

The Disease of the Self: Representing Consumption, 1700–1830

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Introduction

Susan Sontag's now-classic *Illness as Metaphor* presents a compelling analysis of the paradoxical nature of the disease that was variously called consumption, phthisis pulmonalis, and, later, tuberculosis. Comparing the disease with cancer, she noted a stark contrast in the metaphors generated by the two fatal diseases of modern times: while cancer stood for negative values, consumption served as a metaphor of essentially positive attributes, such as heightened beauty, refined sensibility, and artistic creativity—*La Traviata*, *The Magic Mountain*, and John Keats being obvious examples. Or, as Sontag has succinctly put it, “As TB was the disease of the sick self, cancer is the disease of the Other.”¹ Her perceptive work has done a great deal to stimulate both medical and literary historians to approach diseases in the past from the perspective of the subjective experience, images, metaphors, and mythologies, supplementing studies of the objective frameworks of medical discoveries, therapeutic breakthroughs, and disease mortality.

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1. Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p. 66.

Partly following Sontag herself, and partly influenced by Foucault, many practitioners of the new cultural history of disease most commonly use the concept of the Other as its central analytical tool, while others direct their attention to the Self.² The leading proponent of the former historiography has been Sander Gilman, whose works on madness, race, sexually transmitted diseases, and so on have been pioneering the field of the iconology of diseases. Particularly in his *Difference and Pathology* and *Disease and Representation*, Gilman has shown how societies and individuals attempted to draw the boundaries between Self and Other by projecting their various anxieties onto sufferers of certain diseases.³ The abjection of diseases, it is contended, not only dispelled the specters of physical and mental pollution, contamination, and dissolution but also consolidated racial, class, and gender categories. Gilman and others focus on the historical processes of stabilizing one's identity by stigmatizing these diseases as the Other. This conceptual framework seems very effective when applied to certain diseases of a virulent nature such as syphilis, madness, and AIDS, which are Gilman's main examples. Similarly, lethal epidemic diseases such as plague and cholera sit well with this model, for they were often regarded as an alien visitation from outside the community.⁴

On the other hand, diseases of the Self are more commonly found in certain diseases of a relatively mild nature, which were sought after as badges of the social and cultural distinction of the sufferers—George Cheyne's English Malady was the disease of the affluent and sensible, and gout in the eighteenth century suggested the aristocratic pedigree of the sufferer.⁵ Rather

2. The question of the separation of the Other is investigated by Michel Foucault in his early work, *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, 2d ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), while the problem of the Self is examined in his later work: notably in *The History of Sexuality 2: The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), and *The History of Sexuality 3: The Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1990). For a recent overview of the history of the self, see Roy Porter, ed., *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance to the Present* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 2–12.

3. Sander L. Gilman, *Disease and Representation: Images of Illness from Madness to AIDS* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988); idem, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

4. Classic and recent studies of these diseases include Colin Jones, “Plague and Its Metaphors in Early Modern France,” *Representations*, 1996, 53:97–127; Charles E. Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years: The United States in 1832, 1849, and 1866* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987); Paul Slack, *The Impact of Plague in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

5. See George Cheyne, *The English Malady: Or, a Treatise of Nervous Diseases of All Kinds* (London: G. Strahan, 1733; rept. with introduction by Roy Porter, London: Tavistock/Routledge, 1991). For the gout, see Roy Porter and G. S. Rousseau, *Gout: The Patrician Malady* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Lawrence Rothfield, “Gout as Metaphor,” in idem, *Art, History, and Antiquity of Rheumatic Diseases* (Brussels: Elsevier and the Erasmus Foundation, 1987), pp. 68–71.

than being expelled to the other side of the boundaries, these diseases were integrated as vital and positive components of the Self. In other words, people anchored at least part of their identity in them, being ready to live with their unpleasant and occasionally agonizing symptoms.

In these typologies of the cultural meanings of diseases, consumption presents an interesting and apparently paradoxical case. Although it was lethal, and indeed the major killer in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, its romantic allure has long been noted not only by Sontag but also by medical and literary historians, and by patients themselves in the past.⁶ Although there are some situations in which consumption stood for the Otherness of the patient—as in Kafka's tuberculosis and Jewishness, or the more generalized instance of the lower classes—Sontag is right in that it was less abhorred than dreaded, and the "dreaded disease" (whether real or imaginary) was, at the same time, more likely to be embraced into the inner identity of the sufferers.⁷ As we shall see, such a stark opposition between one disease as a dangerous exteriority and another as a positive interiority in relation to the individual is in some senses false: no man, or disease, is an island. Consumption, like the Romantic myth of the alienated or narcissistic self, is obviously part of a social totality, but it is comparatively less "othered" than cancer or, to take a major example from the eighteenth century, smallpox.

In this paper we thus attempt to investigate the paradox of the disease consumption that has been noticed, but left largely unexamined. One of the weaknesses of Sontag's work is the static picture it presents: for her, the metaphors of consumption were there from the beginning, so to speak. Sontag and some other historians sometimes make it sound as if positive images of the disease were automatic or unavoidable developments from its timeless and biologically constant characteristics. Needless to say, its "hard-core" features—such as its localization in the "upper" part of the body, the slow and gentle emaciation, pale skin-color, flushed cheeks, and so on—were vital components of the metaphors.⁸ These characteristics were, however, building blocks with which the metaphors were fabricated, rather than seeds of the disease-imagery's spontaneous generation: from numerous expressions of the disease, they were chosen and adopted for certain specific purposes in preference to other features, some of which called for metaphors of different or opposite

6. René Dubos and Jean Dubos, *The White Plague: Tuberculosis, Man, and Society* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

7. This expression was commonly used to refer to consumption in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

8. See, for instance, Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (n. 1), pp. 11–16.

tendencies. The primary aim of this paper is to investigate the actual historical process by which consumption was made into the disease of the self for certain social groups, and to examine when, how, and why this dreaded killer was formulated as a powerful cultural device of self-fashioning.⁹ We attempt, in other words, to historicize Sontag's too-general analysis and to locate the making of the metaphors of consumption in concrete problematics in certain historical contexts. In so doing, we are led to put new emphasis on the different periodization in the chronology of the metaphors of consumption as they are represented across various cultural media, and to focus on the role of the aestheticization of consumption as a means of "naturalizing" it as a disease of the self.

As for chronology, scholarship on consumption has so far laid very strong emphasis on the nineteenth century, which was studded with physicians who made important breakthroughs (Laënnec's stethoscope and Koch's discovery of the TB bacillus), icons of the artist-who-died-young (John Keats and the Brontës), fictional characters who die of consumption and who still remain very popular (Verdi's Violetta and Puccini's Mimi). The nineteenth century was also the period in which the negative image of the disease as a major threat to public health reached its height, and in many countries and cities governments and voluntary associations mounted a large-scale war against tuberculosis. Indeed, Claudine Herzlich and Janine Pierret have claimed that after the great epidemics of the ancien régime, the nineteenth century witnessed the rise of pulmonary consumption as the new embodiment of disease.¹⁰

Without underestimating the importance of the nineteenth century, we hope to demonstrate below that in the eighteenth century, at least in Britain, there emerged a new crucial element in the culture of consumption vis-à-vis the identity of the sufferer—namely, an aestheticization that allowed it to function as a disease of the Self rather than the Other. By imbuing it with positive and attractive representational qualities, English and American culture enabled an incorporation of the disease into the self, albeit in various historically specific ways; now it became a source of cultural value, rather than a feared and stigmatized Other that lowered self-esteem. We will show that consumption was often a focus for a certain kind of fashionable narcissism (oxymoronic though this notion is) and

9. In this paper, our primary concern is with cultural *perceptions* of consumption: hence we will not be concentrating on the actual incidence of the disease, although there is much to be said on this interesting subject.

10. Claudine Herzlich and Janine Pierret, *Illness and Self in Society*, trans. Elborg Forster (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 24.

self-dramatization, as the Enlightenment moved into a Romantic age that was developing notions of a more interiorized and psychologized self, although representations varied in different ways according to particular contexts such as gender and class.

The nineteenth century developed and transformed, rather than denied, the culture of aestheticized consumption in the eighteenth century. Our account is, therefore, about continuity and change in representations of consumption in the Enlightenment and romanticism, although to trace these developments we must go back as far as the classical physicians. Although we are focusing on Britain, we will occasionally use materials from America and Europe in order to indicate the international nature of the phenomenon, while accepting the discontinuities between these various cultures. Particularly, we should like to argue that the period ca. 1780–1830, especially the last of these decades, was a crucial time in the formation of the metaphors of the disease. Even today, we still live with some of the images and myths of tuberculosis generated at that time.

Constructing the Self and the Medical Marketplace: The Eighteenth-Century Culture of Consumption

Throughout the eighteenth century, the medical concept of pulmonary consumption remained essentially that inherited from classical medicine.¹¹ The model of the process of the disease was the accumulation of putrid blood in the lungs, the corrosion of the organ by ulcerous pus, and the subsequent emaciation of the body.¹² The essential image employed here was that of foul decay. The flesh of the patient is eaten away (consumed), due to the corruption of the blood and the subsequent decomposition of the lungs. Gianbattista Morgagni narrated the horror

11. Consumption was not one specific disease, but a number of conditions, any one of which could result in wasting of the lungs: hence one has titles of studies such as Sir Richard Blackmore's *A Treatise of Consumptions and Other Distempers Belonging to the Breast and Lungs*, 2d ed., corrected (London: John Pemberton, 1725)—not a singular treatise on consumption. Blackmore points out that although consumption is used to denote any wasting condition in its popular sense, for medical practitioners in the past it must signify the lungs in particular. A typical nineteenth-century view of the progress of the study of consumption is expressed in Edward Smith, *Consumption: Its Early and Remediable Stages* (London: Walton and Maberly, 1862), p. 4. For good summaries of medical theories from classical medicine, see Lester S. King, "Consumption: The Story of a Disease," in idem, *Medical Thinking: A Historical Preface* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), pp. 16–69; Walter Pagel, "Humoral Pathology: A Lingering Anachronism in the History of Tuberculosis," *Bull. Hist. Med.*, 1955, 29: 299–308.

12. Gerard van Swieten, *Commentaries upon Boerhaave's Aphorisms concerning the Knowledge and Cure of Diseases*, 18 vols. (Edinburgh: Charles Elliot, 1776), 12: 1.

story of the physical and moral decay of the body of a prostitute: "This woman had thrown up pus by expectoration, and had been long macerated with a slight fever, from a venereal cause; so that in the body after death, no traces remained of her breasts, but the nipples only were discerned."¹³ Being the wellspring of the decay of the whole body, the lungs were thus depicted as the site of repulsive putrefaction. In his much-cited *Theatrum tabidorum* (1656), Christopher Bennet reported his observation of the lungs reduced to a kind of filthy dregs.¹⁴ The breath exhaled from patients' lungs was described as a stench, fetid, or putrid. Gerard van Swieten remembered that he was scarce able to endure the stench, when he visited a young man who coughed up very fetid matter.¹⁵ Due to the repulsive and contagious putrid effluvia emanating from the decomposed organ, many renowned anatomists showed a reluctance to dissect the bodies of those who had died of the disease.¹⁶ In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, medical discourse on the pathology and pathological anatomy of consumption thus employed extremely gruesome images of decay, putrefaction, and stinking effluvia. Here, consumption was no less repulsive a disease than cancer. Like many other lethal diseases, it was framed as the untouchable Other, expressed in the language of medical horror and visceral disgust.¹⁷

These revolting images, which were developed largely in learned medical science, did not pervade the entire realm of the experience of consumption in the early eighteenth century: alongside the horrible pathology, there coexisted a tradition of the art of living well with, and dying a good death from, consumption. In other words, the medical understanding of phthisis pulmonalis and the praxis of consumptive life and death did not necessarily coalesce, nor did one dominate the other.

