

Svein Atle Skålevåg  
University of Bergen  
svein.skalevag@uib.no

### **Hypochondria**

Hypochondria was once a real disease, originating in the guts of professional thinkers, producing all kinds of symptoms and suffering. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century a rich international literature on the disease offered a wide array of advice aimed at the ill, on how to alleviate their very real pains. A significant part of this literature was written from the perspective of the sick man, or from the double perspective of doctor and patient. But in the nineteenth century, with the triumph of medical “localism”, the disease all but disappeared from the medical world, and it eventually became the opposite of a bodily disease: a pure product of the imagination.

Hypochondria has attracted the interest of specialists on the literary history of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but little interest from specialists on the medical history of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Foucault admitted to it a central position in his *Histoire de la folie*. But all in all far less attention has been devoted to this disease than to the closely related disease of hysteria.

In this paper I want to discuss the history of hypochondria focusing on transformation of at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The discussion will be based on published medical literature from the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Keywords: psychiatry, nervous illnesses, hypochondria