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Writing Lourdes

Faith, Miracles, and the Elaboration of an Official Story

Late nineteenth-century France is a place of renewed religious fervor, particularly around the miraculous healings at Lourdes, where sick masses converge in hope of being healed of a wide range of ailments. The same period is also known for its belief in medical and scientific progress, leading to the production of competing narratives about faith, and the question of its role in the healing process becomes a concern in both medical discourse and Catholic literature. Lourdes itself crystallizes these questions and texts written by doctors, clerics, historians, journalists, and novelists illustrate a wide range of opinions about miracles and participate in the production of an ever-growing authoritative list of texts about the events at Lourdes. An analysis of famed neurologist Charcot's *The Healing Faith* (1892) in conjunction with Lasserre's *Notre-Dame de Lourdes* (1868) and Père Cros's *Histoire de Notre-Dame de Lourdes* (1925) explores the role of faith in these narratives, along with the tensions and convergences between them.

1. Healing in Lourdes

France, in the second half of the nineteenth century is a place of renewed religious fervor, prompted, at least in part, by the multiplication of apparitions of the Virgin Mary, most famously in the small Pyrenean town of Lourdes. There, in 1858, a young and sickly shepherdess named Bernadette Soubirous reported seeing the Virgin Mary appear before her eyes. As a spring erupted at the site of the apparition and as her early followers reported being cured of a range of physical ailments, Lourdes's reputation soon went far beyond the Pyrenees and, by 1873, an annual national pilgrimage was established by the Assumptionists bringing in thousands of miracle-seekers by train and making Lourdes one of the most popular sites of Catholic pilgrimage in the world to date.

After sick pilgrims descended on the Sanctuary and many reported being cured, miraculous healings became a large part of Lourdes's mythology. In an effort to control their proliferation, Catholic officials supported the opening of the Lourdes Medical Bureau in 1884. Under the direction of a medical doctor, the Bureau was tasked with evaluating cases of healing and identifying and recording *true* miracles. Indeed, if sixty-nine cases have been officially approved by the Bureau to date, hundreds, if not thousands, of pilgrims have reported having been healed, yet the vast majority of cases does not pass the strenuous medical review necessary to determinate whether a cure is truly scientifically inexplicable. The creation of the Bureau betrays the tension between religious faith and medical discourse in a late nineteenth century most commonly remembered for its

scientific positivism. Indeed, the Lourdes events defied (and to some extent still continue to defy) what was known about the body, about health and sickness, and about the healing process. Indeed, Lourdes challenged natural laws and blurred the line between the possible (and believable) and the impossible (and unbelievable) and stood out at a time when medicine was triumphing with the developments of new fields such as bacteriology and immunology. At the time, the line between what was possible and impossible was also blurred by medicine and, for instance, it is difficult to overstate the epistemological revolution brought on by germ theory, which asserted that invisible organisms were the cause of many illnesses. Along the same lines, when Louis Pasteur successfully administered the first rabies vaccine in 1885, doctors and scientists were revered and faith-inspiring figures.

Appointed at the Salpêtrière hospital in 1862, neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot was one of the most successful doctors of the time and, while he is still remembered for his discoveries of neurological diseases – in French ALS is still known as “Maladie de Charcot” – the part of his research dedicated to hysteria has long been discarded. Yet, it is hysteria and its mysteries that occupied him most. At the time, the Salpêtrière was, in the words of Georges Didi-Huberman (2003, ix), “a kind of feminine inferno, a *citta dolorosa* confining four thousand incurable or mad women. It was a nightmare in the midst of Paris’s *Belle Époque*,” and it constituted a perfect lab for Charcot to investigate the ancient feminine disease, believed to originate in a wandering womb that had always eluded scientists.

Hysteria presented a number of challenges for the Salpêtrière physicians: in spite of its long-documented history, there were still conflicting theories about the nature of the disease. The uterine definition based on etymology continued to haunt hysteria, yet in the nineteenth century physicians were starting to confront the impasse hysteria had led them to. Its symptoms were many, often seemingly random, yet they could not be precisely located nor attributed to physiological lesions. In the face of these mysteries, hysteria was often perceived as a pseudo-disease, a condition dismissed because of its lack of physiological evidence and believed to be merely caused by suggestion. Hysteria’s resistance to scientific explanations mirrors the skepticism surrounding miracles as both manifestations epitomize the mysteries of bodily processes and struggle with the possibility that suggestion – or faith – could affect them.

Charcot’s own fascination with hysteria can be traced back to broader epistemological concerns he had addressed in his early research. Indeed, his 1857 doctoral thesis is evidence that, even before starting his work on hysteria, Charcot was already concerned with some of the issues that would interest him later in his career. Entitled *De L’Expectation en Médecine*, Charcot’s thesis essentially explores the healing process and the natural course taken by a disease. Charcot (1857, 9) quotes M. Littré’s definition of “expectation” from the *Répertoire Général* as follows:

On donne en médecine, dit M. Littré, le nom d’expectation à des règles de conduite qui consistent à abandonner le malade aux seules ressources de la nature,

sans intervenir dans le cours de l'affection par une médication active, et en se bornant, tout au plus, à éloigner les agents et les circonstances nuisibles.

M. Littré tells us that in the field of medicine, we name expectation the protocol that consists of letting the patient rely solely on natural resources, without interfering in the course of his ailment with any active medication and allowing, at most, to keep harmful agents and circumstances at bay. [My translation]

Essentially, “expectation” is a medical method that can be considered as a passive practice: the doctor refrains from actual intervention and observes the natural course of the disease. In that sense, “expectation” is opposed to “médecine agissante,” or active medicine. As it focuses on non-intervention and emphasizes observing the natural course of a given disease, this practice offers insights into bodily processes and is particularly concerned with understanding how the human body fluctuates between various states of health and sickness.

