Popular Healing in a Rational Age:
Spiritism as Folklore and Medicine

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One of the most fascinating factors of studying nineteenth-century history is its liminal quality. Stuck between early modern and twentieth-century modern, the nineteenth century had a particular rhetoric of progress and science but a reality that could not yet live up to the theory professed by most of its thinkers. This was most certainly the case in terms of medicine and its relation to popular healing. Despite the strides of the former, the latter remained much stronger than is perhaps commonly assumed. This paper explores a particularly nineteenth-century variant of popular healing: spiritist healing. Spiritist healing existed in the gaps between reason and superstition, between traditional and modern. The spiritist movement offers a window into ways modern beliefs integrated or updated traditional healing practices. Spiritist healing became popular because it was, like much else in spiritism, a mix of old and new ways of reading or interpreting the world. Unlike traditional healers, however, spiritists increasingly challenged the scientific establishment and its right to control medicine as the century progressed. The importance of this study lies in helping historians to understand the way nineteenth-century popular knowledge interacted with elite knowledge and the way "timeless" practices maintained a constant dialogue with scientific innovation. This paper elucidates one facet of the
continuing attachment of the French people to traditional forms of knowledge and their uneasy relationship to modernity.

Matthew Ramsey has noted how difficult it is to write the history of popular healing. As he points out, even as we reject any assertion of popular healing's timelessness, we must still recognize that many of the beliefs and techniques persisted with little change over time.\(^1\) But if we widen our lens and look not just at traditional popular healers but also at heterodox thinkers, we get a slightly different view. Spiritism built on both traditional healing and the innovations of mesmerism or magnetism. By looking at spiritism and briefly at its predecessor, magnetism, we will see that a version of popular healing touched all classes in the nineteenth century, not just the poor, and that new beliefs maintained traditional healing while updating names and explanations. Spiritism is particularly interesting in this light, because it claimed to be not only scientific, but also democratic and available to all, thus combining relatively new political rhetoric with traditional values of healing.

This paper begins with a brief exploration of traditional popular healing in its many varieties, then turns to spiritism as a movement and in particular to its practice of healing, including its debt to magnetism. This comparison will illuminate the ways spiritism echoed and built on traditional healers. Lastly, we will look at the medical response to spiritism and magnetism and the ways that spiritism challenged the contemporary scientific establishment.

Traditional Popular Healing

The panoply of healers included those sanctioned by the state, such as doctors and health officers (officiers de santé), those sometimes state-licensed but whose techniques often delved into the traditional, such as nuns who might dispense medicines or midwives who often dispensed advice on other female or child-related issues, and popular healers completely outside the control of the state.

Healers ranged from the practical to the mystical. Village bone-setters (rebouteurs) usually specialized in breaks, sprains, and dislocations; their practice involved physical manipulation. The local wise woman used herbs combined with prayers; her practice involved compresses and teas but also rituals such as passing a baby through a double-yoked oak to cure the lungs or make it gain weight.\(^2\) Catholicism was an integral part of the healing system. A whole host of Catholic saints existed whose aid might be invoked. To know which saint, one went first to the diviner (devin(e)) who would "see" the illness and decide to which saint the patient should make a pilgrimage. Diviners used various "empirical" methods such as putting pieces of cloth or wood into water to see which sank first. A sort of healing at a distance was possible, as local women would offer their services to go on pilgrimage in the name of a patient. Even more uncanny were the sorcerers (sorcier or sorcière) or hex-lifters (leveur des sorts) who could heal magical or spiritual illnesses including possession. The witch was usually someone outside the main norms of society, and her practices were the most ambiguous. The hex-lifter functioned by "seeing" an invisible spell and

sending it back to the person who had first sent it. Slow, painful, or mysterious illnesses often indicated a spell; they were attached to illnesses like chronic bronchitis, pneumonia, and other things that got slowly worse or might inexplicably turn worse. 3

