Secret report on mesmerism or animal magnetism
Jean-Sylvain Bailly
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SECRET REPORT ON MESMERISM,
OR ANIMAL MAGNETISM

JEAN-SYLVAIN BAILLY, AND OTHERS

The commissioners entrusted by the King with the examination of animal magnetism have drawn up a report to be presented to his Majesty which ought perhaps to be published. It seemed prudent to suppress an observation not adapted for general publication, but they did not conceal it from the King’s minister. This minister has charged them to draw up a note designed only for the eyes of the King.

This important observation concerns morality. The commissioners have ascertained that the chief causes of the effects ascribed to animal magnetism are contact, imagination, and imitation. They have observed that the crisis occurs more frequently in women than in men. The first cause of this fact consists in the different organizations of the two sexes. Women have, as a rule, more mobile nerves; their imagination is more lively and more easily excited; it is readily impressed and aroused. This great mobility of the nerves, since it gives a more exquisite delicacy to the senses, renders them more susceptible to the impressions of touch. In touching any given part, it may be said that they are touched all over the body, and the mobility of their nerves also inclines them more readily to imitation. It has been observed that women are like musical strings stretched in perfect unison; when one is moved, all the others are instantly affected. Thus the commissioners have repeatedly observed that when the crisis occurs in one woman, it occurs almost at once in others also.

This organization explains why the crises in women are more frequent, more violent, and of longer duration than in men; it is nearly always due to their sensitive nerves. Some crises are due to a hidden, but natural cause, to an emotional cause to which women are more or less susceptible, and which, by a remote influence, accumulates these emotions and raises them to their highest pitch, thus producing a convulsive state which may be confounded with the ordinary crises. This is due to the empire which nature has caused one sex to exert over the other, so as to arouse feelings of attachment and emotion. Women are always magnetized by men; the established relations are doubtless those of a patient to the physician, but this physician is a man, and whatever the illness may be, it does not deprive us of our sex, it does not entirely withdraw us from the power of the other sex; illness may weaken impressions without destroying them. Moreover, most of the women who present themselves to be magnetized are not really ill; many come out of idleness, or
for amusement; others, if not perfectly well, retain their freshness and their force, their senses are unimpaired and they have all the sensitiveness of youth; their charms are such as to affect the physician, and their health is such as to make them liable to be affected by him, so that the danger is reciprocal. The long-continued proximity, the necessary contact, the communication of individual heat, the interchange of looks, are ways and means by which it is well known that nature ever effects the communication of the sensations and the affections.

The magnetizer generally keeps the patient’s knees enclosed within his own, and consequently the knees and all the lower parts of the body are in close contact. The hand is applied to the hypochondriac region, and sometimes to that of the ovarium, so that the touch is exerted at once on many parts, and these the most sensitive parts of the body.

The experimenter, after applying his left hand in this manner, passes his right hand behind the woman’s body, and they incline towards each other so as to favour this twofold contact. This causes the closest proximity; the two faces almost touch, the breath is intermingled, all physical impressions are felt in common, and the reciprocal attraction of the sexes must consequently be excited in all its force. It is not surprising that the senses are inflamed. The action of the imagination at the same time produces a certain disorder throughout the machine; it obscures the judgment, distracts the attention; the women in question are unable to take account of their sensations, and are not aware of their condition.

The medical members of the commission were present to watch the treatment, and carefully observed what passed. When this kind of crisis is approaching, the countenance becomes gradually inflamed, the eye brightens, and this is the sign of natural desire. The woman drops her head, lifts her hand to her forehead and eyes in order to cover them; her habitual modesty is unconsciously aroused, and inspires the desire of concealment.

The crisis continues, however, and the eye is obscured, an unequivocal sign of the complete disorder of the senses. This disorder may be wholly unperceived by the woman who experiences it, but it cannot escape the observant eye of the physician. As soon as this sign has been displayed, the eyelids become moist, the respiration is short and interrupted, the chest heaves rapidly, convulsions set in, and either the limbs or the whole body is agitated by sudden movements. In lively and sensitive women this last stage, which terminates the sweetest emotion, is often a convulsion; to this condition there succeed languor, prostration, and a sort of slumber of the senses, which is a repose necessary after strong agitation.

This convulsive state, however extraordinary it may appear to the observers, is shown to have nothing painful or contrary to nature in it, from the fact that, as soon as it is over, it leaves no unpleasant traces in its subjects. There is nothing disagreeable in the recollection, but, on the
contrary, the subjects feel the better for it, and have no repugnance to enter anew into the same state. Since the emotions they experience are the germs of the affections and inclinations, we can understand why the magnetizer inspires such attachment, an attachment likely to be stronger and more marked in women than in men, so long as men are entrusted with the task of magnetism. Undoubtedly many women have not experienced these effects, and others have not understood the cause of the effects they experienced; the more modest they are, the less they would be likely to suspect it. But it is said that several have perceived the truth, and have withdrawn from the magnetic treatment, and those who have not perceived it ought to be deterred from its pursuit.

