

Georges Gilles de la Tourette

1857-1904



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Georges Gilles de la Tourette, a neurologist and prolific medical writer at the end of the 19th century belonged to a group of students closest to Jean-Martin Charcot (1825-1893). Charcot writes in a preface: "Gilles de la Tourette says that he contented himself with explaining my teaching and organising my works and those of my pupils. It is the first time he has forgotten he is one of my pupils, and one of the best. He does not mention his own works, which are of the highest importance in their domain." Maurice de Fleury, also known as Horace Bianchon (1860-1931), would say: "Charcot likes and values his pupils only in direct proportion to the work they produce under his direction, and for him." Gilles de la Tourette would be the most prolific of his pupils.

Georges Gilles de la Tourette was born on 30 October 1857 in a small village near Loudun in west-central France. He was the first of four children. His father was a merchant but belonged to a family of physicians. Georges lacked discipline and had a difficult character with unpre-

table mood swings. He was peculiar, but exhibited a keen intelligence.

He enrolled in medical school in Paris at twenty years old, three years after having begun his studies at the medical school in Poitiers. In 1881, he became an "interne" (house officer) at the Paris public hospitals. He counted Paul Brouardel (1837-1906) and Alfred Fournier (1832-1914) among his teachers. In 1884, he started studying under JM. Charcot (1825-1893), rapidly becoming one of his favourite pupils, advancing to "chef de clinique" (specialist registrar) for two years (1887-1888).

Although it is not clear why, Gilles de la Tourette was interested in chorea well before meeting Charcot. Indeed, as early as 1881, he translated the 1880 historical paper by the American physician Georges Beard (1839-1883) on the Jumping Frenchmen of Maine. The translation was published in the Archives de Neurologie without any annotations in French. As noted by C. Lajonchere et al. (1996), Gilles de la Tourette took liberties in his translation and misrepresented the original material.

JM. Charcot encouraged his pupil to persist in these studies; Gilles de la Tourette explains: "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". De Fleury writes: "Charcot provides the ideas, his students provide the scientific building materials which he controls and centralises. But there is no way he would forget a service rendered: whoever works for him is rewarded one hundred times over." Charcot rewarded Gilles de la Tourette by giving his name to the first disease he described. This first description appeared in 1885 in *Les Archives de Neurologie*: "Etude sur une affection nerveuse caractérisée par de l'incoordination motrice accompagnée d'écholalie et de coprolalie" (Study of a nervous condition characterised by motor incoordination accompanied by echolalia and coprolalia), in which he included the observation of the Marquise de Dampierre, initially published by J. Itard (1774-1838) in 1825.

We need to notice that his article was published one year before he defended his doctoral dissertation in 1886. Except for one occasion in 1899, when another clinical case was described in *La Semaine Médicale*, G. Gilles de la Tourette never again studied convulsive tic disorder. In the *Semaine Médicale* of 15 September 1886, Charcot clarified the distinction between chorea and convulsive tic disorder, writing: "We have proven that these people have what I would call a particular form of mental alienation...". "We" may mean "Gilles de la Tourette and I", but may also be the emphatic "we" meaning "I", indicating Charcot's significant role in this description. But given that "his" anatomical-clinical method had not been used, since these patients had no detectable neurological lesions, he preferred to attribute the description to one of his pupils. It should also be noted G. Guinon, who succeeded Gilles de la Tourette as Charcot's chef de clinique, made several significant changes to the initial clinical picture for this pathology. For example, Guinon contested the term "motor incoordination", showing that the movements were involuntary but correctly coordinated, and that the development fluctuated, including periods of remission.

Pursuing the experiments started by EJ. Marey, Gilles de la Tourette wrote his thesis in 1886 on walking disorders, inspired by his former teacher FT. Damaschino and illustrated with engravings made from the photos of A. Londe, Charcot's photographer.

