Hysteria and Enlightenment

Chapter 11

I. The Doctors' Dilemmae

"..the hermeneutics of the pathological fact..." **Michel Foucault**

The final installment of Hysteria and Enlightenment returns to the historical record. The author attempts to invent *within* the facts, as best he can, despite his limited understanding of German and an over-extended schedule that makes it unlikely that he will, any time soon, be paying a visit to Vienna to consult primary sources.

Mid- April, 1777. Four months have passed since Franz Anton Mesmer memorably quelled a hysterical crisis experienced by Marie-Therese while attending a concert. It was then, or soon afterwards, that her parents, the couple of Herr Joseph von Paradis and Frau Colnbach, were persuaded to leave Marie-Therese in his care.

If we are to believe the glowing accounts written by Herr von Paradis himself for German newspapers, her progress had been

astounding. Crowds had been coming daily to the Landstrasse estate to see for themselves, (if not merely to gawk and stare), the miracle of her restoration of vision, to laugh sympathetically when she confused an apple with a human head or marvel when she followed someone across the lawn.

But why should anyone trust the naïve opinions of the ignorant rabble, when the wise doctors of the medical faculty of the University of Vienna were, almost without exception, leagued against him, the Franz Anton Mesmer from Swabia, this notorious charlatan, this self-proclaimed medicine man, the enemy of all enlightened thought who dared proclaim that the mind might hold sway over the man-machine trumpeted by authorities from Descartes to Jean de la Mettrie, for whom

It was the custom in that period for doctors to have little good to say about one another. The credibility of medicine was weak, and would remain so for almost a century. The difference between today's medical professionals and those of the past is that, before 1870, doctors presumed authority when there was often little basis for it; whereas a sizable number of today's doctors abuse the authority given them by the fact that that today's medicine can now lay claim to some real credibility.

For this particular case there were complicating factors. It would have been unrealistic for Mesmer to expect any strong endorsement coming from Dr. Anton von Störck, court physician to Maria Theresa. It is to his credit that he did commend Mesmer's initial successes. One recalls that he is the doctor who'd concluded, after 10 years of the capricious application of torture devices, including plaster casts around the head and hundreds of electroshocks in the eyeballs, that the blindness of Marie-Therese von Paradis was incurable.

Nor could he expect much support from the Dutch-English Dr. Jan Ingenhousz, highly esteemed by court and populace as The Great Inoculator. Of which more in a moment. Ingenhouz had been denigrating Mesmer relentlessly ever since the magnetic treatments of Fraulein Österline in 1773. Resistance towards all innovations other than his own (he figures in the discovery of photo-synthesis) appears to have been integral to his professional self-image. For example, his virulent campaign against Jenner's' vaccination continued until the day of his death.

Another enemy was Dr. Anton de Haen. Alone among his colleagues in the medical school of Vienna , he continued ,well into the last quarter of the 18th century, to defend his belief in witchcraft. He may simply have thought that Mesmer was a witch.

The most serious professional criticism came from Dr. Joseph Barth, official ophthalmologist to the Imperial court. Barth knew more about eye diseases than anyone else in Vienna. He responded to an open invitation to visit Mesmer's clinic and examine Marie-Therese. After his second visit he roundly declared Mesmer to be an imposter. Marie-Therese, he stated, was only pretending to be able to see, since she confused the colors of objects, and frequently misnamed them.

Simply from the face of it, it's apparent that Barth is only convicting himself of bad faith. To misname objects one has to see them; to get the colors wrong one must have sensations of color. He'd performed hundreds of cataract operations and knew at first hand how arduous a task it was for those who have suddenly recovered their sight to organize the random impressions of sensory data into distinct recognizable entities. The fact that Marie-Therese was able to identify objects at all should have convinced him that there was had been a real change in her condition.

One can already speak of a conspiracy organized among these doctors to discredit, actually to disgrace, Mesmer at the Austrian court. They devised a strategy based on the manipulation of the two persons with the strongest influence over the situation: Herr Joseph von Paradis and the empress, Maria-Theresa. Joseph II, co-regent since 1765, was in

France. The empress could be managed from a number of directions. Herr von Paradis, Court Councilor and president of the Chamber of Commerce, would prove to be even more malleable.

Traditional accounts of this story now relate that the doctors hostile to Mesmer exploited the anxieties of Herr von Paradis until they succeeded in transforming his former enthusiasm for Mesmer into an implacable hostility. I suspect that these accounts oversimplify the issues so as to create a convenient scenario of recognizable heroes and villains.

II. Medical Politics

"The crisis broke while I was abroad. Word has reached me that something new and evil is at work here….."

