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FIERCE FLAMES AND THE GOLDEN LOTUS: CASE STUDIES ON THE MADNESS AND  
CREATIVITY CONNECTION

By

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Thesis

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

- ❖ *Introduction*
  - Pages 3-11
- ❖ *Chapter I: Romanticizing Madness: Gustave Flaubert and Hector Berlioz*
  - Pages 12-34
- ❖ *Chapter II: ‘Sick Prophets’ and Dionysian Man: Friedrich Nietzsche and Rainer Maria Rilke*
  - Pages 35-69
- ❖ *Chapter III: Great Waves of Melancholy: Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, Manic Depressive Illness and the Will to Art*
  - Pages 70-109
- ❖ *Conclusion*
  - Pages 110-116
- ❖ *Bibliography*
  - Pages 117-123

## INTRODUCTION

The idea that madness, genius, and art are somehow interrelated is ancient. In the Western tradition, Socrates claimed that, “Some of the highest goods have come to us by way of madness.”<sup>1</sup> In the *Phaedrus* he distinguishes between four types of “divine madness.” Each of them corresponds to a god: prophetic madness to Apollo, the madness of mystery to Dionysus, *furor poeticus* or poetic madness to the muses, and finally the madness of love to Eros and Aphrodite.<sup>2</sup> In ancient Greece, madness was neither a pejorative nor a positive concept; it transcended value distinctions. Everyone was thought capable of experiencing moments of madness which, for the fortunate few, might bestow upon them an extraordinary gift. Plato reinforced Socrates’ distinction by explaining that the poet’s genius was the product of “divine madness.”<sup>3</sup>

During the Middle Ages, madness remained, like virtually everything else, a theological issue. Scholastics continued to think of madness as a matter of divine intervention: either as God’s way of punishing people in earthly life or blessing those who shared a mystical union with the creator; but the relative absence of madness as a topic of medieval discourse mirrors its scriptural insignificance. Romanticisms of the *furor poeticus* were reborn along with the Renaissance of classicism, but Apollo, Dionysus, the Muses, Eros and Aphrodite were replaced by the Holy Trinity.<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault argues in *Madness and Civilization* that the Enlightenment marked a fundamental shift in the way the Western world approached madness.

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<sup>1</sup> Socrates, *The Phaedrus*.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Arnold M. Ludwig, *The Price of Greatness: Resolving the Creativity and Madness Controversy* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1995), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (New York: Random House, 1988).

Conceptually, madness became the sanctuary of irrationality, and in the Age of Reason, anything irrational had to be either explained or destroyed. As a result, a stark line developed between the sane and insane, an ideological shift ritualized in the birth of the asylum. Moreover, madness became a prime target in the Enlightenment's wholesale effort to organize and classify the natural world. It no longer remained unspecified, but rapidly evolved into an ever-expanding array of psychoses.<sup>5</sup>

Although the concept of madness underwent a drastic transformation between Socrates' writing of the *Phaedrus* and the nineteenth-century, the idea that madness and genius might be somehow connected has survived the test of time. Thinking dialectically, we might take this as partial proof of its validity. Indeed, the presence of mad artists and intellectuals is so prevalent, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries, that a connection may be taken for granted. The goal, then, is to interpret the connection between madness and creativity and to illustrate its biographical and societal significance.

While psychologists and physicians have begun to seriously examine the origins of the obvious but enigmatic connections between mental illness and the creative impulse, the treatment of the phenomenon by cultural and intellectual historians has been primarily implicit. Kay Redfield Jamison's *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*, for example, argues that manic-depressive illness has played a role in art from Plato to Robert Lowell.<sup>6</sup> Deborah Hayden's *Pox: Genius Madness and the Mysteries of Syphilis* examines some of history's most famous syphilitics through the lens of contemporary medical knowledge.<sup>7</sup> One of the most comprehensive, however impersonal, studies was conducted by

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Kay Redfield Jamison, *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*, (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> Deborah Hayden, *Pox: Genius Madness, and the Mysteries of syphilis*, (New York: Basic Books, 2003)

behavioral psychologist James Kaufman. His 2001 study of 1,629 eminent creative writers concluded that writers in general, and poets specifically, suffer extraordinarily high rates of mental illness when compared with the regular population. Kaufman found that 26 percent of the sampled poets committed suicide compared with 14 percent of writers and only 1 percent of the non-literary public. Kaufman dubbed his findings, “The Plath Effect”, in honor of Sylvia Plath who committed suicide in 1963.<sup>8</sup>

While many of these studies do highlight the correlation of madness and creativity, they tend to either omit or underplay how mental illness in its myriad forms explicitly affects the creative product. It is hardly enough to assume the intellectual or artistic eminence of these disturbed cultural producers, and then to somehow prove that they are, indeed, disturbed. The problem lies in the method, which has been predominantly scientific, and has tended to gloss over valuable subtleties. Many of these empirical studies treat the relationship between madness and creativity as if it were an equation, allowing “A” to represent genius, “B” to represent madness, and then assuming that “A” plus “B” must equal “C,” or the relationship itself. What is needed, therefore, is a method whereby each figure is treated personally and organically. Science should not be discredited as a valuable starting point, but it must be treated as just that, a starting point, because the key to reaching a more penetrating understanding lies in the consummation of a tenuous marriage between contemporary medical discourses and historical analysis. Although necessary, this union is inherently uncomfortable for the historian who recognizes that medical diagnoses, like other technologies, have a relatively short “shelf-life.”

Nevertheless, we cannot afford to ignore contemporary clinical and patient perspectives which are the best tool available for the retrospective reconstruction of individual encounters

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<sup>8</sup> James C. Kaufman, “The Sylvia Plath Effect: Mental Illness in Eminent Creative Writers,” in *The Journal of Creative Behavior*, vol.35 (2001): pg. 37-49.

with mental illness. In order to discover how a subject's psychosis affected their work, however, it is necessary to examine that person's own ways of thinking about madness broadly, as well as the application of these conceptions to themselves. To use the language of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, we must work from the perspective of the *habitus*, which he defines as a synthesis between individual experience and collective experience welded into a single world view. This effort requires the development of a familiarity with the acquired schemas, sensibilities, dispositions and tastes of the individual subject as they relate to a broader cultural and historical context. For example, whether or not we accept the primary tenets of Freudianism, we must be familiar with them in order to determine how they might have influenced a subject's understanding of their own mental health. Bourdieu offers the metaphor of "the game" to clarify his theory in practice. Within this metaphor, the game itself represents a given social space, either historical or contemporary. The player's "feel for the game," or *habitus*, is the force which propels the course of the game. Just as athletes are conscious of the rules that govern the game, artists and intellectuals are conscious of the structures they employ to translate inspiration and ideas into universal forms that can be read, seen and listened to. In both cases, however, strategies for manipulating the outcome are not solely based on conscious calculations, but also on feel. Building on Bourdieu's metaphor, one could add that just as athletes, whether directly or indirectly, are responsible for organic transformations in the rules which govern the sport they play, so too do artists and intellectuals, either consciously or unconsciously, alter the structures of art and discourse in their respective disciplines.

The most pronounced similarity among the individuals examined in this study is that they saw their work as a kind of therapy for madness. Art or discourse could give shape to the chaotic material which madness inspired. Foucault explains that during the eighteenth-century, madness



became an exclusionary historical construct which polarized the western world into two camps, the sane and the insane, which mirrored the polarization between rational and irrational.

Madness, however, is strictly a human concept; art and discourse are inherently excluded from the sane/insane dichotomy. A person may be categorized as either sane or insane, but what they create is transcendent. The structures of art and discourse provide a means of externalization and validation. Impressions, emotions, and perceptions which are problematic in one's everyday life may be legitimized, through careful composition, in mediums that value eccentricities and originality.

As Bourdieu leads us to recognize, however, the relationship between the creator and the structures they employ to produce a creative product is reciprocal. In other words, artists and intellectuals do not only use the structures of art and discourse in creative ways, their creativity and experimentation facilitates transformations within the structures themselves. If madness has indeed been an important source of motivation and inspiration for so many eminent cultural figures, it then becomes a significant factor in the evolution of artistic and intellectual structures as well. The connection between madness and creativity, therefore, does not only matter on a biographical level, but also assumes the role of a historical determinant within much broader societal, cultural and historical contexts.

Bourdieu's theory of "fields" also informs the theoretical underpinnings of this thesis. He values historical materialism as a method for the richness of its symbolic value. Bourdieu's method operates in large part on the symbolism of markets as models for fields of interest. On a variety of levels, these "fields" represent many of the traditionally recognized components of culture and society, including art, politics, power and religion, as well as the fields of academic interest. Bourdieu applies the economic model of the market, with all its structures, postulates,

tendencies, and theories to each of these fields which collectively constitute the social space. The types of capital at work within these “markets” is also symbolic. In addition to material wealth, Bourdieu identifies a variety of other forms of capital which have value within a given field; such as prestige and creative capital. If we treat Romanticism, modernism and postmodernism as the predominant European “aesthetic markets” of the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries, then an examination of the themes and tendencies which they valued helps to explain why so many mentally disturbed artists and intellectuals achieved eminence during this time period. For example, while the Romantic movement emphasized receptiveness to beauty, instinct, emotion and poetic madness, modernism and postmodernism not only accepted but encouraged artistic and intellectual explorations into the unconscious mind. Therefore, mad artists and intellectuals were well situated to both employ, and in the process, transform, the aesthetic orientations of their respective historical contexts.

