

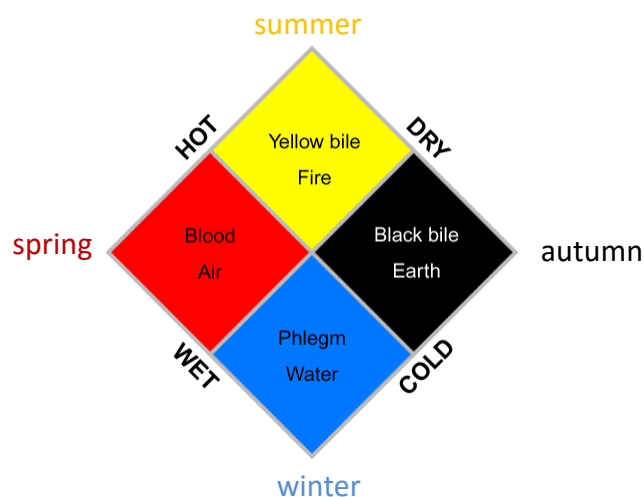
The Year without a summer

Climate and mood

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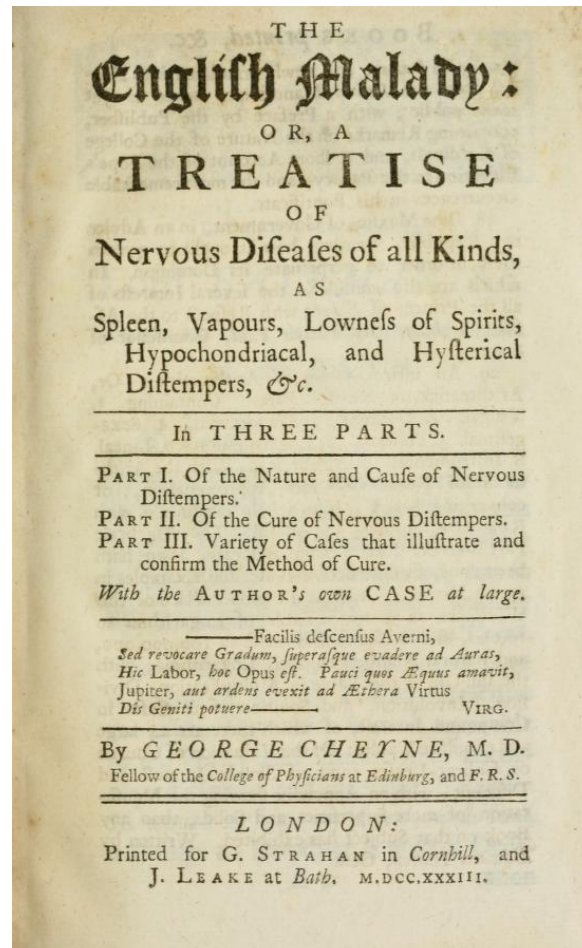
The speculation that there is an association between the weather and our moods goes back to the Greeks. This is illustrated by their links of the four primary substances, earth, air, fire and water with the seasons, climate and mood, especially with regards to the latter with black bile.

Humours and mood



- The first comment on this in the English language I have found comes from the poet **Thomas Hoccleve** (1367-1426). He writes about a sickness in which sorrow is internalised that he hoped God would cure him from:

We, the English had their own malady, written about by **George Cheney** (1671-1743):



- The Title I have chosen for this Treatise, is a Reproach universally thrown on this Island by Foreigners, and all our Neighbours on the Continent, by whom Nervous Distempers, Spleen, Vapours, and Lowness of Spirits, are, in Derision, call'd the ENGLISH MALADY. And I wish there were not so good grounds for this Reflection. The Moisture of our Air, the Variableness of our Weather, (from our Situation amidst the Ocean) the Rankness and Fertility of our Soil, the Richness and Heaviness of our Food, the Wealth and Abundance of the

Inhabitants (from their universal Trade), the Inactivity and sedentary Occupations of the better Sort (among whom this Evil mostly rages) and the Humour of living in great, populous, and consequently unhealthy Towns, have brought forth a Class and Set of Distempers, with atrocious and frightful Symptoms, scarce known to our Ancestors, and never rising to such fatal Heights, nor afflicting such Numbers in any other known Nation. These nervous Disorders being computed to make almost one third of the Complaints of the People in England.

