

# *Hysteria and Enlightenment*

## Chapter 5

### *I. Introduction*

The author of this historical account now finds himself face up against a singularity.<sup>1</sup> The problem is this :the author's immersion in materials related to the age of Mozart, Salieri, Mesmer, Maria- Theresa, Joseph II, Louis XVI, the two Georges ( Washington and III ), Benjamin Franklin, etc. - including histories , letters, biographies , analyses, essays, and other accounts, factual or fictional of the same events - has inflamed his normal tendencies to ditch his obsessive concern for historical accuracy to begin work on a play,movie script or novel.

The temptation to turn from a commitment to accuracy, or at least to credibility – not being a historian trained in this area of specialization he cannot hope to make a contribution at the professional standard - to the manufacture of a historical romance (in which he will be limited only by his talent for creating an aura of verisimilitude) is easily sympathized with. In fact one can go further: historical fiction worthy of the reading ought to be based on the principle that good fiction will be , in important respects, closer to fact than fact itself . How, indeed, is one to communicate the twilight ambience of the late Enlightenment,(*the Aufklärungsdämmerung* ?) through the mere compilation of dates, deeds doings, death and data?

Yet - ( the Dominant Seventh word! ) - Yet ( add a fermata)- Yet (full stop and a pause) ....I fondly muse (thank you, Milton) ... once embarked upon the path of fictionalized biography, the author already anticipates the scrapping of the noose about his neck , ( woven by so many micron-thin strands of the moral fibers of the Scientific Method), which may hang him if he dare add even one more grab-bag of lies in an area where there is already so much junky scholarship; through

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<sup>1</sup> of the Maxwell potential type, producing a cusp surface in Catastrophe Space.

contributing yet more manifold distortions of the character and works of Franz Anton Mesmer, already so maligned, vilified, deified or venerated out of all recognizable proportions; through loading more fertilizer into the dung-mound of Mozart-Salieri fiction; by still one more romantization of the already over sentimentalized, saccarinated tale of Dr. Mesmer and Fräulein Marie-Therese Paradis!<sup>2</sup>

Despite the bad press it has received since the dawn of history, truth *is* deserving of our respect. It is not often that we can say exactly what it is; we usually have a fairly good idea of what it is not. For example: we cannot prove, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that Salieri didn't poison Mozart; yet we can show that he was actually in Paris, promoting his opera, *Tarare*, on the day that so many biographies tell us he was in Vienna sabotaging the first performance of Mozart's "Marriage of Figaro". (Ironically, The texts of both works are adaptations of plays by Pierre Caron de Beaumarchais.)

We cannot prove (beyond a doubt's lurking shadow) that Mesmer did cure the blindness of Marie-Therese Paradis; but we can reproduce the detailed Memoir of her cure which her father, a highly suspicious man, wrote for German-language newspapers. Likewise, we cannot prove that the two French commissions that investigated and condemned the practice and ideas of Franz Anton Mesmer in 1784 were prejudiced against him. It is nonetheless true that that the French medical profession did not officially recognize the existence of the phenomena of hypnotism for more than a century afterwards, by which time it was being used by doctors all over Europe and the United States. And so on.....

Succinctly: the novelist in me is itching to supplant the historian; but the scientist will not permit the novelist to come out. My heart longs to discant upon *the story of Franz Anton Mesmer and Marie-Therese von Paradis*, perhaps entitled something like: "The Magnetic Sympathies", or "The Landstrasse Conspiracy"; with John Gielgud and Juliette Binoche in the principal roles.

Concurrently it is his intention to supply an extended

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<sup>2</sup> A notorious example of the latter, with however a number of redeeming features, is the Dennis Potter film "Mesmer" (1993)

philosophical commentary. There is therefore a requirement that he invoke historical accuracy to the best of his ability.

The author therefore proposes an experiment. He will create accounts of 3 kinds, consecutively or, on occasion concurrently . At the beginning of each narrative he will indicate the mode in which he is operating: *Fiction ; History; Commentary* . The glaring errors which the writer of fiction is sometimes obliged to introduce into the film scripts at least, will be corrected in the footnotes.