13. Gianbattista Morgagni, *The Seats and Causes of Diseases, Investigated by Anatomy*, 3 vols., trans. Benjamin Alexander (London: A. Millar et al., 1769), 1: 652. See also Matthew Baillie, *The Morbid Anatomy of Some of the Most Important Parts of the Human Body* (London: J. Johnson, 1793), pp. 48–49.

14. Christopher Bennet, *Theatrum tabidorum* (1656), cited in van Swieten, *Commentaries* (n. 12), 12: 131.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 130.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 131; Morgagni, *Seats and Causes of Diseases* (n. 13), 1: 646.

17. The same images continued to be employed well into the nineteenth century. The odor of consumption and its echo with venereal diseases still lingered in Dr. Burney Yeo's remark: "Sir William Gull has said that he can smell syphilis. I think I can smell phthisis. There is a peculiar nauseating odour in the breath" (Burney I. Yeo, "On the Results of Recent Researches in the Treatment of Phthisis," *Brit. Med. J.*, 1877, 1: 159–60, 195–97, quotation on p. 196). See also G. L. Bayle, *Researches on Pulmonary Phthisis*, trans. William Barrow (Liverpool: Longman, Hurst, Orme, and Brown, 1815), p. 125.

Despite what the physicians thought, the patients were often finding something positive in consumption, especially in death by consumption.

Here again, continuity with the culture of classical antiquity is evident. The classical culture of consumption put strong emphasis on the tragic and heroic bravery of the patient. Plutarch told the story of a Macedonian king, Antigonus III: "His lungs were touched before; but he would not give way to his disorder, hoping to expire gloriously in victory, and amid the slaughter of barbarians"; defying consumption, Antigonus died a heroic death on the battlefield, "burst[ing] his lungs by shouting in a battle; or, as others relate, by crying out for joy after the victory, . . . 'O happy day!'"¹⁸ This culture of heroic death by consumption was still alive in the seventeenth century, exemplified by the way in which the death of Molière was reported and remembered: on the first-night performance of *Le malade imaginaire*, while he played the title role, Molière had a fit of convulsive coughing on stage, which broke the blood-vessels of the lungs; he hid the convulsion with a forced laugh and finished the performance, but went immediately to bed, where he died within half an hour.¹⁹ These stories put consumption in the framework of a warrior aesthetic: sacrificing one's own life for the public performance of one's duty, and resisting the debilitating effects of the disease up to the ultimate limit.

This heroic secular consumption was not, however, a conspicuous element in metaphors of the disease in eighteenth-century England. This is partly due to the shift of priority in classical virtues—from the military ethos, exemplified in Homeric heroes and Roman generals, to that of enlightened civic humanism: the mentality of the battleground was no longer the essential framework for viewing human behavior.²⁰ Another factor in the decline of intense heroism in consumption was the shift in the pattern of the "good death," intertwined with the rise of rational Christianity. As has been shown by Philip Ariès, John McManners, and Dorothy Porter and Roy Porter, the medieval dramaturgy of struggling with, and prevailing over, the pain and agony of the terminal attack had given way to the new ideal of calmness in the deathbed, passing away as if falling asleep.²¹ People in the eighteenth century discovered that the

18. Van Swieten, *Commentaries* (n. 12), 12: 36.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

20. The formative account of the development of civic humanism is J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975). But see Ronald Paulson's critique of this as the dominant discourse of the eighteenth century, in *The Beautiful, Novel, and Strange: Aesthetics and Heterodoxy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), esp. the preface.

21. Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. H. Weaver (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983); John McManners, *Death and the Enlightenment: Changing Attitudes to Death among*

disease of consumption was compatible with this ideal, by conveniently switching the emphasis from its explosive symptom of vomiting blood to the slow and gradual process of pining away. Here consumption is understood, often at complete odds with reality, as a chronic disease almost without symptoms. Its nonepidemic nature also increased its appeal for the enlightened, since the patient was able to die individually, not amid the countless dead.²² Put in another way, people in the eighteenth century found a mild, civilized, and individualized death in consumption, rather than the heroic death for a collective cause. As early as 1656, Thomas Fuller wrote: "What is thy disease—a consumption? Indeed a certain messenger of death; but know, that of all the bailiffs sent to arrest us to the debt of nature, none useth his prisoners with more civility and courtesie."²³ Katherine Ott has noted the continuing influence in the nineteenth century of Sir Thomas Browne's description of a peaceful consumptive death in his 1690 "Letter to a Friend": "his soft departure, which was scarce an expiration; and his end not unlike his beginning . . . his departure so like unto sleep, that he scarce needed the civil ceremony of closing his eyes."²⁴

The desire for and practice of the new mode of death by consumption are seen in detail in the exemplary instance of the diary of Dudley Ryder, written when he was a young Dissenter law student in London in the 1710s.²⁵ Besides being slightly hypochondriacal, a keen consumer of quack medicines, and a regular visitor to the Islington Spa, he was occasionally haunted by the specter of death by consumption.²⁶ On

Christians and Unbelievers in Eighteenth-Century France (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981); Dorothy Porter and Roy Porter, *Patient's Progress: Doctors and Doctoring in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), pp. 147–52.

22. The contrast between epidemics (diseases of the ancien régime) and consumption (the disease of the nineteenth century) is forcibly made in Herzlich and Pierret, *Illness and Self in Society* (n. 10), pp. 3–37.

23. From Thomas Fuller, "Sermon—Life out of Death," cited in Robert Southey, *Southey's Common Place Book*, 4 vols. (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1850), 4: 353. For Southey's role as one of the key figures who created the myth of the consumptive poet, see below.

24. Sir Thomas Browne, "A Letter to a Friend, upon the occasion of the Death of his Intimate Friend," in *Religio Medici, and Other Works*, ed. Leonard C. Martin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), pp. 177–96, cited in Katherine Ott, *Fevered Lives: Tuberculosis in American Culture since 1870* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 15.

25. William Matthews, ed., *The Diary of Dudley Ryder, 1715–1716* (London: Methuen, 1939).

26. For Ryder's concern about his health and frequent visits to medical practitioners (both qualified and quack), see particularly *Diary of Dudley Ryder* (n. 25), pp. 276–78, 295–98. For the history of the patient in the long eighteenth century, see Dorothy Porter and Roy Porter, *In Sickness and in Health: The British Experience, 1650–1850* (London: Fourth Estate, 1988); *idem*, *Patient's Progress* (n. 21).

Sunday, 1 April 1716, he wrote: "found my throat pretty sore. Was afraid I had got such a cold as might bring me into a consumption because I had heard of a consumption being got by such a thing."²⁷ On the other hand, he was aware that death by consumption was not without merit. On 25 June, he visited William Crisp, a young friend of his who was dying of consumption, and found him calmly and serenely waiting for death in the manner of Browne's friend. This gave him an occasion to think about a good death:

[William Crisp] is sick in bed of consumption and past hopes of recovery conversed with us. He is very serious and loves to talk of another world and to prepare for it. It is indeed a happy state when a man is got so far into religion and so far above the world as to think of passing out of it without terror and distraction, to be able to be calm and serene under the assured expectation of death and leaving whatever is dear and pleasant to him.²⁸

Ryder was not alone in finding a happy state in his friend's death by consumption. The mother of the dying patient was more explicit in linking the good death and a specific feature of the disease: Dudley noted that she "thanked God he had had such a lingering sickness that had given him time to repent."²⁹ Three months after the incident, the lesson seems to have been internalized: "Thought when I was alone about death, finding myself a little oppressed about my lungs. I fancied I might be in a consumption. I was almost pleased with the prospect of it. At least nothing shocking appeared in it and I thought if I was plainly in a dying condition I could with a great deal of calmness and serenity resign up my life."³⁰ In the context of the solemn and spiritually minded code of the good death, consumption was seen as a desirable form of well-prepared, calm, and serene dying.

There was, however, another aspect in the fatal disease: its romantic lure. Consumption was, for Ryder, and for a tradition going back at least to the Renaissance, the disease of a lover. The consumptive lover in Robert Tofte's *Alba: The Months Minde of A Melancholy Lover* of 1598 makes the point perfectly:

27. *Diary of Dudley Ryder* (n. 25), p. 209.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 263. For Ryder's fluctuating philosophy of death (expressed on observing the execution of a Jacobite rebel, and the deaths of his friend and grandmother), see *ibid.*, pp. 188, 291, 294, 339. Perhaps alarmed by this incident of youthful death, when Ryder's father learned about his son's ill-health, he was caught with the fear that Dudley might have consumption, and he promised to pay the cost of a new horse for horse-riding exercise and a course of physic: *ibid.*, p. 269.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 234.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 345. The fear of sudden death, depriving the dying of the chance to prepare for one's end, was widespread in European society. See Ariès, *Hour of Our Death* (n. 21), pp. 10–13; Pat Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 65–69.

Sick is my soule, my Body languisheth,
So as I doubtfull love, scarce drawing breath,
Twixt feare and hope in this extremitie.
A strange Consumption hath me wasted long,
And for a *Pearl* restorative I long.³¹

The fire of love consumes the vital substance and the vital breath:

Thus do I burne, and burning breath my last,
And breathing last, to naught consume away.³²

The symptoms of a languishing lover are analogous to those of the pining consumptive, linked by the age-old formula of love as a disease that changes one's body and one's mode of existence.

Ryder, as a single man looking for romance, could readily identify with the likes of the male lover whose consuming pining was depicted by Tofte. In July, after a few unsuccessful courting attempts at Mrs. Marshall, with whom he was hopelessly infatuated, he played an unrequited lover in his daydream:

At dinner I was taken with a fit of uneasiness and deep concern and all my thoughts were directed to Mrs. Marshall. I longed to see her and languished for her. It came into my head that I should pine away for her and grow very ill upon it. Perhaps this might move her pity. She might be willing to rescue me from death by her love. What ravishing joy and comfort would this bring! Methought this would at once revive and recover me.³³

The pining away was, for Ryder, a romantic mark of lovesickness, a bodily message to convey his deepest affection, which he wished might change the mind of the woman. An important element here is that the message of the pining body was directed at least as much to himself as to Mrs. Marshall: Ryder indulged himself in a narcissistic reverie of being a lover dying of consumption, composing the romantic deathbed scene of Mrs. Marshall and himself, with a happy ending. Clearly in this mode consumption is very much about life rather than death: its gradual nature lends itself to the manipulation of the circumstances of one's present existence to suit one's pleasure, with death as a possible though gratifyingly distant prospect. The major tone of this entry in the diary is a literal, sickly sweet self-pity and gratification at self-dramatization. *Dramatization* seems to be a particularly apt word, because Ryder's daydreaming resonates with the final lines of Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*, in which

31. Robert Tofte, *Alba: The Months Minde of A Melancholy Lover* (London, 1598), 3 (*Poem Section*), p. 277.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 139.

