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**Magnetic Occultism
in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Italy: Mesmerism
as a Science of the Soul in the Writings
of Francesco Orioli and Taddeo Consoni***



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Introduction

In recent decades, the historiography of animal magnetism has advanced significantly. Building on the foundational studies of Robert Darnton and Henri Ellenberger, which dominated the field until the 1980s¹, the 1990s witnessed important contributions from Adam Crabtree, Nicole Edelman, and Bertrand Méheust. These scholars examined both the historical development and the cultural significance of mesmerism, focusing on several key aspects: its connections to emerging psychological disciplines and its role in shaping the concept of the «unconscious»²; the networks of female somnambulists and seers in nineteenth-century French society, which served as hubs for spiritual and political innovation³; and the influence of animal magnetism as a precursor to *fin de siècle* parapsychology⁴. Subsequent research has further illuminated mesmerism's role in fostering new spiritualities, particularly within German Romanticism⁵ and the French occult revival⁶. In Italy, in the wake of Gallini's seminal monograph⁷, research has explored how mesmerism was addressed by religious institutions⁸ as well as its impact on literary production⁹.

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¹ R. Darnton, *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1968; F. Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry*, London, Penguin, 1970.

² A. Crabtree, *From Mesmer to Freud. Magnetic Sleep and the Roots of Psychological Healing*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1993.

³ N. Edelman, *Voyantes, guérisseuses et visionnaires en France. 1785-1914*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1995.

⁴ B. Méheust, *Somnambulisme et médiumnité*, 2 vols., Le Plessis-Robinson, Institut Synthélabo pour le progrès de la connaissance, 1999.

⁵ L. Montiel, *Magnetizadores y sonámbulas en la Alemania romántica*, Madrid, Frenia, 2008; A. Faivre, «Éloquence magique», ou descriptions des mondes de l'au-delà explorés par le magnétisme animal. Au carrefour de la Naturphilosophie romantique et de la théosophie chrétienne (première moitié du XIX^e siècle), in «Aries», VIII, 2008, pp. 191-228; W.J. Hanegraaff, *Magnetic Gnosis: Somnambulism and the Quest for Absolute Knowledge*, in A. Kilcher et al. (eds.), *Die Enzyklopädie der Esoterik: Allwissensmythen und universalwissenschaftliche Modelle in der Esoterik der Neuzeit*, Paderborn, Wilhelm Fink, 2010, pp. 259-276; K. Baier, *Romantischer Mesmerismus und Religion*, in D. Cyranka - D. Matut - C. Soboth (eds.), *Finden und Erfinden. Die Romantik und ihre Religionen*, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 2020, pp. 13-54.

⁶ See for instance J.-P. Brach, *Psychic Disciplines: The Magnetizer as Magician in the Writings of Jules Dupotet de Sennevoy (1796-1881)*, in G. Hedesan - T. Rudbøg (eds.), *Innovation in Esotericism from the Renaissance to the Present*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, pp. 185-200.

⁷ C. Gallini, *La sonnambula meravigliosa. Magnetismo e ipnotismo nell'Ottocento italiano*, Rome, L'Asino d'oro, 2013 (1st ed. 1983).

⁸ D. Armando, *Documenti sul magnetismo animale nell'Archivio del Sant'Uffizio (1838-1908)*, in «Rivista di storia del Cristianesimo», II, 2005, 2, pp. 459-477; *Magnetismo animale*, in A. Prosperi (ed.), *Dizionario storico dell'Inquisizione*, Pisa, Edizioni della Normale, 2010, vol. 2, pp. 960-961; *Spiriti e fluidi. Medicina e religione nei documenti del Sant'Uffizio sul magnetismo animale (1840-1856)*, in M.P. Donato et al. (eds.), *Médecine et religion: compétitions, collaborations, conflits (XII^e-XX^e siècles)*, Paris-Rome, Éditions de l'École française de Rome, 2013, pp. 195-225; *Le Saint-Office romain face au magnétisme animal*, in B. Belhoste - N. Edelman (eds.), *Mesmer et mesmérismes. Le magnétisme*

This paper examines the Italian context of the 1840s and 1850s, exploring how animal magnetism foreshadowed various occult concepts and practices that emerged later in the century. To frame this discussion, however, it is necessary to clarify terminology. In this context, «occultism» refers to a range of nineteenth-century movements and cultures characterized by two primary features. First, these movements advocated for the empirical investigation of hidden forces in nature and human beings, seeking to validate phenomena that seemed to reveal the existence of multiple ontological levels. Second, they aimed to reorganize and re-systematize the body of knowledge traditionally referred to as «occult philosophy» and «occult sciences» (magic, astrology, alchemy, and Paracelsianism)¹⁰. This field, increasingly marginalized since the seventeenth century, was now reassessed through the lens of newer concepts drawn from Swedenborgianism and animal magnetism, in an attempt – as Hanegraaff interprets it – to reconcile traditional esoteric thought patterns with the secular and rational perspectives of modernity¹¹.

1. Building Up an Occult Magnetism

As Brach noted, animal magnetism was from the beginning associated with the occult sciences¹². This comparison was made both by its opponents, who sought to discredit it, and by Mesmer and his followers, who often presented the mesmeric agent – the «fluid» – as the ultimate scientific explanation for ancient mysteries, occult phenomena, and biblical miracles. Within the German context this notion was systematically developed by *Naturphilosophen* such as Karl August von Eschenmayer and Joseph Ennemoser¹³. The most sophisticated forms of «occult magnetism», however, emerged in mid-nineteenth-

animal en contexte, Paris, Omniscience, 2015, pp. 211-224; *The 19th-Century Debate on Animal Magnetism Viewed from Rome: the Holy Office's Decrees*, in «Laboratorio dell'ISPF», XIX, 2022, 11, DOI: 10.12862/Lab22RMD (accessed on July 16, 2024).

⁹ G. Polizzi, *Alla ricerca dello "specioso" e dell'"insolito". Francesco Orioli e Giacomo Leopardi*, in «Lettere Italiane», LX, 2008, 3, pp. 394-419; G. Ambrosino, *Leopardi e il mesmerismo: una lettura in chiave magnetica del Tasso*, in «Enthymema», XXVII, 2021, pp. 31-43; P. Cori, *Ipnatismo e iperrealità. Spunti per un dialogo tra Leopardi e il postmoderno*, in «Italian Studies», LXXIV, 2019, 3, pp. 260-277; Id., *Italian Mesmerism, Religion and the Unconscious. Irresistible Analogies from Muratori to Morselli*, in A. Aloisi - F. Camilletti, *Archaeology of the Unconscious*, London, Routledge, 2019, pp. 113-140; A. Iacarella, *Sonnambule e giovani ribelli: il positivismo italiano nello specchio della letteratura scapigliata*, in «Il sogno della farfalla», XXX, 2021, 2, pp. 47-69.

¹⁰ M. Pasi, *Occultism*, in K. von Stuckrad (ed.), *The Brill Dictionary of Religion*, Leiden, Brill, 2006, vol. 3, pp. 1364-1368.

¹¹ W.J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*, Leiden, Brill, 1996.

¹² J.-P. Brach, *Psychic Disciplines*, cit., pp. 191-192.

¹³ A. Crabtree, *From Mesmer to Freud*, cit., pp. 190-194. On these authors, see also W.J. Hanegraaff, *Joseph Ennemoser and Magnetic Historiography*, in «Politica Hermetica», XXV, 2011, pp. 65-83, and Id., *Carl August von Eschenmayer and the Somnambulist Soul*, in L. Pokorny - F. Winter (eds.), *The Occult Nineteenth Century. Roots, Development, and Impact on the Modern World*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, pp. 15-35.

century French esotericism. A brief historiographical survey will elucidate the key stages of this development.

The first factor to be considered is the explicitly spiritualistic applications of mesmerism. As is well documented, these began to appear in the mystical circles of Freemasonry in Lyon at the end of the eighteenth century¹⁴. In this context, somnambulistic states were employed to explore spiritual realms and communicate with disembodied entities, marking the beginning of what Faivre called «magical eloquence»¹⁵ – i.e. speeches produced in a trance state aimed at describing «ultimate realities» – and what Hanegraaff referred to as «magnetic gnosis»¹⁶. However, for occult magnetism (as defined above) to fully emerge, the practice of somnambulistic trance alone was insufficient. Two additional components were necessary: a doctrine of the latent faculties of the soul and a study of their historical manifestation. In other words, both a theory and a historiography of trance states were required.

