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## MAGNETIC GNOSIS

### Somnambulism and the Quest for Absolute Knowledge

En sommeil somnambulique, l'âme franchit  
toutes les distances, parcourt les siècles et  
l'espace, possède toutes les vérités.

Henri Delaage<sup>1</sup>

#### I. Introduction

In Théophile Gautier's story *Avatar*, published in 1856, we read how the magnetizer Balthazar Cherbonneau introduces his client, a count Olaf Labinski, to a somnambulant girl:

Let's consult this young girl who is sleeping so quietly there in the corner. Question her: she knows more than the Pythias and the Sybils. You can send her to one of your seven castles in Bohemia, ask her what is hidden in your most secret drawers, and she will tell you, for her soul needs no more than a second to make the travel – not surprisingly, since electricity travels a distance of seventy-thousand miles in the same timespan, and electricity is to thought as a horse-coach is to a train-wagon.<sup>2</sup>

For all its brevity, this fragment contains a series of aspects that are highly relevant to the topic of superior, universal or absolute knowledge. First of all, the very theme of ›clairvoyance‹ implies a superior ability of gaining knowledge not easily accessible by normal means. The somnambulant girl in Gautier's story is believed to have direct and quasi-unlimited access to stores of knowledge and wisdom: she knows more than even the ancient oracles and seers, but might also be useful to get information about such prosaic things as stuff hidden in secret drawers. Second (and we will see how important this is), she has this ability because her soul is free from the limitations that space imposes on the body: her soul can travel anywhere in the twinkling of an eye. We will see that in many similar cases not only the category of space, but that of time as well is believed to be transcended in the somnambulant trance. Third, and typical of the period, the analogy with electricity suggests that

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1 Henri Delaage: *Le monde occulte ou les mystères du magnétisme dévoilé par le somnambulisme*, Paris 1851, p. 13, as quoted in Nicole Edelman: *Voyantes, guérisseuses et visionnaires en France 1785-1914*, Paris 1995, p. 62.

2 Théophile Gautier: *Avatar*, as quoted in Edelman: *Voyantes, guérisseuses et visionnaires* (n. 1), p. 7.

the somnambule's access to higher knowledge is grounded in a superior science: normal scientific knowledge is limited (again) by what can be observed within the categories of space and time, but a higher knowledge is possible, based upon mysterious non-observable forces such as electricity and magnetism. Fourth and lastly, the magnetizer invites his male companion to freely make use of the girl as an instrument of scientific exploration. Here and in the overwhelming majority of similar cases, we are dealing with heavily gendered power relations: the woman's role is that of a passive instrument which can be used by the male scientist at will<sup>3</sup>, but of course that scientist does need the woman's special intuitive abilities to make his investigations at all.

## II. Magnetic Somnambulism

The phenomenon of ›magnetic somnambulism‹ is usually traced to the year 1784, when the French nobleman Armand Marie Jacques Chastenet, Marquis de Puységur, was experimenting with the techniques of animal magnetism pioneered some ten years earlier by Franz Anton Mesmer.<sup>4</sup> As is well known, Mesmer believed in the existence of a universal, impalpable life force or ›fluid‹ which permeated the entire universe and connected human beings to animals, plants, objects, and each other. All human illnesses were caused by poor circulation of the fluid within the human organism, and hence a person's health could be restored by re-establishing the equilibrium of the cosmic fluid. The method of doing so was based upon making ›magnetic passes‹ over the patient's body. Mesmer decided to call his theory and practice ›animal magnetism‹, but note that for some time he had been considering the alternative ›animal electricity‹ as well.<sup>5</sup>

Puységur used Mesmer's technique to try and heal a young peasant, Victor Rae, who was suffering from inflammation of the lungs. To his surprise the patient fell into a strange, mysterious, and unusual state of consciousness, a trance-like state in which another personality seemed to take over. In this state, the patient began to give predictions about the development of his own illness and prescriptions for his

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3 For an interesting discussion of the erotic dimension of the somnambule's *rapport*, see Jacqueline Carroy: *Les personnalités doubles et multiples: Entre science et fiction*, Paris 1993, pp. 3-22 (›Eros magnétique et volonté de savoir‹).

4 For accounts of the early history of animal magnetism and somnambulism, see e.g. Henri F. Ellenberger: *The Discovery of the Unconscious. The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry*, New York 1970, pp. 53-83; Alan Gauld: *A History of Hypnotism*, Cambridge 1992, pp. 1-52; Adam Crabtree: *From Mesmer to Freud. Magnetic Sleep and the Roots of Psychological Healing*, New Haven/London 1993, pp. 3-53; Maria M. Tatar: *Spellbound. Studies on Mesmerism and Literature*, Princeton NJ 1978, pp. 3-35; Edelman: *Voyantes, guérisseuses et visionnaires* (n. 1), pp. 15-39; Bertrand Méheust: ›Animal Magnetism / Mesmerism‹, in: *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. by Wouter J. Hanegraaff in collaboration with Antoine Faivre et al., Leiden/Boston 2005, pp. 75-82.

5 Ernst Benz: *Franz Anton Mesmer und die philosophischen Grundlagen des »animalischen Magnetismus«*, Mainz/Wiesbaden 1977, p. 21.

own cure, seemed to be able to look inside his own body, and seemed to be able to read the magnetizer's mind. Puységur subsequently discovered that this altered state of consciousness could be reproduced at will, and in so doing, he became the founder of ›magnetic somnambulism‹ and what is nowadays referred to as ›hypnosis‹.

