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Poetry and Medicine

Deadly doctors and invigorating verse

The mock epic poem *Terrible Tractations!!: A Poetical Petition against Galvanising Trumpery and the Perkinistic Institution* offers an outsider’s perspective on the state of British medicine at the start of the nineteenth century. Written in 1803 by the American Thomas Green Fessenden during his stay in London from 1801 to 1804, *Terrible Tractations!!* pits a modern therapy from the New World against the British medical establishment, represented here by the protagonist and purported author of the poem, ‘Christopher Caustic, M.D. LL.D ASS., Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians, Aberdeen, and Honorary Member of No Less than Nineteen Very Learned Societies.’ The satire defends ‘Metallic Tractors,’ a galvanic remedy that Fessenden’s countryman Elisha Perkins had patented in 1796. These are a pair of metal rods, each made of a different alloy, which when alternately stroked over affected parts of the body supposedly influence ‘hominal electricity’[[1]](#footnote-1) to counter such conditions as arthritis, gout, haemorrhages, herpes, burns and epilepsy: ‘O’er the frail part a subtil fluid pour, / Drench’d with invisible Galvanic shower.’[[2]](#footnote-2) This account of their workings is taken from Fessenden’s verse address for the opening of the charitable Perkinian Institution ‘for the use of the Metallic Tractors, in Disorders of the Poor,’[[3]](#footnote-3) which Perkins’ son Benjamin established in Soho in 1803. Nathanial Hawthorne writes that it was ‘at the request of Perkins [*fils*]’ that Fessenden ‘consented to make [the Tractors] the subject of a poem in Hudibrastic verse.’[[4]](#footnote-4)

Fessenden defends Perkinism for what he sees to be its humanitarian motives, so that his satire accordingly has Caustic oppose it on these grounds. Expressly addressing his verses ‘*against . . . the Perkinistic Institution*, Caustic finds in Erasmus Darwin’s poem *The Temple of Nature* (1803) another contemporary approach to the poor, a scheme to improve agricultural land with their corpses. While Caustic sees all men who defend Perkins to be liars, he maintains that even if we:

. . . grant his Tractors cure diseases,

Folks ought to die just when God pleases;

But most of all the dirty poor,

Who make, quoth Darwin, good manure.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The brutal rhyme that has diseases chime with divine pleasure satirises a persistent religious argument against medical research and efficacy. This position is advanced in another poem from 1803, John Gibson’s 'Verses Composed upon that Sublime Subject the Cowpock Preached by Mr Lyons.' Vaccination against smallpox, which Edward Jenner had established experimentally in 1796, is seen by the poem as a hubristic attempt to frustrate the divine will: ‘Let God alone the first infection give / Then should they die resigned to him you live.’[[6]](#footnote-6) God has the privilege of ‘the first infection,’ for just as Jenner’s vaccination provokes a mild cowpox that prevents deadly smallpox, the deity can engender a mortal disease to protect against the more serious condition of damnation and ensure eternal life.

Caustic’s concern, however, is not with God’s will to hasten ever-lasting life for some, but rather, as he makes clear with his obscene rhyme of ‘poor’ with ‘manure,’ that Perkinian medicine thwarts a Malthusian hygiene. He identifies the Tractors with ‘that pestiferous corps, / Who keep alive the paltry poor,’[[7]](#footnote-7) ‘curing those who ought to depend solely on “Death and the Doctor.”'[[8]](#footnote-8) An apologist and agent for a status quo in which disease and early death are common consequences of poverty, Caustic trusts in Death professionally as ‘Our great and terrible Ally!’[[9]](#footnote-9) He has a like-minded colleague at the other end of the century, in the prison doctor in Oscar Wilde’s *Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898).

For most of the time he spent in prison from May 1895 to 1897, Wilde was held at Reading Gaol. In 1896 he became aware of a new prisoner, Charles Wooldridge, who was charged and promptly hung for murdering his wife. This history is re-worked in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, which Wilde wroteafter his release, while living in exile in France. The doctor’s place in the penal system, and in the larger system of Church and State, is neatly gauged by the following rhyme:

The Governor was strong upon

The Regulations Act:

The Doctor said that Death was but

A scientific fact:

And twice a day the Chaplain called,

And left a little tract.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The Governor enforces the procedures for dealing and dispensing with the condemned man as they are specified by the ‘Act.’ The state’s monopoly of violence is focused in this short sharp syllable, which the Doctor and the Chaplain each buttress with their authority and further letters. While the Chaplain’s ‘little tract’ sounds quaintly ineffectual and apologetic, the Doctor’s forthright declaration, in which he equates the arbitrary ‘Act’ of a state killing with ‘scientific fact,’ recalls Caustic’s callousness, the alliterative alliance of ‘Death and the Doctor.’

Caustic’s poem culminates in the fourth and final Canto, ‘Grand Attack!’ In keeping with epic convention much of this canto is given over to catalogue. The doctors’ armoury, ‘all their weapons in possession,’[[11]](#footnote-11) are mobilised in the spirit not of the ancient Hippocratic Oath but the recent French Terror:

Cram all the ninny-hammers gullets,

With pills as big as pistol bullets;

Then, Frenchman like, give each a glister,

And next go on to bleed and blister.

