



Living his writings: the example of neurologist Georges Gilles de la Tourette

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Abstract

Gilles de la Tourette is known for the disease which now bears his name. As one of the closest followers of Jean-Martin Charcot, he always remained faithful to his mentor's views and was one of the most vehement defenders of La Salpêtrière. His activities in the management of hysterics and in hypnotism, gained him most of his lifetime reputation but are now largely forgotten. Gilles de la Tourette had an unusual personality, with hypomanic and histrionic traits. We present some ignored aspects of his life after we have discovered personal letters which illuminate the hidden part of this famous neurologist.

Gilles de la Tourette (1857-1904) was his last name, Georges Albert Edward Brutus were his first names. The historic honour of being the only eponym in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM III and DSM IV) comes at the price of an unfortunate abbreviation: "Tourette's disorder" [1]. Yet had his name been Dupont or Martin, the pathology he described would probably not have had eponymic attributes. His name did not even become famous until nearly 70 years after his death, when AK. and E. Shapiro published their epidemiological work in the USA [2]. They quoted the following exclamation from a patient in 1978: "What a pretty name for such a dreadful disease!"

We do not know why Gilles de la Tourette became interested in sorting out the different forms of chorea. As early as 1881, the year he became a house officer, he had translated, but not annotated, the article by Beard on the jumping Frenchmen of Maine [3]. The translation was published in *Les Archives de Neurologie*; the original article was published in 1880 in *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Diseases*. Charcot had to be aware of this work. Although the exact circumstances are unknown, it is Charcot who encouraged Gilles de la Tourette to persist in these studies: "On the advice of our teacher, Professor Charcot, we have ourselves analysed the works of the three earlier authors (Beard, O'Brien, Hammond), demonstrating in July 1884 that Jumping Frenchmen of Maine, Latah in Malaysia and Myriachit, observed by American officers in Siberia, were one and the same condition" [4]. In his first description,

which made his beautiful name world famous, G. Gilles de la Tourette reported the observation of the baroness of Dampierre, examined by Itard in 1825, and re-examined by Charcot on several occasions. Gilles de la Tourette added seven other cases and published an article – "L'étude sur une affection nerveuse caractérisé par l'incoordination motrice accompagné d'écholalie et de coprolalie" (Study of a nervous condition characterised by motor incoordination accompanied by echolalia and coprolalia) – in 1885 in *Les Archives de Neurologie*. He was still a house officer at the time and did not defend his doctoral dissertation in medicine until 1886 [5]. Except for one article published in *La Semaine Médicale* in 1899, relating a new case in the form of a consultation as was fashionable at the time, Gilles de la Tourette never again studied the "convulsive tic disorder" [6]. It was thus the work of his youth that assured his later celebrity.

This precocity shaped his biography, which we would like to examine from a new angle, to demonstrate how his personal life was closely related to his professional life, his work to his writings; in summary, how he lived the life of his writings.

Journalism

Gilles de la Tourette was interested in history from his adolescence. His curiosity led him to study the life of Théophraste Renaudot (1586-1653), who was born in the city of Loudun, close to his own birthplace in Saint-Gervais in Poitou. His renowned compatriot, a physician himself,

accompanied Richelieu to Paris. He imported the first pawnshops, or monts de piété, to France, and also instigated free and charitable consultations as well as a bureau d'adresse et de rencontre, which was a forerunner to employment agencies. Gilles de la Tourette, a positivist and progressive, was nothing but fascinated by this important figure. On 30 May 1631, Renaudot launched his famous Gazette. This first French daily paper was a propaganda mouthpiece for Richelieu, who granted it a monopoly over the press in 1635, to the detriment of its Parisian competitors. While still a house officer, Gilles de la Tourette wrote a biography of Renaudot that was published in 1884 [7]. It is impossible not to see his fascination for the written word, which made him so prolific. Apart from his well-known publications on hypnosis and diverse medical subjects, Gilles de la Tourette used the mainstream press to publicise the works of the La Salpêtrière School.

