Animal Magnetism and Psychic Sciences, 1784–1935: The Rediscovery of a Lost Continent

Silvia Mancini

In the spring of 1784 the Marquis of Puységur, a great landowner and colonel in an artillery regiment, was called to the bedside of Victor, the son of his steward, who was suffering from pneumonia. Puységur was a follower of the new holistic medicine taught in an atmosphere of intense enthusiasm and scandal by Franz-Anton Mesmer, an Austrian doctor who had been living in Paris for several years. As a disciple of Mesmer, he intended to direct his 'vital fluid' onto the young patient, by means of 'magnetic passes', to provoke 'spasms' which would lead to a calm state and an improvement in health.[1] But things did not go as anticipated. Instead of displaying the anticipated spasms, the young Victor sank into a strange state of unconsciousness which, at first sight, resembled a deep sleep. Then he revived once more and came to life with a new personality. Freed from his inhibitions, he no longer spoke his habitual dialect, but the French of aristocrats, and he had no hesitation in berating his school teacher, whose secret thoughts he appeared to be able to read. Finally, he forecast the stages by which he would be cured and the remedies which would be suitable for him. Puységur wrote down all these strange facts and the following year he published a report which caused a sensation. Soon, throughout France, somnambulists appeared and observations about their subjects gathered. From that time onwards, the incomprehensible facts apparently evident in 'provoked' or 'artificial somnambulism' and also in 'magnetic sleep' – such expressions were used by Puységur and his followers for the state that he had just discovered – were to give rise to huge controversy. The Marquis of Puységur triggered the development nineteenth century of a movement of reflections and practices which have generally been referred to by the expression 'animal magnetism', invented by Mesmer. On the eve of the Revolution and throughout the nineteenth century this movement held a real fascination for philosophers, writers, and scholars. But there has been a tendency to overlook this episode in European culture, which has ultimately become a "lost continent" in our own period.

In the last twenty or so years this "lost continent" has begun to be rediscovered in successive stages. First, there was a generation of authors who saw evidence in animal magnetism that might be able to shed light on the history of the unconscious. One such is Ellenberger's irreplaceable *summa*,[2] which devotes a substantial chapter to magnetism in its history of dynamic psychiatry; the works of Léon Chertok and Raymond de Saussure,[3] Franklin Rausky,[4] and François Azouvi,[5] written in the perspective of Freudian psychoanalysis. Then came the works of historians like Robert Darnton,[6] Alan Gauld,[7] and Jean-Pierre Peter,[8] which illuminate in depth the historical and cultural context which promoted the rise of mesmerism. Finally, more recently, writers have begun to study the

Diogenes, No. 190, Vol. 48/2, 2000
© ICPHS 2000
Published by Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 108 Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 1JF, UK and 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219210004819008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

epistemological impact of animal magnetism, viewed as an interesting topic in and of itself; no longer as a mere historical curiosity but as a cultural event with important repercussions. This is the case in the US with the historian Alison Winter, and in France with the philosopher Bertrand Méheust.

*

In an article in the *New York Review of Books* in March 1999, the Canadian philosopher Ian Hacking drew attention to recent works by these two authors, emphasizing the convergence of their views. Alison Winter's book, *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain*, investigates the development of mesmerism in England between 1837 and 1862.[9] Bertrand Méheust's *Somnambulisme et médiumnité* tackles the same subject, but adopts a broader historical perspective, as he starts his enquiry with the discovery of somnambulism by Puységur in 1784 and closes it in *c.*1935, with the apogee of metapsychism.[10] The field covered by Winter is essentially English, whilst that explored by Méheust focused above all on France, at least in the first volume of his work. But Winter's study also touches on France and Méheust's on the English-speaking world. Now, it is interesting to observe that these two authors, who do not seem to know each other, agree at least on four main points.

First of all, they agree on what magnetism was in the nineteenth century: far from being a populist or quack form of medicine (a subcultural phenomenon as we might assume today with our own prejudices), it actually developed in the heart of the élite, where it fascinated writers, philosophers, and scholars. Winter cites, among others, Charles Dickens, Charles Darwin, Thomas Huxley, Herbert Spencer, George Eliot, John Stuart Mill, Pierre-Simon de Laplace, and Georges Cuvier. Méheust, in his turn, devotes six pages just to listing the names of the philosophers, writers, and scholars who were riveted by this subject in Europe and the United States. The fact is, that in the middle of the nineteenth century animal magnetism was considered by the élite as an important challenge in relation to which science should define itself. In fact, as Hacking wrote in his above mentioned article,

> The situation was not that there was science on the one hand, and pseudo-science on the other. Science, as Winter shows, was defining itself, in part, by trying to exclude mesmerism. Interestingly, this is also a central theme of the new book by Bertrand Méheust . . . There is no reason to believe that either author has heard of the other's work, but they both apparently share the contemporary urge to find out how science became the Establishment.[11]

An Establishment sustained by a body of practices the function of which was ultimately, Hacking adds, "to define the very nature of knowledge".

