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NEUROLOGY IN LITERATURE

Disorders of higher cortical function

I have written before of Darius Clayhanger's dressing apraxia.¹ The account was based on Bennett's father. The underlying pathological process is not clear from Bennett's journals although I have suggested that it is possible that the condition was a rare form of Pick's disease. Bennett returns briefly to the problem in *These twain*. Most of the other extracts are concerned with memory failure either as part of senescence, or as part of a specific dementing illness. Mr Candy, in *The moonstone*, develops a memory disorder after a flu-like illness, conceivably, therefore, the sequela of an encephalitic illness. Proust's musings, expressed in his typically convoluted sentences, belong more in the realm of philosophy than neurology. It has been suggested elsewhere that Mrs Gradgrind's curious inability to relate her pain to her own body is part of a parietal disorder, although there is nothing in the novel to support that interpretation.

Jonathan Swift, 1726, Gulliver's travels

At ninety they lose their teeth and hair; they have at that age no distinction of taste, but eat and drink whatever they can get, without relish or appetite. The diseases they were subject to, still continue without increasing or diminishing. In talking, they forget the common appellation of things, and the names of persons, even of those who are their nearest friends and relations. For the same reason, they can never amuse themselves with reading, because their memory will not serve to carry them from the beginning of a sentence to the end; and by this defect, they are deprived of the only entertainment whereof they might otherwise be capable.

Charles Dickens, 1854, Hard times

"I think there's a pain somewhere in the room," said Mrs Gradgrind, "but I couldn't positively say that I have got it."

George Eliot, 1863, Romola

He was not mad; for he carried within him the piteous stamp of sanity, the clear consciousness of shattered faculties; he measured his own feebleness. . . .

Would any believe that he had ever had a mind filled with rare knowledge, busy with close thoughts, ready with various speech? It had all slipped away from him—that laboriously gathered store . . . but he found, to his acute distress, that of the new details he learned he could only retain a few, and those only by continual repetition; and he began to be afraid of listening to any new discourse, lest it should obliterate what he was already striving to remember

Old men's eyes are like old men's memories; they are strongest for things a long way off.

Wilkie Collins, 1868, The moonstone

Here, he got on glibly enough. Trumpery little scandals and quarrels in the town, some of them as much as a month old, appeared to recur to his memory readily. He chattered on, with something of the smooth gossiping fluency of former times. But there were moments, even in the full flow of his talkativeness, when he suddenly hesitated—looked at me for a moment with the vacant inquiry once more in his eyes—controlled himself—and went on again.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, 1869, The idiot

The General talked for ten minutes, heatedly and rapidly, as though too engrossed for time to express the thoughts that crowded in his head; towards the end, tears glistened in his eyes. And yet it was only sentences without beginning or end, unexpected words and unexpected ideas, rapidly and unexpectedly bursting forth and stumbling over one another.

Arnold Bennett, 1910, Clayhanger

For many months now he had helped Darius to dress, when he came up from the shop for breakfast, and to undress in the evening. It was not that his father lacked the strength, but he would somehow lose himself in the maze of his garments, and apparently he could never remember the proper order of doffing or donning them. Sometimes he would ask, "am I dressing or undressing?" And he would be capable of so involving himself in a shirt, if Edwin were not there to direct, that much patience was needed for his extrication. His misapprehensions and mistakes frequently reached the grotesque. As habit threw them more and more intimately together, the trusting dependence of Darius on Edwin increased. At morning and evening the expression of that intensely mournful visage seemed to be saying as its gaze met Edwin's, "here is the one clear-sighted, powerful being who can guide me through this complex and frightful problem of my clothes." A suit, for Darius, had become as intricate as a quadratic equation.

Arnold Bennett, 1916, These twain

. . . but it had witnessed hundreds of monotonous tragic meals at which the progress of his father's mental malady and the approach of his death could be measured by the old man's increasing disability to distinguish between his knife and his fork.

Marcel Proust, 1919, Remembrance of things past: within a budding grove

For our memory, relatively to the complexity of the impressions which it has to face while we are listening, is infinitesimal, as brief as the memory of a man who in his sleep thinks of a thousand things and at once forgets them, or as that of a man in his second childhood who cannot recall a minute afterwards what one has first said to him.

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NEUROLOGY IN LITERATURE

Disorders of higher cortical function

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Marcel Proust, 1921, 1922, Remembrance of things past vol 2: cities of the plain

What, then, is a memory which we do not recall? Or, indeed, let us go further. We do not recall our memories of the last thirty years; but we are wholly steeped in them; why then stop short at thirty years, why not extend this previous life back to before our birth? If I do not know a whole section of the memories that are behind me, if they are invisible to me, if I do not have the faculty of calling them to me, how do I know whether in that mass that is unknown to me there may not be some that extend back much further than my

human existence? If I can have in me and round me so many memories which I do not remember, this oblivion (a de facto oblivion, at least, since I have not the faculty of seeing anything) may extend over a life which I have lived in the body of another man, even on another planet. A common oblivion obliterates everything. But what, in that case, is the meaning of that immortality of the soul the reality of which the Norwegian philosopher affirmed? The being that I shall be after death has no more reason to remember the man I have been since my birth than the latter to remember what I was before it.

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