

PICTURES & PROSE

Benedict Augustin Morel (1809–1873)

For scientists worldwide, 2009 was marked by celebrations of Charles Robert Darwin's bicentenary. Born in the same year as the originator of modern evolutionary theory, Benedict Augustin Morel has also made a significant contribution to scientific thought. Indeed, Morel is the father of 'dementia praecox' and 'the theory of degeneration', two concepts that contributed to the understanding of mental illness at the turning point of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Morel, born in 1809 in Vienna, Austria, of French parents earned his medical doctorate in 1839 and 2 years later became secretary to the renowned Jean-Pierre Falret at the Salpêtrière hospital in Paris, France. He died of diabetes in 1873, having worked as director of the mental asylum at Saint-Yon after appointment in 1856 (1).

Morel is the author of 'Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles et morales de l'espèce humaine' published in 1857 (2). Inspired by the thinking of Saint Augustin and Rousseau, he formed the theory of degeneration, and as a devout Catholic conceived his hypothesis of degeneracy with a religious tinge.

According to Morel's theory, madness is the consequence of physical damage and/or moral injury, which are ultimately embodied in the nervous system. The nervous disorder is transmitted to one's descendants, not in the specific form it took in the parent but as a morbid nervous pre-disposition. This pre-disposition is the causative matrix common to all mental disorders. Morel posits the notion of heredity as a biological determinant of madness. Through this theory, Morel



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offers a comprehensive global a etiological model that anchors psychiatric medicine to general medicine without assimilation, thereby explaining its success at the time (3).

The theory of degeneration has since been adopted in many areas of medicine and beyond that has contributed to its outreach and dissemination, thus inspiring criminological (Lombroso's theory of anthropological criminology), aesthetic

(Max Nordau) and political doctrines with racist theories. Finally, it is worth noting that the theory of degeneration is captured within the description of French writer Emile Zola's main work *Les Rougon-Macquart*.

Although the theory of degeneration is regarded as outdated today, it is arguably this work that has placed Morel as a progenitor of the current biological approach to psychiatric illnesses.

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