On 18 September 1780 Samuel Johnson made an entry in his journal:

I am now beginning the seventy-second year of my life, with more strength of body and greater vigour of mind than, I think, is common at that age. . . . I have been attentive to my diet, and have diminished the bulk of my body.

This is surprising in a number of ways. We do not associate Johnson with a fastidiously attention to what he ate; moreover, it seems contrary to nature for Johnson to reduce his “bulk,” so much does his massive frame, as described by Boswell and others, serve as an emblem of his moral stature and his sturdy resistance to the onslaughts of life. His solid person is part of his existential armory.

To move from the particular to the general, we do not expect people in earlier centuries to have concerned themselves with their bodily proportions. We assume (and on the whole rightly) that compulsory slimness is a modern imposition. However, at least two forces were at work in Johnson’s lifetime which had begun to undermine this lack of concern. The first is something which has apparently never been discussed by scholars, but it is a clear-cut historical phenomenon which can be dated fairly precisely and documented, if not fully, then at any rate adequately. The first part of this chapter will attempt to perform these tasks in as brief a space as possible.
I: Fat Is a Fictional Issue

The second tendency is more speculative to identify and more a matter of longue durée. In the later sections of this chapter I shall argue that the representational mode of the novel helped to increase awareness of body shape, and indeed attention to this realm of experience. Fat became a fictional issue, in the period roughly from 1750 to 1850, because the novel is the place above all where the physical is the sign of the inward, and where a kind of sizism can be exploited as part of an entire idiom and syntax drawn from corporeal matter.

I.

First, in a short space, to locate this inquiry. It is a preliminary outline diagram which could obviously be extended in various directions. That means that it offers only sketches of a theory, which have all the marks of a preliminary study—that is, they are at once tentative and sweepingly assertive. My hope is that others will redirect the inquiry to their own special areas of interest. Whatever period is in question, whatever language, whatever genre, there will be found an undertow of allusion to the topics treated here (awareness of body shape and its relation to a sense of identity), though these have never been fully explored.

Nonetheless, the approach adopted here could be related to a sort of somatic criticism which has begun to appear in recent years, evidenced by such works as Carol Houlihan Flynn’s The Body in Swift and Defoe (1990) and Helen Michie’s The Flesh Made Word (1987). Feminists in particular have taken up the issue of the text and the body; there have also been studies of pain, of sexuality, and of the representations in art of physical experience. However, none of these books focuses on the issue of body shape and the way this reinforces both an individual’s sense of a self and the public construction of the identity of others.

There appears to be no history of slimming, except Hillel Schwartz’s “cultural history” of diets and food fetishes. Of course, a considerable library has grown up on eating and drinking. A classic work here is the one by Sir Jack and Lady Drummond, The Englishman’s Food (1939; revised edition 1957), a gender-specific title largely borne out by the contents. This tells us what things people ate over the last few centuries, at what time of day, how much it cost them, and so on. We can discover what meals were like in prisons and workhouses, how much gruel, broth, or hasty pudding was served up, what the calorie intake of laborers in Victorian England might have been. It covers the debates about sugar (with hazards seen as exclusively dental) and
even about butter, which took place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It describes some dietary experiments carried out by Dr. William Start, a pupil of Cullen and John Hunter, in the late 1760s, as well as theories of Dr. William Cadogan on infant nutrition, and various attitudes to gluttony over time.\(^4\) The Drummonds quote William Cullen writing in 1773, to the effect that “A proof that corpulency is produced most by animal foods is that in England there are more fat people than in any country of twice the bulk in the world.”\(^5\) The pun seems unintentional. Cullen does not appear to quote any hard evidence in support of his statement: it is part of a national mythology of diet and character (most famously treated by Hogarth), though here for once turned in a less self-satisfied direction. Cullen, like others, mentions fatness in passing as a symptom of certain dietary habits. All the material cited by the Drummonds is of this kind: it is at the level of food intake, or of ultimate health consequences. The only comment the Drummonds make on the visible effects of gourmandizing, or the reverse, is this: “The heavy jowls and fat pouches in the drawings [sic] by Hogarth, Rowlandson, and the other contemporary artists tell a tale of good living and heavy drinking.”\(^6\) True in its way, but not very illuminating, and inserted into the wrong story from our present point of view.

The Drummonds do very briefly allude to the best-known dietary manuals of the eighteenth century, of which the most notable are John Arbuthnot’s *Essay concerning the Nature of Aliments* (1731) and George Cheyne’s *Essay of Health and Long Life* (1724). Cheyne, however, demands some attention for himself, as an exemplary case of the premodern phase of understanding; that is, one who represents the last stand of the old discourse where plumpness is seen from a purely symptomatic point of view, and yet points toward a newer way of approaching the subject. He is of course famous as one who found it hard to take his own remedies. Carol Flynn, in the book just mentioned, instances Cheyne as one “who repeatedly attempts to heal himself to heal his age.”\(^7\) She is referring principally to his battle against the spleen, and again his obesity is no more than a reflex of the larger condition:

