

# SWEDENBORG, MESMER AND THE “COVERT” ENLIGHTENMENT<sup>†</sup>

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## I

### INTRODUCTION

The latter half of the 18th century heralded a grave conflict between theological and scientific modes of thinking, revealing in the stark contrast of the European Enlightenment the ancient tension between spiritual gnosis and rational modes of apprehending knowledge. This conflict had complex sources, among them the fruits of the 17th century revolution in methods of observation and the quantification of nature’s phenomena, and the resultant maxims of the rule of Law, together with the rising cult of a confident Progress. The reification of reason that took hold of peoples’ minds set publicists like Voltaire to explain Newton to the masses, and to argue for limited monarchy and religious toleration, while condemning

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<sup>†</sup> This paper forms part of research undertaken, partly at the Swedenborg Library at Bryn Athyn, into the origins of the Society for Psychical Research founded in England in 1882. It explores some of the “undercurrents” of Enlightenment thought, especially Swedenborg’s scientific theology based on experience, and Mesmer’s “animal magnetism” as material panacea for the cure of human physical ills, and discusses the revival in “occult” conceptions deriving in part from these current ideas, and from a similar movement within Freemasonry. Within the maelstrom of the “covert” Enlightenment, the merging of these currents into paramasonic societies in France and Sweden presaged the far more influential introduction from England of Swedenborgian ideas, and from France of Animal Magnetism, to the New World in the 1790s. The larger project argues that the transmutation of these paradigms in the U.S. into spiritualism, together with the later influence of psychical research in England, had a considerable effect on religion and on ideas about the human mind and consciousness well into the 20th century. Copyright © 1997 Alfred J. Gabay.

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the clerics with “écrasez l’infâme!”<sup>1</sup> The *philosophes* undertook, through the *Encyclopédie*, the Baconian programme of systematizing all knowledge. From the 1760s, political radicals, following Locke and Rousseau, began to strain against the *ancien régimes*, and while various “benign” despotisms continued, Thomas Paine proclaimed the “Age of Reason” and urged the end of monarchy, as American colonists and disaffected Frenchmen laboured to give democratic theories practical effect. In England Jeremy Bentham pondered Utility, and Joseph Banks promoted scientific ventures to explore a New World in the southern seas. In these closing decades also Adam Smith, along with Turgot and the French Physiocrats, urged free trade based on an analysis of the economic relations within human societies. Almost inevitably, in this developing atmosphere of free and rational inquiry, religion suffered casualties. Those in the West who rejected the Christian outlook in the late 18th century often found solace in Deism, or in secular efforts to ameliorate the conditions of this life, and a rejection of supernaturalism was a common feature of the Age of Reason.

### The late 18th century occult revival

There was another and “covert” aspect to the High Enlightenment, which brought fresh perspectives on the soul, and by extension especially on the human mind and consciousness.<sup>2</sup> At this point the dichotomy between science and religion was breached in a number of interesting and historically significant ways. In a trend that was one reaction to the hegemony of Newton’s science, a number of challenges were posed to the religious, scientific and medical establishments that would extend even into Freemasonry. Through the increasing popularity of heterodox religion, the line of an hermetic or “occult” tradition extending from Paracelsus

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<sup>1</sup>Voltaire’s *Lettres Philosophiques* [1733] linked the achievements of Newton to the milieu of intellectual liberty such as only existed in England. He offered English science and society as an universal model for enlightenment, and in his epic poem on Henry IV *La Henriade* [1728] he praised religious toleration. Margaret C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment, Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans*, London (1981), p. 101.

<sup>2</sup>Clarke Garrett, “Swedenborg and the Mystical Enlightenment in Late Eighteenth-Century England,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. XLV, n. 1, January 1984.

and Bruno to Jacob Boehme and Swedenborg was revived among the literate, especially in Britain and France. Another challenge came to the medical arts from an Austrian physician, F.A. Mesmer, who claimed to have discovered, or rediscovered, an universal fluid as panacea for the cure of diseases. Finally, within Freemasonry a breakaway reforming trend was observed, especially in France, in the last two decades of the 18th century. In "speculative" Freemasonry numbers of aristocrats and *haute bourgeoisie* had adopted a rational religion from the early part of the century, claiming an "antient" lineage to Hermes or even before, which soon, however, abandoned its early "occult" connections.<sup>3</sup> For some this dearth of gnosticism led to the reconstitution of its votaries into new quasi-Masonic societies. Their syncretic programme drew from a variety of sources, Catholic and Talmudic, along with mysticism and Renaissance hermeticism, and especially from the teachings and practices of Swedenborg and Mesmer. These quasi-Masonic movements or trends, while at times they shared a common membership with Swedenborgian study groups and the mesmeric Harmonial societies, had different concerns and outlooks from the religious dispensationalism of Swedenborg, or what might be called the mystic materialism of Mesmer. In these closing decades of the 18th century these new societies, though small in numbers, had a disproportionate influence upon the religious and cultural life of their votaries, and a far more permeating influence upon later generations than has generally been recognized. They comprised the substance of what some historians have called the "mystical" or "covert" Enlightenment.

In Paris, Lyon, and Avignon, as well as London and Stockholm, the Swedenborgian, mesmeric and other intellectual currents then circulating among the European intelligentsia were applied in different ways. Ultimately these amalgamations of ideas would spawn, through Mesmer's theory of "crises" and Swedenborg's teachings on an afterlife, a hybrid that was to hold considerable importance for later generations firstly in the Magnetic movement, then in Spiritualism. This was the mediumistic séance, a 19th century phenomenon that laid claim, through the person of a "sensitive," to transcending the liminal zone between this world and a

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<sup>3</sup> Steven C. Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood, Freemasonry and the Transformation of the American Social Order, 1730-1840*, Chapel Hill (1996), pp. 10-11.

putative other World. In a sense, the application of some of the language and methods of science to metaphysical concerns was one attempt at *rapprochement* between empirical and theological modes of knowing, that would find its most characteristic expression in America of the 19th century.<sup>4</sup> In this paper, I shall postulate that the chief features of the mystical Enlightenment were attempts at just such a *rapprochement*, as those who could accept neither religious orthodoxy nor the mechanistic philosophy, nor the glittering generalities of Freemasonry, organized themselves into para-Masonic, mystical and millenarian societies that drew on the vast fondament of 18th century learning, resulting in a new formulation concerning the nature and purposes of the human experience. It is within this context of change and discovery, during the “covert” Enlightenment, that the lives and labours of Swedenborg and Mesmer are best understood, both in the relation of their ideas to each other and in their broader significance to the era.

### Swedenborg and the “covert” Enlightenment

As exploration increased in the world at large, some thinkers were exploring the interior regions of the human psyche. At least one, Emanuel Swedenborg, advanced the boldest of claims, to be the instrument of a new Christian Dispensation, of a rational Revelation for humanity, which entailed direct experience of an Afterlife, of its inhabitants and their conditions. As I shall endeavour to show, one unintended result of Swedenborg’s Writings was the amazing profusion of spiritisms, occultisms, and Masonic-style societies it inspired throughout the Atlantic world during the closing decades of the 18th century. This was apart from the gradual establishment of the New Church based upon his theology. One central feature of these developments was a new attitude to an Afterlife. It was above all else this hypothesis, to prove the continuance of life beyond the grave, that spurred the growth of Spiritualism from the 1850s, and that brought into existence in 1882 the Society for Psychical Research, the first society formed specifically to investigate such claims. Frank Podmore,

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<sup>4</sup>Robert Fuller, *Mesmerism and the Americans Cure of Souls*, Philadelphia (1982), pp. 14-15; on the liminal zone, see Edmund Leach, *Culture and Communication: The Logic by which Symbols are Connected*, London (1976).

better known as an original Fabian, was also among the core workers for the S.P.R. Writing in 1902 he asserted that:

The idea of intercourse with distinctively human spirits, if not actually introduced by Swedenborg, at least established itself first in the popular consciousness through his teaching. E. Swedenborg is therefore deservedly ranked as the first Spiritualist in the restricted sense in which the term is here used.<sup>5</sup>

While the New Church and her unwelcome stepdaughter spiritualism would continue to have severe differences, it was on this point, the accessibility of an afterlife, that Swedenborg established the first element of what developed into a plebeian cosmology of the 19th century. Swedenborg believed in contact with the spirits of those who had once lived as men and women, although this intercourse was authorized to him alone as agent of the Lord, and was subsumed within his broader message of spiritual regeneration. He taught that the future life is a state much the same in variety, character and circumstances as life on earth. These, Podmore argues, became the two chief articles of the spiritualist creed. He observed that "[Swedenborg's] special contribution to the spiritualist belief consists in his conception of a future life," though Swedenborg's heaven, unlike the spiritualists', was populated with the spirits of the departed, who, by free choice of evil or good during their earthly life become either demons of hell or angels of heaven.<sup>6</sup>

In most other societies, and in Europe's own past culture, belief in spiritual influences, frequently deemed accessible through the induction of altered states of consciousness, has figured prominently.<sup>7</sup> During the Christian era such manifestations were understood mostly as demonic

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<sup>5</sup> Frank Podmore, *Mediums of the 19th Century* (2 vols.), New York (1963), (originally published in London as *Modern Spiritualism*), vol. 1, p. 15.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14; on the structure of the Heavens, see E. Swedenborg, *Divine Love and Wisdom* (1763), n. 140, and *Heaven and Hell* (1758), ns. 449, 450.

<sup>7</sup> On traditional initiations of the Australian Aborigines employing the special use of crystals to induce hypnoid states, see Henri F. Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious, The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry*, New York (1970), p. 34, and A.P. Elkin, *Aboriginal Men of High Degree*, St Lucia (1977); on the Shamans in North America and Siberia, where both hypnosis and travelling clairvoyance figured in initiatory personations, see Erik Holtved,

possession, and those branded as “diabolos” were dealt with accordingly. In the persecution of unfortunate medievals accused as “witches,” in 17th century Salem or in the Cévennes, the shared assumption of both persecutors and persecuted was that spiritual beings exist, but that they are not human spirits.

The nuns of Lodun were possessed by demons, the Tremblers of the Cévennes had claimed inspiration by a divine afflatus, the Rosicrucians and Paracelsus believed they were dealing with elemental creatures.<sup>8</sup>

### Millenarian, millenialist and Freemasonic influences

Hence at least until the Baroque era, deviance from accepted norms was regarded according to religious and canonical understandings, including a complex demonology. However, with the coming of the Age of individual Reason (as the mechanistic philosophy infused order into the universe, along with those among the European educated elite who sought to better understand society and to probe the human mind) many in the West were also thinking differently about the human experience in its spiritual aspects, apart from and sometimes in opposition to the accepted church views.

These trends were exhibited in many forms throughout this century of Enlightenment. Some turned to biblical prophecy, and the millennial predictions of impending doom in the Last Days; others adopted Freemasonry, which claimed to possess secret knowledge reaching back to Egyptian or other antiquity, and rendered a rational religion that worshipped a Great Architect. Still others in England and on the Continent grew in sympathy with the new Christianity, comprising the ecstatic visions and inspired writings of Jacob Boehme. During the closing decades of the 18th

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“Eskimo Shamanism,” in Carl-Marín Edsman (Ed.) *Studies in Shamanism*, Stockholm, (1967), p. 26 and *passim*; Porphyry’s life of his master Plotinus gives an account of an attempt to contact the sage’s “Tutelary Spirit,” in S. MacKenna (Transl.), *Plotinus, The Enneads*, London (1969), pp. 185-90; and on Socrates’ “daimonion” and the Delphic Oracle, see Micheline Sauvage, *Socrates and the Conscience of Man*, London (1960), pp. 92-3.

<sup>8</sup> Podmore, *Mediums*, vol. 1, p. 14.

century, many of the same type of people adopted a new Revelation and Christian Dispensation as proclaimed in the Writings of Swedenborg. These trends were evident throughout Europe, and when in the 1780s was added the potent influence of the new techniques of Mesmer and Puységur, all the elements of the "occult" revival were in place.

This occult revival was due in part to the same forces that in the broader Atlantic community gave rise to Romanticism: a breakdown of intellectualist, rational explanations, given its most dominant impetus from Rousseau and the Nature philosophy.<sup>9</sup> Three major trends can be identified in England and on the Continent up to the early 18th century, that helped to transform attitudes regarding the Christian message, and set the stage for the radically new understandings of the covert Enlightenment: popular millenarianism, comprising small but influential movements grouped around a charismatic leader; millennialism, based upon biblical prophecies; and the rising organisation and influence of Freemasonry.

The great swell of sectaries following the English Civil war like the Ranters, the Quakers and the Muggletonians, continued in small but devoted groups into the new century. In England, the millenarian inheritance from the 17th century provided an intellectual milieu favorable to the eschatological interpretation of events.<sup>10</sup> From the 1690s, millenarian and prophetic traditions flourished in England as they had never done in France, due to the pervasive influence on the populace of the Catholic church, and the existence of a free press in England.<sup>11</sup> In the popular imagination, the Muggletonians were the most widely known among the numerous sects proclaiming the imminent end of the world. Muggleton's six principles included the idea that God and the man Jesus Christ are synonymous expressions. Around the same time, the Philadelphian Society (named after the 6th of the 7 churches in Asia) flourished in London. It was headed by Mrs. Jane Lead (1623-1704), author of *A Fountain of Gardens*,

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<sup>9</sup> John L. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire, The making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644-1844*, New York (1994), pp. 94-7.

<sup>10</sup> J.F.C. Harrison, *The Second Coming, Popular Millenarianism 1780-1850*, London (1979), p.14.

<sup>11</sup> Clarke Garrett, *Respectable Folly, Millenarians and the French Revolution in France and England*, Baltimore (1975), p.166.

a chiliastic spiritual diary that drew heavily on Boehme's ideas.<sup>12</sup> While Swedenborg's message would be based on a new Revelation and a witness to the continuation of human existence beyond the grave, the Philadelphians, Muggletonians and other mystics and millenarians did not recast the Christian message to proclaim a new Dispensation. Rather they placed their faith in the private spiritual insights of their leaders and founders. They did, however, provide a receptive environment for Swedenborg's teachings, inasmuch that his insistence that Jesus Christ is God echoed the views of Muggleton, while his symbolic interpretation of biblical stories found earlier expression in the chiliasm of the previous century, both millennial and millenarian.

The rising interest in millennialist and millenarian ideas was not limited to the broad populace. In general, millennialism was more prevalent among the educated classes, and was largely concerned with various schemes of biblical prophecy as to the Last Days, the breaking of the Seven Seals and so forth. The Bible was used in a variety of ways: as literal and divinely inspired, as a guide for contemporary events, or as allegories, with stories interpreted as internal states of the human mind.<sup>13</sup> Swedenborg would continue these trends after his Illumination in 1745, with a new and deeper interpretation of the Bible based on correspondences and degrees, that he had been permitted by Divine favour to understand and to convey to humanity at large. After 1745 Swedenborg would teach the arrival of an "Internal Millennium," on the basis of the Revelation afforded to him, and of his direct experiences of an afterlife. These aspects were not a part of the millenarian movements at the turn of the 18th century, whose adherents awaited an apocalyptic conflagration to be followed by a thousand years of peace; but they did help to establish in Hanoverian England and elsewhere, a loss of faith among many in orthodox Christianity, at the same time as the Act of Settlement and other measures flowing from the Glorious Revolution strengthened the established Church and secured its relation to the Crown.

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<sup>12</sup> Harrison, *The Second Coming*, pp. 23-4.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

Millenarians were found primarily within popular culture throughout the 18th century, and were concerned with direct spiritual manifestations, in various sects based around individual prophets. The most radical of the millenarian movements were the Camisards, or French prophets, a breakaway sect of Jansenism strong in south east France, and especially in Lyon. They taught the impending arrival of the millenium, which would be preceded by the conversion of the Jews and their return to the Holy Land.<sup>14</sup> Following Louis XIV's revocation in 1685 of the Edict of Nantes that had guaranteed religious freedom to French Protestants, there was an official disfavour with other sects like the Quietists and the Jansenists. After revolts in 1702 and 1705 arising from this new environment of persecution, the Camisard prophets fled to England.<sup>15</sup> The three French prophets, Elie Marion, Jean Cavalier and Durand Fage, were filled with the Spirit, and when they arrived in London in 1706 from the Cévennes, where the Huguenots were in rebellion, they preached the arrival of the Millenium. The Camisards would brook no disagreement with their prophecies and visions, which were often accompanied by tremblings and seizures, and they denounced all who denied the authority of their revelations. Following the sermons and writings of the Huguenot pastor Pierre Jurieu, then living in the Netherlands, they regarded their struggle in apocalyptic terms, with the French monarchy and its armies seen as serving the Great Beast of Revelation.<sup>16</sup> They departed after six years, leaving many followers like John Lacey, Richard Cuninghame and Richard Roach, who became known as the English prophets.<sup>17</sup>

Although they numbered only in the hundreds, the Camisards were a significant bridge between French and English culture, and they provided a continuity with the 17th century sectaries, in their style and in their eschatology. Richard Roach, rector of St Augustine's Hackney, a follower of Jane Lead, regarded the prophets as God's instruments, and yet another

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<sup>14</sup> Garrett, *Respectable Folly*, p. 21.

<sup>15</sup> Harrison, *The Second Coming*, p. 25.

<sup>16</sup> Garrett, *Respectable Folly*, p. 147.

