An odd kind of melancholy: reflections on the glass delusion in Europe (1440-1680)

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A history of psychiatry, says Tellenbach, should ideally be a ‘history of problems’, describing not only abnormal psychic states, but also historical attitudes towards them, by recourse to ideological and sociological factors. This research should then lead to rediscoveries of the past, often conceived as new revelations. In accordance with these premises, the present study describes the glass delusion of Early Modern Europe, not as a series of isolated cases, but viewed within a contemporary cultural setting, for the Glass Man’s cry of pain is only truly audible through the layman’s literature. A brief survey of modern variants on this delusion reveals that man’s preoccupation with the problem of body-soul remains largely unchanged.

Introduction

It has been said that psychology underwent popularization in the last years of the sixteenth century. This process allegedly led to an unreal differentiation between ‘man’ and ‘man under passion’, with the implication for today that only studies of the first type merited the attention of empirical psychology, whilst the literary stereotype had little reliable to offer except a ‘psychiatry of the philosophers’. But psychiatry is concerned with the most difficult of all medical-physiological problems: the body-soul problem, which still remains unsolved today. As ‘man under passion’ is more likely than his rational counterpart to voice that inner conflict, it is possible that behind the posturing of the literary melancholic, there lies sufficient material with which to reconstitute the ‘problem’, as perceived

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and articulated by contemporary writers. The aim of this paper is to examine the contribution of literary works to the corpus of knowledge on Melancholy, and to assess its value for medical historians today. The study will focus on glass delusions affected or experienced by scholars and lovers in Early Modern Europe: probably the best-documented, but the least-studied melancholic aberration. Eclectic by definition, the study examines all parallel cases regardless of national boundaries. The term delusion is used in its modern sense of: ‘Anything that deceives the mind with a false impression; a fixed false opinion with regard to objective things, especially as a form of mental derangement’ (OED).

The melancholic generally succumbed to some form of self-delusion which alienated him from his fellows. In fact the difference between poseur or genuinely-afflicted melancholic, and his literary stereotype was only one of degree, for as the Dutch physician Levinus Lemnius remarked, melancholics had as many affectations, gestures and fancies as though they were Stage Players. Two quite distinctive symptoms, however, set the Glass Man apart from other melancholics: an irrational fear that he was fragile and therefore likely to shatter into pieces, and an aversion to sunlight.

I. Fragility: the earth-bound body
The fragile delusion received relatively more attention than the second symptom in its day. Classical and Medieval accounts of Earthenware Men abound, and whilst they persist into the Early Modern period, it is an obsession with glass bodies which comes to the fore. The Glass Man came in a variety of forms. He

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2 Titles and texts have been translated, where appropriate, into English. Unless otherwise indicated, all translation is my own. For comprehensive studies on Glass Men in the North of Europe see F. F. Blok, Caspar Barlaeus: from the Correspondence of a Melancholic, translated by H. S. Lake (Amsterdam: van Gorcum, Assen, 1976); and J. M. W. Binneveld et al., Een Psychiatrisch Verleden: Uit de geschiedenis van de psychiatrie (Baarn: Amboboeken, 1982). I am indebted to Roy Porter for this last source.


might be a urinal, an oil lamp or other glass receptacle, or else he might himself be trapped within a glass bottle.

Possibly the first case of a man believing his whole body to be made of glass was the French king, Charles VI, who allegedly refused to allow people to touch him, and wore reinforced clothing to protect himself. A later case was recorded by the physician to Philip II of Spain, Alfonso Ponce de Santa Cruz (c.1614). The man in question, possibly a contemporary French prince, was also described by the chief physician to Henri IV, André du Laurens. At the instigation of his physician, this Glass Man languished on a straw bed to avoid being broken, until a conveniently-arranged fire quickly restored his wits. The Flemish poet and philosopher, Gaspar van Boerle (1584-1648), known as Barlaeus, suffered from periods of Melancholy throughout his life, but his glass delusion is unsubstantiated, based only on certain lectures he gave in 1635, in which he detailed that obsession as one manifestation of Melancholy: ‘But how often the fantasy wants to act absurdly and ridiculously in melancholics, of how much does it convince the unhappy fellows! This one thinks he is made of glass, and, terrified, is fearful of people standing close to him’. Barlaeus wrote about his Melancholy to the Dutch diplomat and writer Constantijn Huygens, another melancholic, who had lampooned the glass delusion in his satirical poem Costly Folly (1622).

