

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Table Turning in the Early 1850s: The Séance Reports of Agénor de Gasparin

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Submitted October 1, 2017; Accepted July 30, 2018; Published September 30, 2018

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31275/2018.1252>
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Abstract—The phenomena of table turning flourished during the 1850s, providing for many people a context for belief in spirit action, and for the development of explanations such as unconscious muscular movements and the exteriorization of nervous forces from the sitters. This paper consists of the presentation of excerpts from the classic study of these phenomena by Agénor de Gasparin, who reported his work on the subject in his book *Des Tables Tournantes* (1854, 2 volumes, translated into English in 1857). De Gasparin believed that unconscious muscular action could not explain the movements of tables, and postulated the emission of a force from the sitters around the table to account for the movements. I present a long excerpt from de Gasparin's book in which he described the phenomena he obtained, preceded by a short review of interest in table phenomena in the 1850s, and followed by critiques showing the general skepticism about these phenomena during and after de Gasparin's lifetime.

Keywords: Agénor de Gasparin—table turning—table levitation—unconscious movements—nervous forces

Most people shrug their shoulders when we speak to them of Turning Tables, but they find it very simple to believe in the infallibility of the electric telegraph, and in the fact that physical and moral resemblances are transmitted from them to their children! The tables could not escape the common fate. Absurd to-day and evident to-morrow, they will have their theory, a theory, scientific and official, before which I respectfully bow in advance.

(Agénor de Gasparin 1857:Volume 1:99)

Writing in June 1853 in the *Illustrated London News*, an anonymous author mentioned a delusion threatening to become epidemic: “Thousands of people in Europe and America are turning tables, and obstinately refusing to believe that physical and mechanical means are in any way concerned in the process . . .” (Anonymous 1853a:481). Another commentator, physician and mesmerist John Elliotson (1791–1868), wrote: “Every body now sees the tables turn in his own dwelling, be it Buckingham Palace or a room which serves for kitchen and parlour and all . . .” (Elliotson 1853:191).

These were references to the appeal table turning held for many in some societies. The practice was, in fact, one of the most influential ones in the development of middle Nineteenth-Century belief in Spiritualism, and one that led a writer to state that the phenomenon “is as well-established as any fact in history or science” (Dibdin circa 1853:2).

The purpose of this paper is to reprint descriptions of table turning séances, those published by Agénor de Gasparin (1854; English translation and later abridged edition: de Gasparin 1857, 1889). My purpose is not to discuss their evidential value today, but to remind current students of this phenomenon, and of this important pioneering work and its importance in psychic history. While these séances have been discussed in various historical overview works (e.g., Evrard 2016:Chapter 2, Gutierrez & Maillard 2004:20–23, Inglis 1992:218–219, Podmore 1902:Volume 2:187–188), de Gasparin’s work does not seem to be well-known today, and has not been cited by more recent writers covering the topic of physical phenomena (e.g., Nicol 1977, Robinson 1981; for an exception see Gimeno 2015). Furthermore, these studies deserve to be better-known because they were very influential at the time they appeared. Although there are many reports and discussions of table phenomena throughout the late Nineteenth Century and later (Willin 2015), I focus my comments in most of this paper to material published in the 1850s. I extend the later discussion at the end of this paper to the reception of the work in later periods.

Table Turning in the 1850s

Table turning, also known as table moving, table talking, table tipping, dancing tables, and by various other names, was widely discussed during the Nineteenth Century to the point that in some places it became a fashionable social practice.¹ In addition to being entertaining, in some places the tables had fit into the prevailing political and religious contexts (Monroe 2008). The practice spread fast in the United States and in Europe for many reasons. Furthermore, it may be argued that the terrain for such acceptance had been prepared by highly publicized accounts of unusual physical phenomena. These included physical effects from the early literature of

American Spiritualism (Capron 1855, Capron & Barron 1850), and reports of poltergeist-type cases.²

Here is a fairly typical account of table turning:

I witnessed at the house of an American gentleman in Paris, a series of experiments . . . It may be proper to say that some fifty persons were present . . . In the first place, a light mahogany tea-table, with six legs, was placed on the waxed floor of the saloon, and the palms of the hands of four persons (two ladies and two gentlemen) were placed upon it . . . In three minutes, the table cracked, undulated, and then moved on being directed by the will of one of the party; it moved along the floor slowly or rapidly to the right or left, forward or backward, when thus directed it also rose on two legs, and resisted strong pressure before it would come down. While standing on two legs, it also turned round to the right and the left, as directed by the will.

(Anonymous no date:4)



Table Turning

But not all the effects were purely physical. Some presented veridical information, as in the following account:

The writer has seen a gentleman enter a room who was a perfect stranger to the medium, and ask if the table would spell his name. The alphabet was called over, the table tipping to the different letters which spelt his proper name. It then spelt, in the same manner the name of his deceased sister, the name of the disease with which she died, told many events in her life, &c.

(Wharton 1853)

According to a commentator, lawyer André Saturnin Morin (1807–1888), the behavior and tone of the communications produced by the tables varied greatly. Some were graceful and novel, others presented platitudes. They showed gaiety, mocking, and solemnity, and could be bad-tempered and pedantic. Similarly, they presented various political and religious views (Morin 1860:354–355). This, and other issues such as knowledge of literature, was in Morin's view a function of the composition of the circle. In

his view, communications were “in harmony with the ideas of the operators and it [the table] does not express knowledge other than that belonging to the latter” (p. 359; this, and other translations, are mine).

In some communications, such as those the famous writer Victor Hugo (1802–1885) and his family and friends had in Jersey in the early 1850s, the tables produced messages from communicators identifying themselves as Galileo, Molière, Mozart, and Shakespeare, among others. There were also more abstract communicators who called themselves The Drama, The Idea, and the Shadow of the Sepulcher (Simon 1923).

Many writers believed that spirit agency accounted for table phenomena, be it Satan (Godfrey 1853) or deceased spirits. In a defense of the latter, it was argued that spirits of the dead could charge the table with their perispirit, a vital principle allowing the spirit to cause intelligent movements of a table (and other objects) (Kardec 1862).

The previous idea is a variant of the concept of a force coming out of the body of mediums and sitters, kind of a nervous force that some believed was unrelated to spirits. This idea was proposed by many and was in a way an extension of the concept of animal magnetism (e.g., Charpignon 1848, Deleuze 1813).³ In fact, several writers discussing mesmerism included table turning in their writings (e.g., Baragnon 1853, Bersot 1864, Gathy 1853). One of them wrote that, in his opinion, table turning was “an undeniable magnetic phenomenon” (Baragnon 1853:358), while another stated that the magnetic agent affecting tables was the same principle that was used to magnetize people (Du Potet 1853:581).

Within the context of American Spiritualism, this force was discussed:

Tables are *moved* by a mysterious power, when a circle of interested spectators, with a medium, are seated around it . . . Stretch forth your arm, and grasp a heavy weight and raise it. How mighty that power put forth! Trace it back to its origin, and how wonderful! You *willed* to perform that act. Instantly in your brain, as in a Leyden jar, a nervous influence was generated, which, coursing along your nerves as on metallic wires, entered your muscles and there the mere shrinking of the fibres of a little muscle, the shortening of a small cord, drew up the large weight in your hand. How immeasurable, how unaccountable, such a power! And now think of that circle around the table. When they first sit calmly down, no movement is seen; none can be produced. But when for a few moments in intense mental action, a nervous energy has been generated in the frame of each, until, like a circle of Leyden jars, a whole battery is surcharged, and there are negatives as well as positives in the circle, who can wonder if currents of nervous influence should leap over from one to the other, and if tables, chairs, or anything else intervening, should be moved? We should not wonder at any phenomena which might show themselves under such circumstances.

We should only fear that, like inexperienced experimenters in electricity, we should thoughtlessly inflict upon ourselves an incurable injury . . . If I overcharge myself with it, if I strain the vital organs which generate it, I may weaken my own energies for life. (Oldfield 1852:37–38)

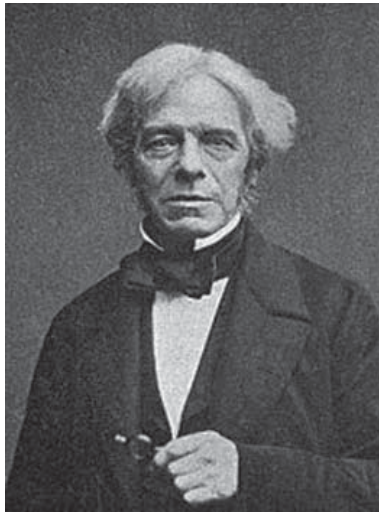
As we shall see, de Gasparin wrote along similar lines. In addition to Oldfield (the pseudonym of George W. Samson [1819–1896]), many others discussed similar concepts of force during the period in question. This was the case of Marc Thury (1822–1905) (Thury 1855) and others (Rogers 1853, Mahan 1855)⁴

A somewhat later example from France was Alphonse Chevillard, a professor at the *École des Beaux-Arts*. He argued that when the medium's magnetic fluid charged the table, this acted like a limb of the body, obeying the medium's will (Chevillard 1869:15). This idea was also discussed by de Gasparin.

