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Carl August von Eschenmayer and the Somnambulic Soul

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PALGRAVE STUDIES IN NEW RELIGIONS
AND ALTERNATIVE SPIRITUALITIES

The Occult Nineteenth Century

Roots, Developments,
and Impact on the Modern World

Edited by
Lukas Pokorny
Franz Winter

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CHAPTER 2

Carl August von Eschenmayer and the Somnambulic Soul

Wouter J. Hanegraaff

Bei weitem leichtgläubiger und kritikloser als Justinus Kerner war sein Freund und Landsmann Eschenmayer, der Arzt und Philosoph, als welchen ihn zwar die wissenschaftlich gebildeten Philosophen nicht gerne wollten gelten lassen, da er überwiegend aus dem Gefühl heraus grübelte. Mit seinem guten, versonnenen Gesicht ist er doch eine bemerkenswerte Erscheinung unter den schwäbischen Naturphilosophen. Im hohen Alter ließ er sich von einem Scheider, der in den Augen auch der nachsichtigen Beurteiler ein Trunkenbold und frecher Gaukler war, mit vorgespiegelten Ekstasen hinters Licht führen, so daß selbst Kerner nicht umhin konnte, den Kopf zu schütteln. Indessen sind seine Werke über Naturphilosophie und Magnetismus reich an feinen und tief sinnigen Anschauungen.

Huch 1951: 608

Nobody has done more than Karl Baier to restore the study of consciousness to a central place in the modern study of Western esotericism. Among

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the many highly relevant, fascinating, but sadly forgotten key figures discussed in the first volume of Baier's magnum opus *Meditation und Moderne* (2009), we encounter the Souabian *Naturphilosoph*, pioneer of Romantic psychology, and advocate of magnetic somnambulism Carl August von Eschenmayer (1768–1852).¹ When Ricarda Huch described him in her classic book on Romanticism, she was clearly echoing Karl Immermann's (1796–1840) popular satirical novel *Münchhausen* (1841), where Eschenmayer and his buddy Justinus Kerner (1786–1862) are lampooned as a comical duo of superstitious fools named “Eschenmichel” and “Kernbeisser.”² And yet, Huch admits that Eschenmayer's writings about *Naturphilosophie* and animal magnetism were full of “delicate and profound” observations. So who was Eschenmayer, and how do we explain these conflicting assessments? While a few good discussions are available in German and French,³ it seems typical of the near-total oblivion into which Eschenmayer has fallen that this chapter happens to be the very first one about him in English. I will provide a general overview of Eschenmayer's life and development, with special attention to the psychology he built on German Idealist foundations and to the role of animal magnetism and Somnambulatory trance in that context.

FROM PHILOSOPHICAL IDEALISM TO ANIMAL MAGNETISM

Born in Neuenbürg on July 4, 1768, young Eschenmayer was destined by his father for a commercial career, but finally managed to get himself accepted as a student of medicine at the Carlsakademie in Stuttgart. After his father's death in 1793, he transferred to the University of Tübingen where he continued his medical studies but devoted himself to philosophy as well. A decisive influence on his later career came from reading the works of Ernst Platner (1744–1818), a follower of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) whose writings were important also to Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) and Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805). In his *Anthropologie* (1772), Platner presented man as a unity of body and soul who, therefore, could only be understood in terms of a philosophical

¹ Baier 2009, vol. 1: 207–209. Eschenmayer's first name “Adolph” was never used, and there is no basis for the name “Adam” that has been often attributed to him (Malkani 1994a, vol. 2: 229 n. 1).

² Immermann 1841, vol. 2: 129–189 (Book 4: “Poltergeister in und um Weinsberg”).

³ For Eschenmayer's biography I rely mainly on Malkani 1994a, b. See also Kerner 1853; Erdmann 1982 [1853]; Holstein 1979; Maier 2009; Schulze 1958; Wuttke 1966.

synthesis comprising the sciences of physiology and psychology (Platner 1772; see also Platner 1793). Another major influence was Kant, whose philosophy Eschenmayer studied in private sessions with his professor Jakob Friedrich von Abel (1751–1829), whom he would later succeed. Of major importance for Eschenmayer’s thinking were von Abel’s *Einleitung in die Seelenlehre* (Introduction to the Doctrine of Souls, 1786) and his *Philosophische Untersuchungen über die Verbindung der Menschen mit höhern Geistern* (Philosophical Investigations about Humanity’s Connection with Higher Spirits, 1791). From these titles alone, in combination with Platner’s work (not to mention Kant’s *Träume eines Geistersehers*, 1766), it is evident that Eschenmayer’s interest in the human soul and its relation to the *Geisterwelt* (spirit world) began early and was anything but idiosyncratic.