33. *Diary of Dudley Ryder* (n. 25), p. 281.

the sprightly heroine retorts to her lover's proposal of marriage ("I take thee for pity"): "I would not deny you, but by this good day, I yield upon great persuasion, and partly to save your life, for I was told you were in a consumption."³⁴ Without stretching the evidence to claim the direct influence of the play on this particular entry in Ryder's diary, one can argue that his imagined consumption acted as a passage into the world of drama in which he played the desirable role of a requited lover. Imagining his own consumed body was, for Ryder, a part of his practice of molding his self into a desirable form, from which he derived the pleasure of escaping from his social anxieties and of fulfilling his desires, via the medium of the dramatized deathbed scene of a lover.

In the eighteenth century, consumption was linked with the intense consciousness of the messages that one's own body was conveying to others. The basic symptom of wasting and losing one's flesh fitted in well with the eighteenth-century cult of delicacy and sensibility. Leading exponents of the medical underpinning of the sensible body, such as George Cheyne, were preaching that the slender body was a mark of social distinction and cultural refinement.³⁵ The craze for a slim body, especially among young upper-class women, was such that in the 1780s and 1790s Thomas Beddoes repeatedly warned that the fad was killing the English nation by making them more vulnerable to consumption, and he further protested about the misrepresentation of medical reality:

Writers of romance (whether from ignorance or because it suits the tone of their narrative) exhibit the slow decline of the consumptive, as a state on which the fancy may agreeably repose and in which not much more misery is felt, than is expressed by a blossom, nipped by untimely frosts. Those who only see the sufferers in passing, are misled by the representation. And I have heard many persons thus prepossessed, after closely attending a sick friend, declare their surprise not less than their horror, at the unexpected scenes of varied and protracted misery which they have been condemned to witness.³⁶

34. William Shakespeare, *Much Ado about Nothing*, act 5 scene 4.

35. Roy Porter, "Introduction," in Cheyne, *English Malady* (n. 5), pp. ix–li; Akihito Suzuki, "Anti-Lockean Enlightenment? Mind and Body in Early Eighteenth-Century English Medicine," in *Medicine in the Enlightenment*, ed. Roy Porter (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995), pp. 336–59.

36. Thomas Beddoes, *Essay on the Causes, Early Signs, and Prevention of Pulmonary Consumption for the Use of Parents and Preceptors* (Bristol: Biggs and Cottle, 1799), p. 6. For Beddoes on consumption, see Roy Porter, "Consumption: Disease of the Consumer Society?" in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. John Brewer and Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 58–81; Roy Porter, *Doctor of Society: Thomas Beddoes and the Sick Trade in Late-Enlightenment England* (London: Routledge, 1992). As late as 1882, the *Lancet* still delivered essentially the same message that consumption is in reality not a romantic disease; see Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (n. 30), p. 40.

Imbibing representations of consumption as the romantic disease and indulging in the pleasure of putting oneself in the picture, patients in the eighteenth century were learning how to dramatize themselves with the disease. Elizabeth Sheridan, the first wife of Richard Brinsley Sheridan, acted her consumptive death and put it literally in the picture: knowing that she was dying of consumption, "she desired to be placed at the Piano-Forte . . . and played some notes with the tears dropping on her thin arms."³⁷ Here, perhaps self-consciously, she re-created her early portrait painted by Joshua Reynolds, with her sitting at the piano as Saint Cecilia. At least to the husband, the dramaturgy was not missed: Sheridan wrote that she looked like a shadow of her own picture.³⁸ Although this is a bittersweet form of personal aestheticization and pleasure, Elizabeth Sheridan clearly found a cultural frame to manage both her disease and the identity threatened by it in her own mind and the minds of others like her husband. This is less a misrepresentation of the sort complained about by Beddoes, and more a form of self-fashioning that aids the patient and loved ones in giving meaning to death.

It was this culture of dramatic consumption that Byron later famously mocked, as Lord Sligo reported after Byron had been ill at Patras in 1828: Sligo described Byron "looking in a glass, and saying,"

"I look pale. I should like to die of a consumption." "Why?" asked his guest. "Because the ladies would all say, 'Look at that poor Byron, how interesting he looks in dying.'" At Athens he used to take the bath three times a week to thin himself, and drink vinegar and water, eating only a little rice.³⁹

In a further irony, Byron was indeed trying to be thin, as his Spartan diet makes clear; despite being aware of the comedy in such consumptive narcissism, he nevertheless bought into the expectations of his culture.⁴⁰ Like Ryder's, Byron's dream of a consumptive death is put into the service of sexual desire, although the overriding impression is one of both writers being in love with the "interesting" self-image that consumption gives to even the most uninteresting, if not actually repulsive (Ryder), people. This of course is part of the irony of Byron's comment: he knows he is a compelling figure, but still cannot resist the need to conform to the consumptive fashion. The detail of the mirror in this episode emphasizes the centrality of self-fashioning

37. Cecil Price, ed., *The Letters of Richard Brinsley Sheridan*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 1: 247.

38. *Ibid.*

39. Wilfred S. Dowden, ed., *The Journal of Thomas Moore*, vol. 3, 1826–39 (University of Delaware Press, 1986), pp. 1119–20, entry dated 19 February [Tuesday] 1828.

40. For a "diagnosis" of Byron's strict diet, see Walter Vandereycken and Ron van Deth, *From Fasting Saints to Anorexic Girls* (London: Athlone Press, 1994), pp. 227–28.

to the disease, as mirrors are the traditional image of the narcissistic self. Byron knew more about generating a self-image than most, and the idea of consumption must have appeared fascinating to him, despite the fact that his acerbic wit would not let him leave the myth unscathed.⁴¹

So far, we have examined patients' strategies to reclaim consumption as resources in self-fashioning, which were at odds with the pathology of the Other, or the morbid anatomy of repugnant foul decay, found in numerous medical writings of the eighteenth century. The patient, however, was not the only player in this game of aestheticizing the disease. Indeed, late-eighteenth-century physicians, keen to respond to the patient's demand and expectations, were not untouched by the lay drive toward constructing consumption as a desirable disease.⁴² This is most obvious in the realm of therapeutics, in which physicians were engaged, via the adoption of certain measures, in the closest communication with the patient's mind and body.⁴³ The development of the "new" eighteenth-century therapy for consumption—namely, travel and change of air—should be interpreted in the light of the physician's attempt to capitalize on this culture of narcissistic dramaturgy created around the disease.

As Roy Porter and others have pointed out, the arrival of consumer society in the eighteenth century prompted rapid growth of the medical service industry, and health resorts and spa towns mushroomed in and outside Britain. Places such as Bristol and Penzance had a gathering of consumptive patients and of physicians who specialized in the disease.⁴⁴ Moreover, from the early nineteenth century on, there existed an international network of English consumption physicians around European

41. Of course there were cases in which suffering from consumption was perceived negatively, by both the patient and his or her friends: see Wilmarth Sheldon Lewis, ed., *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, 48 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937–83), 21: 451; Horace Bleackley, *The Story of a Beautiful Duchess: Being an Account of the Life and Times of Elizabeth Gunning, Duchess of Hamilton and Argyll* (London: A. Constable, 1907), pp. 239–40.

42. N. D. Jewson, "Medical Knowledge and the Patronage System in Eighteenth-Century England," *Sociology*, 1974, 8: 369–85.

43. Charles E. Rosenberg, "The Therapeutic Revolution: Medicine, Meaning, and Social Change in Nineteenth-Century America," in idem, *Explaining Epidemics and Other Studies in the History of Medicine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 9–31.

44. Roy Porter, "Consumption: Disease of the Consumer Society?" in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. John Brewer and Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1993). While staying at Bristol with his wife, Sheridan wrote about young Dr. Bain, "who latterly settled here and . . . came here himself in consumption is reckond very skillful in these cases" (*Letters of Richard Brinsley Sheridan* [n. 37], 1: 244). See also Tobias Smollett, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*, ed. Thomas R. Preston (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), p. 15. As for Penzance, see a remark by John Forbes in R. T. H. Laënnec, *A Treatise on the Disease of the Chest and on Mediate Auscultation*, trans. John Forbes, 4th ed. (London: Henry Renshaw, 1834), p. 335.

resorts. John Keats was sent to Dr. James Clark in Rome; at Madeira in 1819 there were at least five English-speaking physicians; and Nice was vigorously advertised by its resident English physician, Edwin Lee, from the 1830s.⁴⁵

The development of these Mediterranean resorts was crucial, for physicians forged an Arcadian image of the treatment of consumption in their attempt to promote the up-market health resort.⁴⁶ Change of air had long been a staple treatment for consumption since classical medicine, recommended by Aretaeus, Celsus, Pliny, and so on. At least as early as the late seventeenth century, wealthy and aristocratic English patients were sent to places such as Montpellier, Lisbon, and Naples to winter in a warm climate. Personal word-of-mouth information about the most salubrious climate was recorded in letters from the places visited in the early eighteenth century: Lady Mary Montagu made numerous reports to her husband about the quality of air in Padua and Avignon, and Horace Walpole recorded the quickly changing popularity for the British of various health resorts in the south, such as Montpellier and Naples.⁴⁷

It was not until the late eighteenth century, however, that the practice was associated with explicit cultural values, by making aristocratic health resorts available to well-off middle-class patients, aspiring no less to cultural distinction than to health. Tobias Smollett's *Travels through France and Italy* (1766) was probably the first and crucial work that combined travel literature, tourist guides, and medical advice for consumptives; although now famous only for its cantankerous abuse of almost every French custom, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the book was remembered as the first to discover Nice as the best resort for English consumptive patients.⁴⁸ In the work, Smollett offered comparative medical topography of several resorts such as Aix-en-Provence, Nîmes,

45. James Makittrick Adair, *Medical Cautions, for the Consideration of Invalids* (London: J. Dodsley and C. Dilly, 1786), p. 95; *An Historical Sketch of the Island of Madeira* (London: F. S. Hopkins, 1819), p. 48; James Bulwer, *Rambles in Madeira, and in Portugal, in the Early Part of MDCCCXXVI* (London: C. & J. Rivington, 1827); Edwin Lee, *Notes on Italy and Rhenish Germany: With Professional Notices of the Climates of Nice, Pisa, Florence, Rome, and Naples* (Edinburgh: Laing & Forbes, 1835).

46. For shrewd satire of the heated promotion of English domestic health resorts, see Jane Austen's unfinished novel, *Sanditon*, in R. W. Chapman, ed., *The Works of Jane Austen*, 6 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923–54), 6: 363–430.

47. Richard Mead, *The Medical Works of Richard Mead* (London: C. Hitch et al., 1762), pp. 478–79; Bleackley, *Beautiful Duchess* (n. 41), pp. 240–41; Robert Halsband, ed., *The Complete Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965–67), 2: 278, 296; 3: 212; Lewis, *Horace Walpole's Correspondence* (n. 41), 20: 536.

48. Tobias Smollett, *Travels through France and Italy*, ed. Frank Felsenstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); James Clark, *Medical Notes on Climate, Diseases, Hospitals and Medical Schools, in France, Italy, and Switzerland* (London: T. & G. Underwood et al., 1820), p. 5.

