Alfred de Musset's Sign

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Many of us have a personal idiosyncrasy, to remember eponyms in clinical medicine and other branches. They include syndromes, phenomenas, laws and rules, tests, manoeuvres, triads, tetrads, etc. Most of the times, they indicate te names of the persons who first described them, but some imply other persons or situations. De Musset’s sign (head nodding with each heart beat) at times seen in aortic incompetence, is one such example.

Alfred de Musset (1810-1857) was not a physician but a French Romantic poet and playwright. He considered studying medicine; however because of his distaste for the dissection room he abandoned the idea of medical career and instead he became a poet-playwright. He was extraordinarily versatile, writing satirical pieces and poems of dazzling virtuosity, as well as lyrics and gained his acceptance to Victor Hugo’s literacy Circle Cenacle. However, he became a cavalier, with many affairs and embarked on a life of hectic sexual and alcoholic dissipation.

Alfred de Musset had observed this phenomenon earlier among the prostitutes of Paris; however “His” sign of aortic regurgitation was described accurately by his brother, Paul de Musset. In his “Biography of Alfred de Musset” (1864), as follows:

“...The illness so well cared by sister Marcelline had left him with a troublesome tendency to affection of chest... We called doctors twice during the course of winter, they bled him too often... Whatever they may say, I was convinced that their lancets caused him irreparable harm... At breakfast one morning in March, I noticed that my brother’ head was bobbing involuntarily with every pulse beat. He asked my mother and me why we were looking at him with such a startled air. We told him what we saw and he said he did not think that you could see it; but I will reassure you’... He made some sort of pressure on his neck with his thumb and index finger and in a moment his head stopped marking his pulse. “You see”, he then said to us ‘That this dreadful illness can be cured by simple and inexpensive means’. We were reassured, being ignorant, for we had just observed the first symptom of a grave malady, to which he was to succumb 15 years later” (Syphilitic aortitis).