolistes comme les Nabis, les écrits de Jules Bois, en particulier son commentaire inspiré sur une « esthétique spiritiste », doivent se lire en lien avec la psychologie expérimentale française et la réévaluation par celle-ci du pathologique comme scientifiquement utile. Situer dans son contexte la place qu'occupait Héléne Smith à titre d'objet privilégié de la psychologie expérimentale française permet de jeter un éclairage sur les conditions intellectuelles requises pour que l'altérité devienne un espace d'investissement pour l'avant-garde.

Symbolism, Mediumship, and the “Study of the Soul that has Constituted Itself as a Positivist Science”

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Résumé

Alors que la majorité des recherches sur la médium Héléne Smith s'intéresse à ses exploits linguistiques et à leur célébration dans les cercles surréalistes, cet article situe ses peintures réalisées en état de « transe » entre le surréalisme et le symbolisme et soutient que la créativité médiumnique a contribué à transformer la théorie symboliste en pratique visuelle. Vers la fin des années 1890, avant de faire l'objet de la fascination d'André Breton, Smith a « collaboré » avec le psychologue expérimental Théodore Flournoy qui fondait sa théorie de l'« imagination créative » sur les capacités extraordinaires de Smith. Lors de son étude du cas Smith, Flournoy a opéré entièrement à l'intérieur des paradigmes de la psychologie expérimentale française, qui a été institutionnalisée en France par le truchement d'une méthode pathologique. Les médiums et leurs phénomènes concomitants sont devenus des espaces critiques d'expérimentation, dans un esprit similaire à la triade tristement célèbre de sujets psychologiques —« les primitifs, les fous et les enfants »—préconisée par Théodule Ribot. Les phénomènes médiumniques dont fait partie la créativité inhabituelle étaient donc considérés comme une voie scientifique menant à la vérité sur la vie intérieure de l'être humain, en d'autres mots comme un moyen d'« objectiver le subjectif ». S'il n'est pas possible d'établir des liens directs entre l'oeuvre de Smith et celle d'artistes symbolistes comme les Nabis, les écrits de Jules Bois, en particulier son commentaire inspiré sur une « esthétique spiritiste », doivent se lire en lien avec la psychologie expérimentale française et la réévaluation par celle-ci du pathologique comme scientifiquement utile. Situer dans son contexte la place qu'occupait Héléne Smith à titre d'objet privilégié de la psychologie expérimentale française permet de jeter un éclairage sur les conditions intellectuelles requises pour que l'altérité devienne un espace d'investissement pour l'avant-garde.

José Pierre's modest 1976 book on Symbolist art, *Le Symbolisme*, included a full-page reproduction of a painting by the medium Héléne Smith, alphabetically inserted between works by Georges Seurat and Léon Spilliaert.¹ Later than any other work reproduced in the book and the only painting by a medium-artist, the self-portrait of Smith with her guardian angel (fig. 1) was placed on an equal footing with canonical works by well-known Symbolists, in a grouping far more selective than the one presented, for example, at the massive 1995 exhibition *Lost Paradise: Symbolist Europe*.²

Pierre's text outlined Smith's biography but provided little indication of why the author chose to include her in a book on Symbolism, beyond her works possessing a certain family resemblance to paintings by the Pre-Raphaelites and works exhibited in the Salons de la Rose+Croix. He did not suggest that Smith was a follower of Symbolism, or that she had any influence on some strain of Symbolism persisting into the early twentieth century. For the historian of Symbolist art, the inclusion of the work is troubling or, at the very least, provocative. Is it merely symptomatic of the problem of defining a Symbolist aesthetic,³ or did Pierre, best known as a member and historian of the Surrealist movement, attempt to make a more subtle historiographical intervention by forging an implicit link between Symbolism and Surrealism?

Pierre's knowledge of Smith and her trance paintings was filtered through the Surrealists, and especially André Breton, who discussed the medium and reproduced a number of her works, including *Héléne and Her Guardian Angel*, in his 1933 *Minotaure* article “Le message automatique.”⁴ Breton was familiar with her work both through an exhibition held in Paris in 1932 and through Waldemar Deonna's lengthy study of the

same year.⁵ But Smith's paintings, while displaying a certain naïveté, were visually at odds with the kind of mediumistic art that would eventually be subsumed under the Surrealist-supported project of *Art brut*, exemplified by the intricate, non-naturalistic work of medium-artists such as Augustin Lesage, Madge Gill, or Raphaël Lonné.⁶ And in fact, although he reproduced her paintings, Breton hardly discussed them; his fascination lay rather with Smith's mediumistic abilities in automatic writing and glossolalia, as studied and fostered by the experimental psychologist Théodore Flournoy.⁷

Whatever Pierre's intentions, the inclusion of Héléne Smith in a book on Symbolist art, *as an artist*, begs important questions about the interrelationships between Symbolism, mediumship, and what Flournoy would awkwardly refer to in 1896 as “the study of the soul that has constituted itself as a positivist science,” in other words the discipline of experimental psychology, newly institutionalized in late nineteenth-century France.⁸ Smith's paintings, resting uneasily between Symbolism and Surrealism, shed light not only on the mediumistic valences of both these movements, but also demonstrate how the methods of experimental psychology as applied to “scientific” spiritism were implicated in Symbolist aesthetics.⁹ Moreover, I wish to argue, they suggest the importance of French experimental psychology's methodological basis in pathology as a critical intellectual precondition for what I will call an expanded canon of otherness, the veritable explosion in artistic interest in alterity, in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century art.

