Historical origins of the concept of neurosis
HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF THE CONCEPT OF NEUROSIS

JOSÉ M. LÓPEZ PIÑERO
Professor of the History of Medicine
University of Valencia

TRANSLATED BY D. BERRIOS
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To Maria Luz
Introduction

Although the history of the concept of neurosis during the twentieth century can be said to be a direct continuation of the views of Charcot and Freud, it has created severe difficulties amongst historians; this problematic character partially results from the fact that it has been used as a battle ground by schools of thought such as the scientific-natural method, psychoanalysis and psychosomatic pathology. Over the years this has given rise to numerous attempts at reformulating the concept of neurosis, criticising its foundations and even eliminating it altogether.

Most authors agree on the usefulness of analysing the concept historically. In a meeting held in 1925, dedicated to a ‘Revision of the Problem of the Neurosis’, Oswald Bumke, a representative of the reaction of German academic psychiatry against psychoanalysis, stated:

The first step in this revision is to obtain a clear view of what the term neurosis has meant in the past and means nowadays. As none of us would wish to resolve research questions by a majority vote, an attempt should be made to extract, from the historical evolution of the concept, ideas as to what direction the doctrine of neurosis might follow in the future.¹

Unfortunately Bumke did not undertake nor encourage anyone else to do any historical research. He simply iterated few commonplace about the evolution of the concept and used them to support his personal views. The same criticism can be levelled against most general studies on the neurosis and ‘historical introductions’ which are mostly based on second-hand information.

There is a clear difference between proper historical research and the simple outlining of an evolutionary map based on commonplaces, half truths and historical errors. This perfunctory style of historical
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writing, not uncommon amongst psychiatrists and physicians, reflects *inter alia* their attitude towards the historical disciplines. As Temkin\(^2\) has lamented scientific standards are often not carried over from basic medical research to the historical field. Therefore, incomplete or misinterpreted data, which would suffice to disqualify a biochemical or genetic investigation, are often considered as acceptable in historical work.

Evolutionary accounts of the concept of neurosis limit themselves to enumerating ‘landmarks’. The accustomed style is to start by producing a nebulous account of the work of Cullen and then follow this on with vignettes on Pinel and Charcot. The perfunctory treatment of these writers is then complemented by a detailed exposition of the Freudian views. No inquiry is ever made into the circumstances surrounding the emergence of the concept of neurosis and the pre-Cullean period is usually dispatched in a few glosses on the meanings of hysteria and hypochondria and on the manner these concepts were used in ancient medicine. The periods stretching from Cullen to Pinel and even from the latter to Charcot are passed over in silence.

Charcot’s views on hysteria and on its psychogenetic origins started a new period in the history of neurosis and are at the very bases of current thinking on the subject. It would seem reasonable therefore to dedicate a monograph to the period of gestation (about which little is known) that preceded Charcot’s work as it is during this time that the concept of neurosis took shape. This book, which is an abridged version of one of my earlier publications,\(^3\) comprises four chapters, each corresponding to a specific stage in the evolution of the concept:

1. The concept of neurosis was formulated for the first time in the same period that witnessed the development of medical science in its ‘modern’ sense; this reaction against traditional Galenism took place during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The first chapter explores the manner in which such formulation shaped up under the new medical knowledge.

2. The strong influence of *Naturphilosophie*, that romantic form of speculative medicine, placed German medicine in a pre-eminent position during the first half of the nineteenth century. The second chapter investigates how the concept of neurosis fared
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under the impact of Naturphilosophie and of contemporary so-called 'eclectic' doctrines.

(3) The transformation in early nineteenth-century medical science and practice brought about by the Anatomoclinical School of Paris influenced the evolution of the concept of neurosis in a number of European countries. The third chapter describes the way in which this concept adapted itself to the new principle of anatomical lesion that characterized anatomoclinical medicine in the period prior to Charcot.

(4) During the middle of the nineteenth century the physiopathological and the anatomoclinical methods ran parallel. The fourth and final chapter examines changes in the concept of neurosis that resulted from the influence of the physiopathological view and outlines the emerging view of neurosis as a functional disturbance of the diseased organism.

This book intends to give an account of how the concept of neurosis was created and modified in response to the theoretical changes which occurred in medicine during two centuries. The historical epidemiology of the neurosis and cognate states is not touched upon and specific views on the concept of hysteria (and on other conditions falling under the neurosis umbrella) are mentioned only when relevant to the central question.