Along these lines, Charcot is particularly interested in understanding “la propriété en vertu de laquelle l'organisme, un moment ébranlé par la maladie, retourne spontanément à cet état d'équilibre qui constitue la santé” (ibid., 3).¹ A crucial question for the young Charcot was therefore to comprehend and articulate the mysteries of health and sickness, and how the body self-regulates, allowing itself to go from sickness back to health. Hence, his early inquiry into “expectation” demonstrates his concern with truly foundational questions about medicine: how can health be defined? How is sickness defined in comparison to health? Is health to be understood as a fragile balance, and sickness as a (temporary) disruption of that balance? Can the sick body return itself to health? If so, what are the bodily processes at play? What is then the role of the doctor and of medical treatment? Why do some diseases allow for the body's self-healing, while others require outside intervention or remain incurable? While these questions are very general and found the very practice of medicine, Charcot's choice to explore them early in his career points to his particular interest in the epistemology of medicine. Not only a practitioner of medicine, Charcot had demonstrated early his theoretical ambitions.

This detour by Charcot's early research on expectative medicine highlights the fact that healing and its mysteries are topics of inquiry and it helps explain the role played by Lourdes's miracles in this question. In fact, the questions inherent in the Lourdes Medical Bureau's endeavor to differentiate between normal healing processes and miracles are reminiscent of those asked by Charcot early in his career. Hence two types of narratives about healing and its mysteries emerge: one rooted in science and exploring the potential role played by suggestion, and one rooted in religion and centered around faith. Yet these two types of discourses are not parallel and there is both a tension and a cross-contamination between them. In this controversy between religion and science, the notions of faith and suggestion both overlap and echo each other.

Charcot's career began with his questioning the healing process and it also ends with the same concerns. Indeed, the healing process, and more particularly the role of suggestion and/or of faith, is at the center of Charcot's last published essay entitled *La Foi qui Guérit*² (1897), in which he proposes to investigate inexplicable cures at religious sanctuaries and scientifically debunk miracles. Though

Lourdes itself is not named in Charcot's text, there is little doubt that it is the popularity of the Sanctuary city that prompted the need for Charcot's opinion and that its miracles are Charcot's main target. In fact, Charcot alludes to a famous writer's recent trip to a Sanctuary city, probably referring to Emile Zola's well-documented 1891 journey to Lourdes, which would eventually lead to his 1894 novel *Lourdes*. Charcot and Zola's texts are two of the many examples of Lourdes literature, a term I coined in my doctoral dissertation (Garrigou-Kempton 2016) to describe the considerable literary production, including fictional and non-fictional texts, about the Sanctuary city that appeared in the second half of the nineteenth century.

La Foi qui Guérit reinforces Charcot's status by providing him an opportunity to share his expert opinion on a timely question. This recourse to expert opinion is a reflection of the concurrent social visibility of both miracles and hysteria and it illustrates the porosity of the border between the Salpêtrière and culture at large. Because of Charcot's popularity, his opinion on miracles essentially serves as an official scientific statement on an increasingly talked about, highly visible, and controversial phenomenon.

The National Pilgrimage to Lourdes was established in 1873, fifteen years after Bernadette's visions, and by the 1890s it was a well-known and well-run event. As contemporary cases of miraculous healings were getting widely reported and left the public curious about the healing process, Charcot's text is an attempt to reaffirm the preeminence of science. As a physician whose practice had been focused on the inner workings of the brain and the invisible processes by which it affects bodily symptoms, Charcot appeared uniquely qualified to discuss the question of miracles and to offer a medically valid explanation. In *La Foi qui Guérit*, he contends that there are common characteristics in hysteria and miracles and that they have to be considered side by side, and not simply because visionaries were often informally diagnosed as hysterics (cf. Charcot, 1897, 10). More importantly, his analyses of hysteria and miracles converged because they can both be understood as illustrations of the influence of the mind over the body and, invoking the role of suggestion, Charcot creates a kinship between miracles and hysteria. He concludes that miracles, like hysteria, are conditions of suggestion that prey on impressionable minds. Since both manifestations operate similarly, Charcot makes hysteria the secular version of miracles. Under Charcot's pen, miracles often proceed from the same medical conditions as hysteria. Therefore, Charcot's analysis recognizes the possibility of a psychological role in healing in cases of hysteria as well as miracles.

As I have previously argued, Charcot recognizes the power of faith, but he strips it of all religious value as he considers that it may indiscriminately be directed to God or to a medical doctor (cf. Garrigou-Kempton 2014, 64). In fact, Charcot (1897, 36) calls himself a thaumaturge and acknowledges that he has himself agreed to send patients to sanctuaries in the hopes that they would benefit from the faith-healing he was not himself able to prompt in them. Didi-Huberman (2003, 239) also suggests that Charcot was a miracle-maker of sorts:

Called to the side of a young nun in a convent who suffered from functional paralysis, Charcot came and said: “Rise and walk!” The patient obeyed – it was a miracle – and the Church was seized, in all senses of the word. The so-called miraculous healings at the Salpêtrière made the headlines of *Religious Week* as often as the healings at Lourdes. Occasionally witnesses would bare their heads and cross themselves in front of Charcot.

In this context, faith is no longer limited to the religious realm and Charcot’s text illustrates faith’s foray into medicine.

This convergence between miracles and medicine is also recognized by historian of psychiatry Henri F. Ellenberger. In his seminal history of the unconscious, Ellenberger (1970, 32) evokes traditional healing ceremonies and argues that:

[t]he only parallel to such ceremonial healings found in the Western world are the cures at holy shrines, many of which flourish in the Mediterranean area. One of the best-known shrines is in Lourdes, a place famous for the impressive beauty of the site, the Spring and the Grotto, the majesty of the ritual, the pageantry of the processions, and “the perpetual prayer going on day and night, on the part of vast numbers of people – so that the very air is charged and vibrant with it.”³

This thematic convergence of scientific and religious discourses raises a number of questions: what mechanisms are actually at play in cases where the mind is able to affect physical health? Is faith – in God or in a physician – the main agent in the healing process? In other words, what is the role of faith in the healing process? How do doctors write about the healing process, how do the faithful talk about being healed, and how is faith part of Lourdes narratives?