Euripedes, The Bacchae

On the most basic level one is dealing with one out of the numerous manifestations of the deep traumas inflicted on the European consciousness by the violence of the birth of the modern world in the last third of the eighteen century : the multiple revolutions in agriculture, industry, medicine, transport, technology, politics, ideology, religion, ... Many of these scars remain open and unhealed to this day, pulsing with the undiluted pain of their primal onslaught: civil wars in Northern Ireland, Yugoslavia, the demolition of the Soviet Empire, the

continuing turmoil in the Third World vestiges of the old colonial empires.

Including in the long list of disasters provoked by the emergent technologies were those that devolved around the theory and practice of medicine. Before the period which now concerns us it could scarcely be called a science, and it would be another 80 years before the medical doctor could be assured of that public confidence which, (albeit with many misgivings), he is accorded in our own day.

With respect to the local Viennese situation, to uncover the source of the nastiness of the doctors , indeed of the enthusiasms and hostilities of all parties concerned, one needs to look at the bitter relations between the medical faculty of Vienna U. and the Austrian court, dating back to 1767 and even earlier .

In 1745 Maria Theresa brought Gerard van Swieten from Holland to Vienna to head up the newly created medical faculty. A pupil of the celebrated Boorhaeve at Leyden, he was a Catholic in unhappy circumstances among his own countrymen. Van Swieten built up the medical faculty, making it one of the most important medical schools in Western Europe. For almost a century it was the principal drawing card for Vienna, for students desirous of a scientific career.

The medical school scintillated as the brightest gem in the

intellectual crown of the Habsburg domains up into the 1870's when Vienna entered into its one truly period of greatness in European intellectual history.

Ironically, one of the few major scientific discoveries coming from Vienna in the age of Mozart and Haydn, was that of Franz Anton Mesmer himself , a man of but a single idea, but that an important one. Between Kepler and von Helmont in the early 17th century, and Georg Mendel and Semmelweis in the second half of the 19th, there are few scientific developments of note coming out of Vienna. However in 1778, when Mesmer was forced into exile and moved to Paris, he joined the company of Lagrange, Legendre, Laplace, d'Alembert, Cassini, Lavoisier, Jussieu, Buffon, Bailly, Bertholet, Franklin, ...

Overall in relation to its size and resources the contribution of the Austrian Empire to the scientific and technological revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries was quite negligible. This is not necessarily a bad thing: Austro-Hungary was temporarily spared the raw environmental destruction that overtook England in only a few decades.

III. Smallpox as Catastrophe Surface

" … as on a darkling plain, swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight , Where ignorant armies clash by night." ...

- Matthew Arnold , Dover Beach

Until the terrible smallpox epidemic of 1767, Van Swieten's authority at the Theresian court was considerable. He and his son, Gottfried, were also prominent education and reform of the legal code. While smallpox was carrying off several close relations of Maria Theresa (and she herself nearly died from it) Gerard Van Swieten made the blunder of disparaging the effectiveness of inoculation, a precursor of vaccination, invented by the still superior medical tradition of the Arab world. He'd carried his prudence to excess: at the height of the epidemic van Swieten used his considerable authority to prohibit the inoculation of any member of the royal household.

After her recovery Maria-Theresa ignored his prohibitions and bestowed her favors on Dr. Jan Ingenhousz, the royal inoculator from the court of George III of England. Three years had passed since the 7 Years War, and the British and the Austrians were friends again. Business as usual: the aristocracy played at war and peace, while it was merely the people who suffered.

The moment he arrived in Vienna, Ingenhousz set to work inoculating 65 members of the royal household. All of them survived the procedure; this was in itself remarkable, as the death toll from the inoculation itself was over 3%. To celebrate this triumph of the new medicine a feast and festival were held at Schönbrunn Palace on October 5th, 1768.

Historical idiosyncrasy is much in evidence here: in the next decade, George III 's greatest military defeat would be partly attributable to his own distrust of inoculation. It reminds us again of the magnitude of the factor of the smallpox epidemic in shaping of this chapter of European history. Let's review a few chapters from the American war of independence:

(1) The collapse of Benedict Arnold's assault on Quebec on December 31, 1775, was due not to the "red-coats" but to:

(i) his utter contempt for the sufferings of his own men (the infamous "forced march" through Maine) and

(ii) the "red-dots". It was smallpox that broke the Continental Army as it lay outside the walls of Quebec.

