

JOSEF BREUER - (1925)

On June 20, 1925, there died in Vienna, in his eighty-fourth year, Josef Breuer, the creator of the cathartic method, whose name is for that reason indissolubly linked with the beginnings of psycho-analysis.

Breuer was a physician, a pupil of the clinician Oppolzer. In his youth he had worked at the physiology of respiration under Ewald Hering, and later, in the scanty hours of leisure allowed by an extensive medical practice, he occupied himself successfully with experiments on the function of the vestibular apparatus in animals. Nothing in his education could lead one to expect that he would gain the first decisive insight into the age-old riddle of the hysterical neurosis and would make a contribution of imperishable value to our knowledge of the human mind. But he was a man of rich and universal gifts, and his interests extended in many directions far beyond his professional activities.

It was in 1880 that chance brought into his hands an unusual patient, a girl of more than ordinary intelligence who had fallen ill of severe hysteria while she was nursing her sick father. It was only some fourteen years later, in our joint publication, *Studies on Hysteria* (1895d) - and even then unluckily only in a much abbreviated form, censored, too, from considerations of medical discretion - that the world learnt the nature of his treatment of this celebrated 'first case', with what immense care and patience he carried out the technique when once he had discovered it, till the patient was freed from all the incomprehensible symptoms of her illness, and what insight he obtained in the course of the work into the mental mechanisms of the neurosis.

We psycho-analysts, who have long been familiar with the idea of devoting hundreds of sessions to a single patient, can form no conception of how novel such a procedure must have seemed forty-five years ago. It must have called for a large amount of personal interest and, if the phrase can be allowed, of medical libido, but also for a considerable degree of freedom of thought and certainty of judgement. At the date of the publication of our *Studies* we were able to appeal to Charcot's writings and to Pierre Janet's investigations, which had by that time deprived Breuer's discoveries of some of their priority. But when Breuer was treating his first case (in 1881-2) none of this was as yet available. Janet's *Automatisme psychologique* appeared in 1889 and his second work, *L'état mental des hystériques*, not until 1892. It seems that Breuer's researches were wholly original, and were directed only by the hints offered to him by the material of his case.

I have repeatedly attempted - most recently in my *Autobiographical Study* (1925d), in Grote's series, *Die Medizin der Gegenwart* - to define my share in the *Studies* which we published jointly. My merit lay chiefly in reviving in Breuer an interest which seemed to have become extinct, and in then urging him on to publication. A kind of reserve which was characteristic of him, an inner modesty, surprising in a man of such a brilliant personality, had led him to keep his astonishing discovery secret for so long that not all of it was any longer new. I found reason later to suppose that a purely emotional factor, too, had given him an aversion to further

work on the elucidation of the neuroses. He had come up against something that is never absent - his patient's transference on to her physician, and he had not grasped the impersonal nature of the process. At the time when he submitted to my influence and was preparing the Studies for publication, his judgement of their significance seemed to be confirmed. 'I believe', he told me, 'that this is the most important thing we two have to give the world.'

Besides the case history of his first patient Breuer contributed a theoretical paper to the Studies. It is very far from being out of date; on the contrary, it conceals thoughts and suggestions which have even now not been turned to sufficient account. Anyone immersing himself in this speculative essay will form a true impression of the mental build of this man, whose scientific interests were, alas, turned in the direction of our psychopathology during only one short episode of his long life.