Men of letters, or members of the nobility, these Glass Men could have learnt of the delusion from earlier medical treatises, and from contemporary literary accounts accessible to them in the embryonic literary academies. The distinction between medical account and its literary version is particularly diffuse in this period, marked as it is by a sudden plethora of literary Glass Men. One of these is Cervantes’s Glass Licentiate, Tomás Rodaja. Obsessed with the idea that he is made of glass, and traumatized by any physical contact, he refuses to wear shoes or any restrictive clothing. He eats only fruit offered to him in a urinal-pouch (vasera de orinal) on the end of a stick, and drinks fresh water with his hands. He sleeps outdoors or huddled in some hayloft, takes refuge in the country during a storm, and walks in the middle of the street to avoid injury from falling roof tiles.  

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Less well-known is the Glass Man Tactus in the English play Lingua (1607) by Thomas Tomkis. Sitting bolt upright, hands clenched, musing on the brittleness of life, Tactus rebuffs a bewildered Olfactus, who asks if he is hatching eggs. Still insistent, Tactus warns him that any contact will break his life, saying: ‘I am an urinal, I dare not stir for fear of cracking in the bottom’. Even loud voices, apparently, threaten his physical integrity. In the same year Thomas Walkington records that a ‘ridiculous fool’ from Venice thought that his shoulders and buttocks were made of brittle glass. Consequently he refused to sit down, and recoiled from company lest he might break his ‘crackling hinderparts’. A fear that he might be used by a glazier to make the lights in a latticed window prevented him from leaving the house. Another man with glass buttocks is found in a fictitious mental asylum by the Spanish writer Polo de Medina. The man is a dandy, inordinately concerned with his appearance. One day, attending to nature’s needs, he had smashed his buttocks and was left badly scarred. Unable to face the world with these imperfections, he had admitted himself to the asylum.8

These and other contemporary medical and literary accounts possibly originated in a treatise by Lemnius written in 1561. Johan van Beverwyck cited a patient of Lemnius in 1636, who had to relieve himself standing up, fearing that if he sat down his buttocks would shatter. Eighteen years later the Dutch poet Jacob Westerbaen and the Danish physician Thomas Bartholin wrote about a man with glass buttocks, whilst in France a contemporary compiler of anecdotes about crazed or eccentric people, Tallement des Réaux (1657), described the same derangement in Nicole du Plessis, a relation of Cardinal Richelieu. Many of these accounts restricted themselves to a simple statement of facts, but a report by a royal physician, Louis de Caseneuve (1626), reveals that the medical profession was not averse to anecdotal embellishment. The man concerned was a glass-maker from the Parisian suburb of Saint Germain, who constantly applied a small cushion to his buttocks, even when standing. He was cured of this obsession by a severe thrashing from the doctor, who told him that his pain emanated from buttocks of flesh.9


Some fragile delusions affected other parts of the body. Reports of glass bones, arms, and legs appeared much later, but Early Modern accounts were particularly rich in allusions to glass hearts/theses, and fragile heads. Tommaso Garzoni, an Italian monk, wrote a series of character sketches of mentally-disturbed people in 1586. In one of these cameos, drawn from Galen, the fragile delusion presents as a man who thought that his body consisted of only a large head, which he protected from injury by avoiding all contact with his fellows.  

Garzoni's melancholics frequently revealed an obsession with urine and the urinal. This seems to have been a general feature in other literary accounts. The Siennese melancholic who refused to urinate is one of several examples. Many Glass Men even admitted to being a glass urinal. This was a contemporary synonym for a small flask, but it also carried a certain mystique, probably due to the classical diagnosis of melancholy from urine, and also to the recent emergence of 'piss-pot prophets': specialists in urinary infections and syphilis.  

