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Hajek, K. (2016). "Je lis ça comme je lirais un roman": Reading Scientific Works on Hypnotism in Late Nineteenth-century France. *Australian Journal Of French Studies*, 53(3), 232-245. doi:10.3828/ajfs.2016.18

<http://online.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/doi/10.3828/ajfs.2016.18>

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# “Je lis ça comme je lirais un roman”: Reading Scientific Works on Hypnotism in Late Nineteenth-century France

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## Abstract

In France ca. 1878–1890, hypnotism enjoyed unprecedented legitimacy and cultural authority, with literary interest flourishing alongside medico-scientific enquiry into the topic. In light of these dual conditions, this article examines how texts about hypnotism constituted their ideal reader, with a focus on the role of the reader’s imagination. It firstly elucidates the ways scientific texts guided their ideal reader to suppress any imaginative response to hypnotic phenomena. If this served to neutralise potentially damaging interpretations of phenomena, it also placed constraints on scientific experimentation into hypnotism. Fictional studies of hypnotism raised the possibility, however, that it was valid to read accounts of hypnotic phenomena “like novels”, that is, in an imaginative mode. The analysis, in this second part, centres on an episode from Jules Claretie’s 1885 novel *Jean Mornas*, before finally exploring the implications for scientific enquiry of fluidity between scientific and literary ways of reading hypnotism.

“Les phénomènes du sommeil provoqué ont aujourd’hui leur place dans la science”, declared Gilbert Ballet of the Paris medical faculty in February 1887.<sup>1</sup> Under the circumstances, Ballet’s non-specialist audience would have been likely to accept this statement. Not only did Ballet speak from a strong institutional position, but throughout the 1880s, hypnotism, as these phenomena were usually termed, enjoyed a rare medico-scientific legitimacy, attaining the status of a nascent positive science after the model of Claude Bernard’s experimental medicine.<sup>2</sup> As the “golden age” of hypnotism, with considerable influence on the subsequent evolution of psychology, psychoanalysis, and psychiatry, this context has attracted significant critical attention.<sup>3</sup> But what marked representations of hypnotic phenomena as a scientific activity, and not literature, spectacle, or charlatanism? Inverting the question, how did self-consciously scientific texts about hypnotism constitute their ideal reader?

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<sup>1</sup> Gilbert Ballet, *L’Hypnotisme et la suggestion, conférence faite à Reims, le 11 février 1887, par le Dr Gilbert Ballet* (Reims: H. Matot fils, 1887), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Claude Bernard, *Introduction à l’étude de la médecine expérimentale* (Paris: J. B. Baillière et fils, 1865). We can see the influence of Bernardian ideas in e.g. La Rédaction, “A nos lecteurs”, *Revue de l’Hypnotisme* 1: 1 (1886–1887), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Among many others, Dominique Barrucand, *Histoire de l’hypnose en France* (Paris: P.U.F., 1967); Jacqueline Carroy, *Hypnose, suggestion et psychologie. L’invention des sujets* (Paris: P.U.F., 1991); Henri F. Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious* (New York: Basic Books, 1970); Alan Gauld, *A History of Hypnotism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Anne Harrington, “Metals and Magnets in Medicine—Hysteria, Hypnosis and Medical Culture in *fin-de-siècle* Paris”, *Psychological Medicine*, 18: 1 (1988), 21–38; Andreas Mayer, *Sites of the Unconscious: Hypnosis and the Emergence of the Psychoanalytic Setting*, trans. Christopher Barber (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Régine Plas, *Naissance d’une science humaine: la psychologie. Les psychologues et le ‘merveilleux psychique’* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2000).

My mention of literature, spectacle, and charlatanism is not incidental here. On the one hand, there is a striking contrast between the scientific status claimed for hypnotism research ca. 1878–1890 and the disrepute attached to its immediate precursor, *magnétisme animal* (often termed mesmerism in English). Broadly speaking, 1880s observers condemned *magnétisme* for the way it associated charlatanism and a proclivity for the wondrous or supernatural, often in public exhibitions which functioned primarily by “striking the imagination”.<sup>4</sup> Affirming hypnotism’s scientificity was thus precisely a matter of distinguishing present enquiry—soberly directed to real phenomena—from the fraud or astonishing shows offered by the magnetisers. On the other hand, literary interest in hypnotism flourished alongside scientific output during this period, with many physicians publishing in both genres, while some novelists participated in hypnotism experiments on a similar footing to medical students.<sup>5</sup> If there was less risk of confusion between scientific and literary enquiry on hypnotism—even naturalist Jules Claretie held that fictional studies should follow behind their scientific counterparts<sup>6</sup>—it was nonetheless an essential feature of positivist science that the two modes of enquiry should remain distinct. Claude Bernard, who exemplified scientific activity in France in the second half of the nineteenth century, contrasted “la personnalité de l’art et [...] l’impersonnalité de la science”, and deplored “une confusion perpétuelle que l’on fait entre les productions littéraires ou artistiques et les productions de la science”.<sup>7</sup>