The magnetic treatment must necessarily be dangerous to morality. While proposing to cure diseases which require prolonged treatment, pleasing and precious emotions are excited, emotions to which we look back with regret and seek to revive, since they possess a natural charm for us, and contribute to our physical happiness. But morally they must be condemned, and they are the more dangerous as it becomes more easy for them to become habitual. A condition into which a woman creates in public, amid other women who apparently have the same experience, does not seem to offer any danger; she continues in it, she returns to it, and discovers her peril when it is too late. Strong women flee from this danger when they find themselves exposed to it; the morals and health of the weak may be impaired.

Of this danger M. Deslon is aware. On the 9th of last May, at a meeting held at M. Deslon's own house, the lieutenant of police asked him several questions on this point in the presence of the commissioners. M. Lenoir said to him, "In my capacity as lieutenant-general of police, I wish to know whether, when a woman is magnetized and passing through the crisis, it would not be easy to outrage her." M. Deslon replied in the affirmative, and it is only just to this physician to state that he has always maintained that he and his colleagues, pledged by their position to act with probity, were alone entitled and privileged to practise magnetism. It must be added that although his house contains a private room originally intended for these crises, he does not allow it to be used. The danger exists, however, notwithstanding this observance of decency, since the physician can, if he will, take advantage of his patient. Such occasions may occur daily and at any moment; he is sometimes exposed to the danger for two or three hours at a time, and no one can rely on being always master of his will. Even if we ascribe to him superhuman virtue, since he is exposed to emotions which awaken such desires, the imperious law of nature will affect his patient, and he is responsible, not merely for his own wrong-doing, but for that he may have excited in another.

There is another mode of producing convulsions, a mode of which the commissioners have obtained no direct and positive proof, but which they cannot but suspect; namely, a simulated crisis, which is a signal for,
or produces many others, out of imitation. This expedient is, at any rate, needed to hasten or maintain the crises which are an advantage to magnetism, since without them it could not be carried on.

There are no real cures, and the treatment is tedious and unprofitable. There are patients who have been under treatment for eighteen months or two years without deriving any benefit from it; at length their patience is exhausted, and they cease to come. The crises serve as a spectacle; they are an occupation and interest, and, moreover, they are to the unobservant the result of magnetism, a proof of the existence of that agent, although they are really due to the power of the imagination.

When the commissioners began their report, they only stated the result of their examination of the magnetism practised by M. Deslon, to which the order of the King had restricted them, but it is evident that their experiments, observations, and opinions apply to magnetism in general. M. Mesmer will certainly declare that the commissioners have not examined his method, proceedings, and the effects they have produced. The commissioners are undoubtedly too cautious to pronounce on that which they have not examined, and with which they are not acquainted, yet they must observe that M. Deslon's principles are those of the twenty-seven propositions printed by M. Mesmer in 1779.

If M. Mesmer has enlarged his theory, it thereby becomes more absurd; the heavenly influences are only a chimera, of which the fallacy has long been recognized. The whole theory may be condemned beforehand, since it is based upon magnetism; and it has no reality, since the animal magnetic fluid has no existence. Like magnetism, this brilliant theory exists only in the imagination. M. Deslon's mode of magnetizing is the same as that of M. Mesmer, of whom he is the disciple. When we place them together, we see that they have treated the same patients, and, consequently, have pursued the same process; the method now in use by M. Deslon is that of M. Mesmer.

The results also correspond; the crises are as violent and frequent, and the same symptoms are displayed under the treatment of M. Deslon and of M. Mesmer. Although the latter may ascribe an obscure and inappreciable difference to his method, the principles, practice, and results are the same. Even if there were any real difference, no benefit from such treatment can be inferred, after the details given in our report and in this note, intended for the King.

Public report declares that M. Mesmer's cures are not more numerous than those of M. Deslon. There is nothing to prevent the convulsions in this case also from becoming habitual, from producing an epidemic, and from being transmitted to future generations: such practices and assemblies may also have an injurious effect upon morality.

The commissioners' experiments, showing that all these results are due to contact, to imagination and imitation, which explaining the effects produced by M. Deslon, equally explain those of M. Mesmer. It
may, therefore, reasonably be concluded that, whatever be the mystery
of M. Mesmer’s magnetism, it has no more real existence than that of M.
Deslon, and that the proceedings of the one are not more useful nor less
dangerous than those of the other.

(Signed) FRANKLIN, DE BORY,
LAVOISIER, BAILLY, MAJault, SALLIN,
D’ARCET, GUILLOTIN, LE ROY
Paris, August 11, 1784