

A Forgotten Chapter

Dr J. Valckenier Suringar and modern spiritualism.

Derk Jansen and Wim Kramer

ABSTRACT

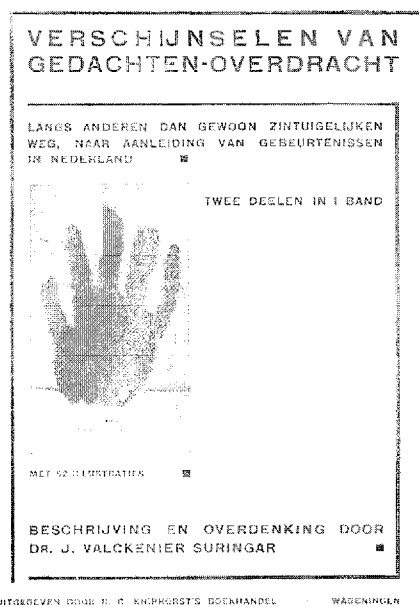
Prof. Dr J. Valkenier Suringar (1864 – 1932) was a well known professor in Botany at the Agricultural University of Wageningen. After losing his son in 1920 he became convinced of the reality of the survival of the human spirit after bodily death. Based on his private séances with the Dutch medium Mrs Akkeringa, and extensive studies in the literature concerning other psychical occurrences, he tried to formulate a model we describe as 'the Third Way'. In this he postulated the existence of a 'psychic substrate' in order to explain spiritualistic phenomena within a more or less scientific context.

KEYWORDS

Valkenier Suringar, Akkeringa, spiritualism, psychical research, cryptesthesia, psychic substrate.

Almost three decades after the formation in 1882 of the English Society for Psychical Research, the Dutch *Studievereeniging* for 'Psychical Research' was founded. This name had deliberately been chosen to make the initials, SPR, match those of her English predecessor. At the first official meeting on 1st April 1920 the first chairman, professor in psychology and philosophy at the University of Groningen Gerardus Heymans (1857-1930), delivered a presidential address in which he pointed out the great merits of the English society: "She reminded the scientists that at the end of the day facts are more important than theories and that it would not be for the first time that a denunciation declared in the name of a theory, that was chosen to be preferred above the facts, had to be corrected later. To the occultists she gave the insight that what science denies at some stage of her development, not always has to be untrue but it certainly does not mean that it is true. However, whatever the truth may be: to determine that truth irrefutably, one always has to recourse to science' (Heymans, 1920, p.10).

This declaration did not make him popular among a section of the original members, for the 'occultists', according to Heymans, and here he had in view the so-called modern spiritualists, expected that the *Studievereeniging* itself aim at the production of proof of members' convictions and work in a spiritual domain.¹ Just as unpopular amongst these spiritualistic members became



▲ Cover of book *Beschrijving van een psychometrisch helderziend medium*

BESCHRIJVING VAN EEN
PSYCHOMETRISCH
HELDERZIEND MEDIUM

DOOR

PROF. DR. J. VALCKENIER SURINGAR
HOOGLEERAAR AAN DE LANDBOUW-HOOGESCHOOL



N. V. DE VRIJ-RECHTELIJKE TEMPEL
DIRECTEUR K. H. MOEST JR.
AMSTERDAM 1921.

AL

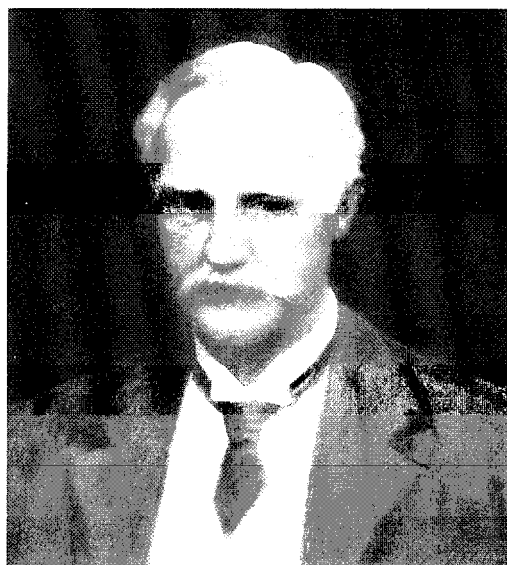
▲ Cover of book *Verschijnselen van gedachten-overdracht*

dr. H. J. F. W. Brugmans, co-worker and former student of Heymans at Groningen University, who held the position of secretary of the board, and dr. I. Zeehandelaar, a psychiatrist from Amsterdam who was appointed SPR librarian, at its second official meeting in 1921. These two expressed quite plainly in both the spoken and the written word that not too much was to be expected in terms of co-operation on the part of the modern spiritualists among their ranks. This was particularly emphasised by J. Valckenier Suringar (VS) (1864-1932)², at that time professor in botany at the Agricultural University of Wageningen, and profoundly interested in modern spiritualism. In the second issue of the *Mededeelingen der Studievereeniging voor 'Psychical research'* (MSPR) the irregularly published bulletin of the Dutch SPR, he particularly criticised dr. I. Zeehandelaar, reproaching him for his a-spiritualistic, sometimes even clearly anti-spiritualistic attitude. This stemmed from Zeehandelaar's wish to classify all phenomena as components of telepathy and consider them physical facts; it stood to reason that this would lead to the prevalence of a purely intellectual approach.³ However, the hypothesis of modern spiritualism deals with soulful spirits, and examination of the hypothesis has to take account of this. Not only the intellect, but also the heart. These were the words of VS, who by way of explanation recollected the following occurrence, "When I visited London I met by coincidence the medium Mr Peters. When I told him about another medium and the experimentation in Groningen⁴ he at once said, 'Let the medium not go there; the atmosphere is so cold and unsympathetic that nothing can be achieved'. I am convinced that 'cold

A Forgotten Chapter
Dr J. Valckenier Suringar and modern spiritualism.

and lack of sympathy' not only will be the cause of the lack of success of spiritualistic experiments, but also as a result of it many spiritualists will refuse to give their experiences to our association."⁵ At the end of his contribution VS pleaded for more empathy from participants in the annual meeting of the SPR, so that a state of mind could develop which gave way for spiritual sittings. In this way he left room for the claims of the spiritualists.