<sup>17</sup> G.S. Rousseau, "Mysticism and Millenarianism: 'Immortal Dr. Cheyne,'" in Richard H. Popkin (Ed.), *Millenarianism and Messianism in English Literature and Thought 1650-1800*, Leiden (1988), p. 94, p. 98.

sign of the millenium approaching.<sup>18</sup> They joined with the Philadelphians to announce that the Last Days had begun. Elie Marion, an unlettered peasant, gave thunderous addresses under inspiration, where he promised to the common people,

Je vengerai mes enfants ma cause; votre sang sera vengé...je vous élèverai sur des trônes, je mettrai ma force en Sion...C'est la forteresse de l'éternel, ton Dieu, qui doit défendre son peuple d'entre les mains du diable du monde.<sup>19</sup>

Such zeal cost three of their leaders to be sentenced to the pillory in 1707. The Camisard prophets also had an indirect significance on American religion, through the Shakers, founded in 1747 by former Quakers James and Jane Wardley of Manchester. They adopted the millenarian view, and also became "convulsionaries" under the influence of a Divine afflatus, through which they came to be known as the "shaking Quakers." In 1758 Ann Lee joined, and following a vision while in prison resulting from members' disruption of a Church of England service, she emigrated in 1774 with eight followers to the American colonies.<sup>20</sup>

Another main current of the early 18th century among the educated, millenialism, drew on earlier demonstrations regarding biblical prophecies being fulfilled in current events, such as those advanced by Brightmann and Mede. These ideas were taken up by Newton and his successor at Trinity, William Whiston, and by the Unitarian theologian and scientist Joseph Priestley.<sup>21</sup> Steven Bullock notes the irony that Newton "drank deeply from the mysteries of alchemy and Biblical prophecy even as he forged many of the concepts that underlay the later mechanistic science that ultimately denied these occult connections."<sup>22</sup> Nicholas Fatio, Newton's

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<sup>18</sup> Harrison, *The Second Coming*, p. 27.

<sup>19</sup> Podmore, *Mediums*, vol. 1, p. 6; "I will avenge my children, my cause; your blood will be avenged...I will raise you upon thrones, I shall apply my force in Zion...It is the fortress of the eternal, your God, who will defend his people from entering into the hands of the devil of the world."

<sup>20</sup> Harrison, *The Second Coming*, p. 25, p. 28.

<sup>21</sup> Garrett, *Respectable Folly*, p. 126.

<sup>22</sup> Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood*, p.10.

disciple, enlisted himself in the service of Elie Marion, and it seems that for a time, Newton was not averse to them. William Whiston also had a visit from the French prophets. He rejected their version of the Last Days, but from his own calculations, he predicted in 1712 that a comet would soon destroy the world. Whiston listed 99 signs preceding the restoration of the Jews to the Holy Land, an important precondition to the millenium, which he set at 1736, then 1766.<sup>23</sup>

The third significant aspect of the "underbelly" of the Enlightenment was Freemasonry. While more elusive to the historian, their status and undoubted permeation of European society in this century makes Freemasonry more than an adjunct to any study of the Enlightenment, and more especially to a deeper understanding of its "covert" aspects. This holds true because Freemasonry, despite claims to an "antient" and venerable lineage, was a product of the Enlightenment, and its popularity reflects among the aristocracy and *haute bourgeoisie* of the era a dissatisfaction with orthodoxy in religion, and also perhaps a more democratic intent, in the creation of a new space within society where members of differing classes could meet "upon the level." But more directly still, not only were many of the same individuals involved in Freemasonic lodges, Swedenborgian study groups and mesmeric conclaves, but as we shall see, in the rash of societies that grew from the 1780s, whose aspect was often syncretistic and millenarian, there was a continuation of Masonic forms of organisation, and other features like its exclusivity and secrecy. One contributing factor to this spilling out of Masonic-like associations, was a schism within Freemasonry itself for reform, from the 1730s, resulting in the "scottish" rites of Grand Orient Masonry, and later still in other reformed fraternities like the Templars or "strict Observance" Masons, and the Zinnendorf system.<sup>24</sup> As orthodox Freemasonry steered further from "occultism" other groups, often borrowing from Swedenborgian theology and mesmeric practices, were being organized throughout Europe. While they kept the quasi-secret and hierarchical structure, groups like the Exegetic and Philanthropic society in Stockholm, the Harmonial societies throughout France,

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<sup>23</sup> Rousseau, "Mysticism and Milleneranism", pp. 94-5; Garrett, *Respectable Folly*, pp. 153-4.

<sup>24</sup> R.W.Weisberger, *Speculative freemasonry and the enlightenment : a study of the craft in London, Paris, Prague, and Vienna*, Boulder (1993), p. 111, p. 118.

and the Avignon Society became virtual clearing houses for heterodox ideas of all kinds. It is within these cultural trends especially of the 1780s and beyond, that the melding of Swedenborgian and mesmeric influences were to figure prominently.

## II

### EMANUEL SWEDENBORG, A RATIONAL MYSTIC

Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) was not the first seer to claim contact with a Higher reality. Yet he holds singular importance for an understanding of the cultural changes wrought by the Enlightenment in all its phases, principally because his teachings were a major contributing factor in the occult revival at the end of the century. Unlike his 17th century predecessor in mystical religion Jacob Boehme, Swedenborg made that knowledge accessible to a far wider public, and his detailed descriptions of the spiritual worlds and their inhabitants drew numbers of adherents among the curious and the bereaved. Neither was he, like Boehme, an unschooled mystic. Prior to his illumination at the age of 54, Swedenborg had acquired a distinguished reputation as both scientist and statesman in his native Sweden and throughout Europe. His labours in all fields were characterized by variety and originality. A pioneer in several fields of science, he ranks with his friend Linnaeus, by whom he was presented to the Swedish Academy of Science, having arrived at the nebular hypothesis before Kant and Laplace. Perhaps most remarkable among his many anticipations of later theories was his localization of the motor centres in the cerebral cortex, a discovery made while Swedenborg was seeking to locate the soul in the body, fully 150 years before any other scientist.<sup>25</sup> In these and other attainments, he bears comparison with that other eclectic genius, Leonardo DaVinci.

This extraordinary man, whom Emerson called "the last of the great Church Fathers"<sup>26</sup> was raised within a pious evangelicalism. His father, Lutheran Bishop Swedberg of Skara, was deeply involved in current debates within the Protestant churches concerning the sufficiency of faith

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<sup>25</sup> Marguerite Beck Block, *The New Church in the New World*, New York (1984), p. 8, p. 14.

<sup>26</sup> R.W. Emerson, *Representative Men* (1883), London (1904), p. 93.

or the need for works for the attainment of salvation; he insisted on works, and made a large personal expenditure in translating the Bible into Swedish.<sup>27</sup> He also conversed with angels, heard voices and practiced a form of hypnotic healing. Thus in the home there was a strong attachment to the Bible as the Word, and a family tendency to mystical reverie. Through royal patronage, the Swedberg family were ennobled to Swedenborg.

As a student, Swedenborg showed a particular aptitude for science. He made the tour of the Continent usual for young aristocratic men in his era, but he did not waste his time in dissipation, and already he lived by the moral doctrine of uses that he would expound in his mature theology. During the first of many sojourns to London, he perfected his command of a number of crafts, including glassgrinding, and studied varied scientific disciplines.<sup>28</sup> While a student of the eminent astronomer Flamsteed, Swedenborg discovered new methods for observing the moon, stars, and planets, and for finding the terrestrial longitude by means of the moon.

On his return to Stockholm, the King appointed him Assessor for the Swedish Board of Mines, where he remained, with frequent absences abroad, relinquishing the post only after his Illumination 30 years later. An extraordinarily prolific worker, Swedenborg had published over 150 papers in seventeen disciplines, written in the scholarly Latin of his day, before he abandoned science for theology in 1745. His rank made him a member of the Swedish House of Nobles, where he applied himself with characteristic industry, producing weighty papers on finance and currency reform. His career brought him success, even eminence in the world of European science. An omnimath and true son of the Enlightenment, Swedenborg's interests covered a wide field. At the Board of Mines, he perfected a way of extracting salts from minerals, and showed his gifts as military engineer when he devised a means of carrying a ship over mountainous terrain between bodies of water, and thus helped the Swedish Navy surprise and defeat the Danes. After returning to England to study mining and manufacturing, in 1734 Swedenborg published his first great scientific work, the *Principia*, the first of the three volume opus *Opera*

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<sup>27</sup> Like his father, Swedenborg was opposed to the theology that discourages works and intuition, Block, *The New Church*, p. 4 .

<sup>28</sup> Block, *The New Church*, p. 5.

*Philosophica et Mineralia*. His next venture was into anatomy and physiology, for at this time he was determined to discover the human soul by empirical means.<sup>29</sup>

However, these efforts came to nought, for in 1743 at the age of 54, Swedenborg's life suddenly took a dramatic turn with the first signs of his illumination. What Swedenborg experienced during the next two years was no less than a transformation that, ever the precise scientist, he carefully recorded in a special diary.<sup>30</sup> In April 1745 in a grand vision, the "Lord God" appeared and commanded him to explain to men the spiritual sense of Scripture.<sup>31</sup> Swedenborg's life entered a new phase, and a new state of consciousness was opened in him where he was fully awake in both worlds at the same time. He describes this momentous event in his life:

From that day I gave up the study of all worldly science, and laboured in spiritual things, according as the Lord had commanded me to write. Afterwards the Lord opened, daily very often, the eyes of my spirit, so that in the middle of the day I could see into the other world, and in a state of perfect wakefulness converse with angels and spirits.<sup>32</sup>

In his personal appearance Swedenborg was a typical 18th century aristocrat, appearing at formal functions in black velvet, fine lace, and jeweled sword.<sup>33</sup> He lived a quiet bachelor existence in unprepossessing style. He has been described as "tall and spare in person, with...blue eyes, a wig to

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<sup>29</sup> He drew up plans for several inventions, including a submarine, a machine gun, a flying machine, and a steam engine, in which "the wheel will...revolve by means of the fire, which will put the water in motion"; *Ibid.*, pp. 6-8.

<sup>30</sup> Block writes:

His mental suffering was undoubtedly very severe. He fasted and prayed, had strange dreams and phantasies, tremors, prostrations, trances, sweatings, and swoonings. He alternated between moods of deepest gloom and states of ecstatic joy. And all the while he watched himself with a coldly scientific eye, kept a careful record of his experiences, and often wondered whether it were not "all mere phantasy." (*Ibid.*, p. 11)

<sup>31</sup> George Trobridge, *Swedenborg Life and Teaching*, New York (1976), p. 97.

<sup>32</sup> Block, *The New Church*, p. 12.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

his shoulders, dark clothing, knee-breeches, buckles, and a cane"; his character was "placid, serene, and ever ready for conversation...but he was afflicted with a stammer which hindered his enunciation."<sup>34</sup>

Obedying the command of the Lord, Swedenborg set about conveying to humanity in numerous heavy tomes, written in the language of dry scientific discourse, what had been revealed to him regarding the "inner" sense of the Bible and the destiny of man. The *Arcana Coelestia* in 12 volumes, published between 1747 and 1758, was followed by *Heaven and Hell*, perhaps his best known work, and *Conjugal Love*, which was to cause some dissention within the New Church because of views expressed therein on marriage and "concubinage." Swedenborg believed the Revelation vouchsafed to him would rejuvenate the Christian faith. He never wavered from the task of expounding a theology which he claimed was received through inward illumination as he read the Word. In *The True Christian Religion*, (the most important work theologically because, according to Swedenborg, the completion of the first draft on 19 June 1770 signalled the commencement of the era of the New Jerusalem) he asserts that "It has now been permitted to enter rationally into the mysteries of faith."<sup>35</sup> The Enlightenment in theological matters had arrived, for as he saw in a vision, inscribed over a temple portal was the inscription "Nunc Licet..." (Now it is permitted...).

In 1749, in the same year that John Wesley's *Plain Account of the People Called Methodists* was given to the world, Swedenborg was in London, where there was no literary censorship, superintending the publication of the first Latin volume of the *Arcana* for which John Lewis, an early convert, placed advertisements in London newspapers. The following year saw the publication of the second volume, and Lewis produced the first English translation.

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<sup>34</sup> A. Conan Doyle, *The History of Spiritualism*, (2 vols), London (1926), vol. 1, p.14.

<sup>35</sup> The Lord sent his 12 disciples all forth into the universal spiritual world with a proclamation:

to preach the gospel that the Lord Jesus Christ reigneth, whose kingdom shall be for ages and ages...After the appearance of this book the Lord will operate both mediately and immediately towards the establishment throughout the whole of Christendom, of the New Church based upon this Theology. (E. Swedenborg, *The True Christian Religion* (1771))

The New Church was not founded until some years after Swedenborg's death, because of the tendency to permeate existing communions, especially in England. Swedenborg was not concerned about the small numbers of his followers, because he believed in the inevitability of the establishment of the New Church, since it had been Divinely mandated.<sup>36</sup> Asked on one occasion how many followers there were of his doctrine, Swedenborg replied: "perhaps 50, and the same number in the world of spirits."<sup>37</sup> Like Nostradamus, Swedenborg foretold the exact date on which he would die, and expressed great delight at the prospect. He sent a short note to John Wesley, an invitation to pay him a visit, as "I have been informed in the world of spirits that you have a desire to converse with me." The astonished Wesley wrote back confirming that he had indeed been wanting to speak with him, but could not as he was then taking a month's journey. Swedenborg replied that this would not do, as he expected "to enter the spiritual world forever on the 29th of the following month."<sup>38</sup> Swedenborg died quietly in London on 29 March, 1772, and was buried there in the vault of the Swedish Church.

### Swedenborg's long-term influence

Swedenborg's widespread and diffuse influence was felt first through private study groups, and through the dissemination of his published works. From the 1780s at Manchester, Rev. John Clowes sparked interest among working class adherents, and a Theosophical Society was inaugurated in London. These believers coalesced in the New Church, attracted by the promise of a regenerated Christianity, and the special insights into the Word. Secondly, a far wider circle were attracted by Swedenborg's pronouncements regarding the Spiritual and Celestial worlds. While the New Church grew unremarkably in the latter half of the 18th century, the Masonic and other *dilletanti* throughout Europe (generally of aristocratic birth and educated) were affected by Swedenborg's claims to seership, and they inferred resemblances between Swedenborg's system and hermetic and other occult wisdom. Hence these two inherently conflicting

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<sup>36</sup> C.T. Odhner (Ed.), *Annals of the New Church*, vol I, 1688-1850.

<sup>37</sup> Edward Brotherton, *Spiritualism, Swedenborg and the New Church*, London (1860), p. 6.

<sup>38</sup> Block, *The New Church*, p. 17.

trends are discernable, whereby Swedenborg appealed both to those wanting to regenerate Christianity, and to those who saw in his Writings the work of an hermetic and Masonic adept.

In France current hermetic ideas were diffused through the interconnected European Masonic lodges, while in England a more popular occultism derived from English working class culture, many of whose members, as we have seen, were familiar with hermeticism through the popular translations of Boehme, the legacy of the French and English prophets, and native traditions of millenarianism drawing from the 17th century sectaries. It was in this environment that from the 1770s, Swedenborg's message began to appeal to modest but growing numbers of the disenchanting within the orthodox churches, drawn equally by the Swede's promise of a new Christian dispensation, as by his descriptions of the heavens he claimed to have visited regularly over more than 25 years. At this distance, through the penumbra of our knowledge of Spiritualism and New Age philosophies, one needs to emphasize the radical nature of Swedenborg's teachings regarding contact with an Afterlife. But he discouraged others less well protected than himself, as instrument and agent of the Lord, to try such contacts.

A deeper interpretation of the inner sense of the Word constituted Swedenborg's primary mission to the world, to indicate "where its holiness and divinity lie concealed," and why he understood this new Dispensation as the Lord's Second Coming. Swedenborg taught the science of correspondences (the representations of the spiritual and the celestial in the natural world) and that by studying the Word according to these insights, a deeper understanding of its Inner sense can be achieved. The biblical stories speak to humanity on several levels of meaning simultaneously, discernable through correspondences and degrees in the first instance, and ultimately through inward illumination. Thus for instance with the benefit of Swedenborg's insights, an historical account of the creation can be understood also as a commentary, or correspondence, on the necessary path to individual regeneration.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>The six days, or periods, of Creation are according to Swedenborg successive states of the regeneration of man. The first state, including infancy, relates to the "void," "emptiness," and "thick darkness," whereupon the Lord's mercy is manifest in "the Spirit of God moving upon the face of the waters." The second state is "when a distinction is made between those things which are of the Lord, and those which are proper to man," and so on up to, "the sixth

Swedenborg taught that beginning with the Last Judgment, which occurred in 1757, an immanent spiritual age had commenced.<sup>40</sup> His theology can be located both within the Rational Enlightenment (in the idea that the deepest mysteries might be comprehended by the unaided reason) and within the lineage of Bible millennialists earlier in the century, except that his message required the regeneration of humans, involving no apocalyptic events. Sharing with Methodism an emphasis on practical piety and on the emotional and spiritual dimension of enlightenment,<sup>41</sup> Swedenborg laid great emphasis on the moral doctrine of uses, and as a true child of the Enlightenment, in the possibility of humanity's improvement, so that through reason, piety and hard work, this world could be made better, at the same time as the spiritual worlds grew more accessible.

It was, however, as a seer of spiritual and celestial spheres, rather than as theologian and moralist, that Swedenborg's views exerted the widest influence on outlooks. In the 19th century, this permeating influence would be based on a popularized idea of the spiritual worlds he had described for the purposes of emphasizing his message of regeneration.<sup>42</sup> Swedenborg's intromissions and visions revealed to him that at death, no radical change takes place either in the individual or the lived environment. He held that the soul enters the world of spirits where it lives in society, continues to have thoughts and feelings, and functions for a time just as it did on earth. Among the most controversial of Swedenborg's teachings was his portrayal of marriage and sex in heaven, which com-

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state is when, from faith, and thence from love, he speaks what is true, and does what is good: the things which he then brings forth are called the 'living soul' and the 'beast.' And as he then begins to act at once and together from both faith and love, he becomes a spiritual man, who is called an 'image'" (From E. Swedenborg, (1758), *Arcana Coelestia*(1749), vol. 1, ns. 6-13, in Block, *The New Church*, p. 27.).