Dash at them escharotics gnawing,

Their carcases to pick a flaw in;[[12]](#footnote-12)

With fell trepaning perforator,

Pierce every rascal's stubborn pate, or

With chisel plied with might and main,

Ope a huge hole in pericrane.[[13]](#footnote-13)

*Terrible Tractorations!!* reports a brutal medicine, an ally of Death that lends itself to attack rather than healing, to warfare rather than well-being, with little means or indeed incentive to cure patients:

Some fell by laudanum, and some by steel,

And death in ambush lay in every pill;

For save, or slay, this privilege we claim,

Though credit suffers, the reward's the same. [[14]](#footnote-14)

Introduced at the start of George Crabbe’s poem on ‘Physic,’ which follows that on the lawyer in *The Borough* (1810), doctors are described as ‘a graver Tribe,’ awarded an equivocal epithet that identifies them with dignity and dismal prospects. The pun’s cloven characterisation is orchestrated in the balanced antitheses of the lines that follow, where doctors are described as learned without being efficacious, their diagnoses and treatments being matters of chance: ‘Helpers of Men they’re call’d, and we confess / Theirs the deep Study, theirs the lucky Guess.’[[15]](#footnote-15) Such well-intentioned uncertainty leaves much scope for charlatans to fill the breach. Crabbe’s discussion of doctors is accordingly brief, effectively forming a preface to the poem’s long disquisition on quacks; ‘Hence Sums enormous by those Cheats are made,/ And Deaths unnumber’d by their dreadful Trade.’ [[16]](#footnote-16)

Crabbe is nonetheless optimistic about the future of medicine, believing that science can prevail over quackery: ‘Then let us trust to Science—there are those / Who can their Falsehoods and their Frauds disclose.’[[17]](#footnote-17) Fessenden is not so sanguine. *Terrible Tractations!!* replies to accusations of quackery made against Perkinism by charging established medicine with hypocrisy. How can it demand a causal explanation of the Tractors, given the mystery surrounding its staple remedies?: ‘this grave reasoning's all a hum, / Because the learn'd are in the dark / How opium, mercury acts, and bark [of Cinchona, Quinine].’[[18]](#footnote-18) The fragmented and unprofessional state of medicine at this time allows proponents of particular cures to each equally ‘Tell the vile deeds by quackery done, / By every nostrum, save *thine own*.’[[19]](#footnote-19)

One of the main targets of Fessenden’s satire, Dr John Haygarth, does test the Tractors scientifically. In treating some of his patients at Bath, Haygarth secretly replaced the tractors with wooden facsimiles, which he found to be as efficacious in relieving the symptoms of rheumatism as the patented originals. From this experiment he concluded that the Tractors worked by harnessing the power not of electricity but of the imagination. Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey include an entry on the ‘The *Tractors*’ as ‘a mode of quackery’ in *Omniana* (1812),[[20]](#footnote-20) and probably knew Haygarth through the chemist Thomas Beddoes. Coleridge also read widely on the medical imagination, and would have known Haygarth’s book, *On the Imagination as a Cause & as a Cure of Disorders of the Body, exemplified by fictitious tractors and epidemical convulsions* (1800).[[21]](#footnote-21)

Having coined the term ‘psychosomatic,’ Coleridge was convinced of the philosophical and medical power of the imagination to both cause and cure disease. His holistic belief in the medical interactions of mind and body, of mental states and somatic feelings,[[22]](#footnote-22) derives from an encompassing principle of Life that fascinated him and his peers, and that impelled the conjoint development of new poetry and science. In his *Hints towards the Formation of a more Comprehensive Theory of Life* (comp. 1818; 1848) Coleridge describes a ‘power’ of Life, a continuous principle of motion impelled by ‘the unceasing *polarity of life, as the form of its process*’[[23]](#footnote-23) that articulates the interdependence of parts as a whole. Developed through his reading of Schelling and other German *Naturphilosophen*, this conception is consistent with the dynamic principle that Coleridge describes in his erratum to the 1817 publication of ‘The Eolian Harp’: ‘O! the one life within us and abroad, / Which meets all motion and becomes its soul.’[[24]](#footnote-24)

For Coleridge and his peers, imagination and poetry not only appreciate but also quicken the ‘one life.’ William Wordsworth sustains principles of medical mentalism throughout his poetry, championing the healing powers of joy, nature and poetry itself. John Stuart Mill famously provides a personal testimonial for such claims, as suffering from a severe depression in 1828, he found in ‘Wordsworth’s poems a medicine for my state of mind.’[[25]](#footnote-25) In his ‘Lines suggested by a portrait from the pencil of F. Stone’ (comp. 1834-35), Wordsworth compares the power of his poetry to the pool described in John’s gospel (5: 7), which will heal the first sick person to enter the water after it has been troubled by the angel:

And I, grown old, but in a happier land,

Domestic Portrait! have to verse consigned

In thy calm presence those heart-moving words:

Words that can soothe, more than they agitate;

Whose spirit, like the angel that went down

Into Bethesda’s pool, with healing virtue

Informs the fountain in the human breast

Which by thy visitation was disturbed.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Poetic diction, those words ‘to verse consigned,’ is implicitly paralleled with the powerful words of Christ in this episode as he heals the sick man by fiat, ‘Rise, take up your pallet, and walk’ (John 5: 8). Wordsworth’s lines turn upon the tension between the stasis of the portrait, ‘thy calm presence,’ and the agitation of the temporal medium of verse, the tranquil pool and its disturbed but vital form, the flow of poetic diction, described and demonstrated here as ‘Words that can soothe.’ A poem is a contained organic form rhythmically pulsing, and the spirit of ‘those heart-moving words’ heals the human heart, as of a fibrillation, ‘Informs the fountain in the human breast.’ This physiological characterization of soothing poetry recalls ‘that serene and blessed mood’ described in Wordsworth’s ‘Tintern Abbey,’ in which, ‘even the motion of our human blood / Almost suspended, we are laid asleep / In body, and become a living soul,’ and ‘see into the life of things.’[[27]](#footnote-27)

Like Coleridge and Wordsworth, their friend the young chemist Humphry Davy also assumes that poetry, not medicine, is best able to describe Life. The tenor of a long draft poem he sent to Coleridge in 1800 can be grasped from its opening lines: ‘Lo! o’er the earth the kindling spirits pour / The flames of life that bounteous nature gives.’[[28]](#footnote-28) This paean to Life only received its final revisions and title in 1808, during a period when Davy was convalescing from a life-threatening illness. ‘The exact cause of this illness, as well as its nature,’ Davy’s brother recalls, ‘was doubtful.’[[29]](#footnote-29) The poem contains no reference to the illness other than its title, ‘Written after recovery from a Dangerous Illness,’ which accordingly mobilises these verses as a grateful tribute to the vital principle that on this occasion prevailed in the face of ineffectual medicine. The impotence of current medicine is also acknowledged obliquely in the closing lines of the poem, where death is figured as a cure for life, ‘an awakening from a dream of pain.’ Dr Caustic’s alliance of ‘Death and the Doctor,’ however, would be gradually countered by a scientific medicine that, sharing the precepts of the new science of biology, is dedicated to understanding and enhancing the principle of Life that Davy lauds in his poem. Jenner’s practice of vaccination furnishes the epochal instance of this new medicine.