Montpellier, and so on; complete with a register of weather and thermometer readings for a full year at Nice, which was his favorite, both as a physician treating, and as a patient suffering from, consumption. The mildness of its weather, the protection offered by the Maritime Alps from the northern wind, and the fragrance from its plants, gave a special quality to the air: softness. Conveying the sense of delicate tactile sensation, the softness of air was a very difficult notion to define, and Thomas Beddoes remarked that terms like “a charming air—a fine air—a pure air—a soft air” were appropriate for “a little dictionary of medical nonsenses.”⁴⁹ To him, they made sense only in terms of the aestheticization of treatment, and, more important, the fashioning of a marketable and presentable cultural commodity.⁵⁰ In describing the merit of a stay in Mediterranean health resorts, physicians were offering, so to speak, an exquisitely designed treatment that would pamper their rich clients with sensual pleasure.

Smollett also embellished his book with notes for cultural connoisseurs: visits to galleries, libraries, museums, remains of Roman amphitheaters, aqueducts, inscriptions, and so on. The treatment for consumption was thus combined with the Grand Tour, rendering the patient the social and cultural distinction of an educated upper-class traveler. The description of the travel from Switzerland to Italy by James Johnson, a physician who published several works on medicine, disease, and climate, wonderfully captured the fusion of the social and cultural into the air of Italy:

Whether, it was owing to the physical qualities of the air, the sudden transition from scenes of savage sublimity to romantic beauty, from sterility to fertility, from the awful work of earthquakes and cataracts, to the peaceful labours of man . . . but the exhilaration produced upon myself and a large party by this first entrance into the glades of Italy, was indescribable. Imagination, early association of ideas, and reminiscences of classic tale and history, must have had considerable effects. I have entered upon and sojourned in many different climates on the face of this globe, but never did I feel such elasticity of soul and body, as in the drive from the Crevola to Duomo Dossola. A thousand times did I inspire, to the very utmost extent of my lungs, the balmy atmosphere of Italy, and still with increasing delight.⁵¹

49. Thomas Beddoes, *Manual of Health, Or, The Invalid Conducted Safely through the Seasons* (London: J. Johnson, 1806), p. 318.

50. Going to Nice, rather than Bristol, for one's health was an obvious sign of wealth—James Adair in effect stated that Bristol was the poor man's Nice: “But as many invalids are unable to incur the expense of such excursions [to a southern part of the continent], there is no other alternative, if their circumstances will permit, than to change their residence in this country” (Adair, *Medical Cautions* [n. 45], p. 95).

51. James Johnson, *Change of Air* (London, 1838), pp. 84–85; the passage is also cited in William Beattie, *Switzerland Illustrated in a Series of Views Taken on the Spot and Expressively for This Work* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown & Green, 1834), p. 61. For a similar

Italy and its cultural attractions were in the air, in its physical sense. In other words, the traveler felt Italy with its present allure and past glory through his respirational sensation, inhaling the atmosphere deeply as if to assimilate himself with the air.

Medical writers who promoted change of air in Mediterranean resorts aestheticized the treatment for consumption. Smollett wrote with enchanted excitement: “The small extent of country which I see, is all cultivated like a garden. Indeed, the plain presents nothing but gardens.”⁵² The rich growth of shrubs, fruits, flowers, and vegetables was the source of aesthetic visual pleasure as well as the sign of beneficial weather. James Clark thought that the observation of plants and scenic beauty was such a vital part of the treatment for consumption (“the beneficial effects of a residence in a mild climate may be much augmented”) that the risk group for consumption should prophylactically cultivate a taste in natural history, which became a gentlemanly and gentlewomanly pursuit in the eighteenth century.⁵³

The plants also gave olfactory pleasure: Clark wrote of Hieres that “the air [is] perfumed by the wild thyme, rosemary, lavender, and many other aromatic plants.”⁵⁴ The emphasis on perfumed flowers and aromatic plants was crucial here, since from the late eighteenth century, delicate and subtle floral and green scents replaced powerful and conspicuous animal perfumes (such as musk) as a way to gently suggest, rather than majestically state, one's olfactory taste. As Alain Corbin has pointed out, floral and green fragrances were short-range messages for the intimate, especially directed at oneself.⁵⁵ Edwin Lee seems to have had a keen grasp of this culture of private olfactory enjoyment: “On the surrounding hills, the air is impregnated with the perfume of aromatic plants, which are pressed beneath the feet at each step”; freshly and individually squeezed aroma, so to speak.⁵⁶ Here Lee evoked the personal pleasure

exclamation on a passage to Italy, see Thomas Burgess, “Inutility of Resorting to the Italian Climate for the Cure of Pulmonary Consumption,” *Lancet*, 1850, 1: 591–94; 2: 10–12, 525–27, 700–703, esp. p. 526.

52. Smollett, *Travels* (n. 48), p. 121.

53. James Clark, *A Treatise on Pulmonary Consumption* (London: Sherwood, Gilbert, and Piper, 1835), p. 333.

54. Clark, *Medical Notes on Climate* (n. 48), p. 20. Breathing in the air from plants and vegetables was widely regarded as an effective treatment for consumption: see van Swieten, *Commentaries* (n. 12), 12: 175–76; Roger Kervran, *Laënnec: His Life and Times*, trans. D. C. Abrahams-Cruet (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1960), p. 177.

55. Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination*, trans. Miriam L. Kochan (Leamington Spa, U.K.: Picador, 1994), pp. 71–85, 176–99.

56. Edwin Lee, *Nice and Its Climate, with Notices of the Coast from Marseilles to Genoa* (London: Hope, 1854) p. 39.

intimately felt by a consumptive patient wandering in the green meadows à la Rousseau.

The patient/client was ready to buy this well-prepared and well-publicized package of medical treatment, cultural distinction, and aesthetic pleasure. One can see that this combination of medical advice and cultural Baedeker worked as a marketing strategy, by looking at a copy of Edwin Lee's work on Nice, which contains an unknown reader's numerous ticks and comments on information about places of cultural and archaeological interest and scenic beauty.⁵⁷ Henry Matthews, a fellow of King's College, Cambridge, who suffered from pulmonary complaints and visited various health resorts in Europe in the early nineteenth century, developed a connoisseurship of the air. He displayed his subtle taste of different kinds of air in various places, remarking that the air of Pisa and Rome was warm, mild, and muggy, comparable to the taste of a cowslip wine, while that of Nice and Montpellier was pure, keen, and piercing, somewhat like frisky cider.⁵⁸ Moreover, Matthews was clearly aware of literary figures who went to the south for a change of air and served as the role model for him: Smollett himself, Henry Fielding (who went to Lisbon and died there), and Laurence Sterne, whose *Sentimental Journey* was the arch-enemy of "Smelfungus" Smollett's *Travels*.⁵⁹

Medical concern with the quality of air in the eighteenth century has been regarded, particularly by James Riley and Ludmilla Jordanova, as a part of the Enlightenment program to improve the physical and moral environment of the lower sector of society.⁶⁰ While physicians were fighting against miasmatic city cesspools and jail fever, there developed another kind of medical discourse on air, with almost diametrically opposite concerns and interests. Conceived as a piece of marketable service to the wealthy and cultured, rather than as reforming the ignorant poor, it

57. *Ibid.*, comments in margins of the copy in King's College Special Collections, University of Aberdeen, pp. 21–22, 26–27. Lee's work itself exhibits some aspirations to culture: its prose is occasionally lyrical, and Lee quotes Jacques Delille's poem, "Les Jardins" (1782) and Ariosto's "Enchanted Garden," to reinforce the sensual pleasure of the place's lavender, thyme, perfuming citrus, evergreen olive, and azure sea (*ibid.*, pp. vii, 37).

58. Henry Matthews, *The Diary of an Invalid: Being the Journal of a Tour in Pursuit of Health in Portugal, Italy, Switzerland and France in the Years 1817, 1818 and 1819*, 2d ed. (London: John Murray, 1820), p. 386.

59. *Ibid.*, pp. 1–2, 36.

60. See James C. Riley, *The Eighteenth-Century Campaign to Avoid Disease* (London: Macmillan, 1987); Ludmilla J. Jordanova, "Earth Science and Environmental Medicine: The Synthesis of the Late Enlightenment," in *Images of the Earth: Essays in the History of the Environmental Sciences*, ed. L. J. Jordanova and Roy Porter (Chalfont St. Giles: British Society for the History of Science, 1979), pp. 119–46.

emphasized the pricey aesthetic pleasure of being embalmed by soft air, under the mild winter sun of the Mediterranean.

In the late eighteenth century, being a consumptive patient and being treated for the disease became an experience associated with refined cultural values and aesthetic pleasures. Our argument is that patients and physicians converged in the process of forging this new culture of consumption, the former taking the initiative of romanticizing the disease. Imbibing the culture that put emphasis on improving one's self-representation, the patients saw a prime occasion to beautify themselves in consumption, gaining individual pleasure from the admiration of others and the refined environments in which they placed themselves. The increasing use of the term *decline* for consumption was in itself a kind of euphemism, a linguistic aestheticization and comparative demedicalization of the condition.⁶¹ Capitalizing on this new consumerism, and riding the wave of a flourishing medical upmarket, the physicians crafted a package of medical-treatment-cum-luxury-tourist-brochure in which they promised that the patients would be pampered with refined pleasure. Moreover, strong emphasis was laid on the olfactory and respiratory feelings, often expressed through tactile metaphors, such as "softness" in the air. It is important to note that olfactory and pulmonary sensations were then regarded as the most basic and primitive of all sensations, involving the most direct relations between the subject and the object: the patient literally inhaled the air into her or his own body.⁶²

It is against this consumptive market that physicians like Thomas Beddoes revolted, warning of the danger of naively following the impetus to beautify the self diseased with consumption. His promotion of the benevolent effect of animal odors, his belief that butchers were free from consumption because they absorbed animal vapors from their hands and arms, and his catalog of the painful and grotesque symptoms and morbid anatomy of consumption were all an attack against the culture of pleasure created around the disease and the medical practice and knowledge that exploited the vanity of the client.⁶³ In the end, however, Beddoes was crying in the wilderness. Wealthy and not-so-wealthy consumptives in the nineteenth century chose to embalm themselves in the soft air impregnated with green fragrance and cultural distinction, instead of living in Beddoes's preferred cowshed.

61. The *OED*'s earliest example of "decline" in the sense of a wasting condition is in 1783; Samuel A. Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (London: Knappton, 1755) does not have a definition of decline in the sense of consumption.

62. See Corbin, *Foul and the Fragrant* (n. 55), pp. 71–85.

63. The social and cultural meanings of Beddoes's treatment of consumption, cowsheds and all, are elaborated in Porter, *Doctor of Society* (n. 36), pp. 106–7.

Aestheticization and the Self: Literary Representations of Consumption

The most striking change in literary representations of consumption through this period is the increasing aestheticization of the disease, a phenomenon indicating the rising value of consumption as cultural capital to accumulate prestige for the self. Consumption becomes a marker of individual sensibility, genius, and general personal distinction as the eighteenth century progresses: its heightened representation in literature and art reflects, and to some extent reinforces, its perceived cultural value to the self. This perception was strengthened by the age-old belief, both popular and professional, that consumption could be caused by mental upset of various kinds, especially that caused by a precocious intellect, academic overwork, or merely a hypersensitive poetic or creative sensibility.⁶⁴ The aestheticization of tuberculosis was the means to demonstrate its sameness rather than otherness: as Philippe Ariès and Elizabeth Bronfen have argued more generally with respect to death in this period, art was a way of divesting the Other of its danger, of controlling and framing what is an alien experience or image.⁶⁵ Placing the diseased into the realm of the aesthetic allows its incorporation into the world of the human; in this case, into a moral and economic value-system that increasingly, although unevenly, stresses the priority of individual sensibility.