Between late 1894 and 1900, Flournoy came to participate regularly in the séances Smith had been giving since 1892. The psychologist was particularly interested in Smith's triple mediumship—visual, auditory, and “typological”—and his analyses

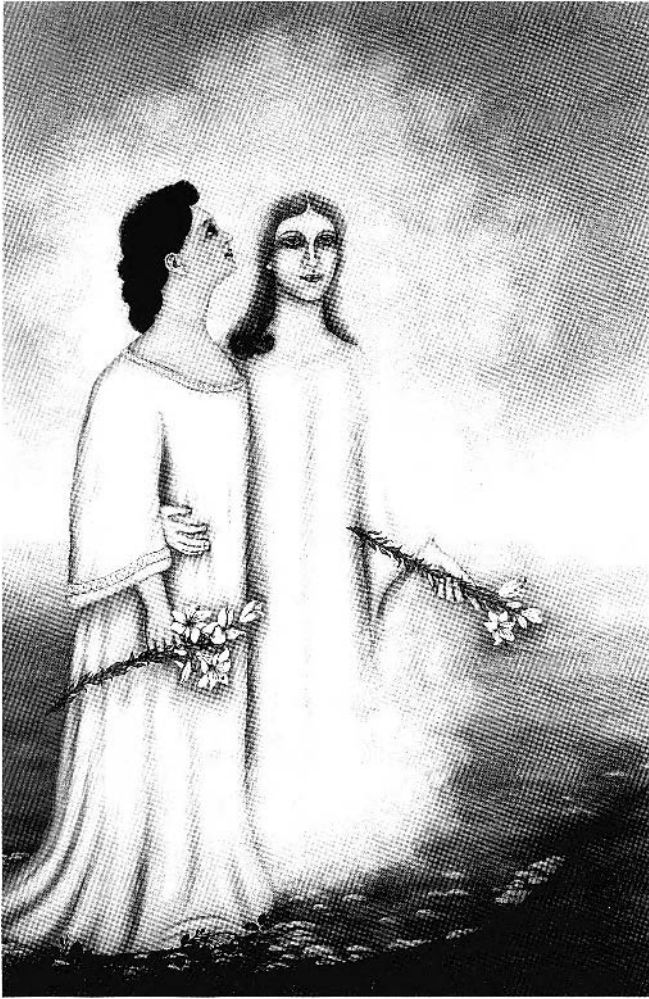


Figure 1. Elise-Cathérine Müller (Hélène Smith), *Hélène and Her Guardian Angel*, 1912. Oil on wood panel, 235 x 154 cm. Paris, ABCD—Art Brut Connaissance et Diffusion (inv. 337–755) (Photo: ABCD—Art Brut Connaissance et Diffusion).

resulted in the widely influential study of 1899, *Des Indes à la planète Mars. Étude sur un cas de somnambulisme avec glossolalie*. Flournoy considered her extraordinary manifestations—written and verbal evidence of her purported spirit travels to fourteenth-century India, to Mars and beyond—to be rich products of her imagination. Using the term “imagination créatrice,” Smith’s case enabled Flournoy to argue that the imagination was *essentially* and *unconsciously* creative; that it could produce endlessly, without the involvement of the will, in the aim of confirming and reiterating a believing self. In claiming that Smith’s spirit manifestations were entirely products of her mind, Flournoy angered the spiritist community who contin-

ued to believe in the extra-bodily and extra-terrestrial source of Smith’s talents.

Smith herself felt betrayed by Flournoy’s book, and soon broke dramatically with the man she had seen as her collaborator, scientific champion and, at times, companion in her out of body travels.¹⁰ She turned to painting and to the final, religious phase of her mediumistic activities—she now claimed to be channelling the hand of God. If Flournoy had insisted that her creative abilities had emerged solely from her imagination, her unswerving belief provoked her to prove that her creativity was entirely divinely inspired. Despite their disillusionment with experimental psychology, Smith and her supporters still held out hope that science would bolster their claims. Increasingly, they turned to the objective tool of photography in order to establish the otherworldly source of her mediumistic powers.¹¹

This new phase of mediumistic creativity began around 1904, and three years later Smith started producing large panel paintings depicting life-size figures from the New Testament. She claimed to have produced the paintings during hypnotic trances, directly at the behest of her spirit guide who had by now metamorphosed into Jesus Christ. Although it was downplayed in contemporary sources, Smith underwent a period of art training immediately following her rupture with Flournoy. The training was crucial; it enabled her to tackle these ambitious paintings, which, although seemingly naïve in their drawing of the figure, display a sophisticated oil painting technique and highly detailed painted vegetation, much more naturalistic than the schematic drawings and watercolours she had produced while under Flournoy’s observation (fig. 2). But more important, it made her aware of traditional painting methods such that she could now claim to deviate from them when not under the power of her own will, but under spirit guidance.¹²

The combination of a detailed technique with the dreamlike atmosphere and flattened, slightly out of proportion figures of works such as *Hélène and Her Guardian Angel* invited comparisons with the paintings of Henri Rousseau in the occultist journal *La Vie mystérieuse* (fig. 3). Without reproducing Smith’s works, one of the journal’s most frequent contributors, Fernand Girod, noted the visual similarities between hers and Rousseau’s paintings in an article of 1911. Surely the similarities and their comparable ambitions of scale encouraged the author’s somewhat surprising identification of Rousseau as a medium-painter.¹³ But as Nancy Ircson has argued, attributing Rousseau’s works to mediumistic inspiration makes sense only within the context of a widespread conflation of difference, in which mediumistic art was placed in the same category as the art of primitives, children, and the insane.¹⁴ Identifying Rousseau as a medium was less about the specific qualities of his painting and more about ascribing his art to a very broad category of “other.”

