

## Essay Review

# More on the Unwritten History of Medical Psychology

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**Théodore Flournoy**, *From India to the planet Mars: a case of multiple personality with imaginary languages*, ed. Sonu Shamdasani, Princeton University Press, 1994, pp. li, 335, illus., £33.00, \$49.50 (hardback 0-691-03407-9), £12.95, \$16.95 (paperback 0-691-00101-4).

In 1900, Théodore Flournoy, Professor of Psychology at the University of Geneva, first published his now classic five-year investigation of Miss Héléne Smith, a trance medium claiming to have clairvoyant powers, who could allegedly communicate in both Sanskrit and the Martian language, and, supposedly, was also able to manifest her past reincarnations as Marie Antoinette, a Hindu princess, and a visitor to other planets. The reasoned sceptic will almost certainly stop reading here. After all, why would a physician or historian of medicine want to look into a book about spiritualism written by a psychologist one hundred years ago? The reasons are several; but I will name only three.

First, the book is a pioneering text in an era of medical psychology that has already passed, but which may actually have flourished in advance of today. Second, the text is an example of the early, important, but presently still overlooked historical relationship between investigation of the paranormal and the development of modern psychotherapeutics. Third, Flournoy's text reiterates an important relationship between psychology and medicine that has cogency today because of new

advances in the neurosciences related to multiple states of consciousness.

### A Psychology in Advance of Today

Flournoy's study of Héléne Smith was part of a much larger psychology that flourished between 1880 and 1920, but one which remains largely unknown to us at the present time. In its simplest form the period could be characterized as having produced a depth psychology based on then-known advances in brain neurophysiology. Such a psychology gave a dynamic explanation of how consciousness communicates with other states of awareness, while at the same time it remained grounded in what was known about brain functioning. Dissociation theory, the disaggregation of consciousness into multiple states, was the reigning model; and the psychogenic hypothesis, that traumatic experiences could be converted in subconscious states into the physical symptoms of hysteria, neurasthenia, and multiple personality, was the explanatory mechanism. Meanwhile, hypnosis as a neurological phenomenon was the experimental intervention used to both create and banish the symptoms of these disorders artificially in the laboratory. Neurotic symptoms could now be created by the physician at will through influencing the buried or forgotten idea in the psychic life of the patient.

But the main problem with such a psychology is that, when we think of psychotherapy and the unconscious, or

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dynamic psychiatry, as the late psychiatrist and medical historian, Henri Ellenberger has called it, we most often think of Freud.<sup>1</sup> This is because Freud's system of psychoanalysis has largely dominated the definition of psychosomatic medicine and various issues surrounding the mind-body problem at least since the 1930s. While psychoanalysis has always tried to appeal primarily to physicians, especially in the United States, paradoxically, it has also remained staunchly independent from control by university medical schools and teaching hospitals. As a result, its status as a science has always been in question. Yet at the same time, for many decades during the mid-twentieth century psychoanalysis continued to have a pervasive influence on popular culture, the social sciences, and literary interpretation in the humanities, especially in the United States, making it appear not only as if it pervaded everywhere, but that nothing had come before.

As Ellenberger (and now a new generation of younger scholars) has pointed out, however, long before Freud came on the scene, dynamic psychiatry flourished throughout Europe, England, and the United States in forms so radically different to Freud's as to not be directly comparable. Recently, I have referred to the largest alliance within this alternative, non-Freudian scene at the end of the late nineteenth century as the so-called French-Swiss-English-and-American psychotherapeutic alliance.<sup>2</sup> Charcot and the Salpêtrière school stood at the centre, linked through several of its members to the psychical researchers and psychopathologists in England, Switzerland, and America. I take the opportunity here to point out that it is within this alternative context that Flournoy's *From India to the planet Mars* should be properly considered.

#### **Psychical Research and Abnormal Psychology**

Shamdasani's new edition of Flournoy also highlights a completely neglected aspect of the history of medical psychology; namely, the study of the paranormal by the methods of physiological psychology. Scientific investigation of claims made by mediums and

mental healers had begun in earnest in the 1880s. This led first to experimental psychopathology and then to modern psychotherapeutics. Yet the standard histories of psychiatry, such as Zilborg's *History of medical psychology*, and Alexander and Salesnick's *History of psychiatry*, conveniently jump from Charcot to Freud, completely omitting the fifty-year period that intervened between Charcot's rehabilitation of hypnosis before the French Academy of Science in 1882 and the mass exodus to the free world of psychoanalytic émigrés fleeing Hitler's rise to power in 1933, the beginning of the true period of psychoanalytic influence.

Recent research has shown, however, that scientific organizations in Britain and the United States were formed between 1882 and 1884 to study the claims of the paranormal. By the end of the decade the results of their investigations gave no credibility to the assertion that we had established communication with the dead, as the spiritualists had claimed. But the psychical researchers did concur, however, that there were consistent laws of mental action underlying trance states that might have a bearing on the understanding of similar phenomena seen in functional disorders of the nervous system that showed no underlying organic pathology.

Along this vein, the work of the psychical researchers naturally fused with the new information coming from the French Experimental Psychology of the Subconscious on the pathology of the emotions. The result was the new field of experimental psychopathology, which was composed of the experimental laboratory study of psychogenesis as well as the naturalistic observation of trance in certain gifted or naturally prone subjects. William James studied the medium Leonora Piper in Boston. F W H Myers studied Stainton Moses in Britain. Janet studied Leonie in France. Flournoy's *From India to the planet Mars*, admittedly a popularly written book for the times, was an example of such on-going research in medical psychology from the Swiss point of view.