Not much is published concerning this aspect of VS' life. In 1942, ten years after his death, the *Gedenkboek J. Valckenier Suringar* was published (Jeswiet, 1942), a memorial book about his life and work. In it, however, the many articles he wrote about modern spiritualism are simply enumerated and are not evaluated⁶. In this article we will deal with this omission and answer the question as to what the contents of that 'forgotten chapter' should be.



Portrait of Valckenier Suringar

FAMILY BACKGROUND

The origins of the patriciate family Suringar⁷ lie in the Dutch village of Zurich (Frisian: Surch) located near the coast in the province of Friesland, in the northern part of the Netherlands. The lineage included many members who were very active in society. One is Willem Hendrik Suringar (1790-1872), who at the beginning of his career worked as a publisher at Leeuwarden, the capital of the province of Friesland, and later became quite famous as a writer and philanthropist. He was an uncle of VS.⁸ The grandfather of VS was also a publisher, but his father, Willem Frederik Reinier (1832-1898), having the intellectual capacities, chose a scientific career. In 1875 he became extraordinary professor in botany at the University of Leiden; some years before this nomination he had already been appointed director of the Hortus Botanicus of Leiden University. In the years 1884-85 he travelled to the Dutch West Indies, but the scientific results of this journey remained at the time of

his death in 1898 and largely due to the availability of new information, still far from conclusive. His son, VS, who in scientific terms followed in his father's footsteps, later felt it his duty to complete this work as best he could, but he did not succeed in this. How hard he struggled with the task may be concluded from a report he compiled about his father's investigations, 'And with this I draw near to the heart of the case, the viability of the investigations. There has been not one moment in which I considered myself able enough to continue these investigations in the way my father should have done, but, for the sake of respect for him, his work and also for science and fatherland, I did not want to withdraw from it.'⁹ Regard for his father will also have played a major role in the choice of subject for his own dissertation. For it was the wish of his father that for his doctoral thesis VS would describe a family of plants that belonged to the vegetation of the Dutch East Indies.¹⁰

After completing primary and grammar school in his native town of Leiden, VS began his studies in mathematics at Leiden University. However, after obtaining his bachelor's degree he stopped his academic studies because of a 'weakness of his head'; for the rest of his life he suffered (!) from bad headaches.¹¹ In 1891, after a two-year break, he restarted his studies in 'natural history', again at Leiden University. He was quoted as having neither natural ability nor pleasure in doing so, but this proved no impediment to his publishing during his studies at the university papers concerning the vegetation found in the German Rhine area and the Dutch tulip fields.¹² In 1898, a year after obtaining his doctoral degree, he was appointed lecturer at the Horticultural School at Wageningen to teach the taxonomy of horticultural vegetation and its *nomenclature*. In 1918 the Dutch government transformed the Horticultural School into the Agricultural University, and VS was promoted to a full professorship. He thus got the opportunity to widen his research topics at his own initiative. He became founder of the *dendrology* (the science of trees) society in Holland and, among other interests, focused on the idea of relationship in nature. After his early retirement in 1925, he wrote to a friend in a covering letter containing his article with the schematic layout for his *otium*, 'I spent a lot of time on the history of the idea of relationship. It puts me into a completely other field, the field of reason, intuition, belief and so on. In this way materialistic studies alter to become spiritualistic studies. For some years I studied the extensive literature of meta-psychic apparitions (telepathy, clairvoyance and such like) and I saw a lot of that topic and had many personal experiences. I wanted also to lecture about these things. My aim is not to clarify the facts, however important they may be, but to be enlightened about the secrets of our soul, of the inspired world, of the real Religion'.¹³

The foregoing shows that the interest of VS for so-called spiritualist phenomena developed at a later stage in his life. It was not coincidental that his interest in spiritualism began at the beginning of the nineteen twenties: on 20th September 1920 his son Frederik, pet name Frits, died in Utrecht in the age of twenty. There are several other examples of men and women who embraced modern spiritualism after the passing away of a loved relative or personal friend. To mention some examples from Holland: the author Marcel-

lus Emants (1848-1923), after the death of his wife Eva Verniers van der Loeff in 1900, attended several séances. His colleague Hendrik Jan Schimmel (1823-1906), well known as an author of historical novels, twenty-five years before and likewise after the death of his life-partner, took the same course, becoming among Dutch authors of the nineteenth century the most interested in modern spiritualism.¹⁴ Less known is the politician Jonkheer Pieter Cornets de Groot van Kraayenburg (1808-1878), who after the death of his grandson Hugo in Batavia became a prominent member of The Hague spiritualist society *Oromase*. The clergyman Albertinus van der Heide (1872-1953) was, *mirabile dictu*, also a politician, having in 1925 become a Member of Parliament for the SDAP (Social Democratic Workers Party). Van der Heide, especially when he was ageing, indulged in modern spiritualism, and in this the decease of his darling daughter Hermien in 1943 played an important role. He was also very interested in the experiences of Sir Oliver Lodge, to whom he dedicated some pages of his *Mémoires*¹⁵ (Jansen, 2003).