### *I: Film Script*

The sultry evening of July 29, 1776. Twilight over the Vienna glacis, that magnificent caraval of fortifications, warehouses, gates, magazines, casernes and stone ramparts which had protected the city so well during the Turkish siege in 1683, yet which is already useless for military purposes. 33 years later Napoleon will brush it aside with the disdain of a maid for agglomerated cobwebs.

The flat walkways on the ramparts that encircle the Old City are filled with strolling crowds: people seeking relief from the summer heat in the evening's breezes, perhaps to admire the glimmering sunset now bathing the spires of St. Stephens Cathedral, gazing at the gorgeous sculpted gardens of Schönbrunn Palace, watching the flocks of birds wheeling against the red sky. A street violinist doing a fair job with a Tartini sonata has put together enough coins for a visit later that evening to his favorite tavern.

On the ramparts to the right, just above the keystone of the Carinthian Gate, one's attention is drawn to a group of distinguished persons, all medical doctors with their wives. Standing and walking about, they watch the arrival of the splendid horses and coaches of the Habsburg nobility as they cross a bridge over the Danube, go through the gate and halt at the entrance of the Stadts-Komödienhaus, also known as the Kärntnertor Theatre.

A new opera by the young Italian musical genius, Antonio Salieri, *Delmita e Daliso*<sup>3</sup>, will be having its premiere in an hour's time. Though only 26, an age at which most composers are happy to be allowed in at the ground floor, Salieri is, in all but name, already the *Imperial Royal Court Kapellmeister*. There is a schmaltzy love story in his background<sup>4</sup> which may have softened even the famously unmeltable heart of the Emperor. Since Salieri is already the *Kapellmeister of the Italian Opera* and *Imperial Court Chambermusic Composer*, the vantage of hindsight causes us to feel that by 1776 he already wields more power at the Viennese court than he would ever merit. But, in that year of revolution, how was one to know that he was destined to reign as unchallenged musical dictator of Vienna for a full half century, during which time Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Kozeluch, Moscheles, Hummel, and others of comparable attainments would arrive, do their life's work, and pass on with little more than a few crumbs from the banquet tables of the Viennese royalty?

This conclave of respectable doctors include the aged and universally respected Gerard van Swieten<sup>5</sup>, director of the medical school and Austria's Minister of Education; Dr. Anton von Störck; Jan Ingenhousze, known as "The Great Inoculator"; and the man whose name would someday become a word in the vocabularies of most of the world's languages, Franz Anton Mesmer.

Frau Mesmer and Frau Störck stroll about the ramparts together. Ingenhousze's wife stays close by her husband's side. Towering half a head over the rest of his colleagues, the appearance of Jan Ingenhousze is formidable. He is taller than the aged van Swieten, more upright than the corpulent Mesmer. He has swaddled his figure in a dark cloak of the kind that went out of fashion half a century before, and is now worn only by diplomats and attendees at a funeral. It gives him the air of an oldstyle professional man, vain and self-important. In his hands he

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3 The first performance of *Delmita e Daliso* was probably held at the Bürg Theatre, not at the Kärntnertor. Joseph II was trying to build up the German language theatre at that time and eventually reserved the Bürg for this sole purpose. The script-writer however, insisted on using the setting of the Kärntnertor.

4 Which must, without fail, be inserted into the script.

<sup>5</sup> The script-writer, in consultation with the director, plays a bit with history. The real Gerard van Swieten died in 1772. He is sometimes confused with his son, Gottfried van Swieten. It is the son who arranged Mozart's 3rd class funeral.

holds a document which he has been showing to the others.