In this thesis, the term “madness” must serve a dual agency. On the one hand, it broadly represents the biologically rooted psychological condition of the subjects presented in each case study. In this usage, madness is broken down into more specific psychoses such as manic-depression, epilepsy, syphilis and schizophrenia. On the other hand, the term represents a constructed historical concept which evolves over the time period in question. Just as the *habitus*, or world view, is the inseparable fusion of individual and collective experience, an individual’s experience with, and conceptualization of, madness cannot be dichotomized, and must be situated within the socio-historical context. In each case study, therefore, the two “narratives” of madness are comingled.

Madness in its myriad forms is paradoxical in its inconsistency. It presents the individual with two or more conflicting emotional and perceptive states and therefore undermines the

singular concept of self. The result is a blurring of the lines between real and surreal, conscious and subconscious, waking and dreaming. Anyone who has awoken from a dream has felt the tension and contrast between opposing realities which are mysteriously the product of the same cognitive framework. While schizophrenia is the paradigmatic example of this phenomenon, any psychosis which creates oscillations between periods of relative health and periods of mental disturbance, such as manic-depressive illness, syphilis, and epilepsy, may have a similar effect.

The implications for social engagement are generally pejorative, which may help to explain the reclusiveness of so many mad artists and intellectuals. While most people enjoy a concretized notion of self, those who suffer from a variety of psychoses often have difficulty relating to others because they think in terms of multiple “selves”, or at least along the lines of the “sane self” and the “insane self”. Other difficulties may owe to differences of perception. Hallmarks of both schizophrenia and manic-depressive illness are sensory and emotional hypersensitivity. For example, sounds may seem louder, lights may appear brighter, and events, which would be considered mundane to most, may seem overwhelmingly profound. To the artist or intellectual in search of the *terra incognita* of everyday life, these “disabilities” are transformed into invaluable creative powers.

An indefinite perception of self can also aid creativity by enhancing empathy. Writers in particular must be able to create lifelike characters that differ significantly from themselves. The problem of madness and multiple realities may also bring the artist or intellectual closer to his or her work. Just as the manifestations of madness are difficult to differentiate from those of reality, the realities these manifestations create may become intermingled with those of everyday life. Even well-balanced geniuses often have trouble distinguishing between the real world and the teeming visions of their own brains.

Each of the six case studies presented here (Gustave Flaubert, Hector Berlioz, Friedrich Nietzsche, Rainer Maria Rilke, Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath) contribute in unique ways to a

more generic knowledge about the relationship between madness and creativity. The format of this thesis, however, simultaneously maintains the autonomous integrity of each case. In other words, it does not compromise the parts for the sake of the whole.

The selection of this particular cast of subjects has been made to emphasize the breadth of the influence mad artists and intellectuals have exerted on the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries by grouping them in accordance with three of the most salient artistic and intellectual movements: namely, Romanticism, postmodernism, and Feminism. With the exception of postmodernism, this grouping is primarily a structural device, being that Romanticism and Feminism seem only to have implicit, rather than explicit, connections with madness. While some of the central figures of both Romanticism and Feminism fit the mad artist paradigm, we cannot definitively say that the movements themselves have been derived from ideas inspired by madness. There is evidence, however, that some of the tenets of postmodernism were.

Unlike Romanticism, postmodernism does not support a dichotomy between *homo sapiens* and *homo sentiens*, or “thinking man” and “feeling man.” Foucault, for example, places imagination, intuition and empathy alongside research, critical analysis, and comparison in his hierarchy of tools necessary for the historian’s craft. Postmodernism is an experiment motivated by the hypothesis that loosening the logo-centric grip may unlock deeper, however more enigmatic, “truths” about artistic, historical, cultural, sociological, and philosophical phenomena. The headwaters of the intellectual and artistic currents which gave rise to the postmodern condition can be traced back to precursors like Friedrich Nietzsche and Rainer Maria Rilke, whose individual encounters with unreason brought them into conflict with traditional and hegemonic definitions of reality.

Chapter one chronicles the lives of two Romantic artists; Gustave Flaubert and Hector Berlioz. It explores how the infant field of psychology informed these artist's conceptual understandings of mental illness and shows how these assumptions are reflected in their work specifically and their thoughts about the creative process more generally. Chapter two examines Friedrich Nietzsche and Rainer Maria Rilke as the "sick prophets" of postmodernism. The case study of Nietzsche is particularly dynamic because his appearance marks the return of human irrationality into the accepted zone of artistic and intellectual life. The third chapter is the most synthetic of the three. Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath share a stronger biographical parity than any of the other figures. Here the relationship between madness and the creative impulse is clarified immensely because of how vocal both women were about their personal struggles with mental illness and the effect it had on their poetry and prose. Viewed collectively, these cases form a mosaic portrait of the madness and creativity connection which both transcends and incorporates the respective personal and historical contexts.

## CHAPTER I

## Romanticizing Madness: Gustave Flaubert and Hector Berlioz

*Introduction*

Romanticism began as a reaction to the twin threats of Enlightenment logo-centrism and the rapid transformation of the physical world by urbanization and industrialization. As an aesthetic distinction, it emphasized receptiveness to beauty, instinct, love, emotion and even madness. “During the Romantic period, the century old notion of the *furor poeticus* [poetic madness] was reinterpreted as a revolutionary and liberating madness that could free the imagination from the ‘restraint of conformity’.”<sup>9</sup> As a movement, Romanticism thus tended to “recruit” mad artists who might have been marginalized during the Age of Reason. The list of Romantic poets, novelists, and musicians who suffered from some form of psychosis reinforces this point and includes names like: Ludwig van Beethoven, Charles Baudelaire, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, John Keats, Victor Hugo, Hector Berlioz, Gustave Flaubert and many others.

This chapter narrows the scope to investigate the explicit connection between madness and creative genius in the lives of two nineteenth-century French Romantics. Mental illness was more than just a personal struggle for these men; it was a primary source of their creative motivation. It is apparent in their work that they both benefited and suffered from extraordinary emotional sensitivity. Although they both express moments of creative frustration, art generally allows them to focus and externalize this potential wealth of inspiration. In short, it provides a therapeutic coping mechanism for the challenges of mental disturbance. The result is an

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<sup>9</sup> Frederick Burwick, *Poetic Madness and the Romantic Imagination* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 2.

interdependency of artistic expression and personal well-being that translates into exceptional motivational intensity and quality of production.

The selection of Flaubert and Berlioz was the product of important commonalities. First, they shared moderate mental disturbances accompanied by a permeating conceptual fascination with madness. Second, unquestionable excellence in their respective disciplines makes them more identifiable and more suitable for inclusion in the thesis. In short, their eminence is taken as granted. Finally, they both worked from a common historical, cultural and national context which influenced their art and shaped their conceptions of mental illness and irrationality. Their differences, however, also tend to contribute to the legitimacy of this topic. Samplings from literature and music will help to expand its application to art in general and preface the subsequent chapters.

### *Gustave Flaubert*

In a mid-January 1867 letter to George Sand, Flaubert refers to himself as “A nut.”<sup>10</sup> Five years later he reports to his mother, Caroline, that a “...foolish idea is just one of the symptoms that [he] is going soft in the head.”<sup>11</sup> Although he wrote these lines in good spirit, they betray a degree of mental disturbance that ebbed and flowed throughout the author’s life. Evidence of Flaubert’s ‘nervous disease’ litters his well-preserved correspondence. This condition was probably a combination of syphilis and epilepsy, a claim substantiated by the majority of Flaubert scholars.<sup>12</sup> Deborah Hayden has suggested that Flaubert’s epilepsy was

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<sup>10</sup> Gustave Flaubert to George Sand, 12-13 January 1867, in *Flaubert to Sand: The Correspondence*, trans. Francis Steegmuller and Barbara Bray (New York: Knopf, 1993), 55.

<sup>11</sup> Henri Troyant, *Flaubert*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Viking, 1992), 261.

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin F. Bart, *Flaubert* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1967), Troyant, *Flaubert.*, Wall, *Flaubert: A Life*.

caused by syphilis.<sup>13</sup> Since epileptic symptoms were present before the onset of his sex life, however, the traditional accounts resist scrutiny.<sup>14</sup>

Epilepsy is a common, but untreatable neurological disorder which affects the temporal lobe of the brain. Its primary symptom is seizures, which may range from uncontrollable convulsions to flaccid losses of consciousness. These seizures often induce hallucinations such as bright bursts of light, intense memory “flashbacks,” or *déjà vu* and macropsia, a specific type of hallucination whereby a small image gradually enlarges into a massive one that comes to dominate all sensory perceptions.<sup>15</sup> Depression is also a concurrent psychological condition of both epilepsy and syphilis.<sup>16</sup> At different times, Flaubert reports all of these symptoms in his letters and notes. Hypergraphia, or compulsive and voluminous writing, may also be a peripheral symptom of epilepsy. Luiza M. Arnold observes that after the onset of epilepsy, “Flaubert’s notes grew extensive in their forms and were marked by extensive underling, corrections, repetitions, and diminished spacing.”<sup>17</sup> The first signs of epilepsy emerged early in his life.