The works of Baron Étienne Félix d'Hénin de Cuvillers (1755–1841), editor of the *Archives du magnétisme animal*, made a significant contribution in this respect¹⁷. Following the Puységurian tradition¹⁸, Hénin focused on «artificial sleep» and equated animal magnetism with somnambulism, while categorically rejecting the notion of «fluid». However, Hénin also explored another prominent theme in earlier magnetic literature: the idea that the origins of mesmerism lay in a forgotten (or suppressed) «primitive tradition». This motif, first evoked by Charles Deslon, a disciple of Mesmer, in the 1780s, had captivated scholars such as Antoine Court de Gébelin and Jacques Cambry¹⁹. In *Traces du magnétisme* (1784) Cambry – the son of a naval engineer of the French East India Company and a man with a deep interest in Breton history²⁰ – argued for the existence of a universal doctrine concerning the mutual influence of planets, elements, and human beings. According to Cambry, Mesmer had merely

¹⁴ See A. Joly, J.-B. Willermoz et l'Agent inconnu des Initiés de Lyon, in R. Amadou - A. Joly (eds.), *De l'Agent inconnu au Philosophe inconnu*, Paris, Denoël, 1962, pp. 11-54; C. Bergé, *Le corps et la plume. Écritures mystiques de l'Agent inconnu*, in «Revue d'histoire du XIX^e siècle», XXXVIII, 2009, pp. 41-59.

¹⁵ A. Faivre, *Éloquence magique*, cit.

¹⁶ W.J. Hanegraaff, *Magnetic Gnosis*, cit.

¹⁷ See A. Crabtree, *From Mesmer to Freud*, cit., pp. 124-126.

¹⁸ I.e., the approach to animal magnetism developed by Amand Marc Jacques de Chastenet, Marquis de Puységur (1751-1825), who emphasized the importance of magnetic sleep (later known as artificial somnambulism) as well as the somnambulists' enhanced ability to access information during the trance state. For a detailed discussion, see D. Armando, *L'invenzione della scoperta. Il sonnambulismo magnetico tra Mesmer e Puységur*, in «Il sogno della farfalla», XXXII, 2023, 4, pp. 47-74, and A. Crabtree, «Historical Introduction», in A. Crabtree - S. Osei-Bonsu, *The Marquis de Puységur, Artificial Somnambulism, and the Discovery of the Unconscious Mind: Memoirs to Serve the History and Establishment of Animal Magnetism*, London, Routledge, 2024, pp. xiii-xxii.

¹⁹ A. Court de Gébelin, *Lettre de l'auteur du Monde primitif sur le magnétisme animal*, Paris, Gastellier, 1784.

²⁰ Cambry, who supported the French Revolution, was the founder of the Celtic Academy in 1804. See A. de Mathan (ed.), *Jacques Cambry. Un Breton des Lumières au service de la construction nationale (1749-1807)*, Actes du colloque de Quimperlé, 11-12 octobre 2007, Brest, CRBC, 2008.

rediscovered this ancient art, known to the Indian Gymnosophists, Orphics and Pythagoreans, developed by the medieval alchemists and still practiced in modern times throughout the world, from Africa to Japan²¹.

Hénin boldly applied such an occult hermeneutic to somnambulism. In his work *Le Magnétisme animal retrouvé dans l'antiquité* (1821), Puysegur's «artificial sleep» was viewed as the core of an ancient occult medicine which the author called «hypnoscopic» or «oneiroscopic»²². This science, cultivated in Asia, Egypt, Greece, and by the Romans, was, according to Hénin, later adopted by Christians and practiced in the Middle Ages «within the confines of monasteries and churches»²³. Hénin believed that this technique was rooted in the «immense power» of the imagination, which, he argued, drawing on Renaissance Paracelsian medicine, constituted «the secret of the ancient and modern magnetizers»²⁴. This idea that somnambulism was the ultimate source of an occult – and universal – divinatory medicine would inspire Aubin Gauthier's *Histoire du somnambulisme* (1842), which Crabtree considers «one of the best and most important histories of animal magnetism and somnambulism ever written»²⁵.

In the same year, 1842, the French Academy of Medicine definitively rejected animal magnetism. This decision, as scholars have noted, may have provoked a reaction from magnetizers who, faced with the insurmountable materialism of institutional science, began to emphasize the spiritual dimensions of mesmerism²⁶. By the end of the decade, however, the rise of occultism also became intertwined with the intellectual dislocations that followed 1848, including the failure of the liberal revolutions and the advent of the Second Empire, which halted efforts at profound social change. The closure of political horizons, police surveillance, and the decline of socialism contributed – as noted by Monroe – to a shift from «revolution to revelation», marking a transition from political struggle to spiritual utopias²⁷.

From the latter half of the 1840s onward, therefore, mesmerism moved away from the «discretion» that had previously characterized the field²⁸. Fueled by the success of early spiritualism, an occultist movement gained momentum,

²¹ A. Cambry, *Traces du magnétisme*, La Haye, s.n., 1784.

²² F. Hénin de Cuvillers, *Le magnétisme animal retrouvé dans l'antiquité*, Paris, Gueffier, 1821, p. 7.

²³ *Ivi*, pp. 175-183.

²⁴ *Ivi*, p. 183.

²⁵ A. Crabtree, *Animal Magnetism, Early Hypnotism, and Psychical Research, 1766-1925. An Annotated Bibliography*, White Plains, NY, Kraus International Publications, 1988, <<https://www.esalen.org/ctr/animal-magnetism>> (accessed on March 16, 2024). Here Gauthier shows that Greek divination and modern somnambulism were one and the same, and that the goal of the magnetizers was the search for the divine. Magnetic somnambulism would therefore have been a science of prophecy widespread among ancient peoples and rediscovered by Mesmer and Puysegur at the end of the eighteenth century.

²⁶ J.-P. Brach, *Psychic Disciplines*, cit.

²⁷ J.W. Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith: Mesmerism, Spiritism, and Occultism in Modern France*, Ithaca, Cornell University, 2008, p. 59.

²⁸ A. Viatte, *Les origines françaises du spiritisme*, in «Revue d'histoire de l'Église de France», XXI, 1935, 90, pp. 35-58, p. 35.

leading to a split within French animal magnetism. On one side were the «therapists», who focused on medical applications²⁹, while on the other were the «spiritualists», who viewed the psychic states of somnambulism as gateways to supernatural experiences³⁰.

Within the spiritualist camp, several key ideas emerged. First, magnetic ecstasy was conceptualized as a universal religious phenomenon, supposedly part of the esoteric teachings of various Eastern and Western traditions. Second, texts from this period boldly announced the dawn of a new era, driven by the revival of these ancient «ecstatic techniques» and destined to disrupt contemporary cultural norms and institutions, including Christianity³¹. Third, these writings solidified the concept of «magnetic magic», as elaborated by Jules Dupotet de Sennevoy and Henri Delaage³². Lastly, the psychic states of somnambulism were explicitly utilized to communicate with various spiritual entities, a practice prominently featured in Louis Alphonse Cahagnet's three-volume *Arcanes de la vie future dévoilés* (1848–1854)³³. These trends radicalized magnetism, shifting its emphasis from therapeutic applications to non-ordinary states of consciousness, set against a backdrop of millenarian anticipation of a forthcoming social and religious transformation – a sentiment later embraced by Éliphas Lévi's occultism and Allan Kardec's spiritism.

2. Francesco Orioli: A “Romantic Scholar” Between Science and Occultism

Although animal magnetism was not widely practiced in Italy in the early 1840s, it was by no means unknown. Two university theses defended in 1837 reflect the circulation of mesmeric theories in northern Italian scientific circles³⁴. The first, by Michele Bevilacqua of Verona, was presented at the University of Pavia, a major center for the dissemination of Romantic medicine, par-

²⁹ See J. Carroy, *Hypnose, suggestion et psychologie. L'invention de sujets*, Paris, PUF, 1991.

³⁰ G. Cuchet, *Les voix d'outre-tombe. Tables tournantes, spiritisme et société au XIX^e siècle*, Paris, Seuil, 2012, pp. 193-195.

³¹ Aubin Gauthier, for example, defines magnetism and somnambulism as «harbingers of a new era into which we are all about to enter» (A. Gauthier, *Traité pratique du magnétisme et du somnambulisme*, Paris, Baillière, 1845, p. 703). This theme was taken up and developed by authors such as Gentil, Delaage and Dupotet.

³² On Dupotet, see J.-P. Brach, *Psychic Disciplines*, cit., and A. Jeanson, *De la thérapeutique au spiritualisme: le baron du Potet de Sennevoy (1796-1881), prophète du magnétisme à Paris*, in «La Révolution française», XXIV, 2023, <<http://journals.openedition.org/lrf/7359>> (accessed on July 24, 2024). On Delaage, see J.-P. Brach, *Histoire des courants ésotériques dans l'Europe moderne et contemporaine*, in «Annuaire de l'École pratique des hautes études (EPHE), Section des sciences religieuses», CXVI, 2009, pp. 297-303.

³³ A. Faivre, «Éloquence magique», cit.; W.J. Hanegraaff, *The First Psychonaut? Louis-Alphonse Cahagnet's Experiments with Narcotics*, in «International Journal for the Study of New Religions», VII, 2016, 2, pp. 105-123.