Eschenmayer’s medical dissertation of 1796⁴ caught Schelling’s attention, which led to an intense correspondence and collaboration between the two philosophers (Gilson 1988; Durner 2001; Roux 2005). Today, Eschenmayer is generally seen as one of Schelling’s most significant sparring partners during the latter’s decisive years around 1800: Schelling developed his early *Natur- und Identitätsphilosophie* in a context of intense discussions with Eschenmayer, even claiming ownership for several crucial insights that he had actually taken from the latter. Particularly important in this regard is Eschenmayer’s article “Spontaneität = Weltseele” (“Spontaneity = World Soul,” published in Schelling’s *Zeitschrift für spekulative Philosophie* in 1801) and *Die Philosophie in ihrem Übergang zur Nichtphilosophie* (Philosophy in its Transition to Non-Philosophy, 1803). Schelling responded to it with his *Philosophie und Religion* (Philosophy and Religion, 1804), but it finally caused a break between the two philosophers. The essential difference between them was that Schelling believed philosophy to be capable of understanding the Absolute through intellectual analysis, whereas Eschenmayer held that the Absolute (God) transcended the capacities of the human intellect altogether and could only be grasped by faith. Put very briefly and simply, Schelling insisted on the primacy of philosophy whereas for Eschenmayer ultimate fulfilment could only be achieved in Christian belief. This should not lead us to think that Eschenmayer responded to Schelling with expressions of Christian piety—on the contrary, we are dealing with an extremely technical debate

⁴Eschenmayer 1796. Significantly, the dissertation was followed immediately by an application of its theoretical framework to the phenomena of magnetism (Eschenmayer 1798).

at the highest level of philosophical sophistication as practised during this period. In addition, Eschenmayer tried reaching out to a wider audience by means of a philosophical dialogue “about the Sacred and History” titled *Der Eremit und der Fremdling* (The Hermit and the Stranger, 1805), in which he argued that philosophy needed to accept the concept of the Fall.⁵

Eschenmayer wrote these works while making his living as a physician in Kirchheim unter Teck, but went on to pursue an academic career. He became an extraordinary professor of medicine and philosophy at the University of Tübingen in 1811 and was offered an ordinary professorship in philosophy one year later. His first major book written while occupying this academic position appeared in 1816: *Versuch, die scheinbare Magie des thierischen Magnetismus aus physiologischen und psychischen Gesetzen zu erklären* (An Attempt to Explain the Apparent Magic of Animal Magnetism from Physiological and Psychical Laws). One might be surprised that Eschenmayer chose to launch his official academic career with this particular topic, but in fact it makes perfect sense. Whereas his first *Versuch* about magnetism (published in 1789, immediately after his dissertation) had been focused on the strictly physical manifestations of magnetism, this second *Versuch* now addressed its strange “spiritual” counterpart.

This twofold approach followed logically from the principles of a broadly Schellingian *Naturphilosophie*, grounded in a dialectical polarisation of the Subject of knowledge (Man) and its Object (Nature). In this framework, the human subject is defined as the principle of absolute Freedom (Spirit) and objective nature as that of absolute Necessity (Matter). Caught in this polar dynamic, the soul has an inborn tendency pulling it up towards Spirit/Freedom while the bodily organism has the contrary tendency of pulling it down towards Matter/Necessity. From these principles, it follows that speculative philosophy must be particularly interested in the ambiguous point of “mediation” (or *Indifferenzpunkt*, indicated as o) between the positive spiritual principle (+) and its negative material counterpart (−). It is in the living organism (whether that of the macrocosmic world or that of man as its microcosmic parallel, both understood as embodied soul = animated body) that this paradoxical encounter takes place. The *Indifferenz* (o) is the very principle of life, “the unifying bond of nature” (Eschenmayer 1817: 20), and its central manifestation is

⁵As explained by Faivre (2008: 209–210), the basic understanding of Fall and reintegration in the milieu around Kerner and Eschenmayer was grounded in Christian Theosophy.

what we refer to as consciousness or, more precisely, self-consciousness (*Selbstbewußtsein*). Eschenmayer believed that it could be studied empirically and even experimentally in the phenomena of animal magnetism—an assumption that might seem like a stretch to us but was in fact quite logical. Mesmer’s theory, after all, had emerged from his own observations of a polar magnetism active in the human organism (reflecting the polarity of the earth), and this made it a natural match for Schelling’s polar dialectics. Moreover, from the same *Natur*-philosophical perspective, it made perfect sense that animal magnetism seemed to demonstrate the enormous, “seemingly magical” feats that the soul should be expected to possess under conditions of relative liberation from the habitual constraints of natural law.

What we find here is a conceptual framework that would become central to the Romantic doctrine of the “nightside of nature”: a perfect reversal of common Enlightenment assumptions about the “light of reason” and its relation to the “darkness of the irrational” (Hanegraaff 2012: 260–266). While the spirit and the body are active and awake, the laws of necessity are predominant over the spiritual principle of freedom, and hence the soul is rendered passive. However, as the body is in a condition of sleep or trance, this allows the spiritual principle of freedom to liberate itself from the constraints of necessity, and its mysterious powers can become manifest. The internal logic is compelling indeed.