We should like to stress, however, that this process of aestheticizing disease does not occur regardless of social gender norms. There were young poor girls wasting away in garrets, male bohemian literary figures spitting blood, middle-class maidens whose lives were tragically cut short by the disease, and so on. Rather than placing all consumptive types under the rubric of romanticization or the disease of the self, an oversimplification into which Sontag occasionally slips, it is necessary to examine the dynamics of several distinct patterns of the aestheticization of the disease. In order to highlight gender and class issues involved in the fashioning of the sufferer's identity, three examples from the late eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century will be presented and analyzed below: an elite female, a plebeian female, and a plebeian male aspiring to elite cultural status. Here the literary concepts of sensibility and the Romantic notion of genius are intertwined with social and gender roles to forge the identity of the consumptive patients. As we move into the

64. William Buchan cited causes of consumption as "violent passions, exertions, or affections of the mind; as grief, disappointment, anxiety, or close application to the study of abstruse arts or sciences" (William Buchan, *Domestic Medicine* [Edinburgh, 1804], p. 119).

65. Ariès, *Hour of Our Death* (n. 21), p. 473; Elizabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), pp. 60–62.

Romantic period the concept of the consumptive male genius begins to take a more definite shape in opposition to the seemingly less active declining tubercular maiden—although, as we will see, the female self could also be empowered by consumption in certain culturally defined ways.

In the early and mid-eighteenth century, literary representations of consumption most often echoed Dudley Ryder's idea of consumptive love-melancholy, although not usually in so wistful a fashion. Ryder was a man writing a diary, rather than a writer showing the death of another from love-melancholy. The literature of the first part of the century and much of the second tended to place less emphasis on the beauty or aesthetic qualities of the sufferer, concentrating rather on the psychogenic nature of the ailment in a brief and prosaic manner. One of Henry Fielding's characters describes a typical case of consumption brought on by the loss of a loved one: "I found the parents of my darling in the utmost misery at her loss; for she had died, about a week before my arrival, of a consumption, which they imputed to her pining at my sudden departure."⁶⁶ The same pattern occurs in *Moll Flanders*: even this resilient heroine is thought by the physicians to be suffering from consumption after she experiences a failure in love and the loss of her desired man.⁶⁷ Women, with their delicate constitutions, were supposed to be especially susceptible to love-melancholy. John Stephens, a physician who was very likely read by Laurence Sterne, stated that "there are many women who, upon the death of a tender husband, dearly beloved infant, or much valued friend, will refute all the comforts, pleasures, and satisfactions of life, and, when in the midst of plenty, sicken and die."⁶⁸

Around the mid-eighteenth century, death by consumption does not constitute a beautiful death in the novel or in poetry. Indeed, Smollett complains in his *Travels* about Michelangelo's pieta in St Peter's: "I was not at all pleased with the famous statue of the dead Christ in his mother's lap, by Michael Angelo. The figure of Christ is as much emaciated, as if he had died of a consumption."⁶⁹ Actual consumptives, especially men, in Smollett's fiction tend to be presented as mobile skeletons or the living dead; beauty evidently does not yet reside in consumption in either sex.⁷⁰ Clarissa Harlowe apparently perishes of excess spirituality

66. Julian and his unnamed betrothed appear in Henry Fielding, *A Journey from This World to the Next*, ed. Claude Rawson (London: Dent, 1973), p. 105.

67. Daniel Defoe, *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders*, ed. G. A. Starr (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 42.

68. John Stephens, *Practical Treatise on Consumptions* (London: W. Owen and J. Gretton, 1761), p. 202.

69. Smollett, *Travels* (n. 48), p. 266.

70. See, for example, the skeletal Lismahago in Smollett's *Humphry Clinker*, originally published in 1771 (n. 44), p. 331.

rather than any earthly disease, but her servant Betty Barnes does die a “pining and consumptive” death less than a year after her mistress, in a kind of lowly parallel.⁷¹ Later in the century, however, it becomes acceptable and indeed almost compulsory for the *mistress* to die of consumption. If the cult of sensibility was predicated on the fragile nerves of the sufferer, consumption became the outward sign of a “sensible” constitution pushed too far, its aestheticization ironically encouraged by the example of Clarissa’s symptomless death. Shortly after this, in 1753, Tobias Smollett’s beautiful, virginal, and fragile “Monimia” in *Ferdinand, Count Fathom* “dies” of consumptive sorrow at the attack of the rakish Count, only to be miraculously revived at the end of the novel. At this point the stress is still not on the beauty of the death itself, however.⁷²

Consumptive Femininities

As we have seen, consumption was a disease well suited to represent the sensible body and delicacy of feeling that had emerged from the new medicine of the “nerves,” and this move was crucial in establishing it as a fashionable disease for at least the next century.⁷³ Although it was thought by most Northern European medics at this time to be hereditary rather than contagious, it is the individual quality of the person’s physical and mental sensibility that tends to be predominant in representations of those suffering from the disease. The bluestocking “Swan of Lichfield,” Anna Seward, lies on the cusp of this transition from a merely melancholic pining to a full-blown romantic aestheticized consumption. In 1764 Seward rather presciently detected signs of consumption in her friend Honora Sneyd, and stated in some detail her understanding of the condition:

This dear child will not live; I am perpetually fearing it, notwithstanding the clear health which crimsons her cheek and glitters in her eyes. Such an early expansion of intelligence and sensibility partakes too much of the angelic, too little of the mortal nature, to tarry long in these low abodes of frailty and pain, where the harshness of authority, and the impenetrability of selfishness, with the worse mischiefs of pride and envy, so frequently agitate by their storms,

71. Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa, Or, the History of a Young Lady*, 7 vols. (London, 1747–48), “Epilogue,” 7: 419.

72. Tobias Smollett, *The Adventures of Ferdinand, Count Fathom*, ed. Damian Grant (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 235–42, 320–27.

73. For the medicine of the nerves in the eighteenth century, see G. S. Rousseau, “Nerves, Spirits, and Fibres: Towards Defining the Origins of Sensibility,” in *Studies in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. R. F. Brissenden and John Christopher Eade (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), pp. 137–57.

and chill by their damps, the more ingenuous and purer spirits, scattered, not profusely, over the earth.⁷⁴

Here consumption has become explicitly formulated in terms of sensibility. Honora is an exemplary instance of feminine refinement that is destined to manifest itself through her delicate, sensible body. Although Honora is partly aestheticized here, it is notable that the bluestocking Seward is also concerned to mention Honora’s “intelligence,” not a usual attribute in other depictions of female consumptives. Laurence Sterne’s letter to the consumptive Sally Tuting in 1764 casts this same angelic sensibility in ostensibly patriarchal and familial terms, even if the intent is ultimately sexual:

The gentle Sally T—is made up of too fine a texture for the rough wearing of the world—some gentle Brother, or some one who sticks closer than a brother, should now pick her by the hand, and lead her tenderly along her way—pick carefully the smoothest tracks for her—scatter roses on them—& when the lax’d and weary fibre tells him she is weary—take her up in his arms.⁷⁵

From this point until the end of the nineteenth century, the dying tubercular maiden would be represented commonly in all media and genres as a beautiful bride of heaven, an angel too pure and spiritualized to abide long in the material world of the crude body and less-refined minds.⁷⁶ This nebulously religious discourse of the body combines Ryder’s sense of consumption as the disease of the easy good death with a more developed notion of individual sensibility.⁷⁷ Ironically, the cynical man-of-science Beddoes later uses exactly Seward’s sentimentalized language of nervous sensibility to describe the susceptibility of young women to consumption:

in respect to delicacy of constitution, they have been well compared to flowers brought forward by the cherishing heat of the conservatory. They cannot with impunity bear to be roughly visited by the winds of heaven. The slightest cause

74. E. V. Lucas, *A Swan and Her Friends* (London: Methuen, 1907), pp. 30–31; originally in Sir Walter Scott, ed., *The Poetical Works of Anna Seward*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: John Ballantyne, 1810), 1: cxvii.

75. Lewis Perry Curtis, ed., *Letters of Laurence Sterne* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935), p. 224. For more on Sterne’s relation to his own consumptive condition, see Clark Lawlor, “Consuming Time: Narrative and Disease in *Tristram Shandy*,” *Yrbk. Engl. Stud.*, 2000, 30: 46–59; idem, “Sterne, Edward Baynard, and the History of Cold Bathing: Medical Shandeism,” *Notes & Queries*, 1999, 244 [n.s., 46]: 22–25.

76. For further analysis of representations of women at this time, see Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body* (n. 65).

77. For discourses of the good and beautiful death, see Ariès, *Hour of Our Death* (n. 21), pp. 409–74; Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (n. 30), pp. 1–189.

disorders them, and till the phthical period is past, they exist in a perpetual state of dangerous weakness. For in this country, by whatever cause women under thirty are weakened, there is always considerable hazard of consumption.⁷⁸

The popular discourse on consumption interacted with that of the physicians, as Beddoes's chosen image of the frail consumptive maiden indicates. Seward does not stress physical so much as moral beauty in the distinctive Honora, although physical beauty is implied. When she describes the consumptive Lady Northesk, "a lovely and amiable young woman" (who was treated by Seward's friend Erasmus Darwin in 1778), she does repeat what had become the standard image of a consumptive young woman: "She was thin, even to transparency; her cheeks suffused at times with a flush, beautiful, though hectic."⁷⁹ The actual symptoms of the disease gave a "hectic flush" to the cheeks that was much remarked upon in and beyond medical circles, because it paradoxically gave the impression of health and beauty even as it indicated the presence of the "spoiler." The symptomatology of the disease made it the ideal condition for the perfect feminine beauty advocated by Edmund Burke in his 1756 essay on the sublime and beautiful:

an air of robustness and strength is very prejudicial to beauty. An appearance of delicacy, and even of fragility, is almost essential to it. . . . It is the flowery species, so remarkable for its weakness and momentary duration, that gives us the liveliest idea of beauty, and elegance. . . . The beauty of women is considerably owing to their weakness, or delicacy.⁸⁰

Because consumption gave "delicacy" to women without supposedly destroying their beauty (as smallpox would), it blended well with the kind of beauty favored by the influential Burke. His pronouncement encouraged the production of manuals like Dr. John Gregory's widely read *Father's Legacy*, a tome warning women that even if they already possessed good health they should "never" boast of it, as men "associate the idea of female softness and delicacy with a correspondent delicacy of constitution."⁸¹ Seward's aestheticization of Lady Northesk's consumption suggests its cultural value as an indicator of exceptional femininity, in terms of not only her physical presence but also her intellectual powers, noting that her "eyes [are] remarkably lucid and full of intelligence."⁸² Even the potentially grotesque wasting of the consumptive here becomes

78. Beddoes, *Essay* (n. 36), p. 124.

79. Lucas, *Swan and Her Friends* (n. 74), pp. 107–9. See also Anna Seward, *Memoirs of the Life of Dr Darwin* (London, 1804), pp. 110–14.

80. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), sects. 14–16.

81. John Gregory, *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters*, 4th ed. (London: W. Strahan, 1774), p. 31.

82. Seward, *Memoirs of the Life of Dr Darwin* (n. 79), pp. 110–14.

the aesthetic "transparency" of the pure, as if Northesk's spiritual self had become more radiant in proportion to the decrease of her flesh. The rest of Seward's account goes on to praise the various facets of Northesk's "susceptibility of taste," or her possession of prestigious cultural capital.

