

Hysteria and Enlightenment

Chapter 2

Animal Magnetism

Around the same time that Mesmer was being inaugurated into the arcana of “magnetic” therapies, John Wesley and Benjamin Franklin were confessing their enthusiasm for electro-shock therapies. Franklin had been knocked unconscious twice during his experiments with electricity; how he survived the legendary kite experiment is still a mystery.

He’d observed that after his recovery - and Franklin was an extraordinary observer – there was a brief period of amnesia. He passed this insight along to Dr. John Ingenhousz, the “Court Inoculator” of Maria Theresa, and one of the most spiteful of Mesmer’s enemies. Ingenhousz would later crown his career by becoming, until his death in the 1790’s, the leader in the campaign to ban Jenner’s improved methods of vaccination in England. We will be hearing more about him later.

Franklin and Wesley jointly concluded that zapping psychotics with electricity might cure them: “let’s”, Franklin writes, “try the practice on mad people!”. Their unfortunate modern legacy is

described and analysed in an article published on Ferment Magazine: www.fermentmagazine.org/FermentXI/FXI10.pdf

Several years later, in 1784, it would again be Franklin, at the head of the commission of the French Royal Society set up to investigate Mesmer's methods and cures, who would oversee and sign the report that would discredit Mesmer's reputation in Paris and lead to the withdrawal of royal support. Nor was this altogether a bad thing. By 1792, when Mesmer finally left Paris for good, any support from the crown might have become a one-way ticket to the guillotine.

It is my opinion that Franklin was just afraid of crazy people, like most of us, and was also afraid to admit it to himself. His extreme rationalism, co-habiting with a well-documented life of unrestrained debauchery, are indicators of the defences of a powerful mind against a soul that was largely out of control. Still, that mind served us well when it came to shaping up a Constitution.

Few doctors have been so venerated and vilified, with so little concern for the historical record, as Franz Anton Mesmer. A particularly unfair denunciation of him fills the pages of Robert Darnton's informative, at times delightful, yet unjustly biased

book : *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France* (13)

. Mr. Darnton believes that he possesses a uncanny ability to weed the charlatans out of the sciences. Were he allowed to roam at liberty with his scythe, hardly anything discovered in the past 500 years would be left.

He does have a point: although I am of the persuasion that Mesmer was a true scientist and not a charlatan, one cannot deny that his Parisian folies brought out a number of disagreeable traits in him, typical of “fashionable” doctors everywhere: paranoia, arrogance, greediness, etc. It’s the age-long story: a “David pitted against the Goliaths of stupidity and humbug” in the medical profession, yet that same professional success which brings upon him the envy of the bureaucrats, the established, the mediocre and the occupants of sinecures, eventually turns his head as well, bringing about his downfall.

These articles will concentrate largely on his Viennese period. It was then that he best displayed his true character as a scientist.

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The case history and cure of Fräulein Franzl Oesterline would fail to satisfy the requirements of any Commission, past or present, convened for the purpose of setting standards for the

application of the scientific method. We know enough about hypnosis and suggestion today to recognize that the very close relationship of Franzl with Mesmer and his family over a period of years set up far too much interference to justify the claim that the success of her cure was due to Mesmer's ability to manipulate the universal magnetic fluid. The fact remains however, that although Franzl was virtually a member of the Mesmer family for at least a year before he beamed magnetic hypno-therapy at her psyche, her symptoms showed no marked improvement until this therapy was first tried in July of 1774.

There are two diagnoses of her condition by independent observers which have come down to us: the letters which Leopold Mozart sent back to his wife in the summer of 1773, and the writings of Mesmer himself.

Leopold Mozart, not being a physician and having other things on his mind (notably his fatal obsession with finding patronage and a career for his brilliant son) does not describe her symptoms *per se*. He does however dwell at some length on her general state of health. He and Wolfgang arrived in Vienna in the third week of July, 1773. They stayed at the Mesmer estate on the Landstrasse until September 26th: two whole months. Like so

many of these journeys that ended in (sadly predictable) failure , its purpose was to seek an appointment for Wolfgang at some autocrat's court.

The mercenary, indeed philistine streak in Leopold's character has been described by all Mozart biographers. It comes prominently to the surface in this excerpt from a letter written to his wife on August 21, 1773:

"I have this moment received your letter. If I had known Frau von Mesmer's circumstances which, as you know, were very doubtful , I could have brought you both with us." (Translation: I didn't realize how rich the Mesmers were; if I had known so before setting out, I would have brought along the whole family of 4 instead of just the 2 of us.)

This derogatory judgement on the honest, earnest, cautious and respectable Leopold, one of the truly great music teachers, is not entirely fair. One needs be reminded of some of the circumstances of his origins. Putting it mildly, the fortunes of Leopold's family had been decidedly unstable for over a century. His bankrupted great-grandfather lived out the final 13 years of his life in the *Fuggerei*, the public poorhouse, what we might today call the homeless shelter. His father, Johann Georg, escaped from poverty by marrying the daughter of an established book-binder. He then

became one himself.

