

Hysteria and Enlightenment

Chapter 12

Finale

V. Joseph II, Psychiatrist At Large

" My job makes me a royalist."

... Joseph II, responding to criticism by Voltaire

But for the next four months ,Joseph II would be in France , eagerly running around Paris setting up appointments to meet as many of its famous scientists, politicians and philosophers as he could.True to his Viennese roots , he also found time to act as a marriage counselor to sister Marie Antoinette and her husband, Louis XVI.

It appears that Louis was unable to produce orgasms, at least at the right moments: when they were most likely to lead to the prized offspring of the Bourbon dynasty. He felt comfortable confiding this

embarrassing secret to Joseph II, whose advice was stern. In the words of the Holy Roman Emperor:

“Imagine! In his marriage bed - this is the secret - he has strong , perfectly satisfactory erections. He introduces the member, stays there for perhaps two minutes without moving, withdraws without discharging but still erect, and bids good night. It's incredible, because in addition he sometimes has night-time emissions, but in his bed, never when on the job, and he's happy, saying simply that he only does it out of duty and gets no pleasure from it. Ah! If I could have been present once, I should have arranged it properly. He needs to be whipped, to make him discharge in a passion, like donkeys. Further, my sister is pretty placid, they're two incompetents together”

The royal couple may have followed his recipe. Marie-Antoinette gave birth to a son within the year, and both she and her husband sent letters thanking him. Evidently the psychiatric genius of Old Vienna extended even to the members of its aristocracy!

VI . *The Greek Tragedy*

"Alas! How terrible it is to know, Where no good comes of knowing!"

Sophocles ; Oedipus Rex

"Of mortal anguish a tempestuous sea"

... Aeschylus; Prometheus Bound

We now must come to the tragic events of the morning of April 29th, 1777. Earlier in the week there had been some friction between Dr. Mesmer and Herr von Paradis . von Paradis had shown up unexpectedly at his clinic to demand the immediate return of his daughter. Mesmer had raised no objections, but evidently Marie-Therese herself refused to leave. Having survived the miseries of the first months and overcome a series of depressive crises, she wanted to persist in the therapy until it could be of some benefit to her. It is not difficult to read between the lines of the official account: she must also have been afraid of her parents. Mesmer and von Paradis exchanged angry words; then von Paradis abruptly left the clinic , swearing that he would be back with the law on his side.

On the morning of April 29th Mesmer was sitting at a table in the parlour of his house finishing up a small breakfast in the company of a certain baron Pelligrini, one of the chiefs of staff of the Austrian army . Some clinical assistants were also in the room. Outside, doormen ,

porters and gardeners were milling around the entrance to the mansion; a butler was stationed within the vestibule. It does not appear that Mesmer's wife was present.

In an adjoining room, behind a Japanese partition, stood Marie-Therese. She was being groomed by 2 maid servants for her usual morning stroll about the garden - not the 'fantastic garden' of the previous episode, but evidently a charming private garden that was much admired at the time by Viennese society. Mozart will visit it in 1781. In a letter to his father he remarks with some sadness, that it had gone to seed.

The butler came into the parlour to announce the arrival of Marie-Therese's mother, Frau von Colnbach-Paradis. Upon hearing this, Marie-Therese cried that she did not want to see her, and begged Mesmer to hide her in the next room. Frau von Paradis was admitted. She was a stout and muscular woman, used to having her own way. Her state was agitated state but she endeavored to remain calm.

She stated that she'd come to apologize for her husband's rude behavior during the previous day. Mesmer told her not to trouble herself over it and invited her to breakfast. She declined, saying that she could not stay for very long. She then expressed a desire to see and

talk with her daughter. Mesmer tried to put her off by saying that she was having breakfast in a different part of the estate; he may have been waiting for a more convenient time and place to bring them together. Upon hearing this, Frau von Paradis totally lost her composure. Unleashing a volley of insults and accusations she threw herself at him.

A sound could now be heard coming from the other room: the uncontrollable, anguished weeping of Marie-Therese. Her mother raced across the parlour into the next room and discovered her daughter hiding behind the partition. She seized her by the arm and yanked her back into the parlour. It is recorded that she yelled something like:

"So! You, too, are in the conspiracy against us!"

Then she picked up her sick daughter, still in the critical phase of her cure for psychosomatic blindness, and threw her headfirst against one of the walls of the room. The concussion knocked her unconscious. Marie-Therese collapsed to the floor, frothing at the mouth, blood pouring from her nose.