These dual conditions—persistent mistrust of *magnétisme* and potential overlap with literary endeavour—form the background against which the phenomena of hypnotism were presented as real and as worthy of scientific attention. In this article, I interrogate the readers (projected and fictional) of scientific texts on hypnotism as a way to approach the neglected question of what it meant to engage hypnotism as *science* in the specific historical context of 1880s France. I propose firstly to elucidate how scientific texts on hypnotism guided their projected readers, suspicious of extraordinary magnetic claims, to share a certain “way of looking at a situation” (to use Lawrence Prelli’s description of rhetoric).<sup>8</sup> What characterised the ideal reader of scientific work on hypnotism? And how did attempts to model a certain orientation to phenomena constrain the business of experimentation on

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<sup>4</sup> The quotation paraphrases Alfred Binet and Charles S. Féré, *Le Magnétisme animal* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1887), p. 20. On the reputation of *magnétisme* in the 1880s, see e.g. Ballet, p. 4; Hippolyte Bernheim, *De la suggestion et de ses applications à la thérapeutique*, 2nd ed. corrigée et augmentée (Paris: Doin, 1888 [reprinted Elibron Classics, 2005]), p. 276; Désiré Magloire Bourneville and Paul Regnard, *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière (Service de M. Charcot). III* (Paris: Bureaux du Progrès médical et V. A. Delahaye & Lecrosnier, 1879–1880), p. 149; Paul Janet, “De la suggestion dans l’état d’hypnotisme”, *Revue politique et littéraire (Revue bleue)*, 3e série, VIII (1884), 100–104, 129–132, 178–185, 198–203: p. 102; Charles Richet, “Du somnambulisme provoqué”, *Journal de l’anatomie et de la physiologie*, 11 (1875), 348–378: p. 348.

<sup>5</sup> Examples of the former include physiologists Charles Richet and Henri Beaunis, who wrote under the pseudonyms Charles Epheyre and Paul Abaur, respectively. Reciprocally, Jules Claretie, Adolphe Belot, and Maurice Barrès participated in scientific experiments.

<sup>6</sup> Jules Claretie, *Les Amours d’un interne* (Paris: E. Dentu, 1881), pp. i–ii.

<sup>7</sup> Bernard, pp. 75, 249.

<sup>8</sup> Lawrence J. Prelli, *A Rhetoric of Science: Inventing Scientific Discourse* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), p. 21.

hypnotism?<sup>9</sup> Secondly, I examine the possibility that there existed valid modes of reading such texts which did not correspond to the projected ideal, in light of the proximity, if not overlap, of scientific hypnotism and fictional studies of the topic. How could fictional representations of hypnotism inflect the reading of scientific texts, and thereby shape the contours of hypnotism as a field of knowledge?<sup>10</sup> My approach here mirrors my analysis of the science; against the ideal scientific reader, I contrast a fictional depiction of the act of reading. The episode in question appears in Jules Claretie's highly popular *Jean Mornas* (1885), a novel that was particularly closely imbricated with scientific work on hypnotism.<sup>11</sup> Dr Pomeroy, a central character, reads scientific works on hypnotism and is eventually persuaded to adopt the role of a hypnotic operator (pp. 129–140). Besides pointing to the substantive place of fictional works in scientific discourse on hypnotism, this scene opens up the potential for blurring between scientific and literary ways of knowing hypnotism.

Running through my analysis is a concern for the role of the imagination in hypnotic science, notably, for the extent to which scientific texts invited or authorised an imaginative response. That the imagination was implicated in literary production and reception, often being accounted the chief characteristic differentiating literature from scientific works,<sup>12</sup> makes it a useful concept around which to centre my attention. It is not by any means my intention to unpack the various ways “imagination” was understood or deployed at this time, neither in psychological discourses, nor in the literary project of movements such as naturalism; that would be beyond the scope of this study, and indisputably beyond its space

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<sup>9</sup> Historians like Steven Shapin and Jan Golinski have studied the influence of specific audiences on the activity and discourses of eighteenth-century sciences. In contrast, I focus on how scientific activity was constrained by the ways texts constructed their ideal readers. Steven Shapin, “The Audience for Science in Eighteenth Century Edinburgh”, *History of Science*, XII (1974), 95–121; J. V. Golinski, “Utility and Audience in Eighteenth-Century Chemistry: Case Studies of William Cullen and Joseph Priestley”, *The British Journal for the History of Science*, 21: 1 (1988), 1–31.