The family of Mozart's mother, Anna Maria Pertl, were destitute from the death, when she was 4, of her father, an indebted civil servant, until she married Leopold in 1747. Despite his beginnings in the insecure lower middle class of artisans, Leopold Mozart rose to be acknowledged as the most accomplished musician in Salzburg, violinist, composer and Kapellmeister to the episcopal court. He became in other words, a most respectable bourgeois; yet the kind of middle class professional who never forgets that the street lies only a few inches away from his doorstep and that a whimsy of fate can toss him back into it.

We can therefore easily appreciate his state of frenzy whenever he gets wind of anything (such as falling in love with the wrong kind of girl) that threatens Wolfgang's chances for a stable and utterly boring life-long security. It is because Leopold's desperate yet understandable financial anxiety that we, to this day, imagine that Mozart somehow lived like a beggar in his final decade. Here is a more sober assessment:

"Mozart's biographers agree that during his first four years of his marriage, when he had no official position or salary, his talent as a composer and pianist brought him sufficient funds. We know that Mozart earned a considerable amount of money during those years...There is no evidence that either Constanze or Wolfgang was

extravagant or uneconomical.. Of all Mozart's biographers, only Sacheverell Sitwell honestly admits that here we are truly confronted with a mystery.. The answer is clearly that we are ignorant of the true state of Mozart's financial position at this time. ." (Carr, pg. 82)

Leopold has also been accused of exploiting, even abusing, his son's talents. One must recognize that there is nothing whatsoever that the parents of a prodigy can do that will relieve them of the censure of history. Another viewpoint is at least equally valid: that his son received the best musical education possible at the time, together with a romantic life full of travel, excitement, adventure and acclaim. He did not judge his father nearly so harshly as later historians have done: In a letter written shortly after his's father's death in 1790, he says :*"I inform you that on returning home today I received the sad news of my most beloved father's death. You can imagine the state I am in."*

Returning to the case history of Franzl: she was already a member of the Mesmer household when the Mozarts arrived there in July of 1773. Her pathology was acute, with crises erupting periodically every day. It is clear that her illness cast a despondant mood over the whole household: Leopold refers to her in almost every letter. In the first letter to his wife and daughter in Salzburg, dated July 21st, he writes: *".....You can picture to yourself their joy (of the Mesmer entourage) in the Landstrasse at seeing us.*

Everywhere it has been the same. We found Fraulein Franzl in bed. She is really very emaciated and if she has another illness of this kind , she will be done for!... ”

On August 12th, 3 weeks later: “...Meanwhile Fraulein Franzl has again been dangerously ill and blisters had to be applied to her arms and feet. She is so much better now that she has knitted in bed a red silk purse for Wolfgang which she has given him as a remembrance. She sends greetings as they all do, the whole litany of the Landstrasse, the two Frau Fischers and Herr Fischer, Posch, and so forth....”

The cyclic recoveries and relapses of poor Franzl must have had the dramatic impact of daily thunderstorms.

August 21st: “... I could not write by the last post as we had a big concert in the Landstrasse. Fraulein Franzl has now had a second relapse from which she has again recovered. It is amazing how she can stand so much bleeding and so many medicines, blisters, convulsions, fainting fits and so forth, for she is nothing but skin and bone. Herr von Mesmer is adding three new rooms on the ground floor in order that he may be able to live downstairs during the winter, since although an enormous amount of wood is burnt upstairs, the rooms never get warmed up...”

These observations show that apart from his researches into hypnotism and psychotherapy, Mesmer was very much a doctor of his times. Bleedings, blisterings and medicines, (largely purgatives and emetics) were as much a part of the pharmacoeopia of the late 18th century as they had been for centuries.

August 25 " *Fraulein Franzl has now recovered...*"

August 28th " *The Mesmers are at the Rotmuhle, where Fraulein Franzl will probably fall ill again and possibly die.. Not only she but her sister are constantly at the Mesmers. We kiss you many 100,000,000 times and I am your old MZT.*"

Leopold is forever kissing his wife a hundred million times; it must have been fatiguing. Wolfgang as usual, goes him one better. In a letter to his wife Constanze dated April 16, 1789, he writes: " *I kiss and squeeze you 1095060437082 times..*" One wonders: if social customs in this age were naturally this warm and cuddly ,what need had it of Mesmer's magic touch? The Rotmuhle was a country estate owned by the Mesmers.