(2) Profiting from the latter lesson, George Washington ordered the inoculation of the entire Continental Army - a bold and somewhat

ruthless step, involving at it did unknown but very high mortality rates and long periods of enforced quarantine. His decision was a major factor in winning the revolution. I can cite no better reference than the amazing memoir, *Pox Americana: The Great Smallpox Epidemic of 1775-82*, by Elizabeth Anne Fenn.

Van Swieten's rejection of what is now recognized as the cornerstone discovery of modern medicine would continue to cloud his standing at the Austrian court. Miracle worker Jan Ingenhousz was in; Van Swieten and his associates were clearly out. A strong political axis now cut directly through the court, the medical school, and the musical world of the capital, which is to say, all aspects Viennese intellectual life. The line of demarcation was smallpox.

Included in the Van Swieten circle were the Mozarts and the Mesmers. Recall the reactions of the Theresian enclave to the arrival of the young Mozart from lmütz in 1768, his face bristling with a fresh carpet of red pimples. Joseph von Paradis and Salieri were in the Ingenhousz camp. Salieri was a teacher of Marie-Therese von Paradis , and there exists extant a file of correspondence between him and her father . To the intelligent yet sentimental empress Maria-Theresa, the issues were quite clear: Gerard Van Swieten and his son Gottfried,

formerly heralded as the torch-bearers of modern science and enlightenment, had killed off most of her immediate family. Jan Ingenhousz had saved the remainder. And the vain and jealous Ingenhousz hated Mesmer with a mortal passion.

Senior Executive Officer, Regierungsrath Herr Joseph von Paradis could not have worked in the inner circles of the court for all his professional life without being a participant in its political imbroglios. His personal admiration for the empress is evident from the fact that he named his daughter after her. The cordiality appears to have been mutual: the pension of 200 gulden per year granted him for the musical education of Marie-Therese came directly from the special-purpose private purse used by the empress for the ostentatious display of aristocratic largesse, one of the many splinters in the heel of son and co-regent , Joseph II.

IV. The Pension

"The best laid schemes of mice and men, Gang aft a-gley"

....Burns, To A Mouse

Mesmer's enemies were quick to capitalize on the sensitive issue of the uncertain future of the pension. An opportunity lay ready at hand: indeed, from the very first manifestations of a crude faculty of vision, Marie-Therese 's piano playing had begun to suffer. By mid-April it was tragically deteriorated.

This decline unfolded itself gradually: hesitation in the attack, a lack of confidence, of sensitivity in her touch; a note missed here and there, passages scrambled ; a growing dysfunction between the hand and the eye that everybody thought she could readily cure with practice and patience. Each tiny defect, insignificant in itself, provided a seed from which, over the weeks and month, entangled difficulties grew, until all the relevant muscles of arms and hands were paralyzed by interlocking focal dystonias. By mid-April Marie-Therese could do nothing at the keyboard.

A focal dystonia is a task-specific neurological handicap. They have recently been the object of much study and investigation in the

young field of *performing arts medicine*, for the simple reason that they are a plague on the musical profession. A typical example is afforded by the all too common experience of a performer accomplished in one instrument, say the violin, who wishes to apply his training to a related instrument such as the viola or cello. The technical requirements of the new instrument are so similar to those of their original training, that it appears at first that mastery should come very quickly. Yet therein lies the trap.

Advanced technique is not a matter of playing individual notes, or even passages, but rather the coordination, together or in sequence, of complex patterns of neuro-muscular coordination, essentially algorithms, which have been programmed into the nervous system.

A new set of coordinated responses will interfere with the earlier training in such a way that the hands, fingers, and eyes are bedeviled by a host of contradictory directives. To the astonishment of the performer, who has been playing music all his life and may even be deemed a virtuoso, his hands will suddenly and without warning freeze. These unanticipated paralyses may extend their domain of influence until the performer finds himself unable to play either the old or the new instrument!

Similar phenomena may occur even when a performer tries to

change from one style to another on the same instrument, say from classical guitar to flamenco. Learning disabilities of this sort ought not to be confused with the "pro-active" or "retro-active" inhibitions of behavioral psychology. They relate to muscular training and have a neurological basis.

Unexpected focal dystonias have terminated musical careers. They carry an air of finality about them, a sense that they may be incurable. Patience and hard work are needed to overcome them. One should also consider the possibility that Marie-Therese had transferred her psychosomatic condition from sight to her hearing and muscular co-ordination. This would merely represent a further complication. However, since the 18th century the breakdown of motor co-ordination has been observed in all situations of the recovery of sight after a long period of blindness.