He wrote the book as a sufferer and as someone who achieved a weight of 32 stone.

Observations on climate and mood were made by the French psychiatrists of the 19th century, such as **Jean- Étienne Esquirol** (1772-1840):

“Climates and seasons have special influence on the production of this malady.’ Hippocrates, and all authors who have succeeded him, assure us that autumn is the season which produces the greatest number of melancholies. This season, according to Cabanis, is fruitful in maladies of this kind, in proportion as the summer has been hot and dry. This remark is confirmed by my own observations made in the autumn of 1818. All physicians noticed that melancholy was more frequent this year, during the months of October and November, than in preceding years. We received at the Salpêtrière, during these two months, a much greater number of melancholies, and particularly of suicides than we usually admitted”.

He continued:

“Climate, it is constantly remarked, exercises a remarkable influence in the production of suicide; in proof of which,

its frequency in England is noticed; caused, it is supposed, by an atmosphere surcharged with humidity, and by fogs...

I am not disposed to deny, that a cloudy and sombre sky disposes to sad and melancholy thoughts, and may, with propriety, be ranked among the causes which give rise to suicide. Cabanis observed, that after a very dry summer, succeeded by a rainy autumn, that suicides were most frequent during the latter season. I made the same observation in 1818. We received during that year into our hospital, a much greater number of suicides than we had received in previous years, or have since admitted”.

Similar observations with regards to suicide were made by another Frenchman **Henry Morselli** (1852-1929):

Of 34 different time periods from 18 European states:

Maximum suicide rates (88%) occurred in summer, 9 % in spring and 4% in autumn.

He wrote: “the falling and rising of the temperature produce the most marked disturbance on the psychological activities of man...the sudden leap (in suicides)...the influence of the annual temperature is disturbed by that of moral, economic and material conditions of great cities, although it never fails to assert itself in the psychical tendencies of their inhabitants”.

At the time in question, around 1816, due to the advances in the science of meteorology, opinions about the effects of weather on the human constitution were changing. There was a shift away from the metaphorical, from weather as proxy for the human condition and the weather revealing itself by the effect it has on other things, including us (a

favourite romantic trope), such as expressed in **John Keats'** (1795-1821) Ode on Melancholy':

“But when the melancholy fit shall fall / Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud”

An important moment was when **Benjamin Franklin** (1706-1790) captured electricity from the heavens and stored it in a Leyden jar:

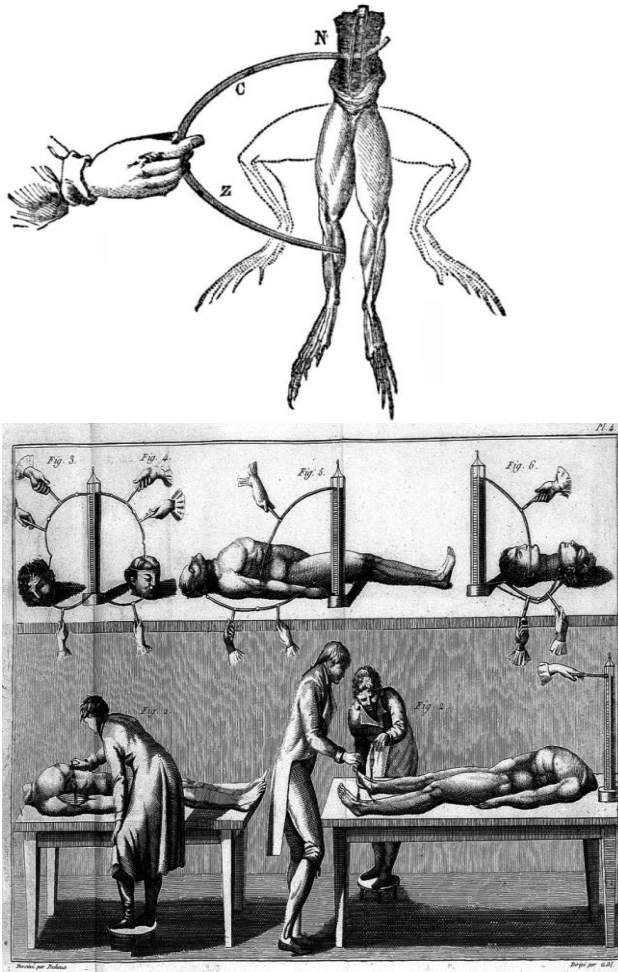


Franklin, like Prometheus stealing energy from the heavens.



Doctors began using electricity for multiple physical ailments

The investigator **Luigi Galvani** (1737-1798) made frogs legs twitch with electric sparks, and his nephew, Giovanni **Aldini** (1762-1834) collect guillotined heads and showed that with electricity he could elicit facial movements. In public demonstrations in London in 1803, he stimulated movements on the face and limbs of an executed criminal.



Mary Shelly wrote on June 1st 1816: “We watch ...the lightening play among the clouds...dark with the overhanging clouds”. On the night of the 22nd June, she had a hypnogogic hallucination, about a man seemingly brought to life by another with a machine, the “horrid” thing, his creation, terrifying him. It is very unlikely that she had not heard about or even seen the shows of Aldini, although there is no reference to Victor

Frankenstein using electricity to bring his monster to life. He used the “spark of being” and “galvanism.”

Further events of the year:

“Melancholy accounts have been received from all parts of the Continent of the unusual wetness of the season”

- Norfolk Chronicle July 20

“We receive...the most melancholy news from Germany on the extraordinary weather...”

- Times July 24

A cook prone to depression hung herself “In a fit of melancholy”

- John Quincy Adams

And Mary’s half sister Fanny committed suicide.

Among the group of artists and writers who referred to themselves as The Prometheans, **John Martin** painted his apocalypse in 1816:

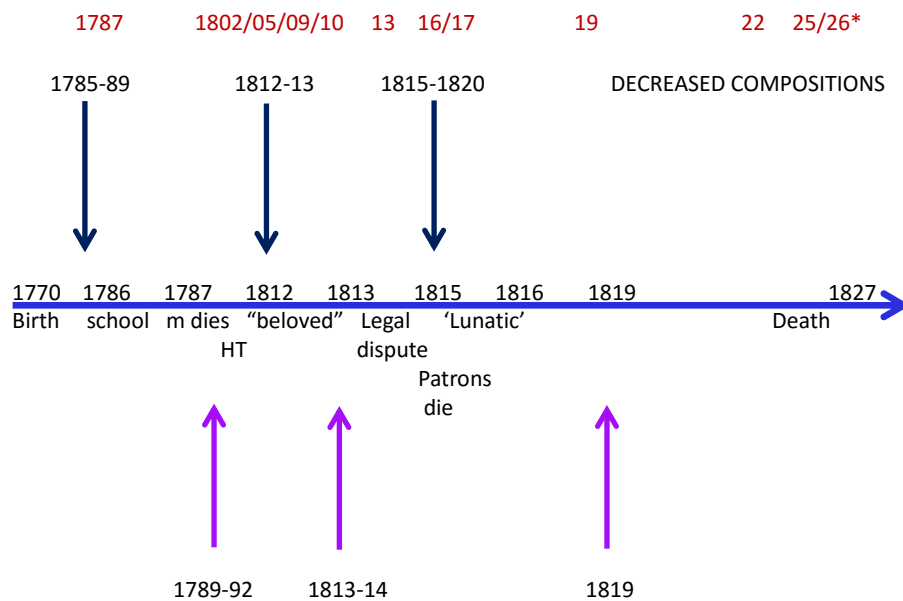


In 1817 his mentally disturbed brother became psychotic and was incarcerated

The psychiatric problems of Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) and Franz Schubert (1797-1828)



This shows the time lines of episodes in Beethoven's life when his musical output declined:



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He had an alcoholic grandmother and father, and a melancholic mother.