“ I received this just the other day. It was sent me from the American colonies by Dr. Franklin in Philadelphia. I am proud to be his friend. ”

Mesmer takes it from his hands and examines it with great curiosity. Ingenhousze goes on, “ It’s some kind of declaration, signed in Philadelphia last July 4<sup>th</sup>. It’s filled with all sorts of radical and hackneyed rhetoric, but what it boils down to is that the American colonies wish to break away - from the rule of the finest monarch on this earth, George the Third ! ”

“ I don’t think its rubbish, Herr Ingenhousze. My English isn’t good, but there’s something here about”, Mesmer points, “ a ‘right to the pursuit of happiness’. I couldn’t agree more.” Mesmer hands the document back over to him.

Ingenhousze beats the ground with his cane: “ Seditious stupidity: a RIGHT to happiness!? Who ever heard of such nonsense? Why not - a right to fly like a bird? A right to get drunk every night? A right to smallpox? What nonsense!!”

“ I beg your pardon, Jan; but the document speaks of the *pursuit* of happiness as a basic right: that’s quite a different thing.”

“ A right to the *pursuit* of happiness? If you like. That would appeal to the kind of patients you have, wouldn’t it, Franz? All pursuing “happiness” like little children playing with toys. No wonder you’ve ended up playing nursemaid to a lot of neurotics!”

“ ‘Neurotics’? I haven’t heard that term before, Jan. What does it mean?”

“ It was invented by another friend of mine, Dr. Cullen of Scotland. I of course have professional associates in over a dozen countries. It means - well, your kind of patient. They are unhappy so they get sick and look for someone like you to tell them something’s wrong with their minds!”

“Did Mr. Franklin write it?”

“No. That’s the funniest part of it. It’s written by a Virginia planter, a slave-holder by the name of Thomas Jefferson!”

Störck is quick to interject: “I wonder if he’s told his slaves about the pursuit of happiness?” General laughter; even Mesmer is obliged to concede the point.

van Swieten quickly interjects: “Now gentlemen, please don’t quarrel

tonight! All Vienna knows how much the two of you hate each other: Jan denounces all of Franz's cures, while Franz threatens a new lawsuit against him for defamation every other day. We're here to enjoy the opera, not to quarrel. Though I must say", here van Swieten once again looks down at the manuscript, printed on Franklin's press in far-away Philadelphia. He rubs the page between thumb and fingers: "Is this the stuff they use for paper over in the Americas?" He looks at it again before handing it back to Ingenhouze:

"If the British colonies in North America succeed in breaking away, the world will never be the same."

As he is speaking the royal coach, decorated with the coat-of-arms of the Habsburg dynasty and bearing the person of the co-regent, Joseph II, Roman Emperor, Perpetual Enlarger of the Empire, King in Germany, heir to Hungary, Bohemia, Dalmatia, Croatia, Slovenia, Archduke of Austria, Duke of Burgundy, Lorraine and Var, Grand Duke of Tuscany and King of Jerusalem, crosses over the wooden bridge spanning the Danube and disappears through the tunnel of the Carinthian Gate.

The doctors all remove their hats and bow from the waist; van Störck actually gets down in the dust and kneels. A dozen more coaches of the royal entourage pass through the gate before the doctors can relax. It is time to walk down to the theatre.

"Yes", van Swieten repeats, "A revolution in America will have serious consequences." <sup>6</sup>

Frau Mesmer turns to Frau Störck: "I haven't been to this theatre in over a dozen years. I don't remember the Staats-Komödienhaus as looking anything like this. Whatever happened to the elaborate Venetian style building that used to be here? "

Frau von Störck replies, "You're right. This building is has been built in the fashionable new style they've been calling 'neo-classic': a silly term if you ask me. They ought to call it Josephine Prudery since it's much like the Emperor himself: everyone admires it but no-one likes it very much."

Her husband smiles and addresses Mesmer: "Franz, I doubt that you had a chance to visit the old building. It burned down before you came

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<sup>6</sup> Movies are not noted for their subtlety

to Vienna in the early 60's."

"True", van Sweten nods, " A dreadful story."

