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*Gut Feeling and Digestive Health in Nineteenth-Century
Literature, History and Culture* ed. by Manon Mathias and
Alison M. Moore (review)

Ian Miller

Literature and Medicine, Volume 40, Number 1, Spring 2022, pp.
187-191 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/lm.2022.0018>



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Manon Mathias and Alison M. Moore, eds. *Gut Feeling and Digestive Health in Nineteenth-Century Literature, History and Culture*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2018. xi + 276 pp. Hardcover, \$159.99.

These are exciting times for humanities scholars interested in the abdomen. Perhaps some scholars would consider the gut to be a curious, even niche, object of historical inquiry. I would disagree. Eating. Digesting. Defecating. All these bodily processes are intimately tied to our physical and emotional well-being. Understanding them can take us to the core of human experience, emotions, and existence—physical and mental. And taking the gut as a starting point can raise unexpected, but important, questions. Why, since the nineteenth century, has digestive health been discussed in relation to broader ideas of nationhood and national identity? For what reasons have ideas about gut health intersected with broader issues such as class, gender, and race? How did the rise of capitalist modernity change (western) humans' experiences of their gut?

In recent decades, scientists have identified the gut as a bodily region swarming with communities of bacteria. Each of us has a unique microbiome that forms early in life. Enter the new medical sub-discipline of nutritional psychiatry, which seeks to comprehend how our gut health affects our moods, positively or negatively. These psychiatrists believe that a fuller grasp of the gut-brain axis will shed light on how our eating affects our feelings and elucidate links between gut health and disorders including depression and anxiety.

A growing number of scholars beyond the sciences are illuminating the gut's modern history, including Elizabeth Williams, who has succinctly examined the history and science of appetite;¹ James Whorton, who emphasizes the importance attached to the bowels in early twentieth-century America;² and Christopher Forth and Ana Carden-Coyne, who have explored topics such as the history of fat.³ My own research approaches the stomach from a historical perspective, revealing its fundamental importance to past experiences of health and well-being.⁴ In recent years, emerging scholars such as Evelien Lemmens and Elsa Richardson have also taken a historical approach to the gut. Manon Mathias and Alison M. Moore's essay collection, *Gut Feeling and Digestive Health in Nineteenth-Century Literature, History and Culture*, is situated in this growing body of engaging interdisciplinary research, linking the science of gut health to the aforementioned issues of identity, nationhood, modernity, class, gender, and race.

The phrase “gut feeling” perfectly encapsulates the volume’s thematic approach. Using diverse methodologies rooted primarily in literature and medical history, *Gut Feeling and Digestive Health* establishes decisively that the nineteenth century was a time of heightened concern about gut health and its implications for emotional well-being. As the editors explain, this was a period when a critical mass of doctors, psychiatrists, novelists, artists, ethnographers, politicians, and religious leaders all wrote extensively on the relation between digestive function (or, more often than not, “dysfunction”) and the human emotions (1–2). This insight justifies an interdisciplinary approach that, despite its diversity, underpins a remarkably cohesive volume—the result of careful editing and an artful weaving together of key topics and themes.

Many of this volume’s contributors examine dietary science’s burgeoning influence on literary works. In his opening chapter, Tripp Rebrovick investigates the impact of esteemed nutritional chemist Justus von Liebig on Walt Whitman’s mid-century writings. Like many physicians and scientists, Whitman was enthralled by the workings of the digestive system and shared with them the view that indigestion was a “great American evil” that threatened the body politic (15). This coupling of digestive health with national identity provides a thread that runs throughout *Gut Feeling and Digestion*. In France, as with Britain and other countries, the abdomen became known as the “second brain”; its disorders constituted a national threat. These interwoven concerns also featured in the writing of Émile Zola, as explored in chapters by Bertrand Marquer, Anne Vila, and Manon Mathias. Joris-Karl Huysmans’s handling of digestion is discussed in contributions by Mathias and Larry Duffy, the latter adding Gustave Flaubert to the analysis. Concerns included the widespread ingestion of modern drinks like tea and coffee which, as Vila explains, figures significantly in Honoré de Balzac’s work. Such drinks began to pose a threat to national as well as personal health as their consumption spread across new geographical regions and class spectrums.

Meanwhile, Alison Moore tackles excrement. According to Sigmund Freud, learning to defecate in appropriate places and in hygienic ways is an important, and healthy, phase of child development. Social Darwinists once imagined this stage collectively as marking a transition to civilized ways of life: at some point in the distant past, some groups of humans shed their lack of taboo surrounding excrement, leaving behind their more primitive existence. As was the case with children, the appearance of an excrement taboo marked a step towards

maturity, in this instance social maturity. This reasoning led Victorian ethnographers to caricature aborigines as trapped in a state of infantile primitivism, taking as evidence the native people's medicinal use of human excrement (69–71). In its unique way, this chapter further confirms how nineteenth-century contemporaries linked digestive function to broader, and significant, historical processes, using the gut as a tool to comment on biological and social evolution, while also feeding into contemporary ideas about degeneration and primitivism.

