



"I cannot sleep", Alexander Pushkin wrote in his *Lines Written at Night during Insomnia* (1830). "Only the monotonous running of the clock/Sounds around me." Almost all of us, at one time or another, will have experienced the dreary desperation of insomnia. "The anxiety of the sleeping night", Pushkin continues in his attempt to capture this intolerable dynamic, "The mouse-like scampering of life". This "scampering" of daily life into the time set aside for rest has been reported for hundreds of years, but it is particularly pertinent to review the cultural history of sleeplessness from the present-day perspective, a world in which many of us take our electronic devices and daily lives to bed with us.

For many people insomnia is a temporary situation triggered by acute physical illness or psychological stress; but for some it is more permanent. Chronic insomnia affects an estimated 10% of adults in high-income countries and is associated with impaired quality of life, depression, and anxiety. Insomnia is a clinical diagnosis, based on subjective self-report by patients. Interestingly, though, overnight electroencephalography (EEG) brain recordings suggest that some patients with insomnia underestimate the amount they sleep. These misremembered periods of wakefulness may rather reflect hyperawareness of fragmented sleep. This phenomenon of "paradoxical" insomnia with normal sleep durations emphasises the limitations of a purely biological approach to insomnia.

Although insomnia does have a partly biological basis, as a disorder of hyperarousal, it is also shaped by prevailing cultural and historical conditions. In the few remaining pre-industrial equatorial societies, the prevalence of chronic insomnia is just 1–2%; indeed, within these communities there might not even be a word to signify involuntary sleeplessness. Thus, social factors have a determining influence on apparently natural patterns of sleep and sleeplessness. For this reason, insomnia can be illuminated

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Roger Ekirch has uncovered frequent references in the diaries and literature of the early modern period to what he calls “biphasic sleep”, “with individuals waking sometime after midnight” between two distinct periods of rest, that