The nineteenth century may have been the century of the professionalization of medicine, but it was a long, slow process and limited primarily to the cities. Medical treatment was rare, expensive, and somewhat haphazard, especially in mid-century when the spiritist movement began. Most rural dwellers, not only peasants but also those in villages and smaller towns, were often without access to official medical care. Not only were doctors relatively rare outside cities, they charged travel fees, and their medicine was "costly, inadequate, and partial." 4 They charged whether their cures worked or not. Such an outrageous practice could hardly be supported by the average farmer or day laborer, especially when, as often as not, the doctor was able to do little to help. Their failures were partly due to the state of medicine of the day and partly due to the fact that rural dwellers called in medical men only as a last

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4 Léonard, "Guérisseurs," 504.
resort. Traditional healing remained available and popular throughout the nineteenth century, only declining in the first quarter of the twentieth.\(^5\)

The reasons patients chose healers over doctors were not only economic. Patients and healers shared a Catholic outlook in which sin or behavior might cause disease, and saints or other supernatural invention might cure it. Medical doctors spoke in the rational terms of the new medical science; they offered to treat symptoms and parts. Whether they saw disease as caused by vapors and humors or by contagion and, eventually, germs, their outlook differed from that of many of their patients.\(^6\) Still dwelling in more traditional realms, healers were often closer to their patients' views. The traditional view of health saw the body and spirit as related; many people, especially those less exposed to Enlightenment thought, believed that illness came from an imbalance of powers, humors, or forces that needed to be restored to equilibrium. These ideas and assumptions resonated well with the explanations that spirtist healing offered.

**Spiritism and Spiritist Healing**

Spiritism became popular in the 1850s and 1860s. The movement crossed classes, involving workers, petit bourgeois, and bourgeois in a search for scientific proof of the survival of the soul. The voices of the spirits, accessed through mediums, provided proof that the soul survived. The movement took the form of small groups, animated


\(^6\) Ackerman, 17-9. For the varying causes of illness that the medical profession accepted, see Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).
usually around one or two private mediums, who would meet weekly to listen to the spirits' teachings, to ask philosophical questions, and if they were lucky, to hear music, poetry, or philosophy originating in the other world. They also asked the more-advanced spirits for medical aid to heal the bodies and spirits of those still living on this plane.

The most important leaders of the movement looked upon spiritist healing with some ambivalence. Allan Kardec, the founder of the movement, accepted but rarely spoke about healing as one of the benefits of contact with the spirits. Nor did later leaders emphasize the issue after Kardec's death in 1869. Most (male) leaders among the spiritist community were concerned with doctrine, science, and politics. Their goals were to achieve the scientific community's acceptance of spiritism and/or to transform the social and political world in egalitarian and just directions. The healing powers of spirits offered individual, not collective, benefits. This silence on spiritist healing may have stemmed from more than just distraction with other ideas. As spiritist doctrine claimed to be rational, anything loaded with too much supernatural taint could become uncomfortable baggage. Yet healing held a place of importance for many among the rank and file of spiritists interested in the practical applications of their newfound knowledge and beliefs. If this healing seemed "miraculous" or supernatural, that often added a thrill rather than detracting.

The spiritists continued an alternative science that flourished in the late eighteenth century and had its most famous protagonist in Anton Mesmer. Mesmer described magnetic fluid as "universally diffused; it is the medium of a mutual influence between the heavenly bodies, the earth,
and animated bodies.\textsuperscript{7} Mesmerists (also known as magnetists) applied Mesmer's teachings to cure both body and mind. By "realigning" fluids, magnetism cured ills resulting from fluid imbalance. Spiritists incorporated this universal fluid into a complete philosophical and moral system based on "scientific" empirical observations of invisible spirits. The phenomena produced by mediums, from table rapping to automatic writing and materializing objects, were attributed to invisible beings who manipulated the universal fluid of all living things to influence the material world.