This topos of consumptive woman with intellectual accomplishment was, however, not the single dominant one in the period under review. Male representations of the same subject tended to cast her in a different mold, particularly when she was a plebeian consumptive, possessing no or little claim to learned sensibility. This is certainly the case in Washington Irving's extremely popular *Sketch Book*, which was published in the United States and Britain in 1819–20.⁸³ By this time the process of the aestheticization of consumptive women was firmly established, with delicate sentimental heroines being consumed (in both senses of the word) at a great rate in novels, plays, and poetry; some of Irving's short stories in this book are exemplary instances of this aesthetic of feminized consumption.⁸⁴ Irving wrote this collection of cultural observations and tales as an American visiting England, nostalgically harking back to an older agricultural society, untainted by modern industrialization. Despite this nostalgia, the narrative is set in the present, and in two of the sketches, "The Pride of the Village" and "The Broken Heart," Irving depicts women dying romantic, beautiful deaths from consumption and clearly explains his understanding of this phenomenon. These tales elevate the female self in terms that are bound by more traditional sexual ideologies than Seward's intellectualism.

In these narratives both women die of a romantic love-melancholy that begets a consumption:

I have seen many instances of women running to waste and self-neglect, and disappearing gradually from the earth, almost as if they had been exhaled to heaven; and repeatedly fancied that I could trace their death through the various declensions of consumption, cold, debility, languor, melancholy, until I reached the first symptoms of disappointed love.⁸⁵

Here Irving confirms ideas of female dependency on men. In his first tale a pure country maiden (the "pride of the village") falls in love with a seemingly gallant soldier, but when he makes a sexual pass at her, "her pure mind" is unable to cope with this harsh reality, and "the effect was

83. Reprinted as *The Works of Washington Irving*, vol. 2 (London: Bell, 1876).

84. See Douglas E. Branch, *The Sentimental Years, 1836–60* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1934), p. 173; Herbert R. Brown, *The Sentimental Novel in America, 1789–1860* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1940), pp. 113, 125–30.

85. Washington Irving, "The Broken Heart," in *Works* (n. 83), 2: 48–52, quotation on p. 50; henceforth "BH."

withering."⁸⁶ "The Broken Heart" depicts an Irish lady who becomes consumptive and dies from grief at the execution of her husband, an Irish rebel.

Consumption is the disease through which the female passive self is elevated to a level of spiritual excellence: both of these women are paragons of their sex in that they take the discourse of feminine dependency to its logical conclusion through the vehicle of romantic love narratives that are both tragic and sentimental. This distinction is only such within the boundaries allotted to women, however:

A woman's is comparatively a fixed, a secluded, and meditative life. She is more the companion of her own thoughts and feelings; and if they are turned to ministers of sorrow, where shall she look for consolation? Her lot is to be wooed and won; and if unhappy in her love, her heart is like some fortress that has been captured, and sacked, and abandoned, and left desolate.

How many bright eyes grow dim—how many soft cheeks grow pale—how many lovely forms fade away into the tomb, and none can tell the cause that blighted their loveliness! . . . it is the nature of woman to hide from the world the pangs of wounded affection. The love of a delicate female is always shy and silent.⁸⁷

Irving's view of these women replays all the usual clichés of passivity, delicacy of body and mind, an inability to articulate their feelings in the rational language of speech, and therefore a displacement of emotion into the sensible body—while the males in both tales are active soldiers, fighting in the competitive and harsh public world.⁸⁸ Most importantly, Irving here argued that susceptibility to consumption was a result of the built-in component of an idealized female passive mind-set, as if to echo the contemporary medical opinion about the feminine or effeminate lifestyle as a general cause of consumption.⁸⁹ Their tender and fragile

86. Washington Irving, "The Pride of the Village," in *ibid.*, 2: 239–46, quotation on p. 243; henceforth "PV."

87. "BH," p. 49.

88. For different gender perspectives on the entrenchment of Victorian separate spheres, see Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984); G. J. Barker-Benfield, "The Spermatic Economy: A Nineteenth-Century View of Sexuality," in *The American Family in Social-Historical Perspective*, ed. Michael Gordon (New York: St. Martin's, 1973), pp. 374–402. Irving himself wrote: "Man is the creature of interest and ambition. His nature leads him forth into the struggle and bustle of the world. Love is but the embellishment of his early life. . . . But a woman's whole life is a history of the affections. The heart is her world: it is there her ambition strives for empire" ("BH," p. 48).

89. For example, Benjamin Rush maintained that while the masculine and active lifestyle of the Indians (whose occupations consisted of war, fishing, and hunting) and the first

settlers made them immune to consumption, women, who sat more than men, and whose work was connected with less exertion, were most subject to consumption: Benjamin Rush, *Medical Inquiries and Observations*, 4th ed., 4 vols. (1815; rept., New York: Arno Press, 1972), 2: 38–39.

selves, whose essence was defined vis-à-vis male activity and aggression, made them susceptible to the disease of consumption. Hypersensitive feminine emotionality is not generalized here as it was with Honora Sneyd, but specifically directed at, and dependent upon, the behavior and status of men. It comes as something of a shock to find that Irving's romanticizing of the disease continued despite, or because of, the fact that his betrothed, Matilda Hoffman, had died from consumption in April 1809. His description of her death actually constructs her as the spiritualized representations of women in his culture suggested: "I saw her fade rapidly away beautiful and more beautiful and more angelical to the very last."⁹⁰

Within these parameters there is a certain narcissistic empowerment for women, however. The very fact of consumptive death proves the outstanding purity and spirituality of the woman as her thwarted love is displaced into religious excellence: the heroine of "The Pride of the Village" is given "the expression of a seraph" by her "sickness and sorrow," while the villagers make way for her "as for something spiritual."⁹¹ Although in one sense self-destructive, this consumption from love-melancholy is a mark of the elevated self. The proximity to death is another factor in the respect that is shown to the heroine: her imminent access to higher secrets. Nor is her secular passivity total: in a pyrrhic victory, the pride of the village takes control of her own narrative by writing to her former gallant. When he appears, a self-dramatizing scene ensues:

her wasted form—her deathlike countenance—so wan, yet so lovely in its desolation, smote him to the soul, and he threw himself in agony at her feet. She was too faint to rise—she attempted to extend her trembling hand—her lips moved as if she spoke, but no word was articulated—she looked down upon him with a smile of unutterable tenderness,—and closed her eyes for ever!⁹²

This may be a pyrrhic victory in the sense that it is won in the private feminine sphere of love, but it is a victory nevertheless. It is he who ends up at her feet in this final tableau, smitten to the soul by her lovely

settlers made them immune to consumption, women, who sat more than men, and whose work was connected with less exertion, were most subject to consumption: Benjamin Rush, *Medical Inquiries and Observations*, 4th ed., 4 vols. (1815; rept., New York: Arno Press, 1972), 2: 38–39.

90. Quoted in Joy S. Kasson, "The Growth of a Romantic Writer," in *The Old and New World Romanticism of Washington Irving*, ed. Stanley Brodwin (London: Greenwood Press, 1986), pp. 27–34.

91. "PV," pp. 244–45.

92. *Ibid.*, p. 269.

desolation. Paradoxically, although she is the person dying, it is she who is the subject and he the object of her actions. Her tender smile in part signifies her moral superiority over her imperfect man and her pleasure at achieving the control and dramatic effects that she had desired from this situation.

Consumptive Masculinities

A few years after Seward was making her remarks about Honora Sneyd's consumptive sensibility, a now almost completely forgotten Scottish poet called Michael Bruce was being cast as an example of a new breed of consumptive male geniuses. Predating Keats by more than four decades, Bruce was one of the earliest embodiments of the Romantic myth of poets who died young, although this formulation was emerging from the discourse of sensibility that we have described.

In 1779 Lord William Craig, a Scottish judge, wrote an article in the *Mirror* entitled "Reflections on Genius Unnoticed and Unknown; Anecdotes of Michael Bruce."⁹³ Craig describes how Bruce died of consumption at the age of twenty-one in 1767, and goes on to observe that Bruce's humble and harsh background had been too much for the poet to bear. The benevolence of the upper-class observer is awakened by

the consideration of genius thus depressed by situation, suffered to pine in obscurity, and sometimes, as in the case of this unfortunate young man, to perish, it may be, for want of those comforts and conveniences which might have fostered a delicacy of frame or of mind, ill calculated to bear the hardships which poverty lays on both.⁹⁴

In this case the hypersensitivity of the poet is in relation to his financial and class position, which in turn prevents his genius from emerging into the public gaze. Bruce's "delicacy" of mind and body needs the comfort of a different "situation" in which to thrive; sensibility is incongruous in a lower-class person, who is by necessity coarsened to the harshness of his life in order to survive. One of Craig's main points in the article is his regret that he was not able to help Bruce at the time. If he had been able to raise Bruce from his financial obscurity, then the consumption might have been prevented and his full literary potential realized. A powerful

93. William Craig (later Lord Craig), "Reflections on Genius Unnoticed and Unknown; Anecdotes of Michael Bruce," in *The Mirror: A Periodical Paper published at Edinburgh in the Years 1779 and 1780*, 11th ed. (London, 1801), p. 266 (first published in *Mirror*, 29 May 1779, 36).

94. *Ibid.*, p. 268.

association is made here between the disease of consumption and the myth of a young and talented man from an obscure background, struggling with his lack of financial and social resources and aspiring to immortal fame through his literary achievement.

Although the word *delicacy* implies a certain feminization of Bruce, as indeed did the application of sensibility to men in general, his consumption is constructed in a distinctly masculine form. Unlike the rather passive and purified nature of Honora Sneyd's predicted consumption, Bruce's disease is not merely the object of another's representation: he actually takes control of the discourse of consumption by incorporating it into the aesthetic of the self. Indeed, Craig finds this to be his most laudable literary act:

A young man of genius, in a deep consumption, at the age of twenty-one, feeling himself every moment going faster to decline, is an object sufficiently interesting; but how much must every feeling on the occasion be heightened, when we know that this person possessed so much dignity and composure of mind, as not only to contemplate his approaching fate, but even to write a poem on the subject!⁹⁵

The poem to which Craig refers is the "Elegy Written in Spring," in which Bruce ironically contrasts the birth of new life at this time with his own deteriorating condition:

Now Spring returns: but not to me returns
The vernal joy my better years have known;
Dim in my breast life's dying taper burns,
And all the joys of life with health are flown.⁹⁶

Craig ends his article with an extract from the poem including these lines, which were to be repeated ad infinitum throughout the nineteenth century as a moving example of the heroic youthful poet making art from disease, and especially so as this disease theoretically meant certain death.⁹⁷ As late as 1905 a biographer tells us that "from letters to his dear friend David Pearson, we discover the trying circumstances which beset him, particularly the state of his health, which greatly hindered his work. Yet with a stout heart he bravely struggled on."⁹⁸ In taking control of his consumption through a self-dramatizing process, Bruce draws his condi-

95. *Ibid.*, p. 269.

96. John Guthrie Barnet, *Life and Complete Works of Michael Bruce, Poet of Loch Leven: The Cottage Edition* (London: Thynne and Jarvis, 1927), p. 108.

97. See W. and R. Chambers, *Chambers Cyclopaedia of English Literature*, 3d ed., 2 vols. (London: W. and R. Chambers, 1876), 1: 687.

