Claire, Lise, Jean, Nadia, and Gisèle: Preliminary Notes towards a Characterisation of Pierre Janet's Psychasthenia

Sonu Shamdasani

Do you suffer from obsessions, impulsions, mental manias, the madness of doubt, tics, agitations, hypochondria, phobias, deliriums of contact, anguish, feelings of estrangement or depersonalisations? Do you dream of sacrilegious acts, of exposing your body to random passers by? Do you daydream and ruminate (perhaps you are doing so now)? Then you, as Pierre Janet would have it, may well suffer from psychasthenia.

For historians suffering from ‘hysteria studies fatigue syndrome’ – HSFS, to give it an acronym – the study of psychasthenia has much to recommend it. For it is a field as yet unpopulated by literary critics, post-colonial theorists, feminists, art critics, post-structuralists, and last but by no means least, psychoanalysts of all persuasions. And it is likely to long remain so.¹

Having just completed a work, which as William James put it, has clung too long to my fingers, the symptoms of psychasthenia – exhaustion and the quest for excitement and stimulation – are not foreign to this contributor.² Thus this essay, as opposed to simply being a study of psychasthenia, is likely to bear its stigmata. So if there be a psychasthenic style, somewhat akin to the neurasthenic discourse identified by Tom Lutz,³ this chapter is proffered as an exhibit.

The advent of psychotherapy

In the medical world at the end of the nineteenth century, a new configuration came into being. A plethora of self-styled psychotherapies emerged, replete with clusters of practitioners, diseases and patients. This was achieved through complex negotiations between medicine, psychiatry, neurology and psychology. As Charles Rosenberg notes, until the middle of the nineteenth century, ‘all medicine was necessarily and ubiquitously
‘psychosomatic’ and ‘every clinician had to be something of a psychiatrist and family therapist.’ It was in the last third of the century that ‘emotional ills, altered mood states, and even patterns of behavioural deviance were for the first time widely advanced, if not universally accepted, as legitimate diseases in and of themselves.’ Concepts of functional nervous disorders and psychoneuroses arose, which gave rise to new ways of framing distress and of being distressed, together with new forms of self-identity, that are still with us today.

According to the still persistent Freudian legend, the birth of modern psychotherapy is solely ascribed to the sign of Freud. This has obscured the breadth and multifaceted nature of these developments, leading to the mystification not only of the development of psychotherapy, but also of psychoanalysis itself. As John Burnham perceptively noted decades ago:

In the United States Freud became the agent not so much of psychoanalysis as of other ideas current at the time. Psychoanalysis was understood as environmentalism, as sexology, as a theory of psychogenic etiology of the neuroses. Likewise when Freud's teachings gained attention and even adherents, his followers often believed not so much in his work as in evolution, in psychotherapy, and in the modern world. Misunderstanding the nature of these substitutions has led to the vastly over-inflated view of the significance of psychoanalysis in twentieth century culture. In 1929 the Bostonian psychopathologist Morton Prince noted: 'Freudian psychology had flooded the field like a full rising tide, and the rest of us were left submerged like clams buried in the sands at low water.' One of these clams was Pierre Janet (1857-1947). Speaking of Freud and Breuer, he complained:

They spoke of ‘psychoanalysis’ where I had spoken of ‘psychological analysis’. They invented the name ‘complex’, whereas I had used the term ‘psychological system'... They spoke of ‘catharsis' where I had spoken of the ‘dissociation of fixed ideas' or of ‘moral disinfection'. The names differed, but the essential ideas I had put forward... were accepted without modification.

After decades of vilification by psychoanalysts, Henri Ellenberger commenced the reappraisal of Janet's work and its historical study. More recently clinicians have taken an interest in his early studies of trauma.

Janet (1857-1947) initially trained in philosophy. From 1883 to 1889, he taught at Le Havre. Under the influence of Dr Gibert, he