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Autumn Memories

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Mesmer's Hypnotic Writings

by Dean Monti

In the history of early psychology one often runs across the contributions of the Austrian physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1733-1815). In the last eighteenth century he "cured" patients of hysteric disorders by touching them with wands which he believed emitted "animal magnetism".

Although Mesmer was deemed to be a fraud, in that he was merely exciting the imagination to the extent that the forerunner of what we now refer to as "hypnosis".

Because of the rather dubious validity of his experiments — (he once secured patients to large wheels so he could "magnetize" many people collectively), his subsequent work was largely ignored.

The journals Mesmer kept during the last year of his life have often been dismissed as the lunatic ravings of a deranged mind. Current critical analysis of these writings produce no new opinion, and they remain of no real importance to the study of modern psychology.

His last experiment concerned hypnotic writing or "magnetic verse" as he named it. Although his studies offer nothing in the area of psychological insight, they are interesting in that they reveal to the modern reader the erroneous beliefs of eighteenth century science. Further, they are often time amusing in their naivete.

The crux of these studies can be explained by Mesmer's journal entry, March 11, 1815:

"... have come across a phenomena which I call "Magnetic Verse". By speaking certain autogenic phrases as I write in my notebook, the ideas are then psychologically transferred into the text. Once this process has been utilized, the ideas will automatically be injected into the mind of whoever shall read the text."

It's not surprising that this sort of mystical mumbo-jumbo was never taken very seriously. If we were to believe Mesmer, entire symptoms could be produced merely by reading his notebook. One in particular Mesmer mentions is the possibility of producing a Deja-vu effect. If we were to believe Mesmer, entire symptoms could be produced merely by reading his notebook.

The effects, he claimed, could extend to psychological functions as well, causing involuntary reactions in the body. Today, however, we know that blurred vision, for example, cannot be brought on simply by reading something written on a page.

Later entries in Mesmer's journal report that upon repeated readings entire words could be blanked out of the consciousness, leaving the reader confused.

One of the most amusing experiments conducted during this period concerned Mesmer's belief that he could create images in the mind brought about by his poetry. Mesmer was, unfortunately, a very poor poet. Take for example the following poem written by Mesmer a few weeks before his death. He reported that it could produce "magnetic imagery" when read:

Monkey, monkey. Monkey see.
See the Monkey? See, see, see?
Monkey in a funny hat.
Monkey, Monkey, fancy that.
Monkey now escaped from cage. "

See the monkey on this page!

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Although the preceding text is obviously the product of a disordered mind, Mesmer swore he had documented proof that the subjects he used for his experiment actually saw something in the left margin! Today scholars are at a loss to know what these alleged subjects might have seen. Again, if we're are to believe Mesmer, the subjects might have imagined to have seen a little monkey in a hat in the left margin, a perception that would recur each time the key word, "monkey," was used. Imagine such a notion!

As for absorbing psychological symptoms, another curious phenomena Mesmer said he discovered was that gardening late in the season so that the tomatoes will be ripe and juicy and has also attributed this sudden unexpected change or subject with no apparent reason as resulting from reading "magnetic writing".

More radical examples concern not only the misperception of single words, which could appear to be missing or merely misspelled, but entire sentences

and which would not resume again until the following line.

If this were true, the Mesmer could mentally command the reader to exclude entire sentences, he could just as easily have added a short message that would act subliminally on a reader, a tactic HELLO, I'M FRANZ MESMER-PLEASE PUBLISH MY JOURNALS that has been tried unsuccessfully to date by twentieth century advertisers.

The publication of Mesmer's journals next month, therefore, seems odd in light of their insignificance. Speaking personally, as a writer, I would do all I could to discredit the deranged Austrian physician so that his bizarre ideas, such as being mentally able to control the writings of his opponents, would hereupon be considered to be the WONDERFUL WORDS of an EXCEPTIONALLY TALENTED AND HANDSOME man.



Autumn Memories

*Soft, gentle winds blow many-colored leaves
Across the path below. October days
Disburse the flocks away; each bird believes
His Nature's call and flies to southern bays.*

*In beautiful formations above trees
Of maple, fir and ash, their long shadows
Stretch far before your view; their patterns please
You as they fly over golden meadows.*

*You walk along the leaf-strewn path; time seems
To pause. Breathing sweet scents in the air,
You stop beside the deep lagoon which gleams
Reflecting light of autumn everywhere.*

*Keep close such memories through winter stark
From Your perspective over Lincoln Park.*

Francis Patrick Murphy