The abundance of Lourdes literature – understood broadly as inclusive of historical, medical, and fictionalized texts – points to the need to explore and perpetually revisit the Lourdes events through constantly renewed narratives. These narratives by doctors, clerics, historians, journalists, and novelists utter a wide range of opinions about Lourdes and its miracles and participate in the production of an ever-growing list of texts about the Lourdes apparitions and subsequent miracles built around the question of faith. I consider that, out of the multitude of texts dedicated to Lourdes, a canon emerges. This canon is composed of a group of texts accepted as “genuine” and trustworthy and I propose to analyze two early examples of Lourdes narratives that constitute its foundation. First, Henri Lasserre’s *Notre Dame de Lourdes* (1868) offers an insightful perspective on the role played by faith in Lourdes literature. Indeed, this unique text combines a historical account of the apparitions and healings at Lourdes with his own personal story since he is the only *miraculé*, the only person to have been miraculously cured, to publish his own account of his experience and, though his cure was not recognized by the Church, he still holds a unique place in the Lourdes canon. Second, Père Léonard-Joseph-Marie Cros’s *Histoire de Notre-Dame de Lourdes d’après les Documents et les Témoins* (1925) and *Notre-Dame de Lourdes: Récits et Mystères* (1901) offer an official narrative of the Lourdes events from the perspective of a Catholic priest. Comparing Cros’s and Lasserre’s texts allows us to go beyond the traditional and binary conception of science vs. religion to demonstrate that, first, there was an interconnection around the issue of faith and suggestion and that there was a multiplicity of voices within each side

of the debate. As such, Lasserre and Cros, both devoted Catholics, illustrate the often-overlooked dissension among the faithful themselves.

2. Lourdes Literature and the Repetition of an Ur-story

Lourdes literature is a hybrid genre at the intersection of historical accounts, hagiography, medical literature and, sometimes, fiction. In her sociological study of the Lourdes phenomenon, Laëticia Orgozelec-Guinchard (2014, 18) acknowledges the proliferation of formulaic texts about Lourdes:

Dans une perspective scientifique, on ne peut se contenter de reproduire les innombrables “Histoires de Lourdes” relatant les visions et les guérisons marquant le devenir du sanctuaire. En effet, charriant le même cortège de personnages archétypiques et de poncifs, ces récits semblent fonctionner comme les variations superficielles d’un véritable système mythique: “en 1858, dans un village des Pyrénées, la Vierge apparaît à une petite bergère, pauvre et ignorante...” Ainsi, il suffit de prononcer ce nom si célèbre de ‘Bernadette Soubirous’ pour voir s’associer une série de motifs devenus lieux communs: la Grotte, la Vierge, la source miraculeuse et les guérisons...

From a scientific perspective, it is not enough to simply reproduce the countless “stories of Lourdes” narrating the visions and the healings that make the history of the sanctuary. Indeed, as they carry along the same archetypical protagonists and clichés, these narratives appear to be functioning as the superficial variations of a veritable mythical system: “in 1858 in a small Pyrenees town, the Virgin appeared before the eyes of a young, uneducated and poor shepherdess...” Hence, it is enough to mention the very famous name of ‘Bernadette Soubirous’ to witness the association of a series of motifs that have now become popular beliefs: the Grotto, the Virgin, the miraculous spring, and the cures... [My translation]

Orgozelec-Guinchard concludes that there is “a history of Lourdes’s story” (ibid.) and it is the inception of this history that I propose to explore. I will show how, in the decades following the apparitions, a new, highly popular literary genre emerges. Lourdes literature encompasses a wide range of non-fictional texts – from historical accounts to healing narratives and opinion pieces – as well as novels – most famously Zola’s novel *Lourdes*. Examples of Lourdes literature share three crucial characteristics: they systematically survey the preceding literature about Lourdes and they offer a discussion and an opinion about miracles. Last but not least, they always include a retelling of Bernadette’s biography.

The retelling of Bernadette’s story – which actually includes both her biography and the story of the apparitions – is a mandatory component of all literature about Lourdes. In *Lourdes*, the novel he dedicated to the annual pilgrimage, Emile Zola did not depart from this rule: Bernadette’s story is introduced when Abbé Pierre, the skeptic priest who serves as a male protagonist, reads Lasserre’s version of her story to a wagon full of pilgrims. As the narrative soothes the sick pilgrims, Zola illustrates the power of storytelling. Thus, the constant inclusion of Bernadette’s story both signals the cultural importance of narratives in the Lourdes context and its irreducible instability and vulnerability.

Zola’s text is a perfect example of the fact that each new text refers back to previous ones in order to produce its own, ever-so-slightly different version. This constant re-telling of the story, through re-reading and re-writing of earlier

ones, illustrates the fact that each example of Lourdes literature attempts to return to the source of the story, while simultaneously acknowledging past accounts. This attempt at a fresh start directly echoes Bernadette's confessor's words as he had referred to her as a "tabula rasa" because of her innocence and lack of education (McEachern 2005, 12), which became a crucial part of her mystery: why was she – of all people – the chosen one? But it only provides an illusion of a *tabula rasa* since each account builds on the previous ones, providing an interconnected chain of evidence that endlessly re-works the same source material. In these attempts to always return to the early sources, Bernadette appears as both the only genuinely trustworthy actor of the events, and the one whose words are the most meaningful.

Yet, it is worth noting that even though her accounts are the foremost source for all subsequent texts about Lourdes, they are hard to come by and were not disseminated in an unmediated version. Though her testimonies made their way into publication, they were not written by Bernadette, but rather reported by other witnesses. Since the start of the apparitions Bernadette was subjected to police and clergy interrogations and, as such, her word was always mediated and framed or, in other words, more likely to be instrumentalized. There is no original written version of Bernadette's first accounts of the apparitions and her early oral reports constitute the basis of most later accounts. A collection of Bernadette's later correspondence along with her written answers to Père Cros's questions (Cros 1901, VIII) constitute, to my knowledge, her only written first-person contributions, though these texts only provide her version of events tangentially. As Lourdes historian Ruth Harris (2000, 190) notes, access to Bernadette became a crucial endeavor for her biographers:

This subsidiary struggle over access to Bernadette shows how she too became embroiled in these disputes, yet lacked the authority to control her own story, for interviewers noted enthusiastically when she confirmed their opinions, but claimed she was too tired, or too forgetful, to remember when she contradicted them. Although they all saw themselves as devotees of her simplicity, they also seemed to believe that this very quality made her inadequate for the task of historical reconstruction: she needed to be helped to express the truth by people wiser than herself.