Reasons for this fear of breaking are complex. Folk culture and biblical tradition supplied several interpretations, chiefly connected with chastity,
purity, or fortune. Several Spanish writers represented the goddess of fortune as a glass figure to denote her inconstancy. Fortuna’s palace in Juan de Mena’s *Labyrinth of Fortune* (1444) was supported by glass pillars. By the early seventeenth century the modified emblem reflected recent optical innovations. In a play called *The Melancholic Gypsy* (1614) by Gaspar Aguilar, for instance, the benighted Numa protests that although a lover is blind, he can still see if he wears the spectacles of his honour. As fortune made them out of glass, which makes them very fragile, their use, he says, is to be commended. The specific application to women of this capricious honour is chastity. There are countless images in popular works of the misogynistic ‘fragile-fickle’ kind, but literary usage also had its lighter moments. Trying to ingratiate himself into the Family of Love, the gallant Gerardine in Thomas Middleton’s work (1608), says to one of the Brothers, a merchant: ‘O my most precious Dryfat, may none of thy daughters prove vessels with foul bungholes... but all true and honorable Dryfats like thyself.’

Purity, of course, had another meaning for the mystical writers. Speaking of chastity, the French bishop Saint François de Sales compared human bodies to glasses, because they could not be carried together without danger of collision and breakage. The motif of fragile vessels also appears in Sebastián de Córdoba’s expurgated version of Garcilaso’s poetry, and in Santa Teresa’s works, for whom the broken vessel meant sinfulness: ‘Lord, put not so precious a liquid in this fragile container, for you know that I shall spill it’. Something similar was intended by Sancho Panza, who said of Quixote’s ingenuousness that he had a soul like a pitcher, to which the Knight of the Wood replied, somewhat enigmatically, that if the blind were to lead the blind, they were both in danger of falling into a pit.

Cervantes was clearly alluding to the complex, and often conflicting biblical tradition of earthenware vessels, one aspect of which, as Sancho knew, stood for simplicity and truthfulness. Another aspect, referring to man’s fleeting existence, attributed his origins and destiny to clay or earth. Saint Augustine and the Church Fathers had warned of man’s ephemeral nature by reference

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to the fragile, corruptible body. This was still in vogue in the seventeenth century, especially after official Tridentine recognition of the Apocryphal books as Scriptural Canon in 1546. Their eschatological imagery overlapped with that of Saint John’s Apocalypse, except that the optimistic note of bodily resurrection was missing: life ended when the soul left the body. Consequently Man’s body was represented as a fragile, transient, earthenware receptacle, whose integrity signified possession of wisdom (Ecclesiasticus 21. 17; 22. 7; Isaiah 30. 14), and vitality, and conversely the broken jar or boat denoted death. The image is used in Velez de Guevara’s play, *The Potter of Ocaña*, which revives a medieval fable of the ass who stumbles and smashes his load of glass jars. Cursing the ass roundly, its owner suddenly reflects, as did the earlier English fable, on the connection between broken crockery and the Day of Judgement: ‘Earth returns to the earth,/ And the clay returns to clay.’

II. Photophobia: windows on the mind

Emphasis on the body thus accounts in large measure for the Glass Man’s fragile delusion. The second characteristic of the Glass Man was his aversion to sunlight. Hippocrates was among the first to refer to this photophobia. Apparently of only passing interest to physicians in relation to other manifestations, it nevertheless presented contemporary dramatists with a useful emblem in their melancholic stereotyping. When the king asks the melancholic Hamlet: ‘How is it that the clouds still hang on you?’, his reply signals photophobia: ‘Not so, my lord; I am too much in the sun’. Tactus was also troubled by sunlight:

No sooner had I parted out of doors,
But up I held my hands before my face,
To shield mine eyes from th’light’s piercing beams;
When I protest I saw the sun as clear
Through these my palms, as through a perspective.
No marvel; for when I beheld my fingers,
I saw my fingers were transformed to glass.

The Glass Man’s fear of sunlight must have been connected with the notion that

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his body was, not fragile, but transparent, as the poet John Donne said: ‘’Tis
much that Glasse should bee/ As all confessing, and through-shine as I’. Tactus
described this phenomenon, whilst also providing an exposition of one side of the
contemporary debate on the seat of the soul and its rationalizing faculty:

Opening my breast, my breast was like a window
Through which I plainly did perceive my heart:
In whose two concaves I discern’d my thoughts
Confus’dly lodged in great multitudes.\(^{19}\)