The general Pelligrini and a maid ran over to protect her. Screaming and shrieking Frau von Paradis turned on Mesmer himself, clawing and beating him with nails and fists. A servant pulled her away, pushed her down onto the floor and restrained her.

Suddenly the sounds and shouts of a violent quarrel were heard.

It was Herr Joseph von Paradis, pushing his way past footmen, porters and gardeners, drawn sword in hand. He had been there all along, pacing impatiently before the front of the house, waiting for his wife to emerge dragging along their daughter. Upon hearing her screams he'd unsheathed his sword and raced up the steps. The commotion rose in volume as he, followed by the servants, went up the spiral staircase of the entranceway to the mansion.

Livid with rage he burst into the living-room; his sword poised like a dagger, he ran at the person of Mesmer. Between the people in the room and those rushing after him from outdoors, he was restrained long enough for the household staff to wrest the sword out of his hand. Joseph von Paradis did an about-face; still shouting threats, he stormed out of the house.

In the meantime Frau von Paradis had fainted. As Mesmer attended to her, staff assistants and maid servants carried Marie-Therese to her bedroom. After her mother left that afternoon Mesmer went to examine her. She was in a delirium, at the onset of a severe hysterical crisis, and, once again, totally blind. She would remain so for the rest of her life. From Mesmer's own account:

" Meanwhile, the wife of Herr Paradis had swooned away. I gave her the

necessary attention and she left some hours afterwards; but the unhappy daughter was suffering from fits, vomiting and rages. The slightest noise, such as the sound of bells, further aggravated her distemper. She had even relapsed into her previous blindness through the violence of the blow on the head given her by her mother, and I had some fear for the state of her brain."

*" O loss of sight, of thee I most complain!
Blind among enemies, O worse than chains,
Dungeon or beggary, or decrepit age!
Light, the prime work of God, to me is extinct,
And all her various objects of delight
Annulled, which might in part my grief have eased,
Inferior to the vilest now become
Of man and worm; the vilest here excel me,
They creep, yet see; I, dark in light, exposed
To daily fraud, contempt, abuse and wrong,
Within doors, or without, still as a fool,
In power of others, never in my own;
Scarce half I seem to live, dead more than half"*

.....Milton; Samson Agonistes

VII. A Modern Diagnosis

Reading of these terrible events, one is tempted to a number of conclusions:

- (a) That grand melodramas such as the above were daily occurrences in the von Paradis household;
- (b) That they were the root cause of the hysteria of Marie-Therese
- (c) That her parents, both of weak and violent dispositions, could not bear the moral burden of the presence of a child restored to emotional health.
- (d) That since family life was built around the psycho-physical dependency of their only child, her improving health threatened the stability of the home, as they conceived it.
- (e) That they therefore deliberately, if unconsciously, and quite apart from whatever rationalizations they might have entertained, sabotaged her cure.
- (f) That such an outcome was perhaps inevitable, it not being possible in the long run to cure just one member of a co-habiting family ,without giving equal attention to all the others.

VIII. Further Squalls and Sequels

"We be by laws eternal what we be" Euripedes, The Euminedes

Herr von Paradis visited the Vienna U. medical school the next day to petition its doctors to force Mesmer to release his daughter to his charge. Yet he also wrote a letter that afternoon to Mesmer apologizing for his behavior and promising not to interfere further. It has been suggested that the doctors had counseled von Paradis to fake an apology to prepare the ground for the speedy return of Marie-Therese.

My feeling is that Herr von Paradis, a psychologically disturbed individual, very responsible and correct, yet overwhelmed by circumstances, was entirely sincere in both of these actions. This was a man who could, on one day, write a glowing account of Mesmer's treatment of his daughter for the newspapers, yet could also, just a few weeks later, attack him with his sword; a man who, after investing a fortune in a controversial cure for his daughter's condition, could also, when in a state of anger, ignore the sight of her sprawled on the floor with a possible concussion.