Starting in 1892 and using the pseudonym Paracelse, he wrote as a scientific columnist on madness and its depiction in the theatre, and also on crimes of passion: l'Etat mental de Froufrou [8], La Folie de la Reine Junana [9], A propos du procès Cauvin: l'état mental de Marie Michel [10], L'état mental de feu Ravachol [11], L'épilogue de l'affaire Eyraud-Bompard [12].

In 1882 Gilles de la Tourette developed a profound and lasting friendship with the journalist Georges Montorgueil, who like him was born in 1857 and wrote the news column for the journal L'Eclair [13]. Drawing his inspiration from Renaudot, Gilles de la Tourette had his friend publish not only medical news from the works of the La Salpêtrière School, thereby assuring its notoriety, but also day-to-day correspondence ("22 June 1894: I am writing first and foremost to ask you not to forget our complaint concerning a shelter for our children at the Tuileries; in case of rain there is nothing, whereas everywhere on the Champs Elysées and in the Luxembourg gardens, there are shelters... Thank you in advance for the children. Affectionately yours. GdT").

Another example dates from 1894. Gilles de la Tourette took a passionate interest in the defence of Dr. Lafitte, accused of helping with an abortion. On one hand, he informed the medical profession by publishing an article in the Progrès Médical, run by his friend Bourneville; on the other, he provided the arguments that Montorgueil would use to orchestrate a press campaign [14]. This led to a three-column cover story in L'Eclair on

28 August 1894. In a long letter addressed to the editor of the newspaper Le Temps, he took Dr. Lafitte's defence: "Dear Mr. Editor-in-chief, Allow me as a delegate of the medical press association to protest against the manner in which your employee has misrepresented the sentiment guiding us in our defence of Dr. Lafitte... If the editor of Le Temps is not convinced as we are that this ill-fated man is innocent, he could, instead of discussing self-interest, at least accord a few humanitarian feelings to those taking care of this unfortunate family. I dare to hope, Mr. Editor-in-Chief, that you will out of fairness agree to publish this letter." The complicity between Gilles de la Tourette and Montorgueil is also evident in the many letters they exchanged, such as this one: "15 October 1894, My dear friend, Thank you for the Lafitte affair. Here is the latest news. My wife has been very kindly received by Mrs. Casimir Perier, the wife of the President of the Republic. She gave her a petition by Dr. Lafitte's two small twins. This is of course between us, nothing for the newspaper. I appear often enough in the papers of Renaudot. What a nice article I will give you if mercy does not win... The behaviour of the Seine-and-Oise public prosecutor is disgusting. PS: Do not tell any of your colleagues about my wife seeing Mrs. Casimir Perrier. They may not be as discreet as you are."

These examples, among others, explain the words of his friend and hagiographer Paul Legendre. At the beginning of his biography on Gilles de la Tourette, he wrote: "With his liking for history and literature he could have been tempted to desert his medical school classes and the hospital theatres for classes at the Sorbonne and the Collège de France; he perhaps would have slipped into literary and political journals and exclusively worked as a publicist, instead of finding in journalism a mere reprieve from his medical career" [15].

Hysteria

Gilles de la Tourette enrolled in medical school in 1876, becoming a non-resident student after his second attempt in 1878 and a house officer in 1881 when he was 24 years old. He completed his house officership at La Salpêtrière Hospital in 1884. In 1887 he became a specialist registrar under JM. Charcot, who was then at the height of his glory, having been appointed to the Chair of Disorders of the Nervous System in 1882. By that time, JM. Charcot had already made his major contributions to neurology. He had described Parkinson's disease, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis,

multiple sclerosis and his theories on cerebral localisation. Having been interested for the past ten years in hysteria, he found in Gilles de la Tourette his most zealous disciple for spreading his ideas. JM. Charcot would never publish a book in his own name and in French again. He tasked his students with publishing the works that would assure his celebrity among his contemporaries, but provoke the most controversy later on. These students included Gilles de la Tourette, Richer, Guinon, Blocq and Bourneville [16]. He only gave his views in the prefaces he accorded to each of them. Only Gilles de la Tourette would get three prefaces, each of them on hysteria, which is a good indication of the particular esteem JM. Charcot had for him [17]. It should be noted that JM. Charcot also published two articles, now forgotten, in English under his own name in the mainstream American journal Forum of New York: "Magnetism and Hypnotism" in 1889 and "Hypnotism and Crime" in 1890 [18,19].