The Normal and the Pathological: Saviour Scientists and Mad Poets.

While Jenner did not discover vaccination, he established it scientifically, first by experiment and then following its rapid and widespread adoption, with statistical analysis and epidemiological observations. The reach of vaccination in controlling infectious disease soon escalated the combative tropes used by medicine from those of individuals fighting for their lives to grand battles and campaigns. In 1808 the consumptive poet John Dawes Worgan, who lived with Jenner’s family from 1806 to his death at the age of nineteen three years later,[[30]](#footnote-30) wrote a verse ‘Address to the Royal Jennerian Society.’ It includes an account of a philanthropic expedition that King Charles IV of Spain commissioned, which from 1803 to 1806 vaccinated 230 000 people across the New World and Asia. The expedition included twenty-four male orphans aged eight to ten, none of whom had previously been exposed to smallpox or inoculated. They were used as incubators of the vaccine. The vesicle fluid was passed arm-to-arm from the ulcerated skin of one child to the next and extracted freshly, as required. Offering some redress for the Spanish conquest of 1519-20, which had originally introduced smallpox to the Americas with catastrophic effects, the King’s philanthropic expedition figures in Worgan’s poem as a pacifist campaign and a secular holy war, a new form of paramilitarism that foreshadows the tropes that have become endemic to discourses of medical research and public health:

See! at Philanthropy's divine command,

Thy sons, Iberia, quit their native strand;

With dauntless hope innumerous toils they dare,

From pole to pole the vital gift to bear.

No deep-mouth'd cannons thunder o'er the main,

No sanguine fights the placid wave distain,

But smiling Peace -- her olive-branch displays,

And faltering infants lisp their Guardian's praise,

As on their arms the sov’reign shield they show,

Whose heav'nly powers repel th' ERUPTIVE FOE,

With mystic charm extend the fleeting breath,

And blunt the direst of the shafts of death.[[31]](#footnote-31)

The children’s arms are the armaments here. Figured as a ‘sovereign shield,’ the rosace cowpox lesions are a preservative talisman and a military honour, a medallion issued by the King, and an enlightenment emblem of individual sovereignty, the right to life, for both the children and the otherwise subject people of the Spanish New World.

Resolutely asserting the scientific merit of vaccination in the face of professional and religious prejudices, Jenner probably caused more lives to be saved than any other individual in history. But as well as furnishing a foundational story for modern medicine, Jenner also wrote some poetry on the side.[[32]](#footnote-32) Along with Worgan, his circle included several other poets, amongst them Edward Gardner, who in the elegy he wrote after Jenner’s death in 1823 describes the doctor as ‘young-ey’d fancy’s darling child,’ styling him as a romantic spirit that oddly recalls Keat’s Nightingale and Shelley’s Skylark; ‘Oft have I heard thee near thy glassy stream / Pour th’ impassioned tones of genius wild.’[[33]](#footnote-33)

Predicated upon romantic interfusions of poetry and science, Jenner’s circle can be compared with Coleridge’s better-known group in Bristol. The power of Jenner’s science as a model and advertisement for modern research-based medicine, however, has been instrumental in rupturing such holism, separating romantic ideas about Life from those of biology. This new scientific medicine increasingly distanced itself from poetry, indeed it would come to pathologise poets. While Baron’s *Life of Jenner* often praises its subject for his ‘imaginative fervour’ and ‘poet’s tongue,’[[34]](#footnote-34) and indeed for the verses he wrote, it also reports that ‘modern physicians have recognised in the delineations of the poet a real disease which they themselves witnessed.’[[35]](#footnote-35) Jenner’s scientific prowess presumably protected him from succumbing to this condition.

‘In the course of the nineteenth century,’ Georges Canguilhem observes, ‘the real identity of normal and pathological vital phenomena . . . became a kind of scientifically guaranteed dogma.’[[36]](#footnote-36) Scientific medicine begins to assert its authority and assume its professional prerogative of demarcating the normal and the pathological during the decades when some of its romantic peers were effectively offering themselves up as case-studies. Opium consumption is conceptualised as addiction at this time, with Coleridge becoming ‘the first Englishman to commit himself to the full-time and long-term care of a surgeon for treatment of drug abuse.’[[37]](#footnote-37) Lady Byron sought opinions about her husband’s sanity from Dr Matthew Baillie and another doctor, Mr. Le Mann, an episode that Byron alludes to in *Don Juan*: ‘For Inez called some druggists and physicians, / And tried to prove her loving lord was mad.’[[38]](#footnote-38)

Writing in a time when medicine was gaining scientific credibility, John Gibson Lockhart opportunistically co-opted its discourse in his notorious defamation of John Keats in the fourth of his essays on ‘The Cockney School of Poetry’ (1818). Lockhart writes near the end of his essay, ‘We had almost forgot to mention, that Keats belongs [also] to the Cockney School of Politics,’[[39]](#footnote-39) a passing reference to the real object of his attack, the poet’s radical politics. By pathologising him through his poetry, Lockhart transubstantiates his private political opinion that Keats is socially harmful and undesirable into a pseudo-scientific observation, an almost unanswerable slur that casts him as a danger to public health and wellbeing.