<sup>40</sup> Garrett, "Swedenborg," p. 68.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>42</sup> Bernhard Lang notes that Swedenborg's heaven was anthropocentric, with four main characteristics: [1] only a thin veil divides heaven from earth; [2] life in heaven is not the opposite of life on earth, but a continuation and fulfillment of earthly existence; [3] heaven is not a realm of repose and contemplation, but dynamic, and motion-filled; and [4] the focus is on human love expressed in communal and familial concerns, not in a beatific vision like that of the scholastics; B. Lang, "Glimpses of Heaven in the Age of Swedenborg," in Erland J. Brock *et al* (Eds), *Swedenborg and His Influence*, Bryn Athyn (1988), pp. 309-10.

pletely separate his visions from the static heaven of the scholastics, and from most of his contemporaries.<sup>43</sup>

The world of spirits, while not heaven *per se*, serves as a middle ground between the heavens and the hells. Swedenborg described a strongly human-centered world with flowers and temples, gardens and libraries, and the continued enjoyment of food and bodily pleasures, including the marriage of true "conjugal" partners. While it horrified the clerics, this was to prove the most popular feature of his Writings, drawing from Plato's *Symposium* the idea that "Two real lovers are not separated by the death of one, since...they again meet and are reunited, and love each other more tenderly than before."<sup>44</sup> Swedenborg's doctrine of the Afterlife was extremely popular with the bereaved, and unique in promoting the love of a man and woman as the foundation of all other love.

An idyllic heaven presages the covert Enlightenment, harmonizing well with Romanticism, for instance in J.J. Rousseau's belief that humans are fundamentally good and worthy of salvation; and in Swedenborg's accounts of the highest sphere, the celestial kingdom, where the "angels are naked" (representing their spiritual purity and innocence) may be discerned the germ of the Natural philosophy and the concept of the Noble Savage.<sup>45</sup> To a Bible-loving people Swedenborg gave new hope, and a new interpretation of the Word, together with the certainty that good works and good will would have their just rewards hereafter. As Margaret Block notes, it was Swedenborg's teachings regarding the Afterlife which have made the greatest number of converts to the New Church, and his views of heaven have affected the success of Spiritualism and had deep implications for religion in general.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Lang, "Glimpses," pp. 312-14, 329; rejecting the Lutheran doctrine of soul sleep between death and the Last Judgment, Swedenborg described another world where the human, "has sight, hearing and speech as in the former world; he walks, runs, and sits, as in the former world; he lies down, sleeps, and awakes...he eats and drinks...he enjoys marriage delights as in the former world. In a word, he is a man in each and every respect"; E. Swedenborg, *True Christian Religion* (1771), n. 792.

<sup>44</sup> Conan Doyle, *The History*, p. 10; Lang, "Glimpses," p. 325.

<sup>45</sup> Lang, "Glimpses," in Brook *et al.*, pp. 320-1; E. Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell*, n. 280; on nakedness and antinomianism, see Harrison, *The Second Coming*, p. 18.

<sup>46</sup> "...whereas hell has been most adequately depicted and in the greatest detail, heaven has always been a nebulous sort of affair, quite unappealing to the average imagination. Swedenborg, however, presents a picture so detailed, so rational, and so matter-of-fact—in

The appeal of Swedenborg's complex system to a broad spectrum of enquirers occurred, like all human experience, within an historical and cultural context. Within the milieu of the High Enlightenment, we may discern its ineluctable connection at this period with mesmerism and the "occult" revival. The hostility of the Lutheran clergy in Sweden meant that the main body of adherents were gathered elsewhere for at least a generation.<sup>47</sup> In England Swedenborg's teachings attracted a small but influential body of followers, who soon diffused the Writings throughout the Atlantic world, and even organized missionary work. In the late 1770s, his teachings on human regeneration in particular led to the formation of small and scattered assemblies, usually study groups within existing demoninations, as with Rev. John Clowes at Manchester, and Rev. Jacob Duché at Philadelphia. In France a more "occult" understanding of Swedenborg was transmitted through the conduit of the "scottish" Freemasonic fraternities and other societies, which in turn bred organizations like the Avignon Society, founded by Dom Antoine Pernety, who in 1782 translated some of Swedenborg's works into French. A mystical Catholic, alchemical and quasi-Masonic group working for the establishment of a truly universal church, this society became increasingly millenarian, a trend soon to be exacerbated by the chaos and repression of the French Revolution.

From the early 1780s the Swedenborgian movement became slowly established in the U.S. also. John Brooke in a recent study has linked Mormonism in the U.S. to the European hermetic tradition and Freemasonry, arguing that through Joseph Smith and his milieu, strong links existed with European hermeticism in the late 18th century. Both Swedenborg and Mesmer are located within this tradition, its latest phase emanating from the 1730s, and Chevalier Ramsay's reformed "scottish" Freemasonry in France. Brooke is keen to establish an hermetic brotherhood ensconced in Freemasonry that indirectly provided Smith with some of his heterodox opinions. The main point for our purposes is his assertion that after the 1730s, religious hermeticism became grounded principally in

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other words, so humani—that thousands have found in it the deepest consolation and satisfaction...The remarkable success of spiritualism proves that, even to-day, the conditions of life in the Beyond are of the greatest interest to many" (Block, *The New Church*, p. 35-6.).

<sup>47</sup> C.T. Odhner, "the early history of the New Church in Sweden," *The New-Church Messenger*, Vol. LXXII, Jan-June, 1897.

the thought of Swedenborg, who fused hermetic philosophy, in the sense of being based on arcane lore, and religious dispensationalism, in his claims to be the harbinger of a new Christian Era. It is argued that Mesmer, in claiming the discovery of an universal fluid, was also drawing from the hermeticism of previous centuries.<sup>48</sup> While no evidence is adduced for either Swedenborg or Mesmer participating in secret societies, a valid inference is drawn, in that Masonic and other secret or quasi-secret associations provided a ready conduit for the transmission of heterodox ideas of all kinds. These are perhaps the first indications of the close if shadowy relations existing between Swedenborgian and other "underground" movements throughout the Enlightenment, while it also strengthens the suggestion of European influence on the cultural geography of the northeastern United States, and especially the "burned over district" of western New York, where Mormonism and a host of other religious reforms had their origins.<sup>49</sup> As Robert Darnton notes on this aspect of the Enlightenment, whose resonances were felt into the 1850s:

Religious mysticism...had flowed through the age of reason, from the convulsionaries to the mesmerists, like an underground stream. When it broke through to the surface after 1789, it had been swollen by Swedenborgianism, martinism, Rosicrucianism, alchemy, physiognomy, and many other currents of spiritualism; but the mesmerist current was one of the most powerful...in the transition from the Enlightenment to romanticism.<sup>50</sup>

The long term influence of Swedenborg, who founded no Church and who had only a handful of adherents in his lifetime, on all shades of heterodox opinion, is difficult to gauge definitively; for some years adherents like Rev. John Clowes remained in their orthodox communion, in his case as an Anglican priest, while actively promoting Swedenborg's teachings. When Mesmer took Paris by storm in 1778, Swedenborg had been dead for

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<sup>48</sup> Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire*, pp. 94-7; on Ramsay see also A.E. Waite, *A New Encyclopaedia of Freemasonry*, New York (1970), p. 313-14.

<sup>49</sup> See Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-over District*, New York (1965).

<sup>50</sup> Robert Darnton, *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France*, New York (1970), p. 127.

six years. It was not long before some among their adherents began to infer conjunctions between the ideas and practices of their respective innovators. As the new science of Animal Magnetism came briefly into conjunction with Swedenborg's metaphysics, especially his ideas concerning an Afterlife, there resulted a new cultural configuration, whose most potent expression appears around the mid 19th century in Spiritualism, especially in the "new" phenomenon of mediumship. Through their discovery of induced somnambulism, Mesmer's followers almost accidentally produced the mechanism wherewith generations of magnetizers and mediums, whose principal aim was the exploration of other levels of being, provided a vehicle for the exploration of the mind itself, and new raw material with which it became possible to apply increasingly sophisticated methods to explore the untapped potential of the human consciousness.

Over the early decades of the 19th century, the New Church would grow increasingly critical of mesmerism, and later of Spiritualism. This was partly because of Swedenborg's exclusive claim to illumination, and the dangers from unwanted influences he warned of regarding spirit intercourse. And the popularized versions of Animal Magnetism from the late 18th century were both drawing on Swedenborg's writings, and introducing new and, from a New Church perspective, dangerous innovations. This was one reason, as we shall see, why the Exegetic and Philanthropic Society in Stockholm established contact in 1787 with the mesmeric Harmonial societies. It is time now to introduce F.A. Mesmer, whose teaching provided the other fundamental element in the gradual transformation from the covert Enlightenment to popular Spiritualism.

### III

#### FRANZ ANTON MESMER AND ANIMAL MAGNETISM

The pioneering historian of dynamic psychiatry Henri Ellenberger has compared Mesmer to Columbus: "Both men discovered a new world, both remained in error for the remainder of their lives about the real nature of their discoveries, and both died bitterly disappointed men."<sup>51</sup> Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815) was born in Iznang Germany, son of the gamekeeper

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<sup>51</sup> Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious*, p. 57.

to the Bishop of Constance. After making a start in theology and law, he graduated in medicine from the University of Vienna in 1766, aged 33, with an M.D. dissertation "A Physical-Medical Treatise on the Influence of the Planets" on human diseases. He set up in private practice, and soon became involved in "alternative" forms of cure that eschewed the heroic drugging, purgatives and bleeding then common to his profession;<sup>52</sup> instead, he claimed to have discovered, or rather rediscovered, an universal fluid he called "Animal Magnetism," by which he believed he could effect cures of most maladies that affect the nervous system. According to Mesmer this was a superfine fluid that penetrates and surrounds all bodies. Later he theorized further that this fluid must exist as the medium of gravity.<sup>53</sup> Two individuals were important in Mesmer's elaboration of the fluidic theory: the Jesuit astronomer with the unlikely name Father Maximilian Hell, and the Swabian faith healer and exorcist J.J. Gassner. From the first he learned of the influence of magnets, which he later abandoned; from the second he developed his theory of "crises."

In 1773 Mesmer and Father Hell conducted a magnetic clinic.<sup>54</sup> Drawing on their experiments the following year Mesmer began treatment of Fraulein Oesterlin, a patient suffering from a variety of ailments, including hysterical faints and trances. Mesmer induced an "artificial tide," whereby the patient was made to swallow an iron preparation, as he attached magnets, one to her stomach, and two to her legs; Oesterlin soon felt the flow of a mysterious fluid through her body, and was cured. From these effects occurring on July 28, 1774, an important date, Mesmer concluded that they could not have been caused by the magnets alone, but from an "essentially different agent," the Animal Magnetism accumulated in his own person, the magnet being an auxiliary means of reinforcing the fluid and giving it a direction.<sup>55</sup>

Mesmer's curative regimen quickly abandoned the use of magnets for the "gaze" and the passes. Under Gassner's tutelage, Mesmer found he could cure disease by manipulating the fluid without magnets, and that

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<sup>52</sup> Adam Crabtree, *Multiple Man, Explorations in Possession and Multiple Personality*, New York (1985) p. 2; Darnton, *Mesmerism*, p. 15.

<sup>53</sup> Darnton, *Mesmerism*, p. 3.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>55</sup> Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious*, p. 59.

Gassner produced many of the same effects he had observed on Fraulein Oesterlin.<sup>56</sup> Gassner would treat patients by means of exorcism, invoking the name of Jesus, and if the condition grew worse, he would attribute its causes to demonic influence, but if no worsening of the condition occurred, he would say that the causes were physical and there was nothing he could do.<sup>57</sup> The following year, 1775, they had a falling out, mainly because of Mesmer's rejection of faith in Jesus, and his insistence that his cures were based on scientifically verifiable laws. Nevertheless it seems clear that Mesmer adapted Gassner's methods in his evolving theory of "crises."

Mesmer's reputation for magical cures grew rapidly. After a triumphant demonstration of his powers in Munich, where he was made a member of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences, Mesmer returned to Vienna and, emboldened by his previous success, he endeavoured to cure Fraulein Paradis, a gifted young pianist who had been blind from the age of three. After a few sessions of magnetic treatment her vision was partly restored, but Mesmer's growing number of enemies pointed out that she could see only when Mesmer was present. This led to an acrimonious conflict with the medical faculty, and the establishment of a commission in Vienna which denied the reality of the cure. Paradis was taken off the treatment, partly it seems because the restoration of her sight might have meant the withdrawal of the pension the Empress Maria Theresa had endowed upon the young musician. After this the patient lost her sight for good.<sup>58</sup> This was the first of Mesmer's many conflicts with medical officialdom. He now believed that the effects on his patients were produced by the force of the accumulated fluid in his own person, discharged with curative benefits according to the principles he had worked out as regards polarity and other factors. Oesterlin had been cured, and married into Mesmer's family. The Paradis case was more questionable.

Although his sincerity as physician was not in doubt, there was always more of the Magus than the rational therapist about Mesmer, while his insistence on the physical nature of the fluid drew allegations of

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<sup>56</sup> Darnton, *Mesmerism*, p. 48.

<sup>57</sup> Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious*, p. 55.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

materialism. An arrogant and opinionated man, throughout his life he "adhered with bulldog tenacity to a body of doctrine which changed but little, and then only in inessentials."<sup>59</sup> Paradoxically Mesmer's doctrine was based firstly on his intuition of being the bearer of a mysterious "fluid," for which he devised rational theories to explain its nature and action. His genius however was to recognize the therapeutic benefits of abreactive induction in combating illness. The crises he induced (drawing on Gassner's methods and analogies given by contemporary discoveries in the field of electricity by Galvani, Franklin and others) were, as Ellenberger and Fuller have argued, the beginning of psychotherapeutics, and constitute the basis of their claims for Mesmer's ultimate significance as a pioneer of psychology.<sup>60</sup> With this latter development, his work transgressed the physicalist assumptions with which he imbued his scientific practice, and entered imperceptibly into the psychological, without his apparent realization of the subtle yet far reaching implications this change in emphasis occasioned. It would be left to his disciple, the Marquis de Puységur, to recognize the psychological nature of these techniques.

### Paris in the 1780s

Expelled from the Vienna medical faculty because of his rigid adherence to an idea, Mesmer went to Paris in 1778. Preceded by a reputation for magical cures, he set up a clinic at the Place Vendôme.<sup>61</sup> He was introduced to Parisian high society via the Comte D'artois, younger brother of the King, probably through his personal physician Charles Deslon, an early convert to Mesmer's curative system.<sup>62</sup> With the benefit of these influential contacts, Mesmer acquired a thriving practice among the *no-blesse* and the *haute bourgeoisie*.

By 1784, Mesmer's *séances* (literally: events) were so popular that they were now dramatically organized. He invented the *bacquet*, a circular

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<sup>59</sup> Alan Gauld, *A History of Hypnotism*, New York (1995) p. 16.

<sup>60</sup> Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious*, p. 63; Fuller, *Mesmerism*, p. 2.

<sup>61</sup> Darnton, *Mesmerism*, p. 117.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

oaken tub around which thirty or more seated persons could be magnetized simultaneously. By means of iron rods attached to a floor covered by powdered glass and iron filings, magnetism was conducted to the hands of patients who were arranged, linking thumbs and index fingers, in several rows around the *baquet*:

in subdued light, absolutely silent, they sat in concentric rows, bound to one another by a cord. Then Mesmer, wearing a coat of lilac silk, and carrying a long iron wand, walked up and down the crowd, touching the diseased parts of the patients' bodies.<sup>63</sup>

Soft music performed by pianoforte, harmonica or wind instruments, a richly carpeted room adorned with copious and strategically placed mirrors and elegant furniture, the astrological symbols and the *valets toucheurs* in livery; together these created a hushed and expectant atmosphere as the cream of Paris society, resplendent in their powdered wigs, silks and satin, awaited effects.<sup>64</sup> The master's iron wand augmented the mystery further. There was an adjoining mattress lined "crisis room," and a separate *baquet* was reserved for the lower classes, free of charge; but the majority of his patients came from among the nobility and intelligentsia; many of them, like the Marquis de Lafayette, not long returned from the triumphal support of the American revolutionists, were also members of the Harmonial Society founded to promote Mesmer's system.

Not all crises took a violent form. They might develop into deep sleeps, and it was claimed by some that this enabled communication with dead or distant spirits, who utilized the fluid to send messages directly to the patient's internal sixth sense.<sup>65</sup> Mesmer denied that there was anything supernatural about his cures, and he considered these as unimportant epiphenomena of his curative techniques.<sup>66</sup> Indeed Mesmer tried with great energy and resource, if some teutonic arrogance, to have his discovery recognized by the medical and scientific authorities. Hence Mesmer's

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<sup>63</sup> Claude-Anne Lopez, *Mon Cher Papa, Franklin and the Ladies of Paris*, London (1967), pp. 170-1.

<sup>64</sup> Darnton, *Mesmerism*, p. 8.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>66</sup> Fuller, *Mesmerism*, p. 4.

system was a synthesis on rationalist lines, explanatory factors at work being not "spiritual beings acting by arbitrary will," but "effluences radiating under ascertainable laws."<sup>67</sup>

### Discoverer of a new fluid?

Soon, however, the hostility of the Paris medical establishment, who received negative reports from their colleagues at Vienna, and the extreme popularity of his *bacquet* sessions, brought a certain notoriety to Mesmer. He was suspected of simply putting older women to sleep, and of inducing in the younger ones *titillations délicieuses*. Along with suspicions about mesmerism (as it was now being called) as sexual magic and a threat to morality, the police also became interested in the preponderance of radicals in the Harmonial Societies, which had now spread to many provincial cities. A secret report warned that several mesmerist pamphleteers were combining radical political ideas with their pseudoscientific discourses.<sup>68</sup> And Mesmer became embroiled in a bitter quarrel with Deslon, his erstwhile supporter, which led Bergasse and others to seek to protect these "secret" teachings from the vulgar through the formation of Harmonial Societies, where a stiff subscription fee and grades of initiation ensured their exclusiveness. Mallet du Pan complained that "Une foule des gens de tout état...se presentent journellement avec des merveilles de toute espèce"<sup>69</sup> (An assortment of persons from all estates...attend daily to witness marvels of all kinds). Among Mesmer's supporters was the venerable philosopher and Freemason Court de Gebelin, author of *Le Monde Primitif*, who searched ancient languages for traces of a lost primitive science. Unfortunately for Mesmer's reputation, he died while receiving treatment in a mesmerist *bacquet*.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Podmore, *Mediums*, vol. 1, p. 48.