Magnetism had a spiritual component as well. Although Mesmer himself had little interest in spirits, one of his earliest followers, the Baron de Puységur, found that when mesmerized, his subjects could speak with spirits. More importantly for healing, "spiritualist" mesmerists soon found that their somnambulists could "see" inside another's body to discover what illness or imbalance lurked there. Spiritualist magnetism grew during the 1830s and 1840s. Some magnetists saw this knowledge as coming from a supernatural source, but many argued that the magnetic trance simply gave the somnambulist access to senses not normally available to the human mind. Although most magnetists who pursued medical applications seem to have done so without including the spiritual side, they nonetheless, like the spiritists, got their knowledge from invisible, immaterial sources.\textsuperscript{8} Spiritists supported

\textsuperscript{7} Anton Mesmer, Mémoire, quoted in Christopher MacIntosh, \textit{Eliphas Lévi and the French Occult Revival} (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1972), 33.

\textsuperscript{8} French magnetism awaits its historian. For a valuable if somewhat eclectic approach, see Bertrand Meheust, \textit{Somnambules et médiumnité, 1784-1930}, 2 vols. (Le Plessis-Robinson: Institut Synthélabo pour le progrès de la connaissance, 1999). Nicole Edelman has an excellent work on spiritist somnambules which deals as well

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magnetism in all uses, although they also considered it only a portion of their own healing process whose strength was to recognize that the "true" source of the invisible fluids was the spirit world and that humans needed spirits' help to heal.

Spiritist mediums used magnetic fluid in their healing, but they gained their knowledge of healing directly from the spirit world. Some healed only occasionally, when the spirits told them to, but numerous mediums came to specialize in healing. Of these, many claimed to work with the spirit of a medical doctor who, on passing, realized the limits of his earthly knowledge. One Mme Lambert offers an example of the mediums' claims to knowledge. Lambert would go into a trance because she was "magnetized" by the spirit of a man who had formerly been head doctor at the hospital of Tours. This doctor spirit gave direct counsel to those who came seeking his advice. He also magnetized "his" patients. All cures were free; if anyone insisted on paying, he would direct them to give money to the poor, especially mothers. Lambert incarnated a variety of other spirits, not as advanced or "enlightened" as the doctor. The spiritist group members would counsel unenlightened souls. All these other spirits were supervised and controlled by the medical doctor spirit, who maintained his authority through his knowledge and assured that science remained the key to knowledge about the newly dead and about


9 Maurice La Châtre, Le Monde invisible, études sur le spiritisme, le spiritualisme et le magnétisme (Paris: Docks de la librairie, 1867), 33-7.
spiritual issues. Here cure of the soul and cure of the body truly came together.

How did healing work? There were two main dimensions of spiritist healing: those dealing with the physical body and those dealing with the spirit. The first was more mundane and linked to traditional healing by its use of remedies. Mediums prescribed a variety of poultices and especially teas or other beverages to soothe or cure intestinal problems, problems with eyesight, or general pain. Most healings of these types involved an actual consultation with the medium, who would touch the patient, almost always while the medium was in a self-induced trance, to diagnose the illness. Spiritist mediums sometimes offered healing recipes in spiritist magazines, which differed little from those found in the collections sold by peddlers. These types of healings were like those of traditional healers with the exception that the source was supernatural. Even this was not greatly different, as most traditional healers claimed their skills came from some form or another of grace, often acquired at birth and usually from God.

The case of Mme Rosa Agullana offers insight into the popularity of spiritist mediums. Agullana came from a poor rural household and married an artisan. She was active in spiritist circles in Bordeaux from at least 1885, when she appears as a member of the Cercle Girondin, to 1923, when she published her autobiography. She was frequently called on to heal relatively wealthy bourgeois clients and was known throughout the area. She is a clear example of a woman advancing herself through spiritist mediumship, and although she claims never to have charged for healing, she became quite well known and probably received more than one gift from a grateful client. Agullana was a medium before she practiced healing. It was the arrival of a spirit,
one Hippolyte, who had been a doctor in life, that pushed her to heal. He taught her how to "see" an illness, and he prescribed remedies. She began her healing career with the aid of a spiritist who also practiced magnetism, M Brisse. Increasingly, she gained confidence to work on her own.\textsuperscript{10}