Flaubert was born in Rouen, in 1821. As a young child, he developed an affinity for literature that bordered on the obsessive. His parents, Anne Justine Caroline and Achille-Cléophas Flaubert, began to notice some startling behavior. They observed that their son would often become so engrossed in reading that he seemed to lose consciousness. From time to time these ‘lesions’ were so severe that the child would literally fall from his desk. Cléophas, a medical doctor, worried that his son might be displaying early signs of *le petite mal*, a

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<sup>13</sup> Hayden, *Pox*, 137.

<sup>14</sup> Luiza M. Arnold, Christian R. Baumann and Adrian M. Siegel, “Gustave Flaubert’s ‘Nervous Disease’: An Autobiographic and Epileptological Approach,” in *Epilepsy and Behavior*, vol. 11, Issue 2 (September, 2007), *onset and course*.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, *onset and course*.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, *depression and social consequences*, and Hayden, Pox, *introduction*.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, *hypergraphia*.



nineteenth-century medical diagnosis which pre-dates the formalization of epilepsy but shares many common symptoms.<sup>18</sup> Ironically, Flaubert reflects on these moments with an air of fondness. In a passage taken from *Mémoires d'un Fou* [Memoires of a Madman], he recalls, “I knew very well that it was a hallucination that I was producing for myself, but I could not help smiling over it and I felt happy.”<sup>19</sup> Perhaps even as a teenager, Flaubert understood that his mental abnormalities harbored creative potential. He was at least open to the experience and soon came to view these hallucinations and his art in a similar light. Both offered him access to deeper levels of memory and emotion. His submission to the hallucinations mirrored his efforts to lose himself completely in the world of his novels.

Flaubert’s need to externalize his emotions and the experiences of his malady culminated in his first real novel, *Mémoires d'un Fou* in 1838. *Mémoires* has been criticized as blatantly autobiographical and aesthetically inferior. Despite its blemishes, it does provide valuable access to the mind of the young novelist.<sup>20</sup> The book introduces the reader to the author’s extraordinary emotional range through its vivid descriptions of dolefully melancholic and electrically blissfully psychological states. In *Mémoires d'un Fou*, the reader is confronted with a hero whose inexplicable and repressed emotion creates a sort of literary dissonance.<sup>21</sup> The title alone speaks volumes about Flaubert’s adolescent experience. Although rough in comparison to the meticulous fluency of his later prose, *Mémoires* certainly foreshadows the author’s future virtuosity.

At the end of the 1830s Flaubert was studying at the Faculty of Law in Paris, and living a decadent and bohemian lifestyle that would soon catch up with him. He frequented brothels and

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<sup>18</sup> Geoffrey Wall, *Flaubert: A Life*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 25.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>20</sup> Wall, *Flaubert*, 48.

<sup>21</sup> Gustave Flaubert, *Mémoires d'un Fou, Novembre et Autres Textes de Jeunesse*. (Paris: Publications Française et Européenne, 1991)

once even bragged of engaging in sex with the ugliest prostitute he could find while his friends watched. It is likely that he contracted syphilis during this time. In 1842, his bravado faltered and he took a vow of celibacy to which he would remain committed for at least a year.<sup>22</sup>

At age twenty-three, Flaubert suffered the most severe epileptic attack of his life. The panic of the moment and the following days are portrayed by his biographers as a turning point in Flaubert's life and career. In the winter of 1844 he and his brother Achille were driving a cabriolet from Pont-l'Évêque to their father's cottage in Deauville.<sup>23</sup> Suddenly, Flaubert suffered a seizure and lost consciousness. He said it was like, "being swept away in a torrent of flames... sudden as lightning... an instantaneous interruption of memory [and] letting go of its entire contents."<sup>24</sup> Achille, who was a doctor after his father, rushed his brother to the nearest farm and began bloodletting. At the time, *le petite mal* was thought to be caused by an excess of blood in the body which affected the brain. After the passage of blood and time, Flaubert finally regained consciousness.<sup>25</sup> Geoffrey Wall suggests that the epileptic attack was triggered by the juxtaposition between the lights of the inn in the distance and an oncoming carriage in the "pre-electric" darkness.<sup>26</sup> Although epileptic attacks do not require a trigger, research suggests that certain patterns in light and sound may induce seizures.<sup>27</sup>

Flaubert described the days after the attack to his friend Ernest Chevalier; "I'm in a wretched state, the least sensation and all my nerves quiver like the strings on a violin."<sup>28</sup> He spent the next several months in Rouen under the watchful eye of his father who prescribed absolute solitude, a regimen that he would more or less maintain until death. Much to his relief,

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<sup>22</sup> Hayden, *Pox*, 133-134.

<sup>23</sup> Troyant, *Flaubert*, 45.

<sup>24</sup> Arnold, "Nervous Disease," *onset and course*.

<sup>25</sup> Bart, *Flaubert*, 90.

<sup>26</sup> Wall, *Flaubert*, 79.

<sup>27</sup> Arnold, "Nervous Disease," *onset and course*.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

Flaubert's plans to study law evaporated. It was not his true passion, and in the months prior to the attack the prospect of a life spent in court had begun to oppress him. A year later, Flaubert began to understand that his passion for writing would become a career. The epiphany left him both relieved and excited. He had survived a renaissance and set about retooling his mind and lifestyle to suit the transformation. Illness provided Flaubert with a justification to exchange the burden of the law for the relative freedom of art.<sup>29</sup>

The sequence of events which led Flaubert to a career in literature is suggestive of why such a high proportion of mentally disturbed individuals are drawn towards creative fields more generally. His success as an artist stems from many of the same traits that made him mentally and physically unsuitable as a lawyer. The creative fields lack the rigidity of most professions, allowing for eccentricities and lapses of health that would not be tolerated otherwise. Moreover, creative professions generally do not require individuals to work in close proximity with colleagues, encouraging a heightened degree of isolation. Flaubert preferred to be alone. He once wrote: "I live a life of calm, regular routine. If anyone disturbs me for a few moments it makes me feel quite ill."<sup>30</sup>

Flaubert's illness and its associated depression oscillated between periods of severity and periods of mildness. At times he felt as if he were losing his identity or that his very soul was escaping through the veins his father regularly opened. As he lost consciousness, the blackness of his mind flooded in a deluge of memories and sensations from the past.<sup>31</sup> He blamed his memory for these attacks in which the events and emotions of his life resurfaced so clearly that he struggled to maintain his grasp on reality.<sup>32</sup> The author attempted to replicate this experience

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<sup>29</sup> Troyant, *Flaubert*, 47.

<sup>30</sup> Arnold, "Nervous Disease", *depression and social consequences*.

<sup>31</sup> Bart, *Flaubert*, 92.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

when writing. André Versailles explains that “he lost himself in [his work] and finished [it] through the comprehension of its interior.”<sup>33</sup>

As evidenced in his writings, mental disturbance was a creative tool that Flaubert would eventually learn to utilize. It both separated him from the plans of his past and haunted him with its memory. “He saw what non-epileptics do not see, and he gave some of his experiences to his characters.”<sup>34</sup> His best work came after the onset of his epileptic and syphilitic symptoms. With maturity, he became more inclined to welcome the insights his experiences gave him.

“[Flaubert] learnt to live with [epilepsy], to inhabit it imaginatively as a unique province of his mind, dark and dangerous though it was.”<sup>35</sup> He tried to decipher the code of his illness scientifically and was soon able to predict a seizure’s onslaught and to manipulate it through an act of will. Although his seizures and hallucinations continued to frighten him, he eventually viewed them as nothing more than, “...a deflection of vital energy that he had now mastered.”<sup>36</sup>

Flaubert withdrew deeper into the comfortable melancholy of sickness and seclusion with each passing day, and became a sort of Dr. Frankenstein who watched the world through the window of his dark laboratory while dissecting the mysteries of the human heart.<sup>37</sup> The results were grim. Flaubert was certain that nineteenth-century French society was diseased. He despised Victorian materialism and vanity and felt that European culture was rapidly developing a correspondingly unhealthy aesthetic orientation. He sensed how shallow this emerging aesthetic was and longed to recapture a deep, tragic beauty that was more representative of the human condition. This angst culminated in his most beloved masterpiece, *Madame Bovary*.

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<sup>33</sup> André Versaille, *La Betise, l’art et la vie: En écrivant Madame Bovary* (Paris: Editions Complexe, 1991), 17.

<sup>34</sup> Bart, *Flaubert*, 96.

<sup>35</sup> Wall, *Flaubert*, 81.