Lockhart’s essay begins: ‘Of all the manias of this mad age, the most incurable, as well as the most common, seems to be no other than the Metromanie.’ He then goes on to argue that Keats ‘has caught the infection.’ Keats was an apprentice to an apothecary and surgeon for a year when he was fifteen and then a medical student at Guy’s Hospital in London from 1811 to 1816, when he was awarded his apothecary’s license. He decided, however, to forsake practicing medicine in favour of writing poetry. Damning him with feint praise, Lockhart considers Keats to have ‘talents which, devoted to the purposes of any useful profession, must have rendered him a respectable, if not an eminent citizen, . . . But all has been undone by a sudden attack of the malady.’[[40]](#footnote-40) Keats has chosen artistic madness over professional sanity, to be a patient instead of a doctor.

Keats reaffirms his choice of poetry over medicine in his ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ (1819) where in the third and fourth stanzas he declares that he wishes to:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget

    What thou among the leaves hast never known,

The weariness, the fever, and the fret

     Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;

Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,

      Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;

           Where but to think is to be full of sorrow

                   And leaden-eyed despairs,

         Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,

              Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,

     Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,

But on the viewless wings of Poesy[[41]](#footnote-41)

Keats was familiar with suffering and death through the loss of his father in 1804 and then his mother in 1810 and brother Tom in 1818, both to the wasting illness of consumption that would also claim his life. His medical training must also have informed the pessimistic description of human life he makes here, especially the specific references to fever, palsy and consumption.[[42]](#footnote-42) The third stanza makes an inductive leap from these medical conditions to its stark characterisation of human life in the ‘Here’ that we all inhabit. Its fourth line pivots about the connective ‘and,’ which functions as a caesura that yields two half lines, and a structural parallel of ‘Here’ to ‘hear’ at the start of each. This positioning of the words facilitates their punning conflation, suffusing the spatial immediacy of the indexical with the visceral affliction of other men’s groans; ‘Here, where men sit and hear each other groan.’ Carefully deployed, ‘Here’ is a keynote that gathers up and focuses the assonant modulations of the preceding line’s ‘The weariness, the fever, and the fret.’ The word-sound is then itself varied in the series ‘Here, where,’ inflected by the earlier ‘weariness,’ a hypothesis that is vindicated by the lines that follow, where the word ‘Where’ takes the lead in cataloguing more miseries.

Set against this grim depiction of human life, which advertises the failures of current medicine, poetry is attributed with life enhancing qualities that directly contest Lockhart’s position. The ‘Ode’ appears to makes some pointed, or at least unapologetic, references to Lockhart’s mocking rhetoric, such as his essay’s closing recommendation that Keats ‘go back to the [apothecary’s] shop,’ but ‘be a little more sparing of extenuatives and soporifics in your practice than you have been in your poetry.’[[43]](#footnote-43) The beginning of Keats’ poem is almost a retort to Lockhart’s final words, as the poet becomes proxy apothecary to his own patient-like persona:

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains

My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,

Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains

One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk[[44]](#footnote-44)

The second stanza introduces another form of Lethe water, ‘a draught of vintage,’ ‘That I might drink, and leave the world unseen, / And with thee fade away into the forest dim,’ a lyrical parallel to the emaciating ‘extenuatives’ Lockhart refers to, which then becomes the keynote to the third stanza, cited earlier; ‘Fade far away, dissolve.’ This stanza, of course, also includes a sobering reference to the involuntary extenuative of consumption, by which ‘youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies.’ Hermione de Almeida notes that the word ‘dissolve’ has several scientific medical meanings at the time that Keats is writing, including the physiological sense of a release from life.[[45]](#footnote-45) The various forms of fading, dissolving and forgetting with which the poet tries to evade the groaning ‘Here’ of human life culminate in the sixth stanza’s yearning for the oblivion of death: ‘Darkling I listen; and, for many a time / I have been half in love with easeful Death.’[[46]](#footnote-46) This life is met with ‘easeful death,’ an almost anagrammatic reversal and undoing of *disease*. Implicitly disavowing Lockhart’s normative ideas of sickness and health, Keats humane and encompassing conception of life defies the critic’s sarcastic diagnostics.

Keats’ death by consumption at the age of twenty-five is well known, and known in many ways. Consumption was the lay term for *pththisis*, a broad diagnosis covering not only pulmonary tuberculosis but any wasting disease that had a pulmonary element. Finally demystified in 1882 with the discovery by Robert Koch of its pathogen, *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*, consumption was variously idealised and sexualised for much of the century. Keats became the definitive case of the creative consumptive, a hopeful but delusional association with the disease that the physician Sir William Osler names in a lecture marking the centenary of the poet’s birth in 1894 as ‘the *Spes phthisica* that has carried so many consumptives cheerfully to the very gates of the grave.’[[47]](#footnote-47) The ‘Stethoscope Song’ (1848), by the American doctor Oliver Wendell Holmes, includes a description of ‘six young damsels’ who ‘were getting slim and pale, / And short of breath on mounting stairs,’ and ‘all made rhymes with “sighs” and “skies.”’[[48]](#footnote-48) Consumption had also been associated with syphilis and attributed to constitutional weakness, principally masturbation, while the paleness and delicacy it imposed upon its victims notoriously chimes in with nineteenth-century ideals of female attractiveness, instanced in such operatic heroines as Verdi’s Violetta in *La Traviata* (1853).

Building upon the legacies of the first and second-generation romantics in an age that was increasingly defined by masculinist cultures of empire, industry and professional science, Victorian poetry was easily feminised and pathologised. This is clearly marked in commentaries on the Pre-Raphelities, the poets who were most influenced by Keats’ poetry and are attributed with rediscovering it. Robert Buchanan’s 1871 essay ‘The Fleshly School of Poetry’ finds in the poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, as in his paintings, all the popular stigmatising symptoms of consumption, whilst leaving it to the reader to make the final diagnosis: ‘the same morbid deviation from unhealthy forms of life, the same sense of weary, wasting, yet exquisite sensuality; nothing virile, nothing tender, nothing completely sane.’[[49]](#footnote-49) Max Nordau similarly singles out the PreRaphelite poets for damning diagnosis in *Degeneration* later in the century (1893; trans. 1895).[[50]](#footnote-50)

