



## RESEARCH NOTE: REREADING MYERS: FROM THE SUBLIMINAL TO THE TRANSLIMINAL

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### ABSTRACT

Frederic Myers (1843–1901), co-founder of the Society for Psychical Research, developed a pioneering theory of consciousness in the late 19th century. Myers initially introduced a distinction between two forms of consciousness: the *subliminal* (subthreshold) and the *supraliminal* (ordinary consciousness). This theory was hailed by his contemporaries, notably Theodore Flournoy and William James, for its breadth and ability to integrate unexplained phenomena. However, conceptual problems remained: a confusion between ‘Subliminal Self’ (all-encompassing unity) and ‘subliminal selves’ (transient personalities); a difficulty in explaining the coexistence of lower and higher faculties in the subliminal; and an inadequacy of the spatial metaphor ‘surface/depth’. Myers thus refined his model using the analogy of the light spectrum. Here, I develop an alternative representation (known as ‘topography’) of his theory, based on a division between a centre, the *intraluminal* (ex-supraliminal), and a periphery, the *transliminal* (ex-subliminal). I am restating several of Myers’s ideas in the light of this reconceptualization. Myers’s theory, though complex and sometimes confusing, laid the foundations for a broader understanding of human consciousness. His subliminal/transliminal model and psychoscopic method opened the way to the exploration of hitherto unexplained psychic phenomena, having a lasting influence on research in psychology and parapsychology.

### INTRODUCTION

Frederic Williams Henry Myers (1843–1901) was a British researcher best known for co-founding the Society for Psychical Research in 1882. His seminal book, published posthumously, *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* (Myers, 1903) is often read in its abbreviated form.<sup>1</sup> While Myers’s ideas and work are recognized within the parapsychological community as pioneering (Gauld, 1968; Hamilton, 2009; Kripal, 2010), his conceptual apparatus leaves much to be desired. Even one of his most important proponents, the father of American psychology William James (1903), could not resist criticizing his conceptual system, which left a few grey areas and whose empirical references perhaps suffered from hasty generalizations. In this article, I propose to analyse Myers’s model of the Subliminal Self and develop it into a model of the

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1. A version of less than 500 pages is currently available online, a far cry from the original 1,360-page version. <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/38492/pg38492-images.html>.

transliminal. This will enable me to make the link with contemporary research that is partially rediscovering his ideas.

#### THE FIRST MYERSIAN TOPOGRAPHY: SUBLIMINAL AND SUPRALIMINAL

##### *The subliminal: The first all-encompassing theory of the unconscious*

Informed both by his studies in classics and his research into hypnosis (Myers, 1886a) and mediumship (Myers, 1884), Myers introduced a distinction between two forms of consciousness, separated by a threshold (*limen*): one subliminal and the other supraliminal, the latter being ordinary consciousness.

At the end of the 19th century, there were many such proposals for thinking about a broader psychic life: Pierre Janet and his *subconscious*, Sigmund Freud and his *unconscious*, Max Dessoir and his *double-I* (*Dopple-Ich*), etc. Historian Ellenberger (1970) brings all these ideas together in what he calls the first “dynamic psychiatry”. However, not only was Myers a pioneer—he greatly influenced Janet and was also the first to introduce Freud in English—but his system was recognized as particularly brilliant in his day. Swiss psychology professor Théodore Flournoy explains:

If the idea of subliminal Consciousness (as opposed to the simple Ego of the classical spiritualists and the unconscious Cerebration of the narrow physiologists) has been floating in the air for a generation or two and has simultaneously pierced, in various forms, the minds of a host of researchers, it is, however, the genius of Myers who has given this idea its presently most perfect and searching expression. (Flournoy, 1903, p. 260)

Over and above his admiration for the theory, Flournoy acknowledges that it has sufficient qualities to form a truly fruitful research programme:

His theory prevails over all its congeners, as far as I know, by its breadth and the field it leaves open to possible possibilities not yet realized; so that, even to those who would attribute to it no truth in itself, it offers at least the inappreciable advantages of a schema sufficiently extensible to embrace, on occasion, many new facts which find no place in current scientific theories and which detonate there like intruders of which one does not know what to do. (Flournoy, 1903, p. 262)

In support of this second assertion, Flournoy cites a case of “terminal lucidity” (Nahm & Greyson, 2009) among the insane, a phenomenon that was not yet called such, but which already fitted in well with Myers’s subliminal theory.