Both Franz and Frau Mesmer confess that they know nothing about it, even though she had been living in the city at the time. Staggering slowly down the hill and setting the pace for all the others, the venerable van Swieten, his silver grey hair falling over broad furrows of his brow, his chest covered with medals and decorations, fills them in on the details:

" I'm rather surprised, Franz, that Christoph Willibald Gluck never mentioned it to you; he gyrates between your musical soirees and mine. He probably just wants to forget ; it was a terrible tragedy.

"The date, to be exact, was November 9th, 1761. For the rest of you who may not know much about music, Gluck is our best opera composer. Salieri, whom you'll be listening to tonight, has still to make his mark, although I can't think of anyone else who's better than he is except, perhaps, Haydn."

" Joseph or Michael?" asks Ingenhousze.

" Oh, Michael. Certainly Michael! Joseph wastes his considerable talent on silly avant-garde experiments to titillate his ivory tower down there in Esterhaza. Well, Gluck's latest ballet, "*Don Juan ,or the Stone Guest*" was being produced that night in the old theatre that used to stand here."

" An odd subject!" Ingenhousze comments, "Who would have any use for music in honor of a notorious libertine?"

" Granted Jan: I'm totally in agreement with you. Naturally of course, the reprobate goes to Hell at the end. To increase the dramatic effect of the finale, the stage director asked that a real fire be built onstage. The ballet was already concluded and the audience out of the building before a workman noticed that the flames had reached the woodwork on the proscenium arch and were spreading through the theatre.

"The audience was safe; but the box office manager and his wife unwisely ran back into the house in an attempt to rescue the evening's receipts. A wall of flames blocked their return through the front door. They then tried to get out through the back, but found the wrought-iron doors were secured with massive chains. Th crowds struggled to break them but to no avail. Four horses were brought up and harnassed to the

gates, but still they would not give .

“By then the couple had almost succumbed to the smoke and heat. So a priest was sent for so that they might receive the last rites. The crowds watched in horror as they, and the entire building, were reduced to ashes.”

“ Well, look who’s here tonight! ”, Störck speaks up as they enter the theatre. He points to a tiny, stiff man who walks with the formal dignity of a seasoned civil servant. The young lady he is accompanying can only be his daughter: “That’s Herr Joseph von Paradis and his talented blind daughter, Marie-Therese.”

“ I’m not surprised they’ve come. ”, says van Swieten, “She’s Salieri’s most promising student. Not, mind you, that a woman has any business composing music . Still, since she’s blind I suppose she’s got to do something with her life.”

“ That’s the saddest part, Gerard”, Störck continues, “ She’s incurable. I know: I was the poor girl’s personal physician . For ten years I tried everything I could think of.”

While Ingenhousze coughs imperiously as if a wasp had just flown down his throat, Mesmer makes an exaggerated effort at re-adjusting the black silken bag at the back of his purple wig. Störck goes on, “ ...her condition is impervious to the most advanced techniques of medical science.” Ingenhousze stares up at the heavens as if he’s just discovered a new planet.

“ Ah! But what a charming dress she’s wearing!”, cries Frau Ingenhousze, “A polonaise! The latest rage. Jan, you’ve got to let me get one for myself.”

Ingenhousze removes his gloves and puts them in the pocket of his coat:

“I’m not made of money.”

“ Oh, they can’t cost that much! You see? The overskirt is wide open and it’s been hitched it up in three places so that the petticoat is exposed all the way around, flounced on the hem with blue taffeta, and those odd things called furbelows. She looks just like a China doll. Why, the bodice is so low it might be considered scandalous; her little boobies are all but dropping out! What a shame she can’t see the effect she’s making.”



“ That doesn’t shock me, my dear”, Ingenhouze replies, “Heaven knows I see enough naked bodies in my daily practise. It’s those – why, just look at them! - fruit salads, vegetables, flowers and fishes doing a minuet high up on that 2 foot wig ! I mean, how the deuce does she sleep at night? And how am I going to be able to watch my opera if I’ve got to sit in back of that horror?”

