CHAPTER SEVEN

THE CULTURE OF COMPLEXES

After World War I, many of the alleged medical and socio-cultural hazards to the health of nerves began to be dismissed or re-interpreted by the younger generation of nerve doctors. A paradigmatic representative of a new approach to neuroses was the American nerve doctor Louis E. Bisch, whose book *Be Glad You’re Neurotic* appeared as a Swedish translation in 1938.¹ Bisch could not be less worried about most of the aetiological factors which the previous generation of nerve doctors and other specialists had put forward to explain neuroses. Rather than focusing on the negative effects of nervous illnesses on the health of people, he radiated an optimistic, almost care-free attitude towards neurosis, as the title of his book indicates. The reader receives a good idea of his message merely by reading the titles of the fourteen chapters of his book. For example, Chapter One is entitled ‘I’m a neurotic myself—and I’m glad of it’; Chapter Two: ‘To be normal is nothing to brag about’; Chapter Four: ‘Your development into a neurotic was inevitable’; Chapter Nine: ‘Of course your sex life is far from satisfactory’; Chapter Eleven: ‘How nervous are you, by the way? Try this test’; and Chapter Fourteen: ‘Then follow these five simple rules—that’s all!’² These ‘five simple rules’ are as follows:

- Study yourself
- Stop blaming yourself
- Be proud of what you are
- Change your failings to opportunities
- Make your neurosis fruitful

And then:

BE GLAD!³

² As I have not been able to consult the original American edition of the book, I have translated the titles of these chapters myself.
The up-beat message of Bisch’s book is: don’t worry, be neurotic! Sing if you’re glad to be nervous! Dr. Bisch’s carefree attitude is quite different from that of Beard, Charcot, Krafft-Ebing, Mantegazza, Hellpach, Janet, Lennmalm, or even such modern psychotherapists as Bjerre and Geijerstam. Bisch’s approach to neurosis is the most optimistic and buoyant I have come across, and it contrasts starkly not only with the sombre approach of the earlier generation of European doctors, but also with such serious-minded representatives of the ‘modern approach’ as the psychoanalyst Otto Fenichel, for whom neurosis was almost a matter of life and death (see his *Theories of Neurosis*, 1945). It is probably no coincidence that Bisch was an American—after all, it is difficult to imagine a German nerve doctor entitling his book ‘Be Glad You’re Neurotic’—but there is more to this than simply the nationality of the author. Bisch, who also wrote (among other things) a book entitled *Cure Your Nerves Yourself* (1953) and a ‘manual’ on *How to Get into the Movies* (1936), was in fact an almost prototypical representative of a new psychomedical mentality that blurred the distinction between health and sickness; between sanity and insanity; and between what is normal and respectable and what is abnormal and reprehensible. For him, as well as for an increasing number of his professional peers, neurosis was an integral part of the normal mental constitution of a modern individual, and far from seeking ways and means to get rid of it, one should learn to live with it and even see it as a resource that can be utilised (e.g. in intellectual and artistic work). It was almost as if neurosis was perceived by Bisch as an inevitable product of cultural evolution, a condition of modernity rather than a stigma or an illness.

The road from Beard’s office in Manhattan in 1880 to Bisch’s office in Manhattan in 1930 was not as long and winding as might be inferred from the kaleidoscopic history of neurosis during these fifty years. Even Beard thought that neurasthenia was a product of civilisation, and he held that those who fell ill represented the very vanguard of social progress. The main difference between Beard and Bisch is that Beard had a predominantly somatic approach to neurasthenia, and that he used mainly electrotherapy as a method of treatment. Bisch, by contrast, had a psychodynamic approach to neurosis, and he relied mainly on talk therapy. These differences can be explained by the fact that Beard’s Nervous Age was not yet affected by popularised psychological ideas, whereas Bisch’s Nervous Age was becoming suffused with things psychological and psychodynamic.