

Historical Review

Living His Writings: The Example of Neurologist G. 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 helped build his reputation during his lifetime, 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 based on the discovery of personal letters which illuminate the hidden side of this famous neurologist. © 2010 Movement Disorder Society

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Gilles de la Tourette (1857–1904) (Figure 1) was his last name, Georges Albert Edward Brutus were his first names. The historic honor 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.”^{1,2} His name did not even become famous until nearly 70 years after his death, when A.K. and E. Shapiro published their epidemiological work in United States.^{3,4}

We have had the chance to discover previously unknown data on the private life of Gilles de la Tourette. One part consists of his descendants' donation to the Museum Charbonneau Lassay of Loudun, near the birthplace of Gilles de la Tourette. We have exhumed the other part, a prolific correspondence between Gilles de la Tourette and the journalist Georges Montorgueil between 1892 and 1904, currently kept in the National

Archives in Paris. From these two sources, we propose a different perspective of Gilles de la Tourette's life.^{5,6}

It seems that Gilles de la Tourette was interested early in his medical studies in the observation of chorea, since he translated for *Les Archives de Neurologie* into French, as early as 1881, the year he became a house officer, the 1880 historical paper of the American physician Beard on the “the jumping Frenchmen of Maine.”^{7,8,9} In his first description in 1885, G. Gilles de la Tourette reported eight cases for the “Study of a nervous condition characterized by motor incoordination accompanied by echolalia and coprolalia.”¹⁰ He was still a house officer at the time and did not defend his doctoral dissertation in medicine until 1886. It was thus the work of his youth that assured his later celebrity.^{11,12}

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

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FIG. 1. Portrait of G. Gilles de la Tourette.

of Théophraste Renaudot (1586–1653). Gilles de la Tourette, a positivist and progressive, was nothing but fascinated by this important figure. On May 30, 1631, Renaudot launched his famous *Gazette*. This first French daily paper was a propaganda mouthpiece for Richelieu. While still a house officer, Gilles de la Tourette wrote a biography of Renaudot that was published in 1884.¹³ It is impossible not to see his fascination for the written word, which made him so prolific. Apart from his well-known publications on diverse medical subjects, Gilles de la Tourette used the mainstream press to publicize 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,¹⁴ La Folie de la Reine Junana,¹⁵ A propos du procès Cauvin: l'état mental de Marie Michel,¹⁶ L'état mental de feu Ravachol,¹⁷ L'épilogue de l'affaire Eyr-aud-Bompard.¹⁸

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'Éclair*.⁶ 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.

An 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 Bourne-

ville; on the other, he provided the arguments that Montorgueil would use to orchestrate a press campaign.¹⁹ This led to a three-column cover story in *L'Éclair* on 28 August 1894.

At the beginning of his biography on Gilles de la Tourette, Paul Legendre wrote: "... 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."²⁰

HYSTERIA

Gilles de la Tourette enrolled in medical school in 1876, becoming a house officer in 1881 when he was 24 years old. In 1887, he became a specialist registrar under J.M. Charcot, who was then at the height of his glory.²¹ By that time, J.M. Charcot had already made his major contributions to neurology. Having been interested for the past 10 years in hysteria, he found in Gilles de la Tourette his most zealous disciple for spreading his ideas. J.M. 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.²² He only gave his views in the prefaces he accorded to each of his students. Only Gilles de la Tourette would get three prefaces, each of them on hysteria, which is a good indication of the particular esteem J.M. Charcot had for him (Figure 2).²³

J.M. 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 "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 J.M. Charcot.²⁴

Gilles de la Tourette became a qualified forensic physician in 1891. It is thus interesting to see the changes in his forensic view on hysteria and hypnosis, particularly in light of the controversy with the Nancy School and Bernheim. In 1887, in his book "Hypnotism and similar states from the forensic point of view," Gilles de la Tourette described two examples of hysteria. These patients were induced to commit a crime while under hypnosis and declared they actually committed the act before waking up.²⁵ 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. Gouffé, a bailiff, was hanged by

Ville de LOUDUN
Musée CHARBONNEAU-LASSAY
217, Boulevard St-Germain

DON de
M. Guy
DALPAYRAT
et de
M^{me} Elisabeth
FOLLET née
DALPAYRAT

Dimanche
Mon cher Pères de la Tourette,
J'ai eu un accès de folie ce soir
même - J'en suis sûr de retour
pour la nuit de Mardi
Matin - Remède le malade
à Vendredi je suis revenue
pour ce jour là, et comme
J'ai eu un accès de folie
de nuit j'en suis sûr de retour
la dernière - En mon
absence faite la consultation
Mardi
soit au public et je suis
venue à la nuit malade
Remède le à Vendredi, je
en suis sûr de retour
ava la dernière cela

FIG. 2. Letter from Charcot to Gilles de la Tourette.

