

Versailles ‘Time-Slip’

The term ‘timeslip’ refers to a rare type of apparitional experience in which the percipient appears to have been momentarily transported back in time, observing their environment as it might have been in an earlier period. It is also referred to as ‘retrocognition’. By far the best known such incident was reported by two English women who said that, while walking in the grounds of the Palace of Versailles one afternoon in 1901, they encountered people dressed in late eighteenth-century dress and observed landmarks from the time that no longer existed. Their published account of the experience aroused considerable controversy.

Moberly and Jourdain

The account of the incident, first published in 1911 as *An Adventure*, carried the names Elizabeth Morison and Frances Lamont.^[1] These were later revealed to be pseudonyms for, respectively, Charlotte Anne Elizabeth Moberly (1846–1937) and Eleanor Frances Jourdain (1863–1924). Both were respected and accomplished English academics. Moberly’s father had been headmaster of Winchester College and Bishop of Salisbury; in 1886, she became the first principal of St Hugh’s College, Oxford, whose students were young women. Jourdain’s father was the vicar of Ashbourne, Derbyshire, in England; hired as Moberly’s deputy, she eventually succeeded her as Principal in 1915 and held the position until her death in 1924.

Both women were held by associates to have special powers of perception.^[2] They reported other anomalous experiences, claiming to have together seen a ghostly French army after battle near the French fort of Malmaison in 1912;^[3] in 1913, Moberly claimed to have seen an apparition of the Roman emperor Constantine in the Louvre.^[4]

The Experiences

The pair spent visited Paris as tourists in the summer of 1901, as a means to become better acquainted and to help Moberly decide whether to hire Jourdain as her deputy. According to their account, on 10 August 1901 they visited the Palace of Versailles. Being somewhat disappointed with the building, they decided to walk in the grounds to the Petite Trianon, a chateau in the style of a small country house that had been built by Louis XV for the Marquise de Pompadour and was occupied by Queen Marie Antoinette after the accession of her husband Louis XVI.

Some three months after the experience the women wrote independent accounts.^[5] Both stated that they passed the Grand Trianon, a larger chateau, at which point their accounts diverge in some details. According to Moberly, they passed to the left of the Grand Trianon. Instead of following a broad green drive that she later learned would have led them straight to the Petit Trianon, they passed by it and went up a lane. Moberly then saw a woman shaking a white cloth out of the window of a building, and recalled being surprised that her companion (whose French was better than hers) did not take the opportunity to ask directions.

However, Jourdain reportedly did not see this woman. For her part, she described passing some farm buildings where agricultural implements were lying about, including an old-fashioned plough. After passing to the right of some other buildings the pair were faced with a choice of three paths, and it was now that Jourdain first felt they had lost their way. They chose the central path where both women saw two men – whom they took to be gardeners despite their dignified attire ('long greyish-green coats with small three-cornered hats'), as they also saw a wheelbarrow and a spade – and asked for directions to the Petite Trianon. The men told them to continue straight on. Jourdain felt their tone to be oddly 'casual and mechanical'.

Jourdain then noticed a woman and a girl of thirteen or fourteen standing by the doorway of a solidly-built cottage. They were unusually dressed, with kerchiefs tucked under their bodices. The woman seemed to be about to pass a jug to the girl.

The visitors then entered a wood, where both saw a circular garden kiosk with a man sitting near it. Jourdain now spoke of 'a feeling of depression and loneliness' as if she were walking in her sleep. Moberly too said she was struck by an 'extraordinary depression'.

The place was so shut in that we could not see beyond it. Everything suddenly looked unnatural, therefore unpleasant; even the trees behind the building seemed to have become flat and lifeless, like a wood worked in tapestry. There were no effects of light and shade, and no wind stirred the trees. It was all intensely still.

The cloaked man looked at Moberly, who found his dark and rough-skinned face to be 'most repulsive – its expression odious'. Jourdain described his skin as marked by small-pox and his expression 'very evil'.

