

Chapter One

Wash and Be Healed *The Hydropathic Alternative*

Water-cure philosophy as a medical regimen offered a simple set of therapeutics that entailed various applications of cold water. To this was added staunch advocacy of reforming personal habits of diet, dress, exercise, and ways of living. Adherents of hydropathy could participate in the system either through home self-care or under the tutelage of a water-cure physician at a site away from home. To place hydropathy within a larger framework before fully developing these themes, I first examine the significance and appeal of hydropathy as a societal vision within the nineteenth-century milieu. I then recall the significance of water as the ultimate healing agent, give a brief history of the medical use of cold water and the introduction of the practice in the United States, and discuss the influence of mineral spas.

Hydropathy as a Vision of Society

The water cure as a popular health system offered a consensual ideology that posited a harmonious universal vision. Informed by a millennial ideal of human perfectability, and consequent societal uplifting, hydropathy championed personal and social advancement through health. It instilled hope, provided a moral base, offered internal logic radiating from a central truth, and proffered inclusive answers for all of life's uncertainties.¹ Yet, amid this communal context, hydropathy offered autonomy and individuation. It appealed, therefore, not only to strains of individualism and personal advancement in American thought but also to gender-specific and culturally valued communal bonds, responsibility to others, and continuity in relationships; it offered a group context in which personal improvement could serve as a model for societal reformation.

As a medical system, hydropathy utilized basic psychosocial factors critical to the healing process. It mobilized the patient's natural healing powers, aroused hope and expectancy of cure, and reinforced ties with the social group and the cultural world view. It also placed primary importance on the healer-patient encounter for providing hope, relief of symptoms, communication, and therapeutic touch while instilling faith and trust.²

The water cure as a system and as a world view promoted a sense of meaning, ordering, power, and control. It provided autonomy without anarchy; personal improvement could be achieved without sacrificing the common good. As posited in the early mastheads of the *Journal*, one need only "Wash and Be Healed."³ In fact, one of hydropathy's unique contributions among the sects was that it offered a vision of a good life unencumbered by theoretical uncertainty and provided the entire context in which to live it.

The hydropathic theory and management of human (particularly women's) physiology was the means through which personal change would inspire societal reformation. Since hydropaths refused to classify women as physically and intellectually hampered by their physiology, the redefinition of women's social role became a primary concern. By soliciting a female readership, rethinking the treatment of female diseases, urging women's active participation in home health care, and actively supporting the inclusion of female physicians, the water-cure movement appealed to women as the primary caretakers of others⁴ and fostered an extension of woman's sphere of influence from the domestic into the informally political realm. Further, it evinced a feminist ideology (termed "emancipationist" in the literature) that stressed woman's right to increased choices, opportunities, and rewards, and her resultant obligation to care for her own and others' health.

Water as the Great Curative

Water, which has been used as a curative agent for thousands of years, was the medium charged with bringing about this cultural rebirth. Symbolically, water possesses potent powers. As a cleansing agent, its universality and value are unparalleled, not only as a remover of soil but also as a metaphoric purifier of souls. The religious and mystical significance of water can be seen in its use in Christian baptism, the Jewish *mikveh*, and the transferring out of bad spirits from an ailing person in folk healing. Water is also the primary life-giving substance on earth. Its necessity for human, animal, and vegetative survival prompted Native American cultures to worship gods imbued with the power to deliver it.⁵ (Its power to destroy is equally undeniable: Floods, tides, and drownings have taxed human understanding and control.) When used topically, water is a soothing, cooling, relaxing, and stimulating agent; and it is employed

in life-cycle rituals as diverse as birth, religious initiation, fertility, trials of adulthood, spiritual awakenings, sickness, death, and mourning.

The water cure, as it was popularized in the United States, directly utilized several key components of water's symbolic nature. Water's ability to cleanse, purify, facilitate the transfer of putrid matter, give renewed life, soothe, cool, relax, and stimulate were all articulated by hydropaths. The more nebulous qualities associated with water added an otherworldliness to the procedures, a sense that powers beyond human understanding were at work during a water cure. For while hydropaths did not lay claim to direct spiritual advancement or cosmic insight for their followers, neither did they disavow the unidentifiable attributes of healing with water. If symbolic and mystical powers accrued while taking the cure, no attempt was made to disassociate from them. This may account, in part, for the often mystical and pseudoreligious portrayal of water evidenced in the writings of hydropathic leaders and followers.