Agullana shows well the mixture of spiritism and folk healing, in this case leaning heavily toward the latter. Often she would simply see a malevolent spirit crouching near a sick person and order it away, thus effecting the cure. In one case, a woman in Langoiran, near Bordeaux, had been in bed for three years due to "a very painful rheumatism" and deformed feet. The patient tried all sorts of cures: steam baths, electricity, and stomach pumping. For nine months she was "at the mercy of the doctors" who finally declared that "a very bizarre nervous disorder" caused her symptoms. At that moment they "abandoned" her. Her family tried everything — a magnetic somnambulist, local sorcerers — but nothing helped. Finally, she heard about Mme Agullana in Bordeaux and sent someone to see her. She was clearly a woman of some means, able to afford a variety of treatments and doctors. Her family had domestic servants and the money to send someone to visit Agullana.

On hearing the story, Agullana immediately "saw" malevolent spirits at work: "It is the bad Spirits who are pulling [the patient] toward the cemetery and toward her death." She claimed to see (from Bordeaux) a lock of hair hung up on the branch of an oak tree near the cemetery. It was this token that allowed the spirits to gain a hold over the patient: "She is pulled fluidically by her hair."\textsuperscript{11} Agullana visited her, went to the cemetery, and with one of the domestics, found the hair. The patient noted that she

\begin{footnotes}
\item[10] Rosa Agullana, \textit{La Vie vécue d'un médium spirite} (Bordeaux: G. Delmas, 1923), 32-3.
\item[11] Ibid., 39.
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had her hair cut earlier and had thrown the clippings in a ditch, but there is no clear explanation of how a lock of her hair got up to the cemetery. Once they burned it she began to feel better, although complete healing took some time. During the same visit, Agullana took the swollen and deformed feet in her hands, and after ten minutes with each one, they returned to normal. Here Agullana acted like a bone-setter, replacing the displaced toes and easing the pain. After that, the patient was able to leave the bed and travel to Bordeaux for more care, and after two months her cure was complete.\footnote{Ibid., 40.} Agullana's cure involved traditional folk symbols of power: the oak, the hair holding the essence of the person. Yet her practice also used the new terms of magnetism and spiritism to translate traditional forms of (mostly rural) healing into cures for urban areas. This was hardly a conscious strategy. Her autobiography shows a shrewd woman good at making a way for herself and using the tools at hand but not someone interested in the theoretical differences between fluidic healing and folk traditions. Agullana's account only supports the idea that the new terms of spiritism resonated well with her patients and presumably with others seeking spiritist healing.

Most spiritist healers were less blatantly part of the magical tradition than Agullana. Certainly, many attempted to offer relatively "modern" advice. A biweekly spiritist newsletter in Lyon featured a column entitled "Give freely that which you have freely received," which ran from August 1868 through September 1870. In it the editors claimed to offer remedies for common indispositions and maladies. These cures were offered by the spirit of Mme Fouquet, who had been communicating for six years with her medium, one Mme R***, and together they gave consultations. At the beginning they had about 150
consultations per month, and the number rose to around 450. The healings they had already achieved, the newsletter boasted, proved the trust this spirit merited and the validity of the cures. The column offered practical ways to deal with medical problems, described as "the action of bad fluids" caused by too much heat, typhoid, and cerebral fevers. The column of 1 September 1870 even explained how to help those wounded in war. Recipes for herbal remedies and tisanes were given in enough detail to reproduce them. Beyond the tisanes, the spirit of Mme Fouquet recommended more frequent bathing to prevent illness in young children – every two to five days even. Here Fouquet was likely more "modern" than the doctors. Mme Fouquet also suggested the group start a mutual aid society, thus ensuring longer-term health as well.

Spiritist healing acted as a reservoir of both traditional beliefs and more recent heterodox ideas, a source often used to mount a critique of the separation modern science and medicine made between the material and the metaphysical. In 1866, a year when the folk healer the Zouave Jacob enjoyed enormous press and popularity, the Revue Spirite featured a number of articles on him and on medium healing in general. Spiritist leader Allan Kardec insisted that medium healing was performed by fluidic action with the support of spirits. Spiritist healing, he argued, would not supplant doctors but rather had come to prove to them that there were laws of nature of which they were ignorant and which they should study.  