³⁴ In northern Italy, the presence of animal magnetism is attested as early as the end of the eighteenth century. See D. Armando, *Il magnetismo animale tra scienza, politica e religione. Nuove fonti e ipotesi di ricerca*, in «Laboratorio dell'ISPF», II, 2005, 2, pp. 10-30, <http://www.ispf-lab.cnr.it/system/files/ispf_lab/documenti/atto_200105_armando.pdf> (accessed on July 24, 2024).

ticularly John Brown's vitalist theories³⁵. The second dissertation, defended in Padua, was by Carlo Maltini, a native of Mantua. Both works show the influence of German medicine, particularly that of Karl A. Ferdinand Kluge³⁶.

While these texts could be considered mere academic exercises, they reveal some intriguing aspects of the discourse on animal magnetism at the time. Maltini, for example, notes that the «state of exaltation» observed in sibyls and prophets «perfectly resembles that produced by certain magnetic crises»³⁷. According to Maltini, mesmerism could thus provide a «physiological and natural explanation» for «innumerable miraculous facts» previously considered supernatural³⁸. This kind of perspective likely raised concerns within the Church, as there was fear that animal magnetism might be used to «naturalize» religious phenomena. It is not surprising, therefore, that mesmerism came under the scrutiny of the Inquisition during this same period. As early as 1838, in a rescript on magnetism, the Holy Office stated that «the application [...] of purely physical principles and means to things and effects that are truly supernatural, in order to explain them physically, is nothing but a completely illicit imposture, worthy of heretics»³⁹. In the years that followed, a complex body of theological literature emerged that oscillated between outright demonization of mesmeric phenomena and their dismissal as mere fraud⁴⁰.

This brings me to my first observation: in Italy, the scientific discourse on animal magnetism developed both in parallel with – and sometimes in open conflict with – the narratives of religious institutions. Such an interplay, as we shall see, is apparent in what can be considered the most important Italian treatise on magnetism of the period: *Fatti relativi a mesmerismo e cure mesmeriche con una prefazione storico-critica* (1842), published in Corfu by Dr. Angelo Cogevina, director of the Civil Hospital, and the physicist Francesco Orioli (1783–1856)⁴¹.

³⁵ M. Bevilacqua, *Cenno storico sul magnetismo animale*, Pavia, Fusi, 1837. The thesis was defended under the supervision of Gian Maria Zendrin (1783–1858), professor of natural history and director of the Natural History Museum at the same university. Giovanni Rasori (1766–1837), Brown's translator, taught pathology in Pavia (see G. Cosmacini, *Il medico giacobino. La vita e i tempi di Giovanni Rasori*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2002).

³⁶ C.A.F. Kluge, *Versuch einer Darstellung des animalischen Magnetismus, als Heilmittel*, Berlin, C. Salfeld, 1811. Known for his classic classification of the different degrees of somnambulism, Kluge considered the fluid to be an «ethereal essence» with extraordinary properties that pours out beyond the bodily boundary, forming a subtle sphere around it. For a critical study of Kluge's essay, see L. Montiel, *Magnetizadores y sonámbulas*, cit.; S. Mielich, *Karl Alexander Ferdinand Kluge (1782-1844), der "animalische Magnetismus" und heutige Hypnosekonzepte*, Medizinische Fakultät der Universität Regensburg, August 2009, <https://epub.uni-regensburg.de/12343/1/doktorarbeit_FERTIG.pdf> (accessed on March 15, 2024).

³⁷ C. Maltini, *De mesmerismo dissertatio inauguralis*, Padua, Cartallier, 1837, p. 10.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹ Quoted by D. Armando, *Le Saint-Office romain face au magnétisme*, cit., p. 217.

⁴⁰ See F. Baroni, *Magic Revived. Theological Controversies Surrounding Animal Magnetism in Italy (1838-1858)*, in V. Vitanova-Kerber and H. Zander (eds.), *Esoteric Catholicism*, Berlin-Boston, de Gruyter, 2025, pp. 243-276 (forthcoming).

⁴¹ See M. Biondi, *Francesco Orioli e il "meraviglioso"*, in «Intersezioni», XXVI, 2006, 2, pp. 233-250.

While little is known about Cogevina⁴², Orioli, who is credited with the theoretical perspectives developed in this treatise, was an internationally recognized scientist. Born in Vallerano, in the Papal States⁴³, Orioli studied philosophy and theology at the seminary of Montefiascone; then, abandoning an ecclesiastical career, he devoted himself to the study of medicine and the natural sciences – while also gaining experience in the local Masonic lodges⁴⁴ –, and was appointed to a chair of physics at the University of Bologna in 1815. His involvement in the liberal revolution of 1831, which aimed to free Bologna from the Papal States, led to his exile. Orioli fled to Marseilles, then Paris, where he taught Roman and Etruscan antiquities at the Sorbonne⁴⁵.

By 1837, Orioli had settled in Corfu as the director of the Ionian College. In the following years, in his journal *Spighe e paglie* (1844–1845), he dealt with various «fringe phenomena», i.e. occurrences and experiences lying outside the boundaries of conventional scientific understanding. In a series of articles that foreshadowed parapsychology in both content and methodology, he explored such topics as Angélique Cottin, the «electric girl» examined by the physicist François Arago⁴⁶, and what we would now classify as near-death experiences, which Orioli categorized as «dreams of the dying»⁴⁷. Orioli also showed a clear penchant for magic and its history, as demonstrated by an article devoted to the use of «magic mirrors» – catoptromancy operations involving the evocation of spirits – in medieval Tuscany⁴⁸, a practice that brings to mind those developed a few years later by French occult magnetizers such as Dupotet and Cahagnet. All these writings testify to Orioli's curiosity regarding «wondrous» and anomalous facts, an interest that also led him to study the spontaneous combustion of the human body and the intelligence of animals, and to participate in the debate on table-turning in 1853⁴⁹.

⁴² *Ivi*, p. 240, note 19.

⁴³ Today Vallerano is in the province of Viterbo, in the region of Lazio.

⁴⁴ U. Marcelli, *La parte di Francesco Orioli nella rivoluzione del 1831*, in *Atti del terzo Convegno interregionale di storia del Risorgimento. La figura e l'opera di Francesco Orioli (1783-1856). Viterbo, 15-16 ottobre 1983*, Viterbo, Agnesotti, 1986, pp. 29-45, p. 29.

⁴⁵ See I. Veca, *Orioli, Francesco*, in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, vol. 79, Rome, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 2013, pp. 499-502.

⁴⁶ Anonymous (but F. Orioli), *D'una meravigliosa facoltà attrattiva e repulsiva in una fanciulla francese*, in «Spighe e paglie», IV, 1845, pp. 271-282. On Cottin, see N. Edelman, *Le cas Angélique Cottin (1832-1913), possédée ou "fille électrique"?*, in «International Psychology, Practice and Research (PIPER)», 2011, 2, pp. 1-13.

⁴⁷ *Dei sogni più in generale. Oneirocritica. Ancora de' sogni de' moribondi*, in «Spighe e paglie», IV, 1845, pp. 25-39 and 68-75. See M. Biondi, *Francesco Orioli e il "meraviglioso"*, cit., pp. 246-249 and Id., *Francesco Orioli precursore degli studi sulle NDE*, in *Gli universi della mente. Atti del X Congresso internazionale di studi sulle esperienze di confine*, San Marino, Ufficio di Stato per il Turismo, 2006, pp. 101-107.

⁴⁸ Anonymous (but F. Orioli), *D'un uso non conosciuto degli Specchi Mistici d'Etruria ne' secoli XIII e XIV. Di due passi dell'antico Biografo di Cola di Rienzo. E di quattro versi non ancor bene spiegati di Dante nel Purgatorio*, in «Spighe e paglie», IV, 1845, pp. 244-271.

⁴⁹ F. Orioli, *Delle tavole e degli altri corpi giranti per l'applicazione delle mani a certi speciali modi*. Opuscolo I, Rome, Tip. Legale, 1853; and Id., *In proposito delle tavole giranti. Esame dell'opinione che attribuisce questo fenomeno all'elettricità o al magnetismo animale e quindi Esame delle teoriche sul mesmerismo*

Fatti relativi a mesmerismo, however, was not Orioli's first foray into animal magnetism. The scholar, who as a teenager had personally witnessed cases of possession involving paranormal occurrences and bearing striking similarities to artificial somnambulism⁵⁰, had previously published the *Lettere critiche sul mesmerismo* (1817), whose influence on the poet Giacomo Leopardi has been acknowledged by critics⁵¹. These letters, addressed to the esteemed Professor Giovanni Aldini, nephew of Luigi Galvani and expert in muscular electricity, aimed to present magnetism not only as a theoretical construct, but as an empirical «fact», the evidence for which was undeniable.