In addition to articles in journals dedicated to psychic phenomena (e.g., Kardec 1859, Gathy 1853), there were discussions in the general press (e.g., de Gasparin 1853b), some of which were humorous. This was the case of cartoons and other humorous writings published in France (Doré & Paulin 1853; see also Monroe 2008:22–26). In France, a commentator wrote that the tables are not only trained to talk but they beat people who do not accept their statements (Kendall 1853).

Furthermore, some discussions of table turning were published in medical and science journals (e.g., Anonymous 1853b, Seguin 1853). In Spain a physician justified the inclusion of the topic in the *Boletín de Medicina, Cirugía y Farmacia* saying that turning tables may have important theoretical implications for physiology, pathology, and therapeutics (D 1853).

Perhaps the most famous publication by a scientist was that of English physicist Michael Faraday (1791–1867), who conducted tests that suggested that the movement of tables observed was caused by small unconscious movements (Faraday 1853a),⁵ an idea defended as well by several others (e.g., Babinet 1854, Carpenter 1853, Chevreul 1854, Orioli 1853).



Michael Faraday

One version of this idea, with some psychological concepts, was that of Scottish physician James Braid (1795–1860). He postulated that various phenomena could be produced provided there was a state of concentration opening the person to the influence of suggestion and dominant ideas. He wrote:

Thus, let the mind of the person be engrossed with the notion, that he is to be irresistibly drawn, repelled, or paralysed, or catalepted, and the ideodynamic or ideational condition of the muscles corresponding to this idea will take place, without any conscious volition of the subject to that effect. It is this very ideational or unconscious muscular action which is the cause of "Table-moving," . . . The experimenters perceive the fact that the table moves; but not being conscious of putting out any voluntary effort, they imagine that the table is drawing them, whilst all the while their own muscles are imparting the requisite impulse to the table, although they are unconscious that they are doing so. (Braid 1853:38)

Such ideas of unconscious movements were developed in opposition to explanations involving spirits and psychic forces of various kinds. But they were in turn criticized as well by others. For example, one writer considered ideas of unconscious movements to be "ingeniously ridiculous explanations" (Morin 1854:676). This was probably because proponents of unconscious movements ignored the various reports of movements of tables without physical contact (for some examples of phenomena, see Capron & Barron 1850:6, Capron 1855:349, Edmonds & Dexter 1853:426, Hare 1855:46).⁶

Interestingly, and one of the reasons to reprint de Gasparin's work in this article, is that most of the literature on table turning consists of discussions of the topic or informal accounts of séances. Not many individuals conducted what may be described as tests with some controls. In addition to the studies of Faraday and de Gasparin, there were other tests. These include the accounts of Thury (1855) and a few others (e.g., Delgras 1853, Orioli 1853, Terzaghi 1853).

Agénor de Gasparin and Table Turning

The son of Count Adrien de Gasparin (1783–1862), Minister of the Interior in France, statesman and author Count Agénor Étienne de Gasparin (1810–1871), was born in Orange, France, and later lived in Switzerland.⁷ His mother was Adèle de Daunant (1784–1834), and he married Valérie Boissier (1813–1894), a well-known writer on social and religious topics (Gilman, Peck, & Colby 1907:471).

An obituarist referred to him as a noble and chivalrous man who showed "grace that charmed his adversaries as well as his friends" (N

1871). He held various political appointments, such as a member of the Chamber of Deputies from Bastia (Corsica) in 1842. Furthermore, de Gasparin was interested and active in issues related to economics, history, politics, and religion.

A biographer presented de Gasparin as a man always willing to fight for causes, such as the abolition of slavery (Borel 1879). This was evident in his various books, among them *De l'Affranchissement des Esclaves et des Rapports avec la Politique Actuelle* (1839), *Intérêts Généraux du Protestantisme Français* (1843), *Les États-Unis en 1861* (1861), *L'Amérique Devant l'Europe* (1862), *La Liberté Morale* (1868), and *L'Égalité* (1869).

Although de Gasparin's book about table turning appeared in 1854, he had discussed the topic in print before that in some letters published in various reviews (de Gasparin 1853a, 1853b). In one of these he expressed his approach. He wrote:

I denounce . . . scientific intolerance that concludes without examination, that seeks to stifle under anathema and sarcasms a physical phenomenon that troubles it. (de Gasparin 1853b)

Entitled *Des Tables Tournantes: Du Surnaturel en Général et des Esprits* [On Turning Tables: The Supernatural in General and Spirits], de Gasparin's (1854) book consisted of two volumes, which were translated into English a few years later (de Gasparin 1857; there was also a later abridged French edition in 1889). The first volume has two parts. The first one, and the one relevant for this article, is about table turning. Here he presented accounts of séances which I reproduce here, and discussed various methodological and evidential considerations.



Agénor de Gasparin

The second part is about “The Supernatural in General.” The third part, entitled “Spirits,” is about the “supernatural apocrypha.” Chapters about miracles, sorcery, animal magnetism, and spirits appeared in the second volume. The discussion consists of attempts to explain the supernatural, including the action of spirits, in natural terms. This includes things such as fraud, testimony problems, nervous excitement producing physiological and psychological changes, and hallucinations. For some cases, the author considers fluid action. This was not confined to physical effects but also included mental ones, such as obtaining information from the thoughts of others.

De Gasparin was critical of all spiritual agency arguments to account for phenomena. Among others, he was critical of French writer about miracles and psychic phenomena Jules Eudes de Mirville (1802–1873), a well-known defender of satanic agency (e.g., de Mirville 1854).⁸

“My deductions,” wrote de Gasparin, “have been of a nature to destroy all superstitious fables, modern as well as ancient, and, at the same time, to strengthen historical, scientific, and religious certainty” (de Gasparin 1857:Volume 2:469). In this sense de Gasparin’s work was similar to that of previous critics who attempted to reduce all unusual phenomena to deception, physiological and psychological explanations (e.g., Dendy 1841, Newnham 1830).⁹ But his emphasis on the action of a nervous fluid outside the physical body separated him from this line of thought and placed him in line with mesmeric ideas and the ideas of other nervous force critics of Spiritualism (e.g., Rogers 1853).

The analyses of previous traditions led French physician Auguste Debay (1802–1890) to remark that the book, unlike other works, was not an “indigestible compilation” of information (Debay 1854:370). He believed de Gasparin’s analyses were “a monument of reason, against the disorders of the imagination” (p. 370), kind of an antidote against superstition.

Writing about this nervous force, de Gasparin referred to it as a hypothetical one consistent with the facts. He stated that although he did not accept all the mesmeric ideas of a universal fluid, he thought that an “hemato–nervous fluid” could explain much in mesmerism and Spiritualism (de Gasparin 1857:331). He wrote further:

If my brain, acting like a Leyden jar, emits and directs a fluid current along my nerves, if this fluid is also emitted by the other members of the chain, it is evident that our combined action will soon form a sort of electric battery, the influence of which will be felt conformably to our thought; we shall communicate a rotation, we shall produce, even at a distance, energetic elevations.
(de Gasparin 1857:Volume 1:430–431)

The fluid was seen as an agent connected to the will of the sitters.¹⁰ As mentioned above, this principle was seen by him as related to body movements. He wrote that

the table identifies itself in some sort with us, becomes one of our members, and executes the motions conceived in our minds, in the same way that our arm does. (de Gasparin 1857:Volume 1:98)

De Gasparin also discussed in the first part of his book the objections to new phenomena. He noticed how new facts were rejected by many without examination. According to a reviewer of his work, he examined in detail many objections, and refuted them “with a clarity, a reason, a dialectic superiority which makes this part of his work a masterpiece of an essay; he victoriously crushes his opponents” (Morin 1854:676).

The section about séances reprinted here includes reports on 12 meetings held by de Gasparin and his collaborators at Valleyres, Switzerland, from September 20 to December 2, 1853. These do not represent all the séances conducted, since there were many held before and after the ones that appear below. But those extra séances were not reported. Not much is said about the sitters, but de Gasparin (1857:Volume 1:178) stated:

The persons engaged in these experiments were two scientific botanists, MM. Muret and Reuter, M. Tachet, the clergyman, M. Boissier, several domestics, three children from eleven to fifteen years of age, my wife, and myself.

The number of sitters varied between 8 and 12 sitters, but was generally 10. Thury (1855) also attended some séances.

The Count’s wife, Valérie Boissier, wrote in a letter to her father dated March 31, 1853: “The day before yesterday, we placed Agénor on the table, and under this weight of nearly a quintal, she rose on two legs and turned” (Barbey-Boissier 1902:243). In a later letter she stated that the table danced the waltz, as well as the gavotte and the minuet.

Excerpt about Table Turning

Presented here are the séance accounts from the English-language translation of de Gasparin’s 1857 work.

Sitting of September 20th

I leave out . . . everything that has not been sufficiently studied, everything that ulterior experiments have rendered in the slightest degree doubtful, everything that is merely a repetition of the facts already stated. This deduction performed, there still remain some results to notice.

