

# Sanative Contagion Among Cambridge Platonists<sup>1</sup>

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Y our generous invitation to address this august audience, for which I am sincerely grateful, was perhaps peculiar in one respect. At least one-half of it was taken up with the admonition, tactful but no less emphatic, that although I could talk about whatever might enter my mind, I'd better do it in 19 minutes and 59 seconds, max. Thus must I rush, *in medias res*, to an obscure corner of rural County Wexford, in the south of Ireland, in the year 1660. For there it was that a pious farmer named Valentine Greatrakes awoke one morning with the odd notion that God had granted him the power to heal, with the touch of his hand, the common and unpleasant disease called *scrofula*, an often hideous inflammation and swelling of the lymph nodes in the face, neck, and shoulders.

Scrofula was commonly called the “King’s Evil” in English because of the belief that the British monarch had the power to cure it by touch. The doctrine of royal thaumaturgy was a medieval relic in both France and England. There were indeed special liturgical ceremonies of royal touching. Queen Elizabeth the Great had briefly discontinued them in what one contemporary called a “fit of Puritanism,” but they were brought back by popular demand—and for the same political usefulness that encouraged the restored monarch, Charles II, to adopt the practice.

That an Irish squire should claim the same gift may seem a political and spiritual overreach. More remarkable yet, Greatrakes pursued his newfound medical mission with startling success. Many sufferers claimed to have been healed by his ministrations. He came to be called “the Stroker” on account of his unusual therapeutic method of literally rubbing out the bodily suffering of the damaged areas presented for his attention.

Several features of the man’s personality argued against obvious fraud. His local reputation prior to his medical fame was unsullied. He was a man of overt rectitude and piety but not a *fanatic*—as that term was then used to describe radical Protestant dissenters, the ancestors of

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some of today's charismatic evangelicals. From the political point of view, it was very important that he was in fact a *conformist*—that is, a member of the established Anglican Church. He claimed to be only an intermediary of the healing power of Jesus Christ, a power he “felt” rather than understood. And although his healing efforts succeeded so frequently that he soon gained the reputation of a wonder-worker, they also failed frequently. He made no attempt to deny, disguise, or rationalize his failures. He would simply apologize with a humble sympathy to the disappointed patient for his inability to help. Most conspicuously, he rebuffed all offers, which were numerous, to exploit his gift for financial gain.

So long as Greatrakes was curing Irish cottagers and ploughboys, he was no more than a local wonder or a dubious distant rumor, but in 1665, he found himself suddenly translated to the inner sanctum of the early British Enlightenment. It happened like this. The wife of Lord Edward Conway, whose estate at Ragley Hall in Warwickshire housed one of the greatest private libraries in the land and was the unofficial weekend retreat of half the members of the nascent Royal Society, suffered terribly from migraines. This remarkable woman, Lady Anne Conway (née Finch), was an intellectual phenomenon. Some scholars have argued that she was the most impressive woman philosopher to appear in Britain to this very day. In an age when no woman could matriculate at any university, she was the prized pupil (by correspondence, of course) of the major philosopher Henry More of King's College, generally regarded as the chief of the “Cambridge Platonists.”

Greatrakes attempted to stroke away Lady Anne's headaches. He failed once, then a few more times. He apologized, as was his wont in such instances, and was prepared to pack up and go home. That should have been the end of it. But news of the presence of the “miraculous conformist” at Ragley raced through the countryside. Dozens, perhaps hundreds, of seriously sick people (including many scrofula cases) presented themselves. Scores reported miraculous cures, many of a dramatic sort.

Witnesses to the medical wonders included a number of the most prominent intellectuals of the age. Among the first were Ragley residents, beginning with Lady Anne herself. The Conways' resident alchemist—an important functionary at stately homes you do not learn about in *Downton Abbey*—was the Dutch Paracelsan physician Mercury von Helmont, an advanced scientific thinker, famous son of a famous father. More eminent yet were the visitors. Practically the whole common room of King's College, Cambridge, was there: Henry More the Platonist; Ralph Cudworth, author of *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*; George Rust; Gabriel Foxcroft, the mathematician and

young friend of Newton; and several others. All these people watched the Stroker in action, and all of them believed on empirical grounds in the genuine nature of the medical cures reported.