“ It’s the latest fashion, dear ; all those things are taken off before she goes to bed. She puts a net around her hair. It means that she has to sleep in one fixed position throughout the night, but one never counts the cost when it’s a matter of beauty. I’m too old for those things; the middle-aged matrons you see wearing those things look foolish. Just looking at her makes me wish I were 30 years younger!”

Störck merely comments: “If you knew the girl’s mother, you’d understand. She must have sat up with her for 6 hours to make up that pastry cake.”

All of them go into the auditorium and take their places. Herr Joseph von Paradis and his daughter sit in the second row from the front in an area reserved for the students and associates of Antonio Salieri. Herr Paradis is not in a good mood. One gathers that he’s the sort of person who thoroughly hates the opera but is under an obligation to put in an appearance from time to time . However, on this occasion he is also accompanying his daughter. Obviously, he’s very proud of her. Because he wants his daughter to be happy, he will try to enjoy himself. The family has reason to believe she will soon become famous in her own right.

Quite apart from the get-up the juveniles are crazy about these days, his daughter’s appearance is very striking. She has known great suffering. She has been very sick and the doctors have not been kind to her. Her face, already drawn and pallid with intense anxiety, is rendered frantic, even lunatic by the grotesque eyeballs. These jut out of their sockets like enormous hardboiled eggs. The pupils are hard, though not fixed as is the case with many blind persons. They rove from side to side in spasms, miniature hysterical seizures, cresting like the foam on ocean waves, reflecting a state of near constant panic, indeed a kind of wild animal terror that is indescribably painful to watch.

Yet in a way one doesn't know how to articulate her face suffuses a radiant afterglow of youthfulness and naïve idealism, the sweetness of a frightened, overly sheltered child. On this evening she is both agitated and happy. An opening night for a new opera by her favorite teacher, Antonio Salieri, one of the world's greatest musicians, fills all her soul with enthusiasm.

The movie's director has decided to place Franz Anton Mesmer and his wife in about the same place that Joseph Cotton is placed behind Ingrid Bergman and Charles Boyer in George Cukor's "Gaslight". The situations of Mesmer and Cotton are similar, witnesses to the psychological condition of a young woman musician caused in part by the elderly gentleman seated beside her.

The orchestra slides on stage from the wings, dressed in the livery of the court. All rise when the Emperor arrives; the trumpets blow a fanfare. Once seated in the loge, Joseph II signals by a wave of his right hand that the conductor should begin the overture. Just then Franz Anton Mesmer leans over to whisper to his wife, concealing his face in her Japanese fan: "Did you notice?" He points towards Marie-Therese, "At the ending of the overture her swollen eyeballs leaped from their blackened sockets and darted about wildly, struggling to see."

The curtain lifts to the first act: *A lusty crowd of illiterate rustics, unspoiled by civilization and singing themselves hoarse in the throat, bounds upon the stage and engages in native dances and rude wrestling contests.*

"I didn't notice anything, dear."

"I suspect she's not really blind. Unless her hearing's very acute, she wouldn't have localized the dancing as well as she has."

"Well, dear, I've been told that she does in fact have exceptional hearing."

"Perhaps... but she intrigues me." They both recline in their chairs to enjoy the show; yet Mesmer's eyes do not for a moment quit the strange couple in front of him.

*The swains, churls and milkmaids leave the stage. A village Burgomeister with his two garlanded daughters remain behind. He turns*

*to them and sings: " Or che siam soli, o figlie." ( Now we are alone, O daughters).*

The audience bursts into hysterical laughter. The performers, anxious to discover the source of this unintended merriment turns their heads from side to side but see nothing. The comic effect brings down the house.

What happened was this: between the performance and the final dress rehearsal, the scene painter took it upon himself to 'improve' the décor by adding a few dozen figures peeping out from the trees, bushes and buildings. Far from being alone, the Burgomeister and his daughters appear to be surrounded by a throng of onlookers.