And first, to speak of the table that has served us most frequently. The top is of ash, about 32 inches in diameter, and rests upon a heavy pillar from which project three feet, 22 inches distant from each other. Another table, the top of which is a little larger, the pillar less heavy, has also been employed. In fact, we have sometimes put in motion tables with four feet, both round and square, all of respectable dimensions. The number of experimenters forming the chain at a time is ordinarily ten; it has varied between the two extremes of eight and a dozen. The rotation usually manifests itself after five or ten minutes. In certain cases—very rare—we have waited nearly half an hour.

On the 20th of September, then, we desired to put to the proof the pretended faculty of divination ascribed to the tables. For this purpose, we submitted to the one around which we were sitting, and which operated to admiration, the most elementary question assuredly, that can be proposed to a spirit. We placed three nuts in the pocket of one of the experimenters; the table, interrogated as to their number, promptly struck nine blows! The same person, after having succeeded in obtaining several numbers indicated by his will—among which was a cypher—entered upon a contest with his *vis-à-vis* [facing person]. This constituted a particularly interesting experiment, which we termed *the balance of forces*. It cannot be said in this case that the motion was communicated by the *vis-à-vis* acting as a lever, for the interests were opposed. The *vis-à-vis* struggle against each other, the one wills a large number, the other a small number. Were the impulsion of a mechanical nature, the champion of the small number would determine to cease furnishing the balance from the moment his number had been struck, he would even lean in such a manner as to obtain judgment! But, no! The most powerful operator carries it; if he is charged with the high number, the high number is attained. One thing must be remarked, however, that from the moment his adversary's limit is passed, and the wills have ceased to coincide, the blows become less strong; the foot which previously obeyed both thoughts is no longer sustained by more than one.

We then changed the conditions of the struggle. A coalition was formed to the advantage of the small numbers; they were confined to two, afterwards to three members of the chain, and it was only then that the knight of the large numbers was vanquished, and the foot in front of him (a foot over which he was deprived of all mechanical action), ceased to follow the impulsion of his will, in spite of the experimenters opposite, who alone would have been sufficient to put and maintain it in motion, had that motion been produced by muscular force.

It is to be taken for granted that different combinations were tried and produced results not less decisive. We made a variation in the feet, sending the blows from one foot to another. We inverted the *roles*—the most powerful experimenter was in his turn charged with the small numbers; and he regularly succeeded in stopping his adversaries, no matter which foot was designated.

It was at last proposed to try the counterproof of one of our most conclusive experiments; that which consists in making the table turn and knock while supporting the weight of a man weighing 174 pounds. The man was placed upon it; the twelve experimenters, taking care not to form the chain, applied their fingers to the table and exerted themselves to obtain by the tension of their muscles what they had obtained some days previous without tension or effort. The energy with which they worked was astonishing! and yet—nothing! The rotation took place in a feeble degree, scarcely turning half round; the poor table all the time trembling and creaking as though it were about to split into pieces. To raise it from the ground was out of the question. Not one of the feet would give the least sign of docility. It is useless to add, that, for the strongest possible reason, we gave up all hopes of obtaining the complete revolution, which our simplest commands had effected but a short time before.

September 22nd Sitting

We have not established any new fact worthy of mention here; but among the old facts reproduced, I think it useful to describe the motions of the table while bearing the same person who was placed on it three days before. The inutility of muscular action had then been seen; we were this time about to see the power of the fluid, or whatever physical agent it may be, of which the operators dispose when they form the chain and when command with a firm will.

We were indeed very glad of the opportunity to make this comparison.

In the habit of criticizing our experiments, and not willing to accept as a certainty what we had observed only once or twice, we were anxious to begin by placing ourselves in the identical positions. The success has this time been complete. The table has turned; it has struck several blows; it has stood entirely upright, so as to throw off the man.

I desire, in passing, to be permitted to record a general remark. We had already held numerous meetings; our experimenters, among whom were several young, delicate women, had acted with uncommon perseverance and energy; their physical fatigue, at the termination of each sitting, was naturally very great; it might consequently have been expected that nervous accidents, more or less grave, would have occurred. If the explanations based upon the involuntary acts accomplished in a state of extraordinary excitement, had rested upon any real foundation, we should have had ecstasies, almost possessions, and in all cases nervous attacks.¹¹ Now, it did not happen, during the five months we thus met, animated and noisy as our experiments frequently were, that one of us, for a single moment, experienced the slightest discomfort.

Still further, when one is in a state of nervous tension, he becomes absolutely incapable of acting on the table. It must be taken cheerfully,

briskly, with confidence and authority, but without passion. This is so true, that the moment my interest in it becomes too great, I cease to make it obey me; and in all our sittings, I invariably found that whenever, by reason of the public discussion in which I was engaged, I allowed myself to desire success too ardently, and became impatient at our numerous delays, I lost my influence over the table.

September 26th Sitting

Our début was discouraging enough, and led us to think that the entire results of the day would be limited to the two following observations, which are in fact well worth their price, and which our practice has not ceased to confirm: First, there are some days when we can do nothing, however numerous, strong, or animated we may be. This proves that the motions of the table are not obtained by fraud, nor by involuntary pressure of the muscles. Second, there are persons (among others, those who are unhealthy or fatigued) whose presence in the chain, is not merely useless, but injurious; themselves deprived of fluid, they seem also to hinder its transmission and circulation; their good will, their faith in the table, go for nothing; so long as they are there, the rotations are feeble, the elevations are languid; the commands are not executed, the foot placed in front of them is particularly affected by paralysis; induce them to retire, and immediately, life reappears and everything succeeds as by enchantment.

It was not, indeed, until after we had taken this course that the movements became as free and energetic as usual. We had already met with several checks, and especially when the purpose was to dislodge a man placed on the table. In vain did we issue our commands impressively and with spirit; no rotation, no perpendicular motion! We were forced to substitute a child for the man, and then alone could we succeed in producing action.

We were thus almost disheartened, when the purification of which I just now spoke was tried, and immediately, what a metamorphosis! Nothing seemed difficult to us; those even, who, like me, ordinarily succeeded only tolerably well, now caused the numbers indicated by our thoughts to be correctly rapped out, with the occasional exception of one rap too many, resulting from the tardy issue of the mental order which should have arrested the blows.

Finding that everything progressed according to our wishes, and determined to attempt the impossible, we undertook an experiment which marks our entrance into quite a new phase, and puts our previous experience under the guarantee of an irrefutable demonstration. We were about to forsake probabilities for evidence. We were about to make the table move *without touching it*.

Our first success was brought about as follows:

Choosing a moment when the table was impelled by an energetic and truly spirited rotation, we all raised our hands at a given signal; then, maintaining them united by means of the little finger, and continuing to form the chain at about an inch above the table, we pursued our course, and, to our great surprise, the table also pursued its course, making thus three or four turns!

We could scarcely believe in such a success; the witnesses of the experiment could not refrain from clapping their hands. And not less remarkable than the rotation without contact, was the manner in which it was effected. Once or twice, the table had ceased to follow us, because the accidents resulting from our change of place had separated our fingers from their regular position above the margin; once or twice the table came to life again, if I may dare thus to express myself, as soon as the revolving chain returned to its proper relative position. We all had a perception that each hand had carried, by a sort of attraction, the portion of the table underneath it.

September 29th Sitting

We were naturally impatient to submit the rotation without contact to a new proof. In the confusion incidental to a first success, we had not thought either to vary or renew this decisive experiment. Since then, we had reflected on it; we had felt that it was important to do the thing over again more carefully, and in the presence of new witnesses; that it was especially important to produce the motion in place of continuing it, and to produce it under the form of elevations, rather than confine ourselves to the rotations.

Such was the programme for the meeting of the 29th of September. Never was a programme more implicitly followed.

First of all, we resumed our experiments of the 26th. The table being in full rotation, the hands were separated and continued to turn above it, in forming the chain. The table followed, making sometimes one or two revolutions, sometimes half, or nearly a quarter of a revolution. The success, more or less prolonged, was certain. We verified it several times.

But it might be said that the table being already started, preserved a certain impetus which it mechanically obeyed, while we imagined it to obey our fluid power. The objection is absurd, and we would have challenged anyone to obtain merely a quarter of a revolution without forming the chain, no matter how great the velocity of the rotation; we would especially have challenged them to succeed in renewing the race, after it had been momentarily suspended. Nevertheless, it is well in such matters to anticipate objections, however absurd, as long as they are plausible: and this might appear so to the eyes of the careless observer. It was necessary, therefore, to produce rotation from a condition of complete repose.

We did so. The table being motionless as well as ourselves, the chain of

hands separated from it and began to turn slowly a short distance above its margin. After a moment, the table made a slight motion, and each person endeavoring by his will to incite the portion underneath his fingers, we drew the body of the table after us. The same circumstances then occurred as in the preceding case; it is a difficult matter to maintain the chain in the air without breaking it, without removing it from the edge of the table, without moving too quickly and thus interrupting the established relation, that the rotation is often arrested after one, or even less than one, revolution. Nevertheless, it is sometimes prolonged during three or four.

