The Statesman, the Artist, and the Ophthalmologist

Clemenceau, Lautrec, and Meyer

James G. Ravin, MD

Georges Clemenceau, the French physician who is better known as a statesman, was the political leader of France during World War I. He was also an author. His fictional story entitled “How I Became Presbyopic,”1 which was illustrated by the famous post-Impressionist artist Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, describes his encounter with an ophthalmologist he named Mayer. Although this very short story is little known today, and evoked little reaction when it first appeared in print, it is a curious period piece that sheds interesting light on the author, the artist, and the ophthalmologist who may have been the basis of the story.

In this tale, while Clemenceau was reading in his study, an ophthalmologist paid him a visit. They had never met before. The doctor was a handsome, well-dressed elderly man, who carried himself with “an air of benign superiority.” His rosy complexion was framed by white whiskers and his gray eyes sparkled. “Monsieur,” said Mayer, “I must first thank you for having received me. Still I am not at all surprised. My name opens all doors.”

The ophthalmologist further said that a general and a marquise “said only this morning that I was the best-known man in Paris. But I have talked enough about myself. It is you whom my visit concerns. I have been waiting long to see you. All your friends have been telling me, ‘Go call on him.’” Mayer insisted that Clemenceau’s health was very important for the country. “It is fortunate that you are well. However, you must save your strength. I am sure that you are working too much.” Mayer emphasized that Clemenceau was almost 50 years old and must take care of his eyes.

Clemenceau had admitted only to himself that his eyesight had been growing weaker. Mayer handed him an elegant antiquarian book to read, which Clemenceau held at arm’s length. Mayer reproved him for not telling the truth. “You tell me that your sight is good, and yet you hold the book at a distance, which proves that you are farsighted.” Mayer measured the distance. Clemenceau was convinced that “the proof of my deceit was scientifically established.”

Mayer’s assistant displayed a box of glasses, “the moving reflections of which filled the room with dancing lights.” Clemenceau, for his part, . . . said nothing more, as if crushed by my irreparable defeat. I gave myself up to his mercy. My authoritative benefactor, disdaining to abuse his victory and treating me like an inert object, without a word placed a pair of eyeglasses on my nose.

Clemenceau could then easily read the tiniest print in the rare book. Mayer said he manufactured the lenses himself. “I have spent half of my life in computing their thickness and their curvature. They are priceless, for unlike others, they do not fatigue the eyes. I have made a revolution. I can call myself a benefactor of humanity. Your gratitude for the service I have rendered you will increase with your age.”

Mayer excused himself, stating he had to rush off to perform surgery.

THE STATESMAN

Georges Clemenceau, MD (1841-1929), was the premier of France during World War I and a major contributor to the Allied victory. But he was also a physician, as were his father and paternal grandfather before him. He practiced medicine only briefly, devoting most of his life to journalism and politics instead.
Clemenceau studied medicine at the Faculty of Medicine, Paris, France, from 1861 to 1865. He received his doctor of medicine degree after successfully defending his thesis, which was entitled "On the Generation of Anatomic Elements." For most of the next 4 years, Clemenceau lived in the United States. He arrived 6 months after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, who was one of his heroes. He admired the candor of political discussion in America, which was not possible in France in that era. For a brief time he practiced medicine in New York City, with an office on 12th Street, but his main means of support was as a correspondent for a Parisian newspaper. Next, he taught French and horsemanship at a girls' school in Stamford, Conn. In 1869 he married one of his students. Shortly after his marriage Clemenceau returned to France to practice medicine in the Vendee, the rustic southwestern region of the country where his family had its roots.

But medicine was not enough to keep him in the countryside. His passionate interest in politics soon took him back to Paris. After France's disastrous defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871, Clemenceau joined a radical political group. He became mayor of the 18th district of Paris (Montmartre) and a deputy to the National Assembly. His fiery energy and biting eloquence made him a powerful figure and the leader of the radicals. After an unexpected defeat in the election of 1893, he returned to journalism. Out of office, he devoted much of his vast energy to writing, and became well known for his commentary.

He was also a cultured man, and a friend of many of the Impressionist artists. His closest friend was the artist Claude Monet. When Monet developed cataracts and became legally blind, Clemenceau strongly encouraged him to have surgery. The surgical result was good, but Monet was subject to bouts of depression. Clemenceau skillfully managed to keep the artist's spirits up. Monet had signed an agreement to create a series of waterlily paintings as a gift to the country, and was in danger of defaulting on his word. With Clemenceau's strong support, Monet completed the project. The famous paintings are still on view today in the museum called the Orangerie, in central Paris.

The short story about Clemenceau's presbyopia was included in an anthology entitled *At the Foot of Sinai*, a collection of ironically humorous impressions of European Jews. The ophthalmologist Mayer was depicted as a member of this religious sect. Clemenceau was not really interested in religious aspects or in racial approaches to the characters. As a man of politics he was ardent, and was more concerned with complex economic issues, such as the effect of capitalism on political questions. Many of his intimate friends, advisors, and political appointees were Jewish.