Consequently, Bernadette herself is at the center of contradicting reactions since she is simultaneously venerated for her divine encounter and dismissed as possibly inaccurate. When attempts to uncover the truth of Bernadette's story fail, it appears that she is repeatedly treated as an unreliable narrator of her own story. Nevertheless, her oral accounts are the source of all subsequent narratives about Lourdes.

Bernadette's word is therefore both the foundation of the narratives about the Lourdes events and its most problematic component. Indeed, her original account has been obscured as it was buried under layers and layers of subsequent versions. As each version works to pierce the mystery, the narrative remains unsatisfying and redundant. Since no new details ever emerge, Lourdes literature appears as a sterile accumulation of narrative layers and Lourdes's literary tradition generates a paradox: while it presents Bernadette as the source of truth, it also contributes to occulting her word. The genre is thereby caught in a self-

justifying position: more texts are required to excavate the truth, yet each text adds to its opacity. Here, the quest for the story of Bernadette echoes Charcot's search for hysteria. During the disease's golden age, the proliferation of clinical research and case studies contributes to extensively documenting hysteria, but it also dissolves it into an overwhelmingly large corpus, thereby making it more difficult to access. Hence, hysteria research is caught in the same self-justifying position as Lourdes's origin story, and it essentially provides itself with the conditions of its own perpetuation.

At Lourdes, new narratives repeatedly emerge out of a constant act of re-interpretation of early available versions. Thus, embedded in the emerging genre of Lourdes literature is the discipline of Lourdes hermeneutics. While a great significance is bestowed on narratives, the idea that the solution to the mystery is contained in the story itself comes to the fore. Thus, the ur-story of Lourdes essentially follows the doctrine of transubstantiation as it itself becomes object of worship and acquires a quasi-divine quality.

It is important to keep in mind this dynamic and ever-changing origin story as we explore two founding texts of the Lourdes tradition. First, one by journalist and *miraculé* Henri Lasserre (1828-1900), author of the reference book on Lourdes – whom journalist Félix Lacaze (1894, 218) referred to as “le seul historien sérieux de Lourdes”⁴ – and then one by Père Cros, a Jesuit scholar, author of an exhaustive and well-respected (but rarely read) historical account. These two texts, along with the multiple accounts of the events left by Bernadette, form the foundation of all subsequent Lourdes literature. These founding texts were themselves the result of laborious and contentious writing processes. Indeed, soon after the 1858 apparitions and amidst ecclesiastic and political power struggle, another battle emerged over the recording of the true story of Lourdes. At stake in this effort was the institutional adoption of a consistent official version. Hence, as the Sanctuary city promptly evolved into a major pilgrimage site, it became crucial to isolate one official, orthodox version and to dismiss any heterodox attempts. In other words, the debates surrounding the adoption of a narrative betray different – and opposed – ideological stances about what Lourdes was, or ought to be. In this light, the way in which the story is told is of particularly crucial importance.

The Church's ambition to control the narrative is evident in the publication of the *Annales de Notre-Dame de Lourdes* and, starting in 1868, this periodical is dedicated to documenting the life of the Sanctuary. Tarbes's Bishop, Monseigneur Laurence, referenced by Cros (1901, 253), explains its purpose:

Nous avons cru, disait l'évêque de Tarbes, que les Annales étaient nécessaires, et pour l'édification des fidèles, et pour les intérêts matériels de l'Œuvre. Sans elles, un grand nombre de faits qui se passent à la grotte demeureraient inconnus, bien qu'ils soient de nature à intéresser les amis de Notre-Dame de Lourdes, et à augmenter la confiance de tous en la protection de la Vierge Immaculée.

We believed that the Annales were necessary to both the edification of the faithful and to the material interests of the Sanctuary said the bishop of Tarbes. Without them, a large number of events happening at the Grotto would remain unknown even though they are of interest to the friends of Notre-Dame de Lourdes and

can increase everyone's faith in the protection of the Immaculate Virgin. [my translation]

Hence, the creation of the *Annales* betrays a desire to exhaustively document everything that happens at the Grotto, as if exhaustivity could hold the key to the mystery. This approach soon yields massive results: by 1891, twenty-two volumes had already been published, thereby creating an overwhelming record of daily life in Lourdes. However, while they include letters from pilgrims and doctors, as well as progress reports on the Sanctuary being built and so on, the *Annales* do not thoroughly address the origin story of Lourdes. This task was left to a few writers who endeavored to produce Lourdes's reference story.

In a chapter entitled "The Battle of the Books," Harris (2000, 177) addresses the question of the story's painful genesis: "At the same time that the sanctuary was being constructed, another struggle focused on building the history of Lourdes, a battle over whose version of events constituted the 'truth' about the apparitions and their aftermath." This battle publicly opposed two widely different versions and approaches to the events. On the one hand, journalist Henri Lasserre, a recent *miraculé* who had made it his life's mission to write the story of Lourdes, produced an early and exhaustive account of the events. But, very much novel-like, his *Notre-Dame de Lourdes* takes some creative license with the historical facts in favor of a more compelling storytelling. As a reaction, Père Léonard Cros would put his meticulous scholarly skills to work in correcting Lasserre's errors in order to produce a drier, but more factual, rendering of the events. Thus, at stake in the two following texts was the integrity of the Shrine's reputation, and a conflict between religious orthodoxy and a more superstitious and fictionalized conception of the Lourdes events.

3. Henri Lasserre's *Notre-Dame de Lourdes* (1868)

Lasserre's *Notre-Dame de Lourdes* (1868) both founded Lourdes literature as a genre and preemptively silenced other versions, in effect making it almost impossible for dissenting versions to emerge. Indeed, according to Harris (2000, 180), Lasserre's account was the greatest bestseller of the nineteenth century: 142 French editions were published in the first seven years and it was translated into 80 languages by 1900.

