

TABLE TURNING

A Brief Historical Note Mainly of the Period 1848-1853

by B. NISBET

TABLE turning, as we know it, began shortly after the start of the modern Spiritualist movement in 1848. This is not to say that a diligent search amongst ancient writers might not reveal that they were as familiar with this phenomenon as we are today. For example:

Tertullian (*c.* 155-*c.* 222), the great Christian writer, addressing certain pagans said: 'Do not your magicians call ghosts and departed souls from the shades below, and by their infernal charms represent an infinite number of delusions? And how do they perform all this but by the assistance of angels and spirits, by which they are able to make stools and tables prophesy.' (1).

Ammianus Marcellinus (*c.* 325-330—*c.* 391+), the Roman historian, described a *mensa divinatoriae* which certain philosophers succeeded in operating after due rites, mysterious formulae and oaths repeated for several hours. This, however, was not true table turning but an early example of the use of the pendulum swinging in a bowl round which were engraved letters of the alphabet (1).

Later, Delitzsch, in his 'Biblical Psychology' shows that table turning was practised by the Jews in the seventeenth century: the 'table springs up even when laden with many hundredweight.' (2). In a work published in 1614 this is denounced as magic. Zebi, in 1615, defends the practice as not due to magic but to the power of God, 'for we sing to the table sacred psalms and songs, and it can be no Devil's work where God is remembered.' (2).

For the present purpose, however, table turning may be said to have developed from the mysterious rapping which disturbed the peace of the Fox family at Hydesville, New York, U.S.A., in 1848. These indicated that a corpse lay buried in the cellar. On investigation, some human remains were found, and, it is said, an almost complete skeleton was actually unearthed in 1906.

The Fox family, however, did not long remain at Hydesville. They moved to Rochester but the rappings accompanied them, being especially noticeable in the presence of the two Fox sisters, Margaretta aged 14 or 15 and Kate aged 12. They were soon giving exhibitions and undergoing tests at which attempts were made to discover the cause of the sounds. It was also found that

many who sat with them developed the ability to rap and became mediums or pretended to do so. At this period of time it is difficult to say how much was genuine, how much was due to bad observation and exaggeration and how much was fraudulent.

It was soon discovered that the table formed a convenient focus point around which to sit. Not only raps but also movements of the table occurred and table moving soon became a craze which swept through America.

What is said to be the first recorded instance of table tilting is the account given by the Rev C. Hammond at a visit to the Fox family. On the 22nd February 1850 he wrote:

'I was selected from half a dozen gentlemen, and directed by these sounds (that is, the rappings) to retire to another apartment, in company with the three sisters and their aged mother. It was about 8 o'clock in the evening. A lighted candle was placed on a large table and we seated ourselves around it. I occupied one side of the table, the mother and youngest daughter the right, and two of the sisters the left, leaving the opposite side of the table vacant. On taking our positions the sounds were heard, and continued to multiply and became more violent, until every part of the room trembled with their demonstrations. They were unlike any I had heard before. Suddenly, as we were all resting on the table, I felt the side next to me move upward—I pressed upon it heavily, but soon it passed out of the reach of us all—full six feet from me, and at least four from the nearest person to it. I saw distinctly its position—not a thread could have connected it with any of the company without my notice, for I had come to detect imposition, if it could be found. In this position it was situated when the question was asked, "Will the spirit move the table back where it was before?" And back it came as though it was carried on the head of someone who had not suited his position to a perfect equipoise, the balance being sometimes in favour of one side and then the other. But it regained its first position.' (3).

This was not the end of the sitting for to the accompaniment of the 'Spirits' Song' and other pieces of sacred music a transparent hand presented itself before Mr Hammond's face, fingers took hold of a lock of his hair, 'a cold deathlike hand' was drawn designedly over his face and many other strange incidents are supposed to have occurred.

The usual procedure about this time appears to have been very similar to that employed today: three tilts were used for 'Yes' but no movement was considered the equivalent of 'No'. The letters of the alphabet were called until a rap or tilt indicated the letter required and words and sentences were built up in this way.