<sup>68</sup> Darnton, *Mesmerism*, p. 52, p. 62.

<sup>69</sup> "An assortment of persons from all estates attend daily to witness marvels of all kinds."; *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38, p. 116; Gebelin's *Le Monde Primitif*(1773) was a dictionary which examines nouns, verbs and adjectives from Chinese, Hebrew, Greek and Latin, and there is a lengthy section on the Eleusinian Mystery Cult, drawing similarities with modern Masonry; Weisberger, *Speculative freemasonry*, p. 100.

But perhaps the greatest perceived threat in Mesmer's hugely popular *bacquet* sessions to officialdom were his notions of physical causation. Mesmer's claims were nothing if not grandiose. Taking his lead from Newton, who had spoken of an aether, that "most subtle spirit which pervades and lies hid in all gross bodies," Mesmer believed that in the elaboration of his curative technique he had at last come upon this primordial aether, the medium through which sensations of every kind—light, heat, magnetism, electricity—were able to pass from one physical object to another.<sup>71</sup> In a 1799 *Memoire* he staked his claim: "I dare to flatter myself that the discoveries I have made will push back the boundaries of our knowledge of physics as did the invention of microscopes and telescopes for the age preceding our own."<sup>72</sup> If a magnetic fluid could be shown to be transmittable between humans, then the possibilities of other unrecognized forces or fluids were also opened up.

Through the early 1780s, the mesmerists enjoyed a high public profile. Queen Marie-Antoinette became interested, probably through her courtier the Comte de Ségur, a member of the Harmonial Society. Over these years mesmerism was "debated and investigated...ridiculed several times on the stage, burlesqued in popular songs, doggerels and cartoons, practiced in a network of Masonic-like secret societies, and publicized by a flood of pamphlets and books."<sup>73</sup> Claude-Anne Lopez, in her biography of Benjamin Franklin, has caught the mood of Paris in 1784:

[T]he issue which was agitating the minds of Parisians in 1784, dividing them into quarreling factions [was] whether Mesmer was a genius or a quack. A genius, proclaimed such a blue-blood as the Comte d'Artois; a benefactor of mankind, insisted such a hero as Lafayette; a saint, said the throngs of people who crowded his clinics or obtained initiation, at a price, into his secret societies. An impostor, maintained the respected Lavoisier; a charlatan, declared the majority of Parisian doctors; a threat to decency and public order, grumbled the more conservatively inclined.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious*, p. 59.

<sup>72</sup> Quoted in Gauld, *A History*, p. 11.

<sup>73</sup> Darnton, *Mesmerism*, pp. 40-1.

<sup>74</sup> Lopez, *Mon Cher Papa*, pp. 168-9.

After only five years, Mesmer's clinic in Paris was attracting a great deal of attention, not all of it favorable. In 1784 two Commissions were established by the government of Louis XVI to investigate Mesmer's cures and the efficacy of his new "fluid." The eminent "electrician" Benjamin Franklin, Ambassador from the American Republic to the French court, was asked to serve on the first Commission, where he threw his considerable status as scientist behind a rejection of Mesmer's claims to have discovered a "new fluid." This "tradesman in the Age of Reason," as a recent writer has called him, in striking a blow against superstition, as he believed, was probably also helping to put an arresting constraint on a potentially dangerous political movement.<sup>75</sup> Among Mesmer's early partisans were several future leaders of the Revolution such as Lafayette, Jean-Louis Carra, and Nicholas Bergasse. Mesmer's universal fluid appealed to radicals, firstly in its democratic implications and its ready "scientific" political theory, while it served as a weapon against the academic establishment.<sup>76</sup> Soon through the efforts of the energetic lawyer Bergasse, Harmonial societies were established in Paris and other cities. There future *revolutionnaires* "perceived their own insides while in somnambulist trances...and the means and date of their recovery while ill..."<sup>77</sup>

Nor was Mesmer the only topic of controversy. We have seen how in England factors like the arrival of the Camisards, the popular translations of Boehme's works, and the native millenarian movements like the Muggletonians and Jane Lead's Philadelphian society, along with a lack of literary censorship and a ready conduit through Freemasonic channels for fructifying heterodoxies, had created an atmosphere favourable to the hermeticism and religious dispensationalism of Swedenborg. In France the greater influence of the Catholic church meant that Freemasonry and other deviations from orthodoxy were mostly the province of the wealthier classes, while the 1738 papal Bull condemning Freemasonry made it more attractive to the privileged classes, who dominated its leadership.<sup>78</sup> The *Journal de Bruxelles* commented with apparent disdain, on the plethora of

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<sup>75</sup> Esmond Wright, *Franklin of Philadelphia*, Cambridge (1986), Ch. 1.

<sup>76</sup> Darnton, *Mesmerism*, p. 164.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>78</sup> Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood*, p. 46.

“hermetic, cabalistic, and theosophic philosophers, propagating fanatically all the old absurdities of theurgy, of divination, of astrology etc.”<sup>79</sup> The Comtesse d’Houdetot wrote to the elderly Benjamin Franklin regarding Mesmer that “Versailles is buzzing with this miracle...”<sup>80</sup>

### The Franklin Commission

Benjamin Franklin, then aged 78 years, was coming to the end of a brilliant and varied career as scientist, inventor and statesman. From 1778 he did a considerable work in cementing the crucial relationship between the American Revolutionary elite and their French allies. He found time also to imbibe French aristocratic culture, making a variety of useful contacts and pleasant liaisons. He moved in a rarefied world, a member of the circle of the philosopher Hélivétius, where he became intimate with most of the leading figures of the High Enlightenment, and was regarded as a sort of rustic philosopher. Franklin was also *vénérable*, or grand master, of the Masonic Lodge of the Nine Sisters, founded in 1776 to foster the study of the arts and sciences, where in 1778 he led the aged Voltaire for his initiation.<sup>81</sup>

The Franklin Commission was convened to test the curative effects of Mesmer’s techniques, while the Société Royale was given the task of testing the hypothesis of a new fluid. The participation of distinguished scientists like the astronomer Bailly and the chemist Lavoisier attests to the degree of controversy Mesmer had aroused at the highest levels of French society.<sup>82</sup> With the Revolution tragedy would befall these members of the Commission, who both perished at the guillotine, while another member, ironically, was Dr. Guillotin.<sup>83</sup>

The Franklin Commission worked with Dr. Deslon, since Mesmer himself declined to participate, partly because he refused to reveal the

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<sup>79</sup> Darnton, *Mesmerism*, p. 33.

<sup>80</sup> Lopez, *Mon Cher Papa*, p. 173.

<sup>81</sup> Weisberger, *Speculative freemasonry*, p. 5; Lopez, *Mon Cher Papa*, p. 249.

<sup>82</sup> Fuller, *Mesmerism*, p. 7; Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious*, p. 65.

<sup>83</sup> Though not its inventor, he was linked to the apparatus that bears his name, since as an humanitarian he advocated its use as less barbarous than the hatchet; Lopez, *Mon Cher Papa*, p. 171.

secrets of his system, now protected by graded initiations, and he also felt, probably with justification, that the Commission was greatly biased against him. At Franklin's estate at Plessy, tests were carried out by Franklin and Lavoisier. They observed as Deslon, a member of the Faculté, brought a magnetic subject (a twelve year old boy) for the experiment. A certain tree on the estate had earlier been magnetized by Deslon, and now the boy sensitive with eyes bandaged was asked to find this tree, whereupon, after feeling varying sensations near several trees, he fainted at the foot of the wrong [unmagnetized] tree, some 28 metres away. They also tricked sensitives by giving them ordinary water, supposedly magnetized beforehand, and observed as the subjects fell into the expected "crises." The Commission did show bias, and ignored hundreds of claims to cures effected with Mesmer's methods.<sup>84</sup> They concluded that the magnetic fluid as such did not exist, and that the convulsions to which patients fell prey were the products of overactive imaginations. Unfortunately, as Fuller notes, no one paused to reflect on just what a wondrous faculty the mesmerists had demonstrated the imagination to be.<sup>85</sup>

Twenty thousand copies of the Franklin report were published and eagerly received.<sup>86</sup> Thomas Jefferson, who had just taken over Franklin's ambassadorial role in France, noted with satisfaction in his February 1785 journal: "Animal magnetism dead, ridiculed."<sup>87</sup> Yet despite the ritual humiliation suffered by Mesmer at the hands of officialdom, numerous others in Paris and the provinces remained deeply interested, and some used mesmerism as a stepping stone to more mystical speculations. A play staged in 1788 "Les Illuminés" defends mesmerism: "It is the true system of the Universe, the mover of all things."<sup>88</sup>

Part of Mesmer's appeal was the ability of his doctrine to harmonize with a variety of outlooks. Mesmer presented his theory as "the remnant

<sup>84</sup> Darnton, *Mesmerism*, p. 64.

<sup>85</sup> Fuller, *Mesmerism*, p. 8; Franklin's opinion of Mesmer was clearly unfavourable; in a letter he notes drily, "If these people can be persuaded to forbear their drugs in expectation of being cured by only the physician's finger or an iron rod pointing at them, they may possibly find good effects tho' they mistake the cause." Lopez, *Mon Cher Papa*, p. 172.

<sup>86</sup> Lopez, *Mon Cher Papa*, p. 174.

<sup>87</sup> Darnton, *Mesmerism*, p. 66.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

of a primitively recognized truth" and, paradoxically, also as an exercise in Newtonian physics. Rejected once again by the medical and scientific establishment, Mesmer was now an embittered man, a *philosophe manqué*. He refused the offer of a clinic and a life pension from the Queen, since with it he must accept the surveillance of three government "pupils," and he took the opportunity in his response to lecture her on "the austerity of my principles."<sup>89</sup> Mesmer was now planning to magnetize horses in order to prove that imagination played no part in the visible reactions he provoked.<sup>90</sup> He left Paris for the shores of Lake Constance around 1785, never to return. He lived until 1815, propounding what he still regarded as his great discovery. Mesmer never achieved the recognition in scientific circles he believed his discovery merited. In these, its first stages, mesmerism expressed the Enlightenment's faith in reason taken to an extreme. Later this provoked a movement toward the opposite extreme in the form of Romanticism. For the moment, the fortunes of Animal Magnetism took a decided turn with the practice of his disciple Puységur.

#### IV

In the wake of Mesmer's disputes with Deslon regarding the ownership and completeness of the therapeutic system of which he claimed to be the sole originator, Nicholas Bergasse had founded the Société de l'Harmonie Universelle at Paris. Bergasse, before a further split which sent him and others like Lafayette in a more political direction, did most of the teaching.<sup>91</sup> With his brother he had in the early 1770s been a member of "Les Amis de la Vérité" at Lyon, a Catholic mystical Masonic lodge.<sup>92</sup> Reflecting the vogue of illuminism and religious mysticism that was in part a reaction against the current atheistic rationalism, he taught to initiate in cabalistic signs, symbols of the pure doctrine communicated to Mesmer in his fabled three month retreat in the wilderness. Their aim was to counter

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>90</sup> Lopez, *Mon Cher Papa*, p. 175.

<sup>91</sup> There was a further split in mid 1785 when Bergasse and Kornmann were ejected from the Harmonial lodge and established a political group including Lafayette, d'Eprémèsnil, Sabathier, and JP Brissot; Darnton, *Mesmerism*, p. 78.

<sup>92</sup> Garrett, *Respectable Folly*, p. 26.

Deslon and other "traitors," so as to protect their master's esoteric system.<sup>93</sup>

A strange mixture of business enterprise, private school, and Masonic society, the Harmonial lodges thrived in their pre-Revolution heyday, in Paris and in around 24 provincial Societies.<sup>94</sup> The most influential lodges were at Strasbourg, where the Marquis de Puységur was the leading figure, and at Lyon, where J.B. Willermoz and the Chevalier de Barberin promoted mesmerism together with various Freemasonic and mystical tenets. There were Harmonial Societies also in Turin, Berne, and in Malta, and a society was founded in the French West Indies by Puységur's brother.<sup>95</sup> Entrance fees were stiff, and new members had to pledge clean living and abstinence from tobacco, as Mesmer believed that snuff upset the nose's magnetic balance.<sup>96</sup> By 1789 the Paris society had 430 members, many of eminent birth, and a number of whom were powerful aristocrats. At the close of the initiation, the acolytes were placed *en rapport* with the director of the ceremony, who embraced them, saying "Allez, touchez, guérissez" (Go, touch, heal).<sup>97</sup>

### The Marquis de Puységur

The phenomena of magnetic sleep provide the common ground between explorations of consciousness and explorations of invisible realms, both central concerns of the "covert" Enlightenment. While the framework was understood as being essentially physiological, it had been assumed that the observed somnambulistic phenomena were related to the passage of the "fluid" or the "nerve fluid," as it was known in later formulations,

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<sup>93</sup> Charles Deslon's star fell dramatically, from being *medecin* to the Comte d'Artois, to being struck off the *Faculté* roll for supporting Mesmer. In another sense also he was perhaps the first martyr for the cause, since in August 1786, like Gebelin, he died while being mesmerized; Darnton, *Mesmerism*, p. 115.

<sup>94</sup> Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious*, p. 65.

<sup>95</sup> Geoffrey K Nelson, *Spiritualism and Society*, New York (1969), p. 50.

<sup>96</sup> Lopez, *Mon Cher Papa*, p. 173.

<sup>97</sup> Among them were 48 gentlemen, almost all of eminent birth; 2 knights of Malta, a lawyer, 4 doctors, 2 surgeons, 7-8 bankers and merchants, 2 clergymen, 3 monks, and aristocrats such as the Ducs de Lauzun, de Coigny, and de Ségur, the Baron de Talleyrand, brother of the statesman, and the Marquis de Jaucourt; Darnton, *Mesmerism*, p. 74, 76.

which awakened an "internal sense." Mesmer held that the subtle fluid to which this sense responds produced a "critical sleep," and because it could extend any distance, thus became also the conduit of rapport, in the merging of fluids between magnetizer and subject.<sup>98</sup> But this could not explain adequately the deeper states, where mesmerized subjects claimed the ability to see inside their own bodies and those of others, to prognosticate the path and resolution of ailments, and more spectacularly, to traverse to distant places, describing with uncanny accuracy places they had never visited in the body, foretelling future events and accurately describing past events unknown to them in the normal state, and at times claiming communications with departed spirits and angels.<sup>99</sup> While the induction of an artificial somnambulant state was probably Mesmer's most important contribution, credit for the recognition of its psychological basis, and its therapeutic elaboration, belongs to Puységur. With Puységur magnetic healing took a wholly new direction, one leading straight to the subconscious mind.<sup>100</sup>

Armand Jacques Marc de Chastenot, Marquis de Puységur (1751-1825) was the scion of an ancient aristocratic family. He served with distinction as an artillery officer in the French army, and was involved in the siege of Gibraltar.<sup>101</sup> After his discharge he came to Paris, where he joined Mesmer's Harmonial Society. It was only when he returned to his family estate at Buzancy, and began applying Mesmer's techniques, that Puységur accidentally made a discovery that would have stupendous importance for the study of the human mind in the long term, and for the fortunes of the "covert" Enlightenment in the short term.

M. Jessieu, a dissenting Commission member, was perhaps the first to record his observations of certain puzzling phenomena, which Mesmer and his early disciples attributed simply to side effects of the induced "crisis."<sup>102</sup> It was while treating Victor Race, a young shepherd on his

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<sup>98</sup> Adam Crabtree, *From Mesmer to Freud, Magnetic Sleep and the Roots of Psychological Healing*, London (1993), p. 65.

<sup>99</sup> Crabtree, *Multiple Man*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>100</sup> Fuller, *Mesmerism*, p. 10; Crabtree, *From Mesmer to Freud*, pp. 65-7.

<sup>101</sup> Crabtree, *Multiple Man*, p. 4.

<sup>102</sup> Podmore, *Mediums*, vol. 1, p. 56.

estate who suffered with a chronic chest infection, that Puységur stumbled upon some of the phenomena that Jessieu had noted. Attempting to induce a crisis in Victor, he found instead that the servant went into a "lucid slumber," a hypnotic somnambulism, followed by amnesia of these events. He could not wake Race, who in this state would stand, sing or dance as ordered, or perform the simulated movements of the hunt when this was suggested to him.<sup>103</sup> Having faithfully imitated Mesmer's techniques only to have his patient fall into unusual, sleeplike states of consciousness, Puységur took the matter further.<sup>104</sup> He found that in this state, the subject was malleable to suggestions, but that he also spontaneously performed feats of thought reading, clairvoyance, and precognition.<sup>105</sup> More intriguing still, when in the somnambulist state Victor was far brighter than in the waking state, and he could diagnose his own disease, foresee its course, and prescribe the treatments, which in his case led to full recovery. Eventually Puységur concluded that the real agent in the cure was the magnetizer's will. He carried out further tests on Victor and other peasants from surrounding estates, with often similar results.<sup>106</sup>

Puységur called the new phenomenon "magnetic sleep," whose most important aspects were mental *rapport*, and the existence of a separate chain of memories for both waking and magnetic states. Soon this was compared to the suggestible state of sleepwalking, and became known as induced or "artificial somnambulism." It seemed he had uncovered a new order of vision. In rare instances a state of ecstasy was achieved, and the inhabitants of sublime realms were revealed. Thus Puységur's discovery had implications both spiritual and psychological; he had discovered the subconscious mind, and became the first to recognize at least two levels of consciousness existing within human beings. Imbued with the beliefs and assumptions of his era, he believed he had discovered the soul.<sup>107</sup>

As a psychological phenomenon, artificial somnambulism was enthusiastically appropriated in the provinces, but not by Mesmer, who saw it

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<sup>103</sup> A.R.G. Owen, *Hysteria, Hypnosis and Healing, The Work of J.-M. Charcot*, New York (1971), p. 174; Crabtree, *Multiple Man*, p. 4.

