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Personality, Dissociation and Organic-Psychic Latency in Pierre Janet's Account of Hysterical Symptoms.

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Pierre Janet's work represents a rare combination of medical observation and description of symptoms of mental illnesses, therapeutical guidance in hypnosis and philosophical writing about the main psychological themes of an epoch in transition from a Metaphysics of the Soul to the modern Experimental Psychology. Pierre Janet's intellectual evolution since the 1880s until the end of his life (1947) is dominated by the philosophical project of a theory of the psychic system supported by three basic columns: a concept of personality, a theory of memory and a sketch of a general theory of conduct. Such complex endeavour cannot be abstracted from the initial connections with Jean-Martin Charcot's school at La Salpêtrière which meant a turning point in the tradition of the "animal magnetism" concerning the treatment of epileptic-hysterical symptoms along with Hyppolite Bernheim's "Nancy School" of hypnotism.

Charcot's or Bernheim's theorising about the organic and psychological aspects of the hypnotic treatment of the hysterical symptoms was already aware of the difficulty in dealing with the extent of the dissimulation of the patients regarding the content of the hypnotic suggestion, even if Charcot insisted in the need for detection of the organic expressions, such as contractures or the posture of the body in arc during the attacks. The precise location of the "great hysteria" in the organic-psychic corridor was itself a riddle. If a symptom is a special type of sign, in the case of the "great hysteria" no one knew for sure what it stood for. The symptom represented an organic trouble with cerebral causes, a psychological interruption of the normal sensorial and muscular movements or a disguise of the female desire?

Pierre Janet described many hysterical patients, somnambulism and multiple personality since his articles in *La Revue Philosophique de la France et l'Étranger*, a Journal founded by the philosopher, experimental psychologist and P. Janet's intellectual predecessor Théodule Ribot.

The description of the case of the "great hysterical" Lucie, treated by P. Janet, is an example of a theoretical hypothesising on multiple personality and discontinuity of memories fragments. There are more cases revealing the same link between hysteria, somnambulism, personality dissociation and "alternating memory". Decisively inspired by and corroborating P. Janet's ideas, S. Freud conceived the essential of the hysterical sicknesses as disorders of memory.

The theme of memory came even more to the foreground in P. Janet's dissertation *l'Automatisme Psychologique* (1889). Here, the strange world of somnambulism was scrutinised along with hysterical contractures and convulsions, anaesthesia, the compulsion to repetition, obsessions, "automatic writing" in hysterical patients, multiple personality and "alternating memories". In the observed cases memory cannot be taken as a homogenous series of remembrances or as a stock of disposable information but as a variable of the depth of the personalities formation. The so-called "seconde existence" of some somnambulists represents not only unconscious representations and unconscious thoughts but complete or inceptive latent personalities provided with multiple virtual existences and multiple memories. Hypnosis was the privileged technique to access to such multiple memories ignored by the official personality.

Later and after the writing of his MD *Contribution à l'Étude des Accidents Mentaux chez les Hystériques* (1893) P. Janet addressed again the themes of memory and alternating memories in the lectures at the *Collège de France* (1927-28) but now according to the larger framework of a

general theory of conduct which included a description of the social actions participating in the narrative construction of personal memories and social memory.

In my paper, from a systemic perspective about the psychic system I'll try to reconstruct such rich theoretical materials in order to understand in which way the janetian concepts of alternating memories and personality can help in the clarification of the relation of the virtual to the real in the system's self-reference. Instead of assuming that the virtual-real pair is simply wrong, I'll take it as a construction of the psychic system regarding itself and its environment.

The paper is divided into three main parts.

- I. Mental stigmata in Hysteria - observing memory troubles and personality dissociation.
- II. Alternating memories / multiple personalities - inner alter-ego.
- III. Social conducts - outer alter-ego.

Basic References -

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