This overwhelming success can be explained by the fact that Lasserre's text is a unique hybrid that combines a compelling history of the events, a detailed account of miracles and his own personal healing testimony. Lasserre's cure is a founding event that explains both his devotion to the cause of the Shrine and his deeply personal involvement with the story. As he explains in his preface, *Notre-Dame de Lourdes* is the result of a promise he made upon healing, and he justifies the delay in writing his history – he was healed in 1862 but his *Notre-Dame de Lourdes* was published in 1868 – by the exhaustive approach he took. He asserts:

Cette étude j'ai voulu la faire complète. Aussi ne me suis-je contenté ni des documents officiels, ni des lettres, ni des procès-verbaux, ni des attestations écrites. J'ai voulu, autant que possible, tout connaître, tout voir par moi-même, tout faire revivre à mes yeux par le souvenir et le récit de ceux qui avaient vu. J'ai fait de longs voyages à travers la France pour interroger tous ceux qui avaient figuré, soit comme personnages principaux, soit comme témoins, dans les événements que j'avais à raconter, pour contrôler leurs récits les uns par les autres et parvenir de la sorte à une entière et lumineuse vérité. (Lasserre 1872, vii)

I intended this study to be exhaustive. I was not satisfied with only official documents, letters, authenticated accounts, or written statements. I have wanted, as much as possible, to know everything, to see everything myself, to make everything alive again in my eyes through the recollection and the story of those who had seen. I have travelled extensively across France to question those who had a role – either as protagonists or as witnesses – in the events I had to narrate in order to cross reference their stories and thus reach a whole and luminous truth. [My translation]

Hence, by his own account Lasserre's history is to be the most trust-worthy and reliable account of Lourdes and his goal is to 'let the truth shine.' The disclosure of his investigative method lends his endeavor heightened legitimacy and credibility and prepares the reader to encounter the true story of Lourdes.

Uniquely legitimate, because of Lasserre's own experience of Lourdes's healing powers, his *Notre-Dame de Lourdes* is a compelling account that would play a key role in promoting the Shrine for decades. Kaufman (2005, 25) considers that:

Notre-Dame de Lourdes combined an idealized vision of Bernadette's peasant religiosity with a novel and compelling story of the power of the miraculous in the modern age. Lasserre's book was instrumental in promoting the shrine to a newly emerging mass audience of readers, though it did so in part by drawing on an image of Lourdes as an unchanging and exotic Pyrenean world.

But the enthusiasm for Lasserre's narrative is not unanimous and, in his travel diary, Zola's (1958, 53) personal opinion of Lasserre is particularly stinging: "un illuminé, un exalté, orateur, s'emballant, peu organisateur, je crois."⁵ This judgment suggests that Lasserre lacks method, or at least that his research might not be the most objective. In fact, Lasserre's skilled storytelling contradicts his truth-finding mission as he endeavors to make Lourdes's story as compelling as possible. His text reads more like a novel than a journalistic inquiry: his style tends to embellish reality in favor of a more dramatic effect. This is particularly evident when he tells the story of Bernadette's testimony at the police station. The dialogue between Bernadette and an officer goes as follows: "– J'ai ordre de vous prendre et de vous emmener. – Et où? – Chez le Commissaire de Police. Suivez-moi." (Lasserre 1872, 68)⁶ Ending a chapter on such a dramatic cliffhanger illustrates Lasserre's skills and helps explain the popular success of his *Notre-Dame de Lourdes*.

One chapter later, Lasserre offers this description of Commissaire Jacomet: "L'homme très intelligent qui allait interroger Bernadette se sentait assuré d'un facile triomphe, et il s'en était à l'avance hautement réjoui."⁷ (Ibid., 70) This particular example shows that Lasserre proceeds to narrate the events as an omniscient narrator. He does not adhere to strict facts, as a journalist would, but he rather relies on emotional descriptions to elicit readers' interest and adhesion. Thus, as one of the earliest – and most comprehensive – books about Lourdes,

Notre-Dame de Lourdes filled a void: as it got disseminated strikingly fast, its dramatic descriptions of the events also contaminated the public imagination about Lourdes and effectively preempted further dissonant accounts. Its anteriority thereby conferred it an aura of authority that would durably mark subsequent Lourdes literature. For instance, its imprint is particularly visible in Zola's novel *Lourdes*. It is in fact not coincidental that Lasserre's book is the one that Zola's protagonist Pierre reads to the pilgrims on the train. At the time it constituted the most famous text about Lourdes and also exemplified Zola's issues with the Shrine.

The text's readability contributed to its wide dissemination. Indeed, by tackling the events in a quasi-novelistic form, Lasserre captured both the interest and the imagination of his readers, having a lasting impact on the Lourdes literary tradition. Harris (2000, 185) explains Lasserre's success by his inclusion of already well-known biblical stories: "Lasserre was a rhetorical genius, and he gave his melodramatic oppositions greater resonances by mixing biblical imagery with contemporary events." Punctuated by biblical motifs, his text is distanced from any alleged journalistic objectivity. For instance, as he introduces Bernadette, he writes: "Telle devait être Ruth ou Noémi, allant glaner dans les champs de Booz."⁸ (Lasserre 1872, 23) This anecdotic reference to a biblical story echoes the contemporary and popular 1859 poem "Booz Endormi" by Victor Hugo and places *Notre-Dame de Lourdes* in the lineage of another famous fictionalized account of religious events.

Suzanne K. Kaufman (2005, 100) is also interested in Lasserre's rhetorical strategies:

Lasserre relied on transcripts of the 1858 Episcopal commission to tell the story of the first cures. While retaining the basic facts, he dramatized these first cures by telescoping the time frame of the event or by citing medical testimony to prove the supernatural nature of the healing process.