To VS the British scientist Oliver Lodge was a *point de mire*, and comparisons may be drawn between the lives of the two men. Both had a background in natural science and moved during the course of their lives from a more or less materialistic ideology to a spiritualistic one. Lodge's son Raymond died in 1915 at the Flemish front; VS lost the apple of his own eye, his son Frits, as a young man. The credibility of paranormal phenomena was for both Lodge and VS stimulated by contacts with a capable female medium. In the case of Lodge this woman was Mrs Osborne Leonard; for VS it was the Dutch medium Mrs Akkeringa. Apart from these individual parallels between the lives of the two men there are some more general ones that we present with some prudence. Both refused to believe that modern science had adequately formulated the possibilities of natural reality. According to them everything in the universe showed relationship and they felt that mankind would never entirely penetrate the depth of this notion. They also shared the opinion that discoveries in the psychic field were not contradicted by fixed knowledge, rather, such discoveries themselves belonging to nature, they could be considered as completing it. The religious character they had in common adds to the parallels; undoubtedly this will have contributed to a more open attitude to modern spiritualism.

SEANCES WITH MRS AKKERINGA

In the year 1921 VS and his wife made the acquaintance of Mrs C. Akkeringa-Kromme at a public séance. Mrs Akkeringa was at that time a well known and respected spiritualist medium in Holland. VS invited her to demonstrate in private sessions her "wonderful gift", his own words. These sessions took place in January and April of the year 1922 at the VS residence 'Berghem' on the Bergweg in Wageningen. In this same year VS began to publish his experiences and thoughts concerning his personal observations during séances with Mrs Akkeringa. His writing appeared in the spiritualist magazine *Het Toekomstig Leven. Maandelijksch tijdschrift gewijd aan de studie van het spiritisme en aanverwante verschijnselen* (Monthly magazine dedicated to the

study of spiritualism and related phenomena). The series of circumstantial series of reports by VS were published in the twenty-sixth and twenty-seventh volumes of this magazine.¹⁶ And, in parts slightly modified, were reprinted as a monograph under the title: *Beschrijving van een psychometrisch helderziend medium* (Translation: Descriptions of a Psychometric Clairvoyant Medium) (Valckenier Suringar, 1922).

Mrs Akkeringa was a so-called 'psychometric medium', a person who can 'read' from an object the history or personality of the person to whom it belongs. 'The images are by an invisible power or force put into her brain and she tries to describe those words, attitudes and feelings as well as possible', recorded VS¹⁷, who, as quoted by himself, with the assistance of his wife made extensive notes during the séances. Mrs Akkeringa showed by use of photographs amazing examples of her powers, describing correctly and sharply the persons portrayed.¹⁸ She was also able to make eminent portraits of the mother and the father of VS from objects like a bridal veil and a diary. According to VS, it was not possible to speak of telepathy in this case, for Mrs Akkeringa had in previous meetings never shown herself capable of this. She possessed just as little the capacity to 'see through things': that is, to be able to 'read' blank paper which someone has 'loaded' with ideas.

VS tried as exactly as possible to analyse the capacities of Mrs Akkeringa and he was struck by the fact that, given a certain object, she was able directly to define whether its owner was still alive. The gender of the owner of the object was for Mrs Akkeringa more difficult to interpret. But the direction in which she sketched the (geographical) history of the object was in all cases correct, 'she felt through the letters or objects America, the East Indies, France, Switzerland or thereabouts, and it always appeared to be right'.¹⁹ This data, independent of the character and possible contents of the object under consideration, were often sufficient for striking and convincing results. These led VS to presume that Mrs Akkeringa initially came to them by feeling the circumstances belonging to the mediating object, rather than seeing (parallel) images.

However, this explanation did not completely satisfy VS, and henceforth he went deeper into the matter.²⁰ He rejected the hypothesis of a *collective subconscious* by which the psychometric medium, with the assistance of psychic capacities and by clues from the object, should be capable to become aware of certain things. Also VS was not convinced of the hypothesis that it would only be the intuitive and associative interpretation made by the medium of the *aura* of the object in question. After discussing the pro's and contra's of both hypothesis VS presents his combined hypothesis of 'psychic contact': the psychometric medium does not just read the aura of the (passive) object, but also the object itself actively sends 'information' about it's history and/or (former) owner into the medium. VS realised himself, that he got nearer to the hypothesis of modern spiritualism and tried to remove this difficulty in referring to the method used by him at the (psychometric) séances: 'In my opinion here should be handled likewise as in the other sciences: the observer and describer gives the reader as much as he thinks that is necessary for the

explanation of the facts and for the interpretation of them. And for the rest the reader must himself know or check how trustworthy is the author; the capacity to judge in this case depends on his experience and knowledge'.²¹ Concluding his discourse, VS made an appeal to philosophers and psychiatrists to look without prejudice at the notion of 'psychic contact'. Not in the manner of the scientist Pluizer (Ferreter) in Frederik van Eedens novel *De kleine Johannes* (The Little John), a symbol for the negative, deductive and analytical approach, but positively, inductively and synthetically.

DE TEMPEL

It may be supposed, with some irony, that VS in his publications also held to his so strongly advocated idea of relationship, for he published his ideas not only in the modern spiritualist magazine *Het Toekomstig Leven*, but also in *De Tempel* (Translation: *The Shrine*), a theosophical-orientated magazine.²² In the first volume of this magazine in 1923 there appeared no fewer than thirteen contributions by VS. In nine of these articles he dealt with the problem of 'Transference of thoughts along other than ordinarily, sensory means: in connection with two special cases in Holland'.²³ The first case occurred in the summer of 1920 on the Kerkstraat (Church Street) in the town of Vlissingen (Flushing). On the evening of 23rd July, seven ladies and gentlemen held a séance. A masculine spirit manifested itself via 'the cross' and by the end of the evening it appeared that the spirit had 'communicated' from the beyond via a quatrain in the English language.²⁴ This event would have been self-limiting were it not that it became known that on the same evening in a house on the opposite side of the road a boy of fifteen years old had 'by chance' been reading exactly the same poem. Such transference of thought in the shape of a poem from one residence to another in the same street was indeed something unique. In his series of articles VS tried to find an explanation for this remarkable event.²⁵

The second case applied to an attack on a (maid)servant who was left badly injured. The event took place in The Hague on Thursday 1st February 1923 at 10.00 pm. At the same time, some doors further down the road, two persons were sitting on either side of a table with a *planchette*²⁶ between them. They suddenly saw words written in pencil on the large sheets of paper lying on the table: 'Come on, come at once - evil is coming now - I can see it - I go through it - it is close and will support you be quiet - over'. Again it looked like a case of telepathy, although VS here made the side-note that perhaps there could be more to it, for the sender of the message, the attacked (maid)servant, used language far too formal for the circumstances.