Cheyne addressed the problem of the English Malady obsessively and self-reflexively. In treatise he formulated the same therapies while he suffered from his own favourite disease. He discloses his own personal connection to his professional calling in his essay, “The Author’s Case,” a sobering history of his own battles against an all-too-corrupt flesh. He endured throughout his life the sin of repletion, growing “daily in Bulk, growing excessively fat, short-breath’d, Lethargic, and Listless.” Lurching between
periods of fasting and purging, taking bark and whole milk, the waters of Bath and seeds, Cheyne bears witness to the tyranny of the body. He recovers from fevers only to suffer from an appetite so insatiable that “I suck’d up and retained the Juices and Chyle of my Food like a Sponge” to grow plump and fat, “indeed, too fast.” Ballooning at one point to over 32 stone, he was “forced to ride from Door to Door in a Chariot even here at Bath; and if had but an hundred Paces to walk, was oblig’d to have a Servant following me with a Stool to rest on.” While dosing himself with milk and white meats, Bristol water and pints of wine, or alternatively living upon vegetables and seeds, he endures extraordinary suffering that invest his “case” with an authority stemming not from his expertise as much as from his own endurance. His “Leg, Thigh, and Abdomen being tumified, incrusted, and burnt almost like the Skin of a roasted Pig,” he was, he boasts, an extreme case. Maintaining “one constant Tenor of Diet,” Cheyne now enjoys “as good Health; as my Time of Life (being now Sixty), I, or any Man can reasonably expect.”

In Flynn’s discussion, the import of this lies in the revelation it affords of the medical and therapeutic mentality of the past: “Eighteenth-century students of the body and its ills seem driven to luxuriate in the excesses they are trying to wipe out.” But looked at in another way, the struggle with “repletion” that she describes is an attempt at management of the self, and a form of refusal to accept the body as given—something which seems remarkably modern. Cheyne stands at the beginning of a process in which treatment results not just in a healthier being, but also in a revised and improved self. He opens up the way to a demedicalization of obesity, and the crucial development in the century after his death is a new readiness to construct a discourse of the body size which is no longer preoccupied solely with health in the narrow sense.

Cheyne’s main statement of his dietary views comes in the long section “Of meat and drink” in the Essay of Health and Long Life. This work of self-help covers the usual attributes and nonnaturals such as air, exercise, sleep, evacuations and so on, ending with (equally conventionally) the passions. John Armstrong’s famous Art of Preserving Health (1744) is in large measure a straight versification of its tenets. It is not at all difficult to fit Cheyne’s ideas on diet into the main narrative of thinking about psychology in the periods, and, in particular, the well-charted history of therapies to counter melancholia. But bodies are more than digestive systems.

Cheyne recommends not a totally vegetarian diet but a light one, avoiding
rich and heavily cooked food—in particular, red meats—as well as an excess of strong liquor. “Plain Roasting and Boiling” is preferred to “made Dishes, rich Soup, high Sauces, Baking, Smoaking, Salting, and Pickling,” which are deemed the inventions of luxury. Later the author suggests that after the time of the Deluge, God reduced the span of human life from nine hundred to a thousand years, to seventy. “He wisely foresaw, that animal food, and artificial liquors, would naturally contribute towards this end; and permitted the Generation that was to plant the World again after the Flood, the use of these for food, knowing that it would shorten their Lives.” The introduction of rich foods was in fact a scourge for ‘the Lazy and Voluptuous.” However, Cheyne offers only one direct comment on weight; this takes the form of a warning against “a fatal Mistake those run into, who being weakly, thin, and slender, aim by all Means, at any Price, to become plump and round, and in order to obtain this are perpetually devouring huge Quantities of high, strong Food, and swallowing proportionable Measures of generous Liquors.” This takes us back into a context where there was no slimming industry, as well as no fear of anorexia or bulimia, and where “a fat, corpulent and flegmatick Constitution” is a matter of “loose, flabby and relaxed Fibres”; that is, a mechanical explanation of a physical state, to be amended within a purely medical system, following a given regimen.

We are still, with Cheyne, in a world where the historic fear of wasting away dominates people’s minds; where the body is a recalcitrant object that is rarely mentioned outside a discourse of failure, breakdown, restitution, remedy and palliative—a world where slimming was on medical grounds only in very rare cases (like Cheyne’s own) and where its adoption on grounds other than medical would have seemed wholly perverse.

This state of affairs would not change radically for something like 200 years. It was prolonged by the continuing blight of pulmonary consumption in the nineteenth century, which made the equation of illness and emaciation survive, even when other factors were working to break this down.

But within a generation from Cheyne, attitudes began to evolve in critical ways. One index of this is the increasing tendency of people to weigh themselves, a habit which scarcely existed, so far as I can judge, before 1750, and grew steadily over the next hundred years. (One must stress that doctors still made no routine habit of weighing patients, and babies seem virtually never to have been weighed. This may account for Swift’s odd impression in A Modest Proposal that “upon a medium . . . a child just born will weigh 12 pounds.”) This is the hidden story which needs a full recital some day: here I shall sketch in the main lines of the narrative.
II.

Of course there had to be accurate scales first invented, and then made widely available. It was the early seventeenth-century Italian physician Sanctorius (quoted by Cheyne in a different context) who developed the first practicable “steelyard” for this purpose. By the middle of the eighteenth century there was a public weighing machine in Paris, and the idea was brought to England by the Belgian-born mechanic, instrument-maker and inventor John Joseph Merlin, who arrived in London in 1760. In time his museum or showplace became one of the sights of the city; as a boy the computer pioneer Charles Babbage was one who delighted in watching the automata and other devices on display.