Factual accuracy is not Lasserre's main concern. Rather, he is interested in making the events more relatable:

Lasserre humanized his main characters, adding personal details to their accounts. At times, he inserted family members into the stories or situated his protagonists within a larger community. [...] In another healing account, Lasserre has a neighbor preparing a special funeral shroud for a dying child, while the boy's mother runs to the grotto frantically searching for a cure. (Ibid., 101)

By borrowing so much from novelistic storytelling, Lasserre loses credibility in the eyes of skeptics, yet by the same token, he also gains a tremendous following and popularity. His compelling stories make his text a particularly effective means of proselytizing and greatly contributed to making a lasting impression on readers' consciousness while building Lourdes as a myth.

Lasserre's personal experience provides a counterpoint to his idealization of historical events. His preface opens with a mention of his own cure and announces its narration, thereby building up readers' expectations of a unique insight into Lourdes's mystery. His miraculous cure fully conferred on him distinctive credentials and made him the only possible legitimate historian of the Shrine. Harris (2000, 186) writes that "Lasserre was straightforward enough to acknowledge his personal engagement with the subject through an almost post-

modernist insertion of the authorial ‘self’ into the narrative.” Lasserre’s ‘je’ is therefore an exceptional voice in the Lourdes literary landscape as he is both an investigator and a party. Consequently, Lasserre’s *Notre-Dame de Lourdes* decisively leaves little space for competing accounts. According to Harris,

Lasserre believed that his book, and his book alone, should be the official story, and defended himself fervently against criticism from the bishop’s supporters, who were wary of the ‘novelistic’ style of his work, its many factual errors and severe characterization of the officials. (Ibid., 188)

It is worth noting that Lasserre’s *Notre-Dame de Lourdes* ends with the word “Fin,” as would a novel. This detail is illuminating for two reasons: first, it betrays the generic ambivalence of Lasserre’s text and second, it indicates his ambition to provide the ultimate account of the events and dismisses competing narratives. The Garaison Fathers, the literal guardians of the Shrine, for instance, had previously completed an account, entitled *La Petite Histoire*, which Lasserre vehemently contested. Essentially the battle between the *Petite Histoire* and *Notre-Dame de Lourdes* was a battle for legitimacy. Both parties appeared to have a claim on Lourdes: Lasserre as a *miraculé*, and the Fathers as the lawful guardians of the Shrine. By inscribing the word “Fin” at the end of his book, Lasserre essentially claims that the last word has been spoken and that his is the only valid version of events.

However, another legitimate hagiographer emerged with Père Léonard Cros (1831-1913), a Jesuit Father, who had been so permanently impressed after meeting Bernadette that he, in turn, committed to writing the *true* account of the events. His mission only became more urgent once he was confronted with Lasserre’s inaccuracies.

4. Père Cros’s *Histoire de Notre-Dame de Lourdes*

While Cros is a contemporary of Lasserre, his *Histoire de Notre-Dame de Lourdes d’après les Documents et les Témoins* was published many years after Lasserre’s *Notre-Dame de Lourdes*. Père Cros died in 1913, but the first – and abridged – version of his history wouldn’t be published until 1927. The complete version was eventually published in 1957 to mark the centenary of the apparitions. If Lasserre claimed his legitimacy thanks to his status as a *miraculé*, Cros’s legitimacy was derived from both his scholarly rigor and his personal devotion to Bernadette. In fact, his personal relationship with Bernadette is listed as evidence of his account’s authenticity. In *Notre-Dame de Lourdes, Récits et Mystères* (1901), a text published years before his *Histoire de Notre-Dame de Lourdes*, Cros (1901, VIII) already insists on his unique access to Bernadette’s account:

En avril 1864 et en octobre 1865, nous interrogeâmes Bernadette: ses réponses furent, chaque fois, écrites sans retard; plusieurs, la seconde fois, de la main même de la Voyante. Plus tard, et jusqu’au mois qui précéda celui de sa mort, Bernadette a dicté ses réponses aux très nombreuses questions que nous lui adressâmes par écrit. Les réponses furent écrites, séance tenante, par des secrétaires de la Mère générale des Sœurs de la Charité de Nevers, et signées par la Mère générale elle-même, qui assistait aux interrogatoires.

In April 1864 and in October 1865 we questioned Bernadette: her answers were, each time, written down promptly; several, on the second occasion, by the Seer's own hand. Later, and until two months before her death, Bernadette dictated her answers to the very many questions we sent her in writing. Her answers were put into writing right away by secretaries of the Mother Superior of the Sisters of Charity of Nevers and signed by the Mother Superior herself, who had attended the interrogations. [My translation]

Cros points out that until the end of her life, Bernadette was subjected to questions about the apparitions, even after she was sent away from Lourdes and lived at the Nevers Convent. Access to Bernadette is tantamount to authenticity and by invoking his close relationship with the young woman, the Jesuit Father essentially silenced all competing accounts.

Histoire de Notre-Dame de Lourdes d'après les Documents et les Témoins, Cros's ambitious summa about Lourdes, consists of three volumes. The first one, "Les Apparitions (11 février - 7 avril 1858)" is an extremely detailed day-by-day account of the apparitions that includes multiple testimonies. The second volume entitled "Les Luttes" focuses on the political and religious conflicts that have marked the establishment of the Sanctuary, while the third volume, "La Chapelle et Bernadette," concentrates on the later years.

As such, his work is not a unified narrative, but rather a succession of transcribed testimonies framed by Cros's own account. The extensive quotations from various testimonies give, on the one hand, the impression of scholarly objectivity. On the other hand, they put readers in an active role and thus make the rendering of the events particularly compelling: readers are invited to compare and evaluate the testimonies themselves. This technique creates an apparent space of objectivity where readers are faced with ostensibly bare testimonies.

Moreover, when he presents reports from the Episcopal Commission, Cros also resorts to a visually compelling presentation. He creates a two-columns table where he includes a point-by-point comparison between the 1858 Procès-Verbal des Commissaires Episcopaux and subsequent ones. This approach makes the differences between the accounts visible. It also makes obvious how much has been added in later versions. In fact, one glance suffices to notice that later accounts have added many details; and this simple visual juxtaposition allows Cros's readers to grasp the development of Lourdes narratives and observe how, as time goes by, newer narratives seem to outdo previous ones. Thus, Cros's intervention offers great insight into the fluidity of Lourdes's story and how it gets modified through successive narrative layers.

