

“Turning Points: Jane Avril in Paris”  
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In 1884, an adolescent girl institutionalized at the Salpêtrière Psychiatric Hospital in Paris attended a “mad ball” to celebrate Mardi Gras. She suffered from St. Vitus Dance, a neurological disease now called Sydenham’s chorea that causes compulsive twitching. That night at the ball she began to dance— with strange disjointed movements and great passion. An audience formed and applauded. Much later the woman claimed that was the turning point in her life: when she realized that what had been called mental illness she could claim for herself as art. “Alas,” she wrote, “I was cured.” The hospital had been a safe haven from an abusive mother, but when she left she was able to reinvent herself, changing her name to Jane Avril. By 1889 she was a star dancer at the Moulin Rouge and soon afterwards a friend and model for the painter Henri de Toulouse Lautrec. Her dancing— a variant of the new can can— drew crowds, and her image—tall, thin, red-haired, pointy-nosed— sold posters. **[SEE IMAGE]** This was not the only “turning point” that Jane identified in her memoirs. There are other places too where she uses phrases like “then my new life began...” This paper focuses on the role of turning points in Jane Avril’s life and in life-writing in general. As biographers, we use turning points as a way to organize a narrative, the “story” part of the life story, but these turning points inevitably close doors as well as open them.

In the only full-length biography of Jane Avril, Jose Shercliff constructs a literal Cinderella story. Jeanne Richepin (elsewhere identified as Jeanne Beaudon) was the illegitimate child of a demimonde beauty and her aristocratic Italian lover. Jeanne was raised by working-class grandparents in the countryside until her mother ran out of

protectors and demanded the child back, with the suggestion of setting her up as a prostitute. For Shercliff, Jane's convulsions and institutionalization rescued her from a life of poverty and depravity. Indeed, in her memoirs Jane refers to Salpêtrière as a kind of "Eden," which partly explains why she writes "Alas!" when she is cured. According to Shercliff, Jeanne went to the ball in a borrowed dress and after her display of dancing she was discharged the next day. The suddenness of this transformation is of course suspect and in fact looking at the dates makes the story unlikely: Jane was discharged in June 1884, months after any possible mardi gras ball, and she didn't start dancing professionally until the late 1880s. Still, one can see the appeal of the story as it neatly divides Jane's/Jeanne's life into a before and after, separating the private from the public, the madwoman from the dancer.

Several stories or turning points are converging here— and perhaps Jane's life story is one of a serendipitous intersection with larger historical transitions. In addition to the transitions occurring around ideas of public and private or within arts like dance, there was another narrative unspooling at Salpêtrière itself. As a teacher and pathologist at Salpêtrière, Jean-Martin Charcot [SEE IMAGE] was considered a pioneer in his treatment of hysterics, mostly women, whom he treated through hypnotism. Hypnotism can be seen as a sort of hinge between physical and mental treatments, between the medical discourse and the psychological that emerged from it. In 1885 the young Sigmund Freud spent several months at Salpêtrière to study Charcot's methods, and published his first contribution to psychoanalysis, *Studies in Hysteria* with Josef Breuer in 1895, at the height of Jane's career at the Moulin Rouge. Both Charcot and Freud considered hysteria to be the result of emotional trauma rather than a medical condition:

one can see how Jane's background could support that hypothesis. For his new theories Charcot became a celebrity himself, inviting prominent Parisian artists and socialites to his clinic on Tuesdays to watch the hysterical women perform their symptoms and to watch him induce new symptoms or cures through hypnosis. [SEE IMAGE] Subsequent accounts of these events emphasize the erotics of gender and power in the developing field of psychiatry: were the doctors exploiting the powerless women? Were the women faking it for attention or authority? Interestingly, though, Jane herself did not necessarily side with her fellow female patients: Shercliff writes, "The very rumor that Charcot was on his way to visit them was enough to set them off. But to Jeanne, who knew their dissimulation, it seemed a pitiful farce" (43). It must have been thrilling theater, as the famous painting "A Clinical Lesson at Salpêtrière" reveals [SEE IMAGE]— the deshabillé of the female patients, the suggestive fainting and convulsions, the all-male audience —almost seem a direct predecessor of the risqué Moulin Rouge performances.

Drawing on Avril's memoirs, Shercliff traces the transformation of Jeanne to Jane through a love affair with a young doctor, an attempted suicide, and a dramatic rescue by warm-hearted prostitutes who took her in (although Shercliff emphasizes that Jane had an essential purity that defied her sexual experiences). She also mentions Jane working as a horseback rider or circus acrobat at the Hippodrome in Paris and as a cashier at the Universal Exposition in Paris in 1889. Both would have made good transitions into a new kind of popular culture. Jane also participated in amateur public dancing like the Bal Bullier, a weekly event in gardens on the Boulevard Montparnasse. There she could intermingle with members of society and artists as well as members of the Paris demimonde: like the circus or the exposition, it was a fashionable place for classes and

cultures to mix together in a public space, which would later become more privatized and institutionalized in locations like the cabaret or club. But the behavior in these spaces was still socially and explicitly defined: Jane wrote that at the Bal de Elysee Montmartre there was a “Father Prude” who stood watch to break apart same-sex couples dancing together.

