

# Of cinder, sea, and shotgun

Literary leitmotifs in a suicide ensued

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Whether we are concerned with the verbal or the written sign, with the monetary sign, or with electoral delegation and political representation, the circulation of signs defers the moment in which we can encounter the thing itself, make it ours, consume or expend it, touch it, see it, intuit its presence.

—Derrida<sup>1</sup>

A neurologist sees a reflexive fanning of five. What she understands, however, is not pedal dysfunction, but something else entirely. Babinski's sign is not the terrain of a podiatrist, but a primitive regression showing central pathology; it is a half-hidden, riddled residue still to be determined.

Psychiatrists read suicide notes and slips of the tongue. There is no pathological liar without a pathological lie. Language matters, or will become matter, as Derrida points out in *Differance*.<sup>1</sup> When one asks for a glass of water, the intention is understood despite the physical absence of the vessel or its contents. Words are placeholders until the eventual touch or toast of the objects worth conjuring.

In the case of three artists—Sylvia Plath, Virginia Woolf, and Ernest Hemingway—certain works may be considered preludes to suicidal encounters.

## Sylvia Plath

Sylvia Plath was born to a German father and Austro-American mother in Boston on October 27, 1932.<sup>2</sup> She



Sylvia Plath

attended Smith College on a scholarship, and was elected Phi Beta Kappa.<sup>3</sup> During her junior year, in 1953, she won a guest editorship at *Mademoiselle* in New York City.<sup>3</sup> When she returned home, Plath attempted suicide for the first time by ingesting sleeping pills and crawling behind her mother's boiler.<sup>3</sup> She was hospitalized and received electroconvulsive shock treatment as well as lithium for a probable diagnosis of manic-depressive disorder,<sup>3</sup> which is now described as bipolar 1 disorder.

Following her initial episode, Plath rebounded and was able to graduate *summa cum laude*.<sup>2,3</sup> She then attended Cambridge University on a Fulbright Fellowship in 1956.

She married the poet Ted Hughes on June 11, 1956, shortly after their initial meeting.<sup>2</sup> Plath continued to write and received the Saxton Fellowship to complete *The Bell Jar*.<sup>3</sup> She gave birth to a daughter, and a son in 1960 and 1962 respectively.<sup>2</sup>

In 1961, Plath completed 21 poems.<sup>2</sup> This is a distinct contrast from her output in 1962, which totaled 56.<sup>2</sup> She wrote the majority of the *Ariel Collection*, in October of that year, following a separation from her husband.<sup>2</sup> One of the final poems Plath wrote in that collection was *Lady Lazarus*, wherein she chronicled her history of suicide attempts.

Themes of fire and ash dominate that poem. She writes:

That melts to a shriek  
I turn and burn  
Do not think I underestimate your great concern  
Ash, ash—  
You poke and stir.  
Flesh, bone, there is nothing there—.<sup>2</sup>

The tone is of a smoldering fury which ultimately catches flame as she challenges at the poem's conclusion:

Out of the ash  
I rise with my red hair  
And I eat men like air.<sup>2</sup>

There is an incandescent exuberance and gathering of agitated force at the poem's terminus earning her the designation of "mad Lear ranting poetry at dawn."<sup>4</sup>

This heated ending is preceded by a hallowed beginning. In the first few stanzas of the poem, Plath makes a direct allusion to the Biblical tale of Lazarus noting:

Soon, soon the flesh  
The grave cave ate will be  
At home on me.<sup>2</sup>

In the Bible, according to the Gospel of John, Jesus went to the cave where Lazarus was buried and called "with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come forth.' And he that was dead came forth," bound in cloth linen.<sup>5</sup>

Feirstein comments that "a key metaphor gives form to the pathological part of the psyche."<sup>3</sup> This was described much earlier by Shakespeare as "The play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king."<sup>6</sup>

The metanarrative of Lazarus woven into one of Plath's

final poems provides a macabre clue of her unconscious motivation. Years before penning *Lady Lazarus*, Plath identified with this figure. She comments in her journal:

I feel like Lazarus: that story has such a fascination. Being dead, I rose up again, and even resort to the mere sensation value of being suicidal, of getting so close, of coming out of the grave with the scars and the marring mark on my cheek which (is it my imagination?) grows more prominent: paling like a death-spot in the red, windblown skin, browning darkly in photographs, against my grave winter-pallor. And I identify too closely with my reading, with my writing.<sup>2</sup>

In 1962, Plath committed suicide by putting her head in an oven.<sup>2</sup>

## Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf was born in London, in 1882, to a father who was an author, critic, historian, and biographer, and a mother who was a writer.<sup>9</sup> She had five siblings, and a half-sister with schizophrenia.<sup>10</sup> Her cousin James had bipolar disorder and committed suicide at 33 years of age.<sup>10</sup> Woolf had her first manic episode at 13-years old, following her mother's death from rheumatic fever.<sup>9</sup>

In her twenties, Woolf became a literary critic and eventually a novelist and joined other artists as a member of the Bloomsbury group.<sup>7</sup>