In the first letter, Orioli distinguishes between «original» and «somnambulo» animal magnetism: the former operates within known physical laws, while the latter reflects an abnormal – and pathological – psychic state induced by the excitation of the nervous system⁵². In this condition, certain mental faculties, such as memory and sensitivity, are «marvelously heightened», making the «clairvoyant seem almost to belong to a higher sphere», with an intuition that provides access to «many things hidden from others, distant, and even future»⁵³. In the second letter, Orioli discusses the influence of the mind on the body, suggesting that a strong will, hope, or conviction can affect various «sensory and vegetative» life functions, thereby predisposing the organism to specific outcomes⁵⁴. Orioli boldly ventures into occult territory when he correlates this healing power of psychic origin with the *Archeus* of Van Helmont's Paracelsian medicine, a mediating principle between spirit and matter closely related

in generale. *Opuscolo II*, Rome, Tip. Legale, 1853. See M. Biondi, *Francesco Orioli e il "meraviglioso"*, cit., pp. 233-237.

⁵⁰ Between 1798 and 1800, together with the parish priest of Montefiascone, Luigi Polidori, Orioli had participated in exorcism sessions involving phenomena similar to mesmeric somnambulism. The subject exorcised by the priest was a young peasant girl from Bolsena, Maria Celeste, who suffered from «strong hysteria combined with nervous disorders so extravagant that not only the foolish parents, but also the wise men of the village judged her demonic» (G. Lombroso, *Roma e lo stato romano dopo il 1789 da una inedita autobiografia*, Rome, Tip. Dell'Accademia, 1892, p. 37). The ailments suffered by the young woman were dysmenorrhea and amenorrhea, dysfunctions that were typically treated by magnetic therapy. In a state of trance, the young woman, completely illiterate, spoke in refined Italian, answered questions put to her in other languages, developed complex philosophical and theological arguments, and had access to the exorcist's thoughts, as well as to information about distant or past events (see A. Cogevina, F. Orioli, *Fatti relativi a mesmerismo e cure mesmeriche*, Corfu, Della Tipografia del Governo, 1842, pp. 312-320).

⁵¹ See G. Polizzi, *Alla ricerca dello "specioso" e dell'"insolito"*, cit., and G. Ambrosino, *Leopardi e il mesmerismo*, cit.

⁵² F. Orioli, *Del mesmerismo altrimenti detto magnetismo animale e delle dottrine che ne dipendono*, in «Opuscoli scientifici», I, 1817, pp. 43-56, p. 51.

⁵³ *Ivi*, p. 54. In this state, which Orioli calls *neurosis claravisio*, the subject depends on the magnetizer's will, loses control of his own body and «puts the operations of the mind at the mercy of the operator»; on awakening, he has no memory «of all the things thought, said or done during the neurotic access» (*ibidem*). In addition to magnetism, this state can be produced «by the venomous bite of certain animals», or by certain nervous diseases, but also «by music, dance, electricity, a prolonged system of intense volitions» (*ibidem*).

⁵⁴ F. Orioli, *Orioli a Aldini. Continuazione delle lettere critiche sul mesmerismo*, in «Opuscoli scientifici», I, 1817, pp. 117-140, p. 130.

to the faculty of imagination⁵⁵, and when he claims that this blend of soul dispositions accounts for the beneficial effects achieved through talismans, enchantments, and other magical practices⁵⁶.

Orioli's exploration of mesmerism, initiated in the *Lettere*, was significantly expanded in *Fatti relativi a mesmerismo*. This volume, based on a series of magnetic therapies conducted by the authors, featured an extensive «historical-critical preface» that served as a bold manifesto for an emerging discipline. Here Orioli, asserting the independence of science from theology – a recurring theme in his correspondence with the Jesuit Giovanni Battista Pianciani⁵⁷ – sought to show that an entirely new approach was needed to fully understand animal magnetism. Magnetic phenomena, he argued, «transcend the sphere of common knowledge» and are «unpleasant» (*antipatici*) as they contradict established truths and challenge common sense. Based on their experiments with somnambulists, the authors made four key claims (*proposizioni*) to establish the reality of four distinct facts: 1) the beneficial influence one individual can exert on another through the will; 2) the induction of states of ecstasy (clairvoyance) by magnetism; 3) the ability of a person in an ecstatic state to diagnose their own illness, predict its course, and identify the most effective treatments; 4) the «vision of certain hidden or distant things, past or even future», described as «second sight»⁵⁸.

One of the hallmarks of this work is the care with which Orioli places such facts in historical perspective. While the extraordinary self-diagnostic abilities of somnambulists (proposition three) are traced back to a historical continuum that, as Hénin suggested, originated in the pagan practices of incubation and oneiromancy, later incorporated into Christianity⁵⁹, Orioli undertakes a detailed cross-cultural survey to support the concept of «second sight» (proposition four). Among the historical references cited are Hermotimus of Clazomenae (an iatromantis with shamanic features mentioned in ancient sources), «Caribbean magicians», «Finnish and Lapp sorcerers» and various other examples drawn from the Latin classics. With regard to healing through thought (proposition one), Orioli emphasizes its congruence with both folk traditions and the therapeutic practices of learned natural magic. These operations are performed «either by touch, direct or indirect, or by reciting various words and charms», or «by the use of various objects such as

⁵⁵ *Ivi*, p. 129. On Van Helmont's conception of Archeus, see W. Pagel, *Joan Baptista van Helmont. Reformer of Science and Medicine*, Cambridge, CUP, 1982, pp. 96-102.

⁵⁶ F. Orioli, *Orioli a Aldini*, cit., p. 137.

⁵⁷ At that time, Pianciani, professor of physics at the Roman College, was involved in the investigation of magnetism carried out by the Holy Office (see D. Armando, *Spiriti e fluidi*, cit., pp. 216-217). The correspondence between the two scholars begins in the early 1820s and shows that Orioli and Pianciani had known each other for some time. Eight letters from Orioli to Pianciani, dating from 1822 to 1846, are preserved in the archives of the Pontifical Gregorian University (574, 2, doc. 466-473). Three letters from Pianciani to Orioli dating from the period 1843-1845 are in the Biblioteca Vallicelliana in Rome (Ms. Z. 80, II, 112).

⁵⁸ A. Cogevina, F. Orioli, *Fatti relativi a mesmerismo*, cit., p. 21.

⁵⁹ *Ivi*, p. 28.

periammata, periapts, amulets, talismans, phylacteries, gamahes, abraxas, magic lamellae, astrological rings and seals, wands, sympathetic powders, characters, and charms, among others»⁶⁰. Orioli points out that such remedies do not work through some supernatural power, but rather involve «lesser-known forces of living nature operating under extraordinary circumstances»⁶¹.

Thus, in demonstrating the transcultural presence of magnetism, the author once again places particular emphasis on the *vexata quaestio* of the influence of the soul over the body. According to Orioli, the power of the will explains the effectiveness of various treatments that cannot rely on their mere mechanical effect, such as insufflation. The action of the will is facilitated by specific vectors, which provide an «irradiation» affecting the material world. The first one is the gaze, described as the «telegraph of the soul» and the «natural crossbow of love»⁶², traditionally used both to heal and to harm, as evidenced by the folk practices of the evil eye. The second vector is sound, whose «vibration» acts on matter⁶³. Orioli, who considers the therapeutic efficacy of music as indisputable, goes further by alluding to an esoteric musicology known only to a select few superior initiates⁶⁴. Even speech alone, however – i.e. without musical accompaniment – possesses a mysterious power of action, an «operative virtue» capable of activating certain «occult efficiencies of the soul», as suggested by a «concealed philosophy» (*filosofia riposta*)⁶⁵. If spoken words fail to produce «physical wonders», Orioli attributes this failure to the speaker's inability to activate them with his will⁶⁶.

⁶⁰ A. Cogevina, F. Orioli, *Fatti relativi a mesmerismo*, cit., p. 59. «*Periammata*» (περίαμματα) and «periapts» (περίαπτα) are Greek terms for talismans and amulets respectively. «Gamahes» are talismans with naturally occurring images or characters («Gamahé or Camaieu, a kind of talisman consisting of images or characters naturally engraved on certain stones, to which superstition has attributed great virtues, believing them to be produced by the influence of spirits»; J. Collin de Plancy, *Dictionnaire infernal*, Paris, Henri Plon, 1863, p. 295). «Abraxas» (ἄβραξᾶς) is a word engraved on certain antique stones (the so-called «abraxas stones») used as amulets or charms. The term gained significance in the 2nd century CE among Gnostic sects, particularly the Basilidians (see M. Le Glay, *Abraxas*, in *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, Band I, Zurich-Munich, Artemis Verlag, 1981, pp. 2-7).

⁶¹ A. Cogevina, F. Orioli, *Fatti relativi a mesmerismo*, cit., p. 59.

⁶² *Ivi*, pp. 77-78.

⁶³ Just as «the rays of the organ of sight» can act on matter, so the vibration of sound has an effect on bodies, «whether it be inarticulate voice, or articulated in language, or poetry, or song, or musical or non-musical sound, by the observation of all the centuries which have left us a uniform and constant memory of it» (*ivi*, p. 83).