From 1884 to 1887, Gilles de la Tourette served as Charcot's private secretary. During this time, he became impassioned by hysteria, zealously compiling the experiments and theories passed on by his teacher, who had been focusing on the topic since 1870. JM Charcot appreciated G. Gilles de la Tourette's devotion and capacity for work. "In 1884, becoming an interne at La Salpêtrière, I was already thinking of becoming the transmitter of the doctrine put forward by our eminent master on hysteria" (*L'hypnotisme et les états analogues au point de vue médico-légal*, p. XII). "The teaching of our master had supplied us the unwavering bases". Charcot said: "In hystero-epilepsy, there is no trace of epilepsy, there is only the appearance of it". In 1889, Gilles de la Tourette wanted to give his teacher a biological diagnostic tool for hysteria. In his lesson on 19 March 1889, Charcot wrote: "Gilles de la Tourette and Cathelineau (another of my students) have done important research, the results of which, if confirmed, would constitute a real discovery. The epileptoid phase of the great hysterical attack is only epileptic in appearance, to such an extent that the urine of hystero-epileptics reveals decreased rather than increased urea levels." In his preface to *Traité de l'hystérie*, Charcot affirmed the validity of this examination: "Today, we are no longer waiting for this confirmation". Related to this topic, in 1890 Gilles de la Tourette published a book entitled *La nutrition dans l'hystérie*, which was rapidly forgotten... and of little interest. Hysteria was, however, his favourite subject. In 1886, he resuscitated the biography of Soeur Jeanne des anges, a "possessed hysteric", for the benefit of literature; in 1887, to give an account of hysteria's representation during previous centuries, Charcot published with P. Richer *Les Démoniaques dans l'art* (The possessed in art).

When he arrived at La Salpêtrière, Gilles de la Tourette had published a historical biography of Théophraste Renaudot, also from the Poitou region and the initiator of print media under Richelieu and Louis XIII in 1631. This was a sign of Gilles de la Tourette's passion for the written word and the press. Always passionate about Renaudot, he organised a fund to erect a statue of his journalistic idol in Paris (a bronze by Boucher, located rue de Lutèce, which was melted down during World War II by the Germans). His passion for the press led him to work with a journalist at *L'Eclair* and *Le Temps*, Octave Lebesgue, also known as G. Montorgueil (1857-1933), to whom he confidentially provided information on the experiments at La Salpêtrière, before this information became widely available, to increase the work's notoriety and dissemination. In the medical field,

in 1888, he helped create the *La Nouvelle Iconographie de La Salpêtrière*, for which he wrote several articles until 1900.

His unfailing and blind attachment to his teacher was once again apparent in 1889 when Charcot asked him to set up the "vibratory techniques" at La Salpêtrière (resurrecting the "dancing chair" to treat Parkinson's) and suspensions for treating locomotor ataxia resulting from tabes. While there were many accounts of the suffering caused by suspensions (Daudet, *Devant la douleur*), Gilles de la Tourette wrote: "While we do not claim this procedure to be a panacea, we can say that thanks to suspensions, Charcot has achieved the most encouraging improvement in patients who have been coming to La Salpêtrière for several years, especially since ataxia seems to have defied therapeutic efforts until now". This is once again a hagiographic account by Gilles de la Tourette; Charcot stopped using these poorly tolerated, ineffective treatments in 1892.

The year 1893 began well for him. He became a hospital physician and was awarded with the *Légion d'honneur*. But soon afterwards, he lost one of his sons to meningitis. Then his venerated teacher Charcot died in August. At the end of this cruel year, a patient came to his home and fired a gun at him. She accused him of making her incapable of earning her living after the hypnosis she underwent at La Salpêtrière. This was the tragic epilogue to a period marked by the conflict opposing Charcot's school and H. Bernheim's school in Nancy. Gilles de la Tourette had recently boasted of the "victory" achieved by his teacher, who denied the possibility of committing a crime under hypnosis.

In 1895, he passed the high-level, competitive agrégation exam, becoming a forensics professor. He only taught neurology for a few months in 1899, replacing F. Raymond, who was ill. As a Republican progressive and a friend of DM. Bourneville and H. Millerand (a member of Parliament) he was appointed head physician for the World's Fair in Paris in 1900 and organised the emergency services with remarkable skill. This was to be his last public activity.

Gilles de la Tourette had been A. Fournier's interne and was reluctant to accept the syphilitic origin of tabes. His book *Les myélites syphilitiques*, published in 1899, dealt with this subject. As the sad irony of history would have it, Gilles de la Tourette died in 1904 after spending 3 years in a Swiss mental institution, following general paralysis, a pathology whose syphilitic origins he had refuted. His behavioural problems dated back at least four years and had been reported in the

press. *La Revue Médicale* wrote: "This neuropathologist continued to see patients until the day his family found him completely naked, flailing wildly before a terrified patient hiding behind some furniture in the doctor's office where he had come to consult about... his health". Mrs. Gilles de la Tourette tended to her husband until the end, with support from his colleagues and friends, JB. Charcot and E. Brissaud. Brissaud wrote to her at the end of 1901: "I realise what conflict it must create in you when you have to face the horrible abjurations of your beloved patient. [...] All your husband's friends offer you their assistance, but I insist on being the first amongst them". AJ. Lees has written: "Despite this abrasive and capricious temperament Gilles de la Tourette gained considerable respect from a number of his pupils".

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