A handsome young man suddenly appeared, running toward the ladies; he was wearing a cloak, a Spanish-style large-brimmed hat, and buckled shoes. '*Mesdames, il ne faut pas passer par là!*' (or '*par ici*' as Jourdain recalled it) he said animatedly, among many other words they could not understand because of his unfamiliar accent. Both were struck by the oddness of his smile, but they followed his direction.

Walking further through the woods they came to the Petit Trianon. A lady sat on its terrace holding a paper at arm's length as if she were sketching, then looked at the visitors. Moberly described her as pretty but not young, fair-haired, and wearing a white hat, a summer dress with a handkerchief-like arrangement on her shoulders overtop of her bodice, a pale green *fichu* and a full short skirt, 'old-fashioned and rather unusual'.

Jourdain did not see this lady at all, though she wrote, 'As we approached the terrace, I remember drawing my skirt away with a feeling as though someone were near and I had to make room, and then wondering why I did'.

Heading toward the house they were accosted by a young man (according to Moberly) or boy (according to Jourdain) coming out of what seemed to be an adjoining house. He offered to show them the way into the house, and this brought

them back almost to where they had started. In the front entrance hall, things returned to normal as they were kept waiting so as not to interrupt the arrival of a wedding party, and they entered a carriage to leave.

The two women did not at first talk to each other about what had happened. Then a week later, Moberly asked Jourdain whether she felt the Petit Trianon was haunted, and was answered with an immediate 'Yes'. They did not converse more until three months later when Moberly mentioned the sketching lady; both were struck by the fact that one of them had seen her clearly and the other not at all.

Jourdain realized that 10 August was the anniversary of the last day of the royal family's freedom.^[6] A French friend said that she had heard that annually, on a certain day in August, Marie Antoinette was still seen sitting outside the Petit Trianon, and the people around her would also be seen engaged in their usual activities.

Moberly wrote:

We wondered whether we had inadvertently entered within an act of the Queen's memory when alive, and whether this explained our curious sensation of being shut in and oppressed. What more likely, we thought, than that during those hours in the Hall of the Assembly, or in the Conciergerie, she had gone back in such vivid memory to other Augusts spent at Trianon that some impress of it was imparted to the place?

Further Experiences

Jourdain made a second visit to the Petit Trianon on 2 January 1902. All seemed normal until she crossed a bridge heading to a building called the Hameau de la Reine. 'It was as if I had crossed a line and was suddenly in a circle of influence', she wrote. A cart was being filled with sticks by two labourers in tunics and capes with hoods of bright terracotta red and deep blue respectively. They vanished when she looked away for an instant, and she could find no trace of their work. She saw a ghostly man, then felt – without seeing anyone – as if she were in a crowd of people passing her, saying words she could faintly hear.

She then heard music as if from a distant band. 'Both music and voices were diminished, as in a phonograph, unnaturally. The pitch of the band was lower than usual', she wrote. A very tall and muscular gardener answered her request for direction, warning that it was impossible to find one's own way in the park of Versailles unless one was so used to it that '*personne ne pourrait vous tromper*' (no one can fool you). Once she had returned to the Palace she checked whether a band had been scheduled to play that day, and was informed that none had. Jourdain afterwards wrote in musical notation about twelve bars of melody she remembered.

Both women, on returning for subsequent visits, found the grounds so much apparently changed from their first visit – forest areas opened up, the 'kiosk' and a bridge missing, distances apparently shorter, and changes to the house – that they could not find the paths they had taken.

In 1908, Jourdain made another of many visits to the Petit Trianon, of which all but the two in 1901 and in 1902 had been uneventful. While taking a shortcut past the guards' lodgings, she noticed two women sitting, arguing loudly. Their voices suddenly faded and, she wrote:

Suddenly and utterly unexpectedly I knew that some indefinable change had taken place. I felt as though I were being taken up into another condition of things ... I turned at once to look back, and saw the gates near which they were sitting melting away, and the background of trees again becoming visible through them, as on our original visit, but I noticed that the side pillars were standing steady (These pillars were old and probably had not been renewed since their original erection.) The whole scene – sky, trees and buildings – gave a little shiver, like the movement of a curtain or of scenery at a theatre. At the same time the old difficulty of walking on and of making any way reproduced itself, together with the feeling of depression described in 1901 and 1902.