In his explanation of the first case VS did not use a spiritualistic hypothesis. The presumption that a ghost (an independent psychic substrate originating from the beyond) had transferred the poem he considered to be highly unlikely. However, he did not feel anything for an animistic explanation as a good theory for explaining the phenomena in this case either, because several causes made unlikely the hypothesis of transference of thoughts.²⁷ VS supposed that the solution could be found in the phenomenon of *extorisation*;

something of the spirit (psychic substrate) of the boy had gone out, bringing his subconscious (in part) to one of the persons holding the cross. However, his super-consciousness had not been totally 'switched off' and the poem in it had acted like a trigger in the subconscious of the receptor, bringing out the poem. 'At the moment that the two stanzas came out the stimulus was ended and the psychic substrate of the boy withdrawn'.²⁸

In the second case, the attack on the maid in The Hague, VS also rejected any spiritualistic interpretation. A spirit who used such words instead of calling for direct help was, in his view, not credible. The animistic hypothesis of telepathy did not satisfy him either, for the agent would certainly not have had the transferred words in her mind. On the contrary, she would have had in her mind only words of panic and distress at the moment she was attacked. Once more VS chose the interpretation that we were here dealing with an activity of the psychic substrate. 'We can imagine very well [...] that the girl in her emotional situation of fear "went out" and in this way connected her psychic substrate with that of the persons of mediums. And it seems very acceptable that this happened with the medium most nearby; at that moment that medium was just in tune for the reception and expression of unconscious thoughts'.²⁹ In this case the emotional pattern of thought of the attacked (maid)servant must have been 'translated' into more solemn language. These two examples show how VS was looking for an explanation: not for a simple choice between the spirit-theory of the modern spiritualists and an embracing of animism.³⁰ But a search for a so-called 'third way': a scientifically justified study of the phenomena and its causes that also valued the hypothesis of psychic contact. How he proceeded along this direction of *cryptesthesia* we can find out by studying in more detail his articles in *De Tempel*.

A THIRD WAY

The 1923 volume of *De Tempel*, in particular, yields a rich harvest of material. On the one hand it contains reaction to a review by leading modern spiritualist and former civil engineer Felix Ortt³¹ and a closer examination of the capacities of Mrs Akkeringa, and on the other attention to mediumistic phenomena. In the October issue of this 1923 volume, VS provides a sharp response to the Ortt review and further elucidation of terms used in his (VS') monograph about Mrs Akkeringa. The term 'thought-reading' should be 'thought-catching', for the medium, according to VS, 'caught' thoughts emitted from the (super) conscious of another person. 'Thought-reading' from the subconscious had to be understood as 'thought-collecting'. Notions used by VS of aura, psychic substrate and psychic contact had also greatly bothered Mr Ortt and VS acknowledged, 'it is all not very successful'. But Mr Ortt's assumption of a so-called 'second time-dimension' from which the medium could survey events did not satisfy him either.³² His criticism of the explanation of future-prediction, however, hit VS hard and using many examples he tried to prove 'that mankind has of itself much more knowledge of the future than it is aware of. And the clairvoyant gets his experiences from the consulting person, also in regard to the future, which matches with my ideas'.³³ The

explanation included the idea that a clairvoyant's vision of the future was latent knowledge that came into his or her own soul while time was abolished. VS for this purpose appealed in particular to investigations by the French astronomer and spiritualistic searcher Camille Flammarion (1842-1925) who in common with several others was of the opinion that in the soul of mankind was much more 'readable' concerning the future than was generally accepted. With this hypothesis of *mémoire future*, VS considered himself as having dealt with the objections of Mr Felix Ortt.

In the course of the year VS once more returned to notions of psychometry and clairvoyance; we may suppose that enough, in his view, had been said about the predictability of the future.³⁴ He gave a detailed review concerning Mrs Akkeringa and spoke highly of her reliability and capacities in the field of psychometry. This series of articles has a special character because into the discussion VS brought some personal matters relating to his family, including his son Frits who had passed away at the age of twenty. Séances with Mrs Osborne Leonard, also medium to physicist Sir Oliver Lodge,³⁵ and with another medium from London, Mrs Brittain, produced stunning results for VS. Of these the following is most touching. 'Most remarkable was a communication that I did not expect at all, that is, that he (Frits) was a "psychic spirit" playing as he had as a little child with his uncle Peter (Pieter) who died very young, but much older in years than he. Hereby we think involuntarily of many other stories of children who pretend to play with spirit children, and apparently it is the truth. But in relation to this communication, it is remarkable that I (VS) really did have a little brother who lived only a fortnight and who was called Pieter (about 1870)'. In this case VS firmly excluded any explanation in the fields of either telepathy or animism, but he also held strongly back from the spirit-hypothesis. In response to the question of what really could be happening here he said only, '*Ignoramus*'.