Buchanan’s essay and others like it draw their authority parasitically from professional medical discussions of poetic pathologies. In 1878, a member of the Royal College of Surgeons, W. A. F. Browne, published an extensive two-part study for the *Journal of Psychological Medicine and Mental Psychology* entitled ‘Mad Poets.’ Wary of similar, more driven, studies, Browne wishes to locate pathologies that are endemic to the vocation itself. He accordingly examines a representative sample of canonical poets across the ages, ‘that vast legion of ill-constituted, irregular, excitable, sentimental, sensitive, crotchety but clever and dreamy individuals who are seen in the twilight which connects the sunshine of right reason and the darkness of derangement.’[[51]](#footnote-51) Browne embarks upon his study with a familiar romantic nosology:

There are manifold considerations which give to mad poets as a class a romantic interest, even a fascination, to scientific minds. Among these are the inquiries, first, whether the mental exaltation, excitement, the transcendental ecstasy, being carried above themselves, out of themselves, attributed to the stage of inspired composition, as the psychologist contends, or the hyperaemia, the blush of redundant blood which then suffuses the grey matter and the genetic cells which it contains, as the physicist believes, tend directly to the production of diseased thought and feeling; secondly, whether the descent, the original or acquired predispositions, the nurture, the situation, the surroundings of imaginative natures augment the proclivities to insanity; thirdly, whether the ideal world in which these inventors live and have their being . . . may not impart morbid tendencies to consciousness, even to their physical constitution . . .[[52]](#footnote-52)

Cold doctors and warm bodies

Browne’s efforts to pathologise poets are reciprocated conversely by poets who observe that doctors are subject to their own peculiar conditions, that medicine attracts or forms particular types of character. For some of these poets, the new professional medicine recalls Wordsworth’s dictum ‘We murder to dissect,’[[53]](#footnote-53) it lacks the sympathetic imagination that the romantic ideology identifies with poetry. The prison doctor in Wilde’s *Ballad of Reading Gaol* observes the condemned man’s agony coldly for its physiological manifestations: ‘some coarse-mouthed Doctor gloats, and notes / Each new and nerve-twitched post.’[[54]](#footnote-54) Suffering is read by the doctor as bodily registered ‘post,’ psychological torment relayed by the nerves, as by the reductionist analogy of telegraph wires. This sinister semiotic is itself observed by the poem, which in turn registers the doctor’s sadistic job satisfaction in the crude chiming of ‘gloats, and notes’.

Alfred Tennyson defends romantic ideology and Christian belief against scientific medicine. The enlightenment origins and ideals of such science are presented in ‘Locksley Hall Sixty Years After’ (1886) as the utopian goals of a future state that will supersede ‘the schemes and all the systems,’ once they fail and fall:

All diseases quenched by Science, no man halt, or deaf or blind;

Stronger ever born of weaker, lustier body, larger mind?

The forthright declaration of this progressive platform is swiftly undermined by the question mark appended to it, yielding qualms about medical perfectibility that resonate with concerns about genetic engineering in our own age. Tennyson finds in such homogenizing rationalism not the promise of an egalitarian utopia but the enforced restraint and dissolution of nature’s Blakean bounties:

Every tiger madness muzzled, every serpent passion killed,

Every grim ravine a garden, every blazing desert tilled. [[55]](#footnote-55)

Such opposing romantic and enlightenment values interact allegorically in the figures of the nurse and new surgeon in Tennyson’s ‘In the Children’s Hospital’ (1880). The poem begins with the arrival of the new doctor, ‘Fresh from the surgery-schools of France and of other lands,’[[56]](#footnote-56) his recent provenance clearly signalling the character of his medicine. The nurse, in whose voice the poem is written, responds intuitively to her first sighting of the surgeon; ‘he sent a chill to my heart.’[[57]](#footnote-57) This premonition of an icy continental rationalism prefigures her conjecture that he has no sympathetic imagination, indeed is a vivisector:

I could think he was one of those who would break their jests on the dead,

And mangle the living dog that had loved him and fawned at his knee –

Drenched with the hellish oorali [curare].[[58]](#footnote-58)

The antivivisection movement had been galvanised in the 1870s after a French physiologist demonstrated the effects of injecting alcohol into dogs at the 1874 British Medical Association meeting, provoking outrage that British medical researchers were not only condoning such experiments but increasingly performing them too.[[59]](#footnote-59) Pitting him against the English love of animals, the nurse makes a topical identification of the surgeon with continental practices of experimental physiology. The nurse accuses the surgeon of being ‘happier using the knife than in trying to save the limb,’[[60]](#footnote-60) a charge that is upheld later in the poem by his willingness to perform a futile operation on one of the children, Emmie. Conforming with the caricature of the surgeon as butcher, he is also presented as physically crude, ‘so coarse and so red,’ with ‘big merciless hands.’[[61]](#footnote-61) The surgeon meets the nurse’s suggestion that Christ be appealed to help one of their dying children with enlightenment naturalism, proffering the rhetorical question ‘can prayer set a broken bone?’ and the further dismissive observation that ‘the good Lord Jesus has had his day.’

Countering the godless materialism of the *sans cullotte* surgeon, the children are identified with created nature, such ‘works of the Lord’ as the cowslip, wildflowers that ‘freshen and sweeten the wards like the waft of an Angel’s wing,’ but are each also allocated a preordained fate. The children are figured with the Manichaean metaphor of ‘“spirits in prison”,’[[62]](#footnote-62) waiting for release, while their identification with flowers naturalises their early deaths, as a sure way of preserving their innocent beauty. On the evening before she is to have her operation, Emmie overhears the kindly old doctor saying ‘she’ll never live thro’ it,’[[63]](#footnote-63) and the intervening night becomes a battle to save her from the surgeon. Another child advises her to ‘“cry to the dear Lord Jesus” to help,’ and sleep ‘with her arms lying out on the counterpane’[[64]](#footnote-64) or bedcover, so that the Saviour can distinguish her from the other children in the ward. Her arms outstretched toward Christ, or perhaps in *Imitatio Christi*, Emmie passes away during the stormy night, a dark night of the soul for the nurse, who ‘dreams of the dreadful knife’ and hears ‘a phantom cry . . ., / The motherless bleat of a lamb in the storm.’[[65]](#footnote-65) This lamb of God is saved from the knife, ‘fears for our delicate Emmie who scarce would escape with her life’[[66]](#footnote-66) oddly overcome by her death at the hands of Christ. ‘In the children’s hospital’ reminds the reader that death is in God’s gifting, much as Gibson does in his 'Verses Composed upon . . . the Cowpock.’ The poem assumes the Christian doctrine of the Fall, a post-lapsarian world in which death is inevitable, but a good death and afterlife are not.