<sup>10</sup> Much scholarly attention has been directed towards relations between medico-scientific and literary writing about hypnotism and its historical double, hysteria. Meriting particular mention are Jacqueline Carroy, *Les Personnalités doubles et multiples: Entre science et fiction* (Paris: P.U.F, 1993); Janet Beizer, *Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); Stefan Andriopoulos, *Possessed: Hypnotic Crimes, Corporate Fiction, and the Invention of Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Bertrand Marquer, *Les Romans de la Salpêtrière* (Geneva: Droz, 2008); chapters in Mark S. Micale, ed. *The Mind of Modernism: Medicine, Psychology, and the Cultural Arts in Europe and America, 1880–1940* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).

I follow the line charted by these studies to interrogate reciprocities between science and the cultural arts. In distinction to studies oriented primarily toward literary analysis, this article, like Carroy's work, engages in careful consideration of both discourses. In so doing, it aims to provide new insights both into the historically specific functioning of scientific discourse, and to its interactions with its literary counterpart.

<sup>11</sup> Jules Claretie, *Jean Mornas* (Paris: E. Dentu, 1885). Further references to this novel will be given parenthetically. Notably, *Jean Mornas* circulated in scientific and literary discourse on hypnotism with the effective status of a scientific document, its plot having inspired “de sérieuses expériences de suggestion hypnotique”. Charles Foureaux, “Suggestion hypnotique”, *Archives de l'anthropologie criminelle* 1: 2 (1886), 188–192: pp. 188–189. Among others, Claretie's novel was also cited in Georges Gilles de la Tourette, *L'hypnotisme et les états analogues au point de vue médico-légal*. (Paris: E. Plon, Nourrit, 1887), p. 133; Jean-Salvy Morand, *Le Magnétisme animal (hypnotisme et suggestion): Etude historique et critique*. (Paris: Germer frères, 1889), pp. 265–270; Adolphe Belot, *Alphonsine* (Paris: E. Dentu, 1887), pp. 277–278.

<sup>12</sup> E.g. Bernard, p. 75; Paul Copin, “Un Roman de M. Adolphe Belot: ‘Alphonsine’”, *Revue de l'Hypnotisme*, 2: 7 (1887–1888), 202–208.

constraints. Rather, the imagination stands in here for an historically specific set of “ways of looking at” phenomena. A representation which “frappe l’imagination” or “fait de l’effet” was also essentially one which produced astonishment in its audience.<sup>13</sup> Its implied opposite term was a representation making appeal to impersonal and disinterested reason,<sup>14</sup> what we might now term an abstract approach to phenomena.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, a focus on the imagination has the advantage of relating to both textual and oral/visual (i.e. “in person”) representations of scientific hypnotism. I have been writing thus far rather loosely of readers and audiences, without precise distinction, and indeed I intend to treat them as roughly equivalent, rather than attempting to delineate their differences. In practical terms, this means that I will use author/experimenter and reader/audience somewhat interchangeably here when referring to the general case. This equivalence is justified by the way the two types of representation blur into one another in discourses on hypnotism more broadly. Notably, most oral/visual demonstrations of hypnotism with scientific aims (and even some exhibitions by popular magnetisers—though these are not my concern) were also transcribed and published in written form; neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot’s *Leçons du mardi* are a notorious example.<sup>16</sup> It was in this written form that many interested parties would have experienced such demonstrations, not to mention researchers’ communications to learned societies.

### **Constituting an ideal reader for scientific hypnotism**

Perhaps the most detailed critique of rhetorical style in hypnotism texts (both oral and written) was penned by philosopher Paul Janet in 1884, as a subsection on “method” in an article principally discussing suggestion.<sup>17</sup> Janet was concerned that authors of some recent works “[ont] surtout cherché à mettre en relief les faits les plus extraordinaires et les plus saisissants pour l’imagination” (p. 101). What made this “tendance à mettre surtout en relief l’extraordinaire et l’inattendu” particularly troublesome from a scientific point of view was its effect on readers from the broader public (p. 102). Those engaged in hypnotic science could not neglect this public, for science in late nineteenth-century France was not yet so professionalised as to be completely segregated from more popular discourses. The mixed content of periodicals such as the *Revue des deux mondes* attests to this overlap of what would today be regarded as distinct knowledges. Hypnotism, more so than other

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<sup>13</sup> Binet and Féré, *Magnétisme animal*, p. 20; Janet, p. 101. Bernard wrote of the “esprit” rather than the “imagination”.

<sup>14</sup> On scientific activity as impersonal, as opposed to art, see Bernard, pp. 75, 356.

<sup>15</sup> In his reconstruction of the scientific mind, Gaston Bachelard distinguishes an abstract approach to phenomena, characteristic of proper scientific thinking, from a pre-scientific tendency to seek astonishment or to view nature in images. Gaston Bachelard, *La Formation de l’esprit scientifique. Contribution à une psychanalyse de la connaissance objective* (Paris: J. Vrin, 2011 [1938]), esp. pp. 40–43 [pp. 34–36 in original edition].