In fact – and this is the second point of convergence between the books of Winter and Méheust – science is confronted by a challenge which, in certain cases, forces it to innovate despite itself. Alison Winter's investigation supports this theme in a particularly convincing way, shedding new light on the conditions which led doctors to use chemical anaesthesia in the second half of the nineteenth century. Contrary to what one might think, the concern to alleviate their patients' suffering does not seem to have been their principal motivation. The effects of ether and chloroform had been known for a long time, but they remained a curiosity on which almost no experiments were performed. It

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219210004819008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

was actually the surgery carried out during magnetic sleep by doctors open to mesmerism which was to push the medical profession to adopt this form of anaesthesia, whose first, spectacular, use goes back to 1828. That year a famous French surgeon, Dr Cloquet, removed cancerous tissue from the breast of a woman who had first been put into a magnetic trance. Magnetic anaesthesia, as Alison Winter demonstrates, was later adopted by English doctors. In 1846 at the Native Hospital in Calcutta, the Scottish surgeon James Esdaile successfully performed sixty-three operations: amputations, cataract operations, or the removal of enormous tumours. One of these – a hydrocele of the scrotum – weighed 103 pounds, almost as much as the patient whose weight was 114 pounds. All the patients operated upon were Indians, who exhibited a high degree of susceptibility to the magnetic trance. But, in England, other doctors got themselves talked about by using "magnetic" anaesthesia. At Nottingham in November 1842 one of these episodes caused a scandal, when a surgeon in the town amputated at the thigh the leg of a labourer put to sleep by magnetism. In all these cases, the observers were struck by the apparent insensibility of the patients and the post-operative efficacy of these 'magnetic' operations. Although Cloquet's French patient died after her operation, it was because the cancer had become widespread; but the English patient survived for thirty years. These operations provoked a scandal, there were cries of faking and complicity. It was these accusations that were to push the doctors to promote the use of ether, as Hacking explains in his summary of Alison Winter's conclusions:

> ... conventional medical men ... did not care much about stopping pain. They did not experiment with nitrous oxide and ether until they were threatened by mesmeric anaesthesia. ... [T]he practice of anaesthesia arose largely because the doctors wanted to keep out the magnetizers, and not because of an intrinsic interest in pain-control.[12]

Now, it is striking to note that, using other examples as his starting-point, Méheust – whose work we will return to – comes to the same conclusions: magnetism operated upon the culture as a prompt and a stimulant, it caused ideas to change through the very effort required to quash it.

The third point of convergence also has a bearing on the reception of magnetism. At the end of the nineteenth century historians of medicine presented magnetism as a practice that had been discontinued and which had, from the mid-century, been supplanted by the new scientific hypnotism discovered by James Braid in 1841. Many commentators have presented this thesis in our own day. Here, too, Winter and Méheust are in agreement in demonstrating that this is a retrospective interpretation. In reality, what was at stake in all the operations just mentioned was the old practices of the magnetizers, not hypnotism at all. Around 1850 the theorists of hypnotism were quite incapable of carrying out such operations. Hypnotism, for both Winter and Méheust, was developed *counter to magnetism*; it was drawn, by means of reduction and simplification, from animal magnetism.

Finally, Winter and Méheust agree on a fourth point. They demonstrate that magnetism, far from disappearing in the mid-century after its defeat at the hands of the medical establishment, joined with spiritualism, and then lay at the origin of the programmes of research in British psychic sciences and French metapsychics. It is striking to observe that the psychic sciences, which claimed to study phenomena such as clairvoyance, telepathy,