We expected to encounter still more obstacles, when it came to the point of raising it without contact. But we were agreeably disappointed—the fact was entirely otherwise, and we accounted for it in the following manner: There being in this instance no circular movement demanded from us, we found it much easier to retain the normal position of the hands above the table. The chain then being formed a short distance above the top of the table, we ordered one of the feet to rise, and it instantly obeyed.

We were in raptures. This beautiful experiment was renewed many times. We ordered the table, likewise without touching it, to stand erect, and to resist the witnesses who should attempt to bring it to the ground. We ordered it to turn over, and it fell with the feet in the air, although our fingers at no time touched it, but always remained at the same distance from it.

These were the essential results of this meeting. They are such that I hesitate to mention by their side other incidents of secondary importance.

I will merely add in passing that the sitting had commenced very discouragingly; that not only had it been necessary to send away some new operators, but several of the old ones were deprived of their usual enthusiasm. The table obeyed badly; blows were struck feebly, and as if with regret the numbers demanded were not expressed. Therefore, we took a new approach, from which good results flowed without number: We persevered and persevered cheerfully; we sung, we made the table dance, we banished from our minds all new experiments, insisting upon easy and amusing operations. After a certain time, the order of things was changed, the table overflowed with activity and willingness, its obedience almost anticipating our commands; we were prepared to approach matters of grave import.

October 6th Sitting

Notwithstanding the distraction created by too many spectators, and the lassitude caused by the stifling heat, we obtained in this long sitting the most essential confirmation of previous results.

Numbers indicated by the thought, the balance of forces, the elevation and resistance of the table, all were renewed. With regard to resistance in particular, we measured it. A weight of 80 lbs. did not suffice to lower the

table over which we made the chain, when it formed with the floor an angle of 35 degrees. The same table forming the same angle, fell heavily under the force of a weight of about 60 lbs. when not sustained by the influence of the chain. Note, moreover, that the hands placed opposite the weight of 80 lbs. had been raised, and did not again touch the table while it continued to resist. But I do not offer this as a conclusive experiment, because I know that there is a certain point of equilibrium, where a table the most destitute of fluids, would, of itself, resist a considerable pressure; notwithstanding, therefore, the difference above established, I discard the fact (very real to my eyes) that I have just related, for I am determined to adduce only such proofs as cannot be controverted.

We tried also to set in motion the table bearing the weight of a heavy man. The rotation was at that time impossible, but the feet struck several heavy blows.

Passing then to the counterproof, we remarked that when we act mechanically, precisely the contrary result takes place. By energetic muscular efforts, a slight rotatory movement is obtained, but it is impossible to raise the feet.

Finally, we resumed the great experiment, that of motion without contact.

It seemed at first that we were not in a condition to obtain good results. But soon, however, we succeeded in continuing the rotation and in producing it from a state of repose. Its most remarkable feature was, that our commands effected a small rotation, about one-quarter of a revolution, although we ourselves remained entirely motionless. The table thus gently glided from under our fingers.

The perpendicular motions without contact were produced many times and with energy. The table, influenced by our hands, which were extended a short distance above it, stood erect, resisted efforts to lower it, and turned itself over completely several times.

October 7th Sitting

Another long and fatiguing *réunion*. It was principally devoted to the trial of divers pieces of mechanism, which had no success: metal rings, frames of canvas or paper placed above the table, platforms turning on pivots, and the keyboard of a piano. Whether a view of the machines in question suppressed the emission of the fluid in the operators, whether the machines themselves suppressed its circulation in the table, whether, in fact, the natural conditions of the phenomenon were disturbed in another manner, it is certain that the results were either nothing or questionable.

Only one new experiment succeeded. A platform turning on a pivot supported a bucket. After filling the bucket with water, I and two others

plunged our hands into it. There we formed the chain, and began to turn round, avoiding touching the bucket; it was not long before the bucket also put itself in motion. The same thing was done several times in succession.¹²

As the objection might be offered that the impulsion given to the water was sufficient to impel a thing so easily moved as a bucket, we immediately proceeded to the counterproof. The water was agitated circularly, and with much more rapidity than when we formed a chain in it, but the bucket did not stir. It remains to know, doubtless, if one of us three did not touch the interior of the bucket in order to influence its motion. To this I reply, first, that the manner in which our hands were plunged into the bucket was evident proof that none of our fingers could, corporally, touch the bottom; second, that being careful to form the chain in the center, we might as easily have brought our fingers in contact with the walls of the room.

The doubt, however, not being absolutely inadmissible, I continue to rank this experiment among those of which I do not pretend to make any use. I desire to show myself difficult on the point of proofs.

That which is furnished by the expression of numbers indicated by the thought, is still one of the most substantial in my estimation.

What rendered it particularly convincing, in the sitting of which I speak, was that each of the ten operators, in turn, received the communication of a sum in writing, from some member of the audience, the others having their eyes closed. Now, of the ten, all, with one exception, obtained perfect obedience from the foot designated by the most suspicious witnesses. Whoever reflects on the above-mentioned experiment, will see for himself that it is entirely beyond the circle of things admissible, that fraud could not have any agency in producing the combination of motions here communicated. The objection needs to invent a prodigy far more surprising than ours.

Let us return to the demonstration *par excellence*—the elevation without contact. We began by accomplishing it three times. Then, as it was suggested that the presence of witnesses exercised a more certain influence over a small table than a large one, over five operators than ten, we caused a round table, made of spruce, to be brought in, and which the chain reduced by one-half, sufficed to put in rotation. Whereupon, the hands being raised, and all contact having ceased, the table elevated itself perpendicularly seven times at our command.

October 8th Sitting

This sitting was accomplished under such circumstances that I ought, perhaps, to pass over it in silence. The death of a valued friend had plunged us all into profound grief, and the moral depression resulting from it took away the fluid power even of those in whom it was usually most abundant.

Had it not been for the presence of a visitor, who had come a long distance to assist at our experiments, and who could not prolong his stay, we should certainly not have attempted to act at such a moment.

Among the new trials, I will mention one, the object of which was to raise entirely from the ground a table suspended from a pulley and balanced by a counterweight. Only one of its feet touched the ground, and the weight to overcome it was reduced to a trifle. The chain having been formed, the foot that touched the ground rose clear from it, and the table thus accomplished some vibrations without encountering the floor.

Had it been raised? I am far from affirming this to be the fact. It might have been simply impelled by the fluid, so as to change the mode of suspension, and put a space between the earth and its foot. It might also have been that the action of the hands on it was purely mechanical, that the cord which sustained it had been removed from the vertical, and that the friction had ceased because the table was forcibly drawn to the right or left, at the precise instant when its foot would have been impelled to strike the ground.

Consequently, this fact possesses no value either in favor of or against my theory. I will say as much of various analogous experiments, and also of the keyboard of the piano, over which we formed the chain anew without obtaining any rotation. The fluid is probably lost in this labyrinth of springs and platforms; moreover, the confidence and will are weakened.

To conclude with something less negative, I will state two more facts confirmatory of the preceding results.

Among the numbers called for, the malice of a witness had placed a cypher, and the foot designated for its expression at the left of the operator, beyond the sphere of his muscular action. Now, the command having been issued without producing any response, we were all extremely annoyed, convinced as we were that our powerlessness for the time being was so great as to prevent our obtaining even the simple elevation. I confidently assert that if the experimenters placed in front of the foot ever were tempted fraudulently to apply mechanical action, they were at that moment. Our *nerves* were intensely excited, and our impatience was at its height; nevertheless, no motion was observed, and to our great relief the figure was announced to be a cypher.

We at length twice effected the motion without contact. At such times, it was great movement, and we considered ourselves happy in having accomplished it.

October 27th Sitting

I relate things as they occurred, and have no wish to describe ourselves as more triumphant than we actually were. The reader must judge for himself. I confess that here again is a sitting by no means brilliant.

Moreover, this lack of uniformity is of interest. We were, for example, deprived of a great portion of our power, by the single fact of the indisposition of the person who has the most influence over the table. Now, let the enemies of the tables try to explain that! If it were the result of mechanical action, it and we would have succeeded as in the past, for our muscular force was not diminished.

If it were the result of fraud, we should also have succeeded equally well, for our *personnel* was the same, and nothing prevented the dishonest hands from performing their office. If it were the consequence of unconscious and involuntary motion, the success ought likewise to have been complete, for never had we been more ardent and energetic. But there we sat, real objects of pity, sometimes passing an entire quarter of an hour without obtaining a rap or a simple rotation.

Nevertheless, we finally arrived at some results, which were as follows:

Seeing that we did not succeed in effecting the perpendicular motion without contact, starting from a state of immobility, we contented ourselves with effecting it under the more modest form of a continuation of the motion; thus, we commanded the table to strike eight blows; at the third, the hands were raised, and the table, no longer touched by any one, pursued its task, at one time striking four, at another five, and at another eight.

Such was our principal exploit. I will cite another, the exact value of which I do not pretend to determine.