By introducing death the Fall naturalizes disease, and so renders questionable modern medicine’s goal of having ‘All diseases quenched by Science.’ In another late poem by Tennyson, ‘Happy’ (1889), a bride appreciates the body of her leper love as an honest emblem of man’s postlapsarian state: ‘This coarse diseaseful creature which in Eden was divine, / This Satan-haunted ruin, this little city of sewers.’[[67]](#footnote-67) Drawn from the medieval *contemptus mundi* tradition, this trope of the body as a contested site and ruined structure is also used by the Jesuit priest Gerard Manley Hopkins in his sonnet ‘Felix Randal’ (comp. 1880), which commemorates the death of one of the poet’s parishioners, a farrier, from pulmonary tuberculosis. The description of Randal’s body focuses upon his build, ‘his mould of man, big-bóned and hardy-handsome,’ a structure that is invaded and eroded, as ‘reason rámbled in it and some / Fatal four disorders, fléshed there, all contended.’[[68]](#footnote-68)

In ‘Happy’ the male body represents the postlapsarian fraternity of sin and disease, a conjunction that Hopkins refers to obliquely by describing incarnate diseases as ‘fléshed there’ and having his own protocols for regulating his potentially sinful attraction to such bodies. He allows himself to express admiration for mature male bodies in his poetry once they have been absolved of sexuality by death. The poet-priest’s attentiveness to the farrier’s bodily physicality, ‘his mould of man,’ resonates with his account of ‘one sea-corpse cold,’ the dead sailor in ‘The Loss of the Eurydice’ (comp. 1878): ‘He was all of lovely manly mould.’[[69]](#footnote-69) Having been made in God’s image, the bodies described in these poems are now akin to Christ displayed on the Cross, the object of chaste admiration.

Recognised as a human and humane gesture that heals, touch is permissible for Hopkins through the priest’s ministering and also metaphorically: 'touch had quenched thy tears, / Thy tears that touched my heart, child, Felix, poor Felix Randal.’[[70]](#footnote-70) The yielding reciprocity and intimacy of the relations between the sick and the care-giver in ‘Felix Randal’ (‘This seeing the sick endears them to us, us too it endears’[[71]](#footnote-71)) is further observed in Walt Whitman’s ‘The Wound-dresser’ (1865). Like Hopkins, Whitman draws on personal experience for his poem, when as a hospital volunteer during the American Civil War he observed such men tending soldiers’ injuries. The Wound-dresser is introduced in the first line in a physical stance that emblematises his open and yielding nature: ‘An old man bending I come among new faces.’[[72]](#footnote-72) The poem comes into being as the protagonist yields to the curiosity of the young ‘new faces,’ recalling for them his earlier experiences as a dresser, when he similarly approached the wounded ‘With hinged knees,’ bending toward them, a habitual attitude that has since become fixed in the old man’s scoliosis. *In extremis*, his patients too are yielding, ‘the soldier bends, with curv’d neck, and side-falling head,’ and both dresser and his charges are reported to have found momentary refuge in physical contact and warmth, literally bracketed off from brutality and suffering for some moments in the poem’s closing lines: ‘(Many a soldier’s loving arms about this neck have cross’d and rested, / Many a soldier’s kiss dwells on these bearded lips.)’[[73]](#footnote-73)

Hopkins was wary of Whitman. Writing in 1882, the priest confesses that ‘I always knew in my heart Walt Whitman's mind to be more like my own than any other man's living,’ adding that ‘As he is a very great scoundrel this is not a pleasant confession.’[[74]](#footnote-74) While the physician to the soul is troubled by erotic subtexts to bodily physicality, Whitman finds desire implicit to healing touch. Tennyson’s nurse asserts the healing power of love, but notably excludes physical contact as a means of conveying it, even to children: ‘I am sure that some of our children would die, / But for the voice of Love, and the smile, and the comforting eye.’[[75]](#footnote-75) The Christian association of the body with sin makes Hopkins and Tennyson cautious about touch. While ‘In the children’s hospital’ identifies the new scientific medicine with coldness, a cognate naturalism licenses physical warmth in ‘The Wound-dresser,’ its final lines voicing what would be for Hopkins and Tennyson’s poems an unspeakable scandal of touch.

Touch becomes medicalized early in the nineteenth century, as diagnostics shifted from being *a priori* and physically aloof to being grounded in physical examination and sense data: inspection, palpation, percussion, and auscultation, most momentously the enhanced mediate auscultation of the stethoscope, which was invented by R. T. H. Laennec in 1816. Such close and tactile practices were fringed with unease about sexual morality, and protocols were adopted for the new diagnostics. Pressures to extend this male prerogative to women incited waves of anxiety about sexual morality, when in the late 1860s and the early 1870s Sophia Jex-Blake led a campaign for women’s rights to study and practice professional medicine. Bringing young men and women together to study the human body seemed a dangerous and scandalous idea to many, while licensing women to take active roles over bodies, through such practices as surgery, palpation and the direct diagnostic gaze of inspection, was variously seen as outrageous and titillating. Nevertheless, despite the often vicious efforts of her opponents, Jex-Blake’s campaign was successful. The Medical Act of 1876 allowed medical professional bodies to accept qualified applicants irrespective of gender, with many universities opening their medicine courses to women in the following year.

