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Homoeopathy and the Occult

By linking homoeopathy with Swedenborgianism the American high-potency school had established an important connection with occultism. It was not, however, the only connection of this kind, and indeed there was a counterpoint of occultism running through homoeopathy right from the beginning.

We may conveniently begin this somewhat obscure story by looking at some of the remarkable resemblances that exist between Hahnemann's ideas and those of the sixteenth century physician Theophrastus Von Hohenheim, commonly known as Paracelsus.

Paracelsus was an extreme individualist, who made himself unpopular by attacking the orthodox physicians of his day as incompetent bunglers. This of course at once puts one in mind of Hahnemann, and so does the fact that Paracelsus was on bad terms with the apothecaries because he prescribed single medicines instead of the customary complex mixtures.

These resemblances, however, are relatively superficial. More significant are Paracelsus's ideas about disease and its treatment. Thus like Hahnemann he rejected the notion that disease could be reduced to a certain number of diagnostic categories, insisting instead that each patient must be considered as an individual. And he recognized the similia principle, saying that 'likes must be driven out by likes', though his meaning is not exactly the same as Hahnemann's.

What Paracelsus taught was a version of the ancient

'doctrine of signatures'. It seems to be a world-wide belief, based on magic, that natural substances, especially herbs, reveal by their appearance or other characteristics the medicinal purposes for which they are suited. Thus yellow plants are good for treating jaundice, for example. Paracelsus adopted this idea and gave it an anatomical twist, claiming, for instance, that plants with heart-shaped leaves could be used to treat heart disease. Although this is not homoeopathy it certainly reminds one of it.

Another way in which Paracelsus anticipated Hahnemann was in his habit of giving drugs in minute doses. A very small dose of medicine, he says, can overcome a great disease, just as a single spark can ignite a great heap of wood. Moreover the medicinal power of drugs is for Paracelsus, as for Hahnemann, a spiritual thing, which can in principle be separated from the crude substance. In all this there is a clear echo of alchemy, for a tiny fragment of the philosopher's stone was held to be sufficient to transmute a large amount of base metal – or to cure any disease.

The numerous parallels between Hahnemann and Paracelsus present us with a puzzle. It is difficult to think that they are due to chance, especially in view of the fact that Hahnemann read so widely. It seems unlikely that he would not have come across Paracelsus's ideas in books or through his Masonic contacts, for early nineteenth-century German Masonry was influenced by ideas of this kind via its connections with Rosicrucianism. Yet the fact is that Hahnemann nowhere refers to Paracelsus by name, and he has merely one disparaging reference, in a footnote, to the 'childish' doctrine of signatures. It seems that at a late stage in his life one of his followers did draw his attention to the similarities between his ideas and those of Paracelsus but he replied that he had never heard of the sixteenth-century physician.

This may of course be an example of Freudian 'forgetting'. In any case, among post-Hahnemannian homoeopaths some were deeply influenced by the occult

alchemical tradition to which Paracelsus belonged, and these homoeopaths did not hesitate to make the connection explicit.

Probably the earliest manifestation of this is provided by the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, the nineteenth-century magical society which included among its members not only the poet W. B. Yeats but also a number of homoeopathic doctors. The Golden Dawn had indeed a medical flavour from its inception, for it was founded in 1888 by Dr Wynn Westcott, a physician turned coroner. For this purpose Dr Westcott forged a number of documents, including letters of authorization from a certain 'Fräulein Sprengel', an eminent Rosicrucian adept who he said lived in Germany. Westcott invited another doctor, W. R. Woodman, and a strange occultist called Mathers to join him as Chiefs of the Order.

The Rosicrucian tradition, on which the Golden Dawn was allegedly based, had itself strong links with medicine as well as with alchemy and also with Paracelsus. It derived from the publication in Germany, in the early seventeenth century, of the 'Rosicrucian Manifestos'. These mysterious texts, supposedly written by a secret Brotherhood of initiates, caused a tremendous furore in Europe when they first appeared and their effects were felt in all kinds of unlikely places. Francis Bacon, for example, appears to have known about them, and Isaac Newton likewise; while the idea of a secret brotherhood of savants probably inspired Robert Boyle and other founders of the Royal Society.