When the Moulin Rouge opened in the fall of 1889 it provided a relatively new form of entertainment in a relatively new kind of public space. It was, in that sense, a turning point too— between a sort of salon culture like Charcot’s clinic, where a charismatic individual attracted a circle of admiring supporters who funded his work, and a club, where a charismatic entrepreneur curated entertainments for a paying public audience (for example, the famous Charles Zidler, played with gusto by Jim Broadbent in Baz Luhrmann’s 2001 film *Moulin Rouge*). When Jane began dancing at the Moulin Rouge, soon after it opened, she was no longer an amateur dancing for her own pleasure at the public gardens but a paid performer with an “act” of her own. She took an English lover, a friend and later biographer of Oscar Wilde, and became “Jane Avril.” [SEE IMAGE] That transformation was physical as well as metaphysical: it changed her identity from mental patient to dancer as well as Jeanne to Jane. She was also called “Jane la folle” or “l’etrange,” both versions of the nickname “crazy Jane” that exists as an English term too.

The common denominator was the twitching or convulsive movements of her body. The recently popularized can can entailed frantic leg kicking -- and other new forms of movement, like Loie Fuller’s serpentine dance, began to free dance from patterns of prescribed steps. One of Toulouse Lautrec’s friends, Paul Leclerc, emphasized Jane’s freedom of movement in describing one of her performances: ‘In the midst of the crowd,

there was a stir, and a line of people started to form: Jane Avril was dancing, twirling, gracefully, lightly, a little madly; pale, skinny, thoroughbred, she twirled and reversed, weightless, fed on flowers.’ (qtd in Hughes) **[SEE IMAGE]** In the transition from formal dance to modern dance, as in the transition from private salons to popular culture, Jane’s experience of mental illness became a paradoxical asset, enabling her to literally break with earlier forms. In other words, her “strangeness” may have at first confined her in an institution but it ultimately allowed her some freedoms in a rapidly changing culture.

Jane was certainly an exception: the female inmates who “performed” for Charcot and his visitors were never named, though a few became close enough to celebrities themselves to have their names recorded, like Blanche Wittman (who appears in the painting mentioned above). But, arguably, fin de siècle Paris demonstrates another turning point in creating more opportunities for artists and performers to literally make names for themselves (as Jane Avril did). In an article on Jane Avril and the lithograph, Catherine Pedley-Hinson argues that the earliest posters advertising cabaret shows used female models only as symbols of sexuality and leisure. In other words, the posters didn’t represent specific women, even when using a specific model, but used femininity itself as a lure for customers. In contrast, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec’s posters for the cabaret shows at the Moulin Rouge or Jardin Japonais suddenly promoted specific women, who were named within the frame —as Jane often was in his many posters and paintings of her throughout the 1890s. Using titles like “Jane at the Entrance of the Moulin Rouge” or “Jane Leaving the Moulin Rouge,” or **[SEE IMAGES]** Toulouse-Lautrec’s images of Jane emphasized transitions or turning points, especially the one between public and

private life. That threshold needed a name, and most of the performers at these clubs chose stage names that evoked their acts (like “La Goulue,” which means the glutton or “Le Désossé,” which means boneless). Toulouse-Lautrec was an innovator in both art and advertising—adapting flat bold colors and composition to billboards appearing briefly on street corners — and Jane might be seen as something of a turning point in his career as well. Some of his most recognizable work bears her name and distinctive face so it is difficult to tell whether he made her name or she made his. The exchange definitely worked in both directions though, and served to transgress other boundaries that were in flux at the time: Toulouse-Lautrec photographed himself wearing her clothing to attend a “women’s ball” [SEE IMAGE]. Through their cafe society they helped define the borders of gender and sexual identities at a time when these seemed potentially fluid or malleable.

It’s tempting to make these cultural changes seem progressive, even more so when they are historical than when they are biographical. We want history to advance, though an individual life may rise and fall. Jane’s story, like those of Toulouse-Lautrec, Oscar Wilde, the inmates of Salpetriere, and many performers of the Moulin Rouge, did not end particularly happily. She bore an illegitimate child, struggled to earn a living as a dancer, married a man who was badly wounded in World War I and eventually abandoned her, and died broke and relatively forgotten in 1943. Her memoirs, published in a Paris newspaper in 1933, were written in an effort to earn much needed funds. Her life dramatizes the relatively free movement between social classes, institutional spaces, and art forms that characterized turn-of-the-century Paris, while also revealing how exceptional and precarious her situation was.

To focus on turning points, to look at the hinge, often relates or juxtaposes two different contexts (such as medical/psychological or mental illness/art). This can add complexity to an otherwise oversimplified representation of a life or a place or an era. As a device, turning points can organize a story sequentially into before and after. Such devices have had their critics: one can easily see how focusing on Charcot or Freud as the “pioneers” of new movements can produce a patriarchal or overly individualistic reading of history. Likewise, even terms like “fin-de-siecle” or “turn-of-the-century” have their own embedded understandings of how we understand time in relation to calendars and countries. The challenge I leave us with here, as biographers and scholars of popular culture, is how to represent overlapping narratives like Jeanne/Jane’s and how to reveal the turning points within them as consciously chosen, whether by our subjects, other biographers, or ourselves. Turning points create a narrative— so the question becomes whose? Here I’ve tried to create a narrative with more than one turning point and from more than one point of view, but without a single defining moment a narrative may lack cohesion, and/or a satisfactory resolution. Jane ended her memoirs by rethinking the relationship between dance and madness in her life: “Perhaps [dancing] is one of many forms of what is called madness. If so, for me it was always sweet and comforting. It helped me live and I remain its enchanted slave....” She concludes at a narrative crossroads — of art and madness, body and mind, life and death, poised with the tip of one toe on the ground.