It had been objected to in our experiment in which the table was made to strike while it bore the weight of a man, that this man could lend himself to the motion, and in a measure provoke it. As earnest seekers after truth, we felt that there was plausibility in this objection, and consequently decided to give it our particular attention. The living being, endowed with intelligence, and consequently subject to suspicion, was replaced by inert matter; retorts, filled with sand, were put on the exact center of the table, which was then summoned to display its skill.

But the day was badly chosen. After having thus deposited, one upon the other, two retorts, weighing 130 lbs., we found that we were incapable of producing the elevations; we were obliged to content ourselves with continuing them; the retorts were therefore removed, the table set in motion, and the retorts replaced while the rotation was going on did not check it; they were jostled about with considerable force, and the sand was spilled out on all sides. The remainder of the sitting was devoted to new experiments on the pretended power of divination. Let me here recapitulate the results of those we had attempted in this and in other sittings.

When the table is requested to divine anything that is known to one of the members of the chain, it happens frequently enough, and very naturally, that it divines. The operation is the same as that of numbers indicated by the thought, neither more nor less.

When the table is asked to divine something which is known to one of the audience who takes no part in the chain, it sometimes happens that it divines. This occurs when the person in question is endowed with great fluid power, and can exercise it at a distance. We obtained no such demonstration; but others have succeeded, and their testimony appears too well-established to be called into question.

Up to the present time, we perceive not the slightest trace of divination; fluid action, either near or distant, accounts for those results which at first glance would appear to resemble it.

If tables divine, if they think, if they are under the control of spirits, we ought to obtain conclusive responses under circumstances where the facts are not known, either in or out of the chain. With the problem thus stated, its solution is not difficult.

Take a book; do not open it, but invite the table to read the first line of any page you may choose to designate—page 162 or page 354.¹³ The table will not recoil; it will strike blows and you will compose words. It is thus, at least, that we have always been treated. Be that as it may, one thing is certain: no spirit, either here or elsewhere, now or at a future time, however cunning or clever he may be, has read, or will read this simple line. I recommend this experiment to the partisans of the thinking tables and of mysterious evocations.

As for the examples of nuts, pieces of money contained in a purse, the hours, playing cards, the tables conform themselves exactly to the calculation of probabilities, they divine just as much as you and I do. As regards the question of small numbers of which we get a proximate idea, the circle of possible combinations is very little extended; the mind fixes upon a figure, which has tolerable chances of being correct; the proportion between the failure of the table and its success, is about the same as it would be, independent of all miraculous divination. We are here very far from those uniform results obtained by fluid action: numbers indicated by the thoughts, for example, which succeed ten or twenty times in succession, during moments of excitement. This cannot certainly explain itself by any casual conjunction of circumstances.

November 9th Sitting

We were in haste to take our revenge; and it far anticipated our hopes.

Before commencing my relation of this sitting, the most remarkable of all, I wish to observe that neither the thermometer nor the compass have furnished the slightest, interesting indication. I have thought it my duty to note this in passing, in order to show the reader that we have not neglected to employ instruments which, it would seem, might have put us on the road to a scientific explanation. In general, I pass over in silence the various trials that have remained under the conditions of the trials and have led to nothing positive.

Our first care was to renew the experiment of raising an inert weight. This time it was agreed that we should begin with a condition of absolute immobility. The question was to produce, not to continue the motion.

The center of the table having been determined with precision, a bucket, filled with sand and weighing 42 lbs., was placed upon it. The feet raised themselves easily as soon as the order was given.

A second bucket weighing 38 lbs. was then placed in the center of the first. They were both raised, less easily, but very distinctly.

A third and smaller bucket, weighing 26 lbs., was likewise added, and placed upon the other two. The elevation took place.

We had prepared, in addition to these, some enormous stones, weighing about 44 lbs. We put them on the third bucket. After considerable hesitation, the table raised each of its three feet successively and several times, with a force, a decision, and a spirit which surprised us. But its strength, already subjected to so many trials, was unequal to this. Staggering under the energetic impulse communicated to the entire mass of 150 lbs., it suddenly gave way, and its pillar was rent from top to bottom, to the great peril of the operators on the side toward which the load fell.

I do not pause to comment on such an experiment; it covers the whole ground. Our muscular force would not have sufficed to determine the motion that took place. An inert and noncomplying weight had replaced the person whose complicity was to be feared. In fine, the three feet having been raised, each in its turn, there could be no excuse for insinuating that we had put the weight more on one side than on the other.

Our poor table was wounded on the field of honor. Not being able to cure it immediately, we took a new one strongly resembling it, but which was in reality a little larger and a little lighter.

It remained to be seen if we should be obliged to wait until it had become charged with fluid. The occasion was favorable to the resolution of an important problem: Where does the fluid reside? In the operators or in the table? The solution was as prompt as decisive. Hardly had our hands, forming the chain, been placed on the table, than it turned with the most unexpected and comical rapidity. Evidently the fluid was in us, and we were free to apply it to any other table.

Our time had not been lost. In the condition in which we found ourselves, the motions without contact ought to have succeeded better than ever. We were not deceived in supposing it.

The rotations without contact were first obtained up to the number of five or six. The motion under our fingers, and under the will that attached itself to this or that particular point of the table, was slow at the beginning, gradually accelerating toward the end; several rotations lasted during three or four revolutions.

As to the elevations without contact, we discovered a new process

that rendered success easy. The chain, formed a short distance above the bed of the table, is so arranged as to pursue its course in the direction of the point where the motion is expected to take place. The hands nearest the foot called upon to rise are outside the bed of the table, which they gradually approach and pass over; while the hands opposite, and which at first had advanced toward the same foot, move off to one side, drawing it with them. It is during this progression of the chain, while all the wills are fixed on one particular spot in the wood, and the orders to rise are uttered with force, that the foot quits the earth and follows the hands to the point of overturning the table if not prevented from doing so.

This is not an isolated result. We reproduced it about thirty times. We caused it to be executed by each of the three feet successively, in order to deprive the critic of all pretext for cavil. We, moreover, watched the hands with scrupulous attention; and when it is observed that this watchfulness was continued during thirty operations, without surprising us with the slightest contact, it will be concluded, I think, that the reality of the phenomenon is henceforth established beyond all reasonable contestation; especially, if it be added that during the last elevations one of the spectators, kneeling down, applied his eye to the plane of the table in such a manner as to assure himself that it was the whole time free from touch or other improper influence.

One word more. It seemed to us that the table once made a movement forward instead of perpendicularly, and that it had thus followed on the floor the progress of the chain. This was a fact to verify.

Confirmed, as will be seen by our subsequent experiments, it manifests under a new form, the impulse to which the table yields. It is curious to see it submit to our action from a distance, and glide over the ground, when it has not force enough to rise. In fact, the same thing occurred when the hands rested on it. If the fluid power does not suffice for the elevation demanded, the table takes flight and makes its escape, sometimes in a straight line, sometimes by commencing an unlooked-for rotation—now in one direction, now in another. The impulse communicated, whether great or small, produces a proportionate effect.

November 24th Sitting

The peculiar characteristic of this sitting was the absence of the person who exercised the greatest authority over the table. By operating without him we were enabled to establish two things: the first, *an experimenter cannot with impunity be dispensed with*; the second, *that he can be dispensed with in case of extremity, and that success, although less brilliant at first, is not impossible*. I underline this last point, along with the frequent modifications caused by our *personnel*, for the benefit of the suspicious portion of the community, who, not knowing the moral value of the persons in question, would be

disposed to impute to their dexterity, results to which they, themselves, essentially contribute.

First of all, and when there was in none of us any fluid developed, we desired to ascertain if it could not be produced by the simple process of mechanical rotation. Applying, then, our hands to the table without forming the chain, we turned it rapidly for nearly a quarter of an hour. We then commanded the table to resume this motion of itself; we commanded it to raise one foot, and although our fingers rested on it the whole time, it was impossible for us to obtain the feeblest movement.

Still more significant was the fact that having formed the chain, but having determined its rotation by the mechanical action of our hands, we were thus able to continue it for a quarter of an hour, without inducing any fluid manifestation; in vain did we address various orders to the table—not one of them was obeyed. We exercised no power over it.

It is consequently clear that the phenomenon is of a mixed nature; that a given position and a circular course are not of themselves sufficient to call it into existence. There must still be another force—the will.

Our wills being finally brought into cooperation with the other powers, and the muscular pressure having ceded its place to the pressure of commands, we produced the fluid rotation after five or six minutes concentration of our thoughts. We clearly felt that we lacked some person of importance, and that we did not possess all our usual power; nevertheless we were determined to overcome the obstacle, even at the price of greater moral fatigue.

The great difficulty, motion without contact, was thus attacked frontally.

The rotations without contact were obtained three times. I should add that they were very incomplete, a quarter or a half revolution at most.

The success of the elevations without contact was more decisive; but it was bought by the expenditure of a very considerable amount of strength. After each elevation we were obliged to take a rest, and when we had reached the figure nine, yielding to lassitude, we were compelled to stop entirely. It is necessary to go through with such experiments in order to know how much attention and energy they exact, to what degree it is indispensable to will, to will absolutely that such a knot in the wood of the table follow the extended fingers that attract it from a distance.

