

The role of language in psychiatric treatment in the French Romantic Age¹

A note on Dr Laurent Cerise

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SYNOPSIS At the beginning of the 19th century France had many experts on the 'moral treatment of insanity'. Very few of them, however, applied their experience and theories to the role of language in the development of behaviour from childhood on, in the pathogenesis of mental disorders, and in psychotherapy. To Dr. Louis Cerise, one of the founders of the *Annales Médico-Psychologiques*, belongs the great distinction of formulating a theory which tried to take account of the necessary contribution of language to individual development. In his book *Des Fonctions et des Maladies Nerveuses* (1842), he put forward a view of the relationship between the individual and society. His concept of 'the goal of activity' still merits our attention.

Many writers from the 18th century onwards have dealt with 'the inter-relationship of the moral and the physical' and in this vast literature very close attention has been paid to ideas, images, and imagination, and to their organic counterparts. Emotions are fleeting; ideas are more lasting and one may therefore attribute to them a pathogenic role in humoral imbalance or in chronic lesions. To explain the process involved, the writers in question have naturally invoked the dependence of the organism on its higher nervous centres. They speak of 'centrifugal innervation' or 'organic sympathies', etc. Since moral considerations have been accorded this allegedly pathogenic role, it follows that they should have a part to play in therapeutic action. Judiciously used, their influence will be beneficial and, moreover, absolutely harmless in comparison with the dangers which drastic physical treatments bring in their train. 'Moral treatment' seems fully justified in somatic disorders that are due to mental disturbances which have not yet passed beyond the functional stage and in which there has been no irreversible change in humours and organs. As for those mental dis-

orders which are due entirely to disturbed ideas and imagination, their treatment by moral resources alone might seem to be the most specific, direct, and adequate therapy possible. The art of the physician will consist in choosing antidotal ideas or corrective images and imposing them on the patient forcibly or by persuasion.

Without neglecting hygiene, diet, and suitable sensory stimuli (such as light, colours, landscapes, games, walks, provoked pain, music), this treatment relies essentially on language. But language is here too diffuse a concept to sustain theoretical study of its specific effects. What interested the writers of the early 19th century was not the use of language as such but the particular messages that were conveyed by words and their relative opportuneness. How should one hand out doses of moral encouragement, threats, religious exhortations (of which Pinel disapproved), reasoned argument, invitations to manual activity, reading, social activity, and so on? In this connection nothing is more instructive than the treatise by François Leuret (1797–1851), *Du Traitement Moral de la Folie*, which appeared in 1840. In it he shows himself to be a very resolute opponent of the physiological methods of treatment that were then in vogue. He was horrified

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by the bleeding which Broussais practised so freely.

'By moral treatment of insanity I understand the reasoned use of all the means which act directly on the intellect and emotions of the insane. Contrary to the practice of those doctors who fight false ideas and delusional passions with bleedings, exudations and purges, I use moral treatment, and moral treatment only, in cases in which the disorder is free of all physical symptoms.'²

Nowhere, however, is the concept of language subjected to theoretical study. Leuret is too busy detailing the results of different educative measures, such as reading, social activity, and manual work.

Nevertheless, there were some French physicians and psychiatrists who in the Romantic Age gave much thought to the problems of language. It must be stated at the outset, however, that this interest was due less to the writers' medical experience than to the influence of certain philosophical theories. The use of language in medicine was important to them because of their own preoccupation with social philosophy and the philosophy of history. It is clear that, from the early days of modern sociology, social theory had its echo in medicine and in the desire of physicians to unravel the organic consequences of psychosocial phenomena.

This is an important theme in the work of P.-J.-B. Buchez (1796–1866). With the socialists of his day he believed in human progress: but with Bonald and the traditionalist Catholics he believed also in primitive revelation. The 'word revealed' was for him the foundation of moral conscience and on this foundation he believed that the facts of individual physiology could be carried over into social physiology too. Buchez, who had abandoned medicine for politics (he was President of the Constituent Assembly of 1848) did not follow up all the neuropsychiatric implications of his idea.³ This task was undertaken chiefly by Dr. Laurent Cerise (1807–1869), who was Buchez's faithful disciple and intimate friend, and who was one of the first editors of the

Annales Médico-Psychologiques. It was to Buchez that Cerise dedicated his principal work, the title of which is worth quoting in full: *Nervous Functions and Disorders, and their Relationship to Education—Social and Individual, Moral and Physical. Proposal for a New System of Physiological and Pathological Research into the Relationship Between the Physical and the Moral. Paris, 1842 (Des Fonctions et des Maladies Nerveuses, dans leurs Rapports avec l'Éducation Sociale et Privée, Morale et Physique. Essai d'un Nouveau Système de Recherches Physiologiques et Pathologiques sur les Rapports du Physique et du Moral)*. We can see in this title an echo of Cabanis's famous work, of which Cerise edited a new edition in 1843 and for which he supplied the Preface.