"How I Became Presbyopic" was first published in a periodical in 1894—a significant date, for it marked the onset of the most important political issue at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century in France, the Dreyfus affair. Dreyfus was a French army officer of Jewish descent who was framed as a traitor by some of his military colleagues. With little information available initially, Clemenceau assumed Dreyfus was guilty, but soon came to realize he was innocent. The situation gave Clemenceau a powerful political issue. In his newspaper, *L'Aurore*, Clemenceau published Emile Zola's attack on the government, and even created its title, "J'accuse" ["I accuse"], which was a defense of Dreyfus. After years of incarceration and highly emotional litigation, Dreyfus was found innocent. Clemenceau's involvement helped resurrect his political career. He was elected to the French Senate in 1902, and held this office until 1920.

He became an astute statesman and later premier of the country. In 1917, after 3 years of World War I, the morale in France was extremely low. Clemenceau's tenacious fighting spirit encouraged the French people never to give in. The eventual defeat of Germany earned him the sobriquet "Father Victory." After the war Clemenceau worked hard to convince Woodrow Wilson of the United States and Lloyd George of Great Britain to disarm Germany. But the French National Assembly no longer found him indispensable after the Treaty of Versailles. Defeated in the national election of 1920, Clemenceau resigned from all political office. He spent the rest of his life traveling, speaking, and writing.

THE ARTIST

Clemenceau was introduced to the artist Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864-1901) through a journalist named Gustave Geoffroy, who probably represented the publisher. Although Clemenceau and Lautrec had many friends in common, they had not known each other previously.

Both men should have gotten along well for they had much in common. They shared interests in medicine and art. Clemenceau was a physician who strongly admired the creativity of artists. Lautrec, with his many serious health problems, was fascinated by medicine, and painted several surgical scenes as well as portraits of physicians. Both men had a connection to the Montmartre district of Paris. Clemenceau had been its mayor, and Lautrec had spent much of his life there, living a bohemian lifestyle in its cafes and music halls. Unlike many of his artist friends, Lautrec had little interest in politics, and did not take a stand on the Dreyfus case. Previously, he had been involved in litigation concerning the resemblance of one of his lithographic illustrations to a living individual, a Rothschild, and he must not have wanted to repeat the experience.

Lautrec's illustration for "How I Became Presbyopic" (Figure 1) shows Clemenceau on the left, with Mayer displaying a pair of eyeglasses on the right. There are several ironic points in the illustration that give it a humorous touch. The figures lean away from each other, in a fashion that is not normal for a close conversation. Clemenceau appears baffled by Mayer. The facial features of the ophthalmologist are depicted in an unflattering manner that suggests caricature. Mayer tilts his head in a humorous pose. He has a tiny upper lip and his hair is clown-like. Lautrec's representation of Clemenceau resembles the real statesman. His depiction of Mayer is closer to the description given in the
story than to a photographic image of the ophthalmologist Edouard Meyer (Figure 2).

The lithograph of Clemenceau and the ophthalmologist was created just a few years before Lautrec’s tragic death, at age 36 years, in 1901. He had been the unfortunate product of inbreeding, with his parents being first cousins. Short in stature and subject to several serious fractures of long bones, he suffered from a rare form of dwarfism termed pycnodysostosis. Chronic alcoholism and syphilis added to his woes.

THE OPHTHALMOLOGIST

The ophthalmologist Clemenceau named Mayer in this story may have been based on an illustrious ophthalmologist, alive and practicing in Paris at that time, Edouard Meyer (1838-1902). Although the spellings differ slightly, they are essentially the same name. (Other variant spellings of this name are Maier, Mair, Majer, Meier, Meir, and Meijer.) Clemenceau may have wanted to alter the name slightly, just enough to reduce the possibility of legal entanglements.

Edouard Meyer was born in the German principality of Anhalt-Dessau, into a large family of modest means. As a child he spent the few coins he earned from giving lessons to purchase candles, so that he could read at night. Meyer received his medical degree in Berlin in 1860, but he had begun to study ophthalmology 1 year earlier with the uncontested leader of the specialty, Albrecht von Graefe. Meyer spent 3 rewarding years with von Graefe, who suggested he establish a practice in Paris. Von Graefe gave him a most favorable letter of introduction, even exceeding his commendations for 2 of his famous pupils who established themselves in Paris at nearly the same time as Meyer, de Wecker and Liebreich. The letter began,

I rejoice in stating that through hard work Edouard Meyer has mastered all aspects of ophthalmology. In these circumstances I can only express the sincere prayer that Edouard Meyer may soon find a wide opportunity, as much in teaching as in the practice of ophthalmology, in which he can utilize his knowledge and skill for the honor of science and the good of suffering humanity.