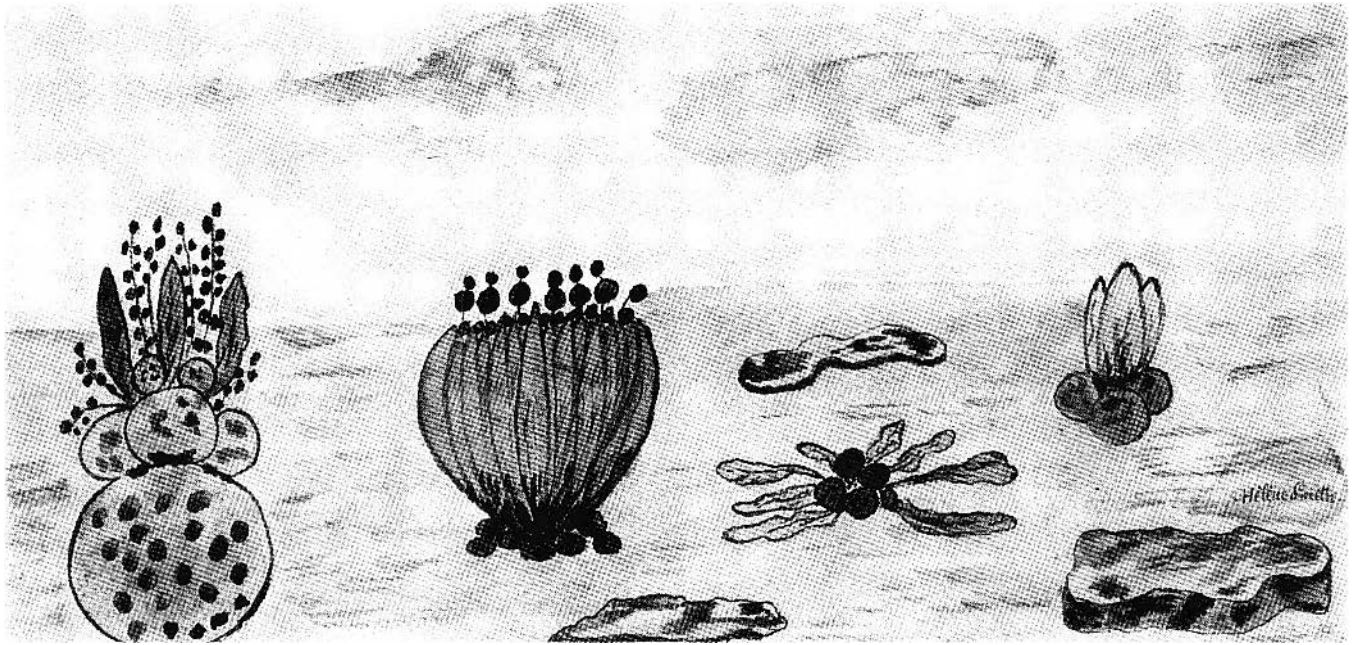


Figure 2. Elise-Catherine Müller (Hélène Smith). *Extra-Terrestrial Plants*, ca. 1899–1900. Ink and watercolour, dimensions unknown. Previously collection of Dr. Olivier Flournoy, Geneva (Photo: reproduced from Olivier Flournoy, *Théodore et Léopold. De Théodore Flournoy à la psychanalyse*, Neuchâtel, 1986).

In 1913, Smith published a pamphlet meticulously describing the evolution of one of her final large-scale religious paintings, *Judas*, over the course of sixty-five sessions.¹⁵ Although photographs were taken of various stages of the painting along the way, they remained unpublished until after Smith's death, but were mentioned in the press and presumably shown, ritual-fashion, to the sympathetic visitors who made the pilgrimage to her tiny apartment in Geneva.¹⁶

The pamphlet and the photographs (fig. 4) were intended to document the non-academic and irrational progression of the paintings, and thus to function as proof of their spirit origins. In the photographs of *Judas* a landscape first appears, followed by Judas's lower legs and a single floating eye against the rock formation. The rest of the figure is then filled in. One of Smith's most tireless supporters, Auguste Lemaître, called her illogical painting process “centrifugal”: “The painted areas succeed each other,” Lemaître wrote, “in the following centrifugal order: the eyes and nose, the cheeks, the nose and the lower part of the face, the beard and hair.”¹⁷ This unusual process, differing from the practices Smith would have been taught during her painting classes, iterated the otherness of the works' creation. The finished paintings could not have made the point themselves, but the photographs underlined that the genesis of the paintings was not normal, but supernormal, and thus signalled, for Smith and her followers, the presence of the divine.

But already for Flournoy, the medium's otherness had signalled her usefulness as an object of study. Since the 1870s, French experimental psychology had sought to detach itself from academic philosophy, asserting its claim to be a *scientific* discipline by recourse to a pathological method.¹⁸ Its authority deriving from the work of Auguste Comte and Claude Bernard, the pathological method posited a quantitative and functional relationship between the normal and the pathological, suggesting that studying one was the best way of shedding light on the other.¹⁹

In France, experimental psychology focused on defining and institutionalizing itself as an experimental science primarily through its attention to the pathological: to both so-called pathological peoples—“madmen, primitives and children” according to the famous triad of Théodule Ribot—and pathological or abnormal phenomena in otherwise normal people, including somnambulism and hallucination, the path particularly recommended by Hippolyte Taine. Mediums were considered especially good subjects because of their spontaneous demonstrations of such abnormal phenomena. All together these pathologies were understood to be “experiments prepared by nature,”²⁰ particularly rich sources of observational material for determining the universal, normal laws of human psychology.