'Cabanis, denying the reality of the forces and phenomena of the mental world, causes them to disappear in the deep recesses of the brain, which is accessible only to sensory impressions. Such a point of view suppresses the element of intellect with which the element of affect must of necessity combine in order to become a feeling, a desire, a passion. By reducing the brain to the level of an organ in the alimentary system, we raise the alimentary organs to the rank of an intellectual system.'⁴

What doctrine does Cerise propose instead? He invokes both philosophical postulates and precise psycho-physiological observations. His first proposition concerns society, which is the matrix and formative milieu of individual existence.

'Society is the depository of traditional teaching, the source of ideas that are indispensable to the manifestation of human life.' 'Now, language and social institutions are inseparable', Cerise continues. 'They reign simultaneously, and the power of the one is manifested only via the power of the other. Nevertheless, in the eyes of the physiologist, language occupies a special place among the traditional methods of educating man.'

The function of language is thus to attach the individual organism to collective life, down to the very roots of his material being. Language is not, however, a product of human activity. It is an independent spiritual gift (given by God) and

²Leuret, F. *Du Traitement Moral de la Folie*, p. 156, J.-B. Baillière. Paris. 1840.

³For further information about Buchez, one of the founders of 'Christian Democracy', see François-André Isambert's *Buchez ou l'Âge Théologique de la Sociologie*. Ed. Cujas. Paris. 1968.

⁴Cerise, L. *Des Fonctions et des Maladies Nerveuses. Introduction*, p. xxvii. Germer-Baillière: Paris. 1842.

For the classical background of the problem, see Pedro Lain Entralgo, *La Curación por la Palabra en la Antigüedad Clásica*. Revista de Occidente: Madrid. 1958.

without it there would be no human activity and man's organic life would itself remain incomplete.

'Like all acts of life, the moral and intellectual acts of man can take place only through the integrated action of the organism. This integration must be regarded as the result of a previously established relationship between the psychocerebral system and the signs of language. These signs, or forms, are peculiar to the mind which, by means of them, acts on the brain, so that the brain itself may function easily in complicated acts of understanding. Their purpose is not only to give ideas the means whereby they are transmitted and conserved, but also to provide psychocerebral operations with a precious instrument, an indispensable aid. The psychocerebral system, with its marvellous functions, requires in some way the intervention of these signs, in the same way as the digestive system requires the intervention of food.'

From these premises, Laurent Cerise proceeds to demonstrate the decisive role of language in the life, both animal and vegetative, of the adult, educated man. Sensations become distinct perceptions only by means of mental activity and it is by the intervention of language that multiple and confused impressions are united, coordinated, and transformed into precise ideas. Language is the agent of synthesis, thanks to which we have a world of objects and not just a nebulous cloud of impressions. After having demonstrated, without too much difficulty, the part played by language in understanding and will, Cerise goes on to affirm that the contributions made by language form a necessary part of 'the development of the organism in general and of the nervous organism in particular'. In remarkable anticipation of today's research in genetic psychology, he points out the role of sensory afferents and motor activities in forming personality and, taking into account the successive stages of development, attributes to verbal stimuli a role that brings the formative process to its climax.