Spiritists insisted on the importance of the democratic function of the ability to heal. At a moment when doctors moved to professionalize and to discipline knowledge of medicine, spiritist healers fought to democratize the same.

13 Spiritisme à Lyon, 15 Sept. 1868, n.p.
14 Revue spirite, Oct. 1866, 347.
The "Healing Group (Groupe guérisseur) of Marmande" aimed many of its efforts at healing "obsessed" people. Members used "moralization" as "indicated by our guides." These spirit guides helped family members to heal their own: "The ability to heal or to relieve our loved ones is not the exclusive privilege of a few people; what is necessary for this is a good will and trust in God."\(^{15}\)

Another group used reason to heal an "obsessed" woman, but the cure took longer. In this case, the woman had been afflicted with sporadic seizures throughout her married life; these ceased each time she was pregnant and only then. The couple had spiritist friends who brought them to a group meeting. Together, the group discovered and contacted the "obsessing spirit" who was torturing the woman, Rose. However, the spirit was hostile and resistant – a frequent trope in spiritist healing. Healers believed that spirits who resented having died and were "taking it out" on those still living caused much of the illness in the world. Often, but not always, there was a connection between the patient and the spirit. The group stolidly continued to contact this spirit and, by the fourth meeting, had convinced it that it could learn from the group. The spiritists explained the afterlife to the spirit, convinced it that it had to let go of this life and move on, and assured it that, although it suffered, that suffering would end and was not in vain. The woman's seizures ceased, the group claimed, and all was well. This version of spiritist healing offered a cure of souls, if you will, but a cure of two souls. The woman, who had what we might call a hysteric fear, was cured, as was the "ill" spirit who shared (and caused) that fear.\(^{16}\)

\(^{15}\) Revue spirite, 1867, 174, 175.

\(^{16}\) Revue spirite, 1865, 173-5.
Spirtists and doctors

Despite tensions, spiritists struggled to achieve some modicum of institutional or orthodox justification. The Revue spirite announced in triumph any acquisition of medical followers; that men of science accepted spiritism showed the scientific character of the movement. There was a contingent, small enough, of allopathic doctors who were practicing spiritists and who combined spiritist charitable healing with their allopathic practices. The Revue spirite boasted of these men, including one Dr. Damien, whose spiritist charity merited a medal of thanks from his patients, the "simple villagers" of Cheniménil. That doctors could be spiritist also challenged what the movement called "the positivism affected by modern medical science."17

Doctors who practiced spiritism were rare enough, however. Unless urged to action, courts and doctors generally ignored strictly spiritist healing, such as the moralization of an obsessing spirit or the distribution of spirit-dictated remedies. They did, however, pursue the spiritist use of magnetism as illegal practice of medicine. In 1873, Marseille courts forced the spiritist medium Daniel Strong, who often magnetized up to a hundred people a day, to suspend his practice. Strong claimed to be only an agent of the spirits; he further argued that his refusal to take money from his patients meant he did not truly practice medicine. Strong's claim is doubtful. He saw patients only with an entry ticket; whether he charged for this ticket, we do not know. We do know that in Paris, trance mediums sold similar tickets for a small fee.18 The court ignored his

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17 Revue spirite, 1870, 121-6, quote on 125.
18 Posted signs notified patients that a entry ticket could be obtained only by letter. Such cards were valid for twelve séances on specified days, and any treatment interrupted during the first three
claims and upheld an 1852 Parisian court decision that considered any healing, free or not, as an application of medicine.