In *Notre-Dame de Lourdes*, Cros gives a particular example of how Bernadette's own words have been interpreted and distorted to give birth to newer, conflicting versions, when he reports:

Le Journal de Lourdes, daté du 4 mars fait dire à Bernadette: "elle est petite comme moi; de mon âge..." Beaucoup de ceux qui entendirent Bernadette parler de la jeunesse et de la taille de l'Apparition, conclurent qu'elle était de l'âge de la Voyante, au moins, et ils lui donnèrent quinze ans: les Pères de Lourdes consignèrent ce témoignage dans leur *Petite Histoire*. Quinze ans parut trop peu à la plupart. M. l'Abbé Père, vicaire de Lourdes, qui vit et interrogea Bernadette, au temps des apparitions, écrit: "l'âge semblait être de dix-huit à vingt ans." (1925, 100; italics in the original)

The Lourdes Journal dated March 4th quotes Bernadette as saying: “she is small like me; *my own age...*” Many of those who heard Bernadette speak of the youth and size of the Apparition concluded that she was *at least* the same age as the Visionary and decided the Apparition was 15 years old: the Lourdes Fathers reported this testimony in their *Petite Histoire*. Fifteen seemed too young to most of the others. M. L’Abbé Père, curate of Lourdes, who saw and questioned Bernadette at the time of the apparitions wrote: “her age seemed to be eighteen to twenty years.” [My translation]

Here Cros illustrates how easily ‘facts’ get modified and how the proliferation of accounts facilitates narratives’ sliding and shifting. Hence, accounting for the existence of conflicting narratives, he both explains and excuses inconsistencies between different versions as distortions, made by various people or over time. As he is able to preemptively point out and address discrepancies and inconsistencies, his credibility as a scholar is furthered. Having uncovered the layering and sliding effects of Lourdes narratives, he maintains that, nevertheless, one should not be wary of witnesses’ accounts as their different perspectives explain the discrepancies between their accounts (cf. *ibid.*, 245). He is therefore able to dismiss most discrepancies without discrediting the integrity of Bernadette’s story.

In an approach that may seem counterintuitive at first, Cros endeavors to investigate whether the Lourdes events can be attributed to naturally occurring facts. For instance, his ninth chapter entitled “En quel sens la source de la grotte de Masabieille est miraculeuse”⁹ establishes the natural state of the soil – he shows that the ground was humid – and he proceeds to explain scientifically the increase in water flow. Cros’s devotion to Bernadette is not paired with a blind enthusiasm for miracles. Rather, his scholarly skepticism goes hand in hand with his devotion. Harris (2000, 199) considers that he “sought to distinguish between superstition and supernatural intervention, intending his work to secure an inviolable, if reduced realm for the holy.” Hence, Cros submits cures to rigorous examinations in order to isolate the ones that can be truly and indisputably considered miracles. Consequently, after he has investigated every alleged miraculous cure, Cros does not hesitate to dismiss the ones he finds unreliable. As such, he refuses to acknowledge the miracle of the candle, one of Bernadette’s most iconic moments:

He dismissed the widely held belief that during the seventeenth apparition, on April 7, Bernadette had accidentally put her arm in a burning candle and had been utterly unharmed. A story propagated initially by the local physician, Dozous, who saw it at first hand, recounted in fulsome terms by Estrade and then immortalized by Lasserre, Cros spent an entire chapter debunking this ‘myth of the marvellous’, examining the depositions, describing the events as circumstantially impossible, and demolishing the testimony of the witnesses. Throughout, he was concerned to demystify Bernadette’s experience and contrast her human ordinariness with the remarkable nature of divine encounter. In this instance Cros’s determination to rid the history of Lourdes of ‘superstition’ meant that he may well have misquoted witnesses to strengthen his case. (Harris 2000, 201)

Cros’s approach remains guided by his faith and, if he chooses to only believe in some miracles, it is because accepting questionable miracles as such would only weaken the Lourdes Sanctuary in the long run.

His determination both contrasts with and echoes Lasserre’s approach since Cros’s dry scholarship seems to wane in light of his agenda and since he too does

not hesitate to instrumentalize a miracle (or lack thereof) to make a point. Cros's dismissal of the miracle of the candle is also interesting to the extent that it severs one of the alleged connections between the Salpêtrière and the Sanctuary. Indeed, this very miracle illustrated the convergence between events at the Salpêtrière and at Lourdes, as highlighted by Harris (2000, 63):

One Eléonore Pérard stuck a big pin with a black head in Bernadette's shoulder without producing any reaction. Similarly, the popularly accepted, if later contested, 'miracle of the candle' also indicated a special anaesthesia. Her invulnerability to pain and injury suggested Bernadette's holy other-worldliness at the moment of her apparitions. What is striking is that both were the sort of tests conducted on subjects under investigation for either demonic influence or hysterical tendencies. The famous seventeenth-century witch of Loudun, Urbain Grandier, was subjected to similar prickings, while the Parisian neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot also used large needles to show the anaesthesia of his hysterical patients in the 1880s, thus transferring this aspect of theological examination into modern medical practice.

Therefore, by dismissing this spectacular performance of the body's dissociation, Cros also implicitly rids the Shrine of any suspicions that suggestion plays a role in miracles. Whether apocryphal or not, the miracle of the candle had found great resonance within the fin-de-siècle imagination. By conjuring up images of the scission between physical and spiritual, it highlights the mysteries of Bernadette's body and illustrates the double impasse of religion and science.