⁶⁴ «Exoteric opinions», he writes, «already attribute great power to sound, whether in the form of human vocal or instrumental music, [music] which they consider to be the enchantress of the soul and the dominatrix of our affections and, through them, of the body. But the esoteric philosophers give it even greater importance, recognizing, beyond this common and profane music, the existence of another music, which constitutes an operative and superior science called apotelematic, unknown to the mass [*plebe*] of those who cultivate medical studies, but very well known to the restricted elite of adepts» (*ivi*, p. 84).

⁶⁵ *Ivi*, p. 88.

⁶⁶ «If, therefore, our words do not produce physical wonders, and are not powers, the fault lies with ourselves, who, content with uttering them and transferring to them the qualities by

Orioli is obviously teetering on the edge of magic here. To support his arguments, he then draws on a wide range of sources, including Paracelsian (Pomponazzi, Maxwell, Van Helmont), magical (Agrippa), and demonological literature⁶⁷. Ultimately, he examines the «substitutes for magnetic conductors» – tools such as wands, stones, and talismans – traditionally used in folk medicine to heal fractures, stop bleeding, or treat psychic disorders, which have gained popularity among contemporary magnetizers. And concludes: «We have thus proved what we wanted to demonstrate, namely the antiquity, demonstrable by facts, of the knowledge spread among men, as well as of the exercise of certain occult energies of the self [*certe occulte energie dell'io*], which operate outside or through the hand, the breath, the voice, or the gaze»⁶⁸.

This discussion, however, serves mainly as a prelude to the central thesis presented in the introduction. Orioli argues that across history and cultures, a consistent doctrine emerges based on two main principles. First, beneath the physical body lies a soul (*anima*) that, when encased in matter, experiences a diminution of its faculties. Second, under certain conditions – such as sleep, ecstasy, or near death – this soul can manifest its full abilities, including its divinatory powers. Orioli claims that this doctrine – which accounts for both magic and animal magnetism⁶⁹ – was embraced by such thinkers as Pythagoras, Socrates, and Plato, taken up by the Church Fathers, and later adopted by what we now term Western «esoteric» movements, such as the Paracelsians, Helmontians, and Rosicrucians. In the eighteenth century, however, it began to decline due to rampant materialism and opposition from the Church, which interpreted these phenomena as supernatural rather than natural⁷⁰. In this context, Orioli discusses the decrees of the Holy Office and tries to clarify the difference between magnetic phenomena and miracles and prophecies⁷¹.

which they signify, do not care, out of ignorance and mistrust, to attach to them, by a sufficiently vigorous act of the will, the qualities by virtue of which they *act* and *move*» (*ivi*, p. 89).

⁶⁷ *Ivi*, p. 95.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁹ «The above few words contain in themselves the natural explanation, not only of mesmerism, but also [...] of rhabdomancy, Perkinism, homeopathy and transplant medicine, of the much-vaunted virtue of armary unguent, of all sympathetic medicine, of that of amulets, talismans, periapts, pericarps, signatures, ligatures, seals, enchanted leaves, gamahes, etc.» (*ivi*, p. 111).

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁷¹ The magnetizer, according to Orioli, «acts as a man», conscious of using his own power according to his own intentions; the thaumaturge, on the other hand, relies on a power that comes from above. Moreover, miracles are characterized by an «absolute leap» from an earlier state to a later one, whereas the cures obtained through magnetism follow certain stages, they are obtained «degree by degree». Similarly, the divinatory powers of somnambulists differ from those of prophets in that they generally concern the evolution of diseases and are therefore limited to the prediction of «necessary» events, insofar as they are produced by present causes, and not «free», i.e. produced by the free intentions of men (*ivi*, p. 146). However, Orioli's position on this issue is not without ambiguity. He admits – and this is a crucial theoretical point – that man has no sure means of determining how far nature goes and where the supernatural begins, since according to philosophy (the influence of Kant and idealism is evident here) we only grasp the external aspect of phenomena, whose quiddity escapes us (*ivi*, p. 147). This sug-

Through animal magnetism, then, the soul can overcome its material limitations and access its «natural faculties», which are usually dormant. However, Orioli does not reject the idea of a «fluid»: this reactivation of the soul's powers requires the existence of a circulating «nervous energy» – influenced by the will – that can be transmitted externally and interact with the energy of another body. During magnetic sleep, the magnetizer's energy permeates the «nervous-cerebral system» of the magnetized individual, resulting in a loss of willpower. Detached from the external world yet still aware of the «fluid», the soul of the somnambulist can then reclaim its higher abilities. This would be enough to explain the extraordinary phenomena reported in the literature on magnetism. However, Orioli expands on this theory, focusing on the specific mechanisms underlying remote viewing, telepathy, and precognition⁷².

In summary, Orioli's innovation goes far beyond his theoretical contribution – specifically, his use of mesmerism to develop a new understanding of the soul and its «occult efficiencies» – and lies equally in his *historiographical* approach, based on the idea that the phenomena of animal magnetism point to a cross-cultural lore of «ancient wisdom» as well as to a «secret doctrine» of the soul that has been lost or forgotten over time. In particular, and compared to Hénin's work, for example, Orioli's stands out for his explicit use of modern esoteric literature to demonstrate the historical long-term continuity of magnetic phenomena. This approach entails a reframing of Western cultural (mnemo)history, suggesting a narrative of «forgotten knowledge» in which specific historical traditions (Platonism, Renaissance magic, Paracelsian medicine, and seventeenth-century esoteric currents) are reassessed and described as interconnected.

In this context, Orioli's work may have paved the way for later attempts to create an «occult historiography» by applying the lens of mesmerism to esoteric (and other) materials. In an influential study of Western esotericism, for exam-

gests that Orioli's distinction between magnetic phenomena and miracles might be more of a strategic argument than a firm conviction. Indeed, in his correspondence with Pianciani, Orioli expresses his deep belief in mesmerism based on personal observation, while also acknowledging the delicacy of the subject in relation to Church doctrine. This nuanced position reflects Orioli's attempt to navigate between scientific conviction and religious sensitivity in a context where the Church was increasingly critical of mesmerism.

⁷² For Orioli, remote viewing, for example, is nothing more than a prodigious extension of normal vision, which occurs when specific parts of the skin, receiving the «light rays» (or «light cones») emanating from external objects, are transformed by heightened sensitivity into the equivalent of the optic nerve (*ivi*, p. 168). Telepathy occurs when the clairvoyant «either through psychic action, intermediate radiations, or attention becomes easily able to read not only in his own brain, but also in that of the magnetizer, or in other brains [...] and thus appropriates the knowledge of that brain» (*ivi*, pp. 170-171). Hence the «knowledge of the past», which takes place when the subject, drawing from the minds of others, comes into possession of information about events he did not know. As for the knowledge of the future demonstrated by somnambulists, it concerns only «necessary» futures, that is, those produced by already existing causes, to which the seer has access, whereas when they seek to know «truly free futures», they very often fall into error (*ivi*, p. 174).

ple, Hanegraaff describes Ennemoser's *Geschichte der Magie* (1844) as original in its use of «mesmerism/somnambulism as the heuristic “key” for tracing the history of magic»⁷³. According to Hanegraaff, Ennemoser's most significant innovation lies «in his emphasis – which announces the progressive psychologization of mesmerism through the nineteenth century – that the true magic lies “in the most secret and innermost powers of the mind”»⁷⁴. Clearly, Orioli's 1842 work differed from Ennemoser's in both scope and scale (and in success)⁷⁵. However, the building blocks of their hermeneutics were quite similar. Thus, while Orioli may not have achieved the same level of influence as Ennemoser, his contributions provided a basic framework for interpreting esoteric traditions through the perspective of mesmerism, effectively anticipating later developments in the field.

Orioli's work thus invites various interpretations. Biondi, for instance, highlights Orioli's «solid critical sense» and his rational approach to controversial phenomena, portraying him as a «true precursor of modern critical thought»⁷⁶. From another point of view, however, Orioli appears to adapt a «Romantic» type of knowledge, as Gusdorf called it, to the Italian context⁷⁷ – a model that is all the more Romantic here given the motif of a lost wisdom, which would later become a staple of occultist discourse.

3. From Theory to Practice: Taddeo Consoni's Christian Mesmerism

Orioli's line of thought, then, aligned closely with esoteric discourses and practices, and was potentially relevant to theorists of an explicitly occult magnetism. In contrast to the French context, however, this trend is poorly repre-

⁷³ W.J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy. Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*, Cambridge, CUP, 2012, p. 273 (on Ennemoser's «magnetic historiography» see pp. 260-277).

⁷⁴ *Ivi*, p. 268.