The Paradis couple were not alone in their confusion, in this crucial period at the end of the 18th century, the watershed of the

modern world, when the devastating power of the Industrial Revolution was poised to erupt upon the nations of Europe and the New World. The tragedies of the von Paradis family can be assimilated into the global accumulation of future shocks that shook Europe in the the 1770's, and which were destined to become increasingly frequent and severe : in Austria alone one counts 3 major wars in 30 years, all lost, wars that remade the map of the globe, (including the war that should really be considered World War I, the 7 Years War (1757-1764)) ; a revolution in the New World precipitating the overthrow of a 900 -year feudal order, with its incipient repercussions in France ; a peasant revolt in Bohemia in 1775, precipitated by the intended *abolition* of serfdom;; partition of Poland in 1772 , the historically unparalleled destruction of a millennial European kingdom, the very nation that in 1638 had rescued Austria from the Turks at the gates of Vienna ; the destruction of clerical power and privilege, begun by Maria Theresa and completed by Joseph in the next decade;

And in the domain of culture and fashion: the supplanting, in less than a decade, of the harpsichord by the piano necessitated more re-education for Herr von Paradis' difficult daughter. The publication and distribution of the earliest fashion catalogues from France , the product of improved methods of printing and the revolution in textile

manufactures meant that both wife and daughter would demand the latest fashions in style and dress. World and local populations would rise to unprecedented levels. New faiths, ideologies, cults and creeds were emerging, the Masons, the Deists, the numerous Protestant schisms and sects, Mesmer's own Societies of Harmony ...

We deplore today the fast pace of change, the increasing stress, the near impossibility of keeping step with technological innovation. Yet we are at least used to the phenomenon, though we don't like it and can't always deal with it effectively. Before 1770, people didn't know what stress meant, in our sense of the term; the shock of its first appearance in human history must have induced states akin to insanity in all of the nations affected by it. And indeed, the 19th century, known as the "golden age of hysteria", was about to begin.

For the von Paradis family the clash of medical philosophies and scientific ideologies embodied in the jealous professional war between Ingenhousz the Inoculator and Mesmer the Hypnotist, struck the final blow to precipitate the breakdown of the decorum which had effectively concealed the crude violence of their domestic life from the gaze of genteel Vienna.

Anton Störck, now chairman of the medical school, wrote a letter

to Mesmer demanding the immediate return of Marie-Therese to her family.

For all of his shortcomings Störck was not, like Ingenhousz, Mesmer's enemy. Reactionary he indeed was, and rather stupid as we have seen, but he does not seem to have borne a personal grudge against Mesmer. He had been one of Mesmer's teachers at the medical school of Vienna U., and the best man at his wedding. Nor did he seem to really mind that Mesmer had succeeded where he had failed. His initial reaction to Marie-Therese's progress had been positive, if lukewarm.

Thus, although as chairman of the medical school it was his duty to write such a letter he added a postscript, amounting to a sizable loophole, leaving it to Mesmer's discretion to keep Marie-Therese at the clinic if he thought that moving her might endanger her life.

Mesmer replied that she must not be moved in her present state; he requested that an observer from the faculty come to visit him to verify as much. A doctor was sent: he found Marie-Therese to be in an incredible state, bed-ridden, vomiting, with periodic bouts of delirium, accesses of hysteria and prolonged fits of weeping. Her blindness was as total as it had been in January. The only improvement over her former condition was the reduction of her eyeballs to normal size. This gave her face a normal appearance. The raven-locked Medusa of the past could at

last appear to have rejoined the human race.

It is very likely that, after the reception of this report, the Paradis couple were severely chastened by the medical faculty. Jan Ingenhousz at least, was a good doctor. Mesmer commanded that her parents stay away from the clinic until Marie-Therese had recovered her mental equilibrium. One more they apologized and agreed to comply.

In fact they stayed away for over a month. They negotiating through the medical faculty to take Marie-Therese home on June 8th for a weekend visit. Needless to say she was never returned to Mesmer's care.

Mesmer makes the claim that in those 5 weeks he was able to restore her sight back to where it had been before the events of April 29th. If she went blind again, he states, it was because of the madness of her family life. I find this very doubtful, and there is no evidence to support it beyond Mesmer's own assertions. Such a miraculous recovery would certainly have reached the ears of the court and the medical faculty, which would have then been obliged to conduct a reasonably honest investigation.

Marius von Senden, in his classic treatise on the problems of

recovered sight¹ states as if it were a known fact, that Marie-Therese went blind again because of the collapse of the cribriform (porous) lenses. If this is so, then her psychosomatic blindness degenerated to a purely somatic and incurable form, and the final outcome was not the fault of anyone.