<sup>16</sup> J.-M. Charcot, *Leçons du mardi à la Salpêtrière*, Notes de cours de MM. Blin, Charcot et Colin (Paris: Bureaux du Progrès médical et A. Delahaye & E. Lecrosnier, 1887–1888).

<sup>17</sup> Janet, pp. 101–102. Further references in this section to this article will be given parenthetically.

medical sciences, appealed for its legitimacy to a broad cultivated public and addressed many of its findings to that public. Much significant scientific research into hypnotism, for instance, appeared in the *Revue philosophique*, which, as its name indicates, also treated questions beyond positivist science.<sup>18</sup>

In Janet's view, striking the imagination of non-specialist readers provoked them to astonishment; in turn, this would lead them to one of two conclusions, both damaging to hypnotism's scientific credentials. On one hand, "les esprits éclairés" would respond to an "étonnement [...] trop violent" with scepticism, construing the gap in expectations as pointing to "le merveilleux et le mystérieux" (p. 102). Since these features were precisely what distanced such a public from *magnétisme*, they would conflate hypnotic facts with magnetic fancies, meeting both with the same reception, "c'est-à-dire une disposition à l'éloignement et à l'hostilité" (p. 102). On the other hand, by a reciprocal effect, "d'autres personnes" would not puzzle out what caused the phenomena portrayed. Consequently, this section of the public would interpret extraordinary phenomena "dans le sens de son imagination et de son ignorance" as signifying causes as "unknown" and "mysterious" as those at work in *magnétisme* (p. 102). Either way, the overall result would be the same, a confusion of domains, of *magnétisme* and hypnotism; "l'on retombe dans le mal que l'on aurait voulu éviter" (p. 102).

Of the two distinct publics outlined here by Janet, it was the higher-status cultivated public ("les esprits éclairés") which most concerned hypnotism researchers. This public, which included physicians not directly engaged in hypnotism research, was supposed to "know what it's talking about" when it came to science. As Janet tells it, insufficiently explained phenomena, those which imply a break with the usual, are construed by such readers as partaking of the wondrous and are therefore automatically rejected outside the bounds of science. The rejection is automatic since positivist science positioned itself in opposition to the wondrous or to superstition.<sup>19</sup> (Indeed, hypnotism researchers demarcated their activities as science in opposition to the wondrous excesses of *magnétisme*.) As a result, it is not the case that the cultivated public would make the link with the wondrous out of some understanding that a supernatural force *causes* the astonishing phenomena directly. Rather, wondrous forces habitually fill—in the speculations of the magnetisers, the eyes of the ignorant, and so on—the gap between cause and effect associated with the astonishing.<sup>20</sup> It is important to clarify here, however, that this is Janet's *construction* of the cultivated public's reasoning. It undoubtedly reflected circulating public views to a large extent, but it also shaped them. In particular, Janet emphasised the astonishing-wondrous-*magnétisme* linkage at the expense of other possible risks of striking the imagination, such as some inherent requirement to present science in plain language; he privileged not the form in itself, but the attributed cause. Janet was not alone in this;

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<sup>18</sup> On the range of topics to be found in this periodical, see Jacqueline Thirard, "La fondation de la 'Revue philosophique'", *Revue philosophique*, 166: 4 (1976), 401–413.

<sup>19</sup> Bernard, pp. 76, 117–118, 313–314, 370.

<sup>20</sup> E.g. Richet, p. 358; Belot, p. 230.

authors concerned with the rhetoric of hypnotic science overwhelmingly endowed their projected public with a tendency to link the astonishing to the wondrous.<sup>21</sup>

### **Orienting the audience, orienting the scientific project**

Having attributed to their readers a particular (inappropriate) way of viewing phenomena, scientific texts on hypnotism then had to guide these projected readers to share a scientific orientation to hypnotism. Notably, this meant neutralising any astonishment provoked by the apparently extraordinary or wondrous effects of hypnotism. For Paul Janet, the required strategy was clear: “Plus [l’auteur] prépare son auditoire ou son lecteur, plus l’effet est affaibli; moins il le prépare, plus l’effet est grand.”<sup>22</sup> It was Alfred Binet and Charles Féré, researchers working with Charcot at the Salpêtrière hospital, who integrated Janet’s views into a broader methodological principle to guide the project of hypnotic science.<sup>23</sup> They were troubled by studies of hypnotism “qui semblent faites plutôt pour piquer la curiosité que pour instruire”, and which therefore seemed to have neglected an important principle of good method, as conceived at the Salpêtrière:

Il est un dernier précepte qu’il ne faut pas perdre de vue, ni dans la recherche des faits, ni dans l’exposition des expériences: c’est de *rapprocher les phénomènes de suggestion des faits qui sont déjà connus et qui font partie de la science positive*.<sup>24</sup>

In other words, the way to avoid “making an impression” on an audience was to link back phenomena to the known, to proceed from the simple to the complex (a precept usually attributed to Descartes).