None of this is visible to Marie-Therese. She is unable to understand what has caused the audience to laugh; she senses only that the opera is experiencing technical difficulties, and is mortified by the thought that her teacher is suffering embarrassment.<sup>7</sup> Her nervous agitation causes the whites of her eyes to tremble so violently that the pupils move up under her eyelids and disappear.

" Ahah!" Mesmer exclaims, standing up. In a loud voice, astonishing his neighbors he barks : " I'm almost certain of it now: the universal fluid is blocked!" Then he sits down abruptly, leaving no-one any more the wiser. Salieri's opera then proceeds smoothly through the first act and into the second.

*Delmita stands alone on the stage, waiting for the appearance of the monster who is supposed to eat her up. She has been put into this predicament by the city of Athens, which placates the beast in this fashion about once every year.*

*Onto the stage springs her champion, Deliso, clothed from crown to toenails with scrap metal armor. With the visor of his helmet down he sings, brandishing his sword: "Non fuggir, non temer, son'io Daliso!" ( Fly not, fear not, I am Daliso.)*

Now he attempts to lift the visor of his helmet so that Delmita will see his face and not be frightened. On this evening there may have been

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<sup>7</sup> It would turn out to be one of Salieri's notable fiascos. That's show biz!

some poltergeists on stage, ( or the spirit of Mozart may have been transmitting bad vibes direct from Salzburg.) The visor refuses to yield.

More hooting, screaming, guffaws from the audience. The cameraman zooms in to show the alert, intelligent, somewhat monomaniacal face of Dr. Mesmer, intently studying the reactions of the unfortunate Marie Therese. Once again the pupils of her eyes have disappeared upwards, as if seaching the contents of her skull. The camera dwells on the swollen blood-shot eyes and the wasted condition of the face.

*Cut:* back to Mesmer, who is writing notes into a little journal that he keeps in the pocket of his waist-coat. The audience settles back, awaiting more mishaps. What is notable about this performance is that Salieri had the greatest difficulty in persuading Joseph II to attend. Between war, Enlightenment and his mother the Empress Maria-Theresa, the Emperor's head never stops swimming. Though he's known to be fond of music, his tastes are decidedly middle-brow. The Emperor doesn't care for *opera seria*; a burlesque *opera buffa* is much more to his taste. He's little patience with really serious classical music, which is why he will prefer Salieri and Piccini to Mozart and Gluck until his dying day. As for his mother, the Empress Maria Theresa, she hasn't entered a theatre since her husband died in 1765. It is beginning to look as if Joseph II is going to get his *opera buffa* after all.

The Finale begins: *An idle shepherd,<sup>8</sup> having little better to do, strides upon the stage and declaims: " Vedete come allo splendor di mille faci e mille feseggia Atene!" ( Behold ! Athens rejoices with the splendor of thousands upon thousands of torches.)*

Not a flicker of light illuminates the stage: the lighting cues were garbled. Choruses and soloists return and the opera is concluded in darkness. But as the curtain descends upon a perplexed crowd of Athenians and a mirthful audience, the lights of Athens burst forth in every direction!

Foot-stomping, howls and hoots: Salieri himself joins in the merriment. One bomb, more or less, won't hurt his career. His position at the Viennese court is secure.

Not so Marie-Therese. The comic mishapes have all been cast in

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<sup>8</sup> that is to say one of those idealized happy stage shepherds so beloved of the 18th century, not the real impoverished wretches up in the hills.

the form of unintended 'sight gags'. She does not know why pandemonium reigns. She imagines that her teacher is being subjected to some terrible humiliation. She stands up, sobbing and screeching. Her arms hysterically beat the air. Losing control she begins to yell in a demented fashion. Her father seizes her, roughly shakes her. Grasping her by the arms, he thrusts her before him out into the aisles. When he reaches the last of the rows of chairs, he finds himself confronted by the stern, portly figure of Dr. Mesmer.