His letters and diary contain many references to his depressive moods over time, and suggest some hypomanic

overactivity, as in the letter to Baron Nikolaus von Zmeskall in 1802:

“My dearest Baron, Baron, Baron!- Domanovitz,
Baron? – Baron – ron –aron –ron – etc, Hail and happiness, happiness and hail and hail and happiness, happiness, hail, hail, happiness etc. baron baron baron baron”

There is the famous Heiligenstadt document of 1802 in which he wrote he was “obliged to seclude myself and live in solitude... (to) live alone like an outcast... (a) miserable existence”

The fallow period around 1816 was associated with several personal crises, including the loss of several patrons, the death of his brother Caspar (1815), and the problems dealing with his sister-in-law and his nephew. He wrote “my brother’s death has affected my spirits and my nerves” (Feb 1816), “I have thoughts of my own death” (May 1816), I am “suffering from a nervous breakdown”, and Charlotte Rosevick commented “I learnt that he has become crazy”. In August 1817 he wrote: “I often despair and would like to die”.

In one diary entry he specifically noted the weather: “Winter depresses me greatly – melancholy reminders”.

Beethoven complained often and bitterly of the Viennese winters, and his health problems, both medical and psychiatric, were frequently worse in winter and better in the summer months.



Schubert's sister had an episode of mental disorder in 1824. Around the year 1816, he was unhappy at his father's schoolhouse, he failed to get a job as a music master at Laibach, and his intention of marriage to Therese Grob was turned down by the state as he was a man without means. Songs by him which had been sent to Goethe were returned without comment. He left an opera (Die Bürgschaft), and a symphony (D615) unfinished. One biographer commented that "the early signs of the depression that was to darken his early years" appeared at this time (E McKay). In 1816 Schubert he made reference to his extremes of mood, in which episodes of joy relieved him of his 'dark life'.

In 1817 he had a 'nervous breakdown' and another biographer noted that "his work (of spring 1818) reflects his depression" (M Brown).

Reviewers have noted a cyclothymic tendency in his music, the tragic turning to emotionality and 'suniness'. His biographer C H Gibbs noted the contrasts in moods in

many letters. With regards to weather, E McKay looked at his periods of high and low productivity and noted a seasonal rhythm to the cycle of his moods observing that he composed little in the summer months.

Then there is the 1814 letter to Leopold Kupelweiser:

“I feel I am the unhappiest, most wretched man in the world...imagine a man whose most auspicious hopes have come to nothingness...to whom the joy of love and friendship has nothing to offer but pain, whose enthusiasm for beauty threatens to vanish...is this not a wretched unhappy man? For every night when I go to sleep I hope I never wake again, and every morning reminds me of yesterday’s misery.

Meine Ruh ist hin, mein Herz ist schwer, ich finde sie nimmer und nimmermehr”.

Conclusion:

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that both Beethoven and Schubert were of a cyclothymic tendency and had episodes of depression and possibly hypomanic spells. They had family histories of depression, they both were unhappy at various stages of their life which must have contributed to their bouts of illness, and they both seem to have been affected by the weather. The effects of the weather around 1816 may have contributed to the mood, characteristics and productivity of their compositions at this time, and certainly seems to have been interlinked with the development of romantic gothic literature that in part emanated from the creation of Frankenstein and his monster. The potential effects of weather on those prone to melancholy were observed way back as noted by Robert Burton.