Binet and Féré’s formulation makes it eminently clear, however, that proceeding from the simple to the complex is more than simply a matter of style; it is a question of “method” (as it is for Janet and Ballet<sup>25</sup>). The solution to a rhetorical problem has bearing not just on representation—“l’exposition des expériences”—but also on the process of knowledge generation—“la recherche des faits”. This sets up a feedback loop: in one arc, researchers deploy the principle of “simple to complex” in order to minimise imaginative effects, while in turn, this shapes the kinds of questions they ask about hypnotism. Completing the loop, the Salpêtrière researchers’ preferred method (chosen ostensibly for epistemological or other reasons), also serves to assuage precisely those concerns authors project onto the cultivated public. In what follows here, I will tease out the workings of this feedback loop, particularly as it frames the characteristics of ideal scientific reading.

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<sup>21</sup> See esp. Albert Pitres, *Clinique médicale de l’hôpital Saint-André. Des suggestions hypnotiques* (Bordeaux: Féret et fils, 1884), p. 16.

<sup>22</sup> Janet, p. 101.

<sup>23</sup> Binet and Féré reproduce precisely those paragraphs of Janet’s which I analysed above. Binet and Féré, *Magnétisme animal*, pp. 143–144.

<sup>24</sup> Binet and Féré, *Magnétisme animal*, p. 143. Emphasis in original.

<sup>25</sup> Janet, p. 101; Ballet, p. 5.

Firstly, the principle of simple to complex influences the way new facts about hypnotism are generated. An exemplar in this regard is Binet and Féré's 1885 article exploring the way magnets could be used to transfer various effects of hypnotism from one side of the body to the other, which was one of their major original contributions to the field of hypnotism research.<sup>26</sup> The structure of their study follows a logic of simple to complex, beginning with their acknowledgement that adherence to this principle has restrained their field of observation<sup>27</sup>; other phenomena might manifest more frequently in hypnotism, but frequency does not equal simplicity, which is what transfer phenomena offer.<sup>28</sup> When it came to transferring specific phenomena, Binet and Féré began with "des faits physiques, qui, si complexes qu'ils paraissent, sont toujours plus simples que le plus simple des faits mentaux."<sup>29</sup> Consequently, from transferring physical states of lethargy and catalepsy, Binet and Féré's experiments progressed to examine simple motor suggestions, bilateral suggested acts, and finally more complex "sensory-sensorial" phenomena such as hallucinations and suggested blindness. It is clear that Binet and Féré have constructed their series of experiments in a careful chain, leaving no gap in expectations to which a reader might react with astonishment and suspicion: "A mesure que nous pénétrons plus avant dans notre sujet, les phénomènes se compliquent [...]. On aurait même de la peine à les croire possibles, s'ils n'étaient pas disposés en série et ne tenaient pas logiquement les uns aux autres."<sup>30</sup> As well as preventing transfer phenomena from appearing dramatic, this presentation also performs a certain way of looking at the situation, namely, to approach new facts step by step. The article thus provides its readers with a model for scientific reasoning; from the inverse perspective, guiding their readers in this way constrained Binet and Féré's field of discovery.

A reader's reaction had to be guided with particular care when the hypnotic phenomena in question resembled those which figured in the magnetisers' repertoire. In this second case, careful stepping from the simple to the complex by an experimenter might not prevent his audience from recognising the dramatic potential or wondrous overtones of some demonstration. Rather than denying or condemning this response, many texts instead attempt to "fill in" the gap in expectations between normal behaviour and the hypnotic effect. One communication marked by such a strategy is that with which I began: Ballet's 1887 public seminar on hypnotism and suggestion. Ballet continually remarked how the facts he presented contributed to "la mise en scène" of the magnetisers or how they "peuvent, au premier abord, paraître merveilleux."<sup>31</sup> Having evoked the possibility of this kind of response, Ballet proceeded to explain why it is inappropriate. For the most part, his explanations take the form of analogies. Hypnotic analgesia "ne saurait nous étonner" as it

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<sup>26</sup> Alfred Binet and Charles Féré, "L'hypnotisme chez les hystériques. Le Transfert", *Revue philosophique*, XIX: 1 (1885), 1–25.

<sup>27</sup> Binet and Féré, "Transfert", p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> Binet and Féré, "Transfert", p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> Binet and Féré, "Transfert", p. 4.

<sup>30</sup> Binet and Féré, "Transfert", p. 12.