For Puységur, the main focus of magnetic somnambulism was healing, but still in the very same year 1784, a society called »La Concorde«, founded by the Martinist Jean Baptiste Willermoz, began to use it as a means to get answers to questions about life after death. As formulated by Nicole Edelman, in the hands of Willermoz and his collaborators, »somnambulism and somnambules became a strange theological tool, a means of investigating extraterrestrial worlds, a machine for answering metaphysical questions«. <sup>6</sup> As the vogue of somnambulism spread through France and Germany during the following years, the use of somnambules as ›information machines‹ became a standard aspect of their activity, along with their use as ›theological tools‹ for exploring the realm of metaphysics.

### III. Information or Gnosis

For our present concerns, it is important to distinguish between two kinds of knowledge that were claimed to be accessed by means of somnambulism. Often both of them were pursued by one and the same somnambule or magnetizer, but they should be kept apart analytically at least. On the one hand, somnambulism was used quite simply as a means to get *information*. This type is concerned with factual as well as practical knowledge, that is to say, with data about observable things and events that exist within our universe of time and space – either now, or in the past, or in the future – or with such concrete things as procedures or recipes for healing. On the other hand, somnambulism was also used as a means to attain what I would refer to as *gnosis*. In this case we are dealing with claims of direct access to a superior knowledge pertinent to dimensions of reality beyond the domain bounded by material reality, space and time – in short, with metaphysics. The first type of knowledge essentially pertains to the domain nowadays known as the ›paranormal‹ and studied by parapsychology: it is concerned with various claims of extra-sensory perception, telepathy, precognition, and the like. In contrast with this, the second type of knowledge – to which I will refer as ›magnetic gnosis‹ – is concerned not with empirical data or practical results that should in principle be accessible to empirical verification or falsification, but with ›meta-empirical‹ domains of reality that are beyond consensual reality altogether and to which somnambules are claimed to have direct access thanks to what is often called an ›internal sense‹. Such knowledge is sought not for pragmatic reasons, but as part of a quest for the meaning of existence. I will first discuss ›magnetic‹ knowledge of the first type and then discuss the second type at somewhat greater length.

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6 Edelman: *Voyantes, guérisseuses et visionnaires* (n. 1), p. 19. On Willermoz, see Jean-François Var: »Willermoz, Jean-Baptiste«, in: *Dictionary* (n. 4), pp. 1170-1174.

#### IV. Information Machines

The use of somnambules as ›information machines‹ relied on their claimed ability to overcome the limitations imposed on most of us by matter, time, and space. To begin with the first of these three: while material limitations often prevent us from diagnosing a patient's illness, somnambules were supposedly able to simply look inside the patient's body. To give only one example among many, Andrew Jackson Davis writes in his autobiography about what he perceived during a magnetic trance state in January 1844:

All things in our room [...] were surprisingly illuminated. Each human body was glowing with many colours, more or less brilliant and magnetical. [...] A few moments more, dear reader, and I not only beheld the exteriors of the individuals in that room – clothed with light as it were – but I also as easily perceived their interiors, and then, too, the hidden sources of those luminous magnetic emanations. [...] now I could see all the organs and their functions – the liver, the spleen, the heart, the lungs, the brain – all with the greatest possible ease. The whole body was transparent as a sheet of glass! It was invested with a strange, rich, spiritual beauty. It looked illuminated as a city. Every separate organ had several *centres* of light, besides being enveloped by a general sphere peculiar to itself.<sup>7</sup>

Davis then proceeded to describe the heart and the brain in considerable detail.

Concerning the transcendence of time, excellent examples can be found in the famous case of Friederike Hauffe, the ›seeress of Prevorst‹. Friederike was treated as a patient by the physician and Romantic poet Justinus Kerner, who wrote a famous book about her.<sup>8</sup> At one point she began to make complex circular drawings or diagrams, described by her as her ›Solar Circles‹ (*Sonnenkreise*) and ›Circles of Life‹ (*Lebenskreise*).

At one level – but there are in fact several levels, as will be seen – the Solar Circles are simply annual calendars in the shape of a circle: on the periphery we find exactly 365 small dots for the days of the year, and here Friederike noted down various events that were important to her physical, mental and spiritual condition. However, while in a somnambulic trance state, she claimed to be able to move freely into the space *inside* the circle, called the ›dream ring‹ (*Traumring*), where she was no longer constrained by limitations of temporality. In a normal state of consciousness she felt as if she were painfully stuck in time: ›I cannot go backwards, and forwards I have only the anxious feeling of *one* dot‹<sup>9</sup> (in fact, at noon and midnight, she always had the physical sensation of suddenly being ›pushed‹ half a dot forward along the periphery of the circle). But in a somnambulic state, all these limitations were gone: now she was free to move backwards and forwards in time, and hence she was able to make various kinds of predictions about what would happen to her on

7 Davis, *Magic Staff*, 215. (which edition?)

8 Justinus Kerner: *Die Seherin von Prevorst. Eröffnungen über das innere Leben des Menschen und über das Hereinragen einer Geisterwelt in die unsere*, Leipzig 1829.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 229.

