Literary Medicine: Brain Disease and Doctors in Novels, Theater, and Film
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Preface

For most people, including neurologists and psychiatrists, the first contacts with brain disease and its consequences take place in reading novels or watching movies. Another initiation may also be through personal experience with a family member afflicted by a specific disorder, but a more scholarly experience is usually delayed until the academic years for future physicians and health professionals. Classical and modern literature is indeed full of patients with interesting neurological, cognitive, or psychiatric diseases, oftentimes including detailed and accurate descriptions, suggesting that the authors were inspired by observations made on real individuals.

In many cases, these literary portrayals of diseases even predate their formal identification by medical science. For instance, one of the best and most vivid reports of acute progressing stroke was written by Marcel Proust in *In Search of Lost Time* about the fatal disease of the narrator’s grandmother. Proust was the son of a famous physician and had heard the daily reporting of medical cases during the family meals from a very young age. Alexandre Dumas probably provided the first precise description of a locked-in syndrome in the case of Mr. Noirtier in *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and William Shakespeare’s plays are a source of a surprising number of various neurological and psychiatric cases. In *Louis Lambert*, Honoré de Balzac may have written the first accurate report of schizophrenia, several decades before Kraepelin and Bleuler provided the first modern descriptions of the condition.

In previous books devoted to neurological diseases in famous artists, writers, and musicians [1–3], we mentioned fascinating self-reports by famous novelists, such as Charles-Ferdinand Ramuz’s own account of his stroke in his diary, or the first known report of a transient ischemic attack by Stendhal in his correspondence to Fiore. However, fictional literature is much richer and encompasses nearly all kind of disorders affecting the nervous system, with certain favorites, such as memory loss and behavioral syndromes. There are even unique observations, which cannot be found in scientific and clinical literature, because of the lack of appropriate studies. A striking example is the extraordinary description of the instable psychological condition immediately preceding the acute entrance into chronic psychosis, reported in André Breton’s novel *Nadjia* and in the correspondence of Léona Delcourt, i.e. Nadja herself.
Not only does literature offer a creative and humane look at disorders of the brain and mind, but just as authors have been inspired by medicine and real disorders, clinicians also have much to gain from literary depictions of the disorders they encounter in their daily practice. While the present coverage of literary medicine obviously is partial, it provides an amazing and fascinating look at conditions, patients, and doctors, in a way which is both reminiscence and novelty.

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References