In the 1820s two poets in different parts of Europe suffered badly from gallstone disease — Walter Scott and Esaias Tegnér. They exemplify how the same disease may have entirely different effects on different personalities. Their case histories were remarkably similar from a medical viewpoint — but what a disparity in reaction and performance between the robust Scotsman and the sensitive Swede!

Walter Scott was not overly concerned. During the attacks he roared like a bull, so that people could hear him on the road outside Abbotsford, and one night, feeling that he was dying, he bade farewell to his children; but as soon as the pain ceased he forgot his suffering.

Tegnér, on the other hand, was deeply disturbed and although witty as always, anticipated an untimely death: « New Year’s Eve I got a Colic which I thought was going to bring both my poetical and theological life to a close and thereby teach me a variety of things about which both Poetics and Symbolics have left me in some uncertainty... I know that we all must die. Nevertheless, under the circumstances it would be somewhat inconvenient, if not for me, at least for my family. However, only a fool complains about the inevitable. Resignation is the sum of life’s wisdom and the slightest consideration should teach us to make the best of the bad bargain which we call life — a bargain which we are sure to lose anyway. »

Both patients learned that even friends in need can be a nuisance; in Scott’s case, the Earl of Buchan called with the Christian wish of relieving Scott’s mind about the arrangements for his funeral, all of which he could safely leave in the Earl’s hands! Tegnér had a friend who wrote, « Thanks heavens you are well again. The news of this illness scared me terribly for good reasons: in this year alone I have lost three friends from my early days ». No wonder the addresses became discouraged!

The two poets reacted quite differently to the general effect of the disease. Scott bore up courageously and wrote, « I should be a great fool, and a most ungrateful wretch to complain of such inflictions as these. My life has been, in all its private and public relations, as fortunate perhaps as was ever lived, up to this period; and whether pain or misfortune may lie behind the dark curtain of futurity, I am already a sufficient debtor to the bounty of Providence to be resigned to it ».

Poor Tegnér was more pathetic: « I can no longer hope for health or happiness: instead I hope that God will, until the end, provide me with the strength of mind, which in our sub-lunar world so often has to substitute for Providence. If my
little personage must return whence it came, to drown in the large fountain-head
or float around for some time like a bubble, reflecting the sky and a strange
light; whether this occurs some months sooner or later seems to be of ever
diminishing importance."

The disease thus added vital elements to the two authors' experience, bringing
suffering to their lives but valuable material for their work.
The patients' literary activity was influenced in different degrees. Scott, with
"the strength of a team of horses", continued to write during his attacks, but
probably feared that the quality of his fictions suffered, because when he sub­
sequently read what he had written in this condition he could not recollect a
single incident, character or conversation: «When I was so dreadfully ill that I
could hardly speak five minutes without loss of breath, I found that the exertion
of dictating the nonsense... suspended for a time the sense of my situation.»

Even if Scott himself could not recollect any of the incidents that he had
invented while suffering, even if he thought that he had dictated nonsense during
his illness, it is hard for us, his readers, to agree — on the contrary, Ivanhoe,
though written mostly between bodily convulsions, became one of his favourite
romances; a beautiful demonstration of mind's triumph over matter.

The influence of the illness on the writing was much more profound in
Tegnér's case. His main project, Fritiof's Saga, had to be put aside for a while.
He began using medical metaphors from his personal experience: «Even in my
better, healthier days did I form Epigrams, but in a happy, light spirit. They were
considered as harmless as they were meant to be, but now they are hardened,
petrified bile and therefore hurting.»

The disease was not the least important of the circumstances that caused
a change in style and character of his poetry. Tegnér became disillusioned, often
cynical, sometimes even desperate. One of his most personal poems, The Spleen,
bears witness. It was written at a time when Tegnér was tortured by recurrent
attacks of pain and fever from stones in the inflamed bile ducts:

I reached the summit of my life
Where waters separate and run
With frothy waves in different directions
It was clear up there, and wonderful to stand
I saw the Earth, t'was green and wondrous
And God was good and man was honest
Then, suddenly, a black, splenetic demon rose
And sank his teeth into my heart.
And see, at once the Earth was empty and forsaken
And sun and stars went dark in haste

A smell of corpses runs through life
The air of spring and summer's glory poisoned

Tell me night-watch, how goes the time?
Is there no end to it, at all?

My pulse beats fast as in my youthful days
But cannot count the times of agony
How long, how endless is each heartbeat's pain
O my tormented, burn-out heart!
My heart? There is no heart within my breast
An urn there is, with ash of life enclosed.
The two authors also provide good examples of different attitudes to medical treatment. Scott professes early a high opinion of doctors and their work. In his novel, Surgeon's daughter he draws on his own knowledge when he describes the hardships of a Scottish country practitioner. In spite of them his doctor is devoted to his profession and has no desire to trade his practice for a comfortable city position. Scott has come to realize — and he does not change his view after being treated for his illness — that humanity is the physician's greatest virtue.

Tegnér was dubious and sarcastic; one of his friends was dissatisfied with his doctor, who had previously sent him some poems, adding that he wrote prescriptions better than poetry. This the friend had believed without difficulty but now, he said, he feared that the doctor had been unfair to his own poetry — a well-worded suspicion. A similar scepticism had been entertained by Oliver Goldsmith's friends when he abandoned medical practice and announced that in future he would reserve his prescriptions for them — they thought he had better reserve them for his enemies.