<sup>104</sup> Robert C. Fuller, *Americans and the Unconscious*, New York (1986), p. 30.

<sup>105</sup> Podmore, *Mediums*, vol. 1, p. 60.

<sup>106</sup> Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious*, p. 189ff.

<sup>107</sup> Crabtree, *Multiple Man*, p. 5, p. 17.

as a danger. When Puységur brought Victor to Paris to demonstrate these new wonders, the Master showed little interest. Puységur still held to the theory of a sensible fluid, but now seen in psychological rather than physicalist terms. It was through the establishment of *rapport* between magnetizer and patient, and the resultant mingling of fluids in a conjoint circulation, that the will of the operator was able to control the phenomena. "Croyez et veuillez" are the key words, said Puységur, "believe and will."<sup>108</sup> How much still depended on the physical rejuvenation afforded by Animal Magnetism in these cures is a moot point. Puységur concluded that "animal magnetism lies not in the action of one body upon another, but in the action of the thought upon the vital principle of the body."<sup>109</sup> These remarkable phenomena implied psychological, not physical, causality. It was a *power* transferred from the robust to the ailing, which importantly had the effect of controlling the will of the subject. It was this aspect that concerned the ever free-willing Swedenborgians of the Exegetic and Philanthropic Society, who were concerned, as moralists and the medical establishment would continue to be, about the possibilities of abuse of this degree of control.<sup>110</sup>

### The revolutionary re-discovery of somnambolic trance

However the immediate ramifications of Puységur's discovery would be to change the praxis of mesmerists, and even the focus from curative techniques to the exploration of the somnambulistic states as ends in themselves, so as to glean spiritual insights. How this change in emphasis came about can be gauged somewhat through activities of the provincial

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<sup>108</sup> Gauld, *A History*, p. 43, p. 47; there was a magnetic effluence from the sun, and yet another, differing in glory, from the earth, which Puységur identifies with the "dephlogisticated air" given out by plants under the rays of the sun; Podmore, *Mediums*, vol. 1, p. 62.

<sup>109</sup> Fuller, *Mesmerism*, p. 11.

<sup>110</sup> For instance *The New Church Advocate*, London, vol. I, May 1842-December 1843, p. 288, on mesmerism:

Now in natural sleep, the power of the will is suspended...as it were surrendered to the Lord himself. No angel would take possession of it, and no devil is permitted to do it. But in mesmeric sleep the will of the patient is completely subject to that of the mesmeriser...it is well understood that the mesmerised patient has continually less and less power to resist the will of his mesmeriser...

Harmonial societies, and similar gatherings in France and throughout Europe. In this dissemination of Puységur's insights, which occurred rapidly, the various Freemasonic societies with which the Harmonial lodges were loosely connected, often with the same persons participating in both, had an undoubted role. Not only were these new manifestations drawing attention away from the cure of disease, but the very basis of an universal "fluid" was being challenged by some of Mesmer's own disciples. Artificial somnambulism or "magnetic sleep" encouraged an approach based upon a belief in the psychogenesis of many conditions, employing the *rapport* between hypnotist and patient as therapeutic channel. The insight that unknown psychological forces were at work, and the induction of "magnetic sleep" to explore unknown psychic functions as well as for therapy, heralded a sea change in the practice of numbers of mesmerists.<sup>111</sup> At the Lyon society, the Chevalier de Barberin dispensed with any material sort of fluid. Extending the notion of *rapport*, he diagnosed by "feeling" within himself patients' diseased states, and prescribing accordingly.<sup>112</sup>

Thus by 1789, an eclectic, spiritualist form of mesmerism was established, and had spread throughout Europe. Mesmer's ideas "had escaped his control and had run wildly through supernatural regions where he believed they had no business."<sup>113</sup> It was this next phase in the transformation from Enlightenment speculations to the fantastic and overarching Romantic vision of a World Soul and other effluviae, that provides another close link to Swedenborgian conceptions, the logical connecting point between fluidic therapeutics and supernatural manifestations. Rather than being considered side effects of a rationally applied "fluid," this emerged as the central focus of experimental psychology for at least a generation. In this transition, the Marquis de Puységur was of fundamental importance.

With Saint Martin, Willermoz, the Chevalier de Barberin and others in the provinces, where after Mesmer's departure from Paris the movement thrived until the Revolution, the fluidic theory began to decline. Some historians, like Ellenberger and Crabtree, have seen in Puységur's activities the advent of the first dynamic psychiatry, whose basic features were

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<sup>111</sup> Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious*, p. vii, p. 102.

<sup>112</sup> Darnton, *Mesmerism*, p. 69.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

the use of hypnosis as an approach to the unconscious mind, based upon the evolving concept of a dual model of the mind with a conscious and an unconscious ego. What was to be of special importance in these emerging views of the mind and consciousness, was the impetus artificial somnambulism gave to these studies throughout France during the 1780s, then the centre of interest for Animal Magnetism. In addition to the existing Harmonial societies, specific Magnetic societies were formed in Paris, Rennes, Troyes, Caen, and Rheims.<sup>114</sup> Apart from disputes over the reality of the phenomena, "a second consciousness had been discovered—a consciousness with properties very different from ordinary waking consciousness. Puységur had discovered it and the later magnetizers confirmed it."<sup>115</sup>

In the long term this new paradigm would make it possible "to conceive of a subconscious or unconscious life in human beings and thereby provided the foundation for all modern psychotherapies that recognize the existence of a hidden arena of dynamic mental activity."<sup>116</sup> In the short term, the hiatus of the French Revolution and the changing focus of the "Magnetizers" to metaphysical enquiries meant that the new discoveries were being channeled in different directions, reflecting the changing priorities of the troubled decade of the 1790s throughout Europe. With the proliferation of interest in mesmerism, and the brief period of wide exposure of the Harmonial societies, something new was occurring: there was a noticeable shift from Animal Magnetism as curative panacea, to the new phenomenon of somnambulism as a means of divination and spiritual communication. Darnton expresses the changing focus of mesmerism thus:

As the Revolution approached, mesmerists tended increasingly to neglect the sick in order to decipher hieroglyphics, manipulate magic numbers, communicate with spirits...<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Owen, *Hysteria*, p. 175.

<sup>115</sup> Crabtree, *Multiple Man*, p. 20.

<sup>116</sup> Crabtree, *From Mesmer to Freud*, p. 88.

<sup>117</sup> Darnton, *Mesmerism*, p. 70.

## Strasbourg and Lyon

The most successful of the Harmonial lodges, the Société Harmonique des Amis Réunis of Strasbourg, was founded by Puységur with some of his Army friends. Enjoying the protection of authorities who were also participants, the Strasbourg society became an entrepôt for other forms of heterodoxy, especially German mysticism, which poured into France before the Revolution. As Swedenborg's teachings were spreading in England in the 1770s and '80s, his ideas, along with those of Jacob Boehme, were propangadized in Germany through the German translation of his works by I. Tafel and by Prelate F.C. Oetinger, who was persecuted for his adherence. At the same time Jacques Cazotte was spreading German mystical doctrines in France.<sup>118</sup>

At Strasbourg and Lyon especially, new connections were being made between the Harmonial societies and other Masonic and occult societies. Many of these have not survived in historical memory. But one may glean their current import, for instance in Thomas Duché's letter to his father written during a six month tour of the continent, that he had found "great Openings of this Kingdom everywhere unconfined to any religious Sects and Denominations."<sup>119</sup> Around the same time the egregious Count Grabianka was visiting many societies in England and the Continent, including Duché's Swedenborgian group in London, to gather like-minded societies for what he believed was the beginning of the Millenium.

The city of Strasbourg, Alsace, with a population of fifty thousand, had by 1789 some 29 Masonic lodges, with 1500 members. Situated on the Rhine border, Strasbourg was an entrepôt between orthodox Paris Grand Orient Freemasonry and the more mystical German versions extant in Berlin and Vienna.<sup>120</sup> There were lodges whose membership was drawn

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<sup>118</sup> Gauld, *A History*, p. 145; Block, *The New Church*, p. 56.

<sup>119</sup> Garrett, "Swedenborg," p. 76.

<sup>120</sup> Margaret Jacob notes on the relation between Freemasonry and mesmerism:

The mesmerist movement was too widespread and complex to be explained or subsumed entirely under the rubric of an extended freemasonry. Yet the significant Masonic participation in it, the support given Mesmer by lodges both in his native Vienna and in France, provided him with ease of access throughout central and western Europe. (Margaret C. Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment, Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, New York (1991), p. 186, p. 200.)

from specific professions, like medicine or the arts, and some Protestant lodges, but these Masonic fraternities were for the most part Catholic. Lodges were also divided along class lines, with predominantly bourgeois or aristocratic membership, although there were exceptions. "La Candeur," the most eminent of the Strasbourg lodges, was Catholic, exclusively aristocratic, and very conservative.<sup>121</sup> At "La Candeur" members like Rodolphe Saltzmann, who also belonged to Willermoz's various mesmeric and Masonic ventures in Lyon, were intent on contributing to the reform of the Catholic Church. These reformers held gatherings that did not resemble the standard ritualism of the Blue lodges. At some of these meetings held during the 1780s, the Sicilian Count Cagliostro, a mystical Freemason and Catholic, held "seances" with Cardinal Rohan and others to search for "regeneration."<sup>122</sup> Cagliostro was calumniated in some quarters as a fraud, but many who knew him, like William Bousie, were impressed with his healing powers. If they used somnambules like Willermoz at Lyon to tap into Divine wisdom, it was as a result of the more mystical varieties of German Masonry to which they were exposed from the 1760s, and the interests of aristocrats like Saltzmann and the Puységur brothers, connected with the Société des Amis Réunis (Society of Reunited Friends).

Among the quasi-Masonic societies that grew in Strasbourg, with strong associations with "La Candeur," was Puységur's Société des Amis Réunis. It was specifically medical and mesmerist, and among its most visible membership were doctors, surgeons and, somewhat unusual in the era, women, who except for some Dutch lodges, were generally not admitted into Masonic fraternities. Their zeal for "le premier bonheur de l'humanité" was centered around the charitable thought that Animal Magnetism was needed because medicines for the poor are rare. Les Amis Réunis was not as exclusive as "La Candeur," although the Society's initiation fee, at 100 louis (600 livres) would have been prohibitive to the humbler classes, and there were also applications for initiation from all over France and Germany.<sup>123</sup> "La Candeur" was well represented in its

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., p. 181.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., p. 184.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., p. 186, p. 199.

membership, as were women. The Société des Amis Réunis, like the other mystical and medical societies that sprang up around this decade, should not be seen as an aberration, but as integral to the Enlightenment. As Margaret Jacob has noted, its ambiance

was simultaneously rationalist and theosophic. The light that shone in their midst cast its rays into realms strange as well as familiar to students of the European Enlightenment...Rather than...these impulses...simply representing the "end" of the Enlightenment, [they were] inextricably bound up with its civic culture created by the mores of elite civility and sociability. The mystical could express concrete social and ideological postures...<sup>124</sup>

Strasbourg was the most influential of the provincial Harmonial lodges outside Paris. We note the interrelation between conventional Masonic societies and more mystical and mesmeric gatherings like the Société des Amis Réunis. Puységur had stumbled upon the phenomenon of induced somnambulism, which shifted emphasis from a physicalist "fluidist" framework to one based upon psychological precepts, especially in relation to the importance of the will of the magnetizer and the theory of rapport. It had the added effect of diminishing the employment of the bacquet for mass magnetization, in favour of individual treatment, although for the lower classes in his region, Puységur would magnetize an old oak tree and connect patients en masse to it by ropes. This shift in emphasis can rightly be regarded as the genesis of psychotherapeutics. Moreover Puységur and philosophers like J.C. de Saint Martin, who had both trained in Paris with Mesmer and taken their practices to the provinces, kept in contact with one another. Saint Martin returned to Lyon, where with J.P. Willermoz he founded the Lyonnais Société. He believed that the fluidist theory was inadequate to account for the phenomena, and that emphasis on it could lead to materialism. Saint-Martin said of Mesmer:

It is Mesmer—that unbeliever Mesmer, that man who is only matter and is not even a materialist—it is that man, I say, who

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., p. 187.

opened the door to sensible demonstrations of spirit...Such has been the effect of magnetism.<sup>125</sup>

Saint-Martin had learned from the founder of Martinism, Martines de Pasqually, of the evil influence of “astral intelligences.” Like the contemporary Avignon Society, Martinism preached cabalism, Talmudic tradition, and mystic Catholicism. Saint-Martin became a sort of metaphysical consultant to the mesmerists—especially to Puységur and Barberin. Saint-Martin influenced Puységur’s ideas that somnambulism constituted a direct link to the spirit world, and that the phenomena of magnetic somnambulism were tantamount to proof of the spirituality of the soul—the final destruction of materialism. Saint-Martin later evolved an unique mystical synthesis, based upon varieties of mesmerism and Martinism, and developed a philosophy strongly influenced by Boehme and Swedenborg.<sup>126</sup>

These views were reinforced by the increasing diversity of phenomena and methods that the second wave of mesmerists were developing. To a considerable degree, they incorporated the insights and techniques of the fluidists into their greater, often Masonic, opinions and practices. J.H.D. Petetin made some discoveries with patients in relation to induced catalepsy, where at times patients saw their own insides, and a leading figure at the Lyonnais Societé was the Chevalier de Barberin, who “practiced a unique technique of locating a patient’s disease, without touching him, from the sensations felt by the mesmerizer.” Along with Barberin, J.B. Willermoz, Perisse Duluc, Bernard de Turckheim and Rodophe Saltzmann of “La Candeur,” were all united by Masonic ties, and they were also involved in the Lyon Harmonial Society, called “La Concorde.”<sup>127</sup>

J.B. Willermoz, a Lyon silk merchant, was the most respected figure in French mystical Masonry. Willermoz and the mystical Masons at Lyon

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<sup>125</sup> Crabtree, *From Mesmer to Freud*, p. 68.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68; Darnton, *Mesmerism*, pp. 68-9.

<sup>127</sup> Margaret Jacob notes that:

mysticism was widespread in the French lodges of adoption...fueled by masonic theosophes active in the adoptive lodges, as well as by mesmerism, the cult of spiritual healing imported into France by the Austrian mystic F.A. Mesmer. Spiritualism appears to have added to the emotional force of the Masonic ceremonies. (Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment*, p. 140)

had initially concentrated on mesmerism as a healing technique. In 1784, they secured local veterinarians for experiments on animals, and by autumn 1784, they were enthused by the Puységur brothers' technique of induced somnambulism. They put a succession of ladies into a trance, who prophesied and brought news from the spirit world. In 1785 Willermoz organized the "Workers of the Eleventh Hour," a select band of mystics who studied messages from heaven, transmitted by automatic writing through a "magnetized" noblewoman of Willermoz's acquaintance.<sup>128</sup> This was possibly a different and more select group than those at La Concorde, and its membership interpenetrated with his other Masonic venture the Loge Élué et Chérie (the lodge of the chosen and cherished, probably referring to hermetic wisdom).

In addition to the messages received through the somnambules of "La Concorde," Willermoz founded the secret "Loge Élué et Chérie" to propagate the true primitive religion from hieroglyphic messages conveyed in unspecified ways from God to Willermoz.<sup>129</sup> As we shall see, the use of Talmudic and cabalistic magic was also a feature of the Avignon society. Willermoz's Harmonial society, which had many members in common with his Masonic ventures, blossomed with Rosicrucians, Swedenborgians, alchemists, cabalists, and assorted theosophists recruited also from another Masonic lodge, the Ordre des Chevaliers Bienfaisants de la Cité Sainte.<sup>130</sup> For instance Joseph de Maistre followed the ideas of St. Martin, Swedenborg and Willermoz, and he found the theory of mesmerism already formulated in Swedenborg's writings.<sup>131</sup>

These practices in the latter part of the 1780s reinforced what may be called the metaphysical rather than the strictly curative in aspect. The new channel for investigation provided through the "La Concorde" somnambules and the other mystical Masonic gatherings, together with the experiences of Puységur with Victor Race and others, were changing the emphasis of these practices. Soon this new *pratique* of induced som-

<sup>128</sup> Garrett, *Respectable Folly*, pp. 110-11.

<sup>129</sup> Darnton, *Mesmerism*, p. 68.

<sup>130</sup> Crabtree, *From Mesmer to Freud*, p. 68.

<sup>131</sup> Darnton, *Mesmerism*, p. 139.

nambulism was incorporated for even more daring metaphysical flights by esoteric societies like that at Avignon, influenced also by Swedenborgian conceptions and in close contact with Puységur at Strasbourg. In some ways these varied permutations were part of a wider reaction against Enlightenment rationalism and materialism; the rise of the "irrational" against the reified Reason evident in the previous decades. By the eve of the Revolution, this eclectic spiritualist form of mesmerism was found not only at Strasbourg and Lyon, but was very popular at the royal Courts in Prussia, Sweden and elsewhere, and it even exercised an impact upon West Indian religion, through the mesmeric society founded there by Puységur's brother.

Among both humble and educated in France, millenarian ideas had long held strong sway, and by the 1780s the introduction of Mesmer's new science seemed to some to hold the key to solving the secrets of nature. As in England, the millennial influences, based on Bible prophecies, were felt in the Masonic institutions, but were now melded more thoroughly with the principal trends of heterodox high culture on the Continent. From the 1730s mainstream Freemasonry was drawing away from the "occultism" of the first generation after its reorganization in England in 1717. The generation after Newton had already begun movement away from occult beliefs, and "the ancient mysteries lost their intellectual respectability, as science and social thought grew increasingly mechanistic and rational."<sup>132</sup> The "scottish" reforms of Ramsay and others had the effect of producing new elitist lodges, like the Templars, and organizations based on Catholicism like "La Candeur" and "Les Amis de la Vérité." Other directions for non-formal masonry included the Avignon society, and the most public of the new movements, the Fareinists, moving away from the Masonic fraternal codes in millenarian and millennial directions. A separate, politically radical *Illuminati* was founded in Germany in 1776.<sup>133</sup> The events leading up to the French Revolution had effects in some quarters. In this process, occurring in the last decades of the 18th century, both mesmerism and Swedenborgian ideas had a significant role. As Garrett writes concerning this trend in Freemasonry in the last decades of 18th century:

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<sup>132</sup> Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood*, p.11.