<sup>36</sup> Bart, *Flaubert*, 97.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

*Madame Bovary* marks a turning point in the content and style of Flaubert's literature. He finished the first version of *La Tentation de Saint Antoine* [The Temptation of St. Anthony] in 1849, which his friends criticized as hopelessly romantic and unrealistic. Flaubert seems to have agreed with them. By mid-century, although Romanticism retained a strong grasp on European music, poetry, and visual art, it was being supplanted by Realism in the French literary vogue. Flaubert perceived this change in the atmosphere and settled on his subject after reading a news article about a country doctor's wife who poisoned herself after a series of tragic infidelities. The novel appeared in 1856, and was initially hailed as the exemplar of a new-school of fictive Realism.<sup>38</sup> Those early critics, however, failed to see that Flaubert employed a characteristically Romantic energy in his criticism of the more vacuous aspects of eighteenth-century culture. He identified with Emma Bovary as much as he intended to indict her. He shared Emma's dissatisfaction with her sterilized bourgeois existence and felt surrounded by mediocrity and isolated from excellence. In adolescence, Flaubert had been 'polluted' by the same fantastic literature that Emma devoured and hence struggled for a more realistic understanding of interpersonal relationships. This was, perhaps, his heroine's greatest character flaw. For Emma, love, "...was something that comes suddenly, like a blinding flash of lightning—a heaven-sent storm hurled into life, uprooting it, sweeping every will before it like a leaf, engulfing all feelings."<sup>39</sup>

*Madame Bovary* is the most poignant display of Flaubert's fascination with insanity. Although he typically denied any biographical link to his heroine in public, he was painfully aware of the connection in private. When he said, "I am Madame Bovary," he was merely

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<sup>38</sup> Bernard Doering, "Madame Bovary and Flaubert's Romanticism," in *College Literature*, vol. 8, no.1 (Winter, 1981), pg. 1.

<sup>39</sup> Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary: Patterns of Provincial Life*, trans. Francis Steegmuller (New York: The Modern Library, 1957), 114.

reinforcing what no one close to him had ever doubted.<sup>40</sup> Her symptoms were his own. The tendencies of her illness; the dizziness, fits of passion, pangs of the heart, and lapses in consciousness were all literary expressions of his tortured mind.<sup>41</sup> The gut-wrenching scenes where poor Charles bleeds his young wife are flashbacks to an experience the author had so often endured. After completing the scene of Emma's first adultery he exclaims, "...at the moment I wrote the phrase 'nervous attack', I was so carried away...feeling so intensely what my little woman was feeling that I began to fear that I was about to have one myself."<sup>42</sup> During the long, arduous construction of *Emma Bovary*, it is certain that Flaubert had reserved a specific diagnosis for his heroine. It was not, however, *le petite mal*.

Emma was a hysteric, an inference that his contemporary critics readily made. Indeed after reading an early release of *Madame Bovary*, Charles Baudelaire went so far as to suggest that other reviewers had erred in not seeing hysteria as the "true foundation" of the novel.<sup>43</sup> The diagnosis of hysteria was innately tied to what had long been understood as the excessive emotional sensitivity and fragility of certain women. It was an especially salient topic in medical discourses of the nineteenth-century.<sup>44</sup> Given the level of Flaubert's education and the family's background in medicine, it is safe to assume that he was at least marginally familiar with medical discourses on hysteria when he wrote *Madame Bovary*.<sup>45</sup>

His knowledge of the malady grew substantially during preparation for his next novel, *Salammbô*. Flaubert read Dr. Hector Landouzy's *Traité complet de l'hystérie*. His meticulous personal notes on Landouzy's research survive as proof of his intense personal and professional

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<sup>40</sup> Troyant, *Flaubert*, 141.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>42</sup> Wall, *Flaubert*, 215.

<sup>43</sup> Jan Goldstein, "The Uses of Male Hysteria: Medical and Literary Discourse in Nineteenth-Century France," *Representations* 34 (Spring, 1991): 139.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

interest in the subject.<sup>46</sup> In 1867, he wrote to Sand, “My heart beats wildly for no reason at all—understandable, in an old hysteric like me. For I maintain that there are male hysterics as well as female, and that I am one of them.”<sup>47</sup>

Flaubert was hesitant to refer to himself as an epileptic or syphilitic. Syphilis was a shameful diagnosis and *le petit mal* had not yet transcended its religious associations with demonic possession and heresy.<sup>48</sup> Public admission of either disease was a serious matter. Instead, Flaubert was under a growing conviction that he suffered from hysteria, the disease of his most famous/infamous heroine. Whether conscious or not, this conceptual coincidence fortifies the psychological bond between Flaubert and Emma. One might venture to say that if Emma was a hysteric, then Flaubert needed to be as well. Otherwise he might begin to lose the psychological connection with her that allowed him to exorcise his mind’s demons.

Flaubert’s other masterpiece, *Salammbô*, also provides strong evidence for the author’s fascination with madness generally and hysteria specifically. Flaubert’s portrayal of Salammbô’s hysteria includes a common list of symptoms including: emotional hypersensitivity, varying states of consciousness, panic and hypnotic hallucinations. Her hysteria, however, is triggered by an excessive devotion to Tanit, the Carthaginian deity of love, rather than an overactive libido or imagination.<sup>49</sup> According to Jan Goldstein, “[the author’s] characterization of Salammbô, like his characterization of Emma Bovary, joined hysteria together with two factors long believed to be predisposing causes of that disease: strong sexual

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>47</sup> Flaubert to Sand, *Flaubert to Sand*, 55.

<sup>48</sup> Bart, *Flaubert*, 93.

<sup>49</sup> Flaubert, Gustave. *Salammbô*. (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1931)

impulses and exaggerated religious devotion.”<sup>50</sup> It is no accident that these predisposing causes of hysteria are also the overarching theme of Flaubert’s two greatest novels.

In a February 1859 letter, Flaubert does little to console Mademoiselle Leroyer de Chantpie whose relative has recently been driven to insanity in her pursuit of piety. With an air of smugness, Flaubert assures Chantpie that her circumstances are actually quite common. He asks, “Don’t you see that they are all in love with Adonis...ethereal aspiration toward supreme bliss? I have been investigating hysteria and mental derangement. There are treasures to be discovered in those fields.”<sup>51</sup> Indeed, Flaubert discovered the treasure he was seeking. *Madame Bovary* and *Salammbô* brought him both immediate and lasting fame. In those novels he was able to use the unique perspective offered by his illness to create some of the canon’s most psychologically complex characters. The nervous energy they engendered is a reflection of his personal experiences with mental illness.

For all the similarities that Flaubert shared with Emma and Salammbô, however, there was one key difference that may have kept the author from meeting the same tragic fate as his heroines. Flaubert had his art. Emma and Salammbô were not able to externalize their overwhelming attacks of emotion. They were consumed by the flames of their own passions, veritable crucibles of love and torture. While their creator certainly felt those same pangs of the heart, he was ultimately able to cope with them through writing.<sup>52</sup> Writing was a therapeutic exercise that allowed Flaubert to remain more or less stable until the end of his life, but the unbreakable link between artistic expression and personal well-being created an interdependency that was often painful in its own right.

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<sup>50</sup> Goldstein, “Uses of Male Hysteria,” 140.

<sup>51</sup> Gustave Flaubert to Mme. Leroyer de Chantepie, 18 February 1859, in *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert 1857-1880*, ed/trans. Francis Steegmuller (Boston: Harvard/Belknap, 1982), 15-16.

<sup>52</sup> Troyant, *Flaubert*, 141.



To write well and to live well became synonymous for Flaubert. The “writer’s anguish” was a dominant theme of his letters. He especially looked to his literary comrades Louise Colet and George Sand for empathy. To Sand he once wrote, “Our charming occupation is to blame...we torment ourselves body and soul. But what if the torment is the only thing that’s valid, here below...?”<sup>53</sup> It took him almost five years to write *Madame Bovary*, progressing an average of seventy-five excruciating words per day.<sup>54</sup> In the final stages of the novel he confessed, “I am heartily sick of Bovary. And I can’t wait to be rid of her.”<sup>55</sup> There may have been a psychological basis for Flaubert’s lugubrious progress. Studies of the affect of epilepsy on cognition show that it may lead to progressive degeneration of verbal recall.<sup>56</sup> We, should not, however, automatically assume that this had an entirely pejorative effect on his writing. It may certainly have reduced the volume of his writing, but it may not necessarily have hindered its quality. In other words, Flaubert’s tendency towards extraordinarily careful composition may have been imposed on him by his illness.

While both epilepsy and syphilis made artistic production exceptionally tedious for Flaubert, the therapy writing provided, however, also made it quite necessary. In *Madame Bovary*, when Charles’s mother exclaims, “[Emma] needs to be put to work,” she expresses a fundamental theme of the novel and of the author’s life.<sup>57</sup> Flaubert understood the connection between productivity and emotional stability. He often enjoyed a feeling of empowerment after particularly successful moments of writing. According to one biographer, “It was a joyful,

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<sup>53</sup> Flaubert to Sand, *Flaubert to Sand*, 55.