ESCHENMAYER’S PSYCHOLOGY

Eschenmayer’s work must be seen in the wider context of a tradition known as *Erfahrungsseelenkunde* (literally, “psychology of experience”). At its origin stood Karl-Philipp Moritz (1756–1793), the famous author of the first German psychological novel *Anton Reiser* (1785–1790). Moritz’s *Magazin zur Erfahrungsseelenkunde*, published from 1783 to 1793 with the motto *Gnothi seautón*, is considered the first psychological journal in Germany (Geyer 2014: 21–23; cf. Béguin 1939: 21–45; Bell 2005: 89–105, esp. 94–97), and it is in this field that Eschenmayer was teaching at the University of Tübingen since 1811, as the first professor in Württemberg for *psychische Heilkunde*. In Schellingian terms, the laws of Nature were modifications of spiritual laws that were to be found in the thinking Subject; and because Nature and the Subject had to be ultimately identical on the level of the Absolute, one had to assume profound analogies (rather than causal connections) between the two realms. Thus one

could arrive at not just the possibility, but the *necessity* of a foundational science that would unify the Natural Sciences and the Humanities. As Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961) would do much later (Shamdasani 2003: 15 and 18–22; Hanegraaff 2012: 285–286), Eschenmayer argued that this science could be nothing else than psychology, the study of the soul (Wuttke 1966: 263).

Eschenmayer’s hefty book about that topic was first published in 1817, followed by a second revised edition in 1822. It was divided into three parts devoted to “empirical,” “pure,” and “practical” or “applied” psychology. Eschenmayer was the first to admit that the final part remained sketchy and insufficient (Eschenmayer 1982 [1822]: xiii), and I will not go into a detailed discussion of it here. His “pure” psychology amounted to a speculative philosophy of consciousness that seeks to analyse the logical essence of its three basic functions (thinking, feeling, and willing) from an a priori point of view (for a short analysis, see Erdman 1982 [1853]: 267–269). The “empirical” part of psychology was based upon the same triad, but now approached from an a posteriori perspective, and it is this part that most closely resembles what we would describe as psychology today.

True to the basic dialectical principles of Eschenmayer’s Schellingian *Naturphilosophie*, the soul should be seen neither as an object nor as a subject. Its true essence had to transcend the very domain of philosophy as such, because its ultimate foundation was in the mysterious realm of the Absolute to which only faith gives access. All this is clear from the very first lines of Eschenmayer’s book, which deal with the object of psychology:

The soul is the singular primal force from which emanates our entire spiritual existence. All our spiritual capacities and functions are just manifestations, directions, externalizations of the one undivided primal force. But these capacities and functions are ordered along a scale of dignity. The closer they are to the primal source, the more excellent, the more free, and the more universal they are. To the extent that they distance themselves from it, and become subject to reflexes, they become murkier, less free, and more empirical.

Right from the outset, we can consider the soul from two main directions:

- (1) According to her *urbildliches Leben* in which, according to Plato, she is pure and untroubled by the connections of a planetary life in time, and beholds the ideas of Truth, Beauty, and Virtue.

- (2) According to her *abbildliches Leben*, where she is bound to a body, chained to a world of phenomena, and subject to multiple reflexes and troubling forces.⁶

The Platonic foundations of Eschenmayer's Psychology are evident. Its entire structure is based upon what is traditionally known as the "three transcendentals" (also, of course, the objects of Kant's three *Kritiken*, as Eschenmayer must have known very well): the Good, the Beautiful, and the True. However, the manifestations of this triad are ordered according to the polar opposition of "Freedom" (the essence of Spirit) versus "Necessity" (Natural law) at the heart of Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*. The soul has descended from the ideal realm of freedom into the material realm of necessity, but its inherent drive is to move upwards from necessity to freedom, from matter to spirit, from the real to the ideal. It is on this basis that Eschenmayer builds his structure of a developmental psychology (an *Entwicklungspsychologie*) in five stages: from baby to child to adolescent to maturity to old age (see Fig. 2.1).

As man⁷ develops physically through five stages between birth and death, psychologically he develops through the five analogous stages of *Sinnen*, *Intellekt*, *Gemüt*, *Sittlichkeit*, and *Religion*: a baby responds only to sensual stimuli; the intellect begins to develop in childhood; the emotions of the heart begin to flourish in adolescence; to be adult means to develop moral consciousness; and as the old man gets close to death, it is time for him to cultivate religion.