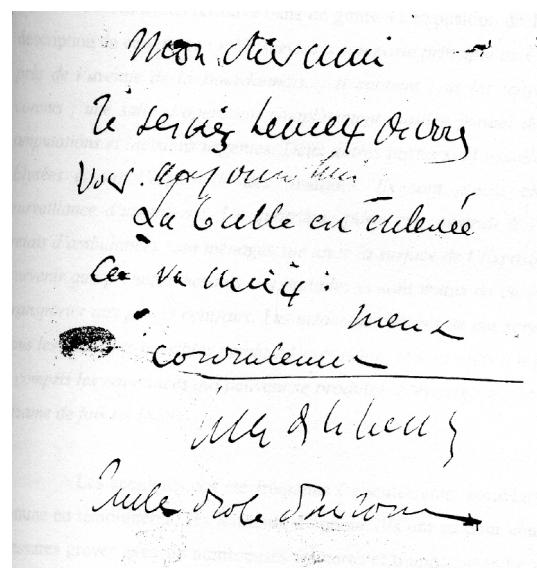
JM. Charcot always encouraged his students to find the illustration of his ideas on hysteria in art. It is once again in Loudun where Gilles de la Tourette found the best example. In 1886 he wrote Soeur Jeanne des Anges supérieure des ursulines de Loudun XVIIè s, autobiographie d'une hystérique possédée (Sister Jeanne des Anges, mother superior of the Ursulines in Loudun during the 17th century, an autobiographical case of hysterical possession), with a preface for the first time by JM. Charcot [20].

But it should be noted that Gilles de la Tourette was a house officer under P. Brouardel and became a qualified forensic physician in 1891. It is thus interesting to see the changes in his forensic view on hysteria and hypnotism, particularly in light of the controversy with the Nancy School and Bernheim. In 1887 in his book L'hypnotisme et les états analogues du point de vue médico-légal (Hypnotism and similar states from the forensic point of view), Gilles de la Tourette described two examples of hysteria (the famous Blanche Wittman and Ms. H.E.), who were induced to commit a crime while under hypnosis and who declared they actually committed the act before waking up [21]. Yet Gilles de la Tourette would fiercely defend the opposite point of view on two occasions.

The first was a criminal affair that fascinated the public in 1889-1890, the Gouffé affair, named after a bailiff. Gouffé was hanged by Michel Eyraud. The latter had been hiding behind a curtain while Gouffé was invited to lie down on a sofa by Gabrielle Bompard, the flirtatious accomplice

who had drawn him into this trap and delicately slipped a rope around his neck during supposed foreplay. The murderers did not find the expected savings and left the body in a trunk. G. Bompard voluntarily turned herself in a few months later. Her lawyers built her defence on the premise that she had acted under hypnosis, having been placed in this state by M. Eyraud. Liégeois, representing Bernheim and the Nancy School, came to court to demonstrate his own experiments, which were supposed to prove that a crime could be committed by suggestion. But the appointed experts, P. Brouardel and G. Ballet, ridiculed his deposition. Eyraud was convicted to death and Bompard to 20 years imprisonment [22]. On this occasion Gilles de la Tourette wrote the memorable Épilogue d'un procès célèbre (Epilogue of a famous trial), proclaiming victory for the theories of the La Salpêtrière School, which denied all possibility of a violent act under hypnosis and by suggestion [23].

The second occasion was a letter to his friend Montorgueil: "14 January 1893. My dear Sir, I do not know what you do to make your articles so lively and so precise with so little information. I will give you an idea for another one. I wanted to write it for my scientific chronicle in the Revue hebdomadaire, but I do not have time at the moment and I am afraid that the news will fade. Is it possible to put someone to sleep against his wishes? Answer: no. Everything they say is foolishness. Can we convince you? Please do me the favour of having an (informal) supper with us Friday 20 January at 7:30 pm. You will meet my friends Cravard and Lembert who just completed their work on a treatise of surgical and obstetrical anaes-



Letter from Gilles de la Tourette to Montorgueil

thesia. I will end the matter by telling you "orally" the conditions under which someone can be put to sleep against his will (or against my own will; I am on bad terms with the Academy). And we will drink to the health of Théophraste Renaudot, who is hugely indebted to you. I trust you will come. Sincerely, Gilles de la Tourette."