Be that as it may, our attempt was crowned with success, and we felt at liberty to terminate the sitting by exercises less exhausting.

The idea then occurred to us to make the trial on a large table with four feet. It had often been claimed that the round tables with three feet alone lent themselves to our operations; it was time to furnish demonstrative proof to the contrary. We therefore selected a table whose diameter was 3½ feet, and the half of which, independent of the foot that supported it when drawn out, folded up at will.

Hardly had our fingers touched it, than it surrendered itself with a loud noise to a rotation, the vivacity of which surprised us, thus showing that tables with four feet diameter were not more rebellious than others. It furnished, besides, a new argument in favor of one of our preceding observations; the fluid is in the individuals, not in the tables. Indeed, the motion was produced almost immediately, and before the large table could be considered as charged.

It was afterwards requested to strike blows with its different feet. We began with those that supported the top and one of the leaves; they were three in number. They raised themselves, two by two, with such force as to break one of the casters in splinters . . . Now it would be difficult to accept the idea that the intensity of this motion could result from the fraudulent action of the fingers as a lever upon so heavy a piece of inert matter, or that they could impel it to such a height.

It remained to try the foot that was independent of the bed of the table. We thought it would obey as readily as the others; but no! In vain we lavished the most pressing invitations; it did not once consent to rise, whether in company with its neighbor on the right, or whether associated with its neighbor on the left. Supposing that this reluctance might be owing to the persons placed near it, we changed the position of the members of the chain. Useless efforts! All the combinations were doomed to be successively foiled.

We already anticipated an important consequence from this fact. But as it was afterwards proved incorrect, the rebel foot yielding us its perfect obedience on another occasion, I shall not confide our process of reasoning to the public; I will only beg them to remark two things: first, the care which we constantly took to confirm the accuracy of our proofs by repeated experiments; second, the impossibility of having recourse to explanations based on muscular action. This action could have been exercised as easily to raise the foot that was independent of the table, as to raise the feet confined to it; and yet, by the operation of some unknown cause, evidently foreign to all mechanical laws, the latter alone consented to move.

November 28th Sitting

We were all assembled; but two or three of the operators were slightly indisposed. In fact, from some cause or other, the meeting was only remarkable because of the almost total absence of fluid power. For a single moment we had a little half an hour of action, and then two hours and a half of inertia.

I always state the fact as it is; first, out of respect for truth, and also because it seems to me that nothing better refutes the vulgar objections than to show that the same individuals are incapable of constantly obtaining the

same results. Their muscles have not changed; their susceptibility is as great; their dexterity in fraud (we need not fear to speak thus) has not vanished, and yet, behold them unable to do that which but a short time previous they had done with extreme facility.

Our wounded victims had been cured; the old table reappeared with its pillar repaired; the large table with four feet was supplied with a new caster. It was with this that we commenced. Inauspicious beginning! That which the other day had whirled and leaped about with so much vigor, now scarcely stirred. And as for inducing either of the feet to strike a single blow, we were compelled to renounce the idea.

Then, passing to the table with three feet, we entered upon our phase of animation, which did not, however, long continue.

Nevertheless, we profited by it to the extent of effecting five elevations without contact. After which, our slender provision of fluid being exhausted, it was no longer possible to effect anything. The rotations without contact, as we had foreseen, were utterly out of the question.

Nothing could be more lamentable and curious at the same time, than to see us sitting round the various tables, passing from one to the other, resorting to all sorts of expedients, and yet unable to obtain more than a languid rotation, which soon ceased entirely.

December 2nd Sitting

I should have been sorry to close the relation of my experience with a report so little brilliant. Happily, the result of our last meeting gives me the right to leave quite a different impression on the mind of the reader.

We were all in excellent spirits; to which the fine weather perhaps contributed, and this is not the first time I have remarked the coincidence. One thing is certain, that the same persons who, on the 27th of November, had obtained but a half-hour of success, passing the rest of the sitting in vainly soliciting for something better than poor, imperfect rotations, or languid blows, ruled the table today with an authority, a promptness, and if I may be allowed the expression, with an elasticity that left nothing to be desired.

The large table, with four feet, had been put in motion, and this time the facility with which the foot at liberty raised its portion of the top, proved that we were right in not drawing from its preceding refusal a too positive conclusion.

We did not succeed in raising this table without contact, or in folding up its movable leaf. None of us were surprised at this, for the weight was very considerable; our attempts, however, were not entirely without fruit, for they brought about a result of which we had not dreamed.

Each time that we endeavored to elevate without contact the portion

of the table farthest from me, I felt the foot, whose neighbor I was, gradually approach, and lean itself against my leg. Struck with this fact, which was repeated several times, I inferred from it that the table was sliding forward, in consequence of not having enough force to raise itself. We thus exercised a sensible action upon this large table without touching it in any way.

In order better to assure myself of the fact, I left the chain, and observed the progress of the feet of the table on the floor. It varied from less than an inch to several inches. Having afterwards tried to fold up without contact, the movable leaf of a card table, covered with cloth, we obtained the same result. The top did not yield to our influence, but the whole table was carried forward in the direction of the ordered motion. I should add that it was far from easy for it to slide along thus, for the floor of the hall in which we carried on our experiments is rough and uneven.

It is not less interesting to note here, the moment when the movement usually occurs. It is precisely the same as that in which the elevation without contact takes place whenever it is effected. When the portion of the chain which presses forward is about to pass beyond the edge of the table where it is brought back, and the portion of the chain that draws, is about to pass over it in making a retreat, then is manifested, either the ascensional, or in default of that, the sliding motion. Our fluid power is at its maximum, just at the point where our mechanical power is at its minimum, where the hands that push have ceased to be able to act (supposing fraud is intended), and where the hands that draw cannot yet act.

Returning to the table we generally employed, we tried to produce the rotations and elevations without contact. Our success was complete.

The rotations numbered three. We obtained the elevations, one after another, with the most satisfactory regularity. Setting aside as uncertain four movements which, although real, did not terminate in a complete elevation of the top (even leaving out of consideration two energetic overtures that were separately produced), we effected an uninterrupted series of fourteen elevations, and so emphatic, in general, that we were several times obliged to catch the table thus subdued, in order to prevent its becoming wrecked.

The reader is now as well-acquainted with the results of our sittings as though he had personally assisted at them. I have concealed nothing; I have related the best and the worst, the experiments that were failures, and the experiments crowned with success.

(de Gasparin 1854/1857:Volume 1:43–66)

[Added Observations in the Preface]

Some distinguished men of science to whom I communicated the results obtained, were unanimously of the opinion that the elevations without contact would possess the character of absolutely certain proof, provided

we could succeed in verifying them by any material process. They said:

Strew some flour over the table the instant the hands are separated from it; in these conditions, cause it to effect one or several elevations; then, if the layer of flour does not bear the impress of fingers, or give any other evidence of having been touched, there can no longer be a word offered in objection to your theory.

Well! we have recently and on several occasion, performed this very experiment. I briefly present a few of the details.

Our first attempts were most unsuccessful. Making use of a coarse sieve, which it was necessary to move about over the entire surface of the table, we met with a double inconvenience; first, of suspending for too long a time, and consequently, annulling the action of the operators; second, our layer of flour was much too thick. The enthusiasm of will was weakened, the fluid action impeded, the ardor of the table diminished; in short, nothing progressed. The effect was even so injurious that the table not only refused elevations and rotations without contact, it almost refused ordinary elevations and rotations.

After a while, a brilliant idea suggested itself to one of the operators. We possessed a pair of bellows, such as are used in sprinkling sulphur over vines infested with *oidium*. Substituting flour for sulphur, we renewed the operation.

We were in the most favorable conditions; the weather was dry and warm, the table bounded beneath our fingers, and, indeed, before the order to raise the hands was given, the majority of them had spontaneously ceased to touch the table. The command being issued, the entire chain separated from the table, which was, at the same instant, covered by the bellows with a light cloud of flour. Not a second had been lost, the elevation without contact had already taken place, and, in order to leave no doubt in our minds, it was repeated three or four times in succession.

That done, the table was scrupulously examined: It bore not the faintest token of having been touched or even grazed.

The fear of inadvertently touching it was indeed so great among the operators as to cause them to raise their hands much higher from the table than in the previous sittings, without, however, producing any diminution of the fluid action. I should also mention that we resorted to none of the maneuvers, none of the passes of which we had made use at other times. Remaining in its place above the table to be raised, the chain had preserved its form; it had scarcely effected a slight motion in the direction of that which it provoked at a distance.

I add, in conclusion, that we did not rest contented with one experiment. We produced several elevations in succession, at the close of which, a minute

examination of the flour that covered every portion of the surface of the table, convinced us that it had been absolutely untouched.¹⁴

(de Gasparin 1854/1857:Volume 1:xix–xxi)

Perspective: Critiques and Influence

De Gasparin wrote about the table movements: “Thus the fact is established. Multiple experiments, various irrefutable proofs, mutually supporting each other, give to fluid action an entire certainty” (de Gasparin 1857:Volume 1:81). But he also discussed various other things about the séances, such as the use of instruments, psychological conditions, occasional unproductive séances, and the implausibility of the issue of fraud and unconscious movements.