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219210004819008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

etc., outside the usual religious presuppositions, (in other words, phenomena that the intellectuals of our own day link to archaic superstitions), were born in Britain, in the nation which at that time was the embodiment of modernity, and in France, the beacon of secularity. Admittedly, these research programmes never succeeded in consolidating their goals, which explains in part why they have fallen into disrepute. Among the phenomena studied by the magnetizers, the theoreticians of the psychic sciences and the hypnologists are unstable phenomena, such as clairvoyance, and others which present a relatively constant core. Well documented, the latter nonetheless remain enigmatic, as, for example, the magnetic amputations. Ian Hacking, open but prudent, regrets our having thrown the baby out with the bath water, and the fact that the discrediting of psychic sciences has included that of the more stable phenomena of hypnosis. As for Méheust, he does not hide his interest in these phenomena, even the least stable and most controversial. Without ever pronouncing on their reality, he proposes using them as heuristic tools, privileged objects of epistemological reflection, by asking, on the path opened up by the Italian historian of religions, Ernesto de Martino, how they might still nourish our reflection on the human being.

*

I have concentrated above all on Bertrand Méheust's book, more easily accessible to the French reader, and one which concerns us more closely, since it is concerned primarily with the French history of animal magnetism and the psychic sciences. I have, indeed, found much material for reflection there. This book is as impressive because of its size (two volumes totalling 1,200 pages) as its content is stimulating. Admittedly, the author is unafraid of exposure, of taking risks. Given the profusion of the material to be mastered, the variety of themes taken up, and the types of knowledge involved – in short, the very nature of the problems tackled – his work will inevitably arouse criticism and objections. Here I shall place the emphasis on what this work appears to bring us.

A political metaphor may help us enter into Méheust's thought. The World Trade Conference at Seattle demonstrated the appearance of a counter-power capable of challenging or at least seriously impacting upon the hyper-liberal model set up by the masters of the planet. All at once, what was presented to us as a natural and necessary process suddenly seemed the product of contingent human decisions placed at the service of special interests, and the future seems once more to have become indeterminate; what will happen to humanity in the future will depend on the power relations and compromise solutions that the new counter-power manages to snatch from neo-liberalism. This is, fundamentally, the thesis set out by Bertrand Méheust, but transposed to the domain of culture and human psychism. According to him, a crucial conflict cut right across culture between 1784 and 1935. After the collapse of the theological systems through which humankind had until that point understood their own nature, it was a question of 're-profiling' mankind for the times to come, of setting about establishing a new demarcation of human faculties. The political metaphor is still illuminating here. Just as neo-liberalism has been heckled by the slogan "the earth is not for sale", so in *c.*1900 the theoreticians of the dominant psychology – mapped out by positivism and by scientism – saw themselves challenged by another slogan: "man is not what you think, he is not limited to what you say". This provocative assertion came from the psychic research movement, which, between 1890 and 1930, claimed to challenge, on decisive points, the

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219210004819008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

conceptions of accredited psychology. The latter believed the stable presence of man in the world was self-evident; it enclosed the self in spatio-temporal limits that were considered intangible; it cut man from the orders constituting the cosmos. For their part, the theoreticians of metapsychics claimed to shake such concepts on the basis of experimental 'facts' or what were claimed as such. They asserted that sometimes, as a result of the trance, consciousness could half-open to other selves without going via any other sensory channel; that psychism might access things directly, that it is animated by a potential creator with limits that were unknown but which, as far as observed facts were concerned, went beyond everything that one had until then been able to conceive; that one of the essential manifestations of this creative process was specifically 'personification' – that is, the spontaneous tendency of psychism to create a plurality of personalities; that, from this fact, the personifications of a medium (in other words, modifications in the personality of subjects during altered states of consciousness) indirectly designate our stable self as a creature of Western culture, the precondition for which is a break with the world of magic and the constitution of a sealed personal defensive enclosure. For the predominating belief these were shocking assertions. At the end of a conflict which went right through culture, this challenge was surmounted. Today, rather than being forgotten, it has departed from the intellectuals' horizon.