Were they witnesses to miracles? This was a tricky business, in which the fraught elements were both intellectual and political. Hume's famous, if philosophically impotent, critique of miracles would not appear until the middle of the eighteenth century, but a general agreement existed among Anglican thinkers that the scriptural miracles of Christ and his Apostles belonged to a unique historical moment—that of the establishment and manifestation of the revelation of Jesus Christ. Hume himself would say that the Christian conquest of the pagan world was itself miraculous; but once so rapidly achieved, the biblical miracles—most of which were, in fact, healing miracles—ceased. The universe, as Cudworth and others would maintain, was one unending miracle, but a miracle of rationality and regularity. "The first Almighty Cause," as Alexander Pope famously put it in his *Essay on Man*, "Acts not by partial, but by gen'ral laws." On the other hand, the recently restored monarch at least pretended to have thaumaturgical powers himself.

The terms *Age of Reason* and *Enlightenment* are often synonyms, but *reason* is actually a complicated term. Consider for a moment the verb *rationalize*. It is relatively new in the language, having been around for only a couple of centuries. It should mean and used to mean "to impose order or coherence upon," but it seldom means that now. What it now means is to impose a spurious coherence upon something, to force some square peg of thought into a round hole of context. A fruitful study might be made of the quasi-accidental advances of learning that have emerged from the deep crevice between reason and rationalization. The theory of *sanative contagion* perhaps belongs in this category.

It seems to be a universal tendency of the human mind when confronted with what is foreign or strange (and it is significant that those two adjectives are etymological synonyms) to attempt to impose upon it categories that are comfortable and familiar. For a person of my age and mental ossification, it is a challenge to deal with something as simple as the metrical system of measuring distance or the Centigrade scale of recording temperature. Surely God measures things in miles, yards, feet, and inches—when she isn't using cubits, that is. But of course there is nothing essential about either Centigrade or Fahrenheit. They are both conventional systems. As Augustine brilliantly pointed out in the year 400, the most prominent of our conventional sign systems is language. We may laugh at the schoolboy who translated *Sic transit gloria mundi* as "Gloria gets carsick on Mondays," but

in their attempts to get what they do not know to submit to the comfortable categories of what they do, even great scholars commit analogous intellectual solecisms on a daily basis.

It is not to be supposed that events as extraordinary as those attendant on Greatrakes's medical ministry would pass without any literary record. We possess two rich bodies of material, one public and formal, the other private and informal. Although many believed that Greatrakes was a modern miracle worker, others believed no such thing. Some accused him of fraud and imposture. In 1666, there was a pamphlet war. Three publications are particularly important. The pious physician Henry Stubbe, a neighbor of the Conways, wrote a full-throated encomium titled *The Miraculous Conformist*. An unpleasant clerical skeptic, David Lloyd debunked the whole phenomenon in his anonymously published polemic *Wonders No Miracles*. Both the enthusiast and the antagonist were burdened by personality defects unlikely to aid their espoused causes. Thus goaded, Greatrakes wrote his own *apologia* under the usual misnomer—*A Brief Account*.

It is primarily with the informal materials that I am here concerned. By extraordinarily good fortune, a large correspondence among the Conway circle has survived. It was expertly edited in 1930 by Marjorie Hope Nicolson, a great American scholar working at the crossroads of English literature and the history of science, and republished in 1992 in an amplified edition. Here are gathered letters between the Conways and their learned friends, especially Henry More and others eminent among the Cambridge Platonists, many of them discussing the Greatrakes phenomenon.

The formal and the informal sources meet in one particularly famous scientist: Sir Robert Boyle the chemist, who enjoyed among the learned class, at the time of these events, a superstar status hardly less brilliant than that which Isaac Newton would later achieve with the publication of the *Principia*. Boyle was a friend of More's and came to be an intimate of Lord and Lady Conway. He was a Christian believer, perhaps less mystical in his belief than was Newton, but no less firm. Like Pascal, Boyle records in his autobiography a youthful moment of dazzling, permanent conversion. But he was also a thorough-going empiricist, and the word "miracle" did not come lightly to his lips. In *The Miraculous Conformist*, Stubbe had dropped Boyle's name in such a way as to suggest that the great man approved of his whacky argument, which was that God was breaking new ground by, for the first time, performing miracles through Protestants!