Within this framework, Eschenmayer then proceeds to discuss 15 psychological capacities (*Seelenvermögen*), resulting in a psychological table of correspondences reminiscent of modern and contemporary "cartographies of consciousness" (Hanegraaff 1998: 246–255):

- Our inherent drive towards knowledge of the Truth, which puts us in the direction of ever-increasing freedom, leads us to successively develop our capacities for: empirical sensation (*Empfindung*); imagination (in the specific German sense of *Vorstellungsvermögen*, the

⁶ Eschenmayer 1982 [1822]: § 1, 18–19. In Eschenmayer's Platonising perspective, *Urbild* means the original or primordial image or archetype, while *Abbild* refers to a secondary copy (cf. *ibid.*: § 2–3, 19–20).

⁷ In Eschenmayer's discussions, *Mensch* always means *Mann*, and women play no part in the narrative, resulting occasionally in amusing statements such as "so steht endlich der Mensch frei als Mann in der Welt" (Eschenmayer 1982 [1822]: § 22, 32).

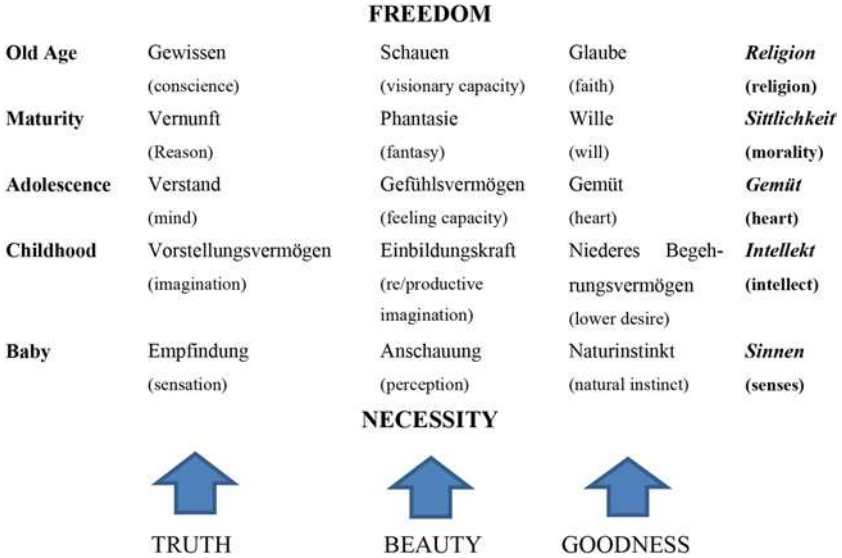


Fig. 2.1 Developmental psychology in five stages according to Eschenmayer

capacity that allows us to synthesise the multiplicity of sense impressions into a unity; Eschenmayer 1982 [1822]: §59, 60); mental or intellectual understanding (*Verstand*); reason (*Vernunft*); and finally conscience (*Gewissen*).

- In analogy with this, our inherent drive towards Beauty (which, again, leads from necessity towards ever greater freedom) causes us to successively develop: the basic sense of perception (*Anschauung*); the productive and reproductive imagination (*Einbildungskraft*: “the [reproductive] capacity to reproduce earlier representations even if we do not presently perceive them, and the [productive] capacity to create new forms and images and make them present to the soul”; Eschenmayer 1982 [1822]: §62, 61, slightly adapted for better comprehension); feeling capacity (*Gefühlsvermögen*); fantasy (*Phantasie*; Eschenmayer 1982 [1822]: §127–129, 108–109)⁸; and higher vision (*Schauen*).

⁸Not to be confused with the two forms of “imagination” (*Vorstellungsvermögen* and *Einbildungskraft*): “Fantasy is the capacity for the Ideal[s] ... The Ideals carry the imprint of the universal, whereas the forms and images of the *Einbildungskraft* are rooted in the soil of

- Finally, our drive towards the Good (which, once again, means ultimate freedom), leads us to successively develop: our natural instinct or drive (*Naturinstinct* or *Trieb*); our capacity for lower desires (*Niedereres Begehrungsvermögen*); our heart (*Gemüth*, obviously understood here in a psychological sense; Eschenmayer 1982 [1822]: §99–100, 88–89)⁹; our will (*Wille*); and finally our capacity for faith (*Glaube*).

If we compare the three columns in the Table above, we see how everything culminates in an ideal vision of religious morality.

All of this concerns the structure of our “spiritual organism” (+). Eschenmayer also discussed its physical counterpart, our “bodily organism” (–), which I need not discuss here in further detail; and finally, as required by the very nature of his dialectical *Naturphilosophie*, he came to speak about the “middle part,” representing the *Indifferenz* (o) where these two organisms met in what he called a “mixed organism.” It is here that he discusses the three basic “states of consciousness” known as wakefulness, sleep, and dream. But in addition to these well-known states, somnambulant trance is highlighted here as the example *par excellence* of how the *Indifferenzpunkt* of Spirit versus Matter (our spiritual and our bodily organism) manifests itself in our world. This point was made most clearly in the new journal *Archiv für den Thierischen Magnetismus* (Archive for Animal Magnetism) that Eschenmayer launched (also in 1817) together with two other university professors, Dietrich Georg von Kieser (1779–1862, Jena) and Christian Friedrich Nasse (1778–1851, Halle). Here we find the same core conviction about the central importance of Somnambulant trance to a scientific study of nature (including human nature) grounded in *Naturphilosophie*:

the singular. The form or image is just the finite reflection of the ideal, and relates to it as finite relates to infinite. If the Idea of reason is Truth, the Idea of fantasy is Beauty. ... Common as it may be to give primacy to reason, I am not ashamed to place fantasy above it, just as the feeling stands above the concept, the ideal above the principle, and altogether the beautiful above the true, as well as art above experience.”