<sup>54</sup> Wall, *Flaubert*, 214.

<sup>55</sup> Troyant, *Flaubert*, 144.

<sup>56</sup> Arnold, “Nervous Disease,” *impact on intellectual work*.

<sup>57</sup> Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, 142.

physical affair of the voice, the authorial voice conferring life on the written word.”<sup>58</sup> His mood almost always reflected how well or how poorly his novels were progressing.

Flaubert died on the 9<sup>th</sup> of May, 1880 at the age of fifty-nine.<sup>59</sup> Since writing *Salammbô*, he never failed to be productive. His *Trois Comptes* [Three Tales], published in 1877, continued to project his morbid fascination with insanity. Flaubert’s contraction of syphilis added two fresh torments to his life. One was absolute sexual frustration, the other, the product of the mercury and bromide tinctures used to treat the disease. These poisonous substances are no longer accepted treatments and may have only further upset the author’s fragile mental balance.<sup>60</sup> Unlike Friedrich Nietzsche, Flaubert did not live long enough to experience the final onslaught of syphilis which results in primary paralysis. The doctors who examined Flaubert at the time of his death determined that he died of a ventricular hemorrhage of the brain. Although a brain hemorrhage remains the most probable explanation of his death, complications of heavy metal poisoning from frequent mercury and bromide doses should not be ruled out as an alternative.<sup>61</sup>

Flaubert slipped out of history in a sea of debt. Owing both to his poor health and his meticulous and exacting style, he never matched the productive pace of his contemporaries such as Honoré de Balzac or Émile Zola. While Balzac and Zola regularly published a novel a year during the height of their careers, Flaubert was lucky to finish one in three. His income, therefore, never supported his lifestyle. His mother, Caroline, often helped him through meager times, but after her death in 1872 his mounting medical bills and inconsistent income finally sunk him financially. Although he enjoyed popularity during his life, he could not have predicted what a literary force he would become in the eyes of posterity. Flaubert weathered the

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<sup>58</sup> Wall, *Flaubert*, 210.

<sup>59</sup> Bart, *Flaubert*, 742-743.

<sup>60</sup> Wall, *Flaubert*, 279.

<sup>61</sup> Arnold, “Nervous Disease,” *biography*.

storms of his ill-health as well as could be expected, and in the course of them was able to use the unique insights they offered to capture the essence of the irrational mind in prose.

### *Hector Berlioz*

Hector Berlioz, another psychologically troubled virtuoso of the nineteenth-century, translated the inspiration of madness into musical structures. Although Berlioz often felt tormented by his music, it ultimately played a therapeutic role in his life as well. He was able to channel extreme emotional intensity into his work. Madness provided the primary source of inspiration for at least two of his seminal works, *Le Symphonie Fantastique* and *La Damnation de Faust*. While the former is built on the obsessive energies of the composer's own life experiences, the latter is framed after Goethe's *Faust*. For Berlioz, art was a propulsive force of emotional externalization and an effective conveyance of his psychological intensity. As a result, the music he composed was fortified with uncanny emotional richness.

Berlioz was born in 1803 in La Cote-Saint-André, a small town in western France. In his *Mémoires*, he wrote glowingly of his introduction to music on the day of his first communion. As he went up to the altar, the choir broke into a hymn. He reminisced that, "at the sound of those virginal voices I was overwhelmed with a sudden rush of mystic, passionate emotion. A new world of love and feeling was revealed to me, more glorious by far than the heaven I had heard so much of."<sup>62</sup> Although this is certainly a stylized account, there is little question of Berlioz's deep psychological connection with music.

Berlioz's father Louis, a country doctor, was responsible for his early education. He taught his son Latin, and encouraged him to read classics such as Virgil, Danté, and Shakespeare.

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<sup>62</sup> Hector Berlioz, *Memoires of Hector Berlioz: from 1803 to 1865 comprising his travels in Germany, Italy, Russia, and England*, trans. Rachel Russell Holmes & Eleanor Holmes (New York: Tudor 1932), 4.

Although Berlioz was originally bored and oppressed by his father's exercises, he soon developed an obsessive admiration for them and often viewed his life through the lens of classic plots and characters.<sup>63</sup> They reflected his passionate intensity better than the realities of life and love and shaped the monumentally tragic aesthetic sensibility that informed his later compositions.

Today's clinical perspectives label Berlioz's psychosis as a combination of bi-polar disorder and obsessive-compulsion.<sup>64</sup> Bi-polar disorder, also known as manic-depressive illness, has long been connected with some of music's most eminent figures such as: Ludwig van Beethoven, Irving Berlin, Georg Handel, Sergey Rachmaninov, Gioacchino Rossini and Robert Schumann.<sup>65</sup> As we will continue to explore in chapter three, those affected by manic-depressive illness experience emotional hypersensitivity during both manic and depressive states. Situations or events that might seem banal or mundane to the general public may be perceived as having overwhelming significance and veiled meaning to those who suffer from bi-polarity.<sup>66</sup> While healthy individuals spend most of their lives oscillating between relatively homeostatic moods, manic-depressives are jostled, often without warning or cause, between the two extreme poles of the emotional spectrum. Music is arguably the most "spiritual" and emotionally evocative of all the arts. Romantic composers in particular, were expected and encouraged to produce emotionally evocative compositions. Mental turbulence, therefore, could provide valuable inspiration. The relationship, however, is reciprocal. Musical composition is a highly structured process which requires years of training and experimentation. Like literature and

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 5-6.

<sup>64</sup> Rebecca Lloyd-Evans, Mark Batey and Adrian Furnham, "Bi-polar Disorder and Creativity: Investigating a Possible Link," in *Advances in Psychological Research*, Vol. 40, ed. by Alexandra Columbus (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2006), 140.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>66</sup> Jamison, *Touched with Fire*.

painting, musical methods provide a framework for the systemization and externalization of powerful, but disordered thoughts and feelings. This begins to explain why Berlioz viewed music as an existential imperative.

Berlioz initially saw thwarted love as the root of his mental disturbance. He fixated on a series of tragic love affairs beginning with Estelle Duboeuf at age twelve. *Stella del monte*, or Stella of the mountain as he amorously referred to her, became an unattainable ideal of love and beauty.<sup>67</sup> He wrote, “The moment I set eyes on her I felt an electric shock; in fact, I fell in love with her, desperately, hopelessly. I had no wishes, no hopes, I had no idea what was the matter with me, but I suffered acutely and spent my nights in sleepless anguish.”<sup>68</sup> Even towards the end of his life, he still thought nostalgically of her as his first true source of inspiration.

In 1821, at age eighteen, Berlioz went to Paris to study at the Academy of Medicine at his father’s insistence. After his first visits to the dissection room, however, he worried that he simply might not have the stomach for it. Those gruesome hours spent in “that fearful human charnel-house” were enough to make him question the entire endeavor. He persevered, however, and continued his studies, though half-heartedly.<sup>69</sup> His true passion was music, and he took full advantage of being in the musical heart of France. He often visited the theaters and the opera and began studying musical scores in the library of the Paris Conservatory. There, he impressed Professor Jean-François Le Sueur. Le Sueur recognized Berlioz’s talents and encouraged his studies. Much to his parents’ dismay, he officially renounced his medical training in 1824 to pursue a career in music. He attributed the decision to one fateful night when he went to a performance of Christoph Gluck’s *Iphigénie en Tauride* at the Paris Opera and vowed afterwards

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<sup>67</sup> Peter Bloom, *The Life of Berlioz* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 11.

<sup>68</sup> Berlioz, *Memoires*, 9.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

that he would become a musician “come what might”.<sup>70</sup> He enrolled as a student at the conservatory in 1826, and passionately threw himself into his work.

In 1827, he met the Irish actress Harriet Smithson, who became the object of his most powerful and obsessive infatuation. After seeing her play the part of Ophelia at the Odéon Theater in the fall of 1827, he was immediately smitten by her. When he saw her play young Juliet a week later, he could barely contain himself.<sup>71</sup> Harriet, on the other hand, ignored him completely. She refused to respond to his emotionally overcharged letters. Berlioz even began avoiding her performances to protect himself from the emotional strain. In desperation he wrote to his father, “Sometimes I can scarcely endure this moral or physical pain...I could believe a violent *expansive force* to be within me...and I suffer so much, *so much*, that if I did not make an effort to restrain myself I would cry out and roll on the ground.”<sup>72</sup> He expressed similar torments in a letter to his friend at the Conservatory, Ferdinand Hiller:

I am a most unhappy man, a being almost alone in the world an animal crushed under an imagination it cannot support, devoured by an illimitable love that is rewarded only with indifference and scorn...[Harriet and I] *will be reunited* in the oblivion of the tomb, which will not prevent other unhappy ones from SUFFERING AND DYING...<sup>73</sup>

Equipped with a torturous muse, he was able to translate this “expansive force” into *La Symphonie Fantastique*. In Berlioz’s letters he began to refer to Smithson as *Ophélie*. Francesca Brittan suggests that, “...The tragic heroine of *Hamlet* was more immediate than the actress herself...[that] in the composer’s imagination, Harriet hovered between the fictional and the

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>71</sup> Bloom, *The Life of Berlioz*, 43.