Excitingly, it is often the case that gut history unearths forgotten health heroes. Despite their international fame in the past, such figures are usually overlooked in standard accounts of medical history. One of these is Paolo Mantegazza, an Italian neurologist, physiologist, and anthropologist, brought to life in Cristiano Turbil's chapter. Mantegazza once enjoyed such popularity that Darwin and Freud both cited him. In the late nineteenth century, Mantegazza popularized hygiene in Italy on both a professional and popular level. As Turbil argues, Mantegazza's study of digestion and hygiene contributed to the extension of Italian scientific literacy, but also helped construct a particular sense of national identity and cohesion in a country which had long been divided (206). As Turbil demonstrates, Mantegazza considered digestion a political matter due to his belief that societies which eat and digest well are healthier ones (207). Digestion thus featured regularly in contemporary art—and particularly in the genre of political satire, which often depicted emissions of vomit, excrement, and gases, as explored in Dolly Johnson's chapter.

In the volume's closing chapter, Molly S. Laas elaborates further on the connections between individual gut health and collective well-being. Over the century, indulgence in meats, alcohol, tea, and spices was feared to provoke nervous excitement by overstimulating stomachs and, in turn, nervous systems and minds. At their most excessive, concerns about poor gut health raised fears of social turmoil. Overstimulated, emotionally aroused minds bore the potential for political revolution, so some feared. As Laas outlines, vegetarian reformers thought that meat-free diets, by contrast, calmed the nerves, producing a gentle stimulus that might help safeguard the body politic. These reformers believed firmly that individual dietary choices had social implications. Laas engages with these themes through a detailed analysis of American health reformer Sylvester Graham and American physician Luther Bell. Graham thought that modern bodies had degenerated from an (imagined) ancient pinnacle of health, and a calming diet could restore a healthy, if perhaps pacified, mind, nerves, and stomach (231). Ideas

about the healthiest diet remained highly subjective, even despite the emergence of an empirically driven and purportedly objective nutritional science. As Rebrovick notes in his essay, Whitman shared the belief that the health and security of the American body politic depended on adherence to an ideal diet—his was just the opposite of Graham's (15).

In this collection's framing of gut health, the issue of class looms in the background. In his chapter, Marquer depicts the "demon of dyspepsia" as especially dangerous for scholars, creative types, and "men of letters" (43). Indeed, it was a nineteenth-century commonplace that the imagination was located in the "second brain." Dyspepsia, associated with melancholy, was the hallmark of the man of genius. As Vila also comments, the period saw the creation of various "sick heroes" (136): the dyspeptic artists and writers also tormented by hypochondria and monomania who sacrificed their own gastric and emotional health in the pursuit of creativity. There is a tendency here to concentrate on the more literate classes, leaving a substantial opening for a fuller discussion of the nineteenth-century working classes, whose health was battered by industrialization, urban diets, and the emotional stressors and shocks of modernity. Issues such as race and gender ought to be fully embedded within such research.

Gut Feeling and Digestion is an outstanding collection of essays on an important and emerging subject. It should appeal to a wide range of scholars with interests in the history of medicine, emotions, literature, and the body. Importantly, it acts as a signpost for future scholars, pointing out various avenues for research. To provide an example, the collection emphasizes nationhood but focuses primarily on France, America, and, to a lesser extent, Britain and Italy. Considerable potential exists to examine how other countries' sense of national identity was intertwined with concepts of digestion, and then to contemplate this subject from a transnational perspective. One could also adopt a more micro-level approach which considers the meanings and functions of digestion for local groups or communities within national contexts.

NOTES

1. Williams, *Appetite and Its Discontents*.
2. Whorton, *Inner Hygiene*.
3. Forth and Carden-Coyne, eds., *Cultures of the Abdomen*.
4. Miller, *A Modern History of the Stomach*.

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—Ian Miller

Elizabeth Outka. *Viral Modernism: The Influenza Pandemic and Interwar Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019. 344 pp. Paperback, \$35.00.

The eerily prescient publication of *Viral Modernism*—a book that interrogates the conspicuous absence of direct references to the pandemic of 1918 in British and American interwar literature—mere months before the outbreak of COVID-19 could be read as a fortuitous coincidence. But as Elizabeth Outka warns in her chilling coda, scientists and researchers have been telling us for years that “we are not ready for the next severe global pandemic, which—as they also remind us—is most assuredly coming” (254). Outka could not have known as she wrote those words how soon the COVID pandemic would overwhelm the world. However, this book is not simply a precursor to the scholarship on the history of pandemics and their literary manifestations that will undoubtedly follow the present pandemic: it is instead part of a substantial subfield of health humanities scholarship that emerged in the early 2000s and focuses on historical and literary accounts of the 1918 flu pandemic. The question that underlies much of this scholarship is why, despite the fact that the flu killed between 50 and 100 million people, it is not directly referenced in the literature of that period.

Viral Modernism succeeds in remapping modernist studies by placing the pandemic at its center, a move that requires a reframing of certain assumptions about this period, such as why the lives lost in war were more grievable than those lost to illness.¹ Outka’s point is that the pandemic dead were ungrievable because they could not be made meaningful through the guise of sacrificial death, and therefore were not politically useful. *Viral Modernism* provides a crucial frame for