In the late 18th century, there was total ignorance in European medical science about the ever-widening marshlands into which the "experiment of Marie-Therese von Paradis" was sinking both patient and therapist. Neurology was an infant science; there was nothing in textbooks or the medical curricula about the re - training of cured victims of blindness. In fact, there no guarantee whatsoever that Marie-Therese's muscular co-ordination would ever again be restored, that she would be

able to walk, dress or even feed herself unaided, or that she would ever "see" more than a sea of confused, weakly differentiated blobs of shadow and light.

Had the medical profession of that time, including both friends, associates and even the enemies of Franz Anton Mesmer, been able to consult the literature that has accumulated up to our own day, they could have worked out a gradual regime of therapy and readjustment for Marie-Therese. It is difficult to imagine that it could be done in less than 5 years, probably as much as 10. Certain aspects would require a lifetime of training and adjustment. The recognition of shapes, objects and distances would need to be carefully integrated to proceed, step by step, with her muscular re-training and musical education. Today, at least, it is obvious that one lone hypnotist, however gifted, could not be adequate to the task; doctors, ophthalmologists, physiotherapists, music teachers and therapists, a veritable battalion of specialists in other words, would have to be to organized, bringing the weight their knowledge, skill and, one should hope, their intelligence, to bear on this fascinating medical challenge.

Politics solves by brute force what reason can not hope to accomplish. Nothing approaching a medical venture of this complexity and sensitivity could have been imagined in the Vienna of the 1770's: the

world is not made of Mozarts! Isolated within a hostile medical establishment Franz Anton Mesmer felt himself under enormous pressure to prove, in a relatively short time, and that completely, that his methods could cure hysterical blindness. Gradualism was not an option.

For his detractors, the numerous unforeseen consequences of his "reckless experimentation" were interpreted as proofs of the intrinsic unsoundness of his ideas and methods. It being granted that Marie-Therese could - in a manner of speaking - "see": was there not a strong likelihood that Mesmer's irresponsible or even sacrilegious intervention into the natural order might result in the production of nothing more than a monstrous circus freak? Was it not more likely that a mentally unstable young woman, after sating the bottomless public appetite for novelties and miracles, was destined, for the rest of her life, to remain in a condition of pitiable helplessness, neither blind nor seeing, bereft even of those musical talents that had heretofore promised her a splendid career?

Such dire prognostications, real or fanciful, were forcefully conveyed to Herr Joseph von Paradis and his wife by the group of doctors determined to ruin Mesmer. They reinforced in them the fear that with the loss of Marie-Therese's two principal economic assets, her musical talent and her blindness, the empress Maria-Theresa was sure to

discontinue the royal pension.

Writers and historians commenting on the effect of this propaganda campaign are of two minds: there are some who maintain that Herr Joseph von Paradis was nothing more than a particularly odious petty monster, who for the sake of a miserable 200 gulden a year would rather his daughter remain blind for life. The other viewpoint, disdaining to stoop so ludicrously to cheap melodrama, argues that such venal projections had no effect at all on the von Paradis couple.

The truth of the matter is probably best approached by placing the fear of the loss of the pension in the context of the avalanche of worries and fears that had suddenly descended upon them. If there had been little or no deterioration in the piano playing of Marie-Therese, she was already advanced to the stage as a professional performer when she could dispense with the royal pension. Her first recorded appearance on a concert stage was in 1770, age 10, in the Augustinian Church, with her godmother the empress in the audience. She sang the soprano part of the Pergolesi "Stabat Mater" , accompanying herself on the organ.

This precious vignette is of the highest eloquence. One senses how much the promise that this charming young prodigy would be able to see again, must have agitated the musical world of the times, the most extraordinary in history. Over the coming decades, quite a lot of money

was made by between father and daughter. There is no evidence that the von Paradis family ever suffered hardship. On the contrary: both were generous contributors to subscription concerts and benefits for needy Viennese musicians right into the 19th century. If, however, her incapacity at the keyboard should prove permanent, *and* in addition the cure of her blindness only temporary or hopelessly botched, then there *did* indeed arise very serious problems in forecasting and planning her future.

Speaking with the advantage of over two centuries of hindsight, the logical next step was to stop the hypnotherapy for awhile and concentrate on the restoration of motor activity. Perhaps it was also the right moment, and with the greatest diplomacy, to arrange an audience with the empress, at which she could witness at first hand the progress that Marie-Therese had made in sight and vision. If handled properly, the pension, rather than being discontinued, could have shifted its purpose, from musical training to vision re-training, with a gradual restoration of her piano technique. It is just this, however, which the doctors at the Medical Faculty of the University of Vienna wished to avoid: a rise in the political currency of a pupil of Van Swieten, and a diminution of the prestige of Jan Ingenhousz.