Around 1775 Merlin became intimate with the circle of Dr. Charles Burney. The musician’s daughter, Fanny, refers to him several times in her letters and journal, first on 28 February 1775, when she writes of “Mr. Merlin, the famous mechanic” and “his new invented harpsichord, the tone of which is the sweetest I ever heard.” On 2 March following she alludes to “our Merlin harpsichord,” presumably an instrument purchased sometime previously. Merlin’s contacts spread out from this base, starting with Hester Thrale, whose fortepiano Merlin tuned at Streatham Place. Other notable figures such as J. C. Bach and Gainsborough (who was to paint Merlin) extended his reputation in the fashionable world.

In March 1782 Samuel Johnson was given one of Merlin’s steelyards as a present. This would be a small set of scales used for weighing coins and the like. Johnson probably employed it for his little scientific experiments, like weighing leaves. Within a few years Merlin had developed a personal weighing machine, which was graduated to record values from 4 ounces to 1 hundredweight: it cost 7 guineas. In general appearance it was not unlike scales which used to be seen in shops and railway stations, though naturally there was no dial, let alone a digital display. Weights and pans were used. It is also significant that one model also had a sliding mechanism to measure the individual’s height.

Thanks to Hester Piozzi, posterity has been informed of Johnson’s height (5 foot 11 in his stockings). Unfortunately we do not have a comparable record of his weight. If one of Merlin’s new scales had been donated to Johnson, it is hard to doubt that his love of accuracy, his passion for mensuration, and his intense interest in his own being could have allowed him to pass up the opportunity. Two final points are worth adding before we leave Johnson for good: first, he may well have been alerted to dietary concerns, though still for health reasons, by the warning which doctors had given to
Henry Thrale before his fatal apoplexy in 1781. Johnson noted in his journal these adjurations against heavy meals. Secondly, there is a journal entry in 1782 which refers to almost the only wager which Johnson ever took in his life. It concerned the relative heights of two friends, Pepys and Selwyn; Johnson lost the bet.\textsuperscript{22}

The most obvious feature of the early self-weighers whom I have been able to locate is that they are nearly always men. There are several explanations which might account for this fact. Weighing was generally done in public, albeit fully clothed, and it might have been indecorous for a woman. A higher proportion of the female anatomy was rendered invisible or camouflaged by underpinning, and so women might initially have felt less pressure to manage their body outline, even if it is equally true that women’s “shapes” are commonly among the factors assessed in determining sexual attractiveness. Perhaps fleshiness was still considered by many people a desirable “feminine” attribute. Whatever the reason, it is striking from our modern perspective, with the onus of weight-watching placed mainly on women and with the slimming industry targeting primarily the female population, that the majority of early shape-awareness should be found among males. One does very occasionally come across a remark like that of Mrs. Thrale, writing in the summer of her second marriage to her daughter Queeney: “I am grown so fat and look so much better Miss Nichols scarce knew me.”\textsuperscript{23} But these are scattered and most often linked to health—or sometimes to pregnancy, another complicating factor here. If women did weigh themselves in any number, they took good care to keep quiet about it.

Who then did indulge in the new habit? Not surprisingly, the evidence indicates the more prosperous classes; this may be a bias of the sample, induced by the survival of records, but that seems unlikely. Poor people conceivably retained a superstitious fear about weighing themselves, one that we know Thomas Hardy with his semi-peasant background still harbored a hundred years later, though he was willing to subject himself to a phrenologist.\textsuperscript{24} It is most commonly people in London who weighed themselves: the best-known place to get oneself weighed at one time was Merlin’s own museum in Hanover Square, and then later at establishments such as those of tailors in the district of St James’s. Berry’s wineshop in St James’s Street itself was long a favorite resort for the purpose. The practice even spread to royalty. No record has been found for George III, though in 1775 he was stated in the press to be “not so corpulent” as formerly, “not having eaten flesh for some months.”\textsuperscript{25} His son the Prince of Wales did weigh himself, or get others to perform the task upon the royal body; by 1797 he had reached 17 stone
8 pounds (246 pounds), and the scales would have confirmed his need for a corset. So far, I have not been able to find records for any other of his pudgy set of brothers.

Some people kept at it for years, with the sort of detached scientific curiosity that Gilbert White brought to the temperature or the date at which tortoises go into hibernation. The most interesting case here is perhaps that of the clergyman William Cole, who recorded his weight at fairly regular intervals between 1749 and 1775. He indeed conducted a little exchange with his friend Horace Walpole on the point in 1767:

May you grow as fat and jolly as your worthy father was, if you like it and feel no inconvenience from it! For my part, though not unwieldily fat, yet I had rather be as lean as yourself than bear such an encumbrance continually about me. Few are contented with their own size and condition, yet I suppose the inconvenience of one and the other are by no means to [be] put in competition.26

Over the years Cole’s records show a losing battle fought with increasing girth, which saw his weight rise in steps from around 12 stone to 15 stone (210 pounds).27 The key feature is that Cole displays little interest in valetudinarian aspects of his weight “problem”—which he does not recognize in those terms. Diet is not mentioned in the context of the weighing exercise. We are moving into a situation where a nonmedical discourse of the body is becoming more usual, with an interest in shape largely detached from any worry about the function of the bodily parts inside.

