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**Hubbub in the Brain**

Scurvy reveals a lot about thinking, feeling, and the relationship between them.

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Source: L0013404 A scurvy sufferer, 1919; Wellcome Library, London; Creative Commons Attribution only license CC BY 4.0
The cause of about two million deaths in navies and merchant marines, scurvy was the premier occupational disease on the high seas between 1500 and 1800. The physical symptoms of scurvy included swollen gums, aching joints and limbs, and a bilious gout. Victims also experienced a hubbub of the brain that activated the imagination, produced morbidly acute sensations (depression, nostalgia and homesickness) and rendered fragrances disgusting, light blinding, and music deafening.

In Scurvy, Jonathan Lamb, a professor of the Humanities at Vanderbilt University, draws on descriptions of the disease by voyagers, diagnoses by scientists, and a wide array of fictional accounts (ranging from Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels to George Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four to Peter Carey’s Jack Maggs and The True History of the Kelly), to identify a “scorbutic” sensibility. Sweeping, sophisticated, and speculative, Scurvy is a tour de force meditation on thinking, feeling, and the relationship between them.

Lamb demonstrates that scurvy was the paradigmatic disease of the Age of Discovery. When explorers reached Australia, he posits, “the internal pressures of malnutrition and depression conspired with the sheer novelty of what was witnessed to make accuracy impossible,” and to render their testimony “tendentious, impulsive and extravagant.” Filled with creatures no one had ever seen before - the potoroo (a marsupial cross between a kangaroo and a rat), the leaf-tailed gecko, and the red-necked avocet - and no standards or norms to measure “things,” Australia “drove or liberated” observers to represent or invent what they saw or thought they saw, and generated uncertainty about whether that visual or literary representation was “real” or imagined.”

The (perhaps) deluded and vivid imaginations of voyagers with scurvy, which overthrew the precision of science and the structure of meaning, critics in nineteenth and twentieth century Europe implied, had counterparts in middle-class neurotics. Responding to the vagaries of a market driven economy, the boredom of country life followed by the fast-paced charms of the city, and the “spikes and troughs” of fashion and war, neurotics, according to William Trotter (who identified citrus juice as a preventive as well as a cure for scurvy), “sit for hours in the same posture, without paying the least attention to what is going on around them, or suddenly burst into pointless laughter.” The principal difference between them and the crews of naval vessels was that the symptoms of the former were induced by indulgence and of the latter by privation.

Critics averred that readers of novels were also enslaved by “all that is extravagant or absurd.” In a survey of health published in 1802, Thomas Beddoes described a woman “so affected by the reading of a romance…as to be deprived of her senses and fall into convulsions.” And the celebrated Scottish philosopher Lord Kames concluded that absorption in fiction produced a trance he called “the ideal presence,” an unreflective and immediate engagement with images presented to the mind as an event, a state in which “history stands upon the same footing with fable.”

These days, Lamb implies, we still do not fully understand “the cognitive disturbance arising from the morbid irritability of the nerves and the senses, the failure of the tongue to express what it is like to be so proximate to things vibrating with sensational stimuli, and the strange pathological coalition of the beautiful and the horrible induced by such a chaos of impressions.” We no longer worry all that much about scurvy, but many folks still live (often virtually) at the end of the real and known world, “where values are reversed, history doesn’t work, things are fertile in contradictions” and imagination (and not reason) reigns supreme.