98. James Mackenzie, *Life of Michael Bruce, Poet of Loch Leven* (London: J. M. Dent, 1905), p. 63.

tion into the self rather than the Other of death. Part of this drama derived from the religious tradition of the good death: Bruce trained as a minister in the Scottish burgher synod, and his refusal to stop working was a sign of his Christian heroism. This attitude to disease is exemplified by the only surviving letter of his father, Alexander, who interprets "diseases and pains" as part of God's grand design, to which the faithful should submit: "He chastens us for our profit."⁹⁹ Despite this, the tone of his poetry tends to be melancholic in a secular manner. Evidently the poet, like many others, did not find it easy to reconcile the reality of his suffering with his religion.

Among those later struck by Bruce's myth was Nathan Drake, who, in his *Literary Hours* of 1798, mentioned Craig's article and quoted the concluding lines of *Loch Leven* that (understandably) adopt the pose of the doomed poet:

Thus sung the youth, amid unfertile wilds,
And nameless deserts, unpoetic ground,
Far from his friends he stray'd, recording thus
The dear remembrance of his native fields
To cheer the tedious night, while slow disease
Prey'd on his pining vitals, and the blasts
Of dark December shook his humble cot.¹⁰⁰

Drake is careful to mention that these verses were "finished under the pressure of mortal disease" that he had earlier identified as "that scourge of our isle, pulmonary consumption."¹⁰¹ The proto-Romantic sense of isolation conferred by this individualizing disease partly intersects with the "graveyard" school of poetry. Bruce does not derive pleasure as such from his disease, as one would expect in the later stages, but rather from its representation in poetry, and the possibility of religious consolation after death. Later critics noted that, as Alexander Grosart put it, "Bruce seems from the outset to have looked forward to early dying."¹⁰²

Consumption is also becoming here the "interesting" disease that Byron ironically admires in the early nineteenth century. Not only does it embody a hypersensibility, but it also allows time for this sensibility to be described by the poet. The fact that it was more prevalent among young people also fed into the emergent rebellious Romantic cult of youth—so much so that even Thomas Chatterton has been erroneously described as a consumptive, although the manner of his death (suicide) was far from

99. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

100. Nathan Drake, *Literary Hours* (London: T. Cadell, 1798), pp. 352–53.

101. *Ibid.*, p. 352.

102. Alexander B. Grosart, ed., *The Works of Michael Bruce* (London: Hamilton, Adams, 1865), p. 35.

lingering.¹⁰³ Creative consumption was defined as a limit experience, furthering the image of a rebellious artist living on the edge. The earlier image of young poets possessed of greater powers of sensibility than the average man was gradually transformed into that of the Romantic "Genius," who was such by virtue of a greater individualism and an access to higher truths predicated partly on physiological makeup.¹⁰⁴ Medical opinion concurred: in 1815 Thomas Young pronounced that

there is some reason to conjecture, that the enthusiasm of genius, as well as of passion, and the delicate sensibility, which leads to a successful cultivation of the fine arts, have never been developed in greater perfection, than where the constitution has been decidedly marked by that character, which is . . . often evidently observable in the victims of pulmonary consumption.¹⁰⁵

This new development occurred for several reasons, not least of which was the move to a Romantic vitalism in medicine in which it was popularly thought that the intense and sorrowful passions of the sensitive individual were likely to cause consumption. The medicine of sensibility now becomes combined with a Romantic vitalism that views man's life as a burning flame with a fixed amount of fuel.¹⁰⁶ Another poet who flirted with fashionable consumption, Shelley, claimed that "the vital principle by some inexplicable process influences and is influenced by the nerves and muscles of the body. The flesh is wasted by an excess of grief and passion. Thought is suspended by the languor of a lethargy and deranged by the excitement of a fever."¹⁰⁷ As the word *wasted* indicates, consumption is

103. Coleridge linked the death of Chatterton with consumption by metaphoric association in his poem "On Observing a Blossom on the First of February 1796," in which he asks whether he should compare the flower "To some sweet girl of too too rapid growth / Nipp'd by consumption mid untimely charms? / Or to Bristowa's bard, the wondrous boy!" (*The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge, 2 vols. [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912], 1: 149). Even Katherine Ott's excellent *Fevered Lives* makes the mistake of attributing a diagnosis of tuberculosis to Chatterton: Ott, *Fevered Lives* (n. 24), p. 14.

104. The classic exposition of the qualities of the romantic genius is in M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953).

105. Thomas Young, *A Practical and Historical Treatise on Consumptive Diseases* (London: Thomas Underwood, 1815), pp. 43–44.

106. For the development of Romantic medicine, and especially its relation to vitalism and literature, see W. F. Bynum and Roy Porter, eds., *Brunonianism in Britain and Europe* (London: Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, 1988); Hermione de Almeida, *Romantic Medicine and John Keats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Barker-Benfield, "Spermatoc Economy" (n. 88); Herbert Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 10.

107. Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Essay on the Vegetable System of Diet," in *Shelley's Prose, Or, The Trumpet of a Prophecy*, ed. David Lee Clark (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico

the Romantic disease par excellence: the operations of the mind are bound to speak through the body. According to Shelley and his contemporaries, when the vital principle is in disharmony, the body is fatally consumed by the spirit. Shelley's poetry abounds with wasting lovers whose pursuit of perfect love is usually frustrated. The more their passions burn, the more they use the flesh as fuel.¹⁰⁸

The genius in particular is the man who burns too quickly, who exhausts his energies in one powerful burst rather than in the slow crawl toward death allotted to the average person. He is consumed physically by his excessive spiritual, emotional, and intellectual activity, whether it be in the form of writing or loving. This is the involuntary pact that the genius makes with disease, as Shelley tells Keats:

This consumption is a disease particularly fond of people who write such good verses as you have done, and with the assistance of an English winter it can often indulge its selection; —I do not think that young and amiable poets are at all bound to gratify its taste; they have entered into no bond with the Muses to that effect.¹⁰⁹

Shelley makes clear that the association of consumption and genius is in place while Keats is still alive, implicitly referring to precursors like Bruce and Henry Kirke White (who will be discussed shortly). Keats is the most significant mythical figure of the tubercular poet in Britain to this day—partly because he combined the excesses of loving and writing in spectacular fashion, while of course writing better poetry than the less skilled poets before him. When suffering from consumption he was forbidden both to write poetry and to see Fanny Brawne, to whom he wrote some of the most famous love letters in literature: both were considered to be sources of great excitement that would deplete his strength still further by overstimulating his already frantic mental constitution.¹¹⁰

Consumption also became a means of selling oneself to the public as a poetic genius, a process in which critics and the public collaborated. The commodification of consumption in the medical world was occurring in the literary one as well, and here one example *before* Keats will suffice. Henry Kirke White, yet another largely forgotten poet, helped confirm the myth of tubercular genius. White, a Nottinghamshire poet and son of

108. See Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude* (London, 1816), p. 44, lines 242 ff., for a typical example of the wasting Romantic lover-poet.

109. Frederick L. Jones, ed., *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 2: 220–21, 27 July 1820.

110. See Hyder E. Rollins, ed., *The Letters of John Keats, 1814–1821*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958); for the major biography, see Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963).

a butcher, had died young of consumption in 1806 and was very well known and influential in the nineteenth century, in both Britain and America—largely due to the work of Robert Southey, who edited the *Remains of Henry Kirke White* in three volumes, published between 1808 and 1822. In 1823 he published a tenth three-volume edition, just at the time when the Keats myth and the first of Thomas Carlyle's articles describing the German consumptives Schiller and Novalis were coming into the public domain.¹¹¹ After examining White's collected papers shortly after his death, Southey had claimed that the existing manuscripts of Chatterton "excited less wonder than these."¹¹² Byron too, although antagonistic to Southey, enthusiastically trumpeted White's fame in his "English Bards and Scotch Reviewers" of 1809, lamenting White's early death.¹¹³ According to both Byron and Southey, White had brought on a consumption by overwork at Cambridge University. As Byron puts it in the same passage: "'Twas thine own Genius gave the final blow."¹¹⁴ Before this, however, White had suffered a cruel review that brought him to the attention of Southey: Byron had mentioned to Tom Moore that what had happened to Keats had nearly happened to Kirke White.¹¹⁵

In the American context, Edgar Allan Poe was to complain in 1841 that writers who wrote badly could be sold to the public almost purely on the strength of their early death and the pathetic sentiment it generated; biography was obscuring art. Discussing the now unknown consumptives Lucretia Davidson and her sister Margaret, he stated: "The name of Lucretia Davidson is familiar to all readers of Poetry. Dying at the early age of seventeen, she has been rendered famous, not less, and certainly not more, by her own precocious genius than by three memorable biographies,—one by President Morse, of the American Society of Arts, another by Miss Sedgewick, and a third by Robert Southey."¹¹⁶ It was of

111. Carlyle's *Life of Schiller* of 1825, first published in the *London Magazine* in 1823–24 as "Schiller's Life and Writings," and his famous essay on Novalis in the *Foreign Review*, July 1829, provided a further elaboration of the myth of tuberculosis. See useful reprints of these pieces: Thomas Carlyle, *The Life of Friedrich Schiller* (1825; repr. with 1872 Supplement, London: Chapman and Holt, 1873); idem, "Novalis," in *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, 7 vols. (London: Chapman Hall, 1872), 2: 183–229.

112. George Gilfillan, ed., *The Poetical and Prose Works of Henry Kirke White: With Life by Robert Southey* (Edinburgh, 1840), p. xli.

113. Ernest Hartley Coleridge, ed., *The Works of Lord Byron*, 7 vols. (London: John Murray, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1898), 4: 364.

114. *Ibid.*

115. John T. Godfrey and James Ward, *The Homes and Haunts of Henry Kirke White* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent, 1908), p. 212. Byron wrote to Thomas Moore in 1821.

116. Edgar Allan Poe, "Biography and Poetical Remains of the Late Margaret Miller Davidson. By Washington Irving" in *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. James A.

course unfortunate for the poet that he or she would usually have to die before attaining such glory.

Meanwhile another influential article appeared in the popular journal *The Mirror of Literature* in April 1823, stating that few readers would have heard of Bruce, but many of Henry Kirke White, "and it is impossible to present any stronger inducement to peruse these pages, than to state, that Michael Bruce was, in many respects, the counterpart of that very interesting individual."¹¹⁷ Not as isolated cases, Bruce and White were given the collective label of "young consumptive poet," with which both identified themselves self-consciously. White, even more than Bruce, had made his consumptive condition central to his poetry, and indeed seemed obsessed with the disease (which was well nigh epidemic in Nottingham) before he contracted it, rather precociously writing a fragment of a Shakespearean imitation when he was fourteen called "The Dance of the Consumptives."¹¹⁸ White diagnoses his own condition in terms of the psychogenic theory of the day in his "Ode to Genius," in which he talks of the tortured poet-genius who "consumes his watchful oil" and "feels the vital flame decrease."¹¹⁹ Like Bruce, he had had ambitions to be a minister, and contributed to the idea of consumption as the disease of the good death by writing a sonnet to "Consumption" that begins

Gently, most gently, on thy victim's head,
Consumption, lay thine hand! let me decay
Like the expiring lamp, unseen, away,
And softly go to slumber with the dead.¹²⁰

The sonnet continues with this vision of his own easy death as he bids farewell to his weeping friends while choirs of angels hymn him to his rest. Such a soft departure into the sleep of death is a benediction from the figure of Consumption rather than a curse, as the end of the poem elaborates:

And, smiling faintly on the painful past,
Compose my decent head, and breathe my last.¹²¹

Harrison, 17 vols. (New York: T. Y. Crowell, 1902), 10: 174–78 ("Literary Criticism," originally in *Graham's Magazine*, August 1841).

