

Literature, Spiritualities and the Politics of Meaning in Liberal Italy (1861-1915)

Guest editors: Giacomo Cucugliato, Sofie Barthels, Guylian Nemegeer

Description

This special issue examines the intersections of literature, spirituality, and politics in Italian culture between 1861, the year of Italian unification, and 1915, a symbolic threshold that, for Italy, marked both the onset of the war and the collapse of its liberal order. This period witnessed a profound epistemological crisis, as traditional structures of knowledge and belief were increasingly destabilized by the pressures of modernization, secularization, and rapid ideological and social change.

In this volatile context, religion, ideology, and artistic theory and practice became deeply entangled, giving rise to new models of meaning and representation that reshaped prevailing understandings of politics, society, and the individual's place in the world. Alongside the dominant current of positivism, a range of alternative epistemologies and spiritualities began to circulate: from mesmerism to hypnotic and mediumistic practices, from the occult revival inspired by the spiritualist chronicles of Hydesville to the reception of evolutionary theories by Alfred Wallace and Charles Darwin.

This complex interplay of spirituality and politics found powerful expression in the literary production of the period, as exemplified, in different ways, by writers such as Luigi Capuana, Antonio Fogazzaro, Gabriele D'Annunzio, Luigi Pirandello, and the Milanese *Scapigliati*. The case of Fogazzaro is especially illustrative: by placing Catholic tradition in dialogue with modernist sensibilities, he articulated a vision of spiritual renewal that anticipated both institutional reforms and broader political transformations. Together, these writers illuminate a cultural landscape in which the spiritual and the political are not merely parallel forces, but intimately connected elements of a shared project of epistemic and symbolic re-foundation. A key dimension of this project was the rediscovery — largely a product of Romantic philosophy — of ancient initiatory myths, which acquired pragmatic social and political significance through the activities of Masonic and related groups.

This interest in initiation rites contributed to the sacralization of the Risorgimento hero and to a fundamental redefinition of national, collective, and personal identity (Banti, 2000 & 2011). Masonic networks played a crucial role in disseminating para-religious and political ideas. This was notably demonstrated by the Anticoncilio di Napoli, organized in 1869 by Giuseppe Ricciardi, backed by a broad Masonic network alongside various *società di mutuo soccorso*, and involving international political and literary figures such as Giuseppe Garibaldi, Mauro Macchi, Victor Hugo, Jules Michelet, and Edgar Quinet. Besides the activities of Masonic networks, by the final decades of the century, theosophy also emerged as a prominent force within Italian cultural discourse, encouraging symbolic reconfigurations of the nation and prompting a reevaluation of the relationship between individual, community, and transcendence.

While recent scholarship has highlighted the significance that contemporary scientific and psychological discourses held for authors — especially in the cultural and literary spheres — it has also underscored the persistence — and even centrality — of discourses that blurred the lines between science and metaphysics (Antonello & Gilson, 2004; Adriano, 2014). In literature and culture, authors frequently engaged with scientific ideas not to affirm positivist principles, but to explore or challenge them through frameworks infused with spirituality, occultism, and

esotericism (Tatar, 1978; Comoy Fusaro, 2007; Morrisson, 2008). What later came to be labeled as ‘pseudoscience’ often occupied a legitimate space in modern epistemological debates.

This epistemological hybridity is particularly evident in the Italian reception of Alfred Wallace’s theories, whose evolutionism was reinterpreted through a spiritualist lens (Scarpelli, 1993), or in the medical and psychological appropriation of nebulous concepts like *neurosis*, often situated between Mesmeric occultism, mediumistic practices, and early psychoanalysis (Capasa, 2009). Theosophy also provides a paradigmatic example: from Helena P. Blavatsky’s early formulations onward, it systematically reframed contemporary scientific and philosophical developments in esoteric terms (Hammer, 2001; Pasi, 2010 & 2017).

Crucially, these hybrid paradigms were not confined to private or marginal speculation. In many cases – including theosophy – they informed large-scale political and ethical projects, such as feminist activism or social reform. Nevertheless, despite this rich background, too little scholarly work has investigated the extent to which these spiritualist and esoteric discourses shaped the literary imagination and framed literature itself as a politically charged mode of knowledge production (Cigliana, 2002). As a result, much of the historiography continues to overlook the paradigmatic role played throughout Italy’s long nineteenth century by attempts to reorganize systems of knowledge: systems that were at once spiritual, religious, esoteric, scientific, ethical, and/or political in nature. Without a thorough analysis of the spiritualist dimensions that characterize many representative authors of Italian literature, we are left with a one-dimensional understanding of Italian modernism and modernity, one that neglects the indispensable contribution of epistemologies traditionally deemed peripheral to the philosophical canon and that obscures their deep political and ethical implications, particularly in shaping new forms of community and social as well as (trans)national identity.

This special issue thus seeks to interrogate the far-reaching implications of the so-called ‘death of God’, understood not merely as the decline of traditional religious authority, but more broadly as a symptom of the collapse of a shared system of absolute truths (Bauman, 1992; Eagleton, 2014). Rather than passively registering this epistemic rupture, the Italian cultural field actively engaged with it, developing new frameworks of meaning to address the challenges of modernity. For instance, within this context, both nationalism and socialism became forms of secular religion (Gentile, 1995 & 2013), offering alternative founding myths, collective rituals, and redemptive narratives that shaped and responded to liberal Italy’s predicament. Viewed through this lens, Italian modernism (Somigli & Moroni, 2006; Griffin, 2007; Cangiano, 2018; Subialka, 2021) appears as a dynamic site of radical epistemological experimentation, in which literature and culture reimaged the foundations of knowledge, identity, and intellectual belonging in response to a changing modern world.

We welcome proposals that investigate the role of alternative spiritual and epistemological paradigms — from mesmerism and spiritualism to theosophy and occultism — in the literary and political imagination of liberal Italy. Contributions should examine how, in a context marked by the erosion of traditional values and hierarchies tied to knowledge, faith, and identity, cultural production responded by forging new symbolic and epistemological paradigms that questioned, revised, or reinvented historically entrenched principles that had long shaped understandings of self, society, and the world.

Possible topics include, but are not limited to:

- Hybridizations of religion, esotericism, science, and politics in literary discourse;
- The reception and reworking of spiritual practices (e.g., spiritualism, theosophy, mesmerism) in literary production;

- The role of cultural networks (Masonic, esoteric, theosophical) in shaping literary and intellectual life;
- The use of spiritual and symbolic forms in the construction and dissemination of national myths;
- Literary representations of epistemological crisis across genres, forms, and discursive registers;
- Interplays between political ideologies (Mazzinianism, nationalism, socialism) and spiritual or sacral rhetorics;
- Masonic lodges as spaces for ideological and spiritual experimentation;
- The circulation of spiritual and para-religious ideas in literary salons, political circles, and periodical culture;
- The influence of theosophy on the period's aesthetic and political imagination;
- The impact of spiritualism, mesmerism, and theosophy on constructions of gender identity, particularly in relation to political and social agency;
- The contribution of the theosophical notion of evolution to the shaping of narratives of national progress.

Interested colleagues are encouraged to send their proposal (max. 400 words) and a short bio (max. 300 words) by 31 August 2025. Essays should be written in English, Italian or French.

Please send proposals and inquiries to: giacomo.cucugliato@unipegaso.it; sofie.barthels@ulb.be; and guylian.nemegeer@ugent.be.

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