<sup>72</sup> Hugh MacDonald, *Berlioz*, ed. Stanley Sadie (New York: Oxford, 1982), 17.

<sup>73</sup> Hector Berlioz to Ferdinand Hiller, included by the editor in *Memoires of Hector Berlioz*, 103-104.

actual, her theatrical personas accruing substance and agency in his letters.”<sup>74</sup> Berlioz is a paradigmatic example of the problem of madness and multiple realities. It is evident that he either had difficulty, or deliberately chose not to draw clear distinction between life and art. He often interpreted the meaning of the events of his life through the works of Virgil, Shakespeare, and Goethe.

Berlioz refocused his amorous energies on the Belgian pianist Camille Molke. He was attracted by her musical talent, instability and beauty. Camille was tangible in a way that he thought Harriet could never be; she provided a willing ear to which he eagerly verbalized the details of his “moral malady”.<sup>75</sup> In a display of characteristic haste, he asked her to marry him after a single summer.<sup>76</sup> With the engagement secure, he was forced to leave for Rome in the winter of 1830. The previous year, he won the *Prix de Rome* with his cantata *Sardanapale* which earned him a five-year stipend, but also stipulated that he had to study music in Rome for two years. Berlioz found Rome to be “perfectly intolerable”. He spent most of his free time wandering in the Abruzzi Mountains agonizing over his separation from Camille.<sup>77</sup> On one of those days he, “...once more fell prey to the miserable disease (mental, nervous, imaginary, if you like),” which he called the “*bane of isolation*”.<sup>78</sup> He wrote, “I suffered agonies, and, casting myself down on the ground, groaned and clutched the earth wildly...in my passionate struggles against the horrible feeling of loneliness and absence.”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Francesca Brittan, “Berlioz and the Pathological Fantastic: Melancholy, Monomania, and Romantic Autobiography,” *19<sup>th</sup>-Century Music* 29, no. 3 (Spring, 2006): 216.

<sup>75</sup> MacDonal, *Berlioz*, 18.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>77</sup> Berlioz, *Memoires*, 145.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

He soon received a letter from Camille's mother that shattered his fragile emotional stability. In his absence, Camille married the heir to a wealthy piano manufacturer.<sup>80</sup> What followed is an excellent testament to the volatility of Berlioz's personality. He "...literally suffered from convulsions, as moments of lucidity followed upon moments of rage."<sup>81</sup> He tried to drown himself unsuccessfully, but soon became committed to revenge rather than suicide. He made plans to return to Paris armed with a maid's costume and a pair of revolvers. He would disguise himself as a servant and, "...kill without compunction two guilty women and one innocent man."<sup>82</sup> In preparation he sent a revised copy of the *Fantastique* to a friend.<sup>83</sup> Although Berlioz's resolution ultimately faltered, these were the circumstances from which the *Fantastique* was born; this symphony more than any other was the progeny of the composer's hyper-emotionality and it is without coincidence that critics unanimously consider it his greatest work. Berlioz had captured therein the essence of madness in music.

After winning the *Prix de Rome*, Berlioz finally felt prepared to write a full scale symphony.<sup>84</sup> Although the idea for the *Fantastique* came to him before he had ever laid eyes on Harriet or Camille, their presence in the finished product is unmistakable. This presence is made dubiously evident in the symphony's literary complement. A young musician afflicted by a certain "sickness of spirit" falls in love with a woman, "who unites all the charms of the ideal person his imagination was dreaming of."<sup>85</sup> In the second movement the artist is led on a spiritual tour of life's most beautiful and satisfying moments. In the fourth his bliss disintegrates. Now certain that he has been betrayed, the musician tries to poison himself with

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>81</sup> Bloom, *Berlioz*, 57.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>84</sup> Macdonald, *Berlioz*, 19.

<sup>85</sup> Edward T. Cone, ed., *Berlioz: Fantastic Symphony* (New York: Chappell, 1971)



opium. He survives, but is racked by intense hallucinations. In the Faustian *mode*, the program culminates at a witches' Sabbath, where the muse joins in the "diabolical orgy" amid a cacophony of damnation.<sup>86</sup>

The opium overdose in the fourth movement, *Marche au Supplice*, may have also been inspired by actual events. Opium and cannabis were popular in Parisian artistic circles throughout the nineteenth-century. According to Brittan, Berlioz attributed his depression to, "...an imagination so vivid that he experienced extraordinary impressions akin to opium hallucinations."<sup>87</sup> The occasional appearance of opium in his letters and autobiography, suggest that Berlioz had an affinity for the drug that he may have picked up from his father.<sup>88</sup> Moreover, it stands to reason that Berlioz would have found relief from periods of manic-inertia in a drug that numbs both mind and body and would have had easy access to it given his connections in the medical field. After two years in Rome, Berlioz returned to Paris and began courting Harriet Smithson once again. Given his recent rise to celebrity in the wake of the *Fantastique*, she was more inclined to take him seriously. In September of 1834 they secured a marriage license, but Harriet's sister, who he often referred to as "that damn hunchback", stole it and tore it up. Afterwards, Harriet reconsidered and moved the wedding date back several months. Crushed, Berlioz attempted suicide for the second time. He swallowed two whole bottles of opium tablets, but had second thoughts and gagged himself with ipecac. The whole ordeal left him "near death", but owing to his dramatics, Harriet married him in early October.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Brittan, "Berlioz and the Pathological Fantastic," 218.

<sup>88</sup> Berlioz, *Memoires*, 6.

<sup>89</sup> D. Kern Holomon, *Berlioz*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 150.

Berlioz's artistic life was heavily influenced by Beethoven, and he especially drew on the master's theories of artistic 'externalization.'<sup>90</sup> Therefore he was quite familiar with the idea that art could provide an emotional outlet; an outlet that he desperately needed. In 1830 he wrote, "I have only ever found one way of satisfying this enormous appetite for emotion, and that is music. Without it I am certain that I could not go on living."<sup>91</sup> Music was therapeutic; a *raison d'être* that instilled the artist's suffering with meaning.

Despite an initially mixed reception, the genius of the *Fantastique* is now well recognized as a triumph by music critics and art historians. Hugh MacDonald praises it as, "...The first unequivocal declaration of romantic ideals in style and musical language."<sup>92</sup> With the *Fantastique*, Berlioz achieved something truly revolutionary. Stripped of the valuable insights and energies generated by his illness, Berlioz's artistic influence might not have been so paramount. According to MacDonald, illness "motivated him toward immense musical thought and concentrated his compositional power. In his letters, disease itself is figured as a generative force and a central impetus for the *Fantastique*."<sup>93</sup> Although his psychological abnormality inspired all his music, the *Symphonie Fantastique* is the pure distillation of the composer's irrational obsession.

Like Flaubert, Berlioz's understanding of insanity was shaped by scientific as well as artistic discourse on the subject. He was familiar with the former because of his father's standing in the medical community and his own medical training. At the Academy, the young composer was likely exposed to the groundbreaking work of Jean-Etienne-Dominique Esquirol. Building on the work of his famous mentor Phillippe Pinel, Esquirol theorized the new mental

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<sup>90</sup> Bloom, *Berlioz*, 3.

<sup>91</sup> MacDonald, *Berlioz*, 17.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>93</sup> Brittan, "Berlioz and the Pathological Fantastic," 217.

malady of “monomania.”<sup>94</sup> He identified its primary symptom as, “the pathological fixation on a single idea,” *une idée fixe*.<sup>95</sup> He also suggested that those most likely to suffer from monomania were, “endowed with marked intelligence, sensitivity and vivid imagination.”<sup>96</sup> Thus it became the unofficial disease of the Romantic Movement and a personal revelation for Berlioz. He meticulously diagnosed himself within this new psychological framework. In the scattered chronicle of the construction of the *Fantastique*, Berlioz adopted a great deal of theory and terminology directly from the early work of Esquirol. Perhaps on some level the symphony was an attempt to give the new diagnosis an artistic utility.

Berlioz died in Paris in 1869 of a stroke. Although he continued to be productive throughout life, none of his later works was as successful as the *Fantastique*. This owes more to political and cultural changes than a decline in his talent. After 1848, the revolutionary government in France increasingly began to support its own agendas in the arts. Berlioz struggled as a result. He detested republicanism, and his symphonies and operas tended to center around classical or universal themes rather than those of the nation or *volk*. His grand opera based on books two and four of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, *Les Troyens*, barely saw the stage.<sup>97</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Flaubert’s disorder helped him construct *Emma Bovary* and *Salammbô*, both powerful projections of his understandings of hysteria and his own nervous energies. Berlioz used the therapeutic device of artistic ‘externalization’ to capture the essence of madness in music. Although they both suffered in different ways, madness was an integral part of their artistic

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<sup>94</sup> Brittan, “Berlioz and the Pathological Fantastic,” 220.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>97</sup> Macdonald, *Berlioz*, conclusion.

excellence. A careful look at the relationship between their lives and work suggests the strong link between creativity and personal crisis which transcends disciplinary categories.