"Here. Let me deal with her." Mesmer pulls a pocket watch from his waistcoat. With one hand he holds her at the collar bone; the other gently swings the pocket watch before her face. "Calmly; calmly", he repeats over and over again in a soft, sultry voice. "There's no need to get excited." He repeats this several times and indeed the young lady begins to relax. "Everything's all right. Calmly, calmly.... that's better"

He puts the watch away. The cure is successful.

Herr Paradis looks on with amazement: "How did you do that?"

"Very simply, Joseph. The motion of the watch, combined with the sound of my voice, unblocked the universal fluid clogging the passages of the brain. There's no magic involved; it's all science."

"But she couldn't even see the watch!"

"I think, Herr Paradis, you will find that she can see a great many things. Her condition is largely psychological, not physical, and best treated by my methods. Can I have the pleasure of calling on you at your convenience tomorrow afternoon?"

*Some Movie, Isn't It?*

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### *The History:*

Franz Anton Mesmer began his magnetic therapy on the psychosomatic blindness of Marie Therese Paradis in the country house of the Paradis family. In the years since the cure of Franzl Österline his competence and understanding had steadily improved. He'd treated

hundreds of hysterical patients in many places in the Germanic world, primarily in Bavaria where he was made a member of the Academy of Sciences . His clinics in Vienna were always crowded with patients. It was a delicate and insecure time for medical professionals, when the science of medicine was just beginning to acquire anything resembling what we would call legitimacy today, and its practitioners were all on the defensive. It is not surprising that the Viennese medical establishment had leagued against Mesmer and were waiting for an opportunity to ruin his reputation. He no longer used magnets; nor did he adopt the kinds of theatrical props, baquets, magnetized waters and eerie music, of the sort he would France. He worked only with his hands and voice, occasionally using a wand.

Some imaginative interpolation is required to reconstruct a picture of his methods in treating Marie-Therese. It is realized today that hypnotic states may be induced, even in sleep, through both vision and hearing. He must have lulled her into a state of high suggestibility, deep somnambulism, by speaking to her in a soft, low voice, combined with slow hypnotic passes over the upper part of the skull, around the temples and eyes. Although she could not see what he was doing, she could feel his hands, and she could certainly hear the swishing of his silken frock coats , shirt sleeves and ruffles as he waved his hands about her head.

The sessions were long and fatiguing. On the first day there was no improvement. Mesmer is honest enough to record that her condition worsened. By the end of the first afternoon she was in a high fever, her eyes were convulsed, her body shaken by tremors and spasms.

The two accounts of the second day - that of Mesmer and of her father - contain the astonishing statement that although she was still unable to see, her eyes followed the motions of his wand as they appeared in a mirror. One must take this with some scepticism.

*“ On the second day, Dr. Mesmer caused an effect very surprising to those who saw it. As she sat beside the patient, he pointed his wand at the reflection of her face in the mirror. Then, as he moved the wand, she moved her head to follow it. She was even able to describe the movements of the wand.”*

(- from the Memoir of J. v. Paradis.)

In all cases in which persons recover their sight after decades of blindness, it can be months, even years, before they are able to properly distinguish objects from their background. To see the tip of a wand in a dim room - to recognize its reflection in a mirror - is perhaps possible, yet highly unlikely. A number of explanations suggest themselves:

Psycho-somatic blindness is not true blindness: the mind can register the stimuli of light, but the brain is denied access to the data. Hippolyte Bernheim, in his classic treatise "Hypnotism and Suggestion", devotes several pages to psycho-somatic blindness in one eye, in particular those with partial achromatopsia (color-blindness). There is a way to trick the mind in some of these cases: color filters and prisms contrive to combine colors to produce effects which, rather than following the laws of optics, are determined by *the ideas about how these laws work* in the mind of the patient. An instrument, Ströber's apparatus, was invented for this purpose.