Fanny Burney is a witness to this tendency. She reports in the Memoirs of her father a conversation which took place around 1790, as follows: “Upon Mr Elliot’s speaking with regret of Mr Windham’s being so thin, Mr Burke exclaimed: ‘He is just as he should be! If I were Windham this minute, I should not wish to be thinner nor fatter, not taller nor shorter, nor in any way, nor in any thing, altered.’”28 In her journal Burney is constantly attentive to such matters. She seems to have been obsessed by the bulk of the Abyssinian explorer James Bruce. On first meeting him in 1774, she exclaimed, “His Figure is almost Gigantic! He is the Tallest man I ever saw, & exceedingly well made, neither too fat or lean in proportion to his amazing height.” The effect of size was of course magnified by Fanny Burney’s own small stature, as is indicated by her later comment, “These immense sized men speak to little Women as if they were Children.” In fact Bruce was 6 foot 4, a much more prodigious height 200 years ago than today. Some time afterwards Burney met “another Mr. Bruce” in the Russian prince Aleksei Grigorevich Orlov,
“being immensely Tall & stout in proportion” (Orlov weighed more than 300 pounds). Once Burney refers to the obesity of a lady who had represented the Queen of the Amazons at a masquerade, but her comments much more often apply to men, such as Lord Edgecumbe (“short & squabbly”). With a novelist’s eye, Burney picks out physical traits for their own oddity or piquancy; she does not seem to make inferences about the individual’s health or personal qualities on the basis of this evidence. The discourse of body is starting to be, as it were, secularized.

Burney stood on the edge of the Johnson circle, although her father did not become a member of the Club until the year in which Johnson died. It may have been the link through the Burneys with Merlin which explains a notable concern with this issue in the group. Boswell, for example, weighed himself at Lord Pembroke’s house in 1776—the earl was evidently one of the earlier owners of a personal set of scales. Boswell recorded his weight as 11 stone 12 pounds (166 pounds), rather a large score for a man of 35 who was 5 foot 6 in height. Edmond Malone, half an inch taller, kept a steady weight of 11 stone 2 pounds (156 pounds) in the 1790s. Another Club member, Lord Palmerston, had got down to 12 stone 10 pounds (178 pounds) in 1795, but thought it necessary to reduce himself further. No exact figure has been discovered in the case of Edward Gibbon, although we do know that when the porters weighed him, as was their custom, before they carried him across the Alps over the Mt. Cénis pass, they decided that he required three porters. The lightest in this group is Warren Hastings, a slight figure of 5 foot 6 also, who turned the scales at 8 stone 10 pounds (122 pounds). The only woman so far identified is the Duchess of Northumberland, whom Boswell knew quite well in his early London days; she weighed 12 stone 9 pounds (177 pounds) in 1757, 4 pounds less than her husband. Other portly members of the Club, such as Charles James Fox, have not yielded up their secret in this regard, nor have the beanpole Langton and the diminutive Colman. Diarists are naturally the most fruitful source for information which is not, in the nature of things, generally made public: William Hickey’s weight can thus be documented. Thomas Percy does not mention his own weight, but he does record his conviction that the Duke of Cumberland had grown “excessive fat” in 1753. Cumberland eventually reached 20 stone (280 pounds), which gave Sir Henry Cheere a good deal of difficulty when he had to carve an equestrian statue of the Duke.

There are a few mountainous individuals recorded: Sir John Dashwood attained 17 stone (238 pounds), and “would weigh himself in competition with Sheldon, the only man in the company who could compete with him”—the competition was evidently to see who could achieve the greatest weight.
Francis Blake Delaval was 14 stone (196 pounds) around 1775. And there were hereditary dynasties of grossness. Erasmus Darwin was a very large man, like his grandson Charles: the intervening generation is represented by Erasmus’s sons Robert (6 foot 2, and 24 stone—336 pounds) and Edward, who reached over 25 stone (350 pounds). Needless to say, it is the wealthier classes who were capable of achieving such dimensions.

Comparatively few people in the first instance seem to have desired, like Palmerston, to get their weight down, although this was beginning to change. A drop in weight conceivably might not always have been recorded, as it portended ill. The biggest fall I know of concerns David Hume, who is said to have lost 5 stone (70 pounds) during his final years, throughout his battle—one might almost say, friendly encounter—with cancer.

Hume had earlier given as a reason for not completing his History of England with a modern section the fact that he was “too old, too fat, too lazy and too rich.” Sloth as well as gluttony could be a concomitant of excess fat, as indicated by James Thomson’s description of himself as “More fat than bard beseems.” Traditionally, the melancholy poet had been spare in outline; one imagines, without much evidence, that the undernourished Chatterton would have worn an appropriately haggard aspect. But in sober reality most poets appear to have approximated to the sleek and well-fed contours of a comfortable clergyman of the time. The most noteworthy weight loss is in fact not that of a poet, but that of Beau Brummell: he lost almost 2 stone, from an original level of 12 stone 10 pounds (178 pounds), between 1815 and 1822. The intervening years had marked his decline, disgrace, and exile. One is inevitably put in mind of Oscar Wilde, who was seen in prison by Robert Ross in 1895 after his trial: “His clothes hung about him in loose folds and his hands are like those of a skeleton.” Wilde, another very tall man who had previously carried a good deal of flesh, never recovered his fleshy identity after the loss of his former social position.