The specter of hysteria had also emerged when Cros had shared accounts by local physicians that mentioned Bernadette's *rire convulsif*:

Enfin quand les docteurs parlent du "rire convulsif" de Bernadette, ils traduisent inexactement, en style médical, ce que les témoins leur rapportèrent, savoir que l'on voyait tout à coup, les plus gracieux sourires illuminer le visage de Bernadette, et tout à coup, ce visage s'assombrir; puis, de la façon la plus inattendue le sourire réapparaître, pour faire place encore à une impression de tristesse. La *convulsion* est, en partie caractérisée par un mouvement *irrégulier* et *involontaire* des muscles: l'irrégularité des sourires était acquise. Bernadette en extase avait-elle pleine possession de sa *volonté*? Rien ne le prouvait: donc, concluaient les médecins, le sourire, le rire de Bernadette est *convulsif*. Déjà, la conclusion n'est pas rigoureuse, et elle le paraît beaucoup moins si l'on observe que la *convulsion* suppose des *secousses plus ou moins violentes*, qui n'accompagnèrent jamais les charmants sourires ou, en de rares occasions, le très doux rire enfantin de Bernadette en extase. (1925, 181; italics in the original)

Finally, when doctors talk about Bernadette's "convulsive laugh," they are translating inaccurately, in medical style, what witnesses reported as the sudden illumination of her face by the most gracious of smiles and then, suddenly, her face darkening, and then again, in the most unexpected way, the smile reappearing before an impression of sadness returned. The *convulsion* is, in part, characterized by *irregular* and *involuntary* muscle movement; the irregularity of the smiles was admitted. When in ecstasy, was Bernadette in full control of her *will*? Nothing proved it and, consequently doctors concluded that her smile, her laugh is *convulsive*. This conclusion is not rigorous in the first place, and it appears even less so if we observe that *convulsion* requires *more or less violent tremors* that have never, or almost never, accompanied the very gentle and child-like laughter of Bernadette in ecstasy. [My translation]

Hence, by rejecting the miracle of the candle and by refusing to pathologize Bernadette's smile, Cros dismisses two occurrences that could have led to associations between Bernadette and hysteria.

Cros's text emerges as a methodical account of events, legitimate because of his scholarly rigor, his devotion to Bernadette, and his careful evaluation of miracles. Yet, it remained overshadowed by Lasserre's version as its focus on sensational episodes and striking anecdotes durably marked the consciousness about Lourdes. Ultimately, no matter how much more accurate and valuable Cros's rigorous sum was, his account never managed to supplant Lasserre's.

5. Conclusion

Lasserre's and Cros's texts present the elaboration of an official narrative as a complex process. While the Lourdes miracles were met with skepticism on the part of the scientific community, my reading of Charcot's *La Foi qui Guérit* pointed to a convergence of epistemological concerns over the questions of healing and the role of suggestion. Hence faith and suggestion appear as two sides of the same coin, two terms for one phenomenon whose ramifications agitate the late nineteenth century.

Lasserre's own intimate experience lent him legitimacy but at the same time it framed him as potentially less objective and thereby altered his credibility. The absolute bestseller of the late nineteenth century, Lasserre's text – his personal story, coupled with his eloquent and embellished novelistic account – was instrumental in giving life to a mythical Lourdes and conquering the heart of a popular readership. As Harris (2000, 177) puts it: "Lourdes became Lourdes because of Henri Lasserre." Or in other words, without Lasserre, it would have been a different Lourdes. Through his novelized version of events, Lasserre frames future versions of the Lourdes story. Hence, his presence as the text read to the pilgrims in Zola's *Lourdes* is an example of its dissemination and illustrates the quasi catechistic quality of his prose.

Père Cros's scholarly approach and his prudence are at odds with Lasserre's style. Harris (2000, 196) argues that,

[i]n tone, style and content, nothing could be further from Lasserre's account than the history that resulted, for Cros produced a scholarly and compendious work that revolutionized the study of the apparitions. However, for a series of political, religious and personal reasons, the new work was also subject to assault, this time before it was even published.

Cros had been particularly alarmed by Lasserre's rhetoric and by his tendency to fictionalize the events. According to Harris (2000, 197), "[h]e was horrified by its romantic and literary qualities, and set out both to overturn his general theses and to correct his many factual errors." Cros's methodical and meticulous research made him a credible authority on Lourdes history, yet the fact that Lasserre's publication preceded his by decades, along with its novel-like readability, can be regarded as the main factors responsible for the dominance of Lasserre's version – however imprecise – in the later reception of the narrative.

Despite Cros's scholarly rigor and institutional authority, Lasserre's account remained the most prevalent. In Harris's words, "Cros's work proves – ironically

considering his wish to write *the* definitive account – how the history of Lourdes was yet in the making” (2000, 200; italics in the original). Thus, Lourdes illustrates how writing and the constant succession of texts – producing accounts that are the result of multiple narrative layers — contribute to shape stories and history itself. Indeed, the abundance of texts, and the divergences between them, provides a fascinating case study of life and literature’s mutual entanglement and influence and particularly shows how the fin-de-siècle imagination was permeated by Lourdes’s narratives.

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How to cite this article:

Garrigou-Kempton, Emilie: "Writing Lourdes. Faith, Miracles, and the Elaboration of an Official Story". In: *DIEGESIS. Interdisciplinary E-Journal for Narrative Research / Interdisziplinäres E-Journal für Erzählforschung* 7.2 (2018). 1-18.

URN: [urn:nbn:de:hbz:468-20181121-105650-8](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:468-20181121-105650-8)

URL: <https://www.diegesis.uni-wuppertal.de/index.php/diegesis/article/download/312/508>



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¹ "The feature that allows an organism that is temporarily weakened by disease to spontaneously return to the state of equilibrium that defines health." [My translation]

² "The Healing Faith" [my translation].

³ Here, Ellenberger quotes from Ruth Cranston, *The Miracle of Lourdes* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1955), p. 7.

⁴ "[...] the only serious historian of Lourdes" [my translation].

⁵ "[...] a fanatic, an orator, getting carried away and not really able to organize as far as I can tell" [my translation].

⁶ "– I have received order to take you. – And to go where? – To the police commissioner. Follow-me." [My translation]

⁷ "The highly intelligent man who was about to question Bernadette felt he was going to triumph easily and he was delighted." [My translation]

⁸ "This is how Ruth or Naomi must have been as they went gleaning in Boaz's fields." [My translation]

⁹ "[...] to what extent the Grotto of Masabieille is miraculous" [my translation].