In both her collaboration with Flournoy and in her cycle of mediumistic paintings Smith provided examples of abnormal

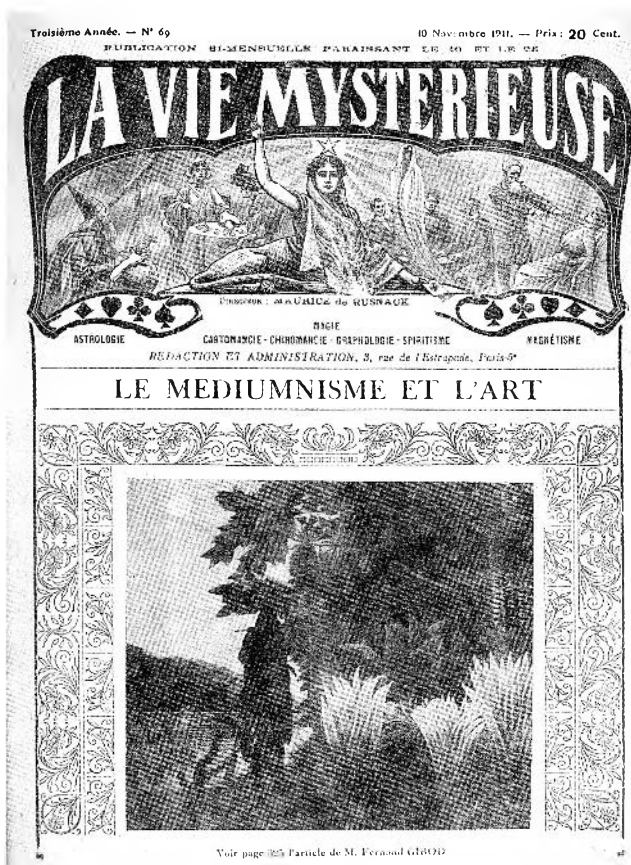


Figure 3. Cover of *La Vie mystérieuse* 69 (10 November 1911), reproducing Henri Rousseau, *The Snake Charmer*. 1907 (Photo: © British Library Board. All Rights Reserved P.P.597.hg).

creativity, a human faculty of particular interest in the realm of psychology and, needless to say, within artistic circles. Many Symbolist artists, highly self-conscious about the psychological processes of creation,²¹ and searching for methods outside traditional academic norms, had already, long before the Surrealists and in a much different context from the 1920s and 1930s, come to see mediumistic processes of creation as rich sources of experimentation for achieving the complex and contradictory aesthetic goals of the late 1880s and 1890s.²² Mediumistic phenomena, as privileged pathological objects of experimental psychology, would become part of an expanded canon of otherness deemed useful, even crucial to putting the aesthetic theories of the period into practice.

Among other statements, Gustave Kahn's pithy formula for Symbolism of "objectifying the subjective,"²³ while reductive, invited a scientific solution to the Symbolist problem of exteriorizing and universalizing one's own interior states, and suggested analogies with experimental psychology's ambitions

to become the positivist science of the soul. Even G.-Albert Aurier, often seen to be among the most anti-science of Symbolist critics, would, like many writers of the time, refer to "false science," suggesting that far from entirely bankrupt, science had the potential to be recuperated as "true."²⁴

The introduction to an enormously popular book in Symbolist circles of the 1890s, Édouard Schuré's *Les Grands Initiés*, argued that the new discipline of experimental psychology had already, in 1889, gone some distance towards "objectifying the subjective," especially in the attention paid to phenomena such as somnambulism and mediumship. After praising the advances made by experimental methods in the domain of psychology, Schuré concluded that for the desired reconciliation of religion and science to come about, "Science would not have to change its methods, but extend its sphere."²⁵ Making his admiration for experimental methods explicit, Schuré prefaced his introduction with an epigraph from Claude Bernard invoking the physiologist's hope that experimentalism would eventually serve to unify science, philosophy, and the arts.²⁶

Schuré's "extended sphere" of study included mediumship and mapped onto psychology's chosen methodological terrain of pathologies, those "experiments prepared by nature." Under the umbrella of the abnormal, a vast range of otherness was newly privileged as providing paths to universal, but difficult to access truths. Spiritists and occultists, including authors such as Schuré and mediums like Héléne Smith, were encouraged by the attention of positivist science to these odd phenomena. From their point of view, and from the point of view of many psychologists who tended to the more spiritualist end of the belief spectrum, positive scientific proof of the afterlife was just around the corner.

From a Symbolist's perspective, regardless of an artist's spiritual or religious beliefs, the cultivation of pathology or otherness, including mediumistic creativity, thus had the potential to perform a dual function: it suggested a method of making outside academic norms, now considered to be bankrupt, and it promised an objective, experimental way to establish truth. In addition, the seductive binary logic of the pathological method and its potential for reversal appealed to the particular theoretical and strategic mindset of the Symbolists: while Naturalism had "subjectified the objective," Symbolists wanted to reverse the paradigm by "objectifying the subjective." While most nineteenth-century artists had painted the exterior world, Symbolists were now going to focus on new realms of the interior. Their cultivation of altered states of consciousness should thus be understood in relation to both scientific spiritism and scientific experimentalism.

Lemaitre compared Smith's paintings to those of Fra Angelico, strategically linking her with an artist considered to be the epitome of religious piety. But the comparison went