The mean figure in the sample collected is around 13 stone (182 pounds). This is likely to be a skewed selection with the average unduly elevated—I had almost said, the figure weighted—by the readiness with which especially high scores might be committed to the record. But it remains a distinctly heavy cohort, when one takes into account the number of lower-class fly-weights as measured by army recruiting data and the generally lower level of heights at this time. According to the Drummonds, as late as 1943, mean heights for British males were no more than 5 foot 7 for those in their twenties and 5 foot 5 to 6 for those in their sixties. Height is a distinct, though often related, issue. It is enough here to remark that individuals’ consciousness of their own size has its bearings on their artistic creativity, as on other
aspects of their life. One thinks of very small men such as Mozart, Schubert, Keats, Christopher Smart, Swinburne, Lorenz Hart, and many more. Maynard Mack and others have shown how Pope’s sense of himself was conditioned by his almost dwarfish scale; while it is equally attested that the tiny Ravel was intensely aware of his size, an area of feeling which may be related to his fondness for the miniature, the childlike, the toylike. Even Stravinsky (far from a giant) was able to note with complacency how Ravel, during the First World War, “looked rather pathetic in his uniform; so small, he was two or three inches smaller than I am.”

We happen to know that Ravel was 5 foot 4, and we do typically have information of this kind on notable people of the last two centuries. We can learn that Charlotte Brontë stood some 4 foot 10; Wordsworth, around 5 foot 9½ inches. I report these figures in the full consciousness that they have a kind of irrelevance and absurdity: one is reminded of the Monty Python sketch in which television experts solemnly discussed whether Nietzsche or Wittgenstein was the tallest of the great philosophers. Nevertheless, there is an underlying point which is to some extent matched by the detail supplied by novelists. Wordsworth’s height looks suspiciously precise, and it is thus a jolt to realize that 5 foot 9½ is exactly the height attributed to that archetypal hero of modern fiction, Leopold Bloom. L’homme moyen sensuel turns out to possess the supremely average stature within Joyce’s characteristic redundancy and overspecificity. Normally one might expect such accuracy to be out of place in the descriptive vocabulary of earlier fiction, but it is noteworthy that Balzac lets us know that old Grandet was “five feet in height, thickset and squarely built,” with legs measuring 12 inches round the calf: la grande Nanon was so called “on account of her height of 5 feet 8 inches.” Equally, Hardy incorporated into The Mayor of Casterbridge the fact that Henchard was 6 feet 1½ inches “out of [his] shoes” and Farfrae about five feet nine. To textualize such information is to embody in the identity of characters something we regard as normal, unprivileged information. This is not so in earlier literature.

III.

Novelists do not typically have recourse to the Sanctorius balance. What they do increasingly provide is a bodily schema, which readers learn to interpret—if not as directly as the physiognomic data which make up so potent a part of the fictional vocabulary. From its outset, the novel documents the corporeal. We are familiar with the idea that the classic realist text presents a dense phe-
nomenclature of day-to-day living, and here Leopold Bloom’s totality of bodily experience is merely the logical extreme of such high-density coverage. More than previous forms, prose fiction gives us a character either as subject or object who must submit himself or herself to minute scrutiny; that is, to the “weighing” of every personal attribute. Of course, it is possible in drama, for instance, to portray characters as very fat or very thin, and to have them talking about their fatness or thinness. But the whole of the body is always visible on stage at once, unless some elaborate masking devices are used. Minute naming or measuring of parts is difficult to achieve. And even with padding and make-up, the limitations of the available actors would have restricted things in the past. One has only to think how different it would have been if the small, lithe Garrick (“little Garrick, young and light in every movement”) had been cast in the Falstaffian mold. The novelist is bound by no such restrictions; he or she can create the cast on any scale desired.

In suggesting that the novel drew increased attention to the bodily size, because of its ability to focus on detail, I am aware that people as far back as Aristotle knew that some individuals were fatter than others. One need not go back beyond the General Prologue of the Canterbury Tales to see that there is an immensely long tradition in writing which draws out the personal implications of physical contours. As everyone knows, there was a standard literary topos involving the representation of gluttony. However, Spenser is surely typical here in that his portrayal of the Seven Deadly Sins in the first book of the Faerie Queene places the emphasis on consumption. Gluttony is a deformed creature, feasting as he rides along: the only concrete physical detail is emblematic—“His belly was upblown with luxury.” His condition is a reflex of eating, as much as it would be in any dietary manual. There is no concept of bodily grossness independent of the particular act of ingesting food.

The later archetypes were laid down by major authors of the Renaissance: Gargantua and Pantagruel, Falstaff, Cassius, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. The instances from Rabelais can be left aside, since our concern is with variations from a standard norm—people who are “monstrously” fat (that is, simply overweight, not literal monsters); the discourse of true giants and dwarfs lies in a different sphere. But Falstaff truly is a case in point: his sharp nose is a reliable symptom of impending mortality. Thinness, for Falstaff, is a terminal condition. Equally, Toby Belch and Aguecheek represent a kind of emblematic contest between the dropsical and the etiolated: rude health still lies on the side of the portly knight. As for Cervantes, it is worth mentioning that the opening description of Quixote contains only a single expression (enjuto de rostro, spare of countenance) which points to his proverbial leanness. In the same way Sancho only gradually emerges as the short
and squat figure we associate with his character; again it is his prominent belly which is emphasized. As time went on, the contrast of lanky master and stocky servant became ritualized into a metaphor of social distance; within the text of Cervantes this is only one of several personal contrasts, but it is the one which later novelists found most apt to their own purpose: partly, I suggest, because corporeal codes became easier and easier to read as more of personal identity became lodged in physical shape.

