NEUROLOGY IN LITERATURE

Some neurological opinions

The borderlands of neurology and psychiatry have clearly been thoroughly trodden by some of the neurologists quoted here. Dr Spitz's satisfaction at diagnosing his patient's dizziness seems undiminished by his subsequent suicide. There are, one fears, several modern equivalents of Dr Greatorex, with not a few to be found in a particular thoroughfare in W1! Silas Weir-Mitchell's treatment, mentioned in Arnold Bennett's novel, is described by Gowers as "keeping the patient absolutely at rest in bed, and obtaining the tonic influence of exercise by daily massage and electricity—skilled rubbing and kneading the muscles, and putting them in action by faradism."

Proust seems to believe that Charcot was responsible for describing the light fixed pupil in tertiary syphilis, an attribution that no doubt would have surprised Argyll Robertson.

Wilkie Collins, 1883, Heart and science

"Doctor Benjulia is what we call a specialist," he said. "I mean that he only professes to treat certain diseases. Brains and nerves are Benjulia's diseases. Without quite discontinuing his medical practice, he limits himself to serious cases—when other doctors are puzzled, you know, and want him to help them."  

Thomas Hardy, undated, The fiddler of the reeds

The next evidences of his influence over her were singular enough, and it would require a neurologist to fully explain them.

Arnold Bennett, 1907, The grim smile of the five towns

The doctor mentioned Greatorex of Manchester, the celebrated brain specialist. And Horace took Sidney to Manchester. They had to wait an hour and a quarter to see Greatorex, his well-known consulting-roons in John Dalton Street being crowded with imperfection brains; but their turn came at last, and they found themselves in Greatorex's presence. Greatorex was a fat man, with the voice of a thin man, who seemed to spend the whole of his career in the care of his fingernails... "Yes, Yes, Yes, Yes, Yes!"  Greatorex would punctuate the recital, and when tired of "Yes" he would say, "Hum, Hum, Hum, Hum!" When he had said "Hum" seventy-two times he suddenly remarked that his fee was three guineas, and told Horace to strengthen Sidney all he could, not to work him too hard, and to bring him back in a year's time.

Arnold Bennett, 1918, The pretty lady

"But I was under the impression you were cured."

"Of my neurasthenia?"

"Yes"

"I believe I am. I gained thirteen pounds in the Nursing Home, and slept like a greengrocer. In fact, the Weir-Mitchell treatment, with modern improvements of course, enjoyed a marvellous triumph in my case."

Marcel Proust, 1920-2, Remembrance of things past. Volume 2: the Guermantes Way; Cities of the plain

I now gave Dr Du Boulbon the benefit of that unlimited confidence which is inspired in us by the man who, with an eye more penetrating than other men's, perceives the truth. I knew indeed that he was more of a specialist in nervous diseases, the man to whom Charcot before his death had predicted that he would reign supreme in neurology and psychiatry.

But I am dumbfoundered when I think that those words were said by love to keep Socrates' name alive all this time. What does his philosophy amount to? Very little when all is said. When one thinks that Charcot and others have done work that is a thousand times more remarkable and is at least based on something, on the suppression of the pupillary reflex as a symptom of general paralysis, and that they are almost forgotten.

Karel Capek, 1926, Tales from two pockets

Of course, they began to consult all sorts of doctors about it, and as generally happens in cases like that, one bone setter said that the attacks of giddiness were due to overwork, another one explained that it was a disease known as labyrinthitis, a third put it down to constipation, while a fourth expressed the view that it was caused by an insufficiency of blood in the brain;... At this juncture, a new doctor, a neurologist, began to perform miracles—Spitz his name was; this Dr Spitz based his method on the treatment of these repressions... "Mr Gierke," said Dr Spitz to him, "I'm not going to worry you; you needn't answer me a single word. I won't ask you about anything. All I want to do is to remove the cause of your attacks of giddiness. You have thrust it down into your subconscious; but the repression is so strong that it produces serious disturbances."... "When you first had that fit of giddiness on the campanile at Venice, try and remember what your feelings were at the time."... "What you felt was," continued Dr Spitz, "what you felt was a dreadful, mad craving to throw your beautiful young wife down from the belfry"... "Gierke," exclaimed Dr Spitz, "You murdered your first wife. You pushed her over the precipice; and that's why, I tell you, that's why you've got the idea that you'll have to kill the second one as well, the one you're in love with; that's why you're afraid of heights; that's why you're troubled with giddiness."... —Gierke committed suicide.

When Dr Spitz was told about it, he whistled to himself and made a very peculiar face. Then he took the book in which he entered the names of his patients, and opposite Gierke's name he just added the date and the one word: "Suicidum."

George Orwell, 1949, Nineteen eighty-four

We shall abolish the orgasm. Our neurologists are at work upon it now.

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26 Elian M, Dean G. The changing mortality from motor neuron disease and multiple sclerosis in England and Wales and in the Republic of Ireland.