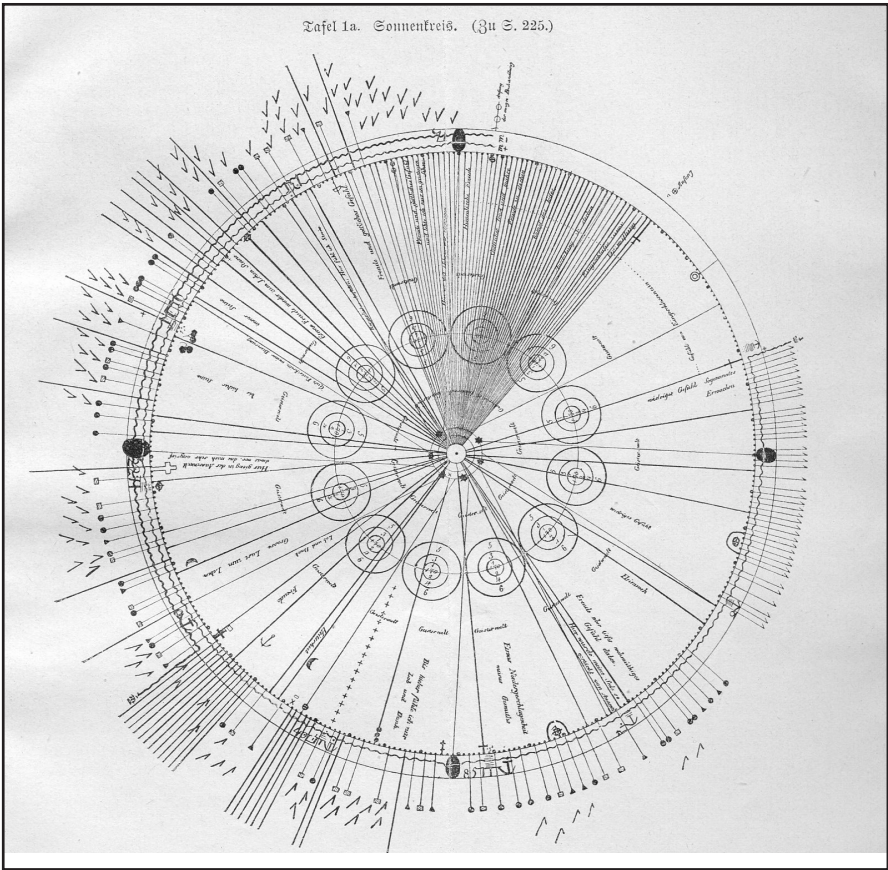


Fig. 1 Friederike Hauffe's *Sonnenkreis*

specific moments in the future or to give carefully timed prescriptions for specific medicines and treatments.<sup>10</sup>

As for the transcendence of space, finally: the power of ›traveling‹, faster than electricity, to any place in this world, and even to other planets, is among the most spectacular and most widely described aspects of the somnambulatory trance. Mesmerists often claimed Swedenborg as a predecessor and called attention to the famous stories of how he saw the fire in Stockholm while being many days away from it; how he was able to tell a noble lady, Mrs Marteville, the precise location – in a hidden drawer in her house – of an important document that she had lost<sup>11</sup>; and

10 For a more detailed discussion, see Wouter J. Hanegraaff: ›Versuch über Friederike Hauffe. Zum Verhältnis zwischen Lebensgeschichte und Mythos der ›Seherin von Prevorst‹«, part I, *Suevica: Beiträge zur Schwäbischen Literatur- und Geistesgeschichte* 8 (1999-2000), pp. 17-45, here pp. 31-36.

11 For the details about these and other famous stories about Swedenborg's psychic powers, see e.g. Cyriel Odhner Sigstedt: *The Swedenborg Epic. The Life and Works of Emanuel Swedenborg*, London 1981, pp. 269-286.

how he traveled to all the planets in our solar system, coming back with detailed information about their inhabitants and their ways of life.<sup>12</sup> As one example, among the many examples of similar travels in the mesmeric/somnambulatory context, let us look at the famous novel *Ghost Land*, published anonymously but attributed to Emma Hardinge Britten.<sup>13</sup> The narrator describes how, as a boy, he was magnetized for the first time by a Professor von Marx, member of a secret society, and finds himself able to travel through space to visit his mother:

In an instant the wish of my childish life, the one incessant yearning that possessed my waking hours, returned to me, namely, the desire to behold my dearly beloved mother, from whom I had been separated for the past two years. With the flash of my mother's image across my mind, I seemed to be transported swiftly across an immense waste of waters, to behold a great city, where strange looking buildings were discernible, and where huge domes, covered with brilliant metals, flashed in a burning, tropical sun. Whirled through space, a thousand new and wondrous sights gleamed for a moment before my eyes, then vanished. Then I found myself standing beneath the shade of a group of tall palm-trees, gazing upon a beautiful lady who lay stretched upon a couch [...]<sup>14</sup>

The woman, of course, turns out to be his mother. Next, one of the secret society's members suggests he visit the society's branch in Hamburg and report on what they are doing there.

As the words were uttered, I saw for one brief second of time my mother's form [...] turn upside down, like forms seen in a reversed mirror, and then the whole scene changed. Cities, villages, roads, mountains, valleys, oceans, flitted before my gaze [...] [and] I perceived that I was at Hamburg, in the house of the Baron von S., and that he and a party of gentlemen were seated around a table on which were drinking cups, each filled with some hot, ruby-colored liquid, from which a fragrant, herb-like odor was exhaled. Several crystal globes were on the table, also some plates of dark, shining surfaces, together with a number of open books, some in print, others in MSS, and others again whose pages were covered with characters of an antique form, and highly illuminated. As I entered, or seemed borne into this apartment, a voice exclaimed »A messenger from Herr von Marx is here, a ›flying soul‹, one who will carry the promised word to our circle in B[erlin]«. <sup>15</sup>

Presumably, the author could not only see and hear what happened in Berlin, but could even smell the fragrance of the liquids in the cups. That ›flying souls‹ were really seen as ›information machines‹ or spiritual telegraphs is made even clearer by another statement by Britten, in which the purely instrumental aspect is particu-

12 See Emanuel Swedenborg: *De Telluribus in Mundo Nostro Solari, Quae Vocantur Planetae, et de Telluribus in Coelo Astrifero, deque Illarum Incolis, Tum de Spiritibus et Angelis Ibi: Ex Auditis et Visis*, London, 1758.

13 On the problematics of the novel's authorship, see Robert Mathiesen: »Britten, Emma (Floyd) Hardinge«, in: *Dictionary* (n. 4), pp. 202-206.