In the background, nevertheless, modern spiritualism played a part; in his publications this was also marked and his choice of words sometimes shows an ideological character. This appears particularly in some articles addressing mediumistic phenomena.³⁶ On this point he tried to avoid both the modern spiritualistic and the animistic hypothesis by pointing at mediums who 'came to action' whilst influenced by gazing at a crystal, by hypnosis or by suggestion. In respect of the third phenomenon, the first ideological signal, he did not exclude the activity of a free spirit: 'Even Richet,³⁷ who in general totally denied the survival of the human spirit after death, acknowledges that he cannot match some phenomena with his *cryptesthesia*. One of them is that metapsychic experiments give better results if there is more trust in the spiritualistic hypothesis and the so-called 'controls' are considered as really independent spirits.³⁸ For the rest, VS came to the conclusion that the modern spiritualism of his day, with its high degree of self-suggestion, was not a properly founded system or one suited for future use. He expected much more of an exploration of the 'psychic substrate', the active psychic energy active both inside and outside the human body, of which he thought a residue would remain after bodily death and which could exert lasting intellectual and

physical influence. He was also hopeful about the development of human powers: if humanity could increasingly have at its disposal forms of second sight this might eventually result in acceptance of the condition of medium as a normal one, and in this manner cryptesthesia comes once more into view. In this context, frequent use of the words 'psychic contact', standing for a secret quality of our consciousness, independent of modern spiritualistic or animistic interpretation, is not surprising. For VS the conclusion had to be that in the first place all scientific means had to be applied before one could consider applying a modern spiritualistic hypothesis.

OTIUM CUM DIGNITATE

On the last day of the year 1924 VS resigned from his professorship at Wageningen³⁹ for health reasons and on 26th February 1925 he gave his public 'farewell' lecture.⁴⁰ In his last lecture he spoke freely on subjects of importance to him, for instance the relevance of pure linguistic usage (nomenclature!) and about his lectures over the years, which, in retrospect, had not been totally satisfying to him. At the beginning of his career he had been too realistic, and only later on he had become aware of the importance of emphasising the fact of the phenomenon of 'natural connection' between plants. It could be said that his personal growth in regard to this insight might be compared with general human development, because here too the idea of the existence of a natural connection had been accepted only gradually. For the growth of this notion did not follow logical processes: '[...] as for *Homo sapiens*, a connection between the individuals of one kind is obvious enough through parental ties. The connection between the plants had nothing to do with individuals but only with species, gender and so on. And just as mankind, parents and children, by living together show their relatedness, species of plants grow as if in a muddle, so that nobody notices their relatedness. Besides, people believed that all species existed as they were created, once and for all; in what way could one speak of natural connection? The rising notion in the human mind of the idea of natural connection, in spite of the belief in an unique creation and without being forced by certain facts, is as miraculous as natural connection itself.'⁴¹

This was all the result not just of human thinking; intuition also played an important role. From the dialectics of thinking and intuition rose the conception of evolution of the great Swedish botanist Linnaeus, and even someone like Darwin, *n'en déplaie lui* and much later, moved in the same direction. The consequences of his ideas led to notions like 'the survival of the fittest', but according to VS Darwin was too much materialistic and mechanical a scientist. It was not survival of the fittest that was the most important thing for VS but the inborn, autonomous sense of evolution of plant, animal and human being, and undoubtedly the human mind had the same capacities.⁴² Evolution everywhere, but not absolute: '[...] the power for that enormous polymorphy was present in the original germs, as the butterfly is fixed in the caterpillar and the oak tree in the acorn'⁴³ and so VS in his own way appeared to be a supporter of the bio-genetic law of Haeckel, according to which individual evolution

is more or less an accelerated recapitulation of preceding generations.⁴⁴ This superseded law excluded Darwinism and, as VS claimed, the leading principle of society, as of vegetable life on earth, could not be the struggle for life but rather association and the maintenance of equilibrium. This view showed him to be a real representative of the nineteenth century (*le juste milieu*), but also somebody who adopted his own position in the debate on creation versus evolution. Not astonishing for a person who in other fields too, such as the exploration of the supernatural and super-sensual, set about finding a third way.

As will be shown later, there is something special in the case of this 'third way'. In an article in 1927 VS characterised those occupied with psychical and spiritualistic phenomena.⁴⁵ The first category, untrustworthy due to their unwillingness to apply healthy criticism, comprised those religious spiritualists who interpreted all phenomena with help of the spirit-hypothesis. On the other hand, he gave more credit to the scientific spiritualists: they could not be tricked and they criticised the phenomena using scientific methods. Examples were the Italian scholar E. Bozzano and Sir Oliver Lodge. 'Bozzano borrows his conviction from many well-controlled phenomena, although he cannot escape the results of a lodged opinion that radically interferes in the emotional life. Lodge also leans on facts, but even more on psychical phenomena observed by him or by relatives in well-known psychic mediums. This second group of people estimates the case like a physical matter.'⁴⁶ The third group comprised those who acknowledged the phenomena but did not believe in the survival of the human spirit. These people tried to interpret phenomena through physical and psychological laws and did not hesitate to go in search of the extension of these laws; of course they rejected the 'spirit-hypothesis' absolutely. According to VS these *metapsychici* were the best observers. The fourth category he defined were the real anti-spiritualists who did not care about so-called meta-psychic phenomena, only writing to him in terms of denouncement.