<sup>133</sup> Weisberger, *Speculative freemasonry*, pp. 148-9; Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment*, p. 14.

There was great interest among some masons in varieties of mysticism that were sometimes esoteric and sometimes Catholic. Aided by cabalism, astrology, prophetic lore, and the trances of mesmerized mediums, lodges throughout France prepared for what they believed was an approaching age of spiritual revelation and worldwide unity, perhaps in the near future.<sup>134</sup>

Catholic mystical masonry surfaced mainly in France. In the 1760s "La Candeur" steered toward more mystical and Germanic forms of Freemasonry.<sup>135</sup> In 1773, a group of pious Catholics at Lyon formed "*Les Amis de la Vérité*," of about a thousand members, with another two hundred members in Toulouse and another smaller group at Grenoble, who met each month to offer an office for the conversion of the Jews and the renovation of the Church, whose membership included the brothers Bergasse, described as "Christian mesmerists."<sup>136</sup>

## V

We have seen how the therapeutic interests of Mesmer and his first disciples were giving way in the latter half of the 1780s to a more metaphysical intent and spiritistic focus, especially among the anti-fluidists of the Strasbourg and Lyon societies. After Mesmer's downfall at the hands of the Commissions in 1784, and his subsequent return to the shores of Lake Constance, mesmerism rapidly declined in the French capital. Among the higher classes, there were expressions of weariness of the rational, and presentiments of the Romantic, as in a 1784 pamphlet by Lamartine, a member of the Harmonial Society, proclaiming that:

the reign of Voltaire, of the Encyclopedists, is collapsing; that one finally gets tired of everything, especially of cold reasoning; that we must have livelier, more delicious delights, some of the sublime, the incomprehensible, the supernatural.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Garrett, *Respectable Folly*, p. 20; p. 26.

<sup>135</sup> Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment*, p. 195.

<sup>136</sup> Garrett, *Respectable Folly*, p. 26.

<sup>137</sup> Darnton, *Mesmerism*, p. 151.

By 1788, other Harmonial lodge members like the minor satirist Louis Mercier had moved on from Mesmer to a belief that the world was full of invisible ghosts.<sup>138</sup> Yet mesmerism continued to exert a potent influence on the practices, and to some extent, on the theories of the second wave led by Puységur, Barberin, and Willermoz in the provinces. For his part Puységur was sympathetic to the Martinists of Lyon, to Cagliostro in Paris, and to the Freemasons and Swedenborgians in Germany and Sweden.<sup>139</sup> To “La Psychologie Sacrée de Lyon” and its fellow travellers in other parts of Europe, mesmerism had proven the fundamental Truth, the continued existence of the soul. Not the least among these complex influences that opened such a possibility to their minds were the insights of Swedenborg.

The numerous and multiple interests among the European heterodoxy began to breathe somewhat the same air of mystery and magic that could be found in Freemasonry, and at the Strasbourg and Lyon Harmonial lodges, but now with a different and millenarian intent. With the partial abandonment of therapeutic concerns for the assuaging of curiosity over large questions such as the continuance of life after death, and communications with Higher Intelligences, came also a *fin de siècle* wave of millenarian sympathies, especially in Britain. This was in particular evidence during the war years of the 1790s and beyond, with the rapid spread of the enthusiasms of Richard Brothers and his “Israelites,” and later still with the extremely popular Joanna Southcott, a Devon washerwoman who claimed to be the “Woman clothed with the Sun” mentioned in Revelations.

### The Avignon Society

In France this was a period of proliferation in the vogue of quasi-Masonic societies, as we have seen already at Strasbourg and Lyon, where these millenarian sympathies formed part of the “occult” revival. Combining the ideas of spirit contact and an Afterlife derived from the works of Swedenborg, frequently together with those of Jacob Boehme, were practices of thaumaturgy, cabalism and induced somnambulism. In the 1790s a

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>139</sup> Crabtree, *From Mesmer to Freud*, p. 70.

number of British millenarian movements like the Shakers, the Buchanites and the Jemimakins were exported to the U.S., only shortly after both Swedenborg and Mesmer's ideas had been established there.<sup>140</sup> But already in the previous decade, some links are revealed between Swedenborgian societies in England and the French sects, where the spread of mesmeric practices and the accompanying positive attitudes to "spirits" were manifest in numerous small but influential societies. The best known was the Avignon Society, which until its forced demise during the Revolution, was a sort of clearing house of hermeticism, mesmerism and occultism, enjoying a constant flow of visitors who formed a network among the like-minded on the Continent and in England.

The Avignon Society was "only one of the many shoots in the lush undergrowth of mystical Masonry in the 18th century." At a time when Deism and conventional Freemasonry "with its tidy generalities" were losing the interest of the educated classes, groups like the Avignon society were attractive to many seekers.<sup>141</sup> Although not part of mainstream Freemasonry, it did have through its founder Antoine Pernety a considerable legitimacy in Freemasonic circles. They were respectable enough to send delegates to International Masonic conferences in 1782 and 1784. Already a high degree Mason in the 1750s, when he had written the most highly elaborated hermetic degree in the Masonic repertoire, the Knight of the Sun, part of the Rite of Perfection, Pernety was also deeply interested in Swedenborg, producing a French translation in 1782.<sup>142</sup> At the 1784 conference the Avignon Society delegates declared that the reunion of the Christian churches and the promulgation of a new doctrine for the entire world was now possible, on the basis of cabalistic numerology, alchemical lore, mesmerist seances, and Swedenborgian spiritualism.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Elspeth Buchan "Friend Mother" and the Buchanites, from the west of Scotland, believed that the second coming was imminent. They held a 40 day fast before the "Midnight Cry" and their ascension. Led by the Rev. Hugh White, a small group left for the American colonies. Jemima Wilkinson, the "Publick Universal Friend," after an illness in 1776 believed she had become a new person with a divine mission. She founded a community of the New Jerusalem in 1788 in western New York; Harrison, *The Second Coming*, p. 34, p. 203.

<sup>141</sup> Garrett, *Respectable Folly*, p. 99.

<sup>142</sup> Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire*, p. 96; Block, *The New Church*, p. 56.

<sup>143</sup> Garrett, *Respectable Folly*, p. 99.

Part of that shadowy European world of Freemasonry, occultism, mesmerism and spiritualism that flourished in the 1780s, the *Illuminés* originated in Berlin in 1779 under the leadership of Antoine Pernety (1716-1800), a former French Benedictine monk, and subsequently librarian to Frederick II of Prussia. Dom Pernety had accompanied Bougainville in the early 1760s as chaplain on his expedition to the Falklands. Upon his return he abandoned the monastic life and went to Avignon in 1765, where he introduced another Masonic rite, for a seceding branch of Freemasons comprised exclusively of nobles, which was reorganized on the basis of his hermetic rite. Pernety, believing that the bulk of ancient literature was disguised hermetic lore, claimed to draw on Greek and Egyptian sources in the formulation of this rite. At the Prussian court in the 1770s Pernety enjoyed the protection of Frederic II's brother Prince Henry, who was deeply interested in occult mysteries.<sup>144</sup> Pernety brought in others to the discussion group like the French priest Guyton de Morveau, known as Brumore, and in 1778, with the arrival of "Count" Tadeusz Grabianka, not really a count, but a very wealthy nobleman, the *Illuminés* were formally constituted.<sup>145</sup>

Grabianka introduced a millenarian interest into what had previously been a largely thaumaturgic and Masonic society. In his youth he had frequented fortune tellers, and through contact with the Sabbatean Jews in his native region of Podolia, he was familiar with the apocalyptic prophecies of the followers of the "Messiah" of the 17th century Sabbatai Zevi. He nursed a desire to succeed to the elective Polish throne, and was increasingly convinced that the Millenium was approaching, and that he would in due course be placed on the throne of Israel. Grabianka, with grandiose aspirations, was a significant precursor of Brothers in his wish to establish an Israelite kingdom. In Warsaw Grabianka joined the reformed Masonic order of "Templars" or "strict Observance," founded around 1760 by Baron Charles Hund, and through this connection, met Pernety in Berlin in 1778.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., pp. 99-101.

<sup>145</sup> Harrison, *The Second Coming*, p. 70.

<sup>146</sup> Garrett, *Respectable Folly*, p. 102; on cabalism and the followers of Sabbatai Zevi, see G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York (1961), pp. 287-324.

In 1782 Pernety received a divine command to relocate the Society from Berlin, ironically choosing the place of the greatest schism of medieval Christianity to proclaim their message of unity.<sup>147</sup> Guided by visions, they established in 1786 at Avignon as a Freemasons' lodge, with the grandiose title the *Académie des Illuminés Philosophes*, and attracted followers from all over Europe. Their doctrines have been described as a blend of Swedenborgianism and Roman Catholicism, salted with occultism. As J.F.C. Harrison notes, their interests were varied:

To the cold intellectualism of the Swedish visionary was added the veneration of the Virgin Mary and recital of the Athanasian creed; while individual members studied Renaissance alchemy, the theurgy of Alexandria, hermetic authors, the philosopher's stone, the divine science of numbers, and the mystical interpretation of dreams.<sup>148</sup>

Though never exceeding one hundred members, the *Illuminés* had a considerable network among the mystical Masonic groups advancing the idea of an impending millenarian regeneration of humanity, and the establishment of a true, unitary church, presided over by Jesus Christ. Pernety employed the "Holy Word," an oracle whose pronouncements were arrived at through cabalistic numerology. His numerological and alchemical interests were now overshadowed by Grabianka's concern with preparing for the Millenium. One historian has noted that the Avignon Society's activities "reveal how the currents of mysticism and occultism within the world of Freemasonry contributed to the dissemination of millenarian ideas."<sup>149</sup> It was through membership in the exclusive Freemasonic lodge at Avignon, founded by Pernety and later reorganized as the *Illuminés*, that Benedict Chastanier had discovered Swedenborg in 1768. Another adherent was the Marquis de Thomé, Royal Librarian at Versailles, who also translated some of Swedenborg's works into French, and in 1783 introduced a reformed system of Masonry called "the Rite of

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<sup>147</sup> Garrett, "Swedenborg," p. 76.

<sup>148</sup> Harrison, *The Second Coming*, p. 70.

<sup>149</sup> Garrett, *Respectable Folly*, pp. 14-15; A.E. Waite, *A New Encyclopaedia*, p. 385.

Swedenborg."<sup>150</sup> Through Pernety's Masonic ties other Freemasons were drawn to the Avignon society, men like the ubiquitous General Rainsford, the French doctor Benedict Chastanier (who later moved to London, where he was a member of Duché's Swedenborgian study group and for some years custodian of some of Swedenborg's manuscripts) and William Bousie, who later joined the New Church. In 1782 Abbé Pernety apparently converted to Swedenborg, and translated some of the Writings into French.<sup>151</sup> Chastanier's adherence to the Avignon Society, whose teachings he introduced in England, decreased with his dissatisfaction with these translations, and with the direction the society was taking, it seems, after the arrival of Grabianka, who was intent upon preparing for the Millennium. Chastanier was among the first to join the New Church in England, being present at the first public meeting in 1783 when the Theosophical Society was organized. But the Avignon Society fell out with the New Church over *Conjugal Love*, which they considered a "damnable book" and Chastanier, now a leader of the New Church, repudiated his connection with the Avignon society. The *New Jerusalem Magazine* in April 1790 denounced the Avignon Society as "the *antipodes* of the New Church, erected on the very borders of Babylon."<sup>152</sup>

The Avignon Society—the most extreme among mystical Masonic groups advancing an impending millenarian regeneration of humanity and the establishment of an unitary church, along with hermeticism and Hebrew Sabbatarianism—drew upon the apocalyptic aspiration of Grabianka to become king of Poland and a second Solomon in Jerusalem. Their tenets were a strange mixture of Masonry, Spiritism, Jesuitism, Swedenborgianism and the teachings of Saint Martin, and their practices have been described as "mystico-cabalistic Magnetical."<sup>153</sup> The *Illuminés* were also committed, like Willermoz at the "Loge Élué et Chérie" in Lyon,

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<sup>150</sup> Block, *The New Church*, p. 58. According to Waite, there is no evidence that Swedenborg belonged to any Masonic order. Two Rites bear his name, the first by Thomé possessed six grades: 1. Apprentice, 2. Fellow Craft, 3. Master Neophyte, 4. Illuminated Theosophist, 5. Blue Brother, 6. Red Brother. The second Rite was founded in Canada circa 1860 and was soon exported to Canada; Waite, *A New Encyclopaedia*, p. 446.

<sup>151</sup> Block, *The New Church*, p. 56.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>153</sup> Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire*, p. 96; Block, *The New Church*, p. 59.

to a secret Masonic form of organization, and like the Lyon Harmonic society at "La Concorde," they used the new insights being spearheaded by Puysegur and Barberin for metaphysical rather than therapeutic pursuits, through the employment of mesmeric methods to direct the minds of subjects; to be sure, they connected these to their other, more esoteric beliefs and practices.

While not a great deal is known about their practices, it is clear that the emphasis of the Society gradually changed to a millenarian intent. Swedenborg was studied both for his allegorical interpretation of the Bible, and his pronouncements concerning the world of spirits, the same aspect concerning "astral intelligences" that attracted Saint Martin, and his teachings on the gradations of the Heavens into Spiritual and Celestial degrees, drew upon the now public Hermetic wisdom of Correspondences, and appealed to their gnostic sensibilities. It was around this period of the mid 1780s, as Mesmer was attracting considerable attention throughout Europe, that at Strasbourg, Lyon and other French and German cities, the Harmonial lodges were turning increasingly to the investigation of the phenomenon of "magnetic sleep," and English Swedenborgianism was being organized in London and Manchester. The London Theosophical Society grew partly out of the Swedenborgian discussion group held on Sunday evenings at the Lambeth residence of Rev. Thomas Duché, and quickly became a meeting point for mystics, millenarians and reformers of all kinds.

### **Origins of the New Church in England and the U.S.**

After Swedenborg's death in 1772, his doctrines were practiced by small groups, the best known being centred around the missionizing efforts of Rev. John Clowes in Manchester and Bolton, and another group in London, led by the printer Robert Hindmarsh. Rev. John Clowes, who was for some 60 years rector of St John's Anglican Church at Manchester, never left his Anglican communion, yet worked tirelessly to promote Swedenborg's teachings throughout his life. His conversion occurred when he came across a Latin copy of Swedenborg's *True Christian Religion*. At first he felt a strong distaste for it, and left it unread. Taking it up casually one day, he noticed the words "Divinum humanum," which seemed to

possess an inner glow, and later he had a transcendental experience, whereby his mind was impressed by a kind of internal dictate, and “the glory [connected with the *Divinum humanum phrase*] lasted a full hour.”<sup>154</sup> Clowes was not unfamiliar with the lineage of Christian mysticism and hermeticism, for his appointment to St John’s had been endowed by a wealthy benefactor interested in propagating the ideas of William Law. Clowes was chosen from a number of applicants because of his interest in Boehme and Law.<sup>155</sup>

Clowes began forming Swedenborgian study groups, and would ride out to cotton-milling villages around Manchester to preach regularly. In this early stage of the Industrial Revolution, less rigid than the later factory system, and with a strong Dissenting population, factory owners often permitted their workers to leave work in order to hear him talk about Swedenborg. Some hearers were thereafter “visited by angels.” Another group was started by lay leader Samuel Dawson in nearby Bolton, where the Shakers would later originate, and counted among its converts Samuel Crompton, the inventor of the spinning mule.<sup>156</sup>

The origins of the New Church in London centered around a small group led by Robert Hindmarsh who met from 1783 at Clerkenwell Close to study the Writings. On 5 December of that year, the first public meeting was held at the London Coffee House, then at the Queen’s Arms Tavern, where the Theosophical Society was organized. Among those present were the Hindmarsh brothers, Dr. Chastanier, the sculptor John Flaxman and the planter James Glenn, who the following year would spread the Writings to the Americas, in the same year that Lafayette brought Animal Magnetism on his triumphal revisiting of the now independent United States. The Theosophical Society was loosely attached to Duché’s chapel at the orphan asylum, and in 1788, at Great East Cheap, the first Swedenborgian chapel was founded, and James Hindmarsh was chosen by lot to become the first New Church minister.<sup>157</sup>

That there were already small groups studying the Writings in America before Glenn’s tour is suggested by the activities of Rev. Jacob Duché, who

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<sup>154</sup> Brotherton, *Spiritualism*, p. 48.

<sup>155</sup> Garrett, *Respectable Folly*, p. 156.

<sup>156</sup> Garrett, “Swedenborg,” p. 74.

