

BETWEEN THE LINES Theodore Dalrymple

# A doctor's dramatic diary

The excellence and extent of doctors' contributions to writing has long been recognised, so it comes as a surprise to read the following: "It is somewhat strange, that a class of men who can command such interesting, extensive, and instructive materials, as the experience of most members of the medical profession teems with, should have hitherto made so few contributions to the stock of polite and popular literature."

The statement is made in the introduction to the 1835 edition that I possess of Samuel Warren's *Passages from the Diary of a Late Physician*, first published in 1832. Warren (1807-77) was not actually a doctor, but he studied "physic" for six years, probably as an apothecary's apprentice, between the ages of 14 and 20, before becoming a lawyer. His book, which was very popular and went through innumerable editions, certainly shows a great knowledge of clinical matters.

The *Diary*, which was first published anonymously, purports to be written by a deceased physician of the recent past. It is episodic in nature: a series of short stories and novellas without overall structure. The *Diary* was criticised at the time for having been too graphic about the sufferings of patients, while later critics found it sensationalist, melodramatic, and morbid.

I do not think this criticism is just. It is very well written; and if the stories are dramatic it is because reality was dramatic. Indeed you might say that one of the stories, "Cancer," is understated rather than the reverse, and indeed it is very moving. The wife of a naval captain is discovered to have breast cancer while her husband is at sea. The narrator, the physician of the book's title, calls in an eminent surgeon, who prepares to operate on her in her own home, an operation at which he, the narrator, assists. She looks away as the surgeon makes his incision and scarcely utters a sound during the operation; her only anaesthetic has been a glass of port

**Her only anaesthetic has been a glass of port and a steady view of her husband's last letter home to her, which the narrator holds before her eyes at her request**



Samuel Warren's *Diary*: graphic suffering

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The operation over, she insists on trying to walk back to her bed but in the end has to be carried. Attended by the narrator, she makes a slow recovery over the next weeks. The story ends: "I shall not easily forget an observation she made at the last visit I paid her. She was alluding, one morning, distantly and delicately, to the personal disfigurement she had suffered. I, of course, said all that was soothing. 'But, Doctor, my husband'—she said, suddenly, while a faint crimson mantled on her cheek—adding, falteringly after a pause,—'I think [he] will love me yet!'"

Among Warren's other writings was *The Opium Question*, 1840, a pamphlet in which he denies the harmfulness of opium: "As to the fatally fascinating qualities of this drug, a vast deal has been said that is gross exaggeration." He goes on to assert the futility of the Chinese government's attempts to prohibit it and suggests that legalisation is the only sensible solution. Comparing opium dens to gin palaces, he asks, "Who can advocate the one and repudiate the other?" In later life he served as commissioner in lunacy.

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## MEDICAL CLASSICS

### All That Jazz

A 1979 film, Columbia Pictures/20th Century Fox

Choreography is not, at first glance, a promising mode for exploring narrative medicine. Visions of tutus, fouettés, and dying swans do not immediately connect with the harsh realities of illness and suffering. However, dance is about more than classical ballet, and to pass over the stunningly choreographed finale of *All That Jazz* would be to miss one of the most powerful insights imaginable into the terror of heart attack and death.

This compelling musical film is a transparently autobiographical fantasy of the life of Bob Fosse, the enfant terrible of choreography in US musical theatre, best remembered for *Sweet Charity*, *Cabaret*, and *Chicago*. He developed an almost instantly recognisable dance style, a highly invigorating and stylised jazz dance with much use of props such as hats, canes, and chairs. He had a penchant for musicals associated with the grittier sides of life and a high octane lifestyle, with a Stakhanovite appetite for work, and a Rabelaisian one in his private life. Not surprisingly this led to his first heart attack at the age of 47, and this was to form the kernel of *All That Jazz*.

The film starts at a frenetic pace, tracking the chain smoking choreographer Joe Gideon (the Bob Fosse character, played by Roy Scheider) as he juggles multiple shows, women, and drugs. Finally pushed over the edge, he is admitted to hospital with chest pain. A sequence then follows alternating between a further heart attack, open heart surgery, scheming producers, a recall of his past life, and a rather portentous "angel of death."



Bob Fosse's last dance

But it is the dance numbers that sear themselves into the consciousness and epitomise Fosse's belief that "the time to sing is when your emotional level is too high to just speak anymore, and the time to dance is when your emotions are just too strong to only sing about how you feel." Fast, furious, hallucinatory, and dark, the dancing leaves an impact that no other art form could possibly match.

Music, dance, family, regrets, and defiance link in a series of numbers, from "Who's Sorry Now?" set in his intensive care bed, to his extended final heart attack, "Bye Bye Life." This is staged as a glitzy and riotous show, with a gleefully demonic master of ceremonies and arterial images abounding, as in the bodysuits of the women dancers, and the choreography carrying an underlying vascular pulsation. It ends with the zip of the body bag being pulled over his head while Ethel Merman sings "There's no Business like Show Business."

Fosse was, unsurprisingly, to die of a heart attack eight years later at the age of 55. Besides a considerable artistic legacy he has left us in this film a remarkable window into life and heart disease that I can still evoke as vividly and viscerally now as I did on first seeing it as a medical student just over 30 years ago.

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