The Manifestos described the life and career of the supposed founder of the Order, Christian Rosenkreutz. He was said to have been a German monk who travelled to the East and there acquired much esoteric alchemical and medical knowledge. On his return he instituted the Brotherhood to preserve this knowledge. He was buried in a secret vault, which contained all the books written by himself and his colleagues and – a significant inclusion – one by Paracelsus, who though not a member of the Order was claimed as a kind of fellow-traveller. The vault was

intended to be a time-capsule to preserve all this knowledge, and it was the accidental rediscovery of the vault, whose location had been forgotten, that was said to have prompted the publication of the Manifestos.

The members of the Golden Dawn believed in the literal truth of the Rosenkreutz legend and went so far as to reconstruct a replica of the vault in which to perform their magical rites. Christian Rosenkreutz himself was a physician, and his followers were supposed to support themselves by practising medicine. In view of this, and the association with Paracelsus, it is easy to understand why Rosicrucianism should have attracted doctors who were drawn by their temperament towards the occult. Fourteen medical men, in addition to Westcott and Woodman, were members of the Golden Dawn before 1900, and many of these were interested in homoeopathy. One of the most prominent members, Dr Edward Berridge, wrote *A Complete Repertory to the Homoeopathic Materia Medica*. The second edition of this work, which appeared in 1873, contained an appreciative note by Dr R. M. Theobald, who also later joined the Golden Dawn. The title page tells us that Berridge, as well as being qualified in orthodox medicine from St Bartholomew's Hospital, was 'A Doctor of Medicine (By Examination) of the Homoeopathic College of Pennsylvania'. This suggests that Berridge visited the USA during the 1870s, which would explain why his name appears as a prover in some of the American literature cited by Hughes in his *Cyclopaedia*.

When it became clear that the authorization for setting up the Golden Dawn that Westcott had obtained from 'Fräulein Sprengel' was bogus the Order broke up in confusion. But one medical member, Dr R. W. Felkin, refused to be discouraged. There must exist somewhere, he supposed, 'Secret Chiefs', guardians of esoteric knowledge, if only they could be found, and he set off on a series of travels in Germany to look for them. This quest led him to Rudolf Steiner, the founder of anthroposophy. Felkin apparently hoped that Steiner would appoint him as his representative

in England, but in this he was disappointed, and Steiner does not seem to have taken him very seriously.

Steiner himself, however, took a great deal of interest in medicine, and later developed a therapeutic system that is in many ways a refinement of Paracelsus's ideas. It also has a good deal in common with homoeopathy and continues to attract a number of homoeopathic doctors.

ANTHROPOSOPHICAL MEDICINE

Though not himself qualified in medicine, Steiner attracted a number of physicians to him, and towards the end of his life he lectured extensively on medicine. In 1921 Ita Wegman came into contact with Steiner, and with his encouragement began her medical training in Switzerland. After qualifying she founded the Clinical-Therapeutic Institute at Arlesheim in Switzerland, where anthroposophical methods of treatment are still used today. In addition a laboratory was set up at Dornach for the investigation and production of Steiner's remedies, and this work later gave rise to a number of commercial manufacturing companies in different countries.

Steiner's medical ideas have a good deal in common with those of Hahnemann though they also derive from earlier sources, especially Paracelsus and the alchemists. Another important influence on Steiner was Goethe, who in turn was deeply affected by the ideas of German idealism that played a part in Hahnemann's development. Steiner's medical thinking therefore overlaps Hahnemann's a good deal but there are also differences, Steiner placing much more emphasis on symbolism and occultism.

Many anthroposophical medicines are the same as those used in homoeopathy but they are often given as mixtures instead of singly. The Hahnemannian method of potentization is sometimes used but Steiner also invented some more complicated procedures. For example, metals are often 'vegetabilized' by passage through a plant. In this technique a metal is added to the soil in which a plant is growing; next year the plant is composted and used to

fertilize a second generation of plants, and the process is repeated for a third year. This is said to 'dynamize' the metals very effectively, while the influence of the metals causes the plants to direct their action to a particular organ or system.

