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## Editorial: The Origins of the Concept of Psychic Traumatism

**Tomasella S\***

Founder of CERP, Psychoanalyst, France

\*Corresponding author: Saverio Tomasella, Founder and Manager, CERP, Psychoanalyst, France, E-mail: saveriotomasella@gmail.com

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### Editorial

Two texts from Antiquity clearly relate the existence of disorders that occurred after a traumatic shock.

Herodotus narrates that during the Battle of Marathon between the Athenians and the Persians, in 490 BC, an Athenian soldier named Epizelos remained blind all his life following a fight during which he saw a colossus approaching him, and kill his comrade right next to him [1].

In the first century before Christ, Lucretius wrote:

“Men whose minds are occupied with the great and violent actions they have performed, repeat and revive their exploits in their dreams. Many, thinking they are falling to the ground with all the weight of their bodies from the top of the mountains, are terrified of terror, and once pulled out of sleep; they find it hard to regain their spirits [2].”

Ancient observers had already been able to observe the traumatic impact of events provoking a psychic shock, either in the form of “hysterical conversion” or in the form of “repetition syndromes”, each time with nightmares and night terrors.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in France, the doctor Philippe Pinel describes the persistent symptoms of a retired soldier, who follow a series of successive traumas.

“After fifty years of very active service, (...this man) became subject to various nervous affections, such as spasms in the limbs, bursts in sleep, frightening dreams [3].”

In Germany, the psychiatrist Hermann Oppenheim proposes the term of “traumatic neurosis” in a first work in 1889, then in a second one in 1891, shortly before the birth of the psychoanalysis. He cites some typical symptoms: nightmares, repetitive sleep disturbances, latency before the appearance of the disorders, irritability and nervous exhaustion.

These clinical signs will be retained to characterize the effects of trauma.

During the same period, and more particularly in the 1880s, the French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot (1825-1893) discovered that a traumatic shock caused a “dissociation of consciousness”, a break in the presence in the world and in the contact with the reality. As a result, the memory of the event remains unconscious [4]. This fundamental discovery will be taken up and continued by the French philosopher and doctor Pierre Janet (1859-1947).

From 1890 to 1897, Sigmund Freud proposed a traumatic theory of neuroses. At this period, he favours the sexual nature of the trauma [5]. In 1915, he gives an economic definition of trauma, as an event which overflows the person by its intensity.

“We call a lived event which, in the space of a short space of time, brings into the psychic life such an excess of excitement that its suppression or natural assimilation becomes an impossible task, which has the effect of lasting troubles in the use of energy” [6].

The father of psychoanalysis identifies a trauma as a psychic event that corresponds to a discontinuity. This stranger element is symptomatic, returns to the identical, and remains in pain while waiting for elaboration.

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