⁷⁵ On Ennemoser's influence see Hanegraaff's remarks *ivi*, pp. 273-274. As to Orioli, the renowned Italian magnetician Francesco Guidi quoted him extensively in his treatises (see F. Guidi, *Trattato teorico-pratico di magnetismo animale*, Milan, Turati, 1854, pp. 6-13). In a section of the first edition of his *Praelectiones theologiae* (1835), the nucleus of his future treatise on magnetism and spiritualism (*Praelectiones theologiae de virtute religionis deque vitiis oppositis, nominatim vero de mesmerismi, somnambulismi ac spiritismi recentiori superstitione*, Regensburg, Pustet 1866), theologian Giovanni Perrone asserts that there is no difference between the power of magnetism and that of the imagination acting «outside the body», a theme addressed by Orioli in his *Lettere critiche*. In the Holy Office investigation, the two experts Onofrio Concioli and Giovanni Battista PIANCIANI also made extensive use of this interpretive model (D. Armando, *Spiriti e fluidi*, cit., pp. 216-217). It is also worth noting that the name of the «learned Professor Orioli» appears in *Mœurs et pratiques des démons* (1854) by Roger Gougenot des Mousseaux, an ultramontane Catholic, in support of the efficacy of magical signs (*Mœurs et pratiques des démons ou esprits visiteurs du spiritisme ancien et moderne*, Paris, Vrayet de Surcy, 1854, pp. 187-190). In keeping with his demonological approach, however, Gougenot eventually demonstrates that this power is of demonic origin.

⁷⁶ M. Biondi, *Francesco Orioli e il “meraviglioso”*, cit., p. 237.

⁷⁷ I.e. an approach that sought to present a coherent vision of the cosmos, emphasizing latent psychic faculties and the interplay between spirit and matter (G. Gusdorf, *Fondements du savoir romantique*, Paris, Payot, 1982). See also C. Gallini, *La sonnambula meravigliosa*, cit., pp. 53 ff.

sented in Italy. An interesting exception is the volume *Saggio intorno ai principali fenomeni del Mesmerismo* (1849) by the priest Taddeo Consoni (1801–1855). This book is notable for not only celebrating the therapeutic virtues of mesmeric techniques, but also arguing that magnetism could induce ecstasy, thus making it a religious – and Christian – practice. This interpretation, however, clearly bordered on heterodoxy. It inadvertently opened the door to a double-edged view: on one hand, it could be seen as elevating mesmerism to a quasi-religious status; on the other, it risked providing fodder for materialistic explanations of religious phenomena, potentially reducing ecstatic experiences to mere physiological effects⁷⁸.

Born in Grosotto, in Valtellina⁷⁹, to a noble Lombard family, Consoni attended the University of Padua, where he studied theology, botany, and various branches of historical and natural sciences. Ordained a priest in 1825, he published a method of shorthand the following year⁸⁰. In the 1840s, the eclectic ecclesiastic – who admitted to having a fascination with «uncommon subjects»⁸¹ – carried out studies on the tobacco plant (*Nicotiana*), the influence of the moon on terrestrial bodies, the devastation and restoration of the forests of Valtellina, and pedagogical treatises, of which no trace seems to have survived⁸².

In April 1849, Consoni attended a series of eight lectures on mesmerism in Florence, given by the Franco-Swiss magnetician Charles Lafontaine, who was touring Italy at the time⁸³. When asked by his fellow students to summarize Lafontaine's course, he chose instead to write a memoir for the Accademia dei Georgofili, which was ultimately rejected. Consoni then decided to publish a «pamphlet» on animal magnetism. Aware of the resistance the subject might provoke, he was determined to challenge conventional views. In his introduction, he claimed that mesmerism was an «almost divine» science, since it concerned «the highest thing in the world», namely the soul⁸⁴, and he was proud to

⁷⁸ On Consoni, see also my *Magic Revived*, cit.

⁷⁹ Today, Grosotto is in the province of Sondrio, Lombardy. Valtellina, historically contested between the Grisons and Milan, became part of the Cisalpine Republic in 1797, then the Kingdom of Italy under Napoleon, and finally the Kingdom of Lombardy-Venetia after 1815.

⁸⁰ T. Consoni, *Nuovo sistema universale e completo di stenografia italiana o sia esposizione elementare e metodica dell'arte che rende lo scrivere rapido quanto il parlare*, Padua, Penada, 1826.

⁸¹ T. Consoni, *Saggio intorno ai principali fenomeni del mesmerismo, altra prova dell'esistenza e divinità dell'anima contra i materialisti*, Pisa, Vannucchi, 1849, p. V.

⁸² G. Giucci, *Cenni biografici intorno al canonico professore Taddeo De' Consoni*, Naples, Avallone, 1845, pp. 57-58.

⁸³ On November 14 of that year, Lafontaine even had a private audience with Pius IX, whom he tried to convince of the usefulness of magnetism. See C. Lafontaine, *L'art de magnétiser, ou Le magnétisme animal considéré sous le point de vue théorique, pratique et thérapeutique*, Paris, Baillière, 1852 (1st ed. 1847), pp. 344-346. On Lafontaine's tour in Italy, see D. Armando, *A Case of Failed Syncretism? Animal Magnetism in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, between European Science, Magical Tradition and Catholic Reaction*, in F.P. De Ceglia (ed.), *Souls of Naples. Corporeal Ghosts and Spiritual Bodies in Early Modern Naples*, Rome, Viella, 2023, pp. 141-155, pp. 141-144.

⁸⁴ T. Consoni, *Saggio intorno ai principali fenomeni del mesmerismo*, cit., p. XI.

present it «under the aspect, if not metaphysical, at least religious, rather than merely and extensively therapeutic»⁸⁵.

Based on a distinction between soul, life, and physical body, Consoni's treatise echoes traditional esoteric discourse as well as earlier theories of mesmerism. The «thinking soul», breathed into Adam by God, is described as immaterial: it is a «simple and indefinable substance, capable only of intelligence and will», and a «portion» of the divine soul. The soul is distinguished from «life», or «psychic spirit», which is a «portion of the elemental motion, animalized by respiration and then circulated by the motion of the blood»⁸⁶. Like the *spiritus* of Ficinian medicine, «life» serves as a crucial mediator, connecting the body to the soul and transmitting sensory impressions to the latter through the nervous system, where the magnetic fluid circulates.

In the central part of the volume, the author closely follows Lafontaine's lectures, supplementing them with long footnotes in which Italian works are extensively cited⁸⁷, and including detailed practical observations on the techniques he employed to magnetize, accompanied by various illustrations. Emulating his mentor, Consoni incorporated music as a tool to induce magnetic states⁸⁸, and claimed to be able to provoke twelve types of phenomena, using different kinds of melodies to elicit specific responses. In addition to artificial sleep, Consoni was allegedly able to provoke extraordinary states such as «ecstasy» and «prayer», as well as «singing», «dancing», and even a form of «fury»⁸⁹. In the trance state, he writes, somnambulists are detached from the world, their physical senses are extinguished: they cannot see, feel pain, or hear sounds. However, they remain deeply connected to the magnetizer, perceiving not only his voice and movements but also his thoughts. In this state, the soul, separated from the body by the nervous fluid, regains its primitive freedom and is able to express its latent abilities, including clairvoyance⁹⁰. This account aligns not only with Orioli's theories, but also with the views of the influential Dominican orator Jean-Baptiste Henri Lacordaire, explicitly mentioned by Consoni⁹¹. Three years earlier, in a lecture at Notre Dame, which caused quite a

⁸⁵ *Ivi*, p. IX.

⁸⁶ *Ivi*, p. 26.

⁸⁷ In particular M. Poeti, *L'omeopatia paragonata agli altri metodi di curare le malattie, accompagnata da un Saggio sopra l'azione curativa del magnetismo animale nelle malattie nervose*, Turin, Bocca, 1848. See T. Consoni, *Saggio intorno ai principali fenomeni del mesmerismo*, cit., pp. 46-75.

⁸⁸ In his treatises, Lafontaine reported having exposed magnetized subjects to music and expanded on the effects of this treatment (*L'art de magnétiser*, cit., pp. 137-138). It is important to note that, since the beginning, «music played an important role in Mesmer's treatments» (D. Armando, *A Case of Failed Syncretism?*, cit., p. 146. On this point, see also M. Traversier, *L'Harmonica de verre et miss Davies. Essai sur la mécanique du succès au siècle des Lumières*, Paris, Seuil, 2021, pp. 273-292).

⁸⁹ T. Consoni, *Saggio intorno ai principali fenomeni del mesmerismo*, cit., p. 38.

⁹⁰ *Ivi*, p. 106, footnote 1.

⁹¹ *Ivi*, pp. 8-9.

stir in local magnetic circles, Lacordaire had praised magnetism as the path to the «Adamic power» of the soul⁹².

However, Italy in 1849 was a different context, particularly in light of the decrees issued by the Holy Office. Unsurprisingly, then, Consoni's activities were met with considerable suspicion from ecclesiastical authorities, particularly the archbishop of Florence, as well as skepticism from the medical establishment⁹³. In the second edition of his treatise, published in 1855, Consoni claims to have endured genuine persecution, to which he responds with a virulent and polemical tone. He proudly declares himself the pioneer of public demonstrations of magnetism in Italy, disputing this distinction with the more famous Francesco Guidi⁹⁴. Consoni also reports having conducted a research program on the phenomena of animal magnetism at the Physico-medical Society of Florence, which provoked outrage in local medical communities⁹⁵, and demonstrating his skills in the private mansions of the Florentine aristocracy⁹⁶.