The psychology professor William James agreed. He considered the most fundamental question in psychology to be precisely what constituted the ‘subliminal’, which he dubbed the “Myers problem” (Taves, 2003). He recognized that Myers had done a gigantic job, presenting a wealth of data in a natural series, with ingenious transitions between the pathological, the normal, and the paranormal, “grading down discontinuities in his argument” (James, 1903, p. 30). However, he expressed some reservations about the state of the question left by Myers, and called for certain clarifications (James, 1903).

*The subliminal (self) vs subliminal selves*

In 2007, American researchers from the University of Virginia and the Esalen Institute published a massive work, *Irreducible Mind* (Kelly et al., 2007), which attempts to re-read Myers and James in the light of current knowledge. They point out an enormous problem: Myers uses the term “subliminal self” to refer to two completely different things, which they choose to distinguish by means of a graphic trick: capitalizing Subliminal Self to distinguish one of its meanings from another (Kelly et al., 2007, p. 585).

According to Myers, our individuality is a permanent, all-encompassing unit, the capitalized *Subliminal Self*. However, we are said to have many transitory personalities, made up of more or less complete chains of memory, the lower-case *subliminal selves*. Our present, ordinary personality, which we regard as the whole of who we are, would be no more than a fragment borrowed from this gigantic reservoir of potential personalities.

Myers proposes nothing less than a reversal of naive psychology:

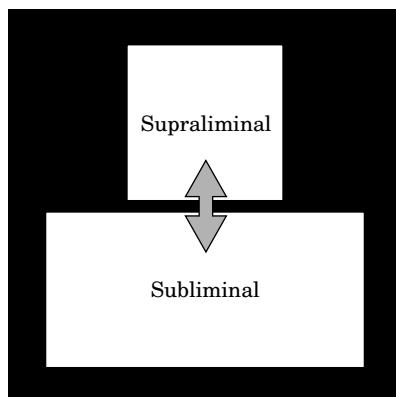
While ordinary psychology sees supraliminal life as the manifestation of normal and substantive personality, of which subliminal life would constitute either the semi-conscious substratum or a half-lit margin or finally a morbid outgrowth, I regard supraliminal life merely as a *privileged case* of personality; a special phase of our personality, which is easiest for us to study, because it is simplified for us by our ready consciousness of what is going on in it; yet which is by no means necessarily either central or prepotent, could we see our whole being in comprehensive view. (Myers, 1905, p. 194)

Although the graphic trick proposed by the authors of *Irreducible Mind* goes some way towards resolving the issue of a model that is both unitary and polypsychistic (Kelly et al., 2007, p. 585), other conceptual problems persist.

*Problems of the first Myersian topography*

Figure 1 is a deliberately erroneous schematic representation of what I propose to call the ‘Myersian first topography’, which has led to much confusion. This topography simply distinguishes between the subliminal and the supraliminal on the basis of a single boundary. For Myers, however, there are two: one below and one above. There is thus a supra-supraliminal, sometimes renamed extra- or ultraliminal. So, Myers identifies two kinds of contradictory faculties, summed up thus by Flournoy:

Our subliminal self, which possesses two kinds of faculties that we do not have at our voluntary disposal. These are, on the one hand, inferior faculties, which once belonged to our animal ancestors, but which our conscious personality lost in the course of evolution, such as the power to direct and modify physiological functions at will. And on the other hand, superior faculties, pertaining to an extraterrestrial environment or mode of existence, and which our present body does not allow us to exercise freely, but which occasionally appear, in flashes, in the ‘supranormal’ phenomena of clairvoyance, lucidity, prophecy, etc. (Flournoy, 1903, p. 247)



*Figure 1. Myersian first topography.*

For James, most troubling is Myers's inability to explain to his satisfaction how the subliminal region can serve equally as "rubbish-heap" and "treasure-house" (Myers, 1903, p. 72), "so impartially the home of both evolutive and of dissolutive phenomena" (James, 1903, p. 32). Myers wanted his model to reflect both the hysterical and genius. How can this bivalence be explained if the whole subliminal is one and the same?