There is also another possibility, which is that in those remaining 40 days, Mesmer was able to re-establish contact with her subconscious penumbral vision. One of the lectures of Pierre Janet on hysteria, (*Lecture IX, pg. 195, see bibliography*) deals with the unique character of the psychosomatic symptoms relating to vision. He presents the evidence, in the form of carefully plotted graphs in polar coordinates (pgs. 202, 203, op. cit.) for a field of subconscious visual awareness beyond the narrow or even totally extinguished range of hysterically impaired vision. He states that he was able to convince Charcot of this fact, who found it quite remarkable. Quote:

“We have two visions, the central vision, which is accurate and attentive, and the peripheric vision, which is vacant, and of secondary importance. You see that the hysterical keeps only the first consciously, the second persisting quite unconsciously.....A young boy had violent crises of terror caused by a fire, and it was enough to show him a small flame for the fit to begin again. Now his visual field

¹ Space and Sight; consult earlier bibliographies

was reduced to 5 cms. and he seemed to see absolutely nothing outside of it. I showed that I could provoke his fit by merely making him fix his eyes on the central point of the perimeter and then approaching a lighted match to the eightieth degree...".

It may be that in establishing contact with this subconscious capacity for vision, Marie-Therese was able to respond to Mesmer's visual cues stimulated by, say, the waving of a wand, or through directing her attention upon specific objects. As for a "total restoration of vision" , it would have been asking too much even of the Great Hypnotist to pull off such a miracle.

IX Canon & Fugue, poco mosso

Marie-Therese readjusted with little difficulty to the familiar state of blind dependence; simpler to cope with, and not without its advantages. Her virtuosity at the keyboard returned. In 1784 , in the company of her mother and her tutor, Johann Riedinger, she began a grand tour of the capitals of Western Europe, lasting two years. The warmest acclaim came from Paris, where she gave 14 concerts. At some of these performances she was presented to the public by Antonio Salieri. Salieri, who dedicated an organ concerto to her, also maintained

a correspondence with her father during her Parisian sojourn. This gives additional support to the hypothesis of an Ingenhousz-Salieri-Paradis political faction in opposition to the Mozart-Mesmer-Van Swieten camp.

Yet she and Mozart appear also to have been friends. He wrote a piano concerto for her specifically for this tour (#18 in B^b Köchel 456) to supplement the concertos by her teacher Kozeluch that supplied the bulk of her concerto repertoire ².

She returned to Vienna via Berlin and Prague in 1786. She was in her mid-twenties. The archives of Viennese concert programs of the 18th century show that she was a consistently active figure on the concert stage of Europe's great capital of music until the age of 48. The summit of her fame was achieved in 1794, when a benefit concert for the war orphans and widows of this half century of warfare was held on January 21 in the *Kleiner Redoutensaal*. The principal work on the program was her cantata: *Deutsches Monument Ludwigs des Unglücklichen*, featured together with a new Haydn symphony and a Mozart aria sung by

² The musicologist Ullrich (listed in a previous bibliography) argues that Mozart's concerto, with its tender slow movement (according to the musicologist Alfred Einstein, the "essence of the feminine") was not ready in time for her to have performed it in either Paris or London.

Aloysia Lange, Mozart's sister-in-law. After 1808, she devoted herself to teaching. She died in 1824.

The notoriety attached to the "case of Marie-Therese" compelled Mesmer to leave Vienna. He went to Paris, where his unorthodox theories and practices created so much public excitement that "Mesmerism" took on the coloration of a veritable political movement. Numerous books and articles have been written about this and I refer interested persons to them. Though his scientific theories were condemned by the royal commissions of 1784, he continued to practice successfully, and to proselytize his ideas in a network of Societies of Harmony up until 1789. The "Mesmer Controversy" was eclipsed by the French Revolution; for the next 5 years he became a wanderer and a refugee.

In 1792 he returned to Vienna. His wife was dead and their estate in ruins, and it is doubtful that he would have stayed there very long. In any case the choice of alternatives was denied him, as he was expelled for Jacobin sympathies by the antediluvian government of Francis II.

Franz Anton Mesmer then retired to Frauenfeld, a small village on the Swiss-Swabian border, surrounded by his relations and the world

of his childhood. Though he continued to write and publish books about Animal Magnetism, he remained in an obstinately cultivated obscurity, known only as a local faith healer, not sensibly different from similar practitioners in the neighboring countryside. In his final years he moved to the adjoining village of Meersburg to stay with relatives. He died in 1816.