A History of Water Cures

Until the eighteenth century the curative power of water was thought to lie primarily in its minerals, its heat, or its mystical properties. American Indians, for example, used water in religious rituals long before it was thought to have hygienic properties. Numerous European and American explorers, among them Amerigo Vespucci (1497), William Penn (1683), Meriwether Lewis and William Clark (early nineteenth century), and the artist and ethnologist George Catlin (1841), noted the Indians' bathhouses and mud lodges and their use of sweating and plunging into cold baths.⁶

In Europe, "taking the cure" involved healing waters but included many other variations. It could be a "quest for healing waters; hot water, cold water, mineral waters, stinking waters or holy water. It was sometimes a quest for healing muds or gases."⁷

In these earliest sojourns for health, the cure was not ascribed "to the action of water itself, but to magic properties in it or to supernatural influences shed by nymphs and water gods. Hence well worship, as practiced in ancient Babylon and modern Derbyshire. Priests and oracles set themselves up beside springs or escapes of natural gases."⁸ This emphasis on magic and faith healing shifted over the centuries to one of physical treatment. But not until the eighteenth century did the water cure experience a large-scale revival. Prompted by the increased popularity of European spas, medical observers began writing tracts that criticized both the medicinal value of mineral water and the nonhygienic practices that abounded at Europe's watering places. These critiques produced a spate of writing on the curative powers of cold water, or hydropathy.

John Floyer, an English physician, wrote *Psychrolusia, or History of Cold-Bathing*, which triggered the turn toward cold water. The tract appeared in London in 1702 and had gone through five editions by 1722.

In his works, which were reprinted in German and Latin, he discussed the subject historically and recounted illnesses cured with water.⁹ Floyer's work was followed by American editions of John Smith's publications, *The Curiosities of Common Water* (1723) and *The Curiosities of Common Water, or the Advantages Thereof in Preventing Cholera* (1725).¹⁰

Floyer's and Smith's theses were followed by Tobias Smollett's *An Essay on the External Use of Water* (1752) in which he claimed:

I can easily conceive how extraordinary cures may be performed by the mechanical effects of simple WATER upon the human Body; and I fully believe that in the use of BATHING and PUMPING, that Efficacy is often ascribed to the MINERAL PARTICLES, which properly belongs to the ELEMENT itself, exclusive of any foreign substance.¹¹

Smollett also detailed the bad conditions existing at the baths in Bath, England, including their use by diseased persons, lack of protection from natural elements, shortage of attendants, lack of sex segregation, and inadequate dressing facilities.¹²

Floyer's, Smith's, and Smollett's path-breaking works were complemented by John Wesley's *Primitive Physic, or an Easy and Natural Method of Curing Most Diseases* (1747), which claimed that cold water, if skillfully administered, could cure nearly every disease. Similarly, James Currie's *Medical Reports on the Effects of Water, Cold and Warm, as a Remedy in Fever and Febrile Diseases* (1797) urged the exclusive use of cold water. Currie, the first to chronicle precisely the effects of cold bathing, recorded and followed the body's temperature in treating fever.¹³ These medical texts and therapeutic innovations led many practitioners to adopt the use of cold water.

In the United States, Dr. Benjamin Rush of Philadelphia also recognized and advocated the use of cold bathing.¹⁴ Its effect, he said, was "to wash off impurities from the skin, promote perspiration, drive the fluids from the surface to the internal parts of the body, brace the animal fibres, stimulate the nervous system, and prevent the 'diseases of warm weather.'" Like Rush, John Bell, in *On Baths and Mineral Waters* (1831), discussed "the various bath forms [and] their effects and applications in cold, warm, hot and vapor baths."¹⁵

Despite this increased attention to the use of cold water and the notable improvements following its use, cold water as a therapeutic procedure was little utilized until Vincent Priessnitz advocated its use. As one historian has noted, "Others had used water as a method of treatment, Priessnitz made it a panacea."¹⁶ Priessnitz, born in 1799 on a small farm in Silesia, first experimented with water as a curative agent after he sprained his wrist, holding it under the pump and wrapping it in cold bandages until the swelling went down. Later, he cured his father's feverish cow with water applications. But his "conversion" to cold water (a similar

"personal revelation" would become a significant rite of passage for many hydropathic followers) occurred when his ribs were crushed in a wagon accident, and he was pronounced incurable. Refusing to accept this diagnosis, Priessnitz applied wet bandages and replaced his broken ribs by pressing his abdomen with great force against a chair and holding his breath to swell his chest. He ate little, remained quiet, was mobile in ten days, and was working in the fields within a year.¹⁸