Despite Stubbe, Greatrakes and Boyle became friendly. By happenstance the Boyle family seat in southern Ireland was not far from

Greatrakes's hamlet of Affane. As a child, Greatrakes had for a time been in the school founded by Boyle's philanthropic grandfather. On the basis of this entrée, Greatrakes had prefaced his own autobiography with a dedicatory letter to Boyle. Boyle was also friends with Henry More, with whom he often discussed, and sometimes debated, various scientific theories and hypotheses. More was wont to account for various chemical reactions in terms of a hypothesized universal "spirit of Nature" or latent dynamic force. Boyle, whose name is still honored today for his "law" concerning the behavior of compressed gases, was skeptical of such a sweeping and immaterial cause.

"True wit," says Pope, "is Nature to advantage dress'd, what oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed." In a famous essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," T. S. Eliot argued that all great art is the product of negotiation between the conventional and the novel. We must recall that Greatrakes's healing rampage was taking place against the most apocalyptic of backdrops: the Great Plague of 1665 in London, which may have carried away as many as 100,000 of the capital's residents. The Great Fire followed closely behind in September 1666. The epidemiological theory of the age was hardly changed from that of the Middle Ages or, for that matter, of Classical Antiquity. This theory knew nothing of microbiology, a development of the nineteenth century. It was believed that disease spread by one of three ways: by foul *air* (as in *mal-aria*); by *miasma* (the stench of filth, and especially bodily corruption); and by *contagion* in its literal sense (a morbid body touching a sound body). At the level of theory, each of these explanations is wrong. At the operational level, however, the practices to which they gave birth could to some degree effect improvements in hygiene. The mode of countering miasma—overwhelm it with floral odors or aromatic smoke—was at least likely to do little harm.

All of the eminent men and women who had watched Greatrakes's healing sessions and recorded their opinions, including at least three who had been his actual patients, were convinced that the man could and did literally rub out pathologies from other human bodies. This was wonderful but not necessarily supernatural. They were, after all, natural scientists. In seeking a rational framework that might account for the wonders, they naturally began with commonly accepted theories of medical morbidity. Was there something about Greatrakes's corporeal person that could combat disease? George Rust and Lord Conway himself at first flirted with an anti-miasmal theory: "Dean Rust observed [the Stroker's] Urine to smell like violets, though he had eat nothing that might give it that scent." Inquire no further. Here is a recycling of the old medieval belief in the odor of sanctity, now

transformed to the odor of sanity. If certain mal-aria caused sickness, certain bon-aria might effect its healing.

But the preferred theory, which came from Henry More, was that of *sanative contagion*, which was the obverse of morbid contagion. In contemporary medical English, *contagious* and *communicable* are virtual synonyms; but to the seventeenth-century virtuosi, who still thought in Latin, *contagious* was not yet much removed from *tangere*, which meant not merely “to touch” but “to touch with force,” “to hold on to.” Morbid contagion gripped the sufferer. The Stroker’s method revealed a benign gripping. This theory was widely shared among the Cambridge Platonists and the larger Ragley circle.

Concerning Greatrakes’s cures, Lord Conway wrote the following to his friend Rawdon, who had been his Irish intermediary in bringing him to England: “. . . I am far from thinking them miracles or that his cures are at all miraculous; but I believe it is by a *sanative virtue* and a *natural efficiency*, which extends not to all diseases, but is much more proper and effectual to some than to others . . . .” Here was a theory that rationalized not merely the cures but also the failed attempts.

Of course the theory of sanative contagion was all wrong, but it was wrong in the right way. Nothing could be more scientific than certain famous errors. Alchemy was founded on a fatal error, yet it was the indispensable proving ground of chemical science. With the exception of the embarrassing, old-fashioned Doctor Stubbe, none of Greatrakes’s philosophical champions spoke of miracles. They spoke of a new horizon in medical science. Robert Boyle himself was puzzled by the “Greatrakes problem” and has left us some intriguing, fragmentary notes. Thus, I would have to say that the episode of Valentine Greatrakes was one small step in the March of Science. It’s just too bad that we don’t actually know what Greatrakes did or how he did it.