She was hospitalized in 1904 at the age of 22 years due to psychosis following the death of her father from bowel cancer.<sup>8</sup>

In 1912, she married Leonard Woolf and the two founded the Hogarth Press, which was responsible for publishing the majority of Freud's works.<sup>7</sup> A year later, she attempted suicide at the age of 31 years by swallowing sedatives.<sup>8</sup> She was again hospitalized in 1915 for mumbling and insomnia.<sup>8</sup> Ten years later she published her major work, *Mrs. Dalloway*.<sup>7</sup>

In 1927, she completed the autobiographical work, *To the Lighthouse*, a poignant rendering of her family's summer stays at St. Ives in Cornwall.<sup>7</sup> Therein one finds themes of swallowing seas:

So that the monotonous fall of the waves on the beach, which for the most part beat a measured and soothing tattoo to her thoughts and seemed consolingly to repeat over and over again as she sat with the children the words of some old cradle song, murmured by nature, "I am guarding you—I am your support," but at other times suddenly



Virginia Woolf

and unexpectedly...had no such kindly meaning, but like a ghostly roll of drums remorselessly beat the measure of life, made one think of the destruction of the island and its engulfment in the sea, and warned her whose day had slipped past in one quick doing after another that it was all ephemeral as a rainbow—this sound which had been obscured and concealed under the other sounds suddenly thundered hollow in her ears and made her look up with an impulse of terror.

...Life being now strong enough to bear her on again, she began all this business, as a sailor not without weariness sees the wind fill his sail and yet hardly wants to be off again and thinks how, had the ship sunk, he would have whirled round and round and found rest on the floor of the sea.<sup>7</sup>

The soothing sea, turned terrorist at a sudden instant, vacillates with violence, not unlike the course of her manic-depression. Water is woven throughout the tale, and by the end, to drown seems a sweet and inevitable surrender:

The sea was more important now than the shore. Waves were all round them, tossing and sinking, with a log wallowing down one wave; a gull riding on another. About here, she thought, dabbling her fingers in the water, a ship

had sunk, and she murmured, dreamily half asleep, how we perished, each alone.<sup>7</sup>

Half asleep, in a dream-state, Woolf echoes the words of William Cowper's 1799 poem, *The Castaway*, which depicts a drowning sailor:

For then, by toil subdued, he drank  
The stifling wave, and then he sank...  
No voice divine the storm allay'd,  
No light propitious shone;  
When, snatch'd from all effectual aid,  
We perish'd, each alone:  
But I beneath a rougher sea,  
And whelm'd in deeper gulfs than he.<sup>9</sup>

On March 28, 1941, at the age of 59 years, Woolf put stones in her pockets and submerged herself in water.<sup>10</sup>

### Ernest Hemingway

Ernest Hemingway was born July 21, 1899, in Oak Park, Illinois, to Dr. Clarence Hemingway,<sup>11</sup> a tempestuous man who later shot himself with a civil war pistol.

Hemingway was notoriously fierce and competitive, sustaining many hunting, fishing, boxing, and skiing accidents.<sup>12</sup> He won the Pulitzer Prize in 1953, and the Nobel Prize in 1954 for *Old Man and the Sea*.<sup>11</sup>

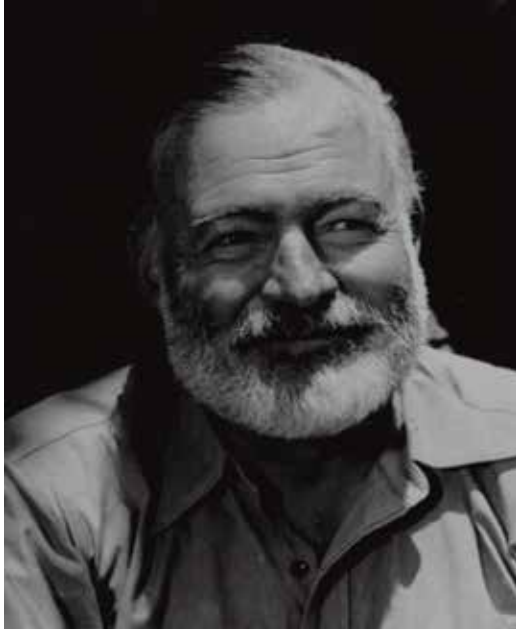
Matching physical fitness with creative prowess, he trained for writing by swimming 80 laps in the morning before beginning his drinking bouts at noon.<sup>11</sup> He had many love affairs and four wives.<sup>11</sup>

In 1959, he began experiencing psychotic delusions and was hospitalized for symptoms consistent with manic-depression.<sup>11</sup> Two years later, he was again hospitalized and underwent electroconvulsive therapy after having attempted suicide three times in four days. His wife caught him loading a shotgun which prompted her to get him help.

Hemingway's fascination with shotguns mars the landscape of many of his narratives, including the tale of *The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber*.<sup>13</sup> In this short story, Hemingway writes of a husband and wife on a big game hunt in Africa. The protagonist, Macomber, is initially portrayed as a coward who eventually confronts his fears and is then shot by his wife in the midst of a buffalo hunt.<sup>14</sup> Multiple passages presage Hemingway's own demise:

'You're very mistaken,' she told him. 'And I want so to see you perform again. You were lovely this morning. That is if blowing things heads off is lovely.'