⁹Clearly Eschenmayer refers to what in English we might call capacities of the heart in a metaphorical sense: “What we call gratitude, respect, love, benevolence, magnanimity etc. emerges and forms itself only in the heart ... [It] is among the most important human capacities, because everything great and sublime, beautiful and noble that must occur in the world must pass through it. He who wins someone’s heart can be sure of the entire person. An appeal to the intellect or the feeling capacity is either cold or transient. Only the impressions of the heart are deep and permanent, such as for instance true friendship and love.”

[I]f the general perspective on Nature that philosophy gives us is true, then it follows that everything which lies within the sphere of Nature must be susceptible to being explained from this perspective. Since animal magnetism presents us with that which no mortal eye has seen and no waking mouth reveals; since its phenomena appear ever more strange and surprising, and, while making a mockery of all merely material explanations, open up for us a spiritual world in which the spatial and temporal limitations of the earthly world almost vanish, and since it is in animal magnetism that Nature opens up to us its most secret depths and speaks like the oracles of ancient times restored; therefore if we follow its phenomena with an open mind and without prejudice, we may hope to attain results in psychology, physiology, and pathology that illuminate for us the still so dark field of knowledge of man's soul, and thereby open a sure road to perfection in the highest knowledge concerning man (Eschenmayer et al. 1817: 2).

According to Eschenmayer, somnambulant trance should not be seen as just "sleep" but as a kind of higher wakefulness; hence somnambulant visions could not be dismissed as mere delusionary dreams but had to be recognised as ideal visions of a higher world: they clearly pertained to the highest levels in his cartography of consciousness. More than anywhere else, it was in somnambulant trance that the visual material world and the invisible spiritual world could be seen to interconnect in an extremely delicate organic balance between the opposing principles of matter and spirit.

THE WORLD OF SPIRITS

Halfway between the two editions of his *Psychologie*, Eschenmayer made an accidental discovery that, for better or worse, would prove crucial to his later career. In a two-part article published in his *Archiv* (Eschenmayer 1820) he discussed a collection of protocols containing first-hand descriptions of the healing practice of Johann Joseph Gaßner (1727–1779), the famous Roman-Catholic exorcist who had already been investigated by Mesmer himself. Karl Baier has published an excellent study of the controversies around Gaßner, and summarises Eschenmayer's perspective with perfect clarity:

For Eschenmayer, all healing is based on a liberation of the non-material healing power that is inherent in man. This power is a bodily expression of the soul, and identical with the spiritual power that builds and maintains the organism as a whole. Eschenmayer defines it as a plastic power that comes

from the feeling of self, which is the innermost core of the feeling capacity. As regards the activation of this power, Eschenmayer distinguishes between three levels. The lowest level of healing is occupied by the “art of the scientifically educated physician,” which works on the material systems, functions, and organs of the body and uses medicaments to remove the material obstacles that stand in the way of healing. This involves no change of everyday consciousness in the patient. The procedure is dominated by reason and the will.

The second level is that of mesmerism. It works directly on the feeling capacity and the nerve system that is subject to it. Rational thinking and will are incapacitated, the habitual state of consciousness is abandoned, and the plastic power of the soul is activated. “That which during the waking state remains hidden in the ground of one’s feelings, and remains obscure, is now illuminated and reveals its inner nature”. This procedure heightens the efficiency of the therapy, for in this manner, the healing power hidden in the unconscious is liberated more rapidly

However, the highest stage of healing is exorcism: the method of healing based on faith in the name of Jesus as practiced by Gafner. “The patients fell into a state without will and consciousness ...” Where the active faith of the exorcist meets with an attitude of trustful surrender, “a divine breath permeates the soul, and in a most profound experience of awe, man feels the miracle of a heavenly power.”¹⁰

Eschenmayer’s discovery of Gafner’s exorcism is extremely important for understanding the direction that his career was about to take. It should not be seen as a radical departure from his earlier work but as its natural conclusion, because it completed the overall picture: above and beyond the realm of experience, which could be understood scientifically in terms of a *Naturphilosophie* with mesmerism at its heart, it now included an even higher “non-philosophical” dimension, at the centre of which was not reason but Christian faith. This was exactly the “transition from philosophy to non-philosophy” that had been central to his controversy with Schelling. Because faith was the highest level in Eschenmayer’s system,¹¹