The other side of the debate is seen in a reference to photophobia by Lope de
Vega, whose melancholic character, Fernando, in *La Dorotea* apparently favours
a link between the soul and the eyes. Exclaiming after a lover’s quarrel that he
is dying, he has the window closed to stop the light from striking his eyes.
His soul, he declares, has departed for ever. Lope’s inspiration for this scene
probably comes from a similar scene in *La Celestina* [1499].\(^{20}\) Barlaeus’s letter
to Huygens in 1647 reveals that he has suffered the same ‘spiritual blindness’
during his latest bout of Melancholy. He says that he was senseless like Niobe,
and like Morpheus, a creator of idle, fanciful imaginations. Claiming to be the
equal of Huygens’s Moria and Eufrasia, imprisoned by his eyes, he says he merits
a place in the latter poem. *Eufrasia* (Eyebright) was written to comfort a woman
for the loss of an eye, pointing out that many with two eyes are still blind in
spirit. Among those listed in this category are victims of delusions arising from
the vapours of inflamed blood.\(^{21}\)

The controversy over spiritual blindness was long and fierce. Galen had said
that the melancholic’s inordinate fear originated in a blindness of the brain
produced by looking on a black substance, whose colour it absorbed. Rejecting
this, du Laurens agreed with Averrhoès that as colours were only a visual object,
they influenced nothing but the eyes, and that although there was a reciprocal
relationship between mind and eyes, there was no eye in the brain. Besides
disclosing his familiarity with trends in optical sciences, the passage also betrays
the persistent animosity between philosopher and physician. And yet it is curious
how closely his argument runs to that of the fifteenth-century philosopher, Pico
della Mirandola (1463-94), a pioneer of the Renaissance Neo-Platonist move-
ment. Pico had compared the mind to an eye, saying: ‘The eye on the corporal
world is the mind in the spiritual field’. Even if the eye possessed its own innate

\(^{19}\) ‘A Valediction of my Name in the Window’, in *John Donne: The Elegies*, 64. Compare also: ‘These
follies are within you, and shine through you like the water in an urinal, that not an eye that sees you but
is a physician to comment on your malady’ (Shakespeare, *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1584), II. 1. 35).
\(^{20}\) Lope de Vega y Carpio, *La Dorotea*, edited by José Manuel Blecua (Madrid: Ediciones de la
Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1955), I. 5. 155; Fernando de Rojas, *La Celestina: Tragicomedia de Calisto y
\(^{21}\) Barlaeus to Huygens, *loc. cit.* (ref. 6); Huygens, *Eufrasia: Oogen-troost*, in *De Gedichten*, IV, 89.
light, he claimed, it still needed external light with which to see colours and enjoy the gift of vision.  

By the early seventeenth century the developing sciences of optics, physiognomy, and psychology were still borderline disciplines which attracted many literate men. Looking at the world through corrective spectacles became a literary commonplace, and countless works were published bearing the words ‘Looking Glass’ or similar in the title, with the implication for the layman that optical glass facilitated discovery of one’s inner nature. An allegorical work, El Criticón by Gracian is laced with these clairvoyant devices. One notable character is the Seer of Everything, who claims to penetrate mens’ hearts and brains as if they were made of glass. Such perspicacity has taught him that many living people lack a soul.  

Given this prevailing spirit of inquiry, it is likely that the melancholic’s photophobia was related to a fear of self-revelation. Yet paradoxically, the very source of this apprehension also exerted a strong attraction on its victim. Walkington explained this paradox using a traditional biblical emblem: although the soul was not completely blind like a bat, it was, like an owl, dazzled by sunlight, seeing as if through a latticed window, the body casting a sable night over the understanding. The Knight of the Wood’s rejoinder to Sancho Panza about the blind leading the blind may allude to this emblem. It could have also inspired the bat delusion suffered by Cellini’s jailer, the constable of the castle of Sant’Angelo. This man, Cellini implies, was not truly afflicted with Melancholy, as it is Cellini himself who experiences a blinding mystical revelation whilst he is immured, in response to his fervent prayers to see the sun. Inspired by this vision, he prophesies his imminent release, which both impresses and frightens his jailers. His poetic interpretation of the experience, written for the constable, earns his release.  

