

19th Century literary non-fiction

Source B

This is an extract from a book published in an English translation in 1904. The writer, a Professor who studies living organisms and the way their parts work, aims to explain the concept of fatigue (tiredness).

Intellectual Fatigue

Some people tell me that when they are greatly fatigued by brain work, they are subject to passing hallucinations, similar to those which are sometimes experienced toward the end of an exhausting walk. To some degree these open-eyed dreams are, I believe, produced in all slightly nervous subjects who have somewhat over-fatigued their brain. More especially in the evening, but sometimes also during the day if we are tired, our mind begins to wander in our reading, and visual images arise. These disappear, leaving only the memory of their passage, as soon as attention reawakens; and then for a little we are allowed to resume work. A fresh distraction supervenes, the same or another image appearing quite clearly; occasionally it is some one we know or a landscape we have seen. And this takes place when we are convinced that we are not asleep. In the morning when we are fresh and fit for work, such images hardly ever appear.

An able dramatic writer once told me that when he composes he has to shut himself up in his study, because he is obliged to make his characters continually talk aloud. He receives them as if on the stage, shakes hands with them, offers them a chair, follows them in every little gesture, laughs or cries with them as occasion demands. When he writes he always hears the voices of his actors, but faintly. If they become loud, he at once stops writing and goes for a walk. Experience has taught him that this is a premonitory* symptom of fatigue, and that he must cease working if he does not wish to spend a sleepless night. When he was writing one of his dramas, the composition of which exhausted him greatly, he fell into such a morbid state that he not only heard his actors talk when he summoned them in order to write or revise the scenes, but he found that some of them would not be quiet again. He did not trouble himself much about this phenomenon, being convinced that it was simply the result of fatigue; he went off for a little holiday and the hallucinations completely disappeared.

All my investigations on fatigue are directed towards the comparison of muscular with cerebral* fatigue, and later I shall have to speak at length on this subject. In the meantime I shall give a preliminary sketch of the more important phenomena of intellectual fatigue.

Fatigue, fasting, and all debilitating causes tend to render us more sensitive. After a long walk we become more irritable. The smallest troubles seem insupportable, and our impressionability is increased.

[...]

During the two or three years I have spent in collecting material for this work I have often questioned my colleagues and friends regarding the phenomena of fatigue. I addressed myself mainly to doctors and others who might be supposed to have experienced the symptoms of intellectual fatigue.

[...]

35 As long as we are in good health, we are little aware of intellectual fatigue; but as soon as ill
health comes upon us, we find how exhausting brain work is. The source of thought and the
power of attention are dried up, and the flow of ideas is sluggish. When we are recovering
from illness even conversation fatigues us; we have occasionally to stop talking, and, taking
40 our head between our hands, close our eyes in order to rest and gather strength to continue,
and we find great difficulty in recalling a name or date which is perfectly familiar to us. The
same thing happens with the brain as with the muscles. As long as they are vigorous, they
are not fatigued by repeated efforts; but when they are weak, the signs of fatigue appear at
once.

Glossary

- * premonitory – giving warning that something bad is going to happen
- * cerebral – relating to the brain

This extract is from Angelo Mosso, *Fatigue*, translated by Margaret Drummond and W. B. Drummond (1904) and the full text can be found online at <https://archive.org/details/fatigue01drumgoog/page/n12>

This resource is brought to you by the Diseases of Modern Life project at the University of Oxford, which is supported by the [European Research Council](#) under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP/2007-2013) under Grant Agreement Number 340121.