One important anthroposophical medicine does not form part of the Hahnemannian materia medica but was a new contribution by Steiner. It has, however, been taken up by a number of homoeopaths who are otherwise unsympathetic to anthroposophy. This is *Iscador*, which is derived from mistletoe and is used in the treatment of cancer.

Mistletoe grows as a parasite on trees and follows its own laws of development without regard to its host; in this it resembles a cancer. It also forms spherical masses that resemble the appearance of cancer colonies (metastases) in organs like the lungs. For these and other reasons Steiner singled it out as an anti-cancer agent; his followers took up the idea and currently *Iscador* is used extensively at Arlesheim and to a lesser extent elsewhere. The mistletoe from which the medicine is manufactured is grown on a number of different species of trees and is combined with various metals. There are thus a number of varieties of *Iscador*, which are used to treat different kinds of cancer. *Iscador* is usually given in a range of strengths according to a 'rhythmic' sequence devised by Steiner.

The occult tradition as exemplified by anthroposophical medicine has remained a minority interest within homoeopathy and some homoeopaths have been hostile to such ideas, fearing that they would repel possible converts from orthodoxy. Often enough, however, these critics have themselves been Kentians, apparently unaware of the influence of Swedenborgianism on their own practice. In any case, it is hardly surprising that an occult element of this kind should exist in homoeopathy, for occult ideas have played a surprisingly important role in the development of orthodox medicine and of science generally.

This may seem a surprising statement. On the positivist,

no-nonsense view, modern science arose from an intellectual revolt against obscurantism and mysticism, and there is a wide gulf in attitudes between alchemy and astrology on the one hand and chemistry and astronomy on the other. And yet one of the founders of modern astronomy, Johannes Kepler, was profoundly motivated by mystical ideas in his search for mathematical order in the heavens, while the great Isaac Newton himself, whom William Blake abhorred as the arch-enemy of spirituality, spent a large part of his life in the pursuit of alchemy and apparently believed in an ancient tradition of hidden knowledge. In medicine, too, mystical ideas run deeper than might be suspected. Harvey's conception of the circulation of the blood was, it seems, inspired by the analogy of the solar system, with the heart corresponding to the sun as the centre of life and the revolution of the planets corresponding to the movement of the blood.

The further one looks into the way in which science arose and developed the more one is driven towards the notion that scientific and mystical thought are not so much opposed to each other as mutually symbiotic, depending on each other in a curious unacknowledged way. To change the metaphor, in the seventeenth century, and to some extent even after that, mysticism and occultism ran below the surface of intellectual life like a root system from which the flowers of science sprouted unpredictably and apparently arbitrarily. It could indeed be argued that the kind of intuitive magical thinking that produces occultism is also, when disciplined intellectually, the driving force of creativity that energizes scientific activity itself.

Many scientists and mathematicians have testified to the importance they attach to the aesthetic value of a theory. So great is this importance that we often read of someone who claims that a theory *must* be right because it is so elegant, even if the facts seem to controvert it. Often, though not always, this intuition is proved right by later events. One of the most celebrated scientific intuitions – still unverified – is Einstein's rejection of chance as a fundamental element in

the make-up of the universe. 'God', said Einstein, 'does not play dice.'

To put what I am saying in the currently fashionable terminology of left brain versus right brain, official science is predominantly a left-brain (analytical) function whereas occultism and magic are products of the (intuitive) right brain. On this hypothesis both halves of the brain are needed for a balanced outlook but for the last few hundred years much greater importance and prestige have been accorded in our culture to the left brain; what is required now is that the balance be restored.

If this theory is right – and I must admit that for me it has many of the elements of a pseudo-scientific myth, a kind of modern phrenology – then homoeopathy (metaphysical homoeopathy anyway) is largely a right-brain product. At any rate I am sure that much of the present enthusiasm for homoeopathy and for other forms of alternative medicine is because of their association with this underground, partly unconscious, current of thought. If you doubt this you have only to go into any bookshop devoted to the occult and see how many shelves contain books on alternative medicine.