She determinedly pressed ahead and things seemed to return to normal.

Percipients' Research

From books on the Revolution and Versailles, Moberly and Jourdain identified the the 'evil-looking' man they had encountered as the Comte de Vaudriuel, an ambitious courtier whom Marie Antoinette despised, and who was a mixed-race Creole with smallpox-marked skin. A certain portrait of the queen struck Moberly as looking precisely like the sketching lady.^[7]

Attending a play by the Comédie Française, which was descended from the royal private theatre and preserved its costume traditions, Jourdain noticed that the dress of some of the extras was almost identical to that worn by the garden officials she and Moberly had met on the first visit.

Between 1904 and 1910, Moberly and Jourdain gathered evidence they interpreted to mean that the following additional items, costumes and people they had seen dated from the time of the Revolution:

- the plough
- the gardeners' attire
- the cottage where a woman seemed to be handing a jug to a girl, and their possible identities
- the kiosk
- the gentlemen's dress of cloak and wide-brimmed hat
- the running man, his buckled shoes, and a possible identity
- a bridge the percipients crossed that no longer existed
- the attire of the sketching lady, whom they felt was Marie Antoinette
- an old-fashioned round-about device called the Jeu de Bague
- the second young man who directed them, coming through a door that currently was never opened, and a possible identity
- the two labourers gathering sticks using a cart, and their attire
- the thick wood in which Jourdain had felt as if she were in a crowd
- the style of the music Jourdain heard

- the dress of the tall, muscular gardener, and a possible identity
- several other items

Somewhat to their discredit, Moberly and Jourdain wrote up a proposed meditation sequence of Marie Antoinette in which the queen imagines seeing two female strangers near the Petit Trianon. In the words of one sceptic, this chapter moves their book ‘from the realm of reporting into that of fantasy fiction’.^[8]

Moberly and Jourdain stated no firm conclusions about the nature or cause of their experiences, but clearly implied that they entered apparitional scenes dating back to the Revolution, possibly due to impression left on the terrain.

Commentary and Criticism

First published in 1911 as *An Adventure*, the account created a public sensation and went through five editions including two in French over the next four decades, to be followed by even newer ones more recently.^[9] It provoked a strong sceptical reaction that continues to this day.

Psychical Researchers

A review in the *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* (unsigned but known to have been written by [Eleanor Sidgwick](#)),^[10] attributed the experience to memory error and insisted that ‘a good deal of evidence would be required before a phenomenon of this kind could be accepted as a fact.’^[11] Four decades later, [William Salter](#), a senior member of the [Society for Psychical Research](#) (SPR) was troubled that the pair had written no immediate account of the experiences and their two original accounts, written some months after the first event, were destroyed after having been copied for publication. He also noted that successive editions seemed to have been embellished and suspected that subsequent research had informed some of the putative memories. ‘The authors recorded, investigated, and published their experience in such a way as to leave the whole affair in an impenetrable fog of uncertainty’, he commented.^[12]

A similar critique was made after a careful analysis in 1988 by Michael Coleman, again for the SPR.^[13]

Later commentators thought that some supernormal event might have occurred, but not necessarily as interpreted by Moberly and Jourdain.

In papers published between 1953 and 1962, psychical researcher [GW Lambert](#) argued that Moberly and Jourdain, both in trance, did perceive in a paranormal way scenes from the past – but misplaced them in time in their interpretation. He laid out a detailed argument for the scenes originating around 1774 rather than 1789, and for some of the scenery having existed only in the imagination of a gardener of the time, Antoine Richard.^[14]

Psychical researcher GNM Tyrrell suggested that this might have been a case of telepathy rather than of retrocognition, the possible agent being one or more of people with knowledge of the events of 1789.^[15]