However, in order to increase the speed of communication the card process was sometimes employed. The medium or sitter was provided with a card on which were printed the letters of the alphabet, numbers, etc. A finger or pointer was run over the card until a rap or tilt came. A development of this process was when the movement of the finger became automatic and stopped involuntarily at the letters required, thus doing away with the use of raps or tilts and speeding up communication considerably. This method, we are told, was 'in full vogue' in Philadelphia in 1851.

Phenomena experienced were also very similar to those experienced today: movements of the table with and without contact, lifting of the table while one or two people sat on it or tried to hold it down, apparent alteration to the weight of the table, the peculiar 'glueing' of objects to the table so that they did not fall off when the table was tilted and so on. It was soon discovered, also, that too much reliance should not be placed on statements or advice given by the table.

It is impossible to go into the question of the genuineness or otherwise of these early seances. Accounts of the same seance by so-called 'believers' and sceptics, where these are available, vary considerably. Common sense precautions were sometimes taken but the possibility of unconsciously giving away and receiving information as well as of subconscious dramatisation was not understood. Most people at this time saw the problem in simple terms: either the tables were moved by spirits as they claimed or the movements were produced by heartless frauds. A few of the more scientifically inclined were prepared to believe in some unknown force, possibly of nervous origin or allied to magnetism or electricity, while those with theological leanings were prepared to see the hand of Satan in the movements.

The table turning craze soon spread to Europe. The arrival of the steamer 'Washington' at Bremen in March 1853 is said to have first brought these 'spiritual gymnastics' to Germany. Contemporary accounts tell us: 'Not a house in the town but is taken up with this fantastic locomotion' from the King of Prussia, who operated upon satin-wood tables in his salon, to the artisan who made the successful attempt on the common deal table in his garret.

Vienna soon followed: 'Like Bremen it soon had all its tables in active exercise, and singular enough were the effects which were produced, ladies fainted, strong men were seized with trembling and chattering of the teeth and the nervous system of many of the operators received violent shocks.' (4).

In April 1853 the craze was in Paris 'agitating alike the mind of

the profoundly erudite philosophers and the gentle bosom of the nervous excitable woman of the world.' Dr Alex. Mayer, editor of *Presse Médicale*, after describing some experiments in which he participated, waxed so enthusiastic as to declare: 'Let us, therefore, greet with affability this era of regeneration which proclaims itself, whose mission it will be to cleanse the world of the atheistical doctrines which turn it from its path! And, moreover, without being disheartened by any obstacles, let us follow this clue which chance has revealed to our eyes. Who knows whether it may not lead to something in the end by which a whole generation shall be dignified.' (5).

After Paris the craze spread to Belgium and Holland before crossing the Channel to the 'sober English Nation'. Here Mrs Hayden and another medium, Mrs Roberts, had already ensconced themselves having arrived from America the previous Autumn. On 16th April 1853 the following advertisement of Mrs Roberts appeared in the front page of *The Times*: 'Spiritual Manifestations and Communications from departed friends, which so much gratify serious and enlightened minds, exemplified daily at . . .'. It should, perhaps, be added that later in the year *The Times* refused to insert such advertisements but for the time being considerable interest appears to have been aroused.

The procedure was usually the card process, popular in America, which has already been described. Some sitters maintained that the spirits were unable to give correct answers when the alphabet was concealed from the medium. Mr G. H. Lewes described how, by carefully emphasised hesitation at appropriate letters, he held conversation with one of the Eumenides, receiving much information not to be found in any classical dictionary, of how the table informed him that Mrs Hayden was a fraud and that the ghost of Hamlet had seventeen noses (6).

However, there were others who said that they had received answers when the alphabet was concealed. Professor de Morgan indeed claimed to have received correct answers to questions mentally asked and on one occasion an unexpected reply which was correct (7). Many intelligent people, although unwilling to commit themselves to any theory, thought that the phenomena were worthy of serious attention and began to experiment themselves.

Invitations to tea and table turning became fashionable and it was not long before a writer could declare: 'In almost every other house are to be found some students of this mystic novelty surrounding a table. At first there is immoderate laughter, universal incredulity, and here and there languid curiosity, this

is followed by the most hushed stillness, by profound silence. In about twenty minutes the fraternity is electrified: hubbub and animation follow, which defy all description, for the promised results invariably occur; and it is not only the idle and curious that are struck by what they see, but minds of the highest grade of intellect acknowledge the truth of the movement of the table, though they may be somewhat incredulous as to the accounts of a still more striking character that are in circulation, but which appear as yet to have been made known only to the few—such for instance, as the narratives of sounds proceeding from the table in reply to questions asked, as to the hour of day, the age of an individual, and sundry other matters.' (8).

