NEUROLOGY IN LITERATURE

Sleep disorders

I have cast my net rather wide for the quotations in this section, but still failed to find an account of the full narcoleptic syndrome. Descriptions of sleep paralysis are fairly common in literature. Those by AS Byatt, James Joyce, Edgar Allan Poe, and Herman Melville are brief and perhaps leave uncertainty as to the exact nature of the event. Charlotte Brontë's account is intriguing and taken from one of her early journals. She seems to be describing, in herself, both hypnagogic hallucinations and sleep paralysis, although neither figure in her fictional writings. Falling asleep while eating is a symptom that many narcoleptics experience. Smike is certainly not narcoleptic and though I would like to suggest that that was Jewel's diagnosis, in Faulkner's novel, I have to confess that the explanation is more banal. Jewel has been "moonlighting"—working overnight to buy a horse. He suffers from severe sleep deprivation rather than narcolepsy. Other conditions can be confused with narcolepsy. Mr Willet, like his better known counterpart in *Pickwick papers*, surely suffers from obstructive sleep apnoea. Certainly the original illustration of that gentleman by Hablot K Browne shows the typical physical habitus of the condition.

Edgar Allan Poe, 1835, Tales of mystery and imagination. Berenice

... a species of epilepsy not infrequently terminating in trance itself—trance very nearly resembling positive dissolution, and from which her manner of recovery was, in most instances, startlingly abrupt.

Charlotte Brontë, 1836, Roe Head journals

Delicious was the sensation I experienced as I lay down on the spare bed and resigned myself to the luxury of twilight and solitude. The stream of thought, checked all day, came flowing free and calm along its channel. My ideas were too shattered to form any definite picture as they would have done in such circumstances at home. The toil of the day, succeeded by the moment of divine leisure had acted on me like opium and was casting about me a disturbed but fascinating spell such as I never felt before. What I imagined grew morbidly vivid. I remember I quite seemed to see with my bodily eyes a lady standing in the hall of a gentleman's house as if waiting for someone. It was dusk and there was the dim outline of antlers with a hat and rough great coat upon them. She had a flat candle-stick in her hand and seemed coming from the kitchen or some such place...

At last I became aware of a heavy weight laid across me—I knew I was wide awake and that it was dark and that moreover the ladies were now come into the room to get their curl-papers... I heard them talking about me—I wanted to speak, to rise, it was impossible... I must get up I thought, and did so with a start.

Charles Dickens, 1839, Nicholas Nickleby

The master Crummles had no sooner swallowed the last procurable morsel of food than they evinced, by various half-suppressed yawns and stretchings of their limbs, an obvious inclination to retire for the night, which Smike had betrayed still more strongly: he having in the course of the meal, fallen asleep several times while in the very act of eating.

Charles Dickens, 1841, Barnaby Rudge

Mr Willet sat in what had been his accustomed place five years before, with his eyes on the eternal boiler,

and had sat there since the clock struck eight, giving no other signs of life than breathing with a loud and constant snore (though he was wide awake) and from time to time putting his glass to his lips, or knocking the ashes out of his pipe, and filling it anew...

The room was so very warm, the tobacco so very good, and the fire so very soothing, that Mr Willet by degrees began to doze; but as he had perfectly acquired, by dint of long habit, the art of smoking in his sleep, and as his breathing was pretty much the same, awake or asleep, saving that in the latter case he sometimes experienced a slight difficulty in respiration (such as a carpenter meets with when he is planing and comes to a knot) neither of his companions was aware of the circumstances, until he met with one of these impediments and was obliged to try again. "Johnny's dropped off," said Mr Parkes, in a whisper. "Fast as a top," said Mr Cobb.

Neither of them said any more until Mr Willet came to another knot—one of surpassing obduracy—which bade fair to throw him into convulsions, but which he got over at last without waking, by an effort quite superhuman.

Herman Melville, 1851, Moby Dick

At last I must have fallen into a troubled nightmare of a doze; and slowly waking from it—half steeped in dreams—I opened my eyes, and the before sunlit room was now wrapped in darkness.

... For what seemed ages piled on ages, I lay there, frozen with the most awful fears, not daring to drag away my hand; yet ever thinking that if I could but stir one single inch, the horrid spell would be broken... more than once, waking, he had been for an indefinite time incapable of moving or uttering sounds.

William Faulkner, 1930, As I lay dying

The summer when he was fifteen, he took a spell of sleeping. One morning when I went to feed the mules the cows were still in the tie-up and then I heard pa go back to the house and call him. When we came on back to the house for breakfast he passed us, carrying the milk buckets, stumbling along like he was drunk, and he was milking when we put the mules in and went on to the field without him. We had been there an hour and still he never showed up. When Dewey Dell came with our lunch, pa sent her back to find Jewel. She found him in the tie up, sitting on the stool, asleep... he would go to sleep at the supper-table... and once I found him asleep at the cow, the bucket in place and half-full and his hands up to the wrists in the milk and his head against the cow's flank... and I have seen him go to sleep chopping; watched the hoe going slower and slower up and down, with less and less of an arc, until it stopped and he leaning on it motionless in the hot shimmer of the sun... he ate hearty enough, except for his way of going to sleep in his plate, with a piece of bread half-way to his mouth and his jaws still chewing.

A S Byatt, 1978, The virgin in the garden

He woke to find himself wet with tears, and worse, and physically prevented from lifting a finger to write anything.

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