September 15th : " ... *So far I have not been out to the Rotmuhle, although the Mesmers have been there for a long time and Fraulein Franzl nearly died there again... "*

This is the extent of Leopold's recorded observations on the

condition of Fräulein Oesterline. We learn from these letters that

- (i) Her crises were dramatic;
- (ii) Because of them, the entire household was charged with distress and a sense of forbidding;
- (iii) They were physically exhausting;
- (iv) The people around her were convinced that she was not going to live much longer;
- (v) Old-fashioned medical practices were applied to her symptoms;
- (vi) She had become emaciated;
- (vii) Her bouts of hysteria were relieved by periods of partial or almost total recovery.

When the Mozarts take their leave in mid-September, both are convinced that Franzl will not last through the year. One therefore understands the astonishment conveyed by Wolfgang Mozart's letter of March 17, 1781, described in the previous chapter.

More precise details on her condition and symptoms are given in several of Mesmer's own writings: in, for example, the "*Schreiben uber die Magnetkur an einen auswärtiger Arzt*" (1775) which I have not read, or his "*Memoire sur la decouverte du Magnetisme Animal*", printed in Geneva in 1779, which I have read, both in

French and in the English translation of Gilbert Frankau (see Bibliography) . A comprehensive bibliography of writings about Mesmer in several languages, is presented on pages 174 -181 of Ellenberger (16).

Mesmer refers to 15 grave symptoms, among them: convulsions, delirium, rage, vomiting, headache, earache and toothache, involuntary bowel movements, retention of urine and fainting. It is quite interesting to see how, just like many of today's scientists , Mesmer uncovers analogies to Newtonian dynamics in the resurgence of her symptoms. The relevant passage is this :

“ The desire to ascertain the cause of the imperfection and my own uninterrupted observations brought me ... to the point of recognizing Nature's handiwork and of penetrating it sufficiently to forecast.. without hesitation, the different stages of the illness..... if I were able to discover the existence, among the substances of which our globe is made, of an action that is also reciprocal and similar to that of the heavenly bodies,.. I could imitate artificially the periodic revolutions of the ebb and flow just referred to... ”

A great gulf separates this from conventional astrology ; one might call it “ applied Newtonianism”. Newtonianism has a long history; it does not begin with Mesmer and it is far from being

extinguished today. One finds it in such places as the psychologist Herbart's strange theories of the rise and fall of hooked atomic ideas in the psyche, in several of Freud's numerous pseudo-scientific models for the unconscious, and in the Cosmic Lagrangian of the TM-guru Maharshi. It is a staple of degraded popularizations of scientific thought such as "The Dao of Physics" and "Godel, Escher, Bach".

Newtonianism works better in some places than in others: the least-squares law occurs naturally as a linear approximation to the Potential Function, whenever an attraction or repulsive force is produced from a point source and radiates outwards on concentric spheres: the surface area of a sphere varies as *the square* of the radius and the constant energy on each spherical shell will therefore diminish as the *inverse square*.

Mesmer, *fortunately*, did not have the mathematical background to be able to quantify his ideas. He might have found the effort throughly engrossing, have consumed all of his time and energy in doing so, and might never have discovered a thing about hypnotism, psychotherapy, suggestion and so on. Mathematics is a good thing, certainly, but quantification can become the bane of scientific minds.

It is apparent by now that Mesmer was far too closely involved

with Fräulein Oesterline and her symptoms to be able to know if her recovery came from him, his magnets, the magnetic fluid or simply her marriage with his stepson, Herr Fischer. He was occupied for more than a year in the minute recording of the etiology of her symptoms and developing theories about them, before making the attempt to 'cauterize' them, as it were, with oddly shaped magnets.

The therapy and even the technology for administering it did not originate with him. Both his methods and his theories can be traced to the practices of certain Catholic priests in the empire with reputations as exorcists and healers. Notably, Mesmer's theory of the "curative crisis" owes much to the remarkable 'exorcisms' and cures of the priest, Johann Joseph Gassner.

He met this notorious faith healer in 1775, when Mesmer was asked to join a Royal Commission of Inquiry in Bavaria to investigate Gassner's claims. Mesmer was not as severe in his judgement of Gassner as Franklin was to be towards him in 1784: it was, after all, his own discipline and he knew something about it. The idea of using magnets shaped in peculiar ways came from his collaboration with another Catholic priest, Maximilian Hell, astronomer at the University of Vienna. (*The word "hell" in German means fair or beautiful, so the pun falls flat. One might*

otherwise speculate that the discovery of the Unconscious occurred when Franzl told Mesmer to go to hell.) It is quite ironic that it should have been the priest, Herr Hell , a religious thinker, who clung to the idea that the magnetic fields themselves 'cured' psychosomatic symptoms in the way that hydrogen peroxide will absorb the pus from an infection, while it was the 'agnostic man of science' , Mesmer, who reached the conclusion that the magnets were essentially placebos and that a direct 'metaphysical' or 'transcendental' connection was possible between a suggestible patient and her doctor.

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