The schema is adopted wholesale by Smollett in his Anglicized version of the Quixote story, *Sir Launcelot Greaves* (1760–62). The tall knight is accompanied by the ugly and ungainly squire Crabshaw: “His stature was below the middle size; he was thick, squat and brawny with a prominent belly.” By contrast, the feminized Quixote of Charlotte Lennox lacks the grotesque servant (as Slipslop or Mrs. Jewkes) who might have set off her beauty. This novel contains a very few references to the topos we are considering, as when Arabella misreads the body language of the deceptive Miss Horton in Book II, Chapter iv: “tho she did not seem to be more than eighteen Years of Age, her Stature was above the ordinary Size of Women; and, being rather too plump to be delicate, her Mine was so majestic, and such an Air of Grandeur was diffused over her whole Person . . . that *Arabella* could hardly help thinking she saw the beautiful *Candace* before her.” In general, however, the work of women novelists shows less concentration on the topos. It may be added that very little attention is paid to the experience of pregnancy in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century fiction. Even Mary Wollstonecraft, who knew so much about this and who plots novels containing marriage, childbirth, and poor women trapped in domestic squalor, never gives a close description of pregnancy. Decorum may be part of the reason, but in addition the subject appears not to have been novelistically very manageable.

Perhaps the servant is squat for a simple reason: low characters should have low stature. Certainly in *Tom Jones* “little Benjamin” Partridge does not need to say or do anything to reveal to us his lack of magnanimity or high courage, such as Tom possesses by right of nature. Partridge’s size tells us all. In the early novel, only eccentrics like Lismahagow or Trunnion are allowed to display physical dimensions. The normative characters, the heroes and heroines, have normal physique, just faintly improved. Joseph Andrews is “of the highest degree of middle stature”; that is precisely the social destiny in store for him. Fanny is a little plump, as indicated by her swelling breasts bursting out of her dress (II, xii): her rustic vitality allows her to exceed the normal girth just a little, but in a palpably sexual way.

By contrast Mrs. Slipslop was “very short, and rather too corpulent in Body.” Trulliber is presented in terms of broad caricature, as the authentic
Mr. Five by Five: “He was indeed one of the largest Men you should see, and could have acted the Part of Sir John Falstaff without stuffing. Add to this, that the Rotundity of his Belly was considerably increased by the shortness of his Stature, his Shadow ascending very near as far in height when he lay on his back, as when he stood on his legs” (II, xiv).45

The other classic case is even more familiar: that of Dr. Slop in Tristram Shandy:

Imagine yourself a little, squat, uncourteys figure of a Dr Slop, of about four feet and a half perpendicular height, with a breadth of back, and a sesquipedality of belly, which might have done honour to a serjeant in the horse guards.” (II, ix)

Such were the outlines of Dr Slop’s figure, which,—if you have read Hogarth’s analysis of beauty, and if you have not, I wish you would,—you must know, may certainly be caricatured and conveyed to the mind by three strokes as three hundred.

Sterne employs a deliberately reductive technique which suggests that a quick survey of the main lines of the body will tell you all you need to know about the character of Slop—and of course the doctor is further besmirched by falling from his horse into the mud, so that he enters the narrative as a raw body, “unwiped, unappointed, unannealed.” As usual, the belly is the main signifier: the signified might be gluttony, sloth, self-indulgence, or luxury (that eighteenth-century translation of ancient gluttony). Arthur Cash tells us that Dr. John Burton, the model for Slop, was in fact a tall and impressive figure; Sterne’s character could not possibly function in the novel as he is meant to do with such an inappropriate shape. It would be the wrong bodily register, so to speak, for the textual needs.

It might appear odd that such stereotypes of comic obesity went on being portrayed even when people were still happily unconcerned about their own weight, or, if anything, seeing girth as an emblem of social position or blooming health. One recalls the manner in which Swift in the “Receipt to Restore Stella’s Youth” pictured her as a cow fed with good nutrients, which “round all [her] body, plump [her] skin” (1.30). Thomas Sheridan would write to Swift himself a few years later that “the Dean begins to look healthier and plumper every day.”47 Clearly at the start of the eighteenth century fat could still be viewed as a sign of health, or sometimes of well-being generally. Even 150 years later, according to Flora Thompson, country people felt most at ease with those who had put on the proper amount of flesh: “thin people were not admired.”48 It took a long time for the psychological and social
assumptions surrounding body shape to change, and at first it was only the upper orders who consented to the change. They were sophisticated enough to have grasped that a heavy cargo of flesh could be no sure indication of good health, and rich enough not to have to demonstrate to the world that they were all well fed.

As time went on novelistic techniques in this area grew more refined. It is enough in *Pride and Prejudice* (chapter 13) for Jane Austen to tell us once at the outset that Collins was “a tall, heavy-looking young man,” as though the heaviness were imputed by his self-importance and doesn’t really subsist in his flesh. Scott contrasts the lean and austere Ochiltree with the well-living Oldbuck, but there are complications of feeling not present in Fielding or Sterne—each man has a tincture of the other, which is why they understand each other more perfectly than do any of the other characters. The old certainties are beginning to fray at the edge. One cannot quite accept the shape of the body as an unalterable given; appearances can be deceptive; for the first time, plausible rogues are able to simulate the bodily contours of their betters.