This method would not work on a totally blind patient, although other indications might reveal the presence of a psychogenic condition. The capacity in human beings for identifying the direction of noises and other sounds, for example, is far more diffuse, by an order of magnitude, than directional identification by vision. A person who identifies too accurately the direction and locations in which sounds originate, may possess some kind of partial vision. This may have been the case with Marie-Therese, whose hearing was far more acute than that of most blind persons. The general impression she gave of such precision in locating the sources of sounds may have been due to some residual or subliminal vision, which may therefore have been present in her ability to follow the motions of Mesmer's wand. Or she may, once again, have simply heard the motions of his clothing and intuited the directions in which his arms were going. Or the story may be pure invention. In our desire to set the record straight against his enemies and detractors, one must still remember that Mesmer had a vested interest in his theories, and was not above elaborating, or even fabricating a story when it suited him.

All accounts state that her eyes had deflated to normal size by the fourth day. Ever since Störck's novel application of electroshock methods her eyeballs had bulged out of their sockets like tennis balls,

creating a frightening image of mental derangement. Every day that she spent under Mesmer's care was accompanied by a reduction in their size, until they returned to normal. The spasms also calmed.

The 6th day is notable in scientific history owing to a succession of dramatic transformations that occurred in a short period of time. For years her sense of smell had been impaired. During the period of treatment her nose became inflamed and pudgy. In the morning of the 6th day there occurred a massive discharge through the nose of some unidentified "green viscous fluid", followed by a prolonged bout of diarrhoea. After the crisis had passed it was found that the nose inflammation had ceased, and that her sense of smell was fully restored.

The termination of one agony proved to be but the antechamber into another: a racking headache began in the occiput; sensations flared up along the optic nerve which she described as feeling as if a barrage of sharp pins were being thrust into her eyes. These were the first signs of an emerging sensitivity to light. The pains increased in severity over the next few days, until her head felt as if it were being split open by an ax. Unshielded natural light would be too painful to bear for some time to come. Mesmer found that he could relieve her distress by wrapping a bandage 5 times around her eyes. He then persuaded the Paradis family to allow her to be moved to the clinic on his estate.

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What a sight their entry into Vienna must have made! The coach holds four persons. One of them is an fascinating, if not exactly beautiful, young woman, a pianist of great sensitivity and ability, pale and deathly in appearance, with face and arms ravaged by illness and medical treatment. Around her eyes a thick bandage has been wound several times. Could it be a blindfold? Does this not suggest an abduction? Were it not for her mother, Frau von Colnbach-Paradis, seen clutching her daughter to her bosom throughout the journey, crying enough for the two of them and compulsively brushing the long unkempt hair out of her face, a distant spectator might well imagine an kidnapping in progress, with two agents, slavers in the service of the Turkish pasha, delivering their blindfolded victim to the endless labyrinths of the harem!

Further evidence for this is to be found in the appearance of these



two forbidding middle-aged men. The one by the right window is easily recognized as the much respected court functionary, Herr Joseph von Paradis, known for his thoroughness, his parsimony and his occasional impulsive fits of rage. The other is even more famous: the controversial, indeed notorious, simultaneously celebrated and reviled Dr. Franz Anton Mesmer, a medical doctor with a broad range of learning. He's the one who's been claiming that he's established - *scientifically* - that the wisdom of the Middle Ages is superior to that of the Enlightenment - that spells, curses, sorcery, trances, exorcism, miracles, witchcraft and demons ought to be the basis for the true art of medicine, whereas advances such as inoculation and the remarkable increase in knowledge about physiology, anatomy, and the circulation of the blood are worthless.

It is late in the afternoon when the coach pulls up at the entrance to the Mesmer estate at 261 Landstrasse, at the trailing edge of the Prater and on the banks of the Danube. Formalities are exchanged, the servants run down the hill to receive instructions from master. The girl is taken back to the house and put in a bedroom on the second floor. Her mother wants to accompany her, but she is restrained by her husband. The parents of Marie-Therese then bid good-bye and climb back into their coach to go off into the twilight. Mesmer returns to his house to begin an astonishing chapter in scientific history, one that to this day is very far from being understood.

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