During this same year, on 6 December 1893, a few months after Gilles de la Tourette had lost a son to meningitis and his teacher Charcot had passed away, a young woman by the name of Rose Kamper fired on him in his consultation office after he refused to give her the money she demanded. The wounds were only superficial. Shortly after the incident, the following was reported: "When asked why she had attempted to kill the doctor, this woman repeated that she lived in poverty and had long ago, either voluntarily, or without her knowledge [sic], agreed to be a subject for hypnotism experiments at La Salpêtrière. By doing so she had lost her will to such an extent that she found it impossible to continue working, and consequently, asking for money from those who had taken away her livelihood appeared logical to her." That same night Gilles de la Tourette wrote to Montorgueil with an unsteady hand: "I would be happy to see you today. The bullet has been taken out. I am better, better. Sincerely. Gilles de la Tourette. What a strange story." And on 8 December, Montorgueil published a complete article in the *L'Eclair*! This trivial event sparked considerable media coverage, occurring a few months after the public dispute in a courtroom between the Nancy School and the La Salpêtrière School. Certain newspapers went as far as to insinuate a publicity stunt orchestrated by Gilles de la Tourette. In 1895, Gilles de la Tourette published the third volume of his *Traité de l'hystérie* (Treatise on hysteria), which JM. Charcot revised a few days before his death. After that he wrote only one more article about hysteria in 1900 [23, 24, 25]. In sum, we can say that Gilles de la Tourette developed theories of criminal suggestion, served as a legal expert arguing against the precedent, and was an indirect victim of these theories! [26]

Personality

Gilles de la Tourette was born in Poitou on 30 October 1857 into a family of physicians. His childhood and adolescence were marked in part by his brilliant academic performance which led him to obtain his baccalauréat at age 16. But he also had trouble fitting in socially during this time, particularly as a boarder at the upper secondary school in

Chatellerault, where he was constantly breaking the rules and being reprimanded. His mother considered him immature and forced him to start his medical studies in Poitiers, fearing that he might get into trouble in Paris. He would stay in Poitiers for three years.

His friend Paul Legendre, who met him in 1881 at the beginning of his house officership, described him this way: "He was a jovial and exuberant boy, with the gift of the gab and a presumptuous tone. Very passionate, but impatient, he was not a man to let his opponents slowly run out of arguments... he flew off the handle at the first contradiction..." Freud met Gilles de la Tourette on a trip to Paris, during a Tuesday evening with JM. Charcot, and mentioned him in a letter to his wife, commenting on his hot-headed and fiery character: "He's an authentic southern Frenchman". Gilles de la Tourette did not display political opinions any more than JM. Charcot, but he shared the strong and anticlerical republican ideas of his teacher. He was a friend of Bourneville and supported him in his fight to secularise the hospitals. A song from the staff room bears witness to this [15, 27, 28, 29]:

"M'sieu Gilles de la Tourette
N'est pas d'humeur facile
Quand avec des pincettes
On touche à Bourneville".

*("Mr. Gilles de la Tourette
Has no easy temper
When we poke fun
At Bourneville")*

Léon Daudet painted a harsh portrait in *Devant la douleur*: "Gilles de la Tourette was ugly, like a Papuan idol covered with patches of hair... He had a raspy and scorched voice, abrupt gestures and a grotesque demeanour. He was seen as unusual. He would broach an interesting subject, then let it drop in favour of another. He disconcerted his teachers with his quirks that became increasingly frequent and less and less funny. He pranced about, jumping and dancing when people drew his attention to certain coincidences. He would repeat, "That is my very strong conviction".

Gilles de la Tourette thus had an unusual personality, with hypomanic and histrionic traits. He was intelligent but unstable, hyperactive and combative. The disease that would claim his life aggravated all of these traits.

