

Letters to the Editor

POETIC INSIGHTS INTO DEPRESSION AND THE SLEEPING MIND

Crisp's erudite article (*Proceedings* 1995; **25**: 436-50) can hardly be bettered but may I add icing to the cake with quotations from the Scottish poet James Thomson who wrote *The City of Dreadful Night* published in 1874? Thomson has a nightmare vision of the city as a place of loneliness, alienation and spiritual despair. His universe is utterly indifferent to human affairs:

I find no hint throughout the Universe
Of good or ill, of blessing or of curse
I find alone Necessity Supreme.

A viewpoint with which surely Richard Dawkins would agree.

In section XXI he mentions 'the pure sad artist'. This is Albrecht Durer (1471-1528) whose engraving of *Melancholia* he goes on to describe. Thomson's sense of pervading gloom is given in the verse (XXI, 57-63):

But as if blacker night could dawn on night.
With tenfold gloom on moonless night unstarred
A sense more tragic than defeat and blight
More desperate than strife with hope debarred
More fatal than the adamant Never
Encompassing her passionate endeavour.
Dawns glooming in her tenebrous regard.

The poem was read by Rudyard Kipling, who in his autobiography tells how it shocked him; it was analogous to his thoughts during insomniac wanderings through the night streets of Lahore.

Thomson also wrote a poem on *Insomnia* which links up with Crisp's views on sleep and depression. He was admired by George Eliot and George Meredith and influenced many, not least T. S. Eliot who freely admitted the strong influence Thomson's poem had on him when he began to write; this is clearly visible in *The Waste Land*. More recently (1963) John Rechy's novel *City of Night*, set in the criminal streets of New York, owes its epigraph to Thomson in the lines:

The City of Night, perchance of Death,
But certainly of Night

Thomson's poetry possibly reflects a state of clinical depression. His last years were close to penury. Increasingly addicted to alcohol, a drinking bout sent him to University College Hospital where he died from haemorrhage in 1882. He is buried in Highgate Cemetery.

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JOB'S ILLNESS

Sir, In considering the illness of the Prophet Job,¹ an important feature is that this severe multisystem indisposition was totally reversible after a few months (Ch. 42, 12 seq.). After his illness he lived long enough to see 'his (new) son's sons and

even to the fourth generation'. Clearly he would have been accepted by our insurance colleagues as 'rate for age', that is at the most favourable prognostic rates.

I have little hesitation in suggesting that he was suffering from non insulin dependent diabetes mellitus which had been latent, but brought out in a full clinical form by stress; He went into complete remission when he was 'delivered' by the Lord after Elihu's consultation and possibly as a result of weight loss and anorexia. Diabetes is in particular apt to precipitate and aggravate skin disorders.

This disease is common among sybaritic Levantines, among whom Job lived between 600 and 300 BC. Diabetes mellitus (honey urine) had been described 1,000 years previously by Indian writers.

I have also always believed strongly that many of Job's comments about his ill-fortune originated in an allegorical way from his actual symptoms and physical manifestations. As long as it is realised that Job made a complete recovery and lived a full life-span, it makes the diagnosis of his short-lived illness much easier. This observation of a severe short-lived reversible illness in an affluent overweight middle-aged man would tend to rule out all the various disease possibilities listed in Dr Wilkinson's review.

REFERENCE

¹Wilkinson, J. The book of Job. *Proc R Coll Physicians Edinb* 1995; **25**: 512-7.

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THE EATING OF MEAT

Sir, Your statement that it is poverty that requires so many Indians to be vegetarians, (Editorial, *Proceedings* July 1995) misses a basic point. It is not poverty, but a deep rooted conviction, that makes so many Indians abstain from eating meat. According to Hinduism, the predominant and the indigenous religion of India, God is not only transcendent but also immanent. For a Hindu, there is Divine Presence, in inanimate as well as in animate objects, nay in the entire universe. Non-injury to others, both physical and verbal, and compassion are regarded as cardinal virtues by Hinduism. Many well-to-do Indians are loath to kill animals for the pleasure of the palate.

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We are grateful to Dr Godbole for this letter which gives concisely the views of many millions of Hindus today. However, it is uncertain whether now or at anytime the majority of Hindus have been vegetarians. For a scholarly account of how vegetarianism may have developed amongst the early Aryan settlers in the Indus valley and also for estimates of its prevalence in India today, readers should consult A. T. Achaya, *Indian Food*, 1994, Oxford University Press p 53-7.

The Editors