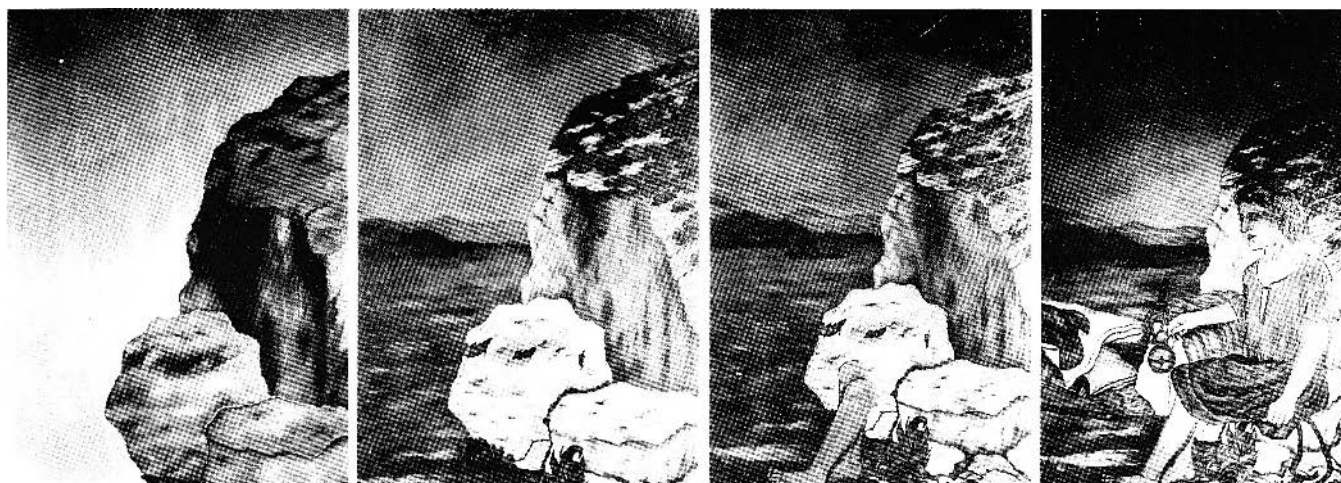


Figure 4. Photographer unknown, Elise-Catherine Müller (Hélène Smith), four stages of *Judas*, 1913, oil on canvas. 225 x 155 cm. Location of photographs and paintings unknown (Photo: reproduced from Waldemar Deonna, *De la planète Mars en Terre Sainte*, Paris, 1932, plates XIII and XIV. © British Library Board. All Rights Reserved 8633.h.12).

further: like Smith, Lemaître argued, Fra Angelico was commonly thought to have painted in a somnambulant state.²⁷ Maurice Denis was one of Symbolism’s most ardent admirers of Fra Angelico, recording his admiration for “le Beato” as early as 1885.²⁸ Like Fra Angelico’s figures, Denis’s gliding, curving women frequently lend themselves to being interpreted as moving in somnambulant states (fig. 5), although we have no specific evidence that Denis understood Fra Angelico’s painting process in the same way as Lemaître did. However, Denis did consider the aesthetic possibilities of a somnambulant state for the sake of his own creative process and he did so in light of his own understanding of and interest in scientific psychology. As Filiz Burhan and Jean-Paul Bouillon have shown, Denis and his fellow Nabis were steeped in the new psychology through their *lycée* education; above all, the influence of Taine can be clearly discerned in Denis’s various writings.²⁹

Denis recalled the abnormal mental processes he had cultivated to create the drawings inspired by Paul Verlaine’s poem *Sagesse*, a project he began in 1889 with a view to breaking into Symbolist circles (see, for example, fig. 6). The reference in this passage to the British psychologist Herbert Spencer, much admired by French experimental psychologists and especially by Ribot and Taine, underlined the scientific aspirations of Denis’s psychological self-experimentation:

Introspection: I imagine myself reflecting on the *Sagesse* drawings. I have left college... full of Spencer; I see to it that my machine of associations functions in such a way that my discursive reason, my dialectic judgment do not intervene: the relationship between the music of a certain line, between

a certain image of the poet and my own image suddenly appears in my consciousness; the more fortuitous, involuntary, unexplained the relationship, the more I am aware of its joy and sensuous delight. The more impoverished the image, the more it is reduced to only those elements of which I am conscious, of which I am master, and the more appropriate it seems to me. It is important, then, to be ignorant and empty. ... Artists who have done Breton Calvaries have avoided expressing these kinds of relationships. But now, for us, this awkwardness represents certain emotional states, certain psychic facts.³⁰

Similarly, Denis’s fellow Nabi, Édouard Vuillard, wrote in his early journal that the starting point for the artist’s perception of nature, and thus the creative process, might consist in cultivating an automatic state: “If one’s mental apparatus is not in a state to grasp these relationships, to hold on to them for a moment and to transfer them like a somnambulist onto a piece of paper or canvas it’s a waste of time.”³¹

Indeed, the instances of artists imagining or trying to put themselves in somnambulant, hypnotic, or other mediumistic states, or critics interpreting the creative act as related to altered states abound in the late 1880s and 1890s. Among others, they appear in relation to the writings, works, and critical reception of Vincent van Gogh, Émile Bernard, Edvard Munch, and James Tissot. What is rarely taken into account, however, is how these references play out in relation to scientific method, and especially the methods of experimental psychology.

But what sorts of somnambulist or mediumistic visual production did the Symbolists have access to and how was it



Figure 5. Maurice Denis, *Procession Under the Trees*, 1892. Oil on canvas, 56 x 81.5 cm. Collection of Peter Marino, New York (Photo: from *Maurice Denis 1870–1943*, exh. cat., Paris, 2006; © SODRAC).

understood? The few drawings that Hélène Smith produced in the late 1890s were unknown within Symbolist circles, but artists may have been familiar with or at least aware of other examples of mediumistic drawings.³² These might broadly be divided into two categories: those produced by already well-known figures who explored mediumistic creativity alongside their other creative activities—Victor Hugo and Victorien Sardou, for example—and those produced by anonymous mediums often inspired to take up pencil or paintbrush by a member of the scientific or spiritist establishment. The latter productions were usually understood either within the pathological context of mental illness, and given nosological or diagnostic value, or as proof of the supernormal. Until the early twentieth century, we rarely find mediumistic visual production considered as art.³³

However, Jules Bois's 1897 article "L'Esthétique des esprits et celle des symbolistes" and the occultist-psychologist's other writings establish provocative *aesthetic* guidelines to the ways in which mediumistic creativity may have been viewed within Symbolist circles.³⁴ Bois suggested that while mediumistic works were still understood to be pathological, the pathological was being revalued precisely in the artistic sphere, not so much fetishized, as one might argue it was for the Decadents, but viewed as potentially useful. The article, like much of Bois's writing, is infused with the language of experimental psychology and his claim to want to "deoccultize the occult" is further typical of attempts during this period to bring scientific method to all things spiritual.³⁵

Bois believed that mediumship was a pathological phenomenon, a "disease of the will," afflicting individuals who were "sur-

normal" or "sous-normal": "It is not the normal man," he wrote, "that expresses himself in these drawings that we have compared to spirit manifestations."³⁶ Yet far from denigrating mediumistic inspiration on this basis, Bois was keen to transform a negative understanding of such pathologies into a positive definition of the prophetic possibilities of mediumistic creativity.³⁷

Part of this more positive definition involved distinguishing between the more banal visual productions of mediums and those works that could be described as possessing a consistent and definable aesthetic, what Bois called a "spirit aesthetic" ("l'esthétique des esprits"). He gave three characteristics of this aesthetic, which all went against academic norms: asymmetry, a profusion of novel forms tied to a *horror vacui*, and a so-called ambiguous line.³⁸ Although he insisted that Symbolist artists such as Édouard Vuillard, Ker-Xavier Roussel, Émile Bernard, and Paul Sérusier were unaware of mediumistic drawings, he argued that their works displayed the same kinds of abnormal characteristics, which in their case had come about through a *deliberate* absence of control over the will.