But how did others react to this work? Here I limit myself to table turning, and not to examinations of other phenomena in different time periods nor to views of de Gasparin’s use of the concept of the fluid.¹⁵

There is no question that de Gasparin’s tests can be considered “classic” studies. Castellan (1960:53–55) opened her chapter about “The Classic Period in Europe” in her brief history of psychical research with this work,¹⁶ which traditionally has been included in older and more recent overviews of these topics (e.g., Podmore 1902:Volume 2:187–188, Inglis 1992:218–219).

In addition, de Gasparin’s work frequently has been mentioned in encyclopedia entries (e.g., Felton 1898:673, Sidgwick 1890:407), and has been summarized in various textbook overviews (e.g., Holms 1927:276–277, Richet 1922:521), as well as in other psychical research books (e.g., de Rochas 1896:317–320, Flammarion 1907:Chapter 6).

Thury (1855) was certainly positive about the work in question. In his view, the experiments at Valleyres established that the will “can act at a distance on inert bodies by means different than muscular action” (p. 11). Students of Spiritism and magnetism were also positive about the séances. One stated that the main aspect of the work was “the evidential constataction, indelible, REAL FACTS . . .” (Auguez 1857:101). Another was also positive, stating he found the work imposing. But he regretted it had little impact on scientists. In summary, “no attention was paid to him [de Gasparin]” (Morin 1860:378).

In fact, various writers in later years discussed explanations of table turning and unconscious movements without mention of de Gasparin’s work (e.g., Hahn & Thomas 1883:286–287, Maira & Benavente 1887:204–209, Maury 1861:419–424). Two further important examples were French physicist Jacques Babinet (1794–1872) and English physiologist William B. Carpenter (1813–1885), whose writings (or reprints) on the topic published after the appearance of *Des Tables Tournantes* in 1854 did not

mention de Gasparin (Babinet 1856:9–56, 231–254, Carpenter 1877:97–100, 1882:292–311).

G. Mabru (1858) stated that

[if de Gasparin had used] the Faraday apparatus to control his experiments, he would have avoided the trouble of writing two volumes on things which do not exist. He would have seen that the movement of the tables was not due to any supernatural cause, that it comes simply from the impulse of the fingers of the operators. (Mabru 1858:386)

No mention was made of effects inconsistent with the unconscious movement explanation.

A further example was Joseph Grasset (1849–1918) discussing his model of polygons, consisting of subconscious centers of superior and inferior mental functioning capable of managing cognitive, motor, and other functions, including unconscious movements related to table turning (Grasset 1908:105–111). While Grasset mentioned de Gasparin in relation to the importance of having confidence in the phenomena (p. 110), he did not mention de Gasparin's evidence regarding actual movement of tables, as opposed to coordinated polygonal activity of the sitters pushing the table around.

Skepticism was the tone of the reviewer in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*. The writer suggested that testimony of sitters would not be convincing to establish facts that science now considers to be in the realm

of the supernatural. "The monks who imprisoned Galileo," he wrote, "only evinced the bigotry of common sense. With their light they were entitled to consider him an impostor; and with ours, we laugh at turning tables" (Anonymous 1857b:772).

Such also was the case of French physician and popularizer of science Louis Figuier (1819–1894), who discussed de Gasparin's studies in the fourth volume of his classic examination of



Louis Figuier

psychic-related topics *Histoire du Merveilleux dans des Temps Modernes* (Figuier 1860). He started out assuming that the movement of tables without physical contact was not possible and that the phenomena was never produced beyond his small group of sitters. Then he speculated that a too-zealous sitter in the circle produced such phenomena fraudulently. While not doubting the honesty of de Gasparin, he wrote:

All that can be said is that he saw the movement without contact occur, without being able to recognize the secret engine. But in order to admit the scientific reality of this fact, it should have been reproduced several times, and at will, in later experiments, at the hands of other experimenters. Now this is what has never happened . . . (Figuier 1860:306)¹⁷

The issue of fraud, something discussed by de Gasparin, was also mentioned by others. Although A. Petit d'Ormoy (1856) wrote that de Gasparin's descriptions of the test seemed to exclude some sources of error, it was not impossible to conceive that some sitters played pranks on the others. Another skeptical response came from Adrien Delondre (1857). He started by raising suspicions about the sitters, saying that in situations like those described by de Gasparin there could be a strong desire to cheat. Then he argued that the sitters could deceive themselves via unconscious muscular movements, to which he added suggestion and dissociation as complicating factors. While Delondre did not deal with movements without contact, he decided that de Gasparin's rejection of unconscious movements obtained when no one was touching the table led "the astonished to reasonably ask whether such a statement is serious" (p. 21).

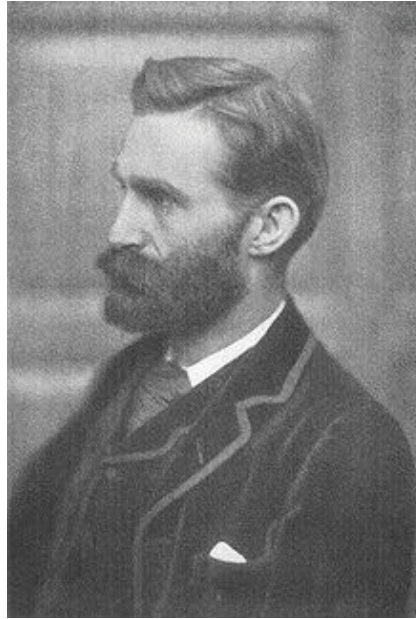
Finally, Delondre suggested that sitters may have hallucinated the movements of the table without contact. He preferred "the marvels of hallucination" to "the prodigies of the volitive fluid" (Delondre 1857:277).

The possibility of fraud was also raised by Frank Podmore (1856–1910), a well-known critic of mediumship and other psychic phenomena. In his book *Studies in Psychical Research*, Podmore stated that de Gasparin did not control well for potential fraud, as some sitters could have used their knees to move the table (Podmore 1897:47). In a later work, Podmore wrote:

It will be seen that the results depend for their acceptance on the sufficiency of the precautions taken to exclude action of the hands, feet, knees, and other parts of the person below the table. These precautions appear to me, so far as can be gathered from the scanty records, to have been wholly insufficient. The records of the experiments are extremely brief, and hardly any detailed accounts of individual experiments are given; the

names of the assistants nowhere appear; but we learn that the persons present numbered on some occasions as many as twelve, that this number included several servants and children, and that, generally speaking, the children were found to be more successful operators than their elders.¹⁸ Neither de Gasparin nor Thury appear to have sufficiently appreciated the possibilities of unconscious muscular action or of fraud; nor the extreme difficulty of detecting the kind of half-conscious fraud which later experience has shown that children and young persons are prone on such occasions to practise.¹⁹

(Podmore 1902:Volume 2:188)



Frank Podmore

Positive comments came from William Crookes (1832–1919), well-known for his studies of mediums, who mentioned de Gasparin’s work as the “only good series of test experiments” of physical phenomena he had found (Crookes 1874:5). Some later discussions suggest that the work was influential and held in high regard (e.g., de Rochas 1896:317–320, Flammarion 1907:Chapter 6). One writer considered the work to have been conducted under rigorous control, and that “the movement of heavy bodies without mechanical contact was recognized, proved, and demonstrated” (Aksakof 1895:10).

Morin (1854) reviewed *Des Tables Tournantes* in the *Journal du Magnétisme*, praising de Gasparin’s scientific spirit. He concluded saying: “Honor to the courageous athlete who defends with equal energy and talent the rights of reason and truth!” (p. 684).

Two writers confessed that their skepticism was diminished after reading about de Gasparin’s séances (Debay 1854:347, J 1855). In addition, an author who was critical of de Gasparin’s use of the concept of the fluid to explain things such as miracles and spiritualistic phenomena, characterized his research with the tables as “scrupulous” and as providing an “incontestable service” for truth (Gougenot de Mousseaux 1860:253).

Comments also came from American magician and student of the history of magic Henry Ridgely Evans (1861–1949). While he believed that most mediumship was accomplished via tricks, he included in his

debunking book *Hours with the Ghosts* the work of de Gasparin (together with the work of Crookes and others) as “a class of cases not ascribable to trickery” (Evans 1897:207).

Concluding Remarks

De Gasparin’s work was ignored by many, particularly by strong defenders of the unconscious movement explanation. While the reports could have been more detailed, something not common at the time, the critics ignored aspects of de Gasparin’s results inconsistent with unconscious movements and simple fraud explanations. This is a pattern that has been common in the evaluation of past work, such as that conducted by Crookes and others. While it may be argued that there are issues of interpretation in terms of the evidential strength of séance reports such as the ones discussed here, I would also argue that it is the duty of the critic to criticize keeping the argument close to the evidence, and at least taking into account aspects of the phenomena inconsistent with the critiques.