<sup>31</sup> Ballet, pp. 14, 20.



is seen “assez fréquemment” in conditions like deep alcoholic sleep.<sup>32</sup> He similarly assures his audience that while post-hypnotic suggestions, such as to see a red cat, “peuvent vous sembler étranges”, they have their analogues in mental pathology, while suggested changes of personality are not “merveilleux” since they are familiar to all of us in dreams.<sup>33</sup> These analogies act to dedramatise phenomena by linking them back to the familiar.<sup>34</sup> Rather than stepping in order from the simple to the complex, like Binet and Féré in the transfer article, Ballet takes a fact that may appear complex and works backwards, to demonstrate how it, too, sits at the end of such a chain of reasoning. By repeating this process throughout his seminar, Ballet effectively models a form of reasoning to his audience; he encourages them to look beyond any initial astonishment to the way a fact links in to the everyday or to the pathological (or if these do not suffice, to other hypnotic phenomena<sup>35</sup>). In fact, proposing such a model appears to have been one of Ballet’s principal aims in giving his seminar.<sup>36</sup> Although Ballet minimised the relevance of these analogies for knowledge generation,<sup>37</sup> drawing analogies to other states was of more than rhetorical import for hypnotic science; the analogy with (natural) sleep inherent in the term “hypnotism” in many ways structured the field as a whole, for instance.<sup>38</sup> In sum, the rhetorical strategy that served to orient reader reactions similarly functioned as a methodological principle orienting the project of scientific hypnotism.

### **Like reading a novel: Pomeroy’s conversion**

In structuring their work around the principle of simple to complex, researchers also steer readers towards avoiding imaginative responses to hypnotism. But are there alternatives to this rhetorical compact, which nonetheless acknowledge hypnotism as scientifically valid? (It would, of course, also be possible to read hypnotism in such a way as to deny it legitimacy.) One such alternative is portrayed in Jules Claretie’s novel *Jean Mornas*, as one major character is persuaded to accept hypnotism as real and to practice it himself, despite his previous mistrust of the topic. Superficially, it appears a success for hypnotism researchers’ rhetoric that this character, Dr Pomeroy, changes his views; however, the detail of this process, which is presented at some length in the novel, raises a more intriguing possibility. For Pomeroy brings his imagination and “personality” to his reading of hypnotic science, without losing medico-scientific authority in his use of hypnotism.

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<sup>32</sup> Ballet, p. 14.

<sup>33</sup> Ballet, pp. 22, 19–20.

<sup>34</sup> Of course, this only works if the second term in the analogy does not appear strange or astonishing, as Ballet acknowledges, p. 23.

<sup>35</sup> Ballet, p. 16. Binet and Féré often employ this means of dedramatising phenomena. Binet and Féré, *Magnétisme animal*, pp. 174, 231, 241.

<sup>36</sup> Ballet, p. 30.

<sup>37</sup> Ballet, p. 20–21, 23.

<sup>38</sup> E.g. Binet and Féré, *Magnétisme animal*, pp. 126–127. Some researchers were concerned that this analogy distorted research into hypnotism. Jacqueline Carroy, “L’effet Delboeuf, ou les jeux et les mots de l’hypnotisme”, *Corpus*, 32 (1997), 89–117: p. 100.

“[L]e bon docteur Pomeroy” (p. 120) turns to re-consider hypnotism after he is consulted by a police doctor regarding a former patient, young and delicate Lucie Lorin. Lucie has been arrested under suspicion of having murdered an old man and stolen money from his room. Under questioning, she admits to killing the man, but not to the theft, while her strange comportment seems to destine her for the mental asylum. The reader is aware that Lucie is innocent, since the first half of the novel relates how Jean Mornas, an avaricious young physician, uses hypnotism and suggestion to mould her into an instrument of crime. At stake for Pomeroy, aided by the police doctor, is to clear Lucie and to find the true criminal. This they eventually achieve when Pomeroy hypnotises Lucie before the *juge d’instruction* and forces her to reveal details of her hypnotiser.

The episode which interests me follows Pomeroy’s visit, accompanied by the police doctor, to the imprisoned Lucie. An apparently idle remark by the police doctor, wondering who suggested the crime to Lucie, evokes hypnotic suggestion in Pomeroy’s mind, prompting him to rush home to review what he knows of the science. Pomeroy is by no means an ideal reader of scientific texts. On the contrary, as a “[v]ieil idéaliste endurci” (p. 131) who is not afraid to declare his belief in God even in a professional setting (p. 139), he is presented as out of step with the march of progress (away from the supernatural or mystical) promised by positivist methods (also p. 133).<sup>39</sup> Nonetheless, the weight accorded to him in the narrative lends significant authority to his perspective. With regard to the story as a whole, Pomeroy is the only major character whose actions are rewarded: entrusted with Lucie’s care after she is released, he finally has the daughter he has always wanted, whereas Lucie ends up almost mad, and Jean dead. More importantly, when it comes to hypnotism, Pomeroy’s hypothesis is proven correct—Lucie did act under the influence of suggestion—and it is he who plays the critical role in establishing the proof, not his more “illustrious” (p. 138) colleague. With Pomeroy’s actions successful, his opinions appear justified, all the more so because his views are not challenged in the story, except by Jean Mornas, who is at least partly impelled by ulterior (criminal) motives. Claretie’s novel intimates that a reader can be right about hypnotism, without conforming to Janet’s model of the cultivated public. Is there, then, another valid way to relate to hypnotic science?