Experiments, however, were not confined to tables. Innumerable other objects were tried amongst which music stools, porcelain vases and top hats appear to have been the most popular.

In the early part of June 1853 a conversazione was held in the Manchester Athenaeum for the purpose of table turning. Seven tables were employed, of which four were made to turn. At this meeting Braid suggested that the popular theory of electricity be tested. His ideas on the subject appear to have been of the haziest kind for he suggested that a circle of brass wire be placed on the table and that the four ladies who had been previously most successful should each hold a loop of wire connected to that on the table. Needless to say the table remained stationary. This experiment was considered of sufficient importance to be printed in the *Manchester Guardian* and quoted in *The Times* of 13th June 1853.

About this time table turning reached such proportions amongst all classes of society that several eminent scientists thought it desirable to intervene. Faraday's experiments originally published in *The Times* of 30th June 1853, were amongst the most important contributions to the subject. Faraday described his simplest experiment as follows: 'A soft cement, consisting of wax and turpentine, or wax and pomatum, was prepared. Four or five pieces of smooth slippery cardboard were attached one over the other by little pellets of the cement, and the edges of these sheets overlapped slightly, and on the under surface a pencil line was drawn over the laps so as to indicate position. The upper cardboard was larger than the rest, so as to cover the whole from sight. Then, the table turner placed the hands upon the upper card,—and we waited for results.' (9). On every occasion when movements were obtained he found by examining the displacement of the pencil lines that the hands of the sitters had moved before

the table and that the table had not moved first as they had believed. The object of the upper card was to conceal any movement from the sitters for it was found, in later and more elaborate experiments, that if they realised the purpose of the experiment and kept their eyes on the movement indicator no movement of the table would occur.

Unfortunately, as a result of his experiments, Faraday committed himself to the belief that all table turning was the result of unconscious muscular movements and rudely refused to witness the experiments carried out at a later date by William Crookes which showed that this was not a satisfactory explanation in all cases.

It is perhaps needless to mention that the general public did not take kindly to theories of unconscious muscular action. Electricity was a more exciting and mysterious explanation. The author of 'Table-turning and Table-talking considered in connection with the Dictates of Reason and Common Sense', published in Bath, 1853, wrote: 'It is not with the learned theories we wish to have to do . . . we would simply bring common sense to bear on these strange matters'. He then points out that 'there is a subtle matter which pervades all nature' known as electricity. It is true, he says, that we know little about it, but for all that, or because of it, it is not unreasonable to suggest that electricity makes the tables move.

Mr Charles Koch, MA, Ph D, was another who supposed that the circle of experimenters constituted a life-electric battery which charged the table with vital or 'electro-odycal' force and thus made it obedient to the will as a member of the human body (10). Whatever this jargon may be taken to mean there were others who rejected all these explanations as inadequate. For them there was only one explanation: Satanic Agency.

Frank Podmore in his 'Modern Spiritualism' (11) describes how the Rev N. S. Godfrey was convinced that the Devil was at the bottom of it all. 'On 16th June 1853 he, with his wife and curate held a meeting for table turning in the presence of the national school master and others. After several unsuccessful attempts to get the table to confess that it was moved by diabolic agency Mr Godfrey continues: "I was now prepared for a further experiment of a far more solemn character. I whispered to the Schoolmaster to bring a small Bible and lay it on the table when I should tell him. I then caused the table to revolve rapidly and gave the signal. *The Bible was gently laid on the table, and it instantly stopped!* We were horror-struck."' These appalling disclosures were made public in 'Table-moving tested, and proved to be the result of Satanic Agency' (London, 1853).

Further revelations of the Anti-christ were made public in

another pamphlet: 'Table-turning, the Devil's Modern Master-piece' (London, 1853). These described a seance held on 4th July 1853 at which, in answer to leading questions, the table admitted that it was moved by the spirit of a dead man, 'A lost soul, sent from Hell by the Devil for the express purpose of deceiving the circle there assembled and doomed to return to Hell when the nightly task was accomplished'.