The poem describes his soul illuminated with a divine light. This was a well-known conceit in the sixteenth century. The concept of light striking the soul as through a latticed window had come from a passage in Song of Songs, which was repeatedly used by the mystical writers San Juan de la Cruz, Santa Teresa, Sebastián de Córdoba, and Giordano Bruno. However, accounts of their efforts

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to separate soul from body (commentatio or meditatio mortis) frequently evoked images of light as a consuming source of heat. A mystical love poem by Giordano Bruno, for example, crystallizes his religious Melancholy into condensed images of dryness and heat, and establishes a relationship between eyes, soul, and body: 'Beauty', he said, 'coursing through the eyes to the heart, made a hot furnace in my breast, first absorbing all the visual humour in a glaring viscous wave, and then devouring the other bodily fluids, and liberating the dry element, with which it rendered me into formless dust'.

This strange polar attraction-repulsion towards light experienced by mystics and melancholics found an explanation in Pico's philosophy. Light as a source of heat was seen as the optimum means of heating and reviving the spirit or luce, which linked the celestial soul to the earth-bound body. Developing this theory a hundred years later, the philosopher Donio explained photophobia in similar terms. The spirit, he said, should ideally be surrounded by hot, lucent substances, 'but in the body it is enclosed in cold, dark, crass flesh and bones. A sign of its resultant discontent is that it cannot bear the direct light of the sun, which should be eminently congenial to it.27

A related literary convention, that of the soul imprisoned in a dark, clay body, owes much to this debate, as also to the Song of Songs, seen as an allegorical account of the flight of the soul towards communion with God.28 Imprisonment had, in any case, become one of life’s vicissitudes, which lent the motif added flavour. Writing from prison about his Melancholy in 1643, James Howell said: 'I consider that my soul while she is cooped within these walls of flesh, is but in a kind of perpetual prison. And now my body corresponds with her in the same condition; my body is the prison of the one, and these brick walls the prison of the other'. Cervantes’s Vidriera was presumably referring to the soul’s ambivalent photosensitivity, when he invited his friends to test his remarkable understanding, acquired through being made of glass instead of flesh. As glass was transparent and delicate, he explained, the soul could function more efficiently than if it were enclosed in a dense, earthen body.29

It seemed that acquisition of intellectual genius, as the first stage in the soul’s

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mystical ascent, was caused by dryness of the brain, more than by temperature. Du Laurens specifically mentioned the Glass Man in this context, stressing that dryness was at the root of the melancholic delusion. If these men happened to look at some common household article, he said, such as a pitcher or glass, this object would impose itself upon their self-perception. But he also endorsed the Aristotelian theory of over-heating, saying that when the humour grows hot, it causes a kind of divine rapture called *Enthousiasma*, which incites men to imitate philosophers, poets, and prophets. Dryness was indeed a notable feature of mystical experiences, as San Juan de la Cruz confirmed. In popular literature, Cervantes's *Vidriera* also becomes very thin, and 'dried up' after his illness, and in *Lingua Olfactus* attributes Tactus's Melancholy to dryness of the brain.\(^{30}\)

The ultimate stage of these mystical excursions of the soul was evidently a purification by fire on the Day of Judgement. According to the Book of Revelations all bodies fused on this day into one 'glassy sea'. The ascetic writer Padre Nieremberg explained that Saint John used the symbol to signify Man's transparency in the sight of God, whose divine vision penetrates Man as easily as if he were glass. A lay variation on this meaning is found in a report from Venice in 1621 about glass-making, when James Howell mused on the apparent connection between glass and the Day of Judgement:

> But when I pried into the materials, and observed the furnaces and the calcinations, the transubstantiations, the liquefactions that are incident to this art, my thoughts were raised to a higher speculation: that if this small furnace-fire hath virtue to convert such a small lump of dark dust and sand into such a precious clear body as crystal, surely that grand universal fire which shall happen at the day of judgement, may by its violent ardour vitrify and turn to one lump of crystal the whole body of the earth, nor am I the first that fell upon this conceit.\(^{31}\)

There could be no literary metaphor more germane to this eschatological concept than that of the alchemist's still or 'limbeck'. Just a few years before Howell's observation, John Donne's 'Elegy to the Lady Marckham' had portrayed the hand of Death, like a potter, re-fashioning the dead body into porcelain. The poem ends by describing the fire on the Day of Judgement, which will blend all into an elixir capable of giving new life.\(^{32}\)

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III. The familiar in a bottle: immortal quests