The assumption here, and again a common one in psychical research, is that there is nothing to consider, no testimony worth credence to support the existence of unconventional psychic action. Carpenter (1853) argued that the testimony of believers was worthless because they were possessed by their own ideas, a form of insanity. Similarly, later versions of this also declared positive testimony in favor of mediumistic phenomena as delusional and the effects of a weak mentality, as discussed by Brown (1983) and Le Maléfan (1999).

To account for the rejection of de Gasparin’s work, it has been stated that he “made the mistake of reopening the old controversy of animal magnetism which had been closed by a final verdict from the Academies” (Sudre 1962:33). Such association with the magnetic fluid must have certainly been an important factor in the perception of the work as tainted. But other contributing factors to this rejection must be considered. The tables, Monroe (2008:Chapter 1) has shown, were associated with entertainment and ridicule, not with scientific analysis. Similarly, they were also connected to the development of mediumship in Western societies, and to the spread of American Spiritualism, topics that were not appealing to many people.

Several commentators on de Gasparin’s work—Delondre, Figuier, and Podmore—raised the issue of fraud. While this has to be considered, it is important to recognize that there was no actual evidence for such an explanation. But as a consequence of this situation, the work was not generally accepted, something quite common in the history of physical mediumship and other areas of psychical research.

Although by modern standards, de Gasparin's accounts could have been more detailed, his work was an improvement in reporting in terms of providing support for nonconventional explanations. His contribution would have been more valuable, however, if he had reported more séances and had he worked with others in addition to Thury (1855). But I have the impression that de Gasparin, who was not a scientist, did not seem particularly interested in further careful work. In fact, his interests seemed to lay elsewhere. The séances in question take only a short section of his book. His concerns seemed mainly exegetic, as seen in his explanations of miracles and various other phenomena recorded through history in the greater part of the book. Furthermore, he was not only interested in séances. As seen in his biography (Borel 1879), most of his time after the publication of the tables book seems to have been taken by work and writings about social, religious, and political issues (e.g., de Gasparin 1861, 1868).

Regardless of evidential considerations, de Gasparin's work was certainly important in many ways. He contributed to rescuing table turning from the casual discussions in the press and popular books, and from the "learned" attempts to reduce all phenomena related to tables to delusion and unconscious muscular movements. It is less clear, however, how influential he was on later studies of table movements (e.g., Crawford 1916).

Regardless of his lack of further work, de Gasparin, it has been stated recently, upheld "reproducible experimentation" and showed in his work "an empiricist will denouncing prejudices and refusals of examination" (Evrard 2016:86). Because of this, he raised the bar in various ways in the study of table turning. This work presented important instances of tests attempting to counter objections empirically, and emphasizing phenomena inconsistent with the unconscious movement explanations of others. While a few conducted tests to see if they could support this hypothesis (e.g., Faraday 1853a), *many* others just accepted the argument without empirical examination (e.g., Chevreul 1854).

Even if de Gasparin's work was not successful in countering skepticism at the time, his effort inspired some like Thury (1855) and Crookes (1874) to conduct later work.²⁰ In addition, it is probable that it provided an impetus both for the development of then-current ideas of nervous forces, and more important the empirical approach typical of later developments in psychical research.²¹

Notes

¹ For discussions of the topic, see Crabtree (1993:Chapter 12), Figuier (1860:Volume 4:Chapters 14–17), González de Pablo (2006), Monroe

- (2008:Chapter 1), Nisbet (1973), Podmore (1902:Volume 2:Chapter 1), and Wantuil (circa 1957).
- ² Some examples were accounts of knockings and movement of objects in the Friederike Hauffe (1801–1829) case (the famous Seeress of Prevorst, Germany, Kerner 1845), the Angelique Cottin case (France, Tanchou 1846), the Phelps and family case (Stratford, Connecticut, Capron 1855:Chapter 7), and the Cideville case (France, Owen 1860:272–283). See also the summaries of cases presented by Owen (1860:Book 3) and Podmore (1902:Volume 1:Chapter 2). Furthermore, the idea of physical phenomena connected to human beings was supported by claims of the influence of animal magnetism on plants and on instruments (e.g., Picard 1845, Rutter 1851).
- ³ I have discussed this rich tradition of unorthodox concepts of force—fluids, human radiations, magnetism, nervous forces—in various papers (e.g., Alvarado 2006, 2009, 2016, Alvarado & Nahm 2011). For ideas about animal magnetism, see Gauld (1992).
- ⁴ Another writer argued that the tables were affected by a nervous fluid directed by the will. This was the same will and fluid “which puts your fingers in movement when you write, and your legs in action when you walk” (Debay 1854:355; see also Alvarado 1981). For some later examples of nervous and vital force speculations, see my papers listed in Note 3 (Alvarado).
- ⁵ Faraday’s work received much publicity, and was reprinted in publications appearing in many countries, such as Australia (Faraday 1853b), France (Faraday 1853c), and the United States (Faraday 1853d). See also Alvarado (2000).
- ⁶ In addition to veridical table communications mentioned above, there were other phenomena hardly explained by unconscious movements, among them difficulties in raising a table (Capron & Barron, 1850:69). One author mentioned that a young girl could raise a table but men and women could not (Tiffany 1851:200).
- ⁷ For biographical information, see Anonymous (1871:332–333), Borel (1879), N (1871), and Ripley and Dana (1868:104).
- ⁸ De Mirville (1855) answered many of the critiques throughout his book *Question des Esprits*. There were other critiques about de Gasparin’s remarks about clairvoyant and other phenomena (Almignana 1889), spirit agency (Hare 1857), and sanctuaries in Palestine (Mislin 1858:485–513). An anonymous reviewer of the English translation felt that de Gasparin’s comments were testy and lacking in calmness (Anonymous 1857a). Samson (1860:175–183) summarizes de Gasparin’s arguments to naturalize the supernatural (see also Anonymous 1857c).

⁹ It may be argued that de Gasparin's work is also part of Nineteenth-Century attempts to present overarching interpretations of many phenomena, as seen in the works of Crowe (1848), de Mirville (1854), and Gougenot de Mousseaux (1860).

¹⁰ De Gasparin may have been influenced by similar previous discussions of the will in relation to animal magnetism (e.g., Chastenet de Puysegur 1809:247, Deleuze 1813:Volume 1:90). Others writing about table turning also referred to the directing role of the will (e.g., Roubaud 1853:39). Rogers (1853:179) argued that the force responsible for phenomena

is not, as a general rule, controllable by the will; not at all directly, as it is the agent of the unconscious organs, and plays its part automatically, as the organs of the brain are affected. That it is not acted upon, therefore, directly by the will, but indirectly.

¹¹ Silas (1853:20, 22, 23, 25) presents some possible cases of nervous reactions related to table turning, but the cause of these reactions is ambiguous at best. Another writer stated that somnambules were the best table turners, followed by persons of nervous and sanguine temperaments (Ogier 1855:114). Physician Félix Roubaud (1820–1878) (Roubaud 1853) stated that women in morbid states made tables move more than other sitters (p. 42), and that in rare cases headaches were associated with table turning. But he observed no relationship with nervous or epileptic attacks (p. 92).

¹² Crookes (1874:30, 36) and Hare (1855:Plate 3, 48–49, 51) also used water in some tests.

¹³ Book tests became an important part of the study of mental mediumship years later (e.g., Thomas 1922).

¹⁴ Ogier (1855:120) wrote that he covered a table with cork sawdust and that it moved without disturbing the dust. For another mention of talc, see Hébert (de Garnay) (1854:84). In a letter sent to Abbot François Moigno (1804–1884), chief editor of the popular science magazine *Cosmos*, a professor Stroumbo from the University of Athens (perhaps D. S. Stroumbo) communicated some tests he conducted in which sitters placed their hands on a plate over a table. In a summary of the tests, Moigno (1853:94) wrote that when dust was placed on the plate the table did not move. It was assumed that the dust prevented the adherence of fingers. Stroumbo believed was necessary to produce table movements.

¹⁵ See Dingwall's (1921) discussion of de Gasparin's fluid in terms of W. G. Crawford's (1921) later work.

¹⁶ After mentioning de Gasparin, Castellan summarized aspects of the work of French researchers, among them Camille Flammarion (1842–1925),

Albert de Rochas (1837–1914), and Joseph Maxwell (1858–1938).

- ¹⁷ Years later Figuier (no date:579) repeated his accusation, once again, without presenting supporting evidence. Both the Countess de Gasparin (1889) and Marc Thury (1889) criticized Figuier, arguing he had omitted important information from the séance reports that did not support his assertions.
- ¹⁸ Sidgwick (1890:407) pointed out that de Gasparin did not present the testimony of his sitters.
- ¹⁹ Podmore wrote earlier on about naughty children and poltergeists (1896).
- ²⁰ For later work with tables, including physical effects without contact, see Willin (2015).
- ²¹ Guy Lyon Playfair, who refereed this paper, pointed out that Kenneth Batchelder’s “work was strongly influenced by de Gasparin’s book, of which he had a copy and knew well.” It is a matter of speculation how much he was also influenced by other early table-turning literature, as well as by later students of table phenomena such as Crawford (1916).

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