Word of Priessnitz's successes spread, and his services gained popularity among his Silesian countrymen. He was the first to systematize the wetting and sweating procedures long advocated by Floyer, Smith, Wesley, Currie, and Smollett. His most significant therapeutic innovation was the wet sheet, which covered the entire body and was utilized when disease was not localized. He promoted the use of specific "baths" when the ailment was localized (head, eye, leg, and foot baths); to these regimens he added the douche, which entailed wet packing to induce perspiration, then sponging, then a plunge bath.¹⁹

Francis Graeter, one of Priessnitz's faithful chroniclers, wrote of his less-schooled mentor, who was not inclined to record his activities, that he believed water was the univocal nostrum, and thus he posited his theory of cure:

All diseases, such only excepted as are produced by external lesions from foreign bodies, originate in bad humors, from which result either a general distemper, or maladies of single parts. Hence his whole method has for its aim to remove the bad [humors] out of the body, and to replace them by good ones. The means . . . by which he employs for this purpose are, *Water, Air, Exercise and Diet*.²⁰

In 1826 Priessnitz opened Grafenberg, affectionately called the "Water University," in the mountains of Silesia. Because the waters used at Grafenberg had no chemical distinction, his cure was not a spa. He called it a cold-water cure but did not use the term *hydropathy*. Priessnitz met with immediate success. Retrospectively, his success stemmed from removing patients from the stresses and excesses that had often induced their illnesses, providing a pleasant communal setting, implementing diet and exercise regimens that strengthened the body, ceasing heroic therapeutics, letting nature help right what was reversible, involving patients in their own cure through habit reformation, and applying the mystical healing powers attributed to Priessnitz personally.

Grafenberg opened with forty-nine patients, but by 1840 fifteen hundred to seventeen hundred people sought help each year. The guest list in 1839 included "one royal highness, one duke, one duchess, 22 princes and princesses, 149 counts and countesses, 88 barons and baronesses, 14 generals, 53 staff officers, 196 captains and subalterns, 104 high and low civil servants, 65 divines, 46 artists, and 87 physicians and apothecaries."

caries."²¹ These illustrious patients' places of origin were equally varied: "In 1840 Prussia supplied over 500, Austria over 350, Russia about 100, and Hungary and Poland each over one hundred."²² One patient was Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman to graduate from an American allopathic (regular) medical school, who went to Grafenberg in 1850 after contracting ophthalmia in 1849. Although her general health was strengthened through diet and exercise, her eye was very badly inflamed, and in June 1850 it was removed.²³

In addition to the therapeutic innovations at Grafenberg, strictures on diet and habits were adopted. The food was coarse, heavy, and always cold, and no spices were allowed to those with bad stomachs. Patients were advised to drink twenty to thirty glasses of water daily to induce internal cleaning; water was the only permissible beverage. They were urged to exercise, behave temperately, and avoid flannel and cotton, since, it was claimed, those materials made people delicate and weakened the skin. No medicines were allowed, nor was reading, writing, or other intellectual effort. Similarly taboo were gambling and "immoral excitement."²⁴

These demands to change personal habits are understandable when one considers the large percentage of Priessnitz's patients who suffered from overexposure to mercury ingested under allopathic instruction (half of his clientele) and liver and stomach disorders caused by dietary and alcoholic excesses. For these patients, Priessnitz counseled:

The first means of strengthening a weakened stomach is to avoid all the causes that have contributed towards destroying its tone. Live temperately and simply. . . . At the same time you ought to wear constantly cold fomentations round your abdomen and the stomach; early in the morning you ought to sweat moderately, and after this take a cold bath; in the evening a seat-bath, constantly rubbing during both the latter, the afflicted parts with cold water. In drinking cold water, avoid excess. . . . Frequent exercise is to be added.²⁵

Whether Priessnitz understood the mechanisms of his success is a matter for speculation. It could be simply fortuitous that he cured patients essentially by keeping them away from the rigors of heroic treatment and allowing the human body to heal itself. This is not to argue that Priessnitz did nothing. Like the water curers who modeled themselves after him, Priessnitz placed great importance on the medical encounter, on communication, and on touch. Given that Priessnitz treated seven thousand patients between 1831 and 1841, the thirty-eight deaths that occurred at Grafenberg stand as a credible record, although he rejected some prospective patients and others very likely left of their own choice. Despite this percentage, Priessnitz was haunted by his critics. Between