14 Emma Hardinge Britten (trans. and ed.): *Ghost Land, or Researches into the Mysteries of Occultism Illustrated in a Series of Autobiographical Sketches* (1876), Chicago 1897 (reprint), Pomeroy n.d. (facsimile), pp. 24-25.

15 *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.

larly clear. She is reported as having described

a case when the London Body wished to send a message to an associated body in Vienna. She was given this message, left her physical body and appeared to the group in Vienna in her astral body, was recognized by them, delivered her message and received their answer, then returning to London took possession of her physical body and delivered the answer.<sup>16</sup>

As has been convincingly argued by John Patrick Deveney, learning the techniques for making such travels – known as »projection of the astral double« – was central to the Theosophical Society at least in its early years.<sup>17</sup> This part of the Society's activity was shrouded in secrecy, however, and we do not know exactly what kinds of techniques were used. The standard procedures used for putting subjects in a somnambulant trance certainly remained important, but the Theosophists were concerned with emphasizing their approach as one of deliberate action, as opposed to the »passivity« of spiritualist trance mediums – the »adept« should be able to consciously and deliberately »project his astral body«, rather than being dependent on the help of a magnetizer –, and therefore classic artificial somnambulism can hardly have been the whole story. Apart from dietary rules and the observance of ethical guidelines, it is likely that not only the early Theosophists, but, to some extent at least, many others interested in »trance traveling« as well actually experimented with some kind of theurgical ritual practice that included not only classic somnambulant techniques, but also various other techniques for inducing the required altered state of consciousness, including the use of psychoactive substances such as hashish and nitrous oxide gas. In *Ghost Land*, for example, we read that, although animal magnetism remains the best and most effective method, the trance state

could be induced some times by drugs, vapors, and aromal essences: sometimes by spells, as through music, intently staring into crystals, the eyes of snakes, running water, or other glittering substances; occasionally by intoxications caused by dancing, spinning around, or distracting clamors.<sup>18</sup>

I give some special attention here to such passages – and there are many more – because they suggest that somnambulant practice may have been more complex than its official theory would suggest: it may often have involved various means and techniques that have nothing to do with somnambulism as technically defined, but that could have played a significant role in what was actually going on during the

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16 John W. Lovell: »Reminiscences of Early Days of the Theosophical Society«, as quoted in John Patrick Deveney: *Astral Projection or Liberation of the Double and the Work of the Early Theosophical Society* (Theosophical History Occasional Papers VI), Fullerton 1997, p. 8.

17 Deveney: *Astral Projection* (n. 16).

18 Britten: *Ghost Land* (n. 14), p. 30. See also the closely analogous passage *ibid.*, p. 67, which lists »the inhalation of mephitic vapors, pungent essences, or narcotics; the action of clamorous noise or soothing music; the process of looking into glittering stones and crystals; excessive and violent action, especially in a circular direction; and lastly, through the exhalations proceeding from the warm blood of animated beings«. See also the repeated references to unidentified beverages, such as the »ruby-colored liquid« mentioned in the quotation from *Ghost Land* (see main text).

meetings. The practice of ›scrying‹ by means of mirrors and crystal balls has been duly noted and discussed by scholars<sup>19</sup>, but the use of psychoactive substances in the context of 19th-century ›somnambulism‹, and occultism generally, has been surprisingly neglected.<sup>20</sup> It might, however, be quite important if we want to understand the sometimes very spectacular claims about what the subjects experienced during their states of altered consciousness.

## V. Traveling: From Imagination to Gnosis

The theme of transcending the limitations of space can also be used to demonstrate that my distinction between the quest for ›information‹ and the quest for ›gnosis‹ has its limitations. For that point, let us briefly leave the 19th century and draw a parallel with a text representative of ›gnosis‹ in the classical sense. In the 11th tractate of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, Hermes Trismegistus is instructed about the fact that ›all things are in God not as lying in a place‹, that ›in incorporeal imagination [*asomatoi fantasia*] things are located differently‹, and that everything – the cosmos, the universe, and even God himself – in fact exists as thoughts within the mind of God.<sup>21</sup> Hence, by attaining gnosis, one gains access to how created reality is perceived from the perspective of the divine which is not bounded by space:

command your soul to travel to India [Trismegistus is told], and it will be there faster than your command. Command it to cross over the ocean, and again it will quickly be there, not as having passed from place to place but simply as being there. Command it even to fly up to heaven, and it will not lack wings. Nothing will hinder it [...]<sup>22</sup>

Perfect gnosis, the text continues, presupposes that one has fully and completely experienced the whole of reality in all its dimensions:

Make yourself grow to immeasurable immensity, outleap all body, outstrip all time, become eternity and you will understand God. [...] Go higher than every height and lower than every depth. [...] be everywhere at once, on land, in the sea, in heaven; be not yet born, be in the womb, be young, old, dead, beyond death. And when you have understood all these at once – times, places, things, qualities, quantities – then you can understand God.<sup>23</sup>

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19 See especially Joscelyn Godwin: *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, Albany 1994, pp. 169-186. See also the objects on the table of the Hamburg society, described in the quotation from *Ghost Land* (see main text).

20 See, however, the recent study by Alex Owen: *The Place of Enchantment. British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern*, Chicago 2004, which contains some short but useful discussions.

21 *Corpus Hermeticum* (CH), XI, 18, 20 (trans. Brian P. Copenhaver: *Hermetica*, Cambridge 1992, p. 41).

22 CH, XI, 19 (trans. *ibid.*).

23 CH, XI, 20 (transl. *ibid.*). In CH, XIII, 11, we read how Hermes' son Tat actually attains this state of gnosis: ›I am in heaven, in earth, in water, in air; I am in animals and in plants; in the womb, before the womb, after the womb; everywhere‹ (trans. *ibid.*, p. 51).