<sup>157</sup> Harrison, *The Second Coming*, p. 75.

provided an important connecting axis between European mystical Freemasonry and occultism, and Anglo-American Swedenborgianism. Jacob Duché (1738-1798) was part of the pre-Revolutionary social and intellectual elite. Born into a prominent Philadelphia family, he became rector of the leading Church of England congregation in that city, and served as chaplain to the first two Continental Congresses. Duché was, like his colleague Rev. John Clowes, deeply interested in mysticism, hermeticism and related topics. As early as 1767 Duché was reading the works of William Law, translator of Jacob Boehme, and his interest in Quietism is indicated by a poem he wrote in 1772-3 on the Ephrata cloister, the German sect of "Dunkers" who had settled in eastern Pennsylvania. He was also a member of a group of men and women who met regularly for prayer and Bible discussions, led by Carl Wrangel, provost of the Swedish Lutheran mission on the Delaware river.<sup>158</sup> It is likely that this group discussed Swedenborg's Writings, and that it was the source of his acquaintance with the famous Ephrata cloister. As hostilities increased with England, Duché became the first Anglican clergyman to omit prayers to the King from the Liturgy. However he became dissatisfied with the Revolution, and wrote to George Washington about his concerns. It was a mistake at this time to confront the Revolutionary elite, and Duché quickly became *persona non grata*, and was forced to flee to England, where he lived for the next 14 years.<sup>159</sup> Fortunately the loyalist Duché had a patron in the Bishop of London. In 1782 he was appointed chaplain of the Asylum for Female Orphans in Lambeth, at St George's Fields. He was well regarded as a pastor, and in the pattern of John Clowes, he did not leave the Anglican ministry. Subscribers to his American sermons published in 1789 included Hannah More, William Blake and Dr. Samuel Johnson.<sup>160</sup>

### The Reverend Jacob Duché

By 1785 Jacob Duché had a deep commitment to Swedenborg's teachings. Writing to his mother-in-law in May of that year, Duché advised her

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<sup>158</sup> Garrett, "Swedenborg," pp. 71-2.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

to "Look Henceforth for an Internal Millenium."<sup>161</sup> Sunday evening discussions of Swedenborg's teachings were held in Duché's apartment at the Asylum. Robert Hindmarsh attended Duché's group, which included John Flaxman and the engraver William Sharp, and probably on occasions William Blake.<sup>162</sup> Duché's circle also attracted many foreign visitors. Various dabblers in alchemy, cabalism and mesmerism like Dr. Chastanier and Freemasons like General Rainsford were involved, attracted to Swedenborg's experiences "as one more confirmation of the existence of truths beyond the reach of the five senses."<sup>163</sup> At this time Count Grabianka was touring various mystical Masonic organizations throughout Europe and England, seeking like-minded societies to merge with his Avignon Society, in preparation for the imminent Millenium and the reign of God on earth.<sup>164</sup> During the year spent in London in 1786, Grabianka was a "frequent and welcome" visitor to the Swedenborgian gathering at Duché's rooms. He wished to create a millenarian international. In his letter of thanks to Duché, he asserted that several other similiar societies with whom he was in contact, were all preparing for the divine command.<sup>165</sup>

Apart from the worship and discussions there was a strong element of mystical Freemasonry in the sessions held at Duché's. That eclectic joiner, General Charles Rainsford (1728-1809), belonged to no less than ten Masonic lodges, and maintained contacts with Masons in London, Paris, Strasbourg, Lyons, Narbonne and at Avignon. A member of the Royal Society, Rainsford also belonged to the Exegetic and Philanthropic Society of Stockholm. It was probably through men like Chastanier and Rainsford, with a wide correspondence, extensive Masonic connections and given to peripatetic wanderings, that Swedenborgian and mesmeric ideas were spread across Europe. In a letter written to Gabrianka in 1788, Rainford asked for his opinion of Swedenborg's doctrines, whether in his opinion they were a "key," and mentioning his own interest in Freemasonry, Cabala, and Animal Magnetism which, he added parenthetically: "is at

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>162</sup> Garrett, *Respectable Folly*, pp. 158-9; Harrison, *The Second Coming*, p. 75.

<sup>163</sup> Garrett, "Swedenborg," p. 75.

<sup>164</sup> Garrett, *Respectable Folly*, p. 104.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

present the subject of admiration and Research for everyone here in our Country." Through his Avignon Masonic lodge, Rainsford may have learned of Swedenborg from his fraternal colleague Benedict Chastanier. It was around this period of the early 1780s, that Chastanier became disenchanted with the Avignon Society, believing that they had a wrong interpretation of Swedenborg. Rainsford joined Grabianka's enterprise, and added the Avignon Society to his numerous other commitments.<sup>166</sup>

Duché kept in contact with the Society at Avignon, especially with Gabrianka and his "network of pious occultists," even though his concept of an "Internal Millenium" already effected, differed vastly from Grabianka's foreshadowing of an apocalyptic transformation in the outer world prior to the Lord's coming, which was to be heralded by the conquest of Palestine and the conversion of the Jews. The known Avignon Society members reflect a mixture of influences. Around 1781 William Bousie of the Avignon Society and the Marquis de Thomé made an intensive study of Swedenborg. From this evolved Thomé's Masonic "Rite of Swedenborg." They convinced Borrée de Corberon to do the same, who left Deism for Christianity on this basis. Before joining the Avignon Society in 1790, Corberon had been involved in reformed Freemasonry, joining the Templars in 1777. He had met the Sicilian Cagliostro, and been impressed by his powers as a healer. He had imbibed mesmerism, and through Bousie and Thomé, plumbed deeply into Swedenborg's Writings.<sup>167</sup> The chemist and alchemist Peter Woulfe was also among those who joined the Avignon Society, and together with the engraver William Sharp and the painter Louthembourg, was an avid student of Swedenborg, and like them would join the apocalyptic millenarianism of Richard Brothers in the mid 1790s.<sup>168</sup> William Sharp, the famous engraver, came to millenarianism by way of Swedenborg at Duché's circle. He tried without success to interest his colleague William Blake in Brothers, then in Joanna Southcott. He was also at the same time a political radical, being an original member of the Society for Constitutional Information from 1792.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Garrett, "Swedenborg," pp. 75-6.

<sup>167</sup> Garrett, *Respectable Folly*, pp. 106-7.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 186.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

The Avignon Society was organized like the Harmonial and other Masonic-style associations, according to degrees of initiation. Its mystical Catholicism, especially the cult of the Virgin Mary, was grafted onto numerological, Swedenborgian, mesmeric and other conceptions. There was an elaborate ritual of initiation, whereby the acolyte was required to ascend a nearby hill Pernety had named "Tabor," and there to recite and burn incense for each of nine days. Members of the Society met every night at 7 o'clock "to commemorate the death of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ by eating bread and drinking wine." Often the furniture shook, announcing the presence of angels.<sup>170</sup> It is likely that these effects were produced through the use of somnambules, a foretaste of the "physical phenomena" seances of the following century. English visitors in 1789 reported that they had been "favoured with divine communications." They returned from Avignon convinced millenarians, and greatly strengthened in "the knowledge of spirits and the spiritual world."<sup>171</sup> The Avignon Society was on the periphery of the occult world, but was of some importance as one of the conduits for the urgent sense of political and spiritual regeneration needed in the last decade of the 18th century.<sup>172</sup>

## VI

### FIRST CONJUNCTION OF SWEDENBORG AND MESMER

We have seen that Swedenborg from the mid 1740s had proclaimed a Revelation, a new understanding of the Word and the demands of the religious life, based upon an inward morality leading to spiritual regeneration, while Mesmer, working through a steadfastly empirical and physicalist theory, advanced a therapeutic system he believed to be based upon laws underlying heretofore untapped powers. Though Mesmer never worked out their broader implications, his ideas concerning *rapport*, or as it was later also known "community of sensation" between magnetizer and subject, and the induced "crises," especially as developed further by Puységur, had stupendous consequences for both psychology and a theory

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<sup>170</sup> Garrett, *Respectable Folly*, p. 112, p. 114; Harrison, *The Second Coming*, p. 71.

<sup>171</sup> Harrison, *The Second Coming*, p. 69.

<sup>172</sup> Garrett, *Respectable Folly*, p. 120.

of the soul. In a sense each was concerned with unusual states of awareness, Swedenborg claiming a direct experience of another Reality, and Mesmer and Puységur with other levels of consciousness within this reality. With the advent of the "psychological" techniques of Puységur, Montravel, Barberin and others, and the discovery of "magnetic sleep" or artificial somnambulism, the door was apparently opened to both realms: Firstly there was a more direct channeling of mental life in a dissociated state, in a mode of psychological healing that now abandoned the *bacquet* and the crises, and even the fluid, for the control of the subject's will, through which diagnoses and prescriptions were obtained through some deeper level of the subject's own consciousness. It was but a short step from the accession of more sublime levels of human consciousness to the merging of that consciousness in the dissociated state with Higher consciousnesses. It was here also that the assistance of spiritual beings was mooted. Puységur, influenced by Saint Martin, was convinced that his technique of "magnetic sleep" had uncovered the pathway to the soul.

Some Swedenborgians evidently recognized early on a possible relation between mesmeric practices circulating throughout Europe at this time, and their special insights into the nature and cure of disease which they owed to Swedenborg's teachings. In June 1787 the Stockholm Exegetic and Philanthropic Society wrote to the Strasbourg Harmonial Society, and copies were sent to other Harmonial societies and learned journals throughout Europe. This letter is an important document, for it is a striking instance of an attempted *rapprochement* between two modalities, theology and science, that bridges the chasm generally associated with them during the High Enlightenment. The letter is important also as perhaps the first recorded account of what would later be called trance mediumship to be documented in European intellectual life.

### **The Exegetic and Philanthropic Society**

The Stockholm Swedenborgians in this letter dated 19 June 1787, a date of fundamental significance since it marked the seventeenth anniversary of the era of the New Jerusalem, were offering the fruits of their mesmeric investigations as understood according to the teachings of Swedenborg, and vindicated by the methods of experimental science. Its

author was Baron Karl Goran Silfverhjelm, a nephew of Swedenborg and later Swedish Ambassador to London, and the intention of the clique he led was the study of hermetic wisdom and Animal Magnetism.<sup>173</sup> This was not the original aim of the Society, but it does underscore the historical judgment that “mystical enlightenment was a preoccupation of the Swedish intelligentsia throughout the 18th century.”<sup>174</sup>

The history of the Exegetic and Philanthropic Society is intimately related to the Court politics in Stockholm and to the attempts by Swedenborg’s followers to gain acceptance of his Revelation in his native country. It also highlights a regular refrain in the early New Church (exemplified in the middle of the next century in the “New Era” movement and the career of Rev. T.L. Harris)—the tension between those adherents who considered Swedenborg’s Revelation as complete, and those who believed in the possibility of its augmentation, especially through spirit contact.<sup>175</sup> Thus magical spiritism plays an important part in both the Society’s inception and its demise.

Sweden’s King Gustavus III had a transformation during the 1770s. From an early enthusiasm for the “free thought” of Voltaire and the French rationalists, along with a somewhat dissolute private life, the King acquired a strong interest in Freemasonry, to which along with his brother Crown Prince Charles, he was initiated in 1772. Through these Masonic channels, he gradually became more involved in magic and spiritism.<sup>176</sup> During the early 1780s the King came increasingly under the thrall of courtiers involved in occultism. A Captain Uilvenklon, a master of “astrology, chiromancy, geomancy and hydromancy” gained influence at Court; he claimed “communication with all possible spirits,” and gave Prince

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<sup>173</sup> Garrett, *Respectable Folly*, p. 155.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>175</sup> On the “New Era” movement see Samuel H Worcester [Jr], “A Letter to the Receivers of the Heavenly Doctrines of the New Jerusalem,” Boston, Otis Clapp (1845), and W.F.Barrett, “Open intercourse with the spiritual world—its dangers and the cautions which they naturally suggest,” *The New Jerusalem Magazine*, vol. XIX, Sept 1845; on the Rev. T.L. Harris, see *New Church Herald*, vol. II, (1857), and *Intellectual Repository*, Vol. VIII, (1860).

<sup>176</sup> There is an apocryphal story that in 1783 the King traveled to Italy to receive anointment into the highest Masonic degree from the Stuart Pretender, who was believed to hold the highest Masonic dignity, and to be empowered to transfer it to another monarch; C.T. Odhner, “The early history of the New Church in Sweden,” *The New-Church Messenger*, Vol. LXXII, Jan-June, 1897, p.73.

Charles a "consecrated hazel-stick" and a "pentacle" which would enable him to "command all possible spirits."<sup>177</sup> J.G. Halldin, another adventurer, who had narrowly escaped execution for criticizing the King's ownership of whiskey distilleries, was reprieved, and came into royal favour. He had travelled widely and been impressed by Cagliostro and by Dr. Mesmer, whom he had seen in Paris. Halldin seems to have been the principal channel for the entry into the royal circles of spiritism, which he mixed with some Swedenborgian doctrines. He was also a Freemason, and at a meeting of the Templars, he flattered the King by explaining the science of correspondences, and implying that each of the members present represented disciples, and the King represented the Master Jesus. Halldin's chief patron was the Crown Prince, who was now head of the Templars, and had earned the enmity of his brother the King.<sup>178</sup>

In 1786, Charles Frederick Nordenskjöld and Charles B Wadström organized the Exegetic and Philanthropic Society, together with Silfverhjelms and a number of noblemen, to publish the writings of Swedenborg in Swedish, Latin, French and other languages.<sup>179</sup> This Society of around 200 included among its patrons a majority of clergymen, various officers of state, and "two of the first Princes of Europe." In addition to their publishing program, they formed perhaps the first anti-slavery movement, based upon Swedenborg's views about the purity of the African races. In that same year, the King sent C.B. Wadström to head a scientific expedition to explore the west coast of Africa, to prepare for a Swedish colony that would operate against the slave-trade.<sup>180</sup>

### Magnetic spiritism

The Exegetic and Philanthropic Society was founded with the ostensible aim of disseminating Swedenborg's Writings and producing a new translation of the Bible. However, probably through Halldin, the society was soon dominated by members favourable to mesmerism "as affording

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., p. 74, p. 91.

<sup>179</sup> Block, *The New Church*, p. 52.

<sup>180</sup> C.T. Odhner (Ed.), *Annals of the New Church*, vol I, 1688-1850, p. 133.

positive proofs of the verity of Swedenborg's revelation regarding the spiritual world." As one commentator puts it, "the cunning serpent of magical spiritism had established himself in the society soon after its first institution."<sup>181</sup> The phenomena of Animal Magnetism were creating a perfect furor all over Europe, and were then fashionable at most of the European courts.<sup>182</sup> In May 1787 the Society began conducting experiments, where it was claimed that the spirits of the dead communicated through a somnambule. In the 1788 Journal of the *Societe Exegetique et Philantropique*, it is explained that the wife of a gardener named Lindquist was placed in a state of magnetic sleep or trance, and the spirits of two children had been controlled.<sup>183</sup> A rational and favourable explanation to these phenomena was thought to have been found in Swedenborg. This was among the first interpretations of these new abnormal phenomena as being the results of supernatural influence, and as with the Society's pioneering opposition to slavery, it was based on a particular reading of the Writings.<sup>184</sup>

There were those among the inaugural membership, like Nordenskjöld and Wadström, whose interest was mainly in the exegesis and dissemination of the Writings, but who soon became accepting of the new emphasis on spiritism. The Society was supported by powerful magnates at Court like Count von Höpken and Baron Liljencrantz, and Swedenborg's nephew Baron Silfverhjelm rapidly became the leader of the magnetists and spiritists.<sup>185</sup> Along with Halldin and Captain Uilvenklon, this trend was reinforced by foreign members. Among these were the Marquis de Thomé, author of the Masonic "Rite of Swedenborg," and the Abbé Pernety, both of the Avignon Society.<sup>186</sup>

By June 1787, the Society had some 150 members, and was about to open a printing office in conjunction with the Masonic Templars.<sup>187</sup> But

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<sup>181</sup> Odhner, "The early history," p. 113.

<sup>182</sup> Block, *The New Church*, p. 53.

<sup>183</sup> Podmore, *Mediums*, vol. 1, p. 76.

<sup>184</sup> Nelson, *Spiritualism*, p. 50.

<sup>185</sup> Odhner (Ed.), *Annals*, p. 129.

<sup>186</sup> Odhner, "The early history," p. 93.

<sup>187</sup> Odhner (Ed.), *Annals*, p. 133.

things went badly from this point. Their greatest heights, and also the seeds of their dissolution within four years, came when Crown Prince Charles was accepted as a regular member in August 1787. The King, disposed against them because of the opposition of the Lutheran high clergy, had already withdrawn from the Society permission to publish, and when the enemies of the Swedenborgians like the poet Kellgren set to work building upon his suspicions as to his brother's motives, he withdrew his protection. Subsequently, their tracts had to be printed in Denmark and smuggled into the country.

Meanwhile Halldin, Silfverhjelm and other magnetic spiritists had gained control of the Society, which now focused almost exclusively on Animal Magnetism. They began experiments. Silfverhjelm, the main proponent of the new thrust of the Society, "praised God, who had given this boon to men as a means of again gaining communication with the spiritual world." He was the principal author of the letter of June 19, which together with the problems exacerbated by Prince Charles' joining the Society, and his leadership of the Templars, did "incalculable harm in the learned world by presenting Swedenborg and the Writings in a false light. By the publication of this letter, the Society had signed its own death warrant."<sup>188</sup> With this background, let us examine the contents of this letter, for what it can reveal about the assumptions and beliefs of the now dominant magnetic spiritists, and the relation of this group with other societies in France.

