Mesmerism in Norway

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Mesmerist Cures

Mesmerism never gained any major popularity in Norway. There was some interest in Mesmer’s theories among medical doctors, some clergymen and others at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and in the last two decades of the century there was renewed interest in animal magnetism and hypnosis among the medical profession and in the general public. Norwegians also became acquainted with more popular forms of mesmerism thanks to visits by mesmerists, especially from Denmark, in the second half of the nineteenth century.

In his brief tract Magnetiske kure i Kristiania 1817–1821 (Magnetic Cures in Kristiania 1817–1821, published in 1886), Axel Theodor Johannessen (1849–1926), a physician and subsequently professor, writes that Kristiania went through a period of “magnetic Sturm und Drang” in the years 1817–1821. According to Johannessen, Dr. Jens Grønbech Døderlein (1787–1867) was the first person in Norway to mention using animal magnetism. After having read Carl A.F. Kluge’s book Versuch einer Darstellung des animalischen Magnetismus als Heilmittel (1811), Døderlein experimented with mesmerism. In a report written in 1818, he mentions several treatments, one of which was said to have been particularly successful. The patient was a young woman in her early twenties who suffered from hysteria. While she was undergoing Døderlein’s treatment, she could predict the times that changes would occur in her own condition, she could clairvoyantly see what the doctor had placed on her chest, and she was able to diagnose her own condition and determine what remedies would be efficient (in casu, garlic). Døderlein states that the woman recovered completely. In a report composed two years later, in 1821, Døderlein describes yet another successful treatment of a woman who had been suffering for years from headaches. In a somnambulistic state, she was able to determine that her pains had originally been caused by a blow to the head, and was able to prescribe medication that cured her.

Another person who used magnetism at this time was Frederik Holst (1791–1871), a medical officer in Kristiania and subsequently professor of pharmacology. Holst had visited Karl Christian Wolfart’s mesmerist clinic in
Berlin while traveling abroad in 1819–1821, and he described his impressions in an article published in the magazine *Budstikken* (The Messenger). Here, Holst described a typical mesmerist séance. Wolfart used Mesmer’s invention, the baquet – a container filled with glass, sand, and iron – and had patients attached to it by ropes, rubbing metal bars that protruded from its midst. The large room where treatments were administered was darkly lit by means of a lamp covered in green cloth, which produced a dramatic effect in the dark evening. Holst relates that Wolfart’s treatments were not purely magnetic, and that he also used medication. Upon his return home, Holst tried out a magnetic cure on a woman who had suffered from cramps, and who was cured after having received daily treatments for three months. Holst specifically notes that the patient gave no signs of having clairvoyant abilities.

Thereafter, mesmerism went into a period of decline, according to Axel Johannesen because the other professors of medicine at the University of Kristiania did not use the method or mention it in their lectures. Johannesen also says that one of the most frequently consulted and most highly regarded doctors in Kristiania, Martin Rasmus With (1788–1848), ridiculed the mesmerist movement.

There are, however, other sources that record an interest in “vital magnetism” (a commonly used synonym for the expression animal magnetism) among medical students and others in the first decades of the nineteenth century. While he was a medical student, Christian Peter Bianco Boeck (1798–1877), who subsequently became professor of physiology, submitted a prize essay in medicine under the aegis of the Norwegian Student Society, with the title: “Can the theory of vital magnetism, or a theory based on the assumption of the proposition that there is a dynamic link between the individual organs of an organic body, between such a body and earthly, inorganic nature, between such a body and everything else in the mass that makes up the world, bring useful results for the practical exercise of medical science, or ought one here stick only to the experiential knowledge of the most immediate physical, chemical, and organic influences of the organs?”

Boeck wrote an extensive study of “vital magnetism”, that was published as a supplement to the weekly magazine *Hermoder* (the name of the messenger of the gods in Norse mythology) in 1823. His presentation took its starting point in Mesmer, but he was especially influenced by mesmerism within a German Romantic tradition, and he dwelt on the higher abilities that could appear during mesmeric sleep and in a somnambulist state, such as clairvoyance, foresight, remote vision, and the gift of philosophical and poetical speech. Boeck, who (together with the geologist B.M. Keilhau) had discovered the Jotunheimen mountains as a hiking region for the bourgeoisie of Kristiania, found in mesmerism a confirmation of a Romantic view of nature.