In the introduction to his 1907 book, *Le Miracle moderne*, Bois took stock of the "study of the soul that has constituted itself as a positivist science," arguing that although much remained to be done, scientific or physiological psychology had already gone some distance, with the help of the pathological method, toward excavating the depths of the human soul. He held Ribot to be psychology's guiding force:

Modern psychophysiology, over which M. Th. Ribot presides as master, remains only at the surface of these profound investigations [of the soul]....The study of morbid states has...been very useful. By examining diseases of personality, intelligence, memory, and the will we can peer into the abyss of our being, the superior soul unknown under ordinary circumstances but always active, our true selves, that directs both our body and mind, uniting them in its mysteries.³⁹

Here again Bois emphasized the pathological as a useful tool enabling the psychologist and the individual to explore the self. As one such object of study within this pathological canon, mediumship—a "disease of the will"—provided access to the depths of the soul that so many Symbolist artists and writers of the 1890s had sought. Pathologies, difference, otherness, alterity provided pathways to truth, ways of exteriorizing the interior, projecting the self onto the plane of universal truth. In short, experimental psychology's pathological method enabled the Symbolist directive to "objectify the subjective" to be potentially transformed into practice.

Prefacing remarks made by Claude Bernard, the towering figure who lay behind the attempts in France to bring psychology under the sway of both experimental method and the

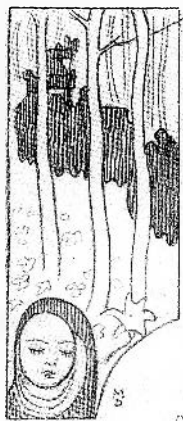


Figure 6. Maurice Denis, from a suite of drawings inspired by Paul Verlaine's *Sagesse*, 1889–90. Black crayon on paper. Paris, Musée du Louvre, D.A.G. (fonds Orsay) (© SODRAC; Photo: RMN / © Thierry Le Mage).

discipline of physiology, Friedrich Nietzsche wrote, “It is the value of all morbid states that they show us under a magnifying glass certain states that are normal—but not easily visible when normal.”⁴⁰ At greater length, and with an emphasis more befitting of the Symbolist project discussed above, the positivist philosopher and historian Ernest Renan made the importance of experimental psychology’s pathological method even clearer:

Sleep, madness, delirium, somnambulism, and hallucination offer to the study of the psychology of individuals a field of experiment that is much more advantageous than the regular state. Phenomena that in the normal state are so subtle as to be almost invisible become more evident in moments of extraordinary crisis by virtue of their exaggeration. The physician does not study galvanism in its rare natural occurrences; he multiplies it by experimentation, in order to study it more easily, since it is the case that the laws studied in this exaggerated state are identical to those of the natural state. The same for the psychology of man, which should

base itself above all on the study of man’s madness, his dreams, hallucinations and all those curious absurdities that we find on every page of the history of the human spirit.⁴¹

Hélène Smith’s inclusion in a book on Symbolist art, a subtle act of anachronistic subversion on the part of a Surrealist author, points provocatively to the necessity of considering the role of mediumship and mediumistic creativity for Symbolism, and invokes a very particular lineage for Surrealism. And it suggests that both scientific spiritism and French experimental psychology, and above all the new discipline’s paradigmatic pathological method, should be seen as intellectual preconditions for a revaluing of otherness in the period. Smith’s work, then, is a wedge into a better understanding of a confluence of seemingly contradictory philosophies and modes of thinking and doing—spiritism and positivism, religion and science, Symbolism and Naturalism. And it furthermore suggests the intellectual and historical conditions out of which emerged a newly invigorated interest in otherness, in mediums and all those “madmen, primitives and children,” the inspiration of whose work would virtually come to define avant-gardism in the twentieth century.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

- 1 Hélène Smith (Elise-Catherine Müller) (1861–1929). José Pierre, *Le Symbolisme* (Paris, 1976).
- 2 Pierre Théberge and Jean Clair, eds., *Lost Paradise: Symbolist Europe*, exh. cat., Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (Montreal, 1995).
- 3 The problem of definition is a thorny one. See Reinhold Heller, “Concerning Symbolism and the Structure of Surface,” *Art Journal* XLV, 2 (1985): 146–53; Dario Gamboni, “Le ‘Symbolisme en peinture’ et la littérature,” *Revue de l’art* 96 (1992): 13–23; and Rodolphe Rapetti, “Pour une définition du symbolisme picturale: critique et théories à la fin du XIXe siècle,” *48/14: La revue du Musée d’Orsay* 5 (1993): 69–82.
- 4 André Breton, “Le message automatique,” *Minotaure* 3–4 (December 1933): 55–65.
- 5 Waldemar Deonna, *De la planète Mars en Terre Sainte. Art et sub-*