The Glass Man’s fatal attraction for light thus betrayed a profound concern for the welfare of the soul as the substance of life. Many contemporary medical accounts of melancholics list a series of delusions focussing on the existential question – men of butter, wax, mud, and straw – all motivating elaborate schemes of protection for the body. But evidence of a preoccupation with the soul is also found in a series of derangements which, like photophobia, concentrated more on essence than accident. They merit inclusion here because of a common purpose: to preserve the contents of a fragile vessel and so guarantee its vital function. One obsession was based on the oil-lamp principle. Garzoni cites one Nicoletto da Gattia who thought that he was the wick of an oil-lamp. A fear of burning too weakly motivated his request that people blow on him from all sides to fan the flame. The same delusion was recorded by Walkington. Existential confusion also afflicted Cellini’s jailer at Sant’Angelo, who periodically imagined that he was either dead or a pitcher of oil, although it is unclear what behaviour this last aberration provoked. 

Emphasis on contents and/or function rather than container suggests a variant on the body/soul preoccupation which probably still originates in Aristotle, but which aspires, not to commentatio, but to immortality. Aristotle’s image of a burning lamp as a metaphor for life was subsequently assimilated into Galen’s humoral physiology. Comparing the heart to the wick of an oil lamp, and the blood to oil, Galen claimed that the heat of the wick attracted the oil in a continuous process. Doubtless influenced by Galen, Walkington’s tract incorporates the motif, comparing man’s heart to the flame of a burning lamp, the moisture serving as its oil. As in the lamp, he said, there had to be efficient use of fuel; too much heat exhausted the oil, whereas an excess of oil suffocated the flame. He warned against extravagant living which would exhaust the supply of oil and extinguish the lamp prematurely.

Besides medical influence on the Lamp Man’s self-perception, popular folklore also contributed the notion of the Life-Index – a charm consisting of an absent person’s urine or blood preserved in a corked bottle. Any changes in its appearance signified illness or death. When used as a repository of luck, guaranteeing protection against evil spells, this was known as the ‘witches’ bottle’. It was a short step from the idea of a vessel containing a beneficent genius, whose release by breaking the pot would bring disaster, to the idea that the vessel was the prison of a disarmed evil spirit. This must have been the basis

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of the final variant on the Glass Man – the familiar in a bottle. Generally defined as a ‘familiar devil or spirit supposed to be under man’s power’, and obliged to ‘attend at call’ (OED), the most famous of these was the fifteenth-century Spanish sorcerer/ alchemist, Enrique de Villena, who was popularly supposed to have preserved himself in a glass flask. Literature through the ages kept this tradition alive, and his name became a metonym for the familiar in Spain. Quevedo alluded to him in several works. The connection between familiars and melancholics is also evident in Salas Barbadillo’s The Inveterate Malcontent, whose protagonist is served by ‘ministers of the flask, those the world call familiars’, in his quest for happiness.\(^{35}\)

By the early seventeenth century, it seems, awareness of familiars was acute. Scot and Wier described and derided the practice, whilst in Spain the execution of the hated Italian Caraffa brothers invited allusions to familiars, because garrafa was another synonym (besides vidriera and redoma) for the urinal or flask. Said the court chronicler Luis Zapata (c.1592): ‘On reflection, one could say that they lived up to the meaning of their name: bottling up all the wealth and estates they could during the papacy of their uncle, and finally breaking like fragile flasks, when one was garrotted, and the other quartered’. The same imagery recurs in a burlesque application for entrance into a literary academy, when a candidate declares: ‘Licentiate Garrafa, Butler of Hippocrates, Dispenser of Dioscorides, desires to infuse himself into this academy, and although he is so crafty/bottle-shaped (redomado), as everyone agrees, he would undertake to evacuate conceits, because he has as many graduations as the best university by virtue of the courses he has conducted’. His application is rejected because no poet, say the Junta, ever came out of a bottle.\(^{36}\)

**Conclusion**

Throughout this study of melancholic glass delusions – the Glass Man, the Urinal Man, the Lamp Man, and the Familiar in a Bottle – there emerges a constant preoccupation with the nature of body and soul, doubtless influenced by a recent schism in the Christian world over the question of salvation and the after-life.