It might be objected that if a challenge of such importance had ever really existed, then more ought to be now known about it. Méheust, referring to Freud, retorts that it was precisely because of its virulence, because of the importance that it had had in the past for so many philosophers, doctors, scholars, and artists – from Henri Bergson to William James, from Charles Richet to Jean Perrin and the Curies, from André Breton to Wassily Kandinsky – that this challenge has opportunely left our horizon. In examining what anthropologists have had to say, Méheust has scrutinized their attitude of denial towards this cultural episode. The opinion that it is all 'old hat', and fallen into disuse; the classical ethico-political arguments by which an interest in metapsychics is linked to a vision of the pre-Fascist world,[13] the total absence of any scientific legitimacy for this question; anthropology's focus on discourse alone; the sidelining of questions of fact; post modern sophistications – all these things, too, according to Méheust, can and should be examined and criticized as the symptom of a flight from, and a fear of, this abyss-like characteristic of reality denied by our culture. This is why he tackles the problem head-on, after checking off the 'avoidance strategies' developed, as he sees it, by contemporary anthropology to dodge these crucial but proscribed questions. The author is fully aware that the facts are uncertain and that psychic research sometimes runs the risk of chasing chimeras and, contrary to what would probably be attributed to him, nowhere in these 1,200 pages does he make any pronouncement on the reality of the facts; but on the other hand he is uncompromising on the question of their heuristic interest and on the legitimacy of studying them. Whence, sometimes, his slightly over-enthusiastic assertions, which aim to shake people up and remind them that today this legitimacy itself is contested.

But in reality the turning-point of 1900 was no more than the outcome of a conflict which had already begun to work on European culture before the French Revolution. And this is why Méheust takes things further, starting his enquiry with the discovery of artificial somnambulism by the Marquis of Puységur. A truly inaugural moment, this discovery revealed an abyss and marked the beginning of scientific thought on what was

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219210004819008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

later to be called the 'unconscious'. The publication of Puységur's book in 1785 aroused a huge polemic – a war, rather – which was to continue throughout the whole of the nineteenth century. It is this war which Méheust takes as his main theme, in order to follow the history of animal magnetism. And it is the pretext for restoring to us a world that has been swallowed up: the facts, the theories, the debates over magnetism, the burgeoning plurality of trends, as much about questions that have been neglected as areas where animal magnetism has been seen as the prehistory of dynamic psychiatry. Méheust, it should be said, does not claim to present a history of magnetism in the strict sense of the word, but to support and problematize a theory by drawing on a fund of documentation that is both quantitatively and qualitatively rich. Nevertheless, this documentation is so extensive that *Somnambuliste et médiumnité* should, on this count alone, remain a standard reference work for a long time to come.

After the restoration of this sunken world, the 650 pages of the first volume are devoted to reconstituting the conflict which set magnetism against institutional medicine: its growing power in the first decades of the nineteenth century, the contradictory judgements delivered on magnetism by successive official commissions, and finally its partial rehabilitation from 1878 onwards by the medical profession, which was to filter it in order to make it compatible with the demands of positivism. But at the same time, and intertwined with this one, another history was starting. Thus, the psychic sciences which had appeared on magnetism's trajectory and been fostered by the new phenomena produced by spiritual mediums which started at Trinity College, Cambridge, in around 1875 then got a foothold in France at the beginning of the twentieth century under the rubric 'metapsychics'. It has been forgotten that they did not only constitute a collection of strange facts that were disputed to a greater or lesser extent, but that top-ranking theoreticians like Frederic Myers, William James, Henri Bergson, Hans Driesch, René Sudre, Eugène Osty, and so on, had pondered an alternative theory of human individuality on the basis of these facts.

The second volume recounts the "shock of the physical sciences". In the course of these 600 pages the author examines the "turbulences" aroused within the institution itself from 1885 onwards by the resurgence of magnetic theories. He shows how, under pressure from contradictory trends, new concepts emerged, new frontiers of psychism were drawn, and he emphasizes the fluid and transitory nature of this demarcation. Lastly, in a final section, he trains his searchlight on the forgotten consequences of the war over somnambulism, in order to highlight the traces left by magnetism and metapsychics in European culture from the end of the nineteenth century and the first few decades of the twentieth century, philosophy, psychiatry, sociology, ethnology, art, or literature. Leaving aside footprints that are all too clear and other acknowledged influences, his focus is more systematically played on those which have been 'euphemized' or disguised, and stresses the resistance sometimes exhibited by commentators to acknowledging that influence. In this respect, the passages concerning André Breton and Wassily Kandinsky are particularly striking and convincing.

*

In the course of these 1,200 pages Méheust's book strives to weave together many threads. A number of them warrant attention from anthropologists. We shall consider just seven here.