Myers himself is unhappy with the 'surface/depth' spatial metaphor introduced by the term 'subliminal', which gives the impression that this zone is below and inferior to the other, which does not correspond to his idea. This type of hierarchical scheme can be found in Hughlings Jackson, Wundt, Janet, Grasset, and Freud's iceberg or Jung's depth psychology. But there's no question of superiority or inferiority here. The subliminal and supraliminal are merely states of consciousness, currents that not only cooperate, but alternate: "so that what was once below the surface may for a time, or permanently, rise above it" (Myers, 1903, p. 15).

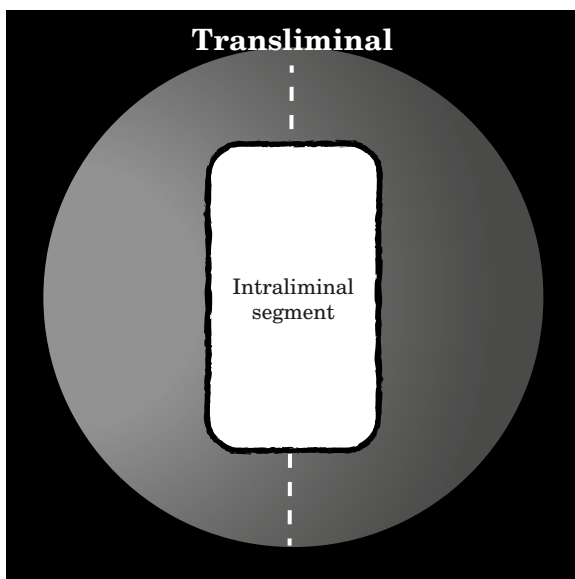
Instead, Myers asserts that supraliminal consciousness reflects only selected psychological elements and processes in the subliminal selves in adaptation to the needs of our present environment; the biological organism, rather than producing consciousness, is the adaptive mechanism that limits and shapes ordinary waking consciousness from this larger latent Self.

From this point onwards, Myers complexified his own model to better reflect his thinking, while unfortunately retaining the same vocabulary of subliminal and supraliminal.

#### THE SECOND MYERSIAN TOPOGRAPHY: TRANSLIMINAL AND INTRALIMINAL

##### *The dynamics of consciousness*

Myers proposed a very simple redefinition of consciousness that allows one not to restrict it to the supraliminal: what is potentially memorable must be



*Figure 2. Myersian second topography.*

regarded as conscious (Myers, 1903, pp. 36–37). It is not complexity that defines consciousness.

Therefore, to speak of the subliminal with notions such as ‘subconscious’ or ‘unconscious’ is nonsense: the subliminal is only transiently ‘outside the field’ of vigilant attention, but it involves processes that are both complex and potentially memorable (Myers, 1892a, p. 305).

Hence, Myers describes the mind as a complex, fluctuating and ever-changing interplay between subliminal and supraliminal elements and processes. In doing so, he builds on the Jacksonian model of the dynamic hierarchy of functions, which becomes the basis of his personality model.

#### *The spectrum of light: Centre and periphery*

To convey his ideas, Myers chose another spatial image from physics: that of a ray of light passing through a prism to present the entire light spectrum. In this model, the supraliminal, which was likely to be interpreted as a higher region, is now reduced to a segment of the light spectrum, with a boundary with the ‘infrared region’ on its left and a boundary with the ‘ultraviolet region’ on its right (Myers, 1885a, p. 234).

On the basis of this analogy, the previous ‘surface/depth’ division is replaced by a ‘centre/periphery’ division. We can therefore correct Myers’s terminology by referring to the ‘transliminal’ (ex-subliminal) and the ‘intraliminal’ (ex-supraliminal), depending on whether we are outside or inside this segment (Figure 2).