The advent of the ‘Lady Doctor’ in the final decades of the century was marked by a genre of light verse that airs the sorts of louche and trivializing assumptions about women that undergirded the controversy in the 1870s, but were not always expressed publically. Most of these poems ignore the new doctor’s professional skills, preferring instead to pay homage to the curative powers of her residual female charms. Such conventionally feminine qualities of ‘voice . . . , smile, and the comforting eye’ that are inflected in a maternal register in Tennyson’s nurse are often freighted with sexual interest and sly innuendo in other poems about nurses and verses on female doctors. In John Godfrey Saxe’s ‘Guneopathy,’ the gent-protagonist describes with vaudevillian suggestiveness the efficacious presence and touch of a Lady doctor in remedying ‘A kind of chronic chill’:

A lady came,—her presence brought

The blood into my ears!

She took my hand—and something like

A fever now appears!

Great Galen — I was all aglow,

Though I’d been cold for years.[[76]](#footnote-76)

Nonsense, Decadence and Deliverance

‘Why must I sink all poetry in this prose, / The everlasting blowing of my nose?’[[77]](#footnote-77) Edward Lear asks in his ‘Growling Eclogue, composed at Cannes, December 9th, 1867.’ Lear had recently met John Addington Symonds and his wife Catherine by chance at the popular winter resort town. On this occasion, however, Cannes was not popular with them, only wintry, and the ‘Growling Eclogue’ records their consequent illnesses and grumpiness. Rather than soaring in holiday sun, poetry is sunk in prosaic pathology, ‘The everlasting blowing of my nose.’ The opening lines find Lear’s creative powers baulked and relegated to the tasks of nosology, as ‘*Edwardus*’ asks ‘*Johannes*’:

What makes you look so black, so glum, so cross?

Is it neuralgia, headache, or remorse?

Categories of illness are dictated by the body of language in this poem, leaving Johannes protesting against their linguistic logic and necessity: ‘Why must I suffer in this wind and this gloom? / Roomattics in a vile cold attic room?’[[78]](#footnote-78) Succumbing helplessly to puns, he is plagued by rhymes and a heavy throbbing assonance:

*Johannes*.---Pain from a pane in one cracked window comes,

Which sings and whistles, buzzes, shrieks and hums;

In vain amain with pain the pane with this chord

I fain would strain to stop the beastly *dis*cord![[79]](#footnote-79)

*Dis*ease is discord here, word and world sounds in which the decorous measures of verse and the healthy proportions of Vitruvian man are all out of kilter.

While Lear’s poem begins tethered to the terms of nosology, in Henry Savile Clarke’s ‘Lines by a Lunatic M.D.’ (c.1876) they are the playful premise that generates the poem. Written by a medical student turned dramatist, who is best known for his 1886 musical stage play of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice* books, the poem takes its cue from Latinate nomenclature for diseases, dignified names that lend themselves to reification. Titles fit for aristocrats or classical deities, their bearers share with these beings lives of leisure, which are similarly given over to amorous passions and rakish intrigues. Such liaisons are conducted within the grand edifice that these diseases hold in demesne, the human body:

Oh! fair are the halls where stern *Peritonitis*

Makes love to *Miss Asthma*, and courts the *Catarrh*.

Where the bright *Influenza* is wooed by *Iritis*,

And *Psora* joins *Measles* in “Beautiful Star.”

Oh! bright gleam the eyes of that flirt *Erythema*.

And lightly *Pneumonia* whirls round in the dance.

*Pleuritis* is madly in love with *OEdema*.

And *Herpes* courts *Cholera* with amorous glance.[[80]](#footnote-80)

All are healthy, fit for romance, biological agents that act nicely but naturalistically, oblivious to the consequences for their host organisms and vectors, the host of mere mortals who make the lives of these genteel agents of illness possible and pleasurable.

The poem’s dactylic and anapaestic tetrameters choreograph the *walpurgisnacht* waltz of the diseases. Within the fair halls of the respiratory system, *Pleuritis* and *OEdema* -- diseases in which fluid accumulates in the pleural cavity and the lungs, respectively -- are clearly meant to spend their lives together, adjunct to *Pneumonia*, which often causes these conditions. Although the pathogenic potential of *pneumococcus* bacteria was not demonstrated until the 1880s, the germ theory of disease was beginning to prevail in the 1860s and 1870s through the efforts of Louis Pasteur and Koch, and is assumed by the poem. Savile Clarke’s ‘*Pneumonia* whirls round in the dance’ ‘lightly’ in the initial invigorating stage of contagion, as having entered the lungs she is eddied about by breaths of air.

The dizzying intoxication of the waltz also furnishes a trope for naturalism in Wilde’s 1885 poem ‘The Harlot’s House,’ where the ‘wheel and whirl’ ‘of the waltz’[[81]](#footnote-81) describes the hedonistic abandonment of sexual lust. The ‘ghostly dancers’ in ‘the house of Lust’ represent a consumptive humanity that has lost its free-will, ‘Slim silhouetted skeletons,’ ‘wire-pulled automatons’[[82]](#footnote-82) who are governed by the overarching Darwinian exigency of species reproduction, the human sexual instinct that Sigmund Freud will theorise in the following decades. Another doctor, Freud’s contemporary and compatriot Arthur Schnitzler explores such themes in his play *Reigen* (Roundelay, 1900), which presents a cycle of ten sexual encounters, a serial saga of changing partners that relays syphilis across the social classes of *fin-de-siecle* Vienna. The play assumes that syphilis is caused by a pathogen, the germ theory of disease having been generally accepted after Koch’s discovery of the anthrax bacteria in 1876. Whereas the miasma theory it despatched located the sources of contagious diseases externally and perceptibly in foul air, the new germ theory found them to be endemic to particular organisms, intrinsic to individuals, but imperceptible when most dangerous to others. Contagion also occurred through close physical proximity, touch, another reason why syphilis, the convergence of sexual lust and the new germ theory, so powerfully cathected *fin-de-siecle* anxieties. The invisibility of deadly pathogens encouraged hysteria while a post-Darwinian *Psychopathea Sexualis* was identified with atavistic regression, ‘decadence’ and ‘degeneration.’ Max Nordau diagnoses *fin-de-siecle* culture ‘as the confluence of two well-defined conditions of disease, with which [the physician] is quite familiar, viz. degeneration (degeneracy) and hysteria.’[[83]](#footnote-83) He identifies Wilde as the primary pathogen of the age, a judgement that the courts concurred with, quarantining him from society with a two-year prison term. But physicians don’t need Nordau as a mouthpiece, any more than Wilde did. They can speak for themselves, even within the constraints of an essay on poetry and medicine.