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219210004819008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

1. He places at their disposal, at first hand, a huge array of historical documentation which has remained largely unknown until now, thus reopening a submerged section of our culture to investigation. He reveals the basic cloth on which the anthropologists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries wove their theories about religion and magic, from E.B. Tylor to Andrew Lang, from Lucien Lévy-Bruhl to Ernesto de Martino.
2. He suggests consideration of the cultural mechanisms which have led anthropological debate to this position of denial and flight, and ultimately draws attention to the 'blind spots' of anthropological discourse.
3. After recalling, like many others before him, that societies are criss-crossed by conflicting dynamics with opposing value systems and world-views, he shows how the metapsychic question shaped culture for one hundred and thirty years before it was displaced.
4. In creating the concept of the 'inner elsewhere' – what Martino called 'the Indies here-below', that cursed dimension or internal strangeness which all culture carries within itself – he suggests a new objective for endo-ethnology, one capable of placing in a broader perspective the foundations on which the cultural identity of the West are placed.
5. He makes it possible to re-examine from a different perspective some chapters of the ethnological literature concerned with magic powers, locating him as a continuator of the theories of authors who are being rediscovered today, such as Andrew Lang and Ernesto Martino, who established a strict relation between the magic vision of the world and the parapsychic phenomonology that often accompanies it.
6. By means of the 'describe-construct' concept, the main theme of the whole process, this work prompts consideration of how effectively realized the theories and representations are that the human being produces concerning him- or herself, not only in the realm of myths and theology but also – and this seems more disturbing – in that of the human sciences themselves. In full accord with pragmatist epistemological views, Méheust thus leads anthropologists to a fresh reconsideration of the issues of their own practice. One of the interests of this 'describe-construct' concept applied to the history of psychism is in challenging an idea that is more-or-less established among anthropologists, namely that of a universal and natural psychism which has come to modulate the diversity of systems of representation. It was a case of substituting for this concept the vision of a psychism that was (almost) indefinitely plastic and re-codable by the discourses which claim to describe it. It is not by chance on this point that the philosophical reference-frame which permeates all of Méheust's work is that of the French philosopher, Cornélius Castoriadis, the great theorist of the creative imagination.

Finally, Méheust's work confronts us with a concept of human psychism very different from that imposed for the last seventy years. The fact that it is based on facts that are sometimes elusive and problematical makes this concept of no less heuristic interest in establishing a tension and a contrast with the accredited concepts.

If this work seems to have received little critical comment as yet, this is undoubtedly because it is difficult to place within the framework of the established disciplines, but also because of the fact that by means of an ironic loop-effect it is involved in the very problem it informs us of, namely rejection by the dominant culture of one field of

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219210004819008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

experience. But anthropological thinking will find it difficult to dodge the great questions that, at great risk to himself, the author has raised.

Silvia Mancini
Université Victor Segalen, Bordeaux II
(translated from the French by Juliet Vale)

Notes

1. "These 'passes' were long, sweeping movements of the hands skimming the surface of the skin without actually touching it, so close that each felt the heat of the other's body". Alison Winter (1999). *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, p. 2.
2. Henry Ellenberger (1974). *À la découverte de l'inconscient, histoire de la psychiatrie dynamique*. Villeurbanne: Simep. [Original English edition: (1970), *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry*; London: Allen Lane].
3. Léon Chertok and Raymond de Saussure (1973). *Naissance du psychanalyste: De Mesmer à Freud*. Paris: Payot.
4. Franklin Rausky (1977). *Mesmer ou la révolution thérapeutique*. Paris: Payot.
5. François Azouvi (1978). Introduction et notes pour Charles de Villers. *Le magnétisme amoureux*. Paris: Vrin.
6. Robert Darnton (1984). *La fin des Lumières: le mesmérisme et la Révolution*. Librairie académique: Perrin. [Original English edition (1968): *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France*.]
7. Alan Gauld (1992). *A History of Hypnotism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
8. Jean-Pierre Peter (1993). Le 'sommeil paradogmatique': Les découvertes et avancées du marquis de Puysegur. *Chimères*, **20**, autumn.
9. Alison Winter (1999), op. cit.
10. Bertrand Méheust (1999). *Somnambulisme et médiumnité. I. Le défi du magnétisme animal. II. Le choc des sciences psychiques*. Paris: Institut d'Édition SYNTHÉLABO, coll. Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond, 1.
11. Ian Hacking (1999). Mind over Matter. *New York Review of Books*, **46: 5**, March, p. 37, col. 2.
12. Ian Hacking (1999), op. cit.
13. Méheust devotes many pages to refuting this argument, which he calls "the argument of marching boots". Moreover, this discussion runs through his entire work, and is one of his constant themes. It is probable that the argument in question cannot be entirely grasped without having read his work.

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219210004819008 Published online by Cambridge University Press