Ernest Hemingway

...Macomber did not know how the water buffalo felt before he started his rush, nor when the smash of the .505 with a muzzle velocity of two tons hit him in the mouth, nor when the second shot smashed his hind quarters and he crawled toward the crashing, blasting thing that had destroyed him.

...Hope the silly beggar doesn't take a notion to blow the back of my head off, Wilson thought to himself.

...Macomber aimed carefully at the center of the huge, jerking, rage-driven neck and shot. At the shot the head dropped forward.

...aiming carefully, shot again with the buffalo's huge bulk almost on him and his rifle almost level with the oncoming head, nose out, and he could see the little wicked eyes and the head started to lower and he felt a sudden white-hot, blinding flash explode inside his head and that was all he ever felt.<sup>13</sup>

As in the previous examples of Plath and Woolf, Hemingway provides a kernel of his unconscious death wish in the form of a literary reference. He borrows a line from Shakespeare's *Henry IV*.<sup>14</sup> Spoken like a specious poetic paradox from the mouth of a hardened huntsman, Robert Wilson suggests to Francis Macomber:

By my troth, I care not; a man can die but once; we owe

God a death and let it go which way it will he that dies this year is quit for the next.<sup>13</sup>

In Shakespeare's version, this line is spoken by the tailor Francis Feeble who is readying himself for membership in the King's army and eventual battle.<sup>14</sup> The meaning is echoed by Macomber remarking, "You know I don't think I'd ever be afraid of anything again,"<sup>13</sup> prior to his being shot to death.

On Sunday, July 2, 1961, Hemingway shot himself in the head.<sup>12</sup>

### Compulsory creation

Leenaars and Wenckstern credit Shneidman and Murray with the notion that for certain writers a "unity thema" emerges that is a recurrent psychological theme enabling death.<sup>15</sup> For Plath, Woolf and Hemingway, the cinder, sea, and shotgun, respectively, are repetitive representations of their specific suicidal modalities. The metanarratives woven within each author's text serve to demonstrate the latent saliency of their suicidal obsession. Andreasen and Jamison reported that the incidence of bipolar disorder is more frequent in writers and their relatives than in other populations.<sup>13</sup>

Many agree that the three authors share this commonality. But what about compulsory creation? According to the *Diagnostic Statistical Manual for Psychiatric Disorders-5* (DSM-5):

Obsessions are defined by (1) and (2):

1. Recurrent and persistent thoughts, urges, or images that are experienced, at some time during the disturbance, as intrusive and unwanted, and that in most individuals cause marked anxiety or distress.
2. The individual attempts to ignore or suppress such thoughts, urges, or images, or to neutralize them with some other thought or action (i.e., by performing a compulsion).

Compulsions are defined by (1) and (2):

1. Repetitive behaviors (such as ordering)...that the individual feels driven to perform in response to an obsession...
2. The behaviors or mental acts are aimed at preventing or reducing anxiety or distress, or preventing some dreaded event or situation...<sup>16</sup>

Describing her writing process, Woolf remarks, "It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this

wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me, it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together.”<sup>8</sup>

Plath states, “I re-create the flux and smash of the world through the small ordered word patterns I make. I have powerful physical, intellectual and emotional forces which must have outlets, creative, or they turn to destruction and waste.”<sup>2</sup>

And, as Young describes Hemingway, “If he wrote it he could get rid of it...He had gotten rid of many things by writing them.”<sup>13</sup>

Bipolar disorder (BD) and obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) frequently co-occur. In a recent meta-analysis, it was demonstrated that there was a 17 percent pooled prevalence of OCD in BD (95 per cent CI 12.7–22.4).<sup>17</sup> A higher prevalence of co-occurrence was specifically found in patients qualifying for bipolar 1 disorder. Psychotic delusions and a requirement for hospitalization, as in the example of these artists, qualify for a type 1 diagnosis.<sup>17</sup> Violent obsessions, defined as obsessions of harming self or others, are an independent risk factor for suicidality over and above depression.<sup>18</sup>

One of the primary treatments for the obsessive-compulsive dyad is exposure. However, is there such a thing as overexposure? Can narrative therapy reduce anxiety to the point, as Francis Macomber put it, “I don’t think I’d ever be afraid of anything again,”<sup>11</sup> including an encounter with death that cannot be undone.

Commenting on Plath, Leenaars and Wenckstern reference Schneiderman’s theory that, “The role of writing, whether a note, a diary, a novel, fiction and so on, may be a ‘death facilitating process in certain authors lives.’”<sup>15</sup> And, referring to Plath, Feirstein suggested, “The curative power of art did not help her. Perhaps writing the book bound her to the horror within her.”<sup>3</sup>

Kay Jamison’s work on art and madness in *Touched with Fire*<sup>19</sup> poses the provocative question of whether or not we are ridding the world of artists by treating them. It is also worth asking, are we ridding the world of certain artists by allowing them to continue to create?

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