¹⁰ Baier 2015: 73–76. On Gafner and his importance to the Romantic reaction against the “false Enlightenment,” see also Grassl 1968: 131–171 (Gafner) and 424–428 (Eschenmayer). Cf. Midelfort 2005

¹¹ Or more precisely, faith in Eschenmayer’s system provides access to a transcendent “reality” that is above our capacity for understanding, *including* its thinking in terms of higher or lower “levels.” In fact, the Absolute is not a “higher level” of reality, but the only true reality from a divine perspective incomprehensible to the human mind.

he began to emphasise it ever more strongly as the “worldly” opposition of unbelievers against his philosophy grew. From around this time, it is clear that Eschenmayer began distancing himself ever more clearly from the rationalist “coldness” of Enlightenment rationality while moving towards the emotional “warmth” of an Evangelical Christianity typical of Württemberg Pietism.

The pivotal moment came in the spring of 1827, when he travelled to Weinsberg to meet with his medical colleague Justinus Kerner and his somnambulant patient Friederike Hauffe (1801–1829). Kerner is remembered today as one of the minor poets of Württemberg Romanticism, and had been working as town physician of Weinsberg since January 1819. Eschenmayer must have read his book about two somnambulant patients, published three years earlier (Kerner 1824). He may have reached out to his colleague because, while “sitting in the midst of an unbelieving Faculty,” he too had been treating two somnambulant girls.¹² At meeting Friederike Hauffe, however, he discovered that she represented a whole new level of somnambulant virtuosity. She had been ill for five years, suffering from a complicated combination of symptoms that seem to have had their origin in some severe psychological trauma, probably including sexual abuse during childhood.¹³ She was in a terrible condition, her body tormented by recurring high fevers and extreme cramps while her consciousness kept shifting uncontrollably in and out of trance states. Her desperate family finally brought her to Weinsberg—since Kerner claimed to have been successful with his previous somnambulates, perhaps he would be able to cure Friederike too. During the two and a half years that followed, she stayed in Kerner’s house (which served as a kind of small hospital), where eventually she reached some degree of stability while developing from a very sick patient into a somnambulant trance visionary.

By the time Eschenmayer came to Weinsberg, Friederike was already well known for her spectacular supranormal abilities,¹⁴ and Kerner was busy preparing a book about her. Understandably impressed by

¹² Eschenmayer letter to Kerner, 1 February 1827, in Gruber 2000: 256–257.

¹³ See Hanegraaff 2001: 223–225; for the much more detailed version of this article in German, see Hanegraaff 1999/2000 and Hanegraaff 2004 (here: 240–242). The essential clues are a sentence on p. 30 in the first edition of Kerner’s *Seherin* that was deleted from all later editions, almost certainly at the request of her family, as well as an elusive passage in a contemporary publication by the psychiatrist Ernst Albert Zeller (1830: 90–92), who must have been privy to information not accessible in print.

¹⁴ See e.g. Eschenmayer to Kerner, 29 April 1827, in Gruber 2000: 257–258 (here 258).

Eschenmayer's credentials, he must have been happy to leave the task of theoretical explanation to this university professor trained in philosophy and psychology. Thus, when *Die Seherin von Prevorst* was published in 1829 (around the time of Friederike's death on 5 August 1829, but with her blessing), it contained an extensive section by Eschenmayer about her famous "solar circles" and "circles of life," connected to an "inner language" and an "inner arithmetic."¹⁵ To the considerable irritation of Kerner's brother and his friend Uhland,¹⁶ this chapter could also be read as a short overview of Eschenmayer's own *Naturphilosophie*. Eschenmayer saw Friederike's circles and his own theoretical framework as a perfect match, and rejected the idea that he was imposing his own ideas on her: he had always sent his manuscripts to be checked by her, he protested, and had accepted any corrections she made.¹⁷ For him, it was rather the other way around: Friederike had opened *his* eyes to the truth. Eventually, he came to think of her as the very embodiment of his own philosophy, as he explains in a letter to Kerner:

As in my psychological lectures I moved closer to the chapter of Magnetism, I made the sudden decision to present a newly designed theory. With help of the *Seherin* [here E. seems to mean Kerner's book], I succeeded in a way that surprised even myself, so that one phenomenon always explains another one, up to the highest level. I am giving these lectures right at this moment, in a lecture hall that is filled to capacity. A crowd of listeners is copying them. What I used to propose as theory has now become little more than a mere introduction. And yet there is space for a larger work, namely the theory of the circles. Every day I must have more admiration for this woman, but I must also regret all that we neglected to ask her. She should come back! But I believe that she is with me—for it is only now that everything becomes clearer to me, and in the end my whole philosophy slips over into this woman and looks back at me through her seeress-eyes [*am Ende schlüpft meine ganze Philosophie in dieses Weib hinüber und guckt aus ihrer Seheraugen wieder hervor*] (Eschenmayer to Kerner, 18 February 1832, in Kerner 1897, vol. 2: 28; cf. 18 May 1828, in Gruber 2000: 266).