As the nineteenth century proceeded, new quasi-scientific theories would supply a new buttress for traditional sizism, but also ways of confusing the simple readings of the body: this was the period in which endomorphs, ectomorphs, and pyknic types began to be categorized. Meanwhile, weight often connotes not substantiality—a natural solidity of being—but instead a sort of incubus imposed from outside. Flaubert wrote to Louise Colet a few years before *Madame Bovary* appeared: “My flesh lies heavy—some 75 thousand kilograms of it—on my soul.” There is perhaps as much of the clumsy, rustic Charles in his creator as there is of the delicate Emma; gross materiality, which is something to hang on to in a primitive society where life is short and food scarce, can become a nasty, anti-spiritual thing only in advanced societies which contemplate their own belatedness, as the nineteenth century so regularly did.

The still unwritten history of weight-watching would explore these complications and devote considerable space to the high Victorian novel. A particularly interesting test case is that of Jos Sedley in *Vanity Fair*: the very first thing we learn about him is his stoutness, and throughout the novel his plump flesh (thighs now, as much as belly) is kept before our eyes. Once we hear of his “sad fat face,” a sign of things to come. The pathos of the plump is a topic reserved for comparatively recent discourse, where the routine cruelties of a Gillray have come to seem offensive and where excess weight can be viewed as an existential burden as well as a physical encumbrance.

There is space to consider only very briefly the amazing spectrum of body types found in Dickens. The task is made easier by a fine discussion by Juliet
McMaster in her book, *Dickens the Designer* (1987). The first part of this work is devoted to “The value and significance of flesh,” although only nine pages out of seventy are allocated to the body directly (the rest is taken up with faces, hair, clothes, gestures, and the like). McMaster is particularly helpful on the way in which Dickens enlarged the corporeal vocabulary we have been pursuing:

The automatic connection between fatness and generosity is particularly Dickensian. If Dickens didn’t invent it, at least he took it over and made it his own. Pickwick, his first hero, who so memorably joined a large waistline with a large humanity, set the fashion. Our modern figure of Father Christmas surely owes his ample girth to a typology that Dickens had established.

But there are two kinds of fatness in Dickensian physiology. Besides Pickwickian fatness, which one might call the fat-cheery, there is the fat-bloated. The fat-cheery swells from within as a manifestation of expansive and inclusive good humour, but the fat-bloated seems to have been soaked up from external sources, and its tendency is to exclude others, to be self-centered rather than diffusive.

McMaster has another acute passage on Pickwick’s mysterious and, as it were, inner-generated energy:

He is charged with energy, solar or otherwise. He bursts, he beams, he bulges. . . . Once set him dancing, and he can’t or won’t stop. . . . Fatness in the Fat Boy may have its customary association with inertia; but fatness in Pickwick is scarcely even heavy. There are a few episodes . . . which remind us that Pickwick indeed has avoirdupois. But more often he seems buoyant as a balloon.

Quite so—Pickwick has sublimated his own flesh.

One case not mentioned by McMaster is Pecksniff, who is initially described in *Martin Chuzzlewit* (chapter ii) in terms of appearance and impression. His get-up is so contrived as to suggest “There is no deception, ladies and gentlemen”—the clear converse of the truth. Everything in this act conspires to the same end; “So did his person, which was sleek though free from corpulence.” The implication is that he ought to have been corpulent; the body takes part in the general conspiracy, in resisting its proper obesity. Once more we have the sense of body shape being managed: the simple, easily read lines of a Trulliber have been replaced by a carefully constructed
bodily fraud. We have reached a point in human history where the corporeal has ceased to be a constant or fixed quality; it can be used as a disguise, it can be donned or doffed, it is within the realm of human control.

What happens by this time is that the novel problematizes fat to some extent. It responds to, and creates, a growing uncertainty about the reliability of body shape. As people begin to interest themselves more and more in their own weight, it starts to seem malleable rather than eternally given. Size comes to seem an effect of choice: weight-watching itself implies body management, and the old one-for-one correspondences between shape and character can no longer be depended on. Once a person might have been idle and crooked in nature because he was fat and misshapen; now he is fat and misshapen because he is crooked in nature. More and more positives come to accrue to thinness: consider the tall and excessively lean Sherlock Holmes, who would have been a joke in Smollett. Some of the modern prejudices have begun to crystallize.

IV.

Two separate narratives have been briefly told here, as they both appear to permit a new mode of discourse about the body. It is possible that the stories are intertwined in ways not yet visible. (I exclude an artificial linking factor, which is that writers are prominent in the early records of weight-watching. This is almost certainly a bias of the limited sample, although it should be said that authors, as members of a comparatively prosperous and well-fed section of the community, and as observers of fashionable society, were likely to be among the first to learn of the new fad.) But even if the phenomena are best regarded as totally discrete, they do separately work to free the body from its immemorial status as a fixed entity.

As was said at the outset, the survey could be extended in many directions. I have left aside the issue of changing concepts of beauty, even though the cosmetic value of slimming is a crucial aspect of the subject in modern times. This is because little of the material covered in this chapter relates explicitly to the beautiful, and it would be an impertinence to charge straight into the assumption that this is a hidden subtext, consciously or unconsciously suppressed by the men and women of the past. It is also the case that sexual overtones are not generally strong; even where there is routine mention of a young woman’s “shape,” this is seldom taken into more specific, let alone more salacious detail. It was clearly possible for a long time to remove almost all overt consideration of sexuality from discussion of body shape.
In terms of the theme of this volume, it may be said that in this area medicine and literature were moving apart. That is, health is a less immediate concern in general discourse about the physical, and in the novel—with its insistent emphasis on the phenomenology of everyday life—bodies are much less often bundles of symptoms than they are boxes of psychological tricks, clusters of sensations, collections of desire, outlines of will and destiny. Weight-watching is a paradigm of the modern urge to trespass beyond the limits prescribed by the body and thus to exceed the knowledge of physicians. And once the practice of weight-watching has come, in and out of the novel, the tyranny of slimness cannot be far behind.¹⁴

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this chapter was given as a lecture at Yale University in 1991. I am grateful to members of the audience who offered suggestions and ideas in several areas where they are more expert than I am; and also to David Marshall and Claude Rawson for their invitation to speak on the topic.