Syphilis

Gilles de la Tourette was a house officer under Fournier. While he accepted that tabes dorsalis was due to syphilis, he never agreed with his former teacher on the syphilitic origin of dementia in general paralysis [30]. In Paris vécu, Léon Daudet gives his version of how Gilles de la Tourette's disease revealed itself publicly. "Pierre Marie, who much later attracted considerable attention with his localisation of articulated speech, was very disciplined and modest, keeping very much to the background: "Yes Sir, no Sir, perfectly Sir". He was attractive, very kind, resembling a shy lawyer more than a physician. He stood in contrast to Gilles de la Tourette, who was hirsute, categorically talkative and absurd and would die insane. Gilles de la Tourette's delirium, resulting from a neglected treponemal infection, became publicly apparent in the most comical way. While conducting an exam he asked the candidate: "Who are, Sir, the three greatest French physicians of the 19th century?" The student thought about it and answered: "Laennec, Duchenne de Boulogne and Charcot", because he knew that Gilles de la Tourette had been Charcot's student. "No, Sir, that is incorrect: it was my grand-father, my father and me, mate. That is why in this room the examiner put his own toque d'agrégé on the head of the speechless young man, that is why a potassium bromide statue will be erected for me!" The public assistance archives showed that Gilles de la Tourette was on leave for health reasons starting 1 November 1901 [31]. After the resignation of Brissaud as the chair of Medical History in 1900, Gilles de la Tourette considered applying for the position. The 38-page manuscript he wrote for this purpose but never submitted contains pathetic passages indicating a flight of ideas, megalomania and the loss of his critical faculties: "We think it a magnificent service we have rendered to the history of medicine by bringing attention to these old treasures in our museums and also by making them appealing. These documents are so specific and so accurate in their representation... and were almost completely ignored until now and unknown to most of the public and also to those physicians most specialised in the posthumous objects of medicine. We have also published, as an appendix, original texts describing the most beautiful discoveries in ancient and modern art, with a minimum of 300 to 400 drawings, which could also constitute a superb volume to the glory of French medicine. We should always consult it to constantly keep in mind this parallel and admirable evolution of the history of medicine and the art of sculpture, pain-



Gilles de la Tourette

ting and costumes in France and abroad, with illustrated documents that are unrivalled in the world. They appear only rarely in common books, aside perhaps from the important work of the honest Ambroise Paré, who must have been an excellent artist as his book is adorned with marvels." He was hospitalised involuntarily at the medical facility in Bois de Céry, close to Lausanne, accompanied by JB Charcot, his teacher's son and fellow student, who explained that they were going to give a medical opinion on a famous patient at the facility. Gilles de la Tourette became psychotic and suffered from dementia. He was the victim of repeated convulsions and died on 22 May 1904.

What a unique journey for a unique personality!

As the biographer of Théophraste Renaudot, the inventor of journalism, Gilles de la Tourette seemed to take profound inspiration in his subject's work, becoming a prolific author and debater on medical as well as artistic subjects, and on the events of his time, in multiple periodicals and several books. He knew how to use his close friendship with an influential journalist to publicise his results and those of his revered teacher JM. Charcot, but he also used this relationship to obtain unofficial information, as Renaudot did with Richelieu.

As an intransigent spokesman of the dogmas on hysteria from the La Salpêtrière School, he argued against the possibility of crimes committed under the influence of a hypnotic state and by suggestion and ultimately became a direct victim of these ideas when a woman attempted to kill him.

Steadfastly opposing Fournier with his peremptory view that general paralysis was not of syphilitic origin, he ended up dying from this disease in a state of dementia and neurological deterioration.

At the very beginning of his career as a neurologist, Gilles de la Tourette spent less than three years extracting a new pathological entity from the descriptive chaos of chorea. Bearing his name, Gilles de la Tourette disorder is definitively associated with him. Witness accounts by his contemporaries about his behaviour suggest that he exhibited psychopathological traits that are now part of this disorder's description.

Thus Gilles de la Tourette truly had the life of his writings.

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