Other Critiques

Moberly and Jourdain were subjected to personal attacks, notably in a 1957 book by Lucille Iremonger, a Jamaican who knew of them by reputation, having attended St Hugh's (the Oxford women's college of which they both served as principal) as an undergraduate. Iremonger focused on a dispute that arose over Jourdain's attempt to dismiss a colleague she viewed as insubordinate, which would have led to her forced resignation had she not first died of a heart attack. Iremonger also intimated that both women had pursued lesbian relationships with their students, and further suggested that the pair had themselves been romantically entangled, which she argued would have made them susceptible to a shared delusion.^[16]

In his biography of the French poet *Robert de Montesquiou*, *Philippe Jullian pointed out that he lived near Versailles and liked to throw parties in the grounds, for which his friends dressed in period costumes and created 'tableaux vivants', which could have been mistaken for apparitions.*^[17]

These and other critiques are routinely referenced in general critiques by sceptics of paranormal claims.^[18]

In 2021, Mark Lamont published a comprehensively-researched and illustrated book-length investigation of the case.^[19] In it, he carefully compares the first and second versions of the two percipients' separately-written accounts. He then examines each vista, object, building and apparent person they perceived, in the context of other people's reported experiences at Versailles (pointing out that many people have reported similar sightings there) and elsewhere, invoking parapsychological studies of [apparitions](#), [hauntings](#), [apports](#), [crisis impressions](#) and retrocognition.

Lamont has little confidence in Jullian's theory regarding Montesquiou. He is inclined to agree with Lambert that the evidence seems to point to an earlier period, coinciding with King Louis XV's reign of the Trianon, and also that Antoine Richard plays a significant role regarding the origin, but argues that more solid evidence would be needed to reinforce the reliability of such a theory. Against Sidgwick, he argues that four points in the women's very first accounts may point to some type of paranormal intervention, and that although the case remains an enigma, the paranormal claims associated with the 1901 incident cannot be completely discredited.^[20]

Archival Collection

Moberly and Jourdain's relevant papers were given to Oxford University by Moberly in 1928 and are held in the Bodleian Library. They include the pair's accounts of their visits to Versailles, their collected maps, engravings and photos, the second and third editions of *An Adventure*, the original correspondence with the SPR for 1911–1913, their diaries for around 1901, and other items.^[21]

Video

A television film based on the events was produced in 1981 by Anglia Television, starring Dame Wendy Hiller and Hannah Gordon, written and produced by Ian Curteis and directed by John Bruce. It can be seen on Vimeo [here](#).^[22]

KM Wehrstein

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Endnotes

Footnotes

1. ^ Moberly & Jourdain, 10. All information in this and the following four sections is drawn from this source except where otherwise noted.
2. ^ Lamont (2021), 8.
3. ^ Lamont (2021), 9.
4. ^ Lamont (2021), 5-6.
5. ^ See Lamont (2021), 23-28, for both.
6. ^ This is not entirely accurate: they were imprisoned in the Tuileries palace starting 6 October 1789; on 10 August 1892 the palace was stormed, forcing the family to flee to the National Assembly, after which they were placed in prison. See Lamont (2021), 18.
7. ^ See this painting and commentary on it [here](#).
8. ^ Dunning (2012).
9. ^ Lamont (2021), 1, 61. See 61-65 for descriptions of revisions to the successive editions up to the present, and reactions of reviewers.
10. ^ Salter (1949–1950), 187.
11. ^ Society for Psychical Research (1911), 353. For a detailed summary of Sidgwick's analysis, see Lamont (2021), 55-61.
12. ^ Salter (1949–50), 186. See Lamont (2021), 38-44 for details of Moberly and Jourdain's correspondence with the initial SPR contact person, [Alice Johnson](#).
13. ^ Coleman (1988).
14. ^ Lambert (1953-1954, 1955-1956, 1961-1962).
15. ^ Tyrrell (1943), 69.
16. ^ Iremonger (1957).
17. ^ Jullian (1967), 140-41.
18. ^ E.g., Zusne & Warren (2014), 195, and Dunning (2012).
19. ^ Lamont (2021).
20. ^ Lamont personal communication (2022).
21. ^ Archives Hub (n.d.).
22. ^ IMDb (n.d.).