5. Quoted by Drummond and Wilbraham, Englishman’s Food, 253, from Cullen’s Lectures on the Materia Medica (1773).

6. Drummond and Wilbraham, Englishman’s Food, 213.


8. Ibid., 49.

9. Ibid., 50.


11. See, for example, John Mullan, Sentiment and Sociability (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 206, 238.

13. Ibid., 92–93.
15. Ibid., 188.
16. On Santorio Santorio (1561–1636), professor at Padua, and noted also for his clinical thermometer and pulsimeter, see A. Castiglioni, “La vita e l’opera di Santorio Santorio,” Medical Life, XXXVIII (1920): 727–86. He invented a “weighing chair” in which he could eat and sleep while carrying out experiments on his own metabolism.
18. The Early Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney, ed. L. F. Troide (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), vol. II, 68, 77. It was also Burney in her letter to Samuel Crisp of c. 22 May 1775 who termed Merlin “the ingenious mechanic” (130). There are several other references.
22. Johnson, Diaries, 304, 345.
23. The Piozzi Letters, ed. E. A. Bloom and L. D. Bloom (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1989–), vol. I, 109. Mrs. Thrale, as she then was, reports the only use of slimming aids I have noted:

   a Disorder common enough to young women[,] the Desire of Beauty; She had I fancy taken Quack Medicines to prevent growing fat, or perhaps to repress appetite. I have seen strange Stuff advertised in Ladies Memorandum books for such purposes. (Thraliana, vol. I, 393, July 1793)

24. Robert Gittings, Thomas Hardy’s Later Years (New York: Quality Paperback Club, 1990), 61. The earliest example I have traced is the brothers Fox, who were weighed at home in 1736: Henry (father of Charles James) was 12 stone; Stephen, 9.
30. The information comes from an entry for Boswell’s journal in April 1776. In general I have not specified sources for the bare facts of weights, unless there is a quotation appended or some special factor applies. The data are drawn from diaries, standard biographies, and similar sources.
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36. Drummond and Wilbraham, *Englishman’s Food*, 167–68; Arthur Young (born 1741) wrote that his height was “above the middling stature, being about 5 ft. 10, the then standard of perfection”: see J. G. Gazley, *The Life of Arthur Young* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1973), 546. The fullest survey of the subject is now R. Floud, A. Gregory, and A. Wachter, *Height, Health and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). These authors make considerable use of military recruitment data, and they thus show (to take a single fact out of many) that the mean height of recruits aged 24–29, born around 1742, was 65.39 inches (148). Also relevant are their observations that “only in very recent times has it become customary to record weights” (their data include no such survey from the eighteenth century), and that there are “very few historical records of the growth of females” in Western Europe (10). It is probably safe to say that, for the eighteenth century, there are no such records of female weights in any number, unless some eccentric hospital or prison keeper preserved data unknown to us.


39. Thomas Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (London: Macmillan, 1974), 79. The estimates are Henchard’s own, in chapter vii, but they may be regarded as in effect endorsed by the author.


41. It was felt that the “short, squat” figure of Theophilus Cibber retarded his career on the stage. Garrick was 5 foot 5. He never attempted the role of Falstaff. Admiral Byng was the same height, and “somewhat corpulent,” as an observer inconsequentially noted at the time he was awaiting execution: see *The Diary of Thomas Turner*, ed. D. Vaisey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 85.


44. Henry Fielding, *Joseph Andrews*, ed. H. Goldberg (New York: Norton, 1987), 31. Claude Rawson directs me to the closely similar phrasing used on Sophia in *Tom Jones* (IV, ii): “a middle-sized woman, but rather inclined to tall.” In both cases the drift seems to be “my heroine is not one of those outlandish romance creations, really quite ordinary on the surface, pretty average in build, anyway, but just a little more impressive
than the average person you meet.”


51. Juliet McMaster, *Dickens the Designer* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble, 1987), 25. In the same passage, McMaster points out that “Wilkie Collins, when he created a fat villain in the sinister Count Fosco, was aware of breaking with a tradition.”

52. Ibid., 88.


54. One of the most regular of all weight-watchers was that pioneer of organized science Sir Joseph Banks. A volume survives in which he kept records of his own weight and that of friends (including Lady Athlone, who was almost 16 stone). We are told by his biographer:

Banks himself in 1781 at the age of thirty-eight weighed 15 stone; by 1806 he had reached 16 stone 3 lb, and a few years later there is a record of 17 stone 2 lb, but this he seems to have refused to credit and has added an incredulous question-mark. Miss Banks [a sister], 11 stone 8 lb in 1778 by 1794 weighed no less than 14 stone 3 lb and Lady Banks, though only 9 stone 6 lb in 1781 achieved 13 stone 12 lb by the same date. Only their dog Mab seems to have kept her figure and remained constant at 10 lb.

See H. C. Cameron, *Sir Joseph Banks* (London: Batchworth Press, 1952), 257–58. I am indebted to Keith Thomas for drawing my attention to this material.