- conscient. *Un médium peintre: Hélène Smith* (Paris, 1932).
- 6 For Smith's work in the context of *Art brut*, see Bruno Decharme, *Abcd. Une collection d'art brut* (Paris, 2000); and Roger Cardinal and Martine Lusardy, eds., *Art spirite, médiumnique, visionnaire, messages d'outre-monde*, exh. cat., Paris, La Halle Saint-Pierre (Paris, 1999–2000).
 - 7 Théodore Flournoy, *Des Indes à la planète Mars: étude sur un cas de somnambulisme avec glossalalie* (Paris, 1899). Breton's overarching interest in the first, linguistic phase of Smith's mediumship is typical of the literature on Smith, which focuses on the collaboration with Flournoy and rarely, if ever, considers her later paintings. See Mireille Cifali, "Une glossalalie et ses savants: Elise Müller alias Hélène Smith," *La linguistique fantastique* (Paris, 1985), 236–44; Cifali, "The Making of Martian: The Creation of an Imaginary Language," in Théodore Flournoy, *From India to the Planet Mars: A Case of Multiple Personality with Imaginary Languages*, trans. D.B. Vermilye (Princeton, 1994), 269–87; Sonu Shamdasani, "Encountering Hélène: Théodore Flournoy and the Genesis of Subliminal Psychology," in Flournoy, *From India to the Planet Mars*, xi–li; Vincent Barras, "Glossolalies? la glotte y sonne un hallali!" *Equinoxe* 14 (1995): 155–66; Alan Ramon Clinton, *Mechanical Occult: Automatism, Modernism and the Specter of Politics* (New York, 2004), 8–12. For a recent article mentioning Smith's painting in relation to mediumistic art, see Michael Krajewski, "Mediumistische Wesen als Künstler," *Kunstforum International* CLXIII (January–February 2003): 54–69.
 - 8 Théodore Flournoy, *Notice sur le laboratoire de psychologie de l'Université de Genève* (Geneva, 1896), 5.
 - 9 I follow Lynn L. Sharp in her use of the term "spiritism" rather than "spiritualism" in order to distinguish the French context from the Anglo-American one and to avoid confusion with the French term *spiritualisme*. See Lynn L. Sharp, *Secular Spirituality: Reincarnation and Spiritism in Nineteenth-Century France* (Lanham, MD, 2006). On "scientific" spiritism and Symbolism, see Serena Keshavjee, "The 'Scientization' of Spirituality," in *Seductive Surfaces: The Art of Tissot*, ed. Katharine Lochnan (New Haven, CT, 1999), 213–44.
 - 10 See Olivier Flournoy, *Théodore et Léopold. De Théodore Flournoy à la psychanalyse* (Neuchâtel, 1986).
 - 11 The use of photography in attempts to prove the existence of spirit manifestations is well documented, although Smith's photographs stand apart from what has been nearly rigidified into a spiritist photographic aesthetic. See, most recently, Clément Chéroux, et al., *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult*, exh. cat. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, 2004).
 - 12 L.S., "Les peintures médiumniques de Mlle Hélène Smith," *La Tribune de Genève*, 10–11 November 1929, 7. Apparently Smith's painting lessons took place in 1901. See also Auguste Lemaître, "Un nouveau cycle somnambulique de Mlle Smith: ses peintures religieuses," *Archives de psychologie* VII (7 July 1907): 63–83; Auguste Lemaître, "Une étude psychologique sur les tableaux médiumniques de Mlle H. Smith," *Annales des sciences psychiques* (1908): 16ff.
 - 13 Fernand Girod, "Le médiumnisme et l'art," *La Vie mystérieuse* 69 (10 November 1911): 325–26. Girod compared Rousseau's work to that of Victorien Sardou and "Hélène Schmidt."
 - 14 Nancy Ireson, "Le Douanier as Medium? Henri Rousseau and Spiritualism," *Apollo* 508 (June 2004): 80–87. See also Pascal Rousseau, "The Magic of Images: Hallucination and Magnetic Reverie in the Work of Henri Rousseau," in *Henri Rousseau. Jungles in Paris*, ed. Frances Morris and Christopher Green, exh. cat., London, Tate Modern (London, 2005), 190–203.
 - 15 Henri Cuendet, *Judas. Tableau d'Hélène Smith (peinture inspirée)* (Geneva, [1913]).
 - 16 The photographs are mentioned in a number of contemporary sources, including "Un Nouveau tableau d'Hélène Smith," *La Suisse*, 15 July 1909, but were published in Deonna's book only after Smith's death.
 - 17 "Les parties peintes se succèdent dans l'ordre centrifuge suivant: les yeux et le nez, les joues, la bouche et le bas du visage, la barbe et les cheveux..." Lemaître, "Un nouveau cycle somnambulique de Mlle Smith," 72. Lemaître is actually describing one of Smith's earlier paintings of Christ, but his emphasis on the irrationality of the process holds for *Judas* as well. The translation is mine, as is the case for subsequent translations.
 - 18 See Jacqueline Carroy and Régine Plas, "La méthode pathologique et les origines de la psychologie française au XIXe siècle," *Revue internationale de psychopathologie* XII (1993): 603–12; Jacqueline Carroy and Régine Plas, "The Origins of French Experimental Psychology: Experiment and Experimentalism," *History of the Human Sciences* IX, 1 (1996): 73–84.
 - 19 See Georges Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological*, trans. Carolyn R. Fawcett (New York, 1991).
 - 20 Ribot, *La psychologie anglaise contemporaine*, 3rd ed. (Paris, 1896 [1870]), 36. The phrase is Comtré's, repeated by Ribot in virtually all his books.
 - 21 For the pioneering study of Symbolist art and scientific psychology, see Filiz Eda Burhan, "Vision and Visionaries: Nineteenth-Century Psychological Theory, the Occult Sciences, and the Formation of the Symbolist Aesthetic in France," PhD diss., Princeton University, 1979. See also Debora L. Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-siècle France: Politics, Psychology, and Style* (Berkeley, CA, 1989).
 - 22 For the most considered accounts of the role of mediumistic creation in the Symbolist aesthetic, see Janis Bergman-Carton, "The Medium is the Medium: Jules Bois, Spiritualism, and the Esoteric Interests of the Nabis," *Arts Magazine* LXI, 4 (1986): 24–29; Keshavjee, "The 'Scientization' of Spirituality"; Keshavjee, "'L'art inconscient' and 'l'esthétique des esprits': Science, Spiritualism and the Imaging of the Unconscious in French Symbolist Art," PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2002.