⁹² «Well, yes, in a divine protest against the formulas of science that go back to Adam, God wanted this force to exist to show materialism that, outside of faith, there are still remnants of Adamic power on earth, remnants of earthly paradise that mark the power of our soul and prove that it is not completely bent under the yoke, that there is something beyond death» (quoted in A. Viatte, *Les origines françaises du spiritisme*, cit., p. 43). Lacordaire's sermon, delivered on December 6, 1846, was partially reproduced in the *Journal du magnétisme* (III, 1846, pp. 328-329) and referred to as early as 1848 by M. Poeti (*L'omeopatia*, cit., pp. 189-191). Jean-Baptiste Henri Lacordaire (1802–1861) was a leading voice in French Catholicism, known for his attempts to reconcile the Church with modern ideas. He had been a close associate of Félicité de Lamennais, a prominent (and controversial) advocate of liberal Catholicism, before breaking with him following the pope's condemnation of Lamennais in 1834. Lacordaire later gained fame for his powerful oratory, particularly his conferences at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris.

⁹³ T. Consoni, *La esistenza e spiritualità dell'anima distinta dallo spirito sensitivo prodotto del meccanismo organico contro i materialisti fatta rilevare in più fasi di mesmerica lucidità mediante una trentina di pubbliche gratuite accademie*, Florence, Bencini, 1855, p. 30.

⁹⁴ Francesco Guidi was a prominent figure in Italian mesmerism and a notable opera librettist. He published his first work on magnetism in 1851 (*Magnetismo animale e sonnambulismo magnetico*), followed by more extensive treatises in 1854 (*Trattato teorico-pratico di magnetismo animale*) and 1860 (*Il magnetismo animale considerato secondo le leggi della natura e principalmente diretto alla cura delle malattie*). Guidi practiced somnambulist medicine, established a «magnetic cabinet», and founded societies to promote mesmerism, including the Philomagnetic Society in Turin (1855) and the Zoomagnetic Institute in Milan. He also attempted to publish journals on the subject. As a librettist, he wrote texts for at least 24 operas performed in major Italian theaters. Guidi's work reflects the effort to spread magnetic culture across all social levels in northern and central Italian cities, positioning himself as a bearer of a new science. See C. Gallini, *La sonnambula meravigliosa*, cit., pp. 101-106.

⁹⁵ On these experiences, and the controversy that ensued, see T. Consoni, *La esistenza e spiritualità dell'anima*, cit., pp. 38-88, pp. 228 ff; pp. 261 ff.; a report by the commission appointed to witness the experiments can be found *ivi*, pp. 66-67. Consoni proposed, among other things, «to put the subjects all at once and without their knowledge into magnetic lethargy, and to send them into ecstasy by the influence of music» (*ivi*, p. 263).

⁹⁶ Consoni performed at the Palazzo Standish in Via Cavour, owned by the Englishman Lord Orlando (Volland) Standish, and at the home of Prince Giuseppe Luci Poniatowski, a diplomat and musician (*ivi*, pp. 176-177). This is in line with Gallini's observations that the

This updated version of the text contains several innovations, both technical and theoretical. Consoni, for instance, claims to induce magnetic sleep using a device of his own invention: six-inch glass tubes, one-third of an inch in diameter, containing three undisclosed substances infused with magnetic fluid, which he likens to Leyden jars, a technique attested in spiritual and esoteric circles of the time⁹⁷. From a theoretical point of view, Consoni ventures even further here, adopting a perspective that could already be described as occultist. Noting that animal magnetism was practiced in antiquity by priests «perhaps of all nations», Consoni suggests that these «ministers of the sanctuary [...] concealed by secret signs the most prestigious and powerful of their mysteries, entrenched behind the curtain of specious enigmas»⁹⁸. But for Consoni, the secret is now out: magnetic ecstasy is an empirical and reproducible fact, and so are the paranormal phenomena that accompany it⁹⁹.

For Consoni, then, magnetism embodies what we might call, to borrow Eliade's term, an archaic «technique of ecstasy» known to the ancients and kept secret for centuries¹⁰⁰. This idea – which can also be found in Guidi's 1854 treatise¹⁰¹ – was not only inspired by Orioli but also recalled earlier efforts in

«intellectual-worldly circles» where animal magnetism was practiced «gravitated around the aristocracy» (C. Gallini, *La sonnambula meravigliosa*, cit., p. 98).

⁹⁷ J. Deleuze, in his *Instruction pratique sur le magnétisme animal* (Paris, Dentu, 1825, pp. 95-96), notes that «some magnetizers use glass rods shaped like spindles» to channel the fluid and remarks: «These are as good as steel bars, perhaps even better». However, he does not seem to endorse this method specifically for inducing somnambulism. This application was explored by certain mystical groups of the time, such as the «Théosophes d'Avignon». In this context, according to Mirville, glass tubes were used to «pour magnetic insufflation on the person to be put to sleep», a gesture accompanied by prayers to the Angels of Light, the Virgin, and even the Soul of the Universe (J.E. de Mirville, *Pneumatologie. Des esprits et de leurs manifestations fluidiques*, Paris, Vrayet de Surcy, 1853, pp. 301-303). It remains unclear to me whether this «Société des Théosophes d'Avignon» was directly or indirectly connected to the occult group called «the Avignon Society» which was active in Berlin, Avignon, Rome, and St. Petersburg, between 1779 and 1807 (see R. Collis and N. Bayer, *Initiating the Millennium: the Avignon Society and Illuminism in Europe*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁹⁸ T. Consoni, *La esistenza e spiritualità dell'anima*, cit., p. 1.

⁹⁹ *Ivi*, p. 175.

¹⁰⁰ See M. Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. W.R. Trask, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1964 (first edited as *Le Chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase*, Paris, Payot, 1951). According to Consoni, practitioners included «the priests of paganism, such as the Bonzes of India, the Sibyls of the Greeks and Chaldeans, the Magi of Egypt, the Druids of Gaul, the priestesses of Vesta and other ministers of the sanctuary of Thoth, Brahma, Vishnu, Hermes and Serapis», right up to Cagliostro (T. Consoni, *La esistenza e spiritualità dell'anima*, cit., pp. 33-34).

¹⁰¹ «The priests of the Chaldees, the Bonzes of India, the Magi of Egypt, the Sibyls and oracles of the Greeks, the Vestals and Augurs of the Romans, the Druids of Gaul, were in antiquity the privileged depositories of this prodigious secret, to the mysteries of which the profane vulgar were not then initiated. If we open the Sibylline books, if we peruse the hieroglyphic annals of the priests of Serapis, if we consult, from this point of view, the pagan theogonies, those of Foo, Brahma, Hermes or Toth, in all of them we find the Sibyl, the magician, the Brahman, the Druid, obviously initiated into this eternal science of the human will, the sole source of their influence and the fundamental basis of their power» (F. Guidi, *Trattato teorico-pratico di magnetismo animale*, cit., p. 8).

the French and German contexts to establish a structural link between «magnetism» and «magic». Among French magnetizers, Baron Dupotet was the main proponent of this equivalence¹⁰². In *La magie dévoilée* (1852), Dupotet claimed that the source of all magic – and magnetism – was the power of the soul when separated from the body, and that through magnetism one could perform the miracles described in the Scriptures. As Brach notes, Dupotet «intends to level a “sacerdotal claim” for the magnetizer», presenting «the practitioners of Mesmerism [...] as the real priests, as opposed to an essentially Roman Catholic clergy whose discourses he considers actually devoid of “power” and, accordingly, of any real efficacy»¹⁰³. In 1855, therefore, Consoni fully embraced Dupotet’s occult discourse, while orienting it towards a distinctly Christian perspective. From another point of view, Consoni – who could read German – was perhaps influenced by a stream of thought characterizing German Catholic Mesmerism, where magnetic therapy was framed as a religious act, and the ideal physician was depicted as a «priest-doctor»¹⁰⁴. In the year in which the second edition of his volume on mesmerism was published (1855), Consoni died in circumstances that we have not been able to reconstruct.

Conclusion

While mesmerism enjoyed significant popularity in the Italian theater¹⁰⁵, its therapeutic practices were shrouded in controversy and faced considerable hurdles in gaining recognition as a scientific discipline. Furthermore, the influence of the Church, which still wielded some coercive power, probably led Italian writers to exercise caution and avoid conflating animal magnetism with spiritual themes, unlike what happened (albeit in different ways) in France and Germany. This may explain why occultism failed to gain a substantial foothold among Italian mesmerists.

On another level, the presence of a strong rationalist current may have contributed to the marginalization of occultist approaches. A notable example is the monumental four-volume work *Storia, teoria e pratica del magnetismo* (1845–

¹⁰² In 1852, Dupotet published *La magie dévoilée ou principes de science occulte*, a «detailed attempt at explaining and justifying the motives behind this overt but rather unexpected association of magic and Mesmerism» (J.-P. Brach, *Psychic Disciplines*, cit., p. 192).