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. Bompard voluntarily turned herself in a few months later. Her lawyers built her defense on the premise that she had acted under hypnosis, having been placed in this state by M. Eyraud. Liégeois, representing Bernheim, 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.²⁶ On this occasion Gilles de la Tourette wrote the memorable "Epilogue of a famous trial," proclaiming victory for the theories of the La Salpêtrière School, which denied all possibil-

ity of a violent act under hypnosis and by suggestion.²⁷

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. Sincerely, Gilles de la Tourette."

During this same year, on December 6, 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. "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, 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 (Figure 3)". And on December 8,

Mon cher Montorgueil
Je serais heureux de vous
voir. Je suis en train
de l'aller en ville
Ce va mieux :
cordialement
Gilles de la Tourette
14 Janvier 1893

FIG. 3. Letter to Montorgueil written after Gilles de la Tourette was shot.

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. 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!^{27–30}

PERSONALITY

Gilles de la Tourette was born on October 30, 1857 into a family of physicians. His adolescence was 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.³¹

Gilles de la Tourette did not display political opinions any more than J.M. 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 secularize the hospitals.^{32,33}

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 demeanor. He was seen as unusual.”

Gilles de la Tourette thus had an unusual personality. Stanley Finger notes “Gilles de la Tourette was an individual of great talent, subject to overexcitement and extraordinary activity.” He was intelligent but unstable, hyperactive and combative, with hypomanic and histrionic traits. Psychopathology occurs in ~90% of patients with Tourette’s disease. Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder is common, and bipolar affective disorder may be related in some individuals.^{34–36} Assessing whether Gilles de la Tourette experienced manic episodes remains a challenge. Nevertheless, we can argue that the disease that would claim his life aggravated all of his own 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.³⁷

In *Paris vécu*, Léon Daudet gives his version of how Gilles de la Tourette’s syphilis revealed itself publicly. Pierre Marie [...] was very disciplined and modest. [...] 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 1901.³⁸ 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. [...] We have also published, as an appendix, original texts describing the most beautiful discoveries in ancient and modern art, with a minimum of 300–400 drawings, which could also constitute a superb volume to the glory of French medicine.”

At the turn of the century, neurosyphilis was a relatively wide-spread disease. Gilles de la Tourette was hospitalized involuntarily at the medical facility in Bois de Céry, founded in 1873, close to Lausanne. This institution still exists. Information concerning Gilles de la Tourette’s syphilis can be found there: Albert Mahaim (1867–1925), medical director, received Gilles de la Tourette, who suffered from progressive paralysis and several years later died in our clinic. He came to Switzerland to prevent a scandal; the Parisian newspapers had previously portrayed Gilles de la Tourette as an insane psychiatrist.

For admission to hospital Céry the physician Jean Baptiste Charcot (1867–1936) declared in a statement, that Gilles had been suffering from episodes of melancholia for 2 years and wanted to commit suicide and subsequently entered a state of delusions of grandeur

and megalomania. Neurological examination lead to the diagnosis of parietic neurosyphilis. After Gilles de la Tourette's arrival at the hotel in Lucerne he became more and more agitated. [...] Charcot, who had been a fellow student and was his teacher's son, was asked intervene. He told Gilles de la Tourette about an imaginary famous patient waiting for him at hospital Céry, who was requesting Dr. Gilles de la Tourette's professional advice. Gilles de la Tourette arrived on May 28, 1901, but no famous patient was waiting for him. Instead this was the beginning of his institutionalization. On June 1, he became so upset that he had to be transferred to a cell."^{39,40} Gilles de la Tourette was the victim of repeated convulsions and died on May 22, 1904.

WHAT A UNIQUE JOURNEY FOR A UNIQUE PERSONALITY!

As the biographer of Théophraste Renaudot, 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, in multiple periodicals. He knew how to use his close friendship with an influential journalist to publicize his results and those of his revered teacher J.M. 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 3 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 behavior 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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