There are two processes in play in Pomeroy’s response, both informed by his personality, in the broad sense. On the one hand, Pomeroy’s motivations for returning to the science are personal, for they arise from his affection for Lucie. His reading is oriented by this personal motive, such that he re-examines the contents of his library “*au point de vue spécial de cette suggestion dont Lucie Lorin était peut-être la victime*” (p. 132).<sup>40</sup> In all Pomeroy’s reflections, as he seeks “la vérité à travers les livres” (p. 132), it is no careful stepping from simple to complex phenomena which convinces him to reconsider the reality of hypnotic suggestion. What drives him, rather, is concern for “le salut d’une créature

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<sup>39</sup> On the links under the Third Republic between mental medicine, positive progress, and anti-clericalism, see Jan Goldstein, *Console and Classify: The French Psychiatric Profession in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), chaps 6, 9.

<sup>40</sup> Emphasis added.

aimée” (p. 133). Yet even as he appears mostly convinced, and contemplates forcing Lucie to re-enact her actions under hypnotism, Pomeroy reacts against the suddenness of his conversion: “Ce matin on m’eût bien étonné si l’on m’avait dit que je songerais, moi, moi, à me livrer à ces pratiques auxquelles je ne croyais pas... auxquelles je ne crois pas!” (p. 136). His new reading has been no more successful than the old in inculcating in Pomeroy a scientific way of looking at hypnotism; he still resists the philosophical implications of suggestion’s power over *la conscience*. However, reading through the filter of “[s]a volonté de trouver Lucie innocente” (p. 133), Pomeroy hesitates, and, suddenly, overturns his disbelief: “c’était le renversement de toutes ses croyances, le balayage soudain de toutes ses résistances scientifiques” (p. 136). What has prompted this precipitous reversal? Perhaps, in part, it is that he is not “entêté”, as the narration suggests, but the crux of Pomeroy’s transformation appears in the following sentence: “Et puis il s’agissait du sort même de Lucie!” (p. 136). Although Pomeroy now accepts that hypnotism and hypnotic suggestion are real, the same outcome desired by scientific authors, he has not adopted their desired orientation to phenomena in this process. Instead, Pomeroy’s convictions are entirely bound up with his personal investment in Lucie’s fate.

On the other hand, throughout this process, Pomeroy’s imagination is strongly affected by what he reads and the possibilities it evokes. In this, he relates to scientific texts in precisely the way which simple-to-complex methods are designed to inhibit. Even before he begins reading, Pomeroy’s fear for Lucie perturbs his state of mind, the very thought of the word “suggéré” “fais[ant] bouillir le cerveau du bon Pomeroy comme le raisin dans la cuve” (p. 132). He is far, therefore, from approaching his texts with “[le] sang-froid et [...] la fermeté d’esprit” that Paul Janet considered necessary for science.<sup>41</sup> Rather, as he reads, devouring the texts feverishly, he cries “Oh!” and “Ah!” in astonishment at the power of suggestion, and shivers at the more astonishing and incredible implications of cerebral duality (p. 134). After several hours of this intense imaginative activity, Pomeroy experiences such “un état de fièvre” that he must to go outside and walk very quickly along the boulevards “pour chasser la congestion qui venait” (p. 137). In this “fever”, he almost hallucinates; hypnotism and Lucie’s situation appear not real and rational, but somehow fantastic, almost supernatural, and sinister:

Il lui semblait que tout ce qui se passait, tout ce qui était imprimé dans ces revues, ces livres, ces brochures, [...] apparten[ait] à il ne savait quel monde fantastique et que tout cela n’existait pas. C’était comme un univers macabre, peuplé de visions falotes, fiévreuses, et dont les grimaces raillaient méchamment son optimisme. (p. 137)<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Janet, p. 102.

<sup>42</sup> Pomeroy experiences a similar reaction in the midst of hypnotising Lucie. This second imaginative response points to a kind of doubling between the hypnotised subject (ruled by her imagination) and the hypnotic operator, such that the novel disturbs commonly held views of the power balance between the two. For an exploration of operator/subject doubling (though not in *Jean Mornas*), see Carroy, *Personnalités*.