¹⁰³ *Ivi*, p. 196.

¹⁰⁴ K. Baier, *Romantischer Mesmerismus*, cit., pp. 23 ff. For example, according to Karl Joseph Hieronymus Windischmann «animal magnetism as the “art of friendly treatment” is the crowning achievement of a truly Christian art of healing» (*ivi*, p. 23). A description of the ideal physician in priestly terms can also be found in the work of Nepomuk Ringseis (1785–1880). On these authors, see also M. Sziede, *Priest-Doctors and Magnetisers: Mesmerism, Romantic Medicine, and Catholic Thought in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*, in L. Pokorny - F. Winter (eds.), *The Occult Nineteenth Century*, cit., pp. 35-57.

¹⁰⁵ P. Guarnieri, *Theatre and Laboratory: Medical Attitudes to Animal Magnetism in Late Nineteenth-Century Italy*, in R. Cooter (ed.), *Studies in the History of Alternative Medicine*, London, Macmillan, 1988, pp. 118-139.

1846) by Giuseppe Pellegrini (1797–1879), a lawyer and man of letters from Lucca writing under the pseudonym of Lisimaco Verati, which quickly became a classic in the field. While acknowledging the existence of the fluid, Pellegrini seems to be targeting Orioli when he criticizes the «magnetic enthusiasm» and «spirit of exaggeration» that led some mesmerists to detect animal magnetism throughout history. He also dismisses clairvoyance and, in a discussion of divination, attempts to distinguish animal magnetism from what he considers mere superstition: the ancient Sibyls are relegated to «the heap of human follies»¹⁰⁶; astrology is described as a «scab»¹⁰⁷; magical phenomena are dismissed as «the fables of overheated or debilitated brains»¹⁰⁸. Pellegrini's scathing critique also targets Theosophy, the Rosicrucians, and Freemasonry, all of which are treated with a distinctively Tuscan irreverent wit¹⁰⁹. As for the paranormal phenomena associated with somnambulism, about which «exaggerated sectarians babble»¹¹⁰, Pellegrini denies their validity and reduces somnambulist experiences to mere psychic pathologies¹¹¹.

Thus, while the impact of mesmerism varied across different areas of the peninsula¹¹², occult magnetism remained largely on the fringes in mid-nineteenth century Italy. Nevertheless, and regardless of the stark contrast between their authors – Orioli, a renowned scientist, and Consoni, an erratic and maverick priest – the works examined here signal the emergence of a new discourse in Italian intellectual circles. This literature blended theories of altered consciousness and the hidden powers of the soul with esoteric interpretations of history, spinning new genealogies of «forgotten wisdom» and fueling new forms of mnemohistory¹¹³. In fact, these narratives echoed long-standing ideas in Italian culture. For instance, one could draw a parallel with Giambattista Vico's notion of an ancient Italian wisdom, as expounded in his *De antiquissima Italorum sapientia* (1710), which itself owed much to debates typical of seventeenth-century academies. These ideas now resonated strongly with the zeitgeist: the notion of a lost sapiential tradition found traction in Masonic circles, which were influential in shaping the cultural landscape of the period and would play a role in the debates on Italian national identity during the Risorgimento¹¹⁴.

¹⁰⁶ L. Verati [G. Pellegrini], *Sulla storia, teoria e pratica del magnetismo animale e sopra vari altri temi relativi al medesimo*, 4 vols., Florence, Bellagambi, 1845-1846, vol. 2, p. 244.

¹⁰⁷ *Ivi*, vol. 2, p. 268.

¹⁰⁸ *Ivi*, p. 311.

¹⁰⁹ *Ivi*, pp. 426-451.

¹¹⁰ *Ivi*, vol. 4, p. 130.

¹¹¹ *Ivi*, pp. 158-159.

¹¹² See D. Armando's remarks in *A Case of Failed Syncretism*, cit.

¹¹³ Mnemohistory, a concept developed by Jan Assmann, refers to the study of how societies and cultures selectively remember, forget, and reconstruct their past to serve present needs and shape collective identity. As Assmann puts it, «mnemohistory is concerned not with the past as such, but only with the past as it is remembered» (*Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1997, p. 9).

¹¹⁴ In his *De antiquissima Italorum sapientia* (1710), Vico argued for the existence of a profound metaphysical knowledge possessed by the ancient Italians. As Gian Mario Cazzaniga

Interestingly, the literature reviewed does not address spirit communication through somnambulism, an omission likely due to prudential reasons. This caution was not unwarranted, as evidenced by the Holy Office's condemnation of animal magnetism in 1856, which specifically targeted practices involving clairvoyance and communication with the spiritual world¹¹⁵. It is important to note that this period witnessed the rapid growth of spiritualism, a movement that shared many features with animal magnetism. This connection was not lost on Catholic writers, who often criticized both animal magnetism and spiritualism as «devilish» practices threatening the orthodox faith¹¹⁶.

However, it is possible that such interests were not entirely foreign to Italian spiritualist magnetism. In this regard, Giacinto Forni's *Del mondo degli spiriti e della sua efficacia nell'universo sensibile* (1850) provides intriguing insights. Forni, a physician with expertise in possession cases and a follower of the spiritualist visionary Andrzej Towiański, sought in this volume to demonstrate the reality of spirit communication. After mentioning the theosophical and occult currents of animal magnetism – from the Exegetical Society of Stockholm to contemporaries such as Dupotet and Cahagnet – he noted that «even in Piedmont, and more specifically in Turin and Alessandria, as well as in Genoa, interesting facts of this kind have been collected over the last decade by those who have persistently pursued magnetic investigations»¹¹⁷. Although Forni did not provide further details, these are valuable clues for future historians of Italian animal magnetism.

points out, the nineteenth-century narratives of an ancient sapiential heritage, rooted in a pre-Greek and pre-Roman Italic context, contributed to the process of elaborating a national identity and served as ideological tools in the struggle against feudal institutions and the Church (G.M. Cazzaniga, *Ermetismo ed egizianesimo a Napoli dai Lumi alla Fratellanza di Miriam*, in G.M. Cazzaniga, ed., *Storia d'Italia, Annali 25: Esoterismo*, Turin, Einaudi, 2010, pp. 547-566; see also C. Giudice, *Occult Imperium. Arturo Reghini, Roman Traditionalism, and the Anti-Modern Reaction in Fascist Italy*, Oxford, OUP, 2022, pp. 27-49).

¹¹⁵ D. Armando, *The 19th-Century Debate on Animal Magnetism Viewed from Rome*, cit.

¹¹⁶ See F. Baroni, *Magic Revived*, cit.

¹¹⁷ G. Forni, *Del mondo degli spiriti e della sua efficacia nell'universo sensibile, coll'esame di un caso d'ossessione osservato in Torino nel 1850*, in «Luce e ombra», XVI, 1916, 11-12, pp. 521-533, p. 522. On Forni, see C. Gallini, *La sonnambula meravigliosa*, cit., pp. 94-95.



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– *Magnetic Occultism in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Italy: Mesmerism as a Science of the Soul in the Writings of Francesco Orioli and Taddeo Consoni*

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the influence of animal magnetism as a precursor to occult concepts and practices in nineteenth-century Italy, focusing on the 1840s and 1850s. Through an analysis of the works of key figures such as Francesco Orioli and Taddeo Consoni, this study elucidates the emergence of a new discursive field that presents mesmerism as a tool for liberating the soul from its material constraints, while using its categories to interpret various magical and religious practices of the past, especially in relation to ecstatic techniques and the power of the mind over the body. The article also highlights the peculiarities of the Italian context, where occult mesmerism remained a relatively marginal trend, circumscribed by the Church and a strong rationalist current.

KEYWORDS

Francesco Orioli; Taddeo Consoni; Animal magnetism; Mesmerism; Occultism

SOMMARIO

Magnetismo animale e occultismo nell'Italia di metà Ottocento: il mesmerismo come scienza dell'anima negli scritti di Francesco Orioli e Taddeo Consoni. Questo articolo esamina il ruolo del magnetismo animale come precursore di concetti e pratiche occultiste nell'Italia dell'Ottocento, con particolare riferimento agli anni '40 e '50. Attraverso l'analisi delle opere di autori come Francesco Orioli e Taddeo Consoni, lo studio identifica lo sviluppo di un nuovo campo discorsivo, che descrive il mesmerismo come uno strumento per liberare l'anima dai suoi vincoli materiali, utilizzando al contempo le sue categorie per interpretare varie pratiche magiche e religiose del passato, soprattutto in relazione alle tecniche dell'estasi e al potere della mente sul corpo. L'articolo mette in luce anche le specificità del contesto italiano, dove il mesmerismo occultista rimase una tendenza tutto sommato marginale, contenuta dall'azione della Chiesa e da una forte corrente di pensiero razionalista.

PAROLE CHIAVE

Francesco Orioli; Taddeo Consoni; Magnetismo animale; Mesmerismo; Occultismo