### *Properties of the transliminal*

Myers notes in particular that the transliminal uses more symbolic than linguistic material (Myers, 1903), and has closer control over the psychosomatic and the spiritual. Entry into the transliminal allows access to greater internal plasticity:

The somnambulant state does indeed appear to involve two completely different faculties, the self-curative faculty and the telesthetic faculty, i.e. a more complete bodily recovery and a more independent spiritual activity. The spirit thus becomes more capable either of attracting meta-etheric energy to the organism, or of acting independently of the organism. (Myers, 1905, p. 189)

These properties of the transliminal suggest that it has a closer proximity to an ontologically primordial substance at the heart of reality, that of living and inert matter. This can be compared with the psychophysically neutral or *unus mundus* domain developed in generalized quantum theory (Atmanspacher & Rickles, 2022).

### *Subdivisions of the transliminal*

Myers now expresses more clearly his polarized identification of both ‘dissolving’ and ‘evolving’ processes within the transliminal. The infrared region refers to dissolving processes where “consciousness disappears among organic processes” (Myers, 1894–1895, p. 197).

The ultraviolet region refers to evolutionary processes where “mental capacities which remain latent because they have not yet emerged to a supraliminal level by adaptive evolutionary processes” (Myers, 1894–1895, p. 197). These new modes of operation appear rarely, fleetingly and briefly. They are “super-conscious operations” that are “above the higher horizon of consciousness” (Myers, 1886b, p. 285). These latent, ‘ultraviolet’ abilities include telepathy, inspirations of creative genius, mystical perceptions and so on.

Myers distinguishes between lower, middle and upper centres:

- the *autonomic*, which deals with unconscious physiological processes
- the *hypnotic*, a powerful stratum that responds positively or negatively to suggestions from external sources or from the workings of its own imaginative faculty
- the *higher subliminal*, a source of inspiration, creativity and spirituality.

It remains difficult, however, to place the ‘middle’ hypnotic centre anywhere but on the side of dissolving functions.

## AUTOMATISMS AND PSYCHOSCOPES

### *The notion of psychoscope*

In 1885, in one of his first essays on automatic writing, Myers (1885a) introduced the notion of *autoscope* (proposed by fellow physicist William

Barrett) or *psychoscope* to designate any instrument that reveals a motor impulse or a subliminal sensory impulse, i.e., any device that allows motor or sensory automatisms to emerge (Evrard & Frigaux, 2021).

He went further, defending what he called the *psychoscopic method* as the ultimate experimental approach to human personality (Myers, 1885b). He proposed that hypnosis, automatic writing, crystal vision, drugs, and other psychoscopes should be to psychology what the spectroscope is to the analysis of light, i.e., the means of studying the different layers and properties of the psyche.

In addition to ‘artificial’ psychoscopes, Myers invited psychologists to take an interest in sleep and dreams. Years before Freud, Myers emphasized their importance as a method of accessing the unconscious, a source of creativity, personal introspection, and telepathic content. In his view, dreams should be the subject of much more in-depth analysis of their language and their real and symbolic content than they had been in the past.

Myers (1892b) asserted that orthodox physiological psychology was imposing methods alien to its object, instead of gradually developing original methods adapted to the specific problems posed by the human mind. In his view, neurology could only photograph the psychic fortress from the outside, without being able to collect direct evidence of what was going on inside (Myers, 1892b, pp. 442–443). He compared his fellow psychologists to “surface miners”, whereas “psychists” undertook the more difficult task of mining at depth (Myers, 1898, p. 147).

Surface research ran the risk of not being sufficiently intimate to lead to real discoveries about the workings of the mind. Today, this opposition can be seen in neuroscientific studies, or simply questionnaire-based studies of personality and psychopathology, set against projective methods that claim to be able to analyse otherwise inaccessible intrapsychic functioning (Evrard & Frigaux, 2021).