It is arguable that the Enlightenment's extreme focus on reason disabled its potential for unbiased commentary on insanity. Romanticism, on the other hand, opened the door for artistic as well as scientific reevaluations of mental illness. Jan Goldstein has highlighted the interdependence between the infant field of psychology and the artistic community in the nineteenth-century. In both disciplines "...an age of amateurs struggled to explain, capture and memorialize a whole universe of human suffering that had hitherto been unexplored."<sup>98</sup> Thus Flaubert, Berlioz and numerous other artists and intellectuals afflicted by a variety of psychoses in the course of the nineteenth-century were in a special position to shape changing perceptions of their ailments.

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<sup>98</sup> Jan Goldstein, *Console and Classify: The French Psychiatric Profession in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). Intro.

## CHAPTER II

## ‘Sick Prophets’ and Dionysian Man: Friedrich Nietzsche and Rainer Maria Rilke

*Introduction*

Friedrich Nietzsche wrote prophetically about a radical philosophic perspective pregnant with the hallmarks of both modern and post-modern thought decades before they achieved widespread cultural significance.<sup>99</sup> His presence in the twentieth-century is like that of a specter, haunting European intellectual life and politics right up to the present. In Germany, figures such as Rainer Maria Rilke, Thomas Mann, and Karl Jaspers developed a more integral understanding of Nietzsche’s aesthetic reevaluation while Adolph Hitler bastardized the *ubermensch* into a justification for genocidal anti-Semitism and Teutonic supremacy. In Italy, Futurists such as Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Umberto Boccioni, and Luigi Russolo built their movement from Nietzschean foundations while, Giovanni Gentile and Mussolini used his philosophy, albeit selectively, to support the anti-liberal currents of Fascist ideology. French Existentialism from its precursor André Gide to its maturation under Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus was heavily reliant on Nietzsche’s stoic atheism.<sup>100</sup> The list is too long to cite in full, but necessitates the inclusion of Sigmund Freud, who of his own admission, “... had to stop reading Nietzsche for fear that [he] would have nothing original left to say.”<sup>101</sup> Read in parity, Freud’s distinction between the ‘Id’ and the ‘Ego’ in his 1920 “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” is uncomfortably

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<sup>99</sup> Allan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). 29-64

<sup>100</sup> For a brief list see: Friedrich Nietzsche, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*. ed/trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 446. For a more complete discussion see; Rüdiger Safranski, *Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography*, trans. Shelley Frisch (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002), Epilogue: Europe Discovers Nietzsche, 317-350.

<sup>101</sup> *The Will to Power: The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche*, Video Cassette, Robert Solomon and Kathleen Higgins: University of Texas/Austin (The great teachers series), Lecture 3.

similar to the formalization of Apollonian and Dionysian aesthetics in *The Birth of Tragedy* five decades earlier.<sup>102</sup> Nietzsche was, without a doubt, *the* philosopher of the unconscious mind.

Nietzsche is to postmodern philosophy what Rainer Maria Rilke is to its art. In this respect he is also deserving of the label “prophet”. Rilke is arguably the single most influential poet writing in German in the first half of the twentieth-century. The span of his life coincides with a moment in European history when artists were presented with the challenge of creating a new art that would reflect the recent transformation of Europe’s cultural soul. Nietzsche had caught sight of this new wave long before it broke on European shores and, in many ways, is partially responsible for its breaking. Rilke and Nietzsche, however, shared more than just philosophical, aesthetic and theological orientations. They also shared the common burden of mental illness. While the syphilis spirochete bore deeper into Nietzsche’s brilliant mind, Rilke fought to retain his psychological integrity against the erratic tides of schizophrenia. The abnormal, “a-rational” thought processes inspired by these illnesses left an indelible print on the structures and forms of their creative products. This chapter draws explicit lines between Nietzsche’s and Rilke’s unique experiences with mental illness and the themes, content, and evolution of their work.

### *Friedrich Nietzsche*

The third day of January 1889, Friedrich Nietzsche finally lost the upper hand in his long and tenuous struggle with insanity. On the Piazza Carlo Alberto in Turin, Nietzsche threw himself around the neck of a draft horse in an act of delirious pity. He lost consciousness and

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<sup>102</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” (London: The international psycho-analytical press, 1922). & Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music*, trans. Shaun Whiteside (New York: Penguin Group, 2003).

when he awoke, he assumed the persona of Dionysus.<sup>103</sup> That day drew a bold line between his brilliant career as a philosopher and the eleven year void before his physical death in the August of 1900.

After the break, Nietzsche was admitted to the Jena Sanatorium where he was diagnosed with general paralysis of the insane stemming from terminal syphilis. An anonymous patient at the clinic provides one of the few records of Nietzsche's stay there. He notes that, "[Herr Nietzsche] was most annoyed when he was inspected after a walk, since stones and all kinds of things were found in his coat-pockets." Throughout the day he would repeat the mantra, "Professor Friedrich Nietzsche," while clutching to a set of printed notes.<sup>104</sup> One cannot help but be struck by the contrast in images between the powerful, authoritarian philosopher of books like *The Will to Power*, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, and *Ecce Homo* and the childish invalid who gathers rocks and trinkets and dances furiously enough to warrant restraint.<sup>105</sup>

This section chronicles the origins and evolutions of Nietzsche's instability while explicitly mapping out how the experience of both physical and mental disintegration figured into one of the most influential philosophies of the twentieth-century. Indeed, some of the most pervasive themes of Nietzschean thought are explicitly connected to this experience. Themes such as the Dionysian, naturalism, dualism, the will to power and self-conquering provide the infrastructure of Nietzsche's philosophy and have been directly shaped by the philosopher's personal experience with abnormal thought. Even the minutia of Nietzsche's aphoristic style and his growing egotism are directly connected to this experience.

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<sup>103</sup> Georges Bataille and Annette Michelson, "Nietzsche's Madness," *October* 36, George Bataille on Laughter, Sacrifice, Nietzsche, Unknowing, (1986): 43. Also; Lesley Chamberlain, *Nietzsche in Turin: An Intimate Biography* (New York: Picador USA, 1996), 208.

<sup>104</sup> *Conversations with Nietzsche: A Life in the Words of His Contemporaries*, ed. Sander L. Gilman, trans. David J. Parent (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 221.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

Before we begin to make explicit connections between Nietzsche's life and work, it may be necessary to explain and justify a method that will no doubt arouse skepticism. First, this process is far from unique. The overwhelming majority of Nietzsche's biographers have attempted to synthesize his life and work in their own fashion. Although working out of disparate motivations, the original memoirs written by his sister Elizabeth Förster-Nietzsche and Lou Salomé focus at once on the man and the philosophy with relative equality given to each theme.<sup>106</sup> Likewise, Walter Kaufman, the foremost Nietzsche scholar to date, also highlights their interdependence.<sup>107</sup> Even the most recent biographies written by Ronald Hayman and Rüdiger Safranski are loyal to this tradition.<sup>108</sup> This essay adjusts the historical lens to examine how the experiences of madness specifically, rather than those of life generally have channeled the flow of Nietzsche's thought. The implication, however, remains unchanged; that it is impossible to develop a clear understanding of the philosophy without a corresponding familiarity with the philosopher himself.

It was this argument that caused the break between Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. Derrida argued that in writing *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault had arrogantly broken cardinal postulates of philosophy by reexamining the evolution of the discipline with respect to its historical context. Like many others, Derrida felt that philosophy was irreducible, that it existed outside of and above the moral and cultural restraints of its time and of its creators.<sup>109</sup> Foucault, on the other hand, refused to recognize that same sovereignty. In its stead, he championed the supremacy of context. In his masterpiece, *The Archeology of Knowledge* he

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<sup>106</sup> Elizabeth Förster-Nietzsche, *The Life of Nietzsche*, vol 1 & vol 2, trans. Anthony M. Ludovici (New York: Sturgis and Walton Company, 1912). and Lou Salomé, *Friedrich Nietzsche: The Man in his Works*, trans/ed. Siegfried Mandel (Redding Ridge: Black Swan Books, 1988).

<sup>107</sup> Walter A. Kaufman, *Philosopher, psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), prologue; *The Nietzsche Legend*.

<sup>108</sup> Ronald Hayman, *Nietzsche* (New York: Routledge, 1999). & Safranski, *Nietzsche*.