¹⁵Kerner 1846, vol. 1: 241–266. For the inner circles, language, and arithmetic see Hanegraaff 1999/2000: 31–35; Hanegraaff 2010: 262–263.

¹⁶Ludwig Uhland to Kerner, 29 June 1829, in Kerner 1897, vol. 1: 573.

¹⁷Eschenmayer to Kerner, 4 November 1828, in Gruber 2000: 269–270. This is indeed borne out by the correspondence published in Gruber's study.

As Eschenmayer had predicted (Eschenmayer to Kerner, 4 November, 1828, in Gruber 2000: 269–270), *Die Seherin von Prevorst* found a large audience. However, neither he nor Kerner may have expected or have been prepared for the degree of hostility and ridicule it evoked. The book created a huge controversy in the popular press,¹⁸ resulting in a swift polarisation between rationalist opponents on one side and Christian-Pietist Romantics on the other. While Kerner’s defenders never created the “occult academy” that Christian von Hesse-Darmstadt (1763–1830) was longing for in 1830 (Fabry 1989, vol. 1: 309; von Hesse-Darmstadt to Meyer, 24 February 1830), they did create a close network of friends and sympathisers. Central participants included Johann Friedrich von Meyer (1772–1849), Johann Franz Ehrmann (1757–1839), Gotthilf Heinrich Schubert (1780–1860), Johann Karl Passavant (1790–1857), and to a lesser extent Franz von Baader (1765–1841) and Joseph Görres (1776–1848) (Fabry 1989: 209, 361, 363–364). They thought of themselves as *Wahrheitsfreunde* (Friends of Truth) or *Freunde des inneren Lebens* (Friends of the Inner Life) and formed the nucleus of authors writing for a journal edited by Kerner from 1831 to 1839, the *Blätter aus Prevorst*, and its successor, *Magikon* (1840 to 1854). The hostile camp of critics included Hegelian theologians, most notably Heinrich Eberhard Gottlob Paulus (1761–1851) and Eschenmayer’s former student David Friedrich Strauss (1808–1874), literary figures such as the editor of the Stuttgart *Morgenblatt* and *Literaturblatt* Wolfgang Menzel (1798–1873), and philosophers such as Friedrich Wilhelm Carové (1789–1852) and Kant’s successor Wilhelm Traugott Krug (1770–1842). Many opponents did not even bother to take the matter seriously at all: when Eschenmayer asked Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) what he thought of Kerner’s book, he was told that “he had leafed through it, but such books he left to his wife” (Eschenmayer to Kerner, 13 October 1830, in Kerner 1897, vol. 2: 9–10).

DECLINE

As a professor of philosophy at the University of Tübingen and the chief theoretician among Kerner’s friends, Eschenmayer was particularly vulnerable to the scorn of rationalist critics who were content to ridicule the

¹⁸On the controversy, see Fabry 1989, vol. 1: 360–364, and 597 n. 1771 for the journals involved; Malkani 1994a, vol. 1: 95–101.

whole endeavour as an obvious case of irrational superstition. The oft-repeated, quite reasonable, but never successful response by Eschenmayer and his friends was that these critics simply refused to even examine the empirical evidence out of rationalist prejudice: Mesmeric somnambulism was dismissed a priori on theoretical grounds. How quickly the controversy exploded can be seen from the fact that Eschenmayer published his chief defence of the Seeress as early as 1830. Under the title *Mysterien des innern Lebens* (Mysteries of the Inner Life), it contained chapters responding to Carové, Görres, Hegel, Strauss, and the psychiatrist Ernst Albert Zeller (1804–1877).

The battle lines were drawn, and what could have been a serious discussion about strange and unexplained phenomena degenerated quickly into vicious ad hominem polemics fought from entrenched positions. Eschenmayer, for his part, got ever more deeply alarmed by the rising tide of Hegelian philosophy (Eschenmayer 1831, 1834), and more specifically by the notorious *Life of Jesus* (1835–1836) of his former pupil David Friedrich Strauss. Strauss had observed the Seeress at first hand (Strauss 1839) but had become fiercely critical of Eschenmayer, who responded by denouncing his work as the theological parallel to Judas' betrayal.¹⁹ Eschenmayer's growing obsession with demonic possession and exorcism, which he shared with Kerner, is evident from his long chapter about "Possession and Magic" published in the latter's *Geschichten Besessener neuerer Zeit* (Eschenmayer 1835b). But whereas Kerner always kept a good measure of soberness and common sense, not to mention a sense of humour, while emphasising empirical research rather than philosophical speculation, Eschenmayer became ever more credulous and paranoid. His all-embracing theoretical framework led him to see the controversies in terms of a metaphysical battle that was ravaging European culture as a whole: the satanic forces of modernisation and extreme rationalism were destroying the soul of the Christian religion. Kerner tried in vain to keep the ageing Eschenmayer from publishing a book about his own experiences with possession and exorcism entitled *Conflict zwischen Himmel und Hölle* (Conflict between Heaven and Hell, 1837, with yet another attack on Strauss; Fabry 1989, vol. 1: 377–381). Its contents made it embarrassingly clear that the author had been duped by a con man posing as an

¹⁹ Eschenmayer 1835a; and cf. the interesting contrast with Strauss's earlier and remarkably positive article (Strauss 1839).

exorcist; none other than the “drunkenbold and stage magician” mentioned in Ricarda Huch’s quotation at the beginning of this chapter.