Such was very much the ambition, too, of those who aspired to ›magnetic gnosis‹ in the 19th century. But note how the hermetic passage differs from what we have seen, so far, in the context of 19th-century somnambulism. The point of commanding one's soul to travel to India in an instant is not to get some kind of information there: the point is simply to demonstrate to oneself that, like God himself, the soul is not limited by space. And second, the hermetic text says that the whole of creation is ordered not according to temporal succession and spatial extension, as seems to be the case for those who do not have gnosis; rather, reality belongs to the order of God's ›incorporeal imagination‹, and hence it is only by using his imaginative powers that a human being can attain true gnosis. It is intriguing to compare this approach to that of mesmerists and occultists in the 19th century, whose essentially Romantic concept of the world of the imagination as superior to the world of the senses was grounded in an Enlightenment – and more specifically Kantian – perspective on material reality. With this, we move from the realm of somnambulatory ›information machines‹ to that of ›magnetic gnosis‹ proper.

## VI. Magnetic Gnosis

To understand the nature of the ›magnetic gnosis‹ that came to flourish in various European countries in the wake of Puységur, but with particular clarity in Germany, they must be seen in the context of reactions to Enlightenment rationalism in general and to the philosophy of Kant in particular. This point may be demonstrated here with the example of the *Theorie der Geister-Kunde*, published by Johann Heinrich Jung-Stilling in 1808 – a book that has exerted a very strong influence on how magnetic somnambulism was interpreted by German authors in the early decades of the 19th century. In the first chapter, Jung-Stilling explains the nature of what he calls the Enlightenment's ›mechanical-philosophical world system‹, and concludes that this system is logically consistent and convincing, but conclusive only as long as one accepts its basic premises.

If our eyes, ears, in a word, our whole sensual apparatus, including the brain and the nerves, were built differently, organized differently, we would experience the entire world of the senses very differently from how we now experience it. [...] The human senses experience only the exterior of things in space and time, that is, in their extension and succession – [but] no created spirit penetrates their inner being, only the Creator who has made them. [...] we cannot imagine two things, let alone more than

two, at the same time; hence we had to be organized in such a way that all things appear to us outside one another, that is to say, in space, and after one another, that is to say, in time. Space and time therefore merely originate in our soul; outside ourselves, in the essence of Nature itself, neither of them exists. [...] hence all movements in the whole of creation are also merely forms of representation [*Vorstellungsformen*] in our souls, which however do not take place in Nature itself. Consequently, all world systems, even the Copernican one, are merely forms of representation. In itself, however, the world of Creation is different.<sup>24</sup>

The Kantian background to this argumentation is, of course, obvious. But for Jung-Stilling and many of his readers interested in ›magnetic somnambulism‹, it implied that the ›mechanical-philosophical world system‹ is merely how the world appears to us as long as our perception of it is based upon the limited testimony of the five external senses. By means of somnambulatory trance, however, one gained access to an ›internal sense‹ (or internal senses) by means of which a person could experience the underlying metaphysical reality.<sup>25</sup> Again, the limitations of time and space would be transcended; but in this case the goal was not just to get information about events taking place in the future or in other places, but to gain direct knowledge (›gnosis‹) about the true nature of reality as it exists in and for itself.

In the wake of a highly influential book by Gotthilf Heinrich von Schubert, his *Ansichten von der Nachtseite der Naturwissenschaft*, published in the same year (1808) as Jung-Stilling's, German Romantic mesmerists came to conceptualize this distinction in terms of a duality between ›daytime consciousness‹ and ›nighttime consciousness‹. According to this perspective, Enlightenment rationality is proper only to waking consciousness, which is centered in the brain, limited by and imprisoned within the Kantian categories of time, space and causality. Fortunately there also exists a wider and deeper ›knowledge of the heart‹, grounded in an expanded consciousness to which we gain access in dreams and other altered states of consciousness, such as the somnambulatory trance, and in which we find ourselves liberated from the narrow limitations of time, space, and linear causality. In his *Seeress of Prevorst*, Justinus Kerner came up with a radical interpretation of Schubert's work, by presenting the everyday three-dimensional world of mere ›reality‹ (*Realität*) as shallow and inferior compared to the much more profound and unlimited domain of ›nature‹ (*Natur*), to which one gains access by means of dreams and other altered states of consciousness, notably the somnambulatory trance. About the latter, Kerner writes:

Dear reader, do not call this condition sleep: for it is rather a condition of the most perfect awakens, the rising of an inner sun, much brighter than the one that out-

24 Johann Heinrich Jung-Stilling: *Theorie der Geister-Kunde, in einer Natur-, Vernunft- und Bibel-mässigen Beantwortung der Frage: Was von Ahnungen, Gesichten und Geistererscheinungen geglaubt und nicht geglaubt werden müsse*, Nürnberg 1808, pp. 30-32 (§§ 45-46). [English translation?](#)

25 Kant himself had discussed the claim of direct perception of the ›spiritual world‹ by means of an internal sense in the last of his pre-critical writings, *Träume eines Geistersehers* (1766) on Emanuel Swedenborg. For a critical discussion of this work and its significance, see Wouter J. Hanegraaff: *Swedenborg, Oetinger, Kant. Three Perspectives on the Secrets of Heaven*, West Chester 2007.

wardly touches your eyesight, a light which is clearer than what you may attain in your waking life by relying on concepts, conclusions, definitions and systems.<sup>26</sup>

This implies that the entire Enlightenment perspective on knowledge and reality is turned radically upside down: not the obscurity and occult chimaeras of nighttime consciousness, but daytime consciousness itself is the dream from which we must awake!