<sup>109</sup> See Foucault's reply to Derrida; Michel Foucault, *The History of Madness*, ed/trans. Jean Khalfa (New York: Routledge, 2006), 576-590. [this is not part of the original content and cannot be found in older editions]



counters, “If the history of thought could remain the locus of uninterrupted continuities...if it could weave around everything that men say and do...it would provide a privileged shelter for the sovereignty of consciousness.”<sup>110</sup>

Foucault once referred to his *History of Madness* as a project of, “great Nietzschean research,” paying homage as much to their shared irreverence for the sacred origin of ideas as their explorations into Dionysian themes.<sup>111</sup> Much of Nietzsche’s philosophy is an exercise in iconoclasm and the rejection of classical systems such as positivism and dialectical historicism. This often meant trying to expose the motivations of the philosophers who preceded him. In Nietzsche’s opinion, “Nothing at all about the philosopher is impersonal: above all his morality provides decided and decisive evidence about *who he is*-i.e., the relative positioning of the innermost drives in his nature.”<sup>112</sup> In *The Twilight of Idols*, he devotes a whole section to the ‘Problem of Socrates,’ claiming that Socrates’ well-documented unattractiveness is reason enough to question the sincerity of his entire program. He argues that like Christians, Socrates’ idealism was proof that he actually despised his own ugly existence and that his exuberance and magnanimity amounted to nothing more than false bravado.<sup>113</sup> Other examples of this treatment can be found in his various intrigues into the pessimism of his self-proclaimed mentor, Schopenhauer and his attacks on Spinoza as a “sick hermit.”<sup>114</sup> In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche sees philosophy as a sort of memoir which betrays the strengths and weaknesses of the

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<sup>110</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, trans. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1982), 12.

<sup>111</sup> Safranski, *Nietzsche*, 338.

<sup>112</sup> Ronald Hayman, “Nietzsche’s Madness,” *Partisan Review* 47 no.1 (1980): 33. (all translations of Nietzsche’s writing from the original German are done by the author)

<sup>113</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Complete works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. Oscar Levy, trans. Anthony M. Ludovici, vol. 16 *The Twilight of the Idols; Or How to Philosophize with the Hammer* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1927), 9-14.

<sup>114</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche. *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*. ed/trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 203.

voice of its operator. For Nietzsche, philosophy cannot merely be written, it must also be lived so that life will instill it with meaning.<sup>115</sup>

Thus we proceed in the spirit of Foucault and of Nietzsche himself, to locate the man behind the books, a man we cannot know from his philosophy alone. This effort will rely primarily on three sets of sources: the letters, the biographies, and the philosophy itself. Unfortunately Nietzsche left no formal memoir, therefore we must triangulate from these sources to locate the clearest portrait of the philosopher.

Whether real or imagined, Nietzsche seems to have believed that his propensity towards mental illness was inherited.<sup>116</sup> His father, the Lutheran minister Karl Ludwig Nietzsche, died of a “softening of the brain” in 1849. In 1882, Nietzsche wrote to Lou Salomé that after being lured to a production of *Carmen* he, “...wondered in all innocence and malice if [he] had any tendency to madness.”<sup>117</sup> He dismissed the prospect until the *Carmen* music began and he, “...was submerged for half an hour in tears and heart beatings.”<sup>118</sup> Later, in 1884, Resa von Schirnhöfer recorded a conversation with Nietzsche in which he explains a series of exotic floral hallucinations. Afterwards, “...with his great, dark eyes fixed on [her] anxiously, and with a disturbing urgency...he asked: ‘Don’t you believe this condition is a symptom of incipient madness? My father died of a brain disease.’”<sup>119</sup> Finally, in an 1888 letter to Franz Overbeck, he explains his “nervous exhaustion” as “partly hereditary [and] partly hard-earned.”<sup>120</sup> It is impossible to pinpoint when, exactly, it dawned on Nietzsche that he might have inherited a

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<sup>115</sup> Nietzsche, *The Basic Writings*, 674. See aphorism three in its entirety for a discussion of the meaning of ‘living’ philosophy.

<sup>116</sup> Hayman, “Nietzsche’s Madness,” 33.

<sup>117</sup> Nietzsche to Lou Salomé, September 16, 1882, *Selected Letters of...*, 192-193.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 192-193. In the literary complement to Bizet’s *Carmen*, he projects the piece as “madness in music.”

<sup>119</sup> Hayman, “Nietzsche’s Madness,” 33.

<sup>120</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche to Franz Overbeck, July 4, 1888, in *Nietzsche: A Self-Portrait from His Letters*, ed/trans. Peter Fuss and Henry Shapiro (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 120.

brain disease from his father. What is important, however, is that he did reach this conclusion and that it is unlikely he would have come to it without some reasonable suspicion.

According to Nietzsche's mother and sister, Karl was diagnosed with "softening of the brain" only after a head injury incurred in a fall down a flight of stairs. There is reason enough, however, to believe that *if* Karl *had* experienced psychological symptoms prior to the fall, if there was a fall, there may have been a corresponding effort by the family to cover it up. Elisabeth had, after all, done the same in her brother's case. Indeed, her recollection of his final months has met complete rejection by subsequent biographers. In the chapter entitled "The Catastrophe" she attributes Nietzsche's final collapse as having resulted from a series of strokes rather than syphilitic paralysis.<sup>121</sup> Therefore, if there was some plot to obscure the circumstances of Karl's mental disintegration, it would not have been an isolated effort for the Nietzsche family. Second, Nietzsche's concern with having inherited some nervous disorder from his father is difficult to explain, if he also believed that his father's affliction had been caused by a single instance of physical trauma. One efficient explanation would cover both cases; that the reverend was syphilitic and that Nietzsche contracted the disease congenitally.<sup>122</sup> Given that there is no conclusive evidence to support this theory, however, the door should remain open to other alternatives.

The first alternative incorporates the broadest range of possibilities and is therefore the most likely. This is that Nietzsche and his father both had syphilis, but that the transmission had been individual rather than congenital. This meshes well with Karl Nietzsche's symptoms of blindness, incoherence and extreme pain.<sup>123</sup> It would also explain Elisabeth and her mother's efforts to conceal a shameful diagnosis on both counts. The other alternative is that Karl was not

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<sup>121</sup> Förster-Nietzsche, *The Life of Nietzsche*, vol. 2, 387-402.

<sup>122</sup> Deborah Hayden, *Pox: Genius Madness, and the Mysteries of syphilis* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 193.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

a syphilitic and that any disease or disorder that he may have passed on to his son was disparate from his struggles with syphilis.

Although there is lingering debate over the circumstances of contraction, the question of whether or not Nietzsche was syphilitic has been all but resolved.<sup>124</sup> Syphilis has long been associated with romanticized images of the mad artist and the mad intellectual. With this diagnosis Nietzsche enters a long and distinguished list. Names like Flaubert, Beethoven, Van Gogh, Goya, Manet, Rimbaud, and Wilde come to mind, each suffering and drawing inspiration from the disease in their own ways. Its physical symptoms are lesions, genital scars and discoloration, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, headaches, body aches, and eventually, paralysis. Psychologically, it can cause delirium, hallucinations, nervousness, paranoia and complete breakdowns.<sup>125</sup> As we have seen with Flaubert, in the nineteenth-century the treatments were almost as destructive as the disease itself. While mercury and bromide tinctures were the most common, chloral and cannabis were also used to treat the related nausea and insomnia. We know from his sister's account that Nietzsche was prescribed all of these at one time or another.

One of the real mysteries of the disease is its cyclical nature. From week to week, month to month, or even day to day, it is possible for those infected to swing violently between periods of crippling illness to manic euphoria. When we factor the pragmatic dynamics of syphilis into our understanding of Nietzsche's madness, the results are consistent with some longstanding observations about his life and work. Whether or not he personally understood the technical implications of the disease is unimportant. What is critical, however, is to understand how his personal experience with syphilis shaped his work. In the process, we must be careful not to oversimplify Nietzsche's madness as the unique product of a singular disease since undiagnosed

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<sup>124</sup> Pia Volz, *Nietzsche im Labyrinth seiner Krankheit: Eine Medizinisch-biographische Untersuchung* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1990).

<sup>125</sup> Hayden, *Pox*.

or otherwise unknown factors may have played a role. Moreover, one should not overlook the extent to which his own philosophical inclinations led him to embrace irrational thought.

Nietzsche's life was a constant struggle between sickness and health, the rational and irrational, the moral and amoral. Understanding the dynamics of these contrasts can help unearth the single most pervasive theme of his philosophy: the determination of health. Daniel R. Ahern has argued that Nietzsche, "...approaches virtually everything he speaks of in the manner of a physician of culture. As is appropriate to such a physician, he possesses...a clinical standpoint."<sup>126</sup> In *The Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche writes that, "Since the healthy cannot be expected to take care of the sick, we need doctors and nurses who are themselves sick...sickliness is normal. Man is the sick animal, insecure, inconstant, indeterminate."<sup>127</sup>

Read systematically, Nietzsche's letters are overwhelming proof that the themes of sickness and health were consistently in the forefront of his mind. Indeed, there are few of his surviving letters that do not at least give mention to, or even explain in detail, his mental and/or physical wellbeing. Although this was fairly common protocol in nineteenth-century epistle writing, it seems to have a heightened presence in Nietzsche's correspondence. In most cases Nietzsche reported physical and "moral" problems in unison, a practice which reflects the nature of his disease.

By writing philosophy, Nietzsche was able to escape from the weakness of his own body. Philosophy represented triumph over self and triumph over the world