117. [Edgar], "Select Biography: Michael Bruce," in *Mirror of Literature, Amusement, and Instruction*, 26 April 1823, 1 (26): 403–5; quotation on p. 404.

118. White wrote an unfinished letter that he intended to send to the editor of the *Nottingham Journal* complaining of consumption's prevalence, which is reproduced in Charles Vernon Fletcher, "The Poems and Letters of Henry Kirke White: A Modern Edition" (Ph.D. diss., University of Nottingham, 1980), 2: 364.

119. Gilfillan, *Works of Henry Kirke White* (n. 112), p. 155.

120. *The Poetical Remains of Henry Kirke White* [editor unnamed] (London: Jones, 1824), p. 33.

121. *Ibid.*

The control over the experience of death is striking here: White's smile, like that of Irving's consumptive heroine, is a smile of triumph over the woes of the world that marks the superior spirituality of the consumptive. Dignity and decency are preserved as the poet literally "composes" the experience of his passing into the next world. Although this self-fashioning has a religious dimension, it also revels in the *image* of the poet's death, as does White's poetry in general. The pleasure to be had in this manipulation of death enabled by consumption is evident throughout.

By the time of Keats's death, the fashionability of the consumptive poet was well established, and his death was surrounded with many of the literary tropes that we have discussed above. Without underestimating his role, it should be noted that Keats *consolidated*, rather than created, the myth of the hapless consumptive poet of obscure background struggling for recognition and an immortal place in the pantheon of Great Poets. The mythology of Keats himself has been well documented, and he famously provided ample material for the reinforcement of the myth of the consumptive poet, especially his self-dramatizing statement after spitting blood that "I know the colour of that blood. It's 'arterial' blood. . . . That blood is my death warrant, I must die."¹²² Although his image has come down to us via the Victorians as a languorous poet of sensuality and a diseased aestheticism, Keats himself was in no doubt as to the often gruesome reality of consumption, having trained in medicine and having watched his brother Tom die of the same disease while he attempted to write *Hyperion*. However, this could not prevent the subsequent association of his genius with consumption.¹²³

An early death was not something planned by the general consumptive tourists of the earlier period, or indeed by the average consumptive contemporary. But if one had pretensions to creative inspiration, then consumption was the disease to acquire—like new clothes. Shelley told Keats in 1820 that "you continue to wear a consumptive appearance," while Dumas stated that "in 1823 and 1824 it was the fashion to suffer from the lungs; everybody was consumptive, poets especially; it was good form to spit blood after each emotion that was at all sensational, and to die before reaching the age of thirty."¹²⁴ Far from being a terrifying disease of the Other, it was a means of adding a heroic luster to the self through its aesthetic qualities, and those involved in aesthetic production ("poets especially") found it almost indispensable in Romantic self-fashioning.

122. The anecdote is from Keats's friend Brown, quoted in Bate, *John Keats* (n. 110), pp. 635–36.

123. For a negative connection between consumption and genius in this respect, see "Art. III. — Life, Letters, and Literary Remains of John Keats," *North Brit. Rev.*, November 1848–February 1849, 10: 69–96.

124. *Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (n. 109), 2: 220–21, 27 July 1820; Dumas quoted in Dubos and Dubos, *White Plague* (n. 6), p. 58.

In the Romantic period the supposed deaths of poets like Keats and Kirke White from cruel reviews and neglect embellished the mythology of consumption by showing that the poet had contracted consumption from the psychic distress caused by a harsh environment, financial and critical. The image of these poets as rebels alienated from an insensitive society was greatly aided by this disease of mental anguish.¹²⁵

Romantic consumption in Britain reached its high point in the late 1820s, and, it should be emphasized again, not merely because of the death of Keats in 1821. Although it is well known that Keats and Shelley were consumptive, and that the myth of the consumptive poet was highly popular from the 1820s onward, following Shelley's poetic tribute to Keats in his *Adonais*, the building blocks for this state of popularity have not yet been adequately recognized. Bruce and especially White continued to attract critical attention throughout the rest of the century, although they are rarely mentioned in our own, having now been condemned to the fate of "regional" poets.

After the decade of Keats's death, the evangelical Christianity that had risen in tandem with the Romantic movement strengthened, leading into a Victorian age that was still concerned with issues of disease, creativity, and genius, but set in a more anxiously religious and moralistic context.¹²⁶ The Victorians reinforced and modified the strain of religious and aesthetic representations of women that had developed in the Romantic period as the "separate spheres" polarized further. Myths of angelic tubercular femininity proliferated with a vengeance in Victorian literature of all genres, although the idea of the dramatic consumptive young poet also persisted, as seen notably in the influence of Monckton Milnes's biography of Keats on the Pre-Raphaelites.¹²⁷ Clearly the Romantic conception of masculine creativity remained deeply attractive for generations after its actual manifestation, as evidenced by the persistence of the myth into our own century—albeit modified by the new germ theory that once again tended to cast consumption in the role of a feared Other.¹²⁸

125. The literature on the death of Keats from a cruel review is extensive, but for a recent and apposite summary, see James Heffernan, "Adonais: Shelley's Consumption of Keats," *Stud. Romant.*, 1984, 23: 293–315.

126. For a crucial example of the consumptive angel, see the death of Helen Burns in *Jane Eyre*: Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. Queenie Dorothy Leavis (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), pp. 111–14. For the importance of Victorian evangelicalism on representations of disease, see Miriam Bailin, *The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction: The Art of Being Ill* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (n. 30), pp. 17–58.

127. See Sidney Colvin, *John Keats: His Life and Poetry; His Friends, Critics and After-Fame* (London: Macmillan, 1917), p. 531.

128. Ott, in *Fevered Lives* (n. 24), pp. 76–77, talks usefully about the persistence of this idea in the American context.

On the other hand, Victorians less sympathetic to Romantic concepts portrayed Keats as an effeminate, sensual, and languorous poet.¹²⁹ Victorian notions of disciplined manliness rather than diseased creativity overtook the previous tendency to regard the consumptive male as a person to be luxuriously and aesthetically pampered. The new perspective was most piquantly expressed in the letters of John Addington Symonds, who had contributed greatly to the fashion of the Alpine sanatorium as a place of abode for British wealthy consumptives in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹³⁰ In September 1876, at his own home at Bristol, he wrote to his friend that "the Alps always make me my best working self, & I find my mind fruitful there while it is apt to be barren in this tepid steam of an atmosphere."¹³¹ Symonds felt that lukewarm air slackened his manly vigor and discipline, and thought that he had to combat the corrupting indolence of a warm climate, especially "in these great sinful cities of the South" like Rome, a destination favored by Keats and Shelley.¹³² The new therapeutics of the clear, cold air of the Alps and the sanatoria, like Davos, that arose in the middle of the century contradicted the previous edicts to avoid such potentially damaging air.¹³³ Dr. Walther's windy sanatorium in the Black Forest was described as an "abode of Spartans," a phrase suggestive of the masculine rigor required to conquer this obstinate disease.¹³⁴ Women, of course, were exempt from these distinctly gendered expectations, keeping the mantle of spiritual overseers of the Victorian hearth.

129. Ironically, Keats's "friend" Leigh Hunt helped inaugurate this critique through his notorious comments in Leigh Hunt, *Lord Byron and Some of His Contemporaries* (London: Henry Colburn, 1828), p. 253.

130. For Symonds's role in making Davos fashionable for the British upper-class consumptives, see Karl Baedeker, *Switzerland and the Adjacent Portions of Italy, Savoy, and Tyrol: Handbook for Travellers*, 25th ed. (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1913), pp. 453–54. The formative article is John Addington Symonds, "Davos in Winter," *Fortn. Rev.*, 1878, 139: 74–87.

131. Herbert M. Schueller and Robert L. Peters, eds., *The Letters of John Addington Symonds*, 3 vols. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1967–69), 2: 429.

132. *Ibid.*, p. 369.

133. Tobias Smollett tells the tale of a Mr. Oswald who, on enquiring why his consumptive condition is deteriorating, is informed by the physician that the air of Montpellier is "too sharp for his lungs, which required a softer climate" (Smollett, *Travels* [n. 48], p. 104).

134. See Thomas Dormandy, *The White Death: A History of Tuberculosis* (London: Hambledon Press, 1999), p. 152. For asceticism as a means of masculine self-fashioning, see James Eli Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. 28–32; Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities* (n. 106), p. 58.

Conclusion

We began our study of the representations of consumption by asking why, how, and when it came to have such a high value in Enlightenment and Romantic self-fashioning. We are now in a position to give general answers to the questions posed above. Although the representations of the physicians themselves stressed the very unromantic and antiaesthetic nature of the pathology of consumption throughout our period of study, ideas of the disease in the popular imagination became crucially enmeshed in the second part of the eighteenth century with the developing theory (and practice) of sensibility in which the slender body became a sign of personal sensitivity, creativity, and taste. Various other factors (medical economics, traditions of the good death, and secular love) combined with this new sensibility to create a culture of an often pleasurable and aestheticized consumption, and so powerful was this "fantasy" that people would attempt to live (and die) according to its image.

At the seemingly abstract level of the literary world and its representations, we have found an increasing aestheticization and concomitant commodification of the disease that parallels and indeed interacts with the image of consumption in medicine and in lay culture. Such patterns of representation are complex, bounded by norms of gender, class, and, more specifically, occupation, yet the general pattern is a reinforcement of the idea of consumption as a disease at least partly beneficial to the Self, whether it be through feminine religious empowerment or masculine poetic Genius.

Despite a Victorian evangelical backlash against the supposedly unhealthy and sensuously narcissistic Romantic, the myth of consumption as a means of self-fashioning has persisted even to the present day, despite the intervening changes in our understanding of the disease. Indeed, one can read the fashion phenomenon of "heroin chic" as a look derived from the images generated by consumption in the Romantic period. The cultural and literary history of consumption is highly significant and deserves much more work in its own right, but it also reminds us that disease is not necessarily an alien Other that threatens the body and identity, but can aid in the construction and representation of the Self in many ways. The fantasies of consumption from 1700 to 1830 are the strongest possible evidence of the existence of a constructive bond between disease and the Self.

The Holistic Gaze in German Medicine, 1890–1930

MICHAEL HAU

Introduction

This work deals with a particular kind of medical gaze—not with the dissecting, analytical gaze described by Michel Foucault in his book *Birth of the Clinic* on eighteenth-century France,¹ but with a different kind: the synthesizing gaze of physicians in turn-of-the-century Germany. In the decades between 1890 and 1930, a growing number of German physicians maintained that the hallmark of a superior physician and healer was his intuitive gaze, a gaze that allowed him to capture the essence and individual qualities of a human constitution in a holistic way. As I argue, the synthetic gaze reflected epistemological principles that were attractive for physicians for several reasons: the holistic gaze was reminiscent of the aesthetic gaze of the male educated bourgeois (*Bildungsbürger*), and only a physician who shared the aesthetic sensibilities of the *Bildungsbürgertum* could truly judge whether a person was normal, healthy, and beautiful.

According to some physicians, a healthy and beautiful body was characterized by the harmonious and purposeful interaction of its constituent parts. At the core of their claim for a holistic gaze was the ability to "see,"

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1. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975).