This ill-advised publication sealed Eschenmayer’s fate. Ever since his appointment as professor at the University of Tübingen, whose Medical Faculty was otherwise “remarkably immune against Romantic speculation in a Schellingian vein” (Grüsser 1987: 2), his high flights of metaphysical speculation had often annoyed colleagues and students with a more sober attitude.²⁰ It was easy now to frame his writings about mesmeric somnambulism and demonic possession as the predictable outcome of an irrational philosophy that had been misguided from the very beginning. Eschenmayer kept publishing books until his death, but his reputation was in shatters. His final years—like Kerner’s—were marked by disappointment and depression:

Next year I turn eighty years old. A long experience lies behind me, which contains better times at least than those that now threaten us from all sides. I am gripped by pain and indignation as I watch the general deterioration breaking loose like a great flood, and see those on the side as mere onlookers who do nothing to stop the hole in the dam (Eschenmayer to Kerner, 11 June 1847, in Kerner 1897, vol. 2: 297).

The revolutions of 1848–1849 inspired Eschenmayer to issue dire prophecies of the coming apocalypse, which would be preceded by general religious confusion: “human beings will put on religions and put them off again the way one changes clothes, and nobody will be happy with the change, and so they will just keep searching for something different but never find it” (Eschenmayer to Kerner, 13 January 1852, in Kerner 1897, vol. 2: 363–365). Finally, at some moment in the 1860s, the Antichrist would appear. And then? “Ask the book of Revelation” (*ibid.*). It is in this mood of despair that Eschenmayer died of a throat illness, on November 17, 1852.

²⁰Robert von Mohl (1902, vol. 1: 92, referring to his experiences as a student in Tübingen around 1817) found Eschenmayer deeply disagreeable (*ungenießbar*). Wilhelm Hauff’s satirical description of an unnamed professor in Tübingen around 1820, who is building a “Jacob’s Ladder” of airy speculation (Hauff 1826/1827, vol. 1: ch. 1) is undoubtedly about Eschenmayer. Eduard Zeller (1875: 581–582) writes that his philosophy had always been a meaningless play with analogies and mathematical formulas.

ESCHENMAYER'S RELEVANCE

From the perspective of the study of Western esotericism, Eschenmayer's oeuvre is a prime example of "rejected knowledge" (Hanegraaff 2012). It deserves to be recovered for several reasons: as a significant and intellectually impressive product of the speculative imagination; as one of the earliest attempts at a comprehensive theory of psychology; and as a crucial manifestation of the German Romantic theory of "nocturnal consciousness."²¹ One of the most poetic descriptions of its internal logic comes from Eschenmayer himself:

In the extraordinary state [of magnetic trance], it is as if we gaze into another world. And isn't our nocturnal side worthy of greater attention? Do we not see millions of suns pass by at night, while during the day we see just a single one? More infinite and far nobler is this spectacle, which leads us far beyond the limited sphere of just one solar system. This is how it is with animal magnetism. That which is written on the darkest ground of the soul now shines out with the brightest splendour, while the common daylight sun is being extinguished. Only in such states does the gate of fantasy open, and we see her Ideals pass by like the fixed stars.²²

Eschenmayer's *Naturphilosophie* looked like a dead end to nineteenth- and twentieth-century academic philosophers and psychologists who were unable to see more in it than a hodge-podge of irrational superstitions. This judgement is in need of revision. Historians of cognitive research focused on alterations of consciousness might be able to see Eschenmayer's oeuvre in its true light: as an impressive theoretical system of remarkable internal consistency, produced by an obviously brilliant and original mind whose treasures deserve to be rediscovered and assessed.

²¹ See discussion in Hanegraaff 2012: 260–277.

²² Eschenmayer 1816: 64. Cf. Eschenmayer to Kerner, 18 May 1828, in Gruber 2000: 264–266, where he continues the logic of his argument by distinguishing between two suns: the physical sun illuminates our daylight world, whereas the spiritual *Zentralsonne* illuminates the inner world of the soul. The latter should be understood here *not* in a metaphorical sense, but in an ultimately Platonic one (with evidently Swedenborgian overtones). That is, as referring to the larger and deeper all-encompassing metaphysical reality of which Eschenmayer believed our world to be merely a secondary reflection or *Abbild*.

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