On 18th July 1853 the spirit of a dead parishioner confessed 'that he had only once before been in the schoolroom (where the seance was being held), and then not to attend Sunday-school but for the carnal delights of a tea meeting'. When on earth this spirit had, apparently attended the Wesleyan Chapel but now deeply regretted that he had not paid more attention to Mr Godfrey's counsel.

Other clergymen were not slow to follow Mr Godfrey's footsteps. The Rev E. Gillson of Bath in his 'Table-talking: disclosures of Satanic Wonders and Prophetic Signs' revealed that the table had told him that Satan's headquarters were in Rome, while the Rev R. W. Dibdin was convinced that table-turning was the Devil's work for did not the table confess to him that the Pope was the true head of the church and recommend prayer to the Virgin Mary. Other pamphlets could be mentioned full of the same absurdities.

Besides the spiritual dangers already mentioned there were also hazards to health. Some doctors considered that disease might be spread from one sitter to another by the mysterious 'fluid' which was supposed to flow round the circle.

One Leipzig physician warned sitters against gouty affections being so transmitted as well as 'oppressions, palpitations of the heart, vertigos, swoonings, catalepsies, congestions, vomitings and other accidents.' (12)

Terrible stories were told, not only of ladies who fainted, even before the table started to rotate, but also of strong men who succumbed to the influence. 'It is reported of a very robust man, that having in vain tried for an hour to put the table in motion, he was seized by so violent a trembling that he could scarcely carry a bit of bread he held in his hand to his mouth. His oscillations were so strong that he bit his fingers every time the bread approached his lips. He declared himself, that on this occasion it was absolutely impossible to prevent the chattering of his teeth.' (13).

Other physicians, such as Dr Roubaud, considered that there was no danger provided the experiments were carried out with prudence. He concluded that the most favourable sitters were likely to be those of nervous constitution who were in perfect

health. In his experience: 'The union of woman's exquisite sensibility and of man's resolute will, constitutes, as the operators have noticed, one of the most favourable circumstances for the rapid manifestation of the phenomenon; so that when three tables, furnished with chains, are placed side by side, one surrounded by women only, a second by men only, and a third furnished with a mixture of men and women, all three consisting of the same number of individuals, it will always be the latter which will exhibit the first oscillations.' (14).

In the Autumn of 1853 table turning began to lose its popularity. Mrs Hayden returned to America and, alas, Dr Mayer's dream of a whole generation being dignified was not realised. Invitations to tea and table turning became less frequent. The oracular responses of the table were found to be unreliable and Michael Faraday's experiments showed that, in many cases at any rate, there was no mysterious electric fluid or spirits involved, only unconscious muscular action. Table turning, therefore, was soon forgotten by the general public.

Experiments, however, continued abroad. The most important of these were those carried out by the Count Agenor de Gasparin in Valleyres, Switzerland, in the Autumn of 1853. Briefly, under what appears to have been good conditions of control he suspended a table from an arm of a balance with a counterpoise on the other thereby enabling the force required to lift the table to be measured. On one occasion a force of 4.27 kilos (9 lbs 6 ozs) was observed. He also obtained movements without contact, the absence of contact being assured by the sprinkling on the surface of the table of flour and by the experimenters watching both above and below the surface (15).

De Gasparin also noted certain psychological factors which were important. 'When a person is in a state of nervous tension, he or she becomes positively unfit to act upon the table. It must be handled cheerfully, lightly, and deftly, with confidence and authority, but without passion. This is so true that the moment that I took too much interest in things I ceased to obtain obedience. If, on account of public discussions in which I had been engaged, I chanced to desire success too ardently and grew impatient over delay, I had no longer any control over the table; it remained inert.' (16).

He also noted that the presence of some people adversely affected the phenomena. 'There are persons (those among others who are sickly or fatigued) whose presence in a chain is not only of no use, but even detrimental. Destitute themselves of the fluidic force, they seem besides, to hinder its circulation and

transmission. Their good will, their faith in the table are of no avail; as long as they are there the rotations are feeble, the levitations spiritless, the drafts drawn on the table are not honoured; that one of its feet facing them is especially struck with paralysis. Beg them to retire, and immediately the vitality appears again and everything succeeds as if by magic.' (17).