'If we observe the child from birth, we see that . . . instinctive or gangliocerebral arousal appears immediately after birth. It precedes sensory or psychocerebral arousal, which in turn precedes mental or psychocerebral arousal. It is remarkable how the formative force which presides over organic evolution coordinates all functional operations in such a way that they work towards the final development of

the different organs which have to execute them. Thus the sucking movements of the infant precede that contact with his mother's breast which is necessary to supply him with food and to develop his digestive organs; thus by trial movements he arrives at the development of the muscular and skeletal systems. Thus, while fixing his gaze, or listening, or stretching his hands over objects, he seeks those impressions which are necessary to develop his sensory organs. In the same way, later, his cerebral system, already exercised at least in part under the influence of instinctive and sensory arousals, is led to seek those mental stimulations which are appropriate to the development of the cerebral system in its final form. By means of such stimulations, society is called upon, if one may put it thus, to add the final touch, by spoken or figurative teaching, setting its seal on its creation, imprinting the indelible traces of its educative intervention. Admirable harmony between the needs of the organism, mental faculties, and elements of the outside world, both material and spiritual: if these elements are lacking, if their stimulus is rejected, the organism will be arrested in its development, the mind will not manifest its activity and the man will be incomplete.' The same agenesis can affect alike his cerebral system and 'the parts of the organism which cerebral innervation is designed to influence'.

To support this assertion Cerise invokes the works of Itard, the otologist who studied deaf mutes and cases of intellectual isolation and emotional deprivation (Victor, the wild boy of Aveyron). One of Itard's papers, entitled 'Language as a means of developing organic senses' (*Revue Médicale*, June 1828) deals with the physical ailments of deaf mutes, the evolution of which, he thinks, differs considerably from that of similar ailments in normal subjects. Itard attributes these differences to the absence of 'organic sympathies' determined by the use of language, since

'in the human species, sensory development has as its chief agent civilisation, in particular intellectual exchange between man and man, by means of spoken or written language'.

Laurent Cerise rises to bolder heights, adding

'By its religious and political institutions society influences not only present but also future generations, introducing physiological modifications in the organism which can be transmitted hereditarily. In this way society succeeds in moderating the physical and organic influences by which animals are exclusively dominated.'

But the habitus determined by social institutions may, in its turn, be transformed by a new state of civilization—that is to say, by a new organization of the collective word.

On these theoretical foundations Cerise builds a physiopathology in which reciprocal influences are exercised by nervous excitability and circulatory activity. He pays special attention to the idea of hyperexcitability, seeking to determine its causes and to correct its effects. Motivated by moral concern, he devoted long pages to analysing the harmful influences of 'modern' life. His aim is to define what we today call 'the evils of civilization'.

One suspects that the therapeutic conclusions arrived at in Cerise's system are not exempt from ethico-religious elements. A medical idea which attributes so much importance to the education of the normal individual will almost of necessity regard therapy as re-education, in conformity with the demands of a teaching that exalts man to the highest heights. Thus, to the traditional prescriptions of diet and hygiene, Cerise adds an essential ingredient, the goal of activity, a concept which already played a considerable part in Buchez's outlook and the sources of which are to be found partly in the philosophy of Joseph de Maistre. Teaching man to have a 'goal of activity includes directing his ideas and feelings'. These ideas and feelings are not without physical consequences. They 'determine the production of a large number of phenomena of cerebromuscular, cerebrogangliar, intracerebral and cerebrosensory innervation'. So far as the physiological counterparts of the goal of activity are concerned, Cerise advances only general propositions of a purely speculative nature. We do not find him commending highly a practical method of treatment, nor does he cite cases or observed results. His thinking on this point is dogmatic, programmatic, and stamped

with religious, social, and political formulae. Cerise is not concerned to establish rules or techniques of psychotherapy, but to choose between the different goals of activity offered by contemporary philosophical and religious doctrines. Between spiritualism, mystical pantheism, and materialism, he does not hesitate. He chooses spiritualism.

'Spiritualism, in general, has as its point of departure and its practical outcome, a goal of social activity. The point of departure and practical outcome of Christian spiritualism is a goal of activity that leads everyone to strive together towards Christian brotherhood by charity, aided by faith and hope.'

In a perfectly logical manner, this theory, which makes society and language the formative milieu of the normal individual, orientates the sick individual back to collective existence: it is a true social therapy, which is defined as such. The life of the community is likewise subject to a 'common goal of activity' which attracts to itself all the individual goals. If they have no collective purpose, societies dissolve. This 'spiritual medicine', so characteristic of the Romantic Age, thus ends in a dynamic view of history as community effort and spiritual conquest. It unites, by means of language, the psychic integrity of the individual and the creative struggle of societies. In the unity thus proposed, language is the chief tie that binds the whole to the part. Society may be viewed as a huge living body, while the organic life of the individual, depending on social institutions and education, is interpreted as an emanation of social life.

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