

Editorial

On The History of Dissociative Identity Disorder in Germany

Burkhard Peter*

Psychologist, Psychotherapist, Konradstr, München, Germany

***Corresponding author:** Burkhard Peter, Psychologist psychotherapist, Konradstr, München, Otto-Heilmann-Str. 27A, 82031 Grünwald, Germany**Received:** August 19, 2016; **Accepted:** November 07, 2016; **Published:** November 09, 2016

Editorial

The history of hypnosis is closely linked to the theme of possession because the forerunner of hypnosis, Mesmers animal magnetism, has replaced exorcism in 1775 [1]. The idea of possession as one of the causes of severe illness, however, was not at all off. In the era of romantic somnambulism integration took place – the treatment of possession by animal magnetism and exorcism. This integration is best represented by the special romantic-magnetic therapy of the Swabian doctor Justinus Kerner. By a paper [2] some years ago I have introduced Justinus Kerner as an important figure in the history of hypnosis and presented one of his case studies of a possessed girl who today can be regarded as a dissociative identity disorder (DID) patient. Some other authors have already asked the question; whether one can regard certain forms of possession as dissociative identity disorder [3-5]. Many historic cases of DID (formerly denoted multiple personality disorder, MPD) have been reported, e.g. the case of an “exchanged personality” (umgetauschte Persönlichkeit) by Gmelin [6] and the famous cases of Estelle [7], Mary Reynolds [8] and Louis Vivet [9,10]. However, neither in Germany nor internationally known were the cases of “magic-magnetic” disease and possession that have been extensively documented by Justinus Kerner [11] although they offer enough clues in order to be regarded as dissociative disorders or some of them even as definite DIS. This historical gap was filled by the paper on the “Story of the girl from Orlach” [2]. In the following I give a brief description of it or the paper on it, respectively.

Justinus Kerner was a general physician and public health officer in Weinsberg, a small city near Heidelberg, Germany. He was the first one to describe the food poisoning of botulism [12] as well as the poisoning through mercury precipitation [13]. Besides this professional role, Kerner was a well-known romantic writer and poet in the beginning of the 19th century. His house became a mecca for many poets, writers and philosophers of German Romanticism [14]. Were the first biographer of Franz Anton Mesmer and a prominent physician of the romantic somnambulism? A series of detailed case histories entailing dissociative symptoms were penned by him, among them the “Clairvoyant from Prevorst” [15] as the most famous one.

Only in the “Story of the girl from Orlach”, however, which is told in [16] the phenomenon of multiple personality is mentioned in explicit words. The whole story is extensively told in my 2011-paper.

This would be the totally normal story of a possession like they have been told in other cacodemonic-magnetic stories by Kerner [16] if there would not be some extraordinary phrases:

“Most marvellous though is the exchange of personality. It is actually difficult to find a name for this state. The girl loses consciousness, her “Self” disappears or rather leaves in order to make place for another “Self”. Another spirit now takes possession of this organism, of its sense organs, of its nerves and muscles, speaks with this throat, thinks with these brain nerves [...]. It is just as if a stronger one appears and chases the owner out of the house and then looks comfortably out of the window as if it would be his own. Since it is not an unconsciousness which takes place, a conscious self inhabits without any interruption the body, the spirit which is now in her knows very well - even better than before, what happens around him, but it is a different resident that lives in there. Though, the girl is not forgotten in all this, he [the “black” ghost] talks about her, he knows quite well that she is alive but claims that instead of she would be there, he would be there” (ibid. p.42f).

Kerner finally has to admit that “we have never heard about such a sharply detached, clearly recognized exchange of the Self” (ibid., p.43, italics). In the other stories of Kerner, sudden and dramatic exchanges of personality also occur during the state of possession that would easily fit into the image of a multiple personality. However, it is only in the story of the girl from Orlach that he calls this a “clear exchange of the self”.

It is to be noted, however, that Kerner conceived these symptoms neither as a psychopathology of the individual nor that he regarded the systemic context of the family. In other words, Kerner describes the case of a multiple personality disorder and how she finally was cured, but for the etiology of this “magic-magnetic” disease, he remains clearly with the old, demonic ideas, that of possession. Because of this, we could speculate, he thought that “no ordinary drug would help” but only prayers and the good guiding by a “white” ghost.

From the point of view of contemporary clinical experience, particularities of this case, which fit well into the image of a multiple personality (MPD/DID), are discussed in the 2011-paper, especially the obvious links to severe traumatizing events – mostly physical and sexual abuse – during childhood and youth [3,5]. For therapy, it is, among others, considered to be necessary that (1) the victim explicitly recalls the abuse (in order to be able to work it through); further, it would be desirable that (2) the perpetrator admits the abuse (in order to ratify the memories of the victim and – ideally - in order to demand to be pardoned). Those two elements can be found in the case of the girl from Orlach, too.

It is very intriguing to read the discussion of this historic text. Kerner, for example, is engaged in finding argumentations against sceptics who, at that time already, regarded the symptoms as a sort of

role play. One could think that Kerner tried almost 200 years ago to invalidate similar arguments that were put forward by some of today's writers [17]. One can also find the reproach of iatrogenous induction of demons. Kerner's defense was as follows: "Only inexperienced or malicious people can misunderstand this in a way to assume that it is the magic-magnetic manipulation that injects the initial opinion of a second, evil individuality into such suffering people" (ibid, p.11). One can read the same argumentation with similar words also today.

The figure of the "white" guardian ghost is very intriguing: we can regard it as an internalized helper figure, which appears in all of Kerner's possession stories. It is close to the guest personality, gives helping advice, consoles or encourages and sometimes even predicts the course of the disease respectively the healing. As a rule, this "white" ghost is female, has also burdened guilt on her which, however, does not weigh as heavy as the one from the "black" ghost. This evil, black figure is as a rule male and has seduced or forced the white guardian spirit to – often sexual – transgressions.

The figure of the guardian ghost seems to represent an important therapeutic resource and facilitates what today should be done in phase 1 of trauma-therapies: support, stabilization and reduction of symptoms. Only afterwards, in phase 2, it becomes useful to identify the dissociated parts – the "black" ghost – and to explore the traumatic event. The actual therapeutic act consists in the restoration of the narrative memory, ideally through an explicit confession of the perpetrator or other actual proof. It is only thereby that, analogue to phase 3, all alter, the positive and the negative ones, dissolve and their reintegration and a social rehabilitation of the personality takes place [18].

The "Story of the girl from Orlach" is not only of historical interest because it describes – in the language and terminology of romantic medicine – very impressively the syndrome of a dissociative identity disorder, but mainly because different therapeutic elements and techniques were used that are still – or again – of use today.

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