One should not be afraid to experiment with heavy tables once the circle has shown its ability. The Count reported that at the seance on 9th November 1853 buckets of sand and heavy stones were gradually added to the table until there was a weight of 165 lbs on it: 'After a long hesitation, the table lifted several times in succession each of its three legs. It lifted them with a force, a decision, an *élan*, which surprised us. But its strength, already put to so many proofs, could not resist this last one. Bending under the powerful swaying motion imparted by the total mass of 165 lbs, it suddenly broke down, and its massive centre-post was split from top to bottom—to the great peril of the operators on the side of whom the entire load rolled off.' (18).

Victor Hugo, during his exile in Jersey, also indulged, as the saying went, in table turning seances during the years 1853 to 1855. At first he was incredulous: no movements of the table occurred and he was not impressed by Madame Delphine de Girardin's explanation: 'The spirits are not like cab horses, obedient to the whim of those who hire them. They are free and come only when they feel inclined' (19). However, when he joined the group table movements immediately occurred, messages were received and Victor Hugo was greatly impressed.

Regular communication was soon established not only with famous spirits such as Jesus Christ, Mahomet, Plato and Dante but also with fabulous and symbolic images such as the Lion of Androcles, the Ass of Balaam, the Dove of Noah, not to mention The Shadow of the Tomb, The Spirit of Criticism and so on. Many spoke in verse: Victor Hugo found himself challenged to a poetry competition by the spirit of Shakespeare and there were many other strange incidents.

It was not necessary for Victor Hugo to be in contact with the table. Charles Hugo appeared to be the principal medium. Whoever or whatever the visitants might be they were all highly intellectual as befitted the group of literary exiles who gathered round the table. Victor Hugo apparently took these messages very seriously and under the influence of the table fully believed that he was the 'Wise Man' chosen to guide humanity. In the end a sudden madness on the part of Jules Allix frightened the investigators and put an end to the seances(20).

Although the general public lost interest table turning still continued to be popular with the early Spiritualists and many mediums who subsequently became famous first discovered their gifts by sitting at the table. Mediums such as D. D. Home and later on Stainton Moses in the 1870's to name only two of the more reputable, produced astounding table movements more or less as a by-product of even stranger phenomena. Unfortunately, Spiritualist records contain little of real value to those interested in table turning and who can blame them, when such extraordinary phenomena as full form materialisations and the aerial voyage of Mrs Guppy were being reported in the psychic press.

In 1871 William Crookes claimed to have demonstrated the existence of a hitherto unknown force and published his experiments in the *Quarterly Journal of Science* for July of that year. Experiments with Eusapia Palladino in the late 19th and early 20th century, in spite of much controversy, convinced many important investigators of the reality of the phenomena without throwing any light on how they were produced (21). It was not until Dr Crawford's experiments with the Goligher circle in the years 1914 to 1920 that any workable theory was produced (22). Even here there was controversy for after Dr Crawford's death by suicide on 30th July 1920 Dr Fournier d'Albe, as a result of 20 seances, accused the group of fraud (23). He did not, however, attempt to explain how Dr Crawford and others could have been deceived. In 1923 and 1926, Harry Price carried out some interesting experiments with Stella C. at which recording thermometers showed that there was a real fall in temperature during the seances (24).

Today, most people have heard of table turning but it is still a controversial subject: phenomena reported are much the same as in the 1850's and, apart from Dr Crawford's investigations, we are still as ignorant as ever we were on how they are possibly produced. This is regrettable for there is no doubt that the subject cannot be dismissed as being entirely due to fraud and illusion. There is good evidence that, in the presence of some people and under suitable conditions, a strange force is liberated of which they may be quite unconscious. The discredit into which the subject fell in the past was mainly due to the popular belief that either fraud or 'spirits' must be the explanation. This is not the case. Modern methods of infra-red control, etc., can do much to eliminate fraud and our greater knowledge of unconscious processes shows that 'spirits' may also be just as unsatisfactory an explanation.

The subject, however, is not a simple one and the author would

welcome correspondence from those who have had experience of table turning in the past or who would like to start investigations on their own. Letters should be addressed to Mr Brian C. Nisbet, c/o Society for Psychical Research, 1 Adam & Eve Mews, London, W8 6UQ.

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