While radicalized by authors like Kerner, the basic idea is certainly not new. For example, we find it clearly stated in Marsilio Ficino's *Theologia Platonica*:

As the Pythagoreans and Platonists believe, during the whole time the sublime soul lives in this base body, our mind, as though it were ill, is tossed to and fro and up and down in a kind of perpetual restlessness, and is always asleep and delirious; and the individual movements, actions, and passions of mortal men are nothing but the dizzy spells of the sick, dreams of the sleeping, deliriums of the insane [...] But while all are deceived, usually those are less deceived who at some time, as happens occasionally during sleep, become suspicious and say to themselves: »Perhaps those things are not true which now appear to us; perhaps we are now dreaming«.<sup>27</sup>

For Romantics like Schubert and Kerner, the concept that ›life is a dream‹ from which we must wake up had gained a new polemical edge in the context of their battle against Enlightenment concepts of ›reality‹. We must wake up from the daytime consciousness of mere rationality, to the higher consciousness of the heart and the soul; and in doing so, we discover not only that we believed to be reality was no more than a dream, but moreover that in dreams and other altered states of consciousness we wake up to the real life.

In his *Seeress of Prevorst*, Kerner devoted much time to what we might call ›parapsychological‹ experiments. Scholars have given less attention, however, to Kerner's claim that by means of her somnambulatory trances, Friederike Hauffe gained access to superior knowledge pertaining to the ›true nature of reality‹ beyond the restrictions of matter, space and time. Schubert and Kerner were both convinced that this knowledge had still been a living, daily reality in the most ancient periods of history, but that humanity had gradually lost it. According to Schubert, the problem is not that such superior knowledge is no longer available at all; rather, the problem is that we have come to favor the shallow daytime language of rational discourse while neglecting the superior hieroglyphic language by means of which our soul still tries to speak to us in our dreams. This is explained clearly in his *Symbolik des Traumes*, first published in 1814:

In our dreams [...] the soul seems to speak a language that is wholly different from the usual one. [...] As long as the soul speaks this language, its ideas follow a different law of association than the usual one, and it cannot be denied that this new combi-

26 Kerner: *Seherin von Prevorst* (n. 8), p. 43.

27 Marsilio Ficino: *Platonic Theology*, English trans. by Michael J.B. Allen with John Warden, Latin text ed. by James Hankins with William Bowen, vol. 4: Books XII-XIV, Cambridge MA/London 2004, XIV: 8. The translation is a mixture of the one given by Paul Oskar Kristeller (*The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, New York 1943, pp. 208-209) and the new standard translation by Allen and Hankins (*ibid.*, pp. 278-279).

nation of ideas takes a much faster, a ghostly and shorter road or flight than the one of the waking state, where we rather think with our words. In this [dream] language, by means of a few hieroglyphic, strangely connected images, we express in a few moments more than we would be able to explain in hours by means of words. [...] [We cannot deny] that in many ways, this language of abbreviations and hieroglyphs seems more fitting to the nature of the Spirit than our normal word-language. [...] The latter we must first learn, but we are born with the former, and the soul attempts to speak this language, which is natural to her, as soon as, in sleep or delirium, she has come a bit loose and free from its usual bounds [...]<sup>28</sup>

In all his writings on these subjects, Schubert explicitly treated magnetic somnambulism and normal dreams as closely connected, and in doing so he was by no means an exception among the Romantics, on the contrary. Scholars have tended to underestimate the fact that Romantic discussions about sleeping and dreaming are often *not* only about what we nowadays understand by those words, but tacitly include the entire domain of magnetic trance or somnambulism.<sup>29</sup>

If we want to study the notion of a hieroglyphic language proper to the superior reality accessible in the somnambulant trance state, there is no better example than Kerner's book on Friederike Hauffe, the Seeress of Prevorst. In line with Schubert, Kerner speculated about an *Ursprache* of nature and of the soul:

Shouldn't there, then, exist a language which expressed, like creative Nature, the Potencies and Gradations of Natural things in characters and words; so that, at hearing or reading the word, all the essential characteristics of the things themselves immediately become present as well? A language expressed in schematic and plastic characters would have to contain complete systems in a few words, and thus there can also exist magical words which contain in themselves not only the meaning but also the power of the sacred [...]<sup>30</sup>

The theoretical desideratum of such a language had become a tangible reality, for Kerner, through the somnambulism of Friederike Hauffe. We already took a brief look at her *Sonnenkreis*, which essentially represented her life in this world (including her ability of transcending its spatial and temporal limitations by entering her ›dream ring‹), and we saw that various events that took place in her life were noted down in the circle in normal German script. The *Sonnenkreis* was, however, no more than the outward reflection (so to speak) of a second circle called the *Lebenskreis*, subdivided not into twelve but 13  $\frac{3}{4}$  segments.

This circle represented the deeper, more fundamental, inner world of the soul, and here everything was written down in what Friederike called her ›inner language‹ (*Sprache des Innern*) which came with its own script. Superior or absolute knowledge pertaining to the true nature of reality could only be expressed in this language, which in its turn was based upon numbers. Kerner writes:

28 Gotthilf Heinrich Schubert: *Die Symbolik des Traumes* (1814), Heidelberg 1968 (facsimile), pp. 1-2.

29 For abundant documentation with regard to this, see the classic study of Albert Béguin: *L'âme romantique et le rêve: Essai sur le Romantisme Allemand et la poésie Française*, Marseille 1937.