IX. Which: Doctor or Witch Doctor?

"Und aussen, horch! Gin's trap, trap, trap,

Als wie von Rosseshufen

Und klirend stieg ein Reiter ab

An des Gelande Stufen..."

Gottfried Burger, "Lenore";
set to music by MT Paradis, 1789

The problem with writing about a subject like Franz Anton Mesmer, is that it is impossible to do so without taking sides. Two centuries after his condemnation by the French Academy in 1784 we are still unable to decide quite where to put him or his discoveries. Shall we consider him a "real" scientist, like Max Planck or Georg Mendel, proud possessor of a novel and important discovery misunderstood in his own time? Or should he instead be classified with the faith healers

and gurus of cults , present and past , with Madame Blavatsky, Ron Hubbard, Rajneesh, Jerry Farwell and others? Or with those society doctors, so numerous today as ever, enriching themselves by preying on the sick souls of the powerful and wealthy?

None of these stereotypes are really appropriate. It is simply impossible to imagine that Franz Anton went into the study of his mansion one afternoon to emerge later that night with a magnificent and cynical scheme to hoodwink society. Relative to Cagliostro, whose star ascended and was eclipsed in roughly the same period, he is the polar opposite. Mesmer believed in the scientific revolution; he was steeped in the science of his day; he believed that he was proceeding scientifically, that he was merely another contributor to the great international enterprise of scientific discovery.

For over two centuries he has been faulted for ascribing more importance to his theory of the magnetic fluid than to his impressive clinical record. It is easy to see why he did so. In the course of his therapeutic activity he actually saw the converging lines of force , and physically experienced, in the tensions of his own muscles, the savage powers of the fields he spoke of. Their impact to him was as immediate to him as the tug of gravity, the torque of mighty winds, the pressure of intense sunlight upon the optic nerves. It was essential to the success of

his therapies, that his own organism should be so receptive to this tidal force in order for him to be able to manipulate it effectively in the minds and bodies of his patients.

The Freudians use the word transference; psychiatrists in general talk about abreaction, or catharsis; mystics, saints and traditional religious faith healers speak of the power of God or Christ; other traditions speak of shakti, macumba, manes; modern hypnotists speak of trance. All these terms, though offering little in the way of 'scientific' explanation, are equally effective in conveying the experience of the therapist and his patient in the presence of the concentrated force field of elemental psychic energy.

With his excellent scientific education, it was only to be expected that he would substitute a fashionable and successful scientific theory, Newtonian gravitation, for the description of a phenomenon that such faith healers as Gassner and John Wesley had called the Divine Light. In this respect he was no different from his immediate predecessors.

Yet in one important respect he improved upon them. Since the powers under his command were assumed to be natural, they could be observed and recorded. The growing field of medical statistics, initiated by Pascal and Huygens in the 17th century, could be brought to bear on more carefully compiled files of case histories. Therapies and their

follow-ups could be analysed, compared and disputed. Previous to this one dared attempt no such thing with the "power of God"!

It is because of this that Mesmer is considered today to have founded the field of psycho-therapy, although the phenomena he described had been known for millennia.

The modern consensus appears to be that, although he may be considered both scientist and charlatan, he was not terribly good at either profession. His scientific theories were debunked with admirable thoroughness by Franklin, d'Alembert, Bailly, Lavoisier, Buffon, Guillotin and others in 1784 (with an important dissenting opinion by Jussieu) . His career as a charlatan in Paris and Spa came to an end with the outbreak of the French revolution.

Yet there is one title that historians will never be able to deprive him of: a gifted *doctor* , of prodigious talent and inexhaustible dedication one of the finest *practitioners* (in the best sense of the word) in our entire European tradition.

X. Full Cadence

What moral, if any, is there to be drawn from this absorbing, inherently tragic tale, woven from fact far more compelling than any fiction? Moral? I know of none. Perhaps some obscure laws of compensation; some deep insights, possibly, into the artistic personality, the nature of science, and of medicine; the pitiful frailty of the human condition; yet, at the same time its indestructible dignity, integrity and power. Perhaps this is no more than a bittersweet legend; some saga of love and struggle, of failure, confusion, idealism, hope one of those precious gems, glowing ever more brightly with each retelling, embedded in the brickwork and masonry of that ungainly yet monumental cathedral, now so much under attack , which we may still, with appropriate modesty, call the civilization of the West?

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