- ²³ Gustave Kahn, “Réponse des symbolistes,” *L'Événement*, 28 September 1886.
- ²⁴ G.-Albert Aurier, “Beaux-Arts—Les Symbolistes,” *Revue Encyclopédique*, 1 April 1892, 474–86.
- ²⁵ “[L]a Science n’aurait pas à changer de méthode, mais à étendre son domaine.” Édouard Schuré, *Les Grands initiés: Esquisse de l’Histoire secrète des religions* (Paris, 1889), xxx.
- ²⁶ “Je suis persuadé qu’un jour viendra, où le physiologiste, le poète et le philosophe parleront la même langue et s’entendront tous.” The quote is taken from a well-known 1865 article.
- ²⁷ Lemaître, “Un nouveau cycle somnambulique de Mlle Smith,” 71–72.
- ²⁸ Maurice Denis, *Journal*, vol. I (30 July 1885; 5 August 1885; 20 August 1885) (Paris, 1957), 35, 36–37, 41–42. Denis records his growing interest in the works of Fra Angelico in the wake of reading Joséphin Péladan’s study of the artist.
- ²⁹ Burhan, “Vision and Visionaries”; Jean-Paul Bouillon, “Denis, Taine, Spencer: les origines positivistes du mouvement Nabi,” *Bulletin de la Société de l’histoire de l’art français*, 1999: 291–309.
- ³⁰ “Introspection: je me vois en train de penser les dessins de *Sagesse*. Je sors du collège. Je suis plein de Spencer; je fais en sorte que la machine à associations fonctionne de telle façon que ma raison discursive, mon jugement dialectique n’aient pas à intervenir: entre la musique de tel vers, entre telle image du poète et une image à moi, surgie dans ma conscience, plus le rapport sera fortuit, involontaire, inexplicable, plus j’en prendrai conscience avec joie et volupté. Plus cette image sera pauvre, réduite aux seuls éléments dont je suis conscient, dont je suis maître, plus elle me paraîtra appropriée. Il importe donc d’être ignorant et vide. Les artistes qui ont fait les calvaires bretons n’ont pas voulu exprimer ce genre de rapports. Mais il se trouve que maintenant, pour nous, cette gaucherie est représentative de certains états de notre sensibilité, de certains faits psychiques.” Maurice Denis, *Journal*, vol. II (September 1915), in Maurice Denis, *Le Ciel et l’Arcadie*, ed. Jean-Paul Bouillon (Paris, 1993), 177–78.
- ³¹ “Si l’appareil cérébral n’est pas en état de saisir ces rapports, de les garder un moment et de les reporter comme un somnambule sur le papier ou la toile inutile de dépenser son temps.” Édouard Vuillard, *Journal*, I.1, fol. 12v, 22 November 1888 (unpublished manuscript held in Paris at the Bibliothèque de l’Institut de France), cited in Guy Cogeval et al., *Édouard Vuillard*, exh. cat., Paris, Galeries nationales du Grand Palais (Paris, 2003), 53.
- ³² See Françoise Will-Levaillant, “L’analyse des dessins d’aliénés et de médiums en France avant le Surréalisme,” *Revue de l’art* 50 (1980): 24–39.
- ³³ The first art-critical treatment of the art of the insane, which also considered the art of mediums, “primitives,” and children, is often argued to be Marcel Réja, *L’Art chez les fous* (Paris, 1907). See Michel Thévoz, “Marcel Réja, découvreur de l’art des fous,” *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* CVII, 1408–1409 (1986): 200–08; Rodolphe Rapetti, *Symbolism* (Paris, 2005), 293–99.
- ³⁴ Jules Bois, “L’Esthétique des esprits et celle des symbolistes,” *Revue des Revues* XX (January–March 1897): 405–20.
- ³⁵ The phrase “désoccultier l’occultisme” was ascribed to Bois by M. Bouvéry. See Dominique Dubois, *Jules Bois (1868–1943): Le Reporteur de l’occultisme, le poète et le féministe de la Belle époque* (Paris, 2004), 93.
- ³⁶ “Ce n’est pas l’homme normal qui s’exprime en ces dessins que nous avons rapprochés de manifestations spirites.” Bois, “L’Esthétique des esprits,” 419.
- ³⁷ Keshavjee notes that Bois, like many writers of the 1890s, was responding to Max Nordau’s book *Degeneration*, published in French in 1894, and in particular to Nordau’s highly negative valuation of so-called pathologies in art. See Keshavjee, “‘L’art inconscient’ et ‘l’esthétique des esprits,’” 190.
- ³⁸ For more on ambiguity and Symbolism, see Dario Gamboni, *Potential Images: Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art* (London, 2002).
- ³⁹ “La psychophysiologie moderne, dont M. Th. Ribot est le grand maître, reste à la surface de ces profondes investigations [de l’âme]. L’examen des états morbides a été très utile. À travers les maladies de la personnalité, de l’intelligence, de la mémoire, de la volonté, elle permet d’entrevoir les abîmes de notre être, cette âme supérieure ordinairement inconnue et toujours agissante, notre véritable nous-même, qui commande à la fois à notre corps et à notre esprit, les unifie en ses mystères.” Jules Bois, *Le Miracle moderne* (Paris, 1907), i–ii.
- ⁴⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufman and R.J. Hollingdale (New York, 1968), 33.
- ⁴¹ Ernest Renan, *L’Avenir de la science. Pensées de 1848* (Paris, 1910 [1890]). Cited in English translation in Canguilhem, *Normal and Pathological*, 44–45.