30 Kerner: *Seherin von Prevorst* (n. 8), pp. 180-181.

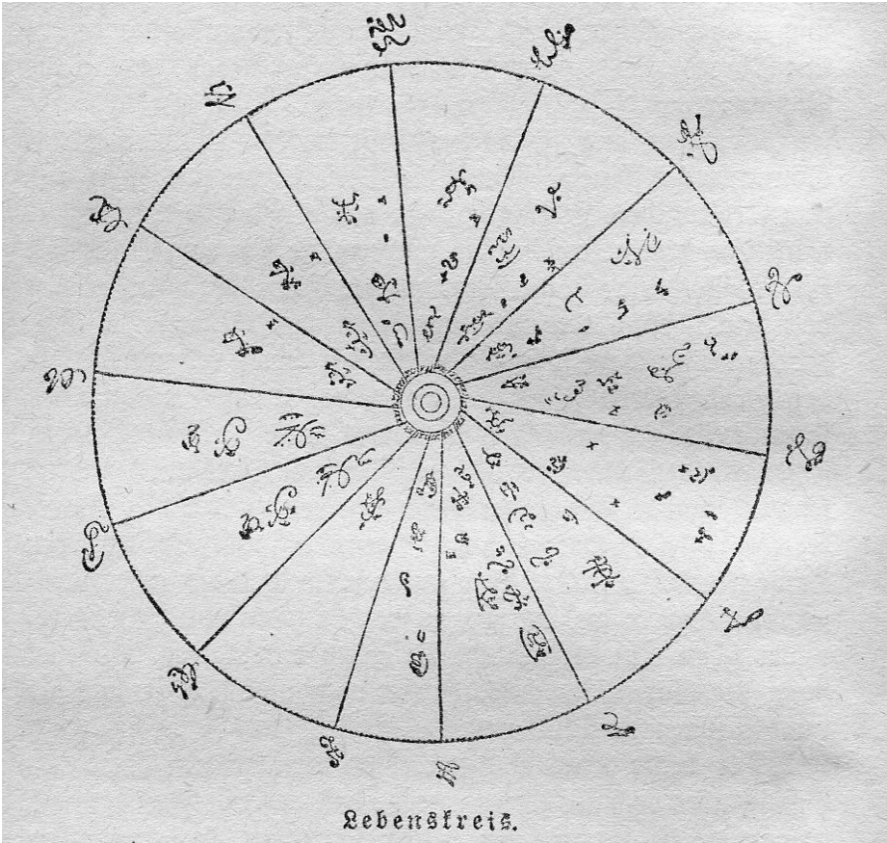


Fig. 2 Friederike Hauffe's *Lebenskreis*

The written signs of this language were for her always connected with numbers. She said: »When I want to write this language which lies in me without expressing something more profound, something which very intimately concerns me, I write it without numbers, but then I need longer words and I have to make more brackets. The word to which I do not add a number is without much significance to me; it does express the word, but without a deeper meaning. For me, God without numbers means just God, but with the numbers it expresses to me God's whole essence, one might say that it is illuminated by the numbers, one is introduced into its profundity. To me the numbers without letters are ultimately more sacred than the words, but for unimportant things one does not need a number; to attain full completeness, however, I have to use the letters in combination with the numbers«.<sup>31</sup>

That one single word could express a fullness of meaning that would otherwise require many words is illustrated, for example, by the names she used to give to people around her. One such name, *Emelachan*, was »translated« by her as »Your

31 Ibid., p. 252.

mind is calm and quiet, your soul is tender, your flesh and blood is strong: softly both murmur like the waves of the sea; then what is tender in you speaks: come, and be calm«. <sup>32</sup> Friederike seems to have used the inner language with impressive consistency so that people around her gradually came to understand what she said.

Ultimately, all the signs of the inner language could be reduced to numbers, for, as Friederike explained, »in the center of this circle sits something which administers numbers and words, and that is the Spirit«. <sup>33</sup> Moving from this spiritual center, towards physical existence, its purity was increasingly impaired. In the periphery of the *Lebenskreis* – the periphery of spirit – Friederike saw the numbers 10 and 17, which were both words at the same time. They were absolutely central to her so-called ›inner arithmetic‹ (*innere Rechnung*), which appears to have dominated every single minute of her magnetic life. She explained:

In the number 10, which is common to all human beings, lies the basic word [*Grundwort*] for man as man, and for his relation as man to the external world. In the other number, which can be a different one in each human being, lies the word of the destiny for this individual and his inner life, which he takes with him after death. <sup>34</sup>

Friederike pointed out that this should not be misunderstood in terms of predestination. Each individual has a free will, and may disregard his or her destiny by doing evil; in this way, one may ultimately *lose* one's individual number altogether and become a helpless victim of the forces of evil.

Perhaps even more terrible than Friederike's many physical pains was her mental obsession with numbers. She believed that literally *everything* that happens in an individual's life gets expressed in numbers (in the inner language), and that this ›inner arithmetic‹ is essential to one's spiritual destiny:

I feel that for each sin, each evil wish or thought, the individual is administered an inner number; a human being's inner being notes that down; the spirit, which tolerates no evil, does that; and having awoken in the in-between realm [*Zwischenreich*] (death), when one stands alone exactly as isolatedly as I am right now, and when one feels the points [on the circle] just as I do now, everything lies revealed clearly before one, and then a human being's own spirit is his judge. It also seems to me that each human being has such a ring in itself from birth onwards, including such numbers and language, but the numbers and language are not the same in everyone. I mean to say that such rings go through the whole of Nature, through everything that lives and moves, through the whole of creation since the very beginning. <sup>35</sup>

Friederike's mental torment consisted in the fact that, in a magnetic state, she was conscious of her own inner arithmetic from moment to moment, whereas other people are spared such knowledge. For example, a person who had a negative influence on her condition automatically received a number. Every evening at seven o'clock all numbers were added up and noted down; and these results were again

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32 Ibid., p. 251.