Both *fin-de-siecle* scientist and poet, the English physician Ronald Ross identified the pathogen and insect vector for malaria, a tropical disease that had long been seen to vindicate the miasma theory. Finally establishing these facts in 1897, his achievement was recognized five years later, when he became the first person outside of continental Europe to be awarded a Nobel prize. In 1898 the *fin-de-siecle* scientist formed a neologism from the biblical story of Herodias, who Jezebel-like left her husband to marry Herod Antipas and schemed to behead the disapproving John the Baptist. Ross’s coinage ‘*Herodiasis*’ describes illnesses caused by promiscuous infestations of ‘Multiple Parasitism,’[[84]](#footnote-84) a characterization that makes them fitting companions for Savile-Clarke’s scandalous diseases. Wilde develops the biblical story in his play *Salome*, the decadent sensuality of which accords with Ross’s ‘Vision of Nescience’ (c. 1897):

A ray of corruption, blue

As in encharnel'd air

On corpses comes. I knew

A Death, a Woman there.

Delirious, knee to knee,

They drank of love like wine,

He skeleton thin, and she

Most beautiful, most divine.[[85]](#footnote-85)

Later the poem discloses that the male lover is the devil, and, as ‘The purple, fold by fold, / Fell from her,’ that the woman is a queen. A decadent ‘vision of the night’[[86]](#footnote-86) that recalls the richly coloured proto-surrealism of the Symbolists, Ross’s ‘Nescience’ identifies its eponymous principle with dreams and fantasies that are impelled by Darwinian drives. Like Nordau, Ross sees such ‘degeneration’ to describe not only individual psyches but also whole civilisations. Writing in the ‘Preface’ to *Philosophies*, the poetry collection that includes ‘Nescience,’ he describes India, where he was born and worked for the Indian Medical Service from 1881 until 1899, akin to Rome, as ‘an ancient civilisation fallen for centuries into decay. One saw there both physical and mental degeneration. . . and I saw in it the work of nescience—the opposite of science.’[[87]](#footnote-87)

Ross overlays with Christian typology the opposition he makes of irrational and decadent nescience to rational and progressive science. Assuming a parodic form in ‘Nescience,’ the Devil has ‘on his head a crown / Of thirsty thorns of flame,’ which ‘flicker’d up and down / In words.’ These are words ‘Like God’s, “I am of God”’ and ‘“Duty to me / Is duty unto God”.’[[88]](#footnote-88) In his ‘Preface’ Ross describes ‘the crime of Nescience, parodying God’s words, and the victory of His thunder and rain.’[[89]](#footnote-89) The poem’s decadent lovers are also inflected with a further characterisation redolent of the malarial pathogen and its blood-borne transmission that Ross was researching at the time he was writing the poem, naturalistic imagery in which they are compared to ‘vultures sipping blood.’ The implication of blood-borne infection hovers about the vision as it fades and unravels later in the poem, beginning with the wastage of its faux Helen of Troy, who is like the diseased malarial vector, the female Anopheles mosquito, followed by the male lover, ‘Blood nourisht by her blood’:

I saw the Woman waste

To nothing ; and he, as tho'

Blood nourisht by her blood,

Grow grosser in the gloom

And leprous like the toad

That battens in the tomb.

And both corrupted pined.[[90]](#footnote-90)

Poets and paradigms of a new humane science, Jenner and Ross book-end a century of experimental collaborations and professional rivalries between medicine and poetry. A little further on from ‘Nescience’ in his chronologically arranged series of poems *In Exile*, Ross includes a triumphant rebuke to this degenerate idol, and tribute to all that it parodies. On the evening of August 21, 1897, having proved his hypothesis about malarial transmission earlier in the day, Ross expresses his feelings of wonder and humility in poetry that is ostensibly ‘bad’ but genuinely affecting:

This day relenting God  
Hath placed within my hand  
A wondrous thing; and God  
Be praised. At His command,  
Seeking His secret deeds  
With tears and toiling breath,  
I find thy cunning seeds,  
O million-murdering Death.  
I know this little thing  
A myriad men will save.  
O Death, where is thy sting?  
Thy victory, O Grave? [[91]](#footnote-91)

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58. l. 8-10, *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. W. F. Bynum, *Science and the Practice of Medicine in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), 169. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. l. 4; 6, Ricks, Tennyson, 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. l. 4; 6, *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. l. 35; 38; 37, *Ibid*, 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. l. 42, Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. l. 48, *Ibid*., 48; l.58, *Ibid*. 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. l. 65; 63-64, *Ibid*, 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. l. 66, *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. l. 33-34, *Ibid*., 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. ll. 2, 3-4. Norman H. Mackenzie (ed.), *The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. l. 73; l. 74, *Ibid*., 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. ll. 10-11, *Ibid*. 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Ll. 9, *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
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73. *Ibid*. 319. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
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75. ll. 11-12, Ricks (ed.) *Tennyson*, III, 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
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78. *Ibid*, 235. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. *Ibid*, 236. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
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81. l. 33; 32, Murray (ed.) *Oscar Wilde*, 540. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. l. 10; l. 30; l.14; l. 13, *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Nordau, 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Ross, *Memoirs* (London: Murray, 1923), 281; 319. See also 283. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Ross, *Philosophies* (London: Murray, 1911), 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. *Ibid.*, 46; 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Ross, *Memoirs*, iii-iv. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Ross, *Philosophies*, 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Ross, *Memoirs*, v. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Ross, *Philosophies*, 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Ross, *Philosophies*, 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)