Judgment depended on the court and on the practitioner. In a case in Le Mans, a group of spiritists won acquittal for healing by magnetized water, while a similar case in Narbonne condemned a solitary healer for the same acts. LeMans’ group president, M Cornilleau, was a well-respected bourgeois citizen; he argued that he and his group "Solidarity" had done no legal wrong. "That's true, the president of the tribunal told him, but it is a bit contrary to good sense."19 Judges often took this attitude when they found spiritists in their court, dismissing charges even while questioning the sanity of the accused.20

Although willing to ignore rural traditional healers, the medical profession showed less tolerance when healers became popular in urban areas. The Lyon faculty of medicine directly initiated more than one trial against Mlle Marie Bressac, who as a "seer" identified patients' illnesses. Although found guilty in 1858, Bressac had several faithful followers in the local elite who protected her. She continued practicing until her death in 1872. Each case increased her popularity. She finally solved the legal problem by having a doctor countersign all her weeks would not be resumed. Patients were expected to bring their own water to be magnetized. See Revue spirite, June 1873, 177.

19 Revue spirite, Nov. 1876, 397. Cornilleau was a retired tax collector who had lived "the life of an honorable citizen," a point which apparently no one contested.

20 This is especially true in several cases where heirs tried to prove that family members who had left money to spiritist groups were insane.
prescriptions. This was a step increasingly taken by many traditional healers as well.\textsuperscript{21}

The medical profession continued to work for laws against miraculous healings. Many doctors considered all alternative healing as charlatanry. These complaints were not aimed specifically at spiritism but included it. A new law against the illegal exercise of medicine passed in 1892. This law aimed especially at healers, magnetizers, and somnambulists but was also meant to control the influence of belief in "the marvelous," which medical and psychiatric discourse named dangerous. The medical profession accused spiritism of reviving foolish belief in the supernatural and miracles; the law was worded to protect "weak persons" from these dangers.\textsuperscript{22}

That spiritist groups continued to practice healing is certain. They do so today. But they had lost their cause in terms of either integrating spiritist and orthodox medicine or gaining recognition of spiritist healing as a legitimate practice.

By changing the way healing worked, modern medicine also changed the reasons for (or causes of) disease. Disease was no longer a question of harmonious balance but of germs and external causes. Might the pendulum be swinging back with the rise of acupuncture, which aligns chi, or energy – the "fluids" of the nineteenth century? At

\textsuperscript{21} Legal actions against Bressac are discussed in the \textit{Revue spiritualiste}, 1858-59, 465-7 and in \textit{Le spiritisme à Lyon}, Feb. 1872, n.p. On traditional healers using doctors to legitimate their claims, see Léonard, "Guérisseurs."

\textsuperscript{22} The question of spiritism's relations to medicine and psychology is wonderfully discussed in by Pascal le Maléfan, "Les Délires spiritistes: le spiritisme et la métapsychique dans la nosographie psychiatrique française" (thesis, Paris V, 1988). The law of 1892 and reasons behind it are discussed on 61-2. Le Maléfan notes that laws in Italy and Austria went even further, forbidding all expressions of the marvelous.
any rate, the spiritists helped integrate science and religion in their explanation of healing. They used a more traditional "Catholic" idea that disease might well be caused by non-material factors. They rejected "sin" as a cause, however, and claimed that their approach to curing was as "scientific" as that of the doctors, thus luring people interested in the traditional just a few steps closer to modern ideas of scientific medicine. Evelyn Ackerman argues that peasants were hardly unchanging in their approach to medicine; they were willing to learn new ways if they found them efficacious: "country dwellers . . . on the eve of the First World War could tolerate more ambiguity and syncretism in their ideas about disease than could their ancestors of Napoleon's time." Spiritism offered a key source of that syncretism, bringing the traditional and the modern together in a mix that spoke to the values of the consumers of medicine much more directly than could most medical doctors.

Relations between science and popular knowledge remained tense in the second half of the nineteenth century when spiritism became popular. Spiritists insisted they were "scientific" and yet refused to yield the ability to heal to doctors and others who claimed expert knowledge. Spiritism strove, ultimately unsuccessfully, to find a place as an intermediary form of knowledge, combining the popular and the scientific. The attempt is more important than the failure for several reasons. As this paper has shown, the study of spiritism illuminates popular cultural values and the continued relationship between the supernatural and the scientific. It also reminds us of the liminal quality of the nineteenth century. If we continue to use the term modernization we must consider it not as a series of new discoveries, but as a process of negotiation.

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23 Ackerman, 3.