33 Ibid., p. 232.

34 Ibid., pp. 234-235.

35 Ibid., p. 237.

added up and noted down at the end of the month. The day's number should not be higher than that of the night; if that nevertheless happened for several subsequent days, a whole day ›fell out‹ and the deficit was transported to the next month. The arithmetic for the first half of the month was based on seventeen, for the second on ten. An even result was bad, and uneven one was good; and the less numbers, the better. If a person has to endure too many negative influences, the resulting number gets too high, and the person dies. If one's ideal number is not disturbed at all, one gets very old. It must have been particularly terrible for Friederike to be confronted almost daily with huge ›deficits‹ that had to be transported to the next month, and to see how a new circle began much too early because the highest possible number (7000 in her case) had already been reached in the previous one. The result was growing arrears which made it even more difficult to accomplish at least a neutral result at the end of the next period. Thus Friederike saw her own death approaching with increasing speed and ever more inevitably, as her inner arithmetic confronted her with more and more insurmountable tasks. It should be added that, although the situation turned her life into a hell, she believed that it helped her spiritually. Suffering and misery may shorten a person's external life, but they improve that person's inner being. Thus, she seems to have faced her approaching death as the moment of salvation not in the least from her own arithmetic suffering, as expressed in an impressive poem (here reproduced in the original):

Dich Lebenskreis, dich werd' ich wiederfinden,  
 Wenn ich durch alle Kreise bin,  
 Dann wird nicht fehlen auch das kleinste Pünktchen,  
 das ich verloren jetzt nach meinem Sinn.  
 Dann wird es ganz mir helle werden;  
 Aus jenem Mittelpunkte steigt ein Licht,  
 Das wird erleuchten, ob auf Erden  
 Ich hab' erfüllet meine Pflicht.  
 Auch nicht das Kleinste wird verschwinden,  
 Was eingetragen in den Kreis.  
 Und alle Zahl und Zeichen wird man finden,  
 Die ich jetzt noch so forschend nimmer weiß.<sup>36</sup>

There has been no systematic research into the possible backgrounds of, and historical precedents for, Friederike Hauffe's circles, inner language, and inner arithmetic. Also, for both source-critical and hermeneutic reasons, it is very difficult to distinguish between what was contributed by Friederike herself and what by Kerner. There can be little doubt, however, about the status of *Die Seherin von Prevorst* as almost certainly the most highly developed representative of a specific perspective on superior or even absolute knowledge that emerged in the context of German Romantic mesmerism in the first half of the 19th century and to which I have been referring as ›magnetic gnosis‹.

Essential to the claims of superior or absolute knowledge made in this context is the distinction between at least two basic states of consciousness: ›waking‹ and

36 Ibid., p. 241.

›sleeping‹. The former, of course, has to do with daytime and light, the latter with nighttime and darkness; the external light of the former, associated with Enlightenment rationality, remains relatively shallow, compared to the internal light of the latter, associated with the deeper knowledge of the heart and the soul; the former uses discursive language and logic, whereas the latter expresses itself in images, hieroglyphs and numbers; the former is limited to the material domain of space and time, whereas the latter is the unlimited world of the spiritual and the divine; the former has to do with the ultimately empty domain of social conventions, as opposed to the richness and meaningfulness of the world of the individual soul. The list of oppositions could be expanded further, but the basic nature of the opposition should be clear.

## VII. Concluding Remarks: Altered States of Knowledge

Essential to the theme of the present volume is the reversal of how ›waking‹ and ›sleeping‹ are here evaluated in view of their epistemological potential: while we are awake, we are really asleep to the truth, and when we fall asleep, we are really waking up to it. Formulated differently, the waking consciousness of daily life is considered a state of spiritual ignorance since true knowledge can only be found in the domain of ›sleep‹. As soon as we fall asleep, Schubert tells us, our soul attempts right away to speak to us in its natural ›hieroglyphic‹ language of images. The internal logic of ›magnetic gnosis‹ implies, however, that such normal dream-consciousness, including its symbolic language and the knowledge it conveys, is still relatively blurred and unsophisticated: it is low-resolution knowledge, one might say, compared to the clarity and precision that can be achieved in somnambulant trance, and most especially in the case of highly gifted somnambules such as Friederike Hauffe. Such seers were actually considered ›sleep specialists‹ or ›sleep virtuosos‹, capable of using altered states of consciousness with a superior degree of sophistication, so as to take advantage of their full epistemological potential.

›Sleeping‹, in this perspective, is the state in which the soul tries to communicate true and superior knowledge to us, but most people are just not very good at receiving and understanding it: most of us do not get much further than perceiving a somewhat vague, ambiguous, and chaotic stream of images and moreover forget most of it. A sleep virtuoso like Friederike Hauffe, in contrast, was considered capable not only of perceiving crystal-clear images: she could also clearly understand the inner language of the soul and write the messages down in their own script, and she was even able to perceive all the complex calculations of the underlying arithmetic. A clear hierarchy in the means of expression and a move towards increasing abstraction is clearly implied in all of this: in progressing towards every clearer knowledge,



we move from image to sign and from sign to number.<sup>37</sup>

This point further suggests that, in the end, the ›magnetic gnosis‹ of German Romanticism can probably be interpreted as an original variation on basic Platonic and Pythagorean schemes. In line with the original perspective from which those traditions derive – but much more explicitly and more extremely formulated – reason, discursive language, and empiricism are seen as incapable of ever giving us truly reliable knowledge about the essential nature of reality: the basic claims are that such knowledge can only be directly perceived and that such perception is possible only in some kind of altered state of consciousness – whether conceptualized as sleep, dream, or somnambulatory trance. In sum, therefore, the ›magnetic gnosis‹ of German Romanticism is based upon the claim that somnambules can access an ›altered state of knowledge‹ superior to any knowledge dreamt of in Enlightenment philosophy.

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37 It might be useful to draw a comparison with computers: most users depend solely on the images and letters that are visible on their computer screens, but a specialist can understand the technical and normally invisible programming language, and this in turn can ultimately be reduced to complex numerical calculations of ones and zeros (not visible even to programming specialists).