Meyer was required to pass a second doctoral examination in the French capital. He received his second medical degree after writing a thesis entitled, “On Strabismus and the Success of Tenotomy.” In 1865, French health officials asked him to help control a severe outbreak of trachoma. Meyer succeeded and Emperor Napoleon III decorated him with the Legion of Honor. Joking with him, the emperor said, “If I had known you were so young, I would have made you wait a while.” Meyer was 27 years old.

After the Franco-Prussian War, Meyer was naturalized as a French citizen but remained on good terms with colleagues in his former homeland. The ophthalmic historian Julius Hirschberg, who lived in Berlin, described him as “extraordinarily amiable,” and “a valuable friend and a pleasant colleague.” He purchased the clinic of the famous ophthalmologist Julius Sichel, which gave him a large patient base, and married into the French branch of the Rothschild family, which brought him additional social status.

His influential textbook Traite pratique des maladies des yeux [A Practical Treatise of Diseases of the Eye] went through 4 French editions from 1873 to 1895, and was translated into English, Spanish, Italian, Greek, Russian, and Polish. It presented von Graefe’s teachings clearly and in an easily understood manner. Even more important was his Traite des operations qui se pratiquent sur l’oeil [Treatise of Operations That Are Practised on the Eye], published in 1870. This was the first textbook of ocular surgery to be illustrated with photographs (Figure 3). His coauthor, de Montmeja, was the photographer. This book was published in the early years of photography, barely 30 years after its inception. The procedures were done on cadavers, due to the limitations of photography and anesthesia at that time. The film was slow and required lengthy exposure times. In addition, topical anesthesia in the eye had not yet been developed.

Meyer and Henri Dor of Lyon, France, founded the journal Revue Generale d’Ophtalmologie in 1870. It contained reviews of ophthalmologic publications and meetings, as well as original articles. In 1936 it was merged into the Archives d’Ophtalmologie. Meyer wrote on a wide range of subjects, including sympathetic ophthalmia, cysticercus infection, cocaine anesthesia, intraocular foreign bodies, traumatic retinal detachment, enucleation technique, and binocular vision. He was an important influence on a generation of students, practicing physicians, and patients. Like his beloved mentor, von Graefe, Meyer eventually died of tuberculosis.

In late 19th-century France, distinguished ophthalmologists such as Edouard Meyer did not go from door to door fitting glasses. Dispensing opticians did most of the refractions. But there was another Meyer,
a brother of the famous ophthalmologist, who was an itinerant spectacle salesman. He worked in the shadow of his famous brother, and benefited from his fame. Through clever advertising he would create something of a trap for his clientele. Although seemingly skillful in medical diagnosis and surgical therapy, he would persuade those who consulted him that what they really needed was spectacles, and he would provide them. He pretended to share the scientific achievements of his brother.

The subtle and clever nature of his advertising is remarkable. This is evident in a series of announcements in a periodical that appeared in the city of Dijon, France, in 1874.6 The first reads

We have the benefit of announcing the approaching arrival of Monsieur Meyer, oculist from Paris, brother of the celebrated oculist Dr Meyer, Professor of Ophthalmology at the practical school of the Paris Faculty of Medicine, Chevalier of the Legion of Honor. The method which this celebrated specialist uses to cure eye disease and poor vision is the only one used by our contemporary celebrities. We do not need to speak in praise of Monsieur Meyer, who is known for his marvellous cures and the good results which he has achieved. Monsieur Meyer will receive visitors at the Hotel de la Cloche in Dijon from May 24 to June 7.

The next announcement described Meyer as “one of the most celebrated oculists in Paris,” who is able to cure maladies of the eye and provide “instantaneous relief of weak vision.” His background included “serious research and special studies of anatomy of the eye.” “Everyone, we are certain, should like to consult the honorable practitioner who is recommended by such competence.” The third announcement said,

The numerous, marvellous cures which Monsieur Meyer performs daily through his lenses, without any surgery, draw the attention of all those who suffer from their eyes. His treatment, which is of the greatest simplicity, always provides perceptible improvement in the shortest time. In spite of his reputation, some people may be wary of deception. To the contrary, “perfect cure and that alone” comes from his lenses, “applied with intelligence and discernment,” which have come from his “profound study of the organ of vision.”

The response of the esteemed ophthalmologist Edouard Meyer to this type of publicity is not available, but Clemenceau’s is. In writing “How I Became Presbyopic,” Clemenceau aimed to create a humorous bit of fiction. We do not know if he or Lautrec ever met Edouard Meyer or his brother. However, the short story remains a curious period piece from the turn of the 19th century.

The assistance of Pierre Amalric, MD; Edouard Mawas, MD; and Michael Marmor, MD, is gratefully acknowledged.

Reprints: James G. Ravin, MD, 3000 Regency Ct, Toledo OH 43623 (e-mail: jamesravin@aol.com).

REFERENCES