Reading hypnotism texts has not led Pomeroy to link phenomena back to their normal or pathological analogues, but, on the contrary, to draw them into the imaginative domain, catapulting him into a vision of the science as a dark dream-world, where macabre spectres move in unreal patterns.<sup>43</sup>

### **Conclusion: Imaginative science**

What implications, then, does Pomeroy's mode of reading have for the project of scientific hypnotism? Both ways that Pomeroy involves his personality—interpreting the texts in light of Lucie's fate, and responding to them imaginatively—compromise, even shatter, the implicit rhetorical pact proposed by authors like Janet, Ballet, and Binet and Féré. And since hypnotism's credentials as science are bound up with this pact, what *Jean Mornas* depicts in Pomeroy's far-from-ideal conversion tends to disrupt that scientific project. In the first place, that Pomeroy swings so suddenly to acceptance of suggestion implies he is not so much persuaded of its reality, as *converted*; his views are transformed in a process that conjures up the mystic appeal of *magnétisme* to the credulous masses, or the equally mystic appeal of religious belief to those masses. Scientific argumentation has performed something other than the required work of careful persuasion. Now, it may simply be that Pomeroy's temperament predisposes him to react in this way; he does, after all, confess to a "foi du charbonnier" (p. 139). The novel, however, raises another possibility by showing Pomeroy's deep imaginative involvement with the subject-matter. Could it be that researchers' projections of ideal audience response are just that, projections? What if proceeding from the simple to the complex does not prevent astonishment, or if other rhetorical figures are equally or more significant? Under the borders drawn by Janet, this would imply that texts fail to constitute their subject-matter as properly scientific. Alternatively, is there something in hypnotism's very nature which privileges conversion over reasoned persuasion, such that no amount of careful argumentation will prevent an imaginative, affective reaction to it? Either way, the literary depiction of reading critiques scientific representations of hypnotism. It is interesting to note in this regard Jacqueline Carroy's argument for conversion as the "typical" way proponents arrived at confidence in *magnétisme* and hypnotism.<sup>44</sup> Whereas Carroy emphasises an initiate's first successful magnetisation (or hypnotisation) of a subject as the key moment in this process, *Jean Mornas* situates the decisive moment of Pomeroy's conversion during his reading, thereby drawing attention to the question of representation.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Bertrand Marquer reads this scene as part of his argument that *Jean Mornas* points to "le brouillage éthique" and "l'engrenage diabolique" inherent in using hypnotism. Marquer, pp. 352–356, quotations on p. 355.

<sup>44</sup> Carroy's "typical scenario" draws on remarks by magnetiser Alexandre Bertrand. Carroy, *Hypnose*, pp. 37–40. Régine Plas extends this argument to the processes in play in nineteenth-century *spiritisme*. Plas, pp. 28–29.

<sup>45</sup> This "reversal" of Pomeroy's views is, nonetheless, cemented by his first successful hypnotisation of Lucie, as indicated by his subsequent remarks to Jean Mornas (p. 171).

If *Jean Mornas* critiques the project of scientific hypnotism, it does not set up a radical *clivage* between fictional and scientific enquiry into hypnotism.<sup>46</sup> Rather, the novel points to the productive reciprocities that link scientific and literary knowledges. This emerges from the point that Pomeroy brings his own sentiments and his own imaginative interpretation to the texts, yet nevertheless emerges with enhanced authority from his involvement with hypnotism; it does not disqualify him from hypnotic success to have modified (or rejected) the model projected onto him by scientific authors. In this way, *Jean Mornas* intimates that it is valid for the imagination/personality to play a pronounced role in the reception of texts about hypnotism. Such a role perturbs the hierarchical processes—operator studying subject, reader accepting texts, science influencing literature—around which positivist science based its activities. For a literary text to voice this sort of challenge disturbs the presumed direction of authority, knowledge, and influence from scientific to literary discourses. It thereby raises the possibility of entanglement between scientific representation, particularly of hypnotic phenomena, and its literary counterpart, asserting a place for fictional studies like *Jean Mornas* in knowledge-making about hypnotism.<sup>47</sup>

Highly suggestive here is Pomeroy's remark, when recalling the conditions under which he first read about hypnotism, that, "je lis ça comme je lirais un roman" (p. 131). Given that Pomeroy also recalls paying only "moderate" attention to the new research, it may simply be that he characterises this reading as unserious and inattentive. More intriguing, however, is the other possibility: that authentication of hypnotic phenomena as real and scientific can proceed from, perhaps even require, the same imaginative work demanded of readers of a novel—while at the same time, such authentication also involves representational strategies (like proceeding from the simple to the complex) designed to circumvent imaginative audience responses. That it is a fictional text which prompts such reflections further points to the substantive place of the literary in constructing hypnotic science. Ultimately, hypnotism appears a recognised "scientific" activity implicating literary modes of knowing alongside those of positivism. As an activity with clear significance to the emerging human and psychological sciences, it reveals the fluid nature of scientific and literary categories at this critical turning point in both their histories.

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<sup>46</sup> It is on this point that my interpretation of hypnotism discourse differs from that offered by Carroy and Marquer, who place interactions between science and fiction under the sign of *clivage* and deformation. Carroy, *Personnalités*, esp. 55; Marquer. Andriopolous, in contrast, focuses on "reciprocal exchange". Andriopolous, p. 37.

<sup>47</sup> Claretie described the novel as "cette étude médico-légale" (p. vi).