### *The dynamics of automatisms*

Myers defines automatisms as:

messages from the subliminal to the supraliminal self; endeavours-conscious or unconscious-of submerged tracts of our personality to present to ordinary waking thought fragments of a knowledge which no ordinary waking thought could attain. (Myers, 1903, p. 169)

Automatisms thus correspond to all exchanges or communications of material between these two zones, regardless of the subdivisions of the transliminal (Kelly et al., 2007, p. 87). They could therefore be interpreted as *thrusts from the transliminal that penetrate the intraliminal*.

There are two types: motor automatisms and sensory automatisms. The latter are the products of the senses, externalized in such a way as to take on the character of quasi-perceptions. Similarly, motor automatisms show that

intelligent actions can be organized without the aid of waking consciousness. These include dreams, second personalities, hypnosis, automatic writing, trance-like speech, spurts of inspiration translated into supraliminal expressions, and so on. Myers stressed that these automatisms were not necessarily pathological, clearly opposing Janet on this point (Evrard et al., 2018; Myers, 1889). On the contrary, the messages they contained could be useful to the conscious mind in the form of advice or warnings (monitions).

### *Psychic permeability and trances*

These automatisms are processes over which the intraliminal exerts little control, particularly psychosomatic and paranormal processes (which Myers terms *supernormal*).

If the transliminal resides on the periphery, then dissociation could correspond to a *centripetal process* channelling material toward the intraliminal. Conversely, conscious attention becomes a *centrifugal process* illuminating areas of the transliminal through extension, contraction, or displacement—as seen in memory recall.

In all cases, this implies that the boundaries between the two realms are *permeable*, with a lability that enables adaptation to shifting circumstances. Flournoy (1911, p. 248) summarizes: “there are perpetual exchanges and fluctuating borders—the separation level is not fixed, the partition is not impermeable, the threshold is not insurmountable between these two parts of our being”. Not only is there constant material exchange between these regions (i.e., ongoing dissociation and attention) but on the individual level “the personality of each of us is in a state of constantly shifting equilibrium” (Myers, 1893, p. 9). Such formulations were remarkably ahead of the cybernetic models of personality that would emerge half a century later. They challenge our conventional view of ‘altered states of consciousness’, which assume a ‘static’ baseline consciousness rather than the fluidity James advocated.

All modifications of consciousness thus stem from instability or ‘permeability’ in the psychological boundaries between intraliminal and transliminal processes. This aligns with body–mind models proposing that the brain’s role is not to *produce* the mind but to *enable* its adaptive intervention (Bergson, 1896; Kelly et al., 2007).

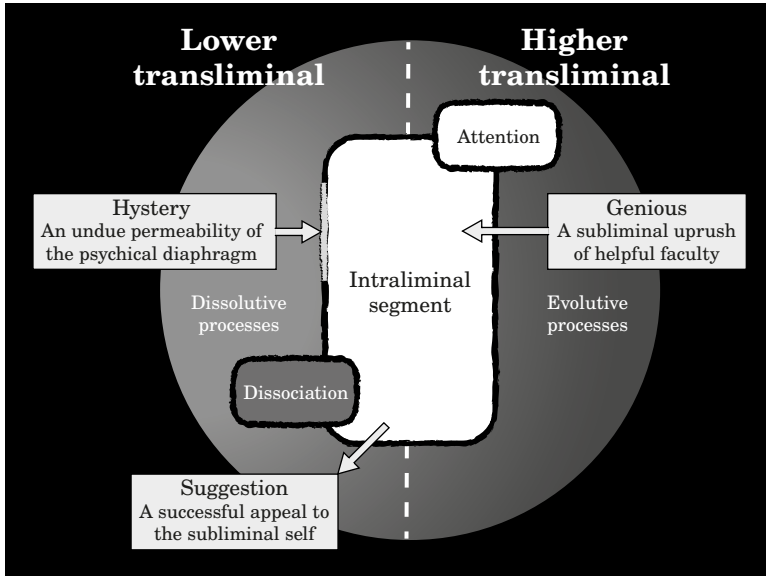
For Flournoy (1911, p. 261), the value of Myers’s model lies in its generative imagery (Figure 3):

- *hysteria* is “an undue permeability of the psychical diaphragm”
- *genius* is “a subliminal uprush of helpful faculty”
- *suggestion* is “a successful appeal to the subliminal self”.