### Contact with the Strasbourg Society

The letter dated June 19, 1787 was sent from Stockholm, in Swedish and in French, to the Société des Amis Réunis, Strasbourg, with an attached brochure. In arguing for the spiritual origins of the phenomena associated with Animal Magnetism, the concerns of the Swedenborgians it seems were at the undisciplined nature of the communications made at Strasbourg and elsewhere. The letter explained that "members' experiments have contributed much to direct our attention to the true principles of Magnetism and Somnambulism, and consequently to a solution of the

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<sup>188</sup> Odhner, "The early history," p. 113.

phenomena which they exhibit..."<sup>189</sup> The distinction in terms made suggests that by 1787, Puysegur's work was recognized as growing out of, but being distinct from, Mesmer's own system. Angels had possessed the inner beings of somnambulists in Stockholm, communicating "an adumbration, though feeble, of the first immediate correspondence with the invisible world," meaning Swedenborg's own intromissions. Mesmerism and Swedenborgianism complemented one another perfectly, it is maintained, and the two Societies should cooperate in the business of regenerating humankind by disseminating one another's works. A solution was then offered for these puzzling phenomena:

...We believe that those systems which have their foundation in mere physical causes, as "La Psychologie Sacrée de Lyon" are quite inadequate to explain how those singular effects take place and are produced...It seems to be impossible fully and rationally to explain them, unless we once for all, and without shrinking from the shafts of ridicule, take it for granted that spiritual beings exert an influence upon the organs of the invalid during the time that the power of Magnetism has produced a partial cessation of the functions of the soul, and that these spiritual agents, in virtue of the higher degrees of knowledge which they possess, originate these wonderful and otherwise inexplicable phenomena<sup>190</sup>

The soul, the writer explains, "in essence consists in the will and the understanding; properties which can never exist, except man possesses self-consciousness (*conscientia sui*), which somnambulists generally do not."<sup>191</sup>

Magnetism was regarded as a method of inducing a "partial cessation" of perception and discrimination and other normal functions of the intellect, which gave the benign spiritual beings a chance to do their work. Swedenborg's notion of spiritual "exhalations" informs this view that the

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<sup>189</sup> The letter is included in an Appendix in George Bush, *Mesmer and Swedenborg; or The Relation of the Developments of Mesmerism to the Doctrines and Disclosures of Swedenborg*, New York (1847), p. 261; Darnton, *Mesmerism*, p. 67.

<sup>190</sup> Bush, *Mesmer and Swedenborg*, p. 262.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 262.

soul can be operated upon by spiritual agents, just as disease itself is sometimes produced by evil influences. The will and understanding were for Swedenborg, as for Kant, the essence of the individual, and necessary for the exercise of free will. It is maintained that the "spirit sleep-talker" is a completely different being from the magnetised patient. As a result of their experiments, it was found that "a Magnetizer speaking only to the spirit as to another person, and not to the sleeper, can, by rational, directed, and well-digested questions, render it practicable for the spirit to make itself known as a being different from him whose tongue it makes use of..."<sup>192</sup> What this seems to say is that disease is caused by malevolent spiritual beings, and that a cure depends upon their dislodgment, which in turn relies upon the distancing of the intellect of the magnetized subject, in effect a form of exorcism carried out with the help of benign spirits.

The crux of the argument is then presented: Magnetism and Somnambulism, if rightly understood and applied, are intimately connected with the advancement of divine truth; they corroborate this truth by means of a "speaking illustration" that Swedenborg spoke of in the *Arcana*, which led some like de Maistre to claim that the principles of mesmerism had been first discovered by Swedenborg. Thus if the magnetism be directed "not to the natural and physical alone, but especially to the spiritual good of the soul..." and if the magnetizer is convinced that all diseases are the results of moral evil, from the influence of hell, then "the act of magnetizing is chiefly a moral act...The operative *cause* is the magnetizer's *strong desire* to benefit his neighbor; and the *effect* is that of removing or expelling the influence of the disease."<sup>193</sup> Hence the moral condition of the magnetizer, together with the dissociation of the magnetized subject, creates the conditions for the expulsion of unwanted influences that manifest in disease. As the writer puts it "the state of the Somnambulist...may be called ecstatic...[W]hat is said and done through the sleeper's organs, is not the act of his soul, but of some other being, who has taken possession of his organs, and operates through them..." Paroxysms and the like denote that

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid., p. 263.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., pp. 265-7; in a letter to Prelate Oetinger, Swedenborg mentions that the truths of his doctrine will be known not by miracles, but through the Word thus revealed, and "some speaking illustration of certain persons"; *ibid.*, p. 211.

the spirit of disease is still present; but when the subject begins to talk in his "sleep," that is, under magnetic influence, this is a sign of the presence of a spiritual being friendly to that person, as being his guardian-angel or good genius, and possessing the same measure of goodness and wisdom as the patient. It is not explained how, in this circumstance, the disease takes hold of the patient in the first instance, but that the guardian angel speaks through the somnambule, after the spirit of disease is dislodged.<sup>194</sup>

Swedenborg's theology is marshalled for support. Not only was the "speaking illustration" one means by which the reality of the spiritual realms would be made known, but the arrival of somnambulism itself is seen as confirming the Revelation of the Church of the New Jerusalem. It is explained that from the time of the Councils in the early Church, this gift for healing had ceased. This was because the Christian world had perverted pure religion by "the spurious glosses and additions" of later ages, until by Swedenborg's era, the Divine Influx was being blocked by the multitudes now existing in the intermediate spheres. But ever since the Second Coming in 1757, great progress had occurred, along with an unprecedented revolution in habits of thought and action. The writer is leading to the point that these new phenomena which have burst forth throughout Europe have a far deeper significance:

The transition which the natural world is undergoing...renders it probable, as our sleep-talkers have declared: that supernatural gifts and powers will be bestowed upon such, who abstain from all known and deliberate sinning, and in their hearts sincerely and humbly desire and pray, that the Lord's will may be done in everything, and theirs only in as far as it shall be perfectly conformable to His.<sup>195</sup>

### **A new step in explaining Animal Magnetism**

The Stockholm Society took a courageous stand in favour of a spiritistic interpretation of the phenomena of magnetic somnambulism. This was a

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid., pp. 268-9.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., p. 268.

new step in the evolution of explanations for Animal Magnetism. Deriving from a broader Swedenborgian framework that understands the human experience as a battleground between good and evil spirits, all beneficial effects were attributed to the work of wise and helpful spirits who, upon the induction of magnetic sleep, were given the opportunity to act. Disease results from the action of an evil spirit lodged within the body of the patient. By the mechanism of induced somnambulism, healing was brought about by the action of a good spirit, who might then eject the evil influence.<sup>196</sup>

Margaret Block in her study of the New Church, concluded that Strasbourg had rejected the hypothesis of the Exegetic and Philanthropic Society, concerning the phenomena of Animal Magnetism. She writes that the Strasbourg Society "insisted on a naturalistic interpretation of the phenomena, and ridiculed the Stockholm Society's spiritualistic theories."<sup>197</sup> This judgment does not agree with other accounts, and the term "naturalistic" is not a true descriptor of the Strasbourg Society's views. It is true that on the psychological and functionalist level, as a therapeutic tool they rejected what the Swedenborgians advanced as the true causes of disease, which is tantamount to exorcism: that disease originates from the influences of "exhalations" from spiritual realms; and they rejected also the notion advanced by the Swedenborgians of "guardian spirits" being necessary in effecting cures, for this would have eclipsed their evolving psychological theory, whereby the magnetizer's will becomes the most important factor in the establishment of "rapport" with the patient, and the mingling of "fluids." But they did not in principle reject supernatural action, and indeed, with their confrères at Lyon, they saw the new phenomenon as "the final rejection of materialism." Crabtree focuses on the real dilemma for the Strasbourg Society, for if they rejected some species of spiritual "intrusion" as an explanation for therapeutic efficacy, then they must account for the observed phenomena according to a differing paradigm. This they did in the positing of a second consciousness, largely independent of the waking consciousness which, according to their inherently Catholic cultural understanding, was none other than the soul.

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<sup>196</sup> Crabtree, *From Mesmer to Freud*, p. 71.

<sup>197</sup> Block, *The New Church*, p. 53.

Seen from the psychotherapeutic vista of its author, Crabtree's account attributes Strasbourg's rejection to the unsatisfactoriness of the Swedenborgian explanation. While they could agree that some sort of spiritual forces were at work in somnambulism, they disagreed over their nature. Although the evidence allows no firmer conclusions to be made, their disagreement with the spiritistic Swedenborgians led by Silfverhjelm seems to have been based on the alleged operation of spirits and angels. To the Strasbourg mesmerists, searching for the hypnotic stratum, the arena of mental processing was neither the mind of an external entity [spirit] nor the conscious mind of the somnambulist. The positing of mental acts that occur "within human beings but outside of and unavailable to consciousness"<sup>198</sup> was for the magnetists at Strasbourg and Lyon a result of direct Gnosis, the operation of a deeper state of consciousness coeval with the soul. While this interpretation of the grounds for their disagreement is necessarily speculative, it seems consistent with the psychological insights the work of Puységur and his followers since 1784 had indicated.

### **Decline of Mesmer and Swedenborg in post-Revolutionary France**

The European Enlightenment and its lengthy aftermath in secularism and 20th century humanism is perhaps unique in the world's history in its tendency toward the rejection not only of formal religion and its values, but also of the mystical and occult aspects common to most other societies. In a sense, the revival of occult and millenarian modes in the late 18th century, and their revivification in a more secular milieu at the mid 19th century with movements like Spiritualism and Theosophy, can be seen in the long term as the minority reaction to an impending secular order. The 1789 Revolution in France was an important watershed in this complex process. The destruction of the monarchy, and the events that saw *citoyen*

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<sup>198</sup> Crabtree writes:

Needless to say, thinking about magnetic sleep had not yet developed to such a sophisticated stage. It would be much later, when a new form of spiritism (American spiritualism with its table-turning phenomena) met with a more advanced form of animal magnetism (magnetic and hypnotic experiments with double consciousness), that this mystery at the heart of magnetic sleep could be solved. (Crabtree, *From Mesmer to Freud*, p. 72)

Napoleon raised first to Consul, then to Emperor, and the long period of war in Europe from the 1790s, brought the urgency of millenarian movements like those of Richard Brothers and Joanna Southcott to the fore in England, while it virtually ended contacts on an intellectual level between and among the European nations. This would help to change the focus of the trends we have observed through the last decades of the 18th century to the New World, where Swedenborgianism would have an impressive revival, and where mesmerism would be relegated for a time to the world of the stage performers until it was gradually taken up again in earnest by the medical fraternity. By the mid 19th century, after its amalgamation with certain Swedenborgian concepts, this would form the basis of the popular religion of Spiritualism.

The Avignon Society during its brief existence in France, had many visitors from other like-minded organizations. At the end of 1789 Count Reutherholm and Baron Silfverhjelm visited various French societies. Like Grabianka and Pernety, they were both Templars, the order headed by the Duke Charles of Södermanland, brother of King Gustavus III. After a brief stay in Paris, they proceeded to Lyon to visit Willermoz, from where they went to the Avignon Society, where Reutherholm was initiated, including the ritual ascension of the hill "Tabor" for each of nine days, and the burning of incense at the top.<sup>199</sup> It is not clear whether their visit was intended to round up support for their Society, to buttress its position since the almost fatal withdrawal of royal protection. Significantly, they did not visit Strasbourg. This suggests that the 1787 letter had soured relations with the less millenarian-inclined Harmonial societies. Whether Silfverhjelm and Reutherholm went to Lyon and Avignon at the invitation of Willermoz, Pernety or Grabianka, and how far they shared the millenarian enthusiasms of the latter, is not known. The odium heaped on the Exegetic and Philanthropic Society by the German University journals affected the harmony within the Society.

In May 1790, Silfverhjelm became President of the Exegetic and Philanthropic Society. Always the most zealous of the magnetizers, he produced much disharmony within the Society and at Court, which led to the

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<sup>199</sup> Garrett, *Respectable Folly*, pp. 113-14.

dissolution of the Society in 1791.<sup>200</sup> Hence the introduction of magnetic and spiritistic practices (mingled by Halldin, Silfverhjelm and others into an eclectic set of beliefs to which they tried to lend the authority of Swedenborg's doctrines) resulted in the strengthening at Court of the opponents to Swedenborg's teachings, like the acerbic poet Kellgren, whose ideals were those of the philosophes, and who now had the King's ear.<sup>201</sup> It also exposed the Society to ridicule in France and Germany. More needs to be learned about the appropriations of Swedenborg's doctrines in the various European societies that together embodied the "covert" Enlightenment, but it seems that Strasbourg was least enthusiastic, probably because of Puysegur's psychological interests, and his Catholic associations with "La Candeur." The Strasbourgiens were clearly not convinced by the explanations proffered in the 1787 letter.

Grabianka's desire for kingship seems to have been a main preoccupation of the Avignon Society at this time, and it is likely that the Society may have contemplated a military exercise against the Turks to reconquer Palestine, presumably as part of the foreordained precondition to the coming of the Millennium, and perhaps to place Grabianka as king of Israel. At any rate, the plan came to nought, as the Revolutionary government annexed Avignon from papal authority to France in 1791. This brought the activities of the Avignon Society effectively to an end. Although they now abandoned occultism for demonstrations of civic patriotism, the Society was suspect, and from 1793 Pernety, Grabianka, Corberon and Bousie were all arrested. Other members fled, and only 15 remained at Avignon in 1800. Pernety died in 1796, and Grabianka left for Russia. He was placed in prison at St Petersburg in 1807, on suspicion of plotting against the czar.<sup>202</sup> Thus came to a close the organization that reflected more than any other the complex synthesis of the main currents of the "covert" Enlightenment. The Avignon Society dispersed, some adopting the other-worldly mysticism of Saint-Martin, and others like William Bousie, joining the New Church.<sup>203</sup> At Strasbourg also the suspect Société des Amis Réunis

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<sup>200</sup> Odhner (Ed.), *Annals*, p. 154.

<sup>201</sup> Odhner, "The early history," p. 113.

<sup>202</sup> Garrett, *Respectable Folly*, pp. 116-17.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

was disbanded. Puységur published three volumes of the *Proceedings* of the Strasbourg Society, before being imprisoned by Napoleon. He served two years and, after recovering his estate which had been confiscated, Puységur returned to his work with Race and other sensitives. In 1807 he published *Du Magnetisme Animal*, which instituted a new era in the history of Animal Magnetism, and a brief renaissance in its therapeutic practice.<sup>204</sup> Even the Lodge of the Nine Sisters in Paris came under suspicion by the Jacobins, and was disbanded in 1792.<sup>205</sup> With the Restoration, the era of the Romantic brought a new life also to the spiritistic style of mesmerism. P.S. Dupont de Nemours wrote "a chain of invisible spirits stretches between us and God; the spirits communicate with our sixth sense by means of an invisible fluid; our souls migrate through the mineral, vegetable, and animal worlds..."<sup>206</sup>

Significant patterns are discerned in these years of the covert Enlightenment: At the Exegetic and Philanthropic Society at Stockholm, as at the Amis Réunis at Strasbourg and the mystical Masons at "La Concorde" in Lyon, there was in each case some common membership, and a degree of cooperation and cross-pollination of ideas between reformed Freemasonries like the Templars, "La Candeur," and the "Loge Éluée et Chérie," and the quasi-Masonic societies, which imbibed a wide variety of heterodox perspectives, ranging from mystical Catholicism, Talmudic and cabalistic magic, somnambulism, and Swedenborgianism. These were adapted into a syncretic belief system that exemplifies the most durable aspects of Enlightenment thinking, an extreme curiosity about the world, and a propensity for constructing systems.

By the close of the 18th century, the quasi-Masonic, Swedenborgian and mesmerist currents of the covert Enlightenment had dissipated. Mesmer's theories were rejected, his Harmonial lodges were short-lived, and his therapeutic techniques were modified and even abandoned by his disciples.<sup>207</sup> A century was to elapse before the medical world put Mesmer's ideas into practice, when they would provide the decisive impulse toward

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<sup>204</sup> Podmore, *Mediums*, vol. 1, p. 59.

<sup>205</sup> Weisberger, *Speculative freemasonry*, p. 106.

<sup>206</sup> Darnton, *Mesmerism*, p. 136; Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious*, p. 191.

<sup>207</sup> Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious*, p. 53.

the elaboration of dynamic psychiatry. More than any other religious teacher, Emanuel Swedenborg opened the popular imagination of the thinking and reading public to what he called the Spiritual and Celestial Worlds, just as Franz Anton Mesmer indirectly opened the way for the discovery of states and levels within the human mind and consciousness. Together their conceptions subtly transformed the subsequent ways of thinking about the human organism in its mental aspects. The result was nothing less than a revolution, firstly in popular theology, especially in respect of the conditions of a future life and the destiny of the human spirit, and secondly in the clinical, theoretical and practical applications of mesmerism, later known as hypnotism.

Swedenborg, a distinguished scientist turned mystical Revelator, and Mesmer, a scientist with mystical proclivities, were both children of the Enlightenment in their respective search for absolute truths. Originating within Teutonic culture, their ideas were taken up in France and England, where the rationalist dream failed most signally, and around the same time were carried to the U.S.A., where gradually they flourished. Yet the quest for a key to the Universe was not an unusual concern in the 18th century. As *philosophes* they were shunned by the societies they sought to rejuvenate. Nonetheless, the seminal importance of their ideas to modern thought derives principally from the popularized versions of their teachings, in the Magnetic movement and especially in Spiritualism, and in this form were to exercise a profound influence on modern European-based societies. Several currents of thought bear their direct influence, not the least being the generation of psychical researchers living a century later, whose interest was sparked initially through the mediumistic phenomena of Spiritualism, and by their opposition to the current hegemony of scientific naturalism.<sup>208</sup> Moreover, through his disciple the Marquis de Puységur, Mesmer forms a direct line, initially with the early magnetists, then through the revival of hypnotism in the 1870s, with the therapeutic concerns of the generation of Charcot, Janet, Bernheim and Freud. As I have tried to show, Swedenborg's influence found robust expression in a number of move-

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<sup>208</sup> For a discussion of the factors that induced the philosopher Henry Sidgwick and others to take up psychical research, see Frank Miller Turner, *Between Science and Religion*, New Haven (1974), pp. 50-65.

ments and trends from the 1780s, ranging from millenarian theology to quasi-Masonic and religious organizations.

In a broader sense, the conjunctions between the ideas of Swedenborg and Mesmer, or rather the interlacing at a specific period of their paradigms of reality, were also part of the closer dialogue at the popular level between science and religion, which continued into the 19th century, and which Spiritualism was to fuse into the distinctive ritual practice, the mediumistic séance. The real significance of these conjunctions of Swedenborg and Mesmer, or rather of the altered paradigms of mind flowing from their formulations, was in the quantum change in conceptions of mind, consciousness and cosmos, which their ideas helped to transform. □

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THE NEW PHILOSOPHY, July-December 1997

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