Meanwhile, by the mid 1890s, and especially just after 1900, the work of the experimental psychopathologists began to encroach on various parts of clinical neurology, psychiatry, and general medicine in both the diagnostic classification and the treatment of patients. Paul Dubois's *The psychic treatment of nervous disorders*, Dejerine and Glaucker's *Psychotherapy*, Morton Prince's *Dissociation of a personality*, Boris Sidis's *Dissociation and multiple personality*, Janet's *Psychasthenia and fixed ideas* and his work *The major symptoms of hysteria*, Albert Moll's *Hypnotism*, Dessoir's *The double ego*, and Jung's *The psychology of dementia praecox* are but a few examples of texts from the period that were both psychological and medical in their orientation.<sup>3</sup>

### The Role of Multiple Consciousness in General Medicine

Most would agree that psychology is widely used within the doctor-patient relationship, from inducing prescription compliance to the engendering of hope in difficult operations or consoling the grief stricken. The same judges will likely also admit that such a psychology is as yet not systematically understood. Almost one hundred years ago, Flournoy's book was part of a much larger enterprise that was just beginning to examine the role of beliefs and values in healing. The form that the investigation took was to posit a growth-oriented dimension to personality, normally hidden from waking consciousness, to which physicians could appeal in exceptional circumstances if they knew about the keys that would unlock the subconscious and bring about what Aldous Huxley later called "an opening of the internal doors of perception".

Flournoy, himself, believed that while medical science had clearly debunked the existence of life after death, its investigation of trance mediums such as Héléne Smith had conclusively shown the possibility that exceptional human abilities could be developed within each individual by an appeal to the mythopoetic dimension of inner experience.

It was an idea which, at the time, had a dramatic effect on burgeoning theories about

personality and consciousness. In the late 1880s, F W H Myers was the first to broach the possibility that an appeal to this dimension of the patient's subconscious was the locus of healing. William James, Flournoy's close friend, made a similar claim in *The varieties of religious experience* (1902), where he called for scientists to embark on constructing a cross-cultural psychology of the subconscious. In the context of the climate created by psychoanalysts and by even more vocal critics in the reductionistic sciences in the twentieth century, all of whom were hostile to the cultivation of religious experience, C G Jung of Zurich was the only figure of international prominence in psychiatry to keep the possibility of a transcendent dimension to personality alive as a dynamic formulation in his psychology.

Today, the closest analogy that we have to the ferment going on back then is to be found in the various humanistic implications emerging from the neuroscience revolution. One hundred years ago, Flournoy's subject Héléne was studied because her automatic verbal productions were so complete that they were thought by linguists at the time to be a perfect model for understanding the generation of natural language. Today, we have computers that can be programmed with all the known rules of grammar and syntax and likewise produce an imaginary language. What occurred at the centre of Héléne's immediate field of awareness was powerfully controlled by subconscious forces hidden out of sight, in the same way that today proponents of artificial intelligence accept the reality of hidden programmes controlling what is seen and done visually at the centre of attention on the computer screen. Likewise, studies in hemispheric lateralization clearly point to alternative states of consciousness, and neurochemical brain mapping has revealed an entire alternate information network operating in parallel with the hard wiring of the nervous system that may hold the key to moods and the biochemistry of emotions and to non-cognitive states of awareness. Intelligence is also considered by experts such as Howard Gardner

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to be multiple.<sup>4</sup> In fact, some researchers, such as Ernest Hilgard, have gone back to the dissociation models of the late nineteenth century and reexamined them, discovering much contemporary relevance.<sup>5</sup>

This is simply to say that, before the psychoanalytic hiatus began with Freud's *Interpretation of dreams*, published the same year as Flournoy's *From India to the planet Mars*, medical researchers had already begun to home in on a dynamic psychology grounded in brain science. Perhaps with the demise of the Age of Freud, we return to the task at hand. Thus, it may be more than a mere fitting tribute to history that texts such as Flournoy's are once again able to see the light of day. In a certain very important way, beyond the historic circumstances that brought us psychoanalysis, they may presage the outlines of a possible depth psychology to come.

<sup>1</sup> Henri Ellenberger, *Discovery of the unconscious*, New York, Basic Books, 1978.

<sup>2</sup> Eugene Taylor 'Scientific psychotherapy before Freud: the Paris-London-Zurich-Boston axis', paper delivered at the Third Triennial Conference on the History of European Psychiatry, Friends House, London, August, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Breuer and Freud's 'Preliminary communication' was first noticed in the American psychological literature in 1894 as corroboration for Janet's already old findings. See W James, review of Breuer and Freud's *Über den Psychischen Mechanismus Hysterischer Phänomene* in *Psychological Review*, 1894, 1: 197; and Eugene Taylor, *William James on exceptional mental states*, New York, Scribner's, 1982, p. 63n.

<sup>4</sup> Howard Gardner, *Multiple intelligences*, New York, Basic Books, 1993.

<sup>5</sup> Ernest Hilgard, *Divided consciousness*, expanded ed., New York, Wiley, 1986; C B Pert, M R Ruff, R J Weber and M Herkenham, 'Neuropeptides and their receptors: a psychosomatic network', *J. Immun.*, 1985, 135(2): 820 (supplement); F O Schmitt, 'Molecular regulators of brain function: a new view', *Neuroscience*, 1984, 11: 991.