### POSTERITY OF THE TRANSLIMINAL

In his *Varieties of Religious Experiences*, James (1902, p. 242) employs Myers’s model to conceptualize “porous or perforated” boundaries and





*Figure 3. Dynamics of automatisms between transliminal and intraliminal.*

individual differences regarding “leaks” of data situated below the threshold. He overcomes the terminological issue by proposing to call the fully illuminated level of consciousness Region A and the rest Region B, “the domain of everything latent and the reservoir of everything that passes unregistered or unobserved”.

The notion of ‘transliminal leakage’ was evoked in parapsychological research as early as 1909 to explain how telepathy connects two subliminal selves (Usher & Burt, 1909). Subsequently, this term was forgotten before being reemployed in a different context more than 80 years later.

#### *Psychometric measures of the transliminal*

Starting in 1991, without reference to Myers, psychometric proposals emerged to measure ‘psychic boundaries’. First, Hartmann’s (1991) psychic permeability questionnaire identifies thin or thick boundaries (see Simmonds-Moore, 2010a, 2010b). Then, Australian psychologist Michael Thalbourne (1991) discovered, somewhat by chance, a unique factor associating different dimensions of psychic life, which he termed “transliminality”.

Thalbourne’s transliminality scale underwent several refinements and now describes a remarkable aspect of psychic life. Thalbourne et al. (1997, p. 305) redefined transliminality as “susceptibility to, and awareness of, large volumes of imagery, ideation and affect—these phenomena being generated by subliminal, supraliminal and/or external input”. A simpler definition was later proposed:

Transliminality is a hypersensitivity to psychological material originating in (a) the unconscious, and/or (b) the external environment. 'Psychological material' is taken to cover ideation, imagery, affect and perception, and thus is a rather broad concept. (Thalbourne & Maltby, 2008, p. 1617)

This definition intertwines concepts different from those of Myers that Thalbourne had theorized himself. Since its establishment, the concept of transliminality (Thalbourne, 2010) has been highly successful in its ability to connect disparate processes, certain psychological and psychopathological traits, openness to paranormal beliefs and experiences, and parapsychological performances. Recent work on hypersensitivity and psi further reinforces this view (Roxburgh et al., 2024). It would be interesting to strengthen the connections between contemporary measurement tools and the observations made by Myers and his colleagues in their time.

### *Clinical aspects of the transliminal*

Psychologist Gordon Claridge (1997, 2010) revisited the notion of the transliminal to better describe 'schizotypy', characterized by a tendency to have paranormal beliefs and experiences, in a less stigmatizing way than with common psychiatric vocabulary. Psychologist Isabel Clarke (2014) expanded on this idea by developing a transpersonal psychotherapy approach to this 'transliminal' zone that blends psychosis, spirituality, and paranormality. The process of 'crossing thresholds' into or out of consciousness seems to have broad potential applications to a large number of psychological phenomena, which can thus be described more parsimoniously as the consequence of a highly transliminal mind. However, the current connotations of 'transliminal' are more restricted than those envisaged by Myers for his 'subliminal'.

### CONCLUSION

Myers's name is inseparable from the concept of the subliminal. However, I am suggesting abandoning this term, as it fails to account for the complexity of his model. While there is indeed a boundary between two forms of psychic life, there is no hierarchy between these two consciousnesses, but rather a relationship of continuous collaboration and symbiosis.

It seems clearer to identify a segment of intraliminal consciousness responding to certain properties, largely studied by cognitive psychology; and beyond this a segment that refers to a broad field still too little explored. Myers proposed an initial mapping of this space, with subdivisions reflecting a hierarchy of functions inherited from Hughlings Jackson (who happened to be the physician of his brother Arthur, a severe epileptic). However, his posthumously published work invites us to think that Myers himself did not fully resolve the problem to which James gave his name. We must therefore continue to explore the transliminal and its relationships with intraliminal consciousness.

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