A century after the two poets, a great French painter was racked by the same kind of torments. As Henri Matisse obstinately refused to be operated for his gallstones he suffered as much and as long as his brothers in misfortune. It was, in fact, the third serious disease that had a profound influence on this master's life and work — first the appendicitis of his youth, and then, in his seventies, cancer of the colon, which was followed soon after by this latest problem.

For more than a year he had frequent attacks of severe pain, fever and jaundice. He was, however, more stoic than even Walter Scott; his proud nature did not permit him to complain — only his intimates knew about his agonies: «For my part, I spend most of my time in bed. I get up for an hour but, as I am not used to it, I am not very comfortable and it is with pleasure that I return to bed. I work regularly though, and paint in the afternoon.» Thus, his strong character helped him to continue creating serene masterpieces, «the calm and mighty expressions of conquered pain». Only in the illustrations for Pasiphae does he let us divine his ordeal. In L'Angoisse qui s'amasse (Increasing anxiety), the agony of pain itself wields the etching-needle with fine-spun subtlety.

I had a conversation with him, some years later while he was lying in bed with a cat on his feet, directing with a long stick how his large cut-outs should be pasted on the canvas. He explained how his illness had altered his attitude to life and art. He wished to fill the new life given him with as much happiness as possible. During his earlier years he had often, by dint of great pain and effort, broken new paths in modern art. Now he wished to allow himself the joy of treading these paths again, light of heart and without effort. This state of mind is reflected in his pictures. In many of his earlier works one can see him wrestling with new problems. Over his later work — amongst them the large « Collages », based on his experience and acquired knowledge — rests a happy air of repose and relaxed contentment after a good day's work. They have been a blessing to many and Matisse himself was so convinced of the beneficial radiation of his colour and its power to heal, that he hung his pictures around the beds of ailing friends.

The story of the disease of Matisse also illustrates the disadvantage of consulting several doctors, each with his own opinion: «My dear Louis Aragon, I won't to do Switzerland this summer: I am too busy with the disease and the doctors; I have two teams. One wants me to be operated. The other not. The one that advises against is presided by a surgeon — my surgeon from Lyon, who knows the risks that I have been exposed to before and who does not want to subject me to them again.»

One evening, the medical consultations turned into a riot and through the closed doors even the patient could hear the furious voice of Professor W. shouting...
that the heart of the patient would not stand an operation. No wonder that Matisse proclaims: «I have some right to defend my own skin. I have no character; I like to have an attack of pain now and then and prefer evading an operation — I could not endure it.» It was probably under pressure of the different opinions that he quotes and old adage: «Listening to them, one would think that all doctors are assassins» — excuse me!

The irony of Matisse, the sarcasms of Tegnér are echoes of numerous complaints about doctors through the centuries. The treatment of Scoot and Tegnér reminds us that they lived in an era when medicine had not yet entered the Age of Enlightenment and still retained many mediaeval errors. Disease was thought to be caused by some vitiated and impure matter in the blood, which had to be diverted. This idea lay behind the extensive use of bleedings, blisterings, emetics and catharsis. Doctors had a confused understanding of bodily functions and were esteemed primarily for their skill in abstract argument and their readiness to cite classic authorities. For centuries, men of light and learning expressed doubts about doctors’ capacities, jokingly, sarcastically or bitterly, according to the degree of their disappointment. The outstanding examples in literature are Montaigne and Molière. Both suffered lingering disease and appreciated the value of health; the former says that «Health is a precious thing... without it our life becomes painful and offensive; pleasure, wisdom, science and virtue tarnish and fade away. We have to endure patiently the rules of our predicament: we are going to age, to grow weak and to get ill, in spite of all medicine.»

He had more confidence in the healing power of nature than in that of prescribed drugs, and he despised doctors — doubting not only their ability, but also their honour: «They have more consideration for their own reputation, and, consequently, for their profits, than for their patients’ interest.» He goes as far as to suggest that some doctors do not hesitate to impair the condition of their patients in order to earn more, and summarizes his opinion, «I have always despised medicine but when I get ill, I don’t conform to it — instead I get to hating and fearing it and I ask those who urge me to take medicaments at least to wait until I have regained strength and health to enable me to stand the effort and the risk of taking them».

When Molière deals with doctors, there is not a trace of his usual joviality — only the harshest mockery. «Why does he need four doctors — is not one enough to kill a patient?»

Antoine Watteau died young. He shared in painting the same low opinion of medicine that Montaigne and Molière expressed in words: their doctors appear, drawn to life in one of his paintings. He depicts himself already at the cemetery, wrapped in his dressing gown, trying to escape his tormentors, the Medical Faculty who attack him with their enema syringes. The very thought of death is with him, barely concealed by his usual graceful fancy, but with a shrill tinge bordering on the grotesque. Only in the inscription does the cry of distress, pain and agony break from his lips without restraint: «What have I done, confounded assassins, to so incur your wrath?» In order to enjoy fully the scenes described by Molière and depicted by Watteau we may add an accompaniment by Mozart as he in tones ridicules Doctor Bartolo, the basso-buffon in The Marriage of Figaro.

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This texte will appear as part of a book «Creativity and Disease. How illness affects literature, art and music», to be published by George F. Stickley, Philadelphia.