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Theologians reacted to this period of free-thinking by defining strict boundaries between orthodoxy and heresy. Many mystics came under interrogation by the Inquisition, and in this maelstrom the layman struggled to understand weighty doctrinal issues in some meaningful way, but his simple imagery often brought him into the Inquisitorial courts.\textsuperscript{37}

For those whose faith was strong enough to shoulder the Church’s advocation to prepare oneself for dying (and there was a prolific literature on this topic) the melancholic delusion manifest itself in a fervent wish to be released from this earthly form.\textsuperscript{38} James Howell’s reflections as he languished in prison embody the diverse manifestations of the glass delusion: ‘The soul is a spark of immortality, she is a divine light, and the body is but a socket of clay that holds it. In some this light goes out with an ill-favoured stench. But others have a save-all to preserve it from making any snuff at all’.\textsuperscript{39}

Meanwhile, those men who faltered under the burden of ‘dying a good death’ embraced the marginal quest for immortality, as professed by the medieval sorcerors, but in the final reckoning the doctrine was the same - that is, health and longevity depended upon preserving a vital life force within a fragile and translucent container. Men of letters dabbling in the newer sciences of physiognomy, psychology, optics and natural philosophy in their quest for a solution to the existential problem often saved themselves from ecclesiastical censure by reserving their discussions for the academies where they congregated.\textsuperscript{40} The legacy of these academies to the modern world, often masquerading as fiction, is probably the best account there is of Melancholy. Allusions to Melancholy and theories pertaining are consciously and liberally disseminated through their works. These, together with the ‘unwitting testimony’ accompanying them, constitute a fascinating mosaic for medical historians today.

Surveys of modern psychiatric institutions have only revealed two specific (uncorroborated) cases of the glass delusion. Foulché-Delbosc reports finding one Glass Man in a Paris asylum, and a woman who thought she was a potsherd

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{On learning as a means of conquering the fear of death see Francis Bacon, \textit{Advancement of Learning and Novum Organum} (1605), revised by James Edward Creighton (New York: Willey Book Company, 1900), 35.}
\end{footnotes}
was recorded at an asylum in Meerenberg. However, certain variations endure in life and literature with the same existential connotations. Michael Jackson, the popular screen star, reputedly lives inside a plastic bubble in an aseptic world. In literature Lewis Carroll’s *Alice through the Looking-Glass* explores a strange world beyond the glass. Peter Carey’s novel *Oscar and Lucinda*, threaded with allusions to the after-life, uses glass variously as a cipher for the soul, for purity, and for life. ‘Glass,’ he says, ‘is a confession, an accusation, a cry of pain’.

Finally, a recent poem by George Szirtes resurrects that earlier Glass Man, burdened with existential apprehension, expressing himself through familiar images of glass, clairvoyance, and psychopathology:

You leave one body, enter another, thinner than
The one you wore. Having nothing to declare
The customs do not bother you. You pass
To other gravities, no longer man or woman,
But neuter as the clothes you wear
As thin and transparent as glass.

In the glass you see anatomies,
Bacteria and germs in broken places.
You see the future in slivers and shards
Faint, farcical lobotomies.
I try to discover my disease in traces
Of tea-leaves, life-lines, livers, tarot-cards.

Impossible to read the auguries:
The future waits on fiercer surgeries.

For Szirtes the thin, frangible quality of glass makes it an ideal emblem of exposure and danger, keeping things at a distance, whilst still exposing what is inside. He relates glass to ‘the traumatic process of destabilized identity – fleeing one’s country and upbringing for example, undergoing official and personal questions which raise doubts about the validity of your whole existence’. Szirtes adds that a collection of poems titled ‘Being Glass’ by Emma Rose was inspired by the alcoholic breakdown of her father.

If, as Lillian Feder believes, delusions are ‘distorted communications of deeply

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suppressed human impulses', then these literary works must contain the key to understanding twentieth-century man in his milieu. Melancholics may well have been trapped in myths (some of their own making) but as several modern writers have pointed out, the responsibility for myth-making lies just as much with psychiatrists. To divorce fact from fantasy simply by labelling the one as 'history' or 'medicine', and the other as 'fiction' is merely to create a new myth about ourselves. Life is inextricably linked with literature, and that is why there are no passports to a myth-free future. As Porter observes of madness in general: 'What kind of a delusion would that be?'. The myth of Melancholy, at any rate, is self-perpetuating. 