VS declared himself at home among the representatives of the second and third categories, a seemingly ambiguous position for him. Studying the phenomena, as previously said, he wanted to hold as long as possible to pure scientific methods by employing the physical and psychical laws but he did not exclude the spirit-hypothesis. A couple of quotes will show how he linked up the spirit-hypothesis using what Germans so elegantly denote *Heilsgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen*. He wrote, 'The spiritual hypothesis may be strongly attacked; however, it is of great importance, while it leads us to the deepest human and religious matters. More, it leads us to the idea of God'. In an article of 1925 VS gives his opinion even more plainly. 'And, proven or unproven, spiritualism will probably soon play an important role; on the one hand perhaps protecting western society from its destruction in consequence of abuse of great scientific and technical knowledge in the interests of the pursuit of gain and delight, and on the other hand protecting it from a corruption of religion.'⁴⁷

This combination of propaganda for modern spiritualism and the fight against materialism was not original. In 1860, two years after the introduction of modern spiritualism in Holland, the acting president of The Hague spiritualistic society *Oromase*, Major J. Revius, had already emphasised this in a

speech to members. 'For if we know the rules of spiritualism then we have the opportunity to develop in knowledge and virtue towards the infinite; for Creation, as we understand it, is endless and that's why we will always have at our disposal means to perfect ourselves, for which we are destined'. In this way he tried to apply the scientific goal of that time, the search for the laws of nature, to the kingdom of the spirits. In this way also the reprehensible striving after materialistic and sensual pleasure could be fought.⁴⁸

IN BETWEEN

VS used the first years of his *otium* to write a substantial book of 420 pages in which he summarised many of his preceding studies published in *De Tempel* and added the results of some new investigations and insights. This book was published in 1927 in two volumes under the long title: *Verschijselen van gedachten-overdracht langs anderen dan gewoon zintuigelijken weg, naar aanleiding van gebeurtenissen in Nederland*. (Translation: Phenomena of Thought Transference along Another way than Ordinary Sensory Perception, with reference to events in The Netherlands), (Valckenier Suringar, 1927). The new cases he presented, in addition to the above mentioned two cases in Vlissingen (Flushing) and Den Haag (The Hague), are the description of an apparition, a communication received using a *planchette* and a game of chess with an unknown spirit.⁴⁹ In comparison with the first two cases, these descriptions and explanations are very brief and add little new insight into the thoughts and opinions of VS. He maintained that in all these cases there could have been activities of a 'psychic substrate' that during a state of 'sleepiness' (a better, modern expression for what is meant there would be 'altered state of consciousness') influenced a 'medium at a distance'. Thus in such way that ideas came out which did not belong to the medium but to the person whose psychic substrate became active.⁵⁰ In so describing things he embarked upon his 'third way', known as *cryptesthesia*, and we are not astonished to find him starting his book with a quote from Charles Richet, who accepted only this method for the explanation of occult phenomena, 'L'Ensemble des faits - q'on les appelle spiritiques ou occultes ou métapsychiques - est vrai, authentique, indestructible ...'.⁵¹ Nevertheless he cannot help but quote Oliver Lodge on the same page, and so we end up in modern spiritualism again. The end of this book has the same atmosphere and emphasises the idealistic and utopian character of modern spiritualism.

VS published his book privately and even offered it to interested persons free of charge 'by addressing the costs of postage and packing (25ct) on giro number 4357 or otherwise', as announced on the front page of some copies. His ideas may lead him to be considered a loner, perhaps. Or, more complementarily, as a mediator,⁵² but among the ranks of the modern parapsychologists, especially those of the *Studievereeniging for Psychical Research*, he was an outsider.⁵³ For them he was too much a modern spiritualist who used scientific methods and nomenclature to ventilate ideas which were in essence irrelevant. For some modern spiritualists, on the other hand, VS was too neutral; somebody who basically bowed to the results of science and seemed to reject the spirit-hypothesis.

CONCLUSIONS

This article discusses an unknown aspect of the life and work of a botanist from Wageningen, Professor dr. J. Valckenier Suringar (VS). His interest in psychical research and modern spiritualism is a 'forgotten chapter' in previous publications about his life and work (e.g. Jeswiet, 1942). However, his characteristic attitude and opinions concerning this field and the phenomena involved deserve to be rescued from oblivion. About 1920, after the decease of his son Frits, he indulged in spiritualistic phenomena and psychical research. He tried to combine his training as a scientist with his personal beliefs about God, nature and mankind.

Exploring spiritualistic phenomenon by the use of scientific methodology is always a very tricky adventure. At the end of the day one always has to make the choice either to believe in the existence of spirits from beyond or to explain all phenomena as originating in the human mind.⁵⁴ VS tried to escape from this choice by looking for a 'third way' and formulating a theoretical model that might explain all the phenomena in full and at the same time leave both options, spiritualism or reductionism, open. Reading VS' articles and trying to follow his line of reasoning is not very easy. He wanted to find this 'third way' so badly that his line of reasoning is not always as straightforward as one might have expected from a scientist with his background. However, VS was not the only scientist to address the methodological near-impossibility of bridging the gap between the two belief systems.

To some degree VS may be compared with the well-known Dutch parapsychologist W. H. C. Tenhaeff (1894-1981). Tenhaeff, who was a student of psychology in the 1920s, also dealt personally with these issues but chose the scientific option in formulating his opinion that parapsychology was in fact one of the many different branches of the tree of mainstream psychology. Thus his scientific opinion was that so-called paranormal or mediumistic phenomena should be considered as originating from the human mind. However, Tenhaeff as a person never really abandoned the spiritualistic hypothesis. Even in his later work he was to write, 'Personally I do not believe that in the science of parapsychology we will ever come to a total rejection of the spiritualistic hypothesis.' (Tenhaeff, 1973).⁵⁵ This was also the conviction of VS. The divergence between the two scientists was that for VS the spiritualistic hypothesis meant much more than just a scientific theory.⁵⁶ In his opinion it could become a future religious and social programme. This, in an even more explicit way, was an opinion shared by Prof. Dr E. A. Greven. This worker advocated the opinion that spiritualistic phenomenon actually demonstrated that life was not meant for the purpose of gaining as much as possible material or financial wealth, but that God had a 'higher plan' for mankind (Kramer, 2006).

So we find the opinions of VS to be in line with others like those of Tenhaeff *cs.* and Greven *cs.* This is an interesting position, because in a way he turned himself into a sort of 'lone cowboy' travelling along his third road; or, in more classic terminology, a knight in search of the Grail.

However, even back in the 1920s ideological ideas of spiritualism as the ‘gateway’ to a new and better world were not new. Many decades before VS and others formulated their opinions and hypothesis, the well-known Dutch author, pedagogue and outstanding spiritualist Elise van Calcar (1822-1904) advocated similar opinions on ‘utopian spiritualism’. Although VS tried to explain spiritualistic phenomena in an open, modern and unbiased way he was in fact a child of the nineteenth century.

REFERENCES

- Heymans, G; ‘Doel en middelen eener studievereeniging voor “Psychical research”’ (Object and means of a study-circle for “Psychical research”). In *Mededeelingen der Studievereeniging voor “Psychical Research”*, 1 (1920) pp1-10.
- Jansen, Derk; *Op zoek naar nieuwe zekerheid. Negentiende-eeuwse protestanten en het spiritisme. (In search for new certitude. Nineteenth-century Protestants and spiritualism)*, Groningen/Amsterdam 1994.
- Jansen, Derk; “‘Een persoonlijk voortbestaan’ (A Personal Survival). Ds. Albertinus van der Heide en de parapsychologie’. In *De Vrije Fries*, 83 (2003) pp179-200.
- Jeswict, J; *Gedenkboek (Memorial volume) J. Valckenier Suringar*. Wageningen 1942.
- Kramer, Wim; ‘Prof. dr. E.A. Greven, de eerste hoogleraar parapsychologie’ (The First Professor in Parapsychology). In *Tijdschrift voor Parapsychologie*, 2006 (n^o 1) pp14-24.
- Oppenheim, Janet; *The other world. Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914. Cambridge, 1985*.
- Tenhaeff, W.H.C; *Het Spiritisme*, (ninth edition) Den Haag, 1973.
- Valckenier Suringar, J; ‘*Beschrijving van een psychometrisch helderziend medium*’ (*Descriptions of a Psychometric Clairvoyant Medium*), Wageningen, 1922).
- Valckenier Suringar, J; *Verschijselen van gedachten-overdracht langs anderen dan gewoon-zintuigelijken weg, naar aanleiding van gebeurtenissen in Nederland: beschrijving en over denking (Phenomena of Thought Transference by Other Means than Sensory Perception, referring to events in The Netherlands: description and reflection)*. Wageningen, 1927.

NOTES

- ¹ The list of members of the Dutch SPR from 1922 contains 274 names. At least thirty members were modern spiritualists, i.e. about eleven percent.
- ² In this text we will use the abbreviation VS throughout to distinguish him from other members of his family.
- ³ *Mededeelingen*, 1921, n^o 2, 11.

A Forgotten Chapter
Dr J. Valckenier Suringar and modern spiritualism.

- ⁴ In the year 1920 Heymans, Brugmans and others held a séance in Groningen with the English psychometric medium Alfred Voût Peters. This séance failed completely. Peters reacted by telling the experimenters, '(...) there is a sphere of cold here that you sent out to me. When I am feeling such influence I cannot work; unless you help me with your sympathy, I cannot work'.
- ⁵ *Mededeelingen*, 1921, n° 2, 11.
- ⁶ This book was published by the Society of Dendrology. As biologists they were probably not so much interested in this 'Psychical Research' aspect of the life of their founder and former president.
- ⁷ Jan (Valckenier) Suringar, by Royal decree of 22nd January 1885, won permission to place the name of his mother, Valckenier, before his own.
- ⁸ Jo Egging, 'Willem Hendrik Suringar als propagandist en intermediair van praktische filantropie' ('W. H. S. as propagandist and intermediary of practical philanthropy.' In: *Documentatieblad voor de Nederlandse kerkgeschiedenis na 1800*, 28 (2005) pp57-67.
- ⁹ J. Jeswiet (ed.), *Gedenkboek*, 44.
- ¹⁰ *Het geslacht Cyperus (sensu amplo) in den Maleisischen archipel, benevens een overzicht van de geschiedenis der systematiek van de familie der cyperaceën. (The genus Cyperus (sensu amplo) in the Malayan archipelago, with a survey of the history of the taxonomy of the family of cyperaceën)*, (s.l.) 1898.
- ¹¹ *Gedenkboek*, 39.
- ¹² *Die Flora von Boppard und Umgegend*. Keil 1895; *Hyacinthus orientalis L en Tulipa Gesneriana L op Hollands' bollenvelden.*(H.o.L and T.G.L on (?) Dutch bulbfields, (s.l) 1896.
- ¹³ Letter to Leonard Springer dd 19th July 1925. In: *Gedenkboek*, 55, 56. Leonard Antonij Springer (1885-1940) was an influential landscape gardener and dendrologist. From 1897 to 1900 teacher in landscaping at Wageningen, where he designed the *Arboretum*. VS, for a short time a colleague of his, dedicated himself enormously to the further exploitation of this institution.
- ¹⁴ Derk Jansen, *Op zoek*, 105.
- ¹⁵ Derk Jansen, "Een persoonlijk voortbestaan," pp189-191.
- ¹⁶ *Het Toekomstig Leven* 26 (1922) 42-43; 151-154; 168-172; 184-187.
Idem, 27 (1923) 4-6; 23-27; 33-37; 59-60.
- ¹⁷ *Het Toekomstig Leven*, 26 (1922) 151.
- ¹⁸ *Idem*, 168, 169, 170.
- ¹⁹ *Idem*, 151.
- ²⁰ *Idem*, 170, 171.
- ²¹ *Het Toekomstig Leven*, 27 (1923) 33, 34.
- ²² This was not the first time VS had published in a theosophical magazine. Back in 1910 he published a translation of an essay by Linnaeus (1748) in the magazine of the Dutch Theosophical Society under the title 'Godsdienst en natuurbeschouwing' (Religion and observations on nature). *Theosophia*, February 1910, pp596-616.
- ²³ *De Tempel*, 1 (1923) 71-76; 100-104; 132-134; 161-166; 180-186; 211-216; 274-278; 294-298; 322-324.

- ²⁴ A 'cross' consists of two crossed lathes with a needle at its centre; under certain circumstances the needle will point to the characters of an underlying alphabet. The text of the poem said:

'The sun has set and now anew
with fallen dew the grass is wet.
Each little bird has sunks (sic!) to rest
within its nest, no song is heard'.

- ²⁵ This case was also, independently from VS, investigated and reported on by Dr Vollgraff in *Mededeelingen der Studievereeniging voor Psychical Research*, 1923, No. 5. A discussion of the report by VS on the case was published in English in (1923). 'A case of thought-transference' in *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, 21, pp170-175 and a brief account of it appeared in the issue of *Light* of 27th October 1923.
- ²⁶ A planchette is a small, triangular board with a straight and two longer curved sides that rests on three little balls; in the angular point opposite the short side is a gap in which a pencil is placed, pointing downwards. Both persons placed a hand on the board.
- ²⁷ *De Tempel*, 1 (1923) 296. The most important causes he brought forward were the unfamiliarity with such a form of telepathy (by air) in the relevant literature, and the implausibility of the receipt of a *perfect* poem by the gentlemen at the séance who were *not mediumistic* at all.
- ²⁸ *Idem*, 297.
- ²⁹ *Idem*, 322, 323.
- ³⁰ Animism: paranormal phenomena dealing with powers in living people and not the result of the activities of spirits.
- ³¹ Ortt is described in H. van Dongen & J.L.F. Gerding, *PSI*, passim.
- ³² *De Tempel*, 1 (1923) 356.
- ³³ *Idem*, 381.
- ³⁴ *Idem*, 'Psychometrie en helderzien' ('Psychometry and clairvoyance'), 576-579; 627-630.
- ³⁵ Lodge published in 1915 the book *Raymond* with communications from fallen English soldiers: among them the son of Lodge, Raymond, who in 1915 was killed at the Flemish front. Also, Derk Jansen '“Een persoonlijk voortbestaan”' and: Janet Oppenheim, *The other world*, passim. In this book a note about Osborne Leonard: 'Sir Oliver Lodge, A Great Scientist', *The Times*, 23rd August 1940, 7, underscores the degree to which Lodge became associated with the war-inspired resurgence of popular interest in spiritualism. One of the mediums through whom Raymond allegedly contacted his family was Mrs Osborne Leonard, who subsequently became a prominent subject of SPR investigation, 482, note 163.
- ³⁶ 'Mediummieke verschijnsels bij normale personen' (Mediumistic phenomena of normal persons). In: *De Tempel*, 1 (1923) 464-466; 494-496; 'Mediummieke verschijnsels bij zieke personen' (Mediumistic phenomena in sick persons) *Idem*, 549-553.
- ³⁷ Charles Richet (1850-1935): French physiologist who received the Nobel Prize in 1913. He had great knowledge of parapsychology and was among the first who tried to deliver evidence for extrasensory perception with the aid of statistics.
- ³⁸ *Mediummieke verschijnsels*, 495.
- ³⁹ A very nice oil painting showing a portrait of VS is still displayed in the 'Klein Auditorium' of Wageningen University.

A Forgotten Chapter
Dr J. Valckenier Suringar and modern spiritualism.

- ⁴⁰ *De plantensystematiek en de plantengeografie aan de Landbouwhogeschool* (The plant taxonomy and plant geography at the Agricultural university), Wageningen 1925.
- ⁴¹ *Idem*, 7, 8.
- ⁴² *Idem*, 13.
- ⁴³ *Idem*, 12.
- ⁴⁴ The ontogenesis is a recapitulation of phylogenesis.
- ⁴⁵ 'Metapsychica en Spiritisme. Een opzienbarende gebeurtenis' I (A spectacular event). In *De Tempel*, 5 (1927) 24-27.
- ⁴⁶ *Idem*, 24.
- ⁴⁷ 'Over bewustzijn, onderbewustzijn en de psyche van den mensch' (II) (About the conscious, subconscious and the psyche of man). In *De Tempel*, 3 (1925) 282-284, 284.
- ⁴⁸ Derk Jansen, *Op zoek naar nieuwe zekerheid*, 82.
- ⁴⁹ *Verschijselen van gedachtenoverdracht* (1927), 44-53.
- ⁵⁰ *Idem*, 211, 212.
- ⁵¹ *Idem*, 5.
- ⁵² The *Indisch Spiritistisch Tijdschrift*, 1 (1930) nr. 12, 142 writes about him, 'He belongs to the neutralists between the right and the left wing and can do justice to both points of view'.
- ⁵³ In 1928 P.A. Dietz and W.H.C. Tenhaeff announced the start of their *Tijdschrift (Journal) voor Parapsychologie*. VS was mentioned in the list of future contributors. However, he never published a single line in the magazine. According to Tenhaeff VS was a disciple of one of the founding fathers of modern spiritualism, Sir William Crookes. (1936, *Het Spiritisme*) 42. For some time Tenhaeff was himself also an adherent of Crookes.
- ⁵⁴ In this article the other explanation, one of simple fraudulent behaviour on the part of the medium, is not the issue of discussion.
- ⁵⁵ W. H. C. Tenhaeff, *Het Spiritisme* (ninth edition) Den Haag 1973, 63.
- ⁵⁶ Tenhaeff himself mentions this difference of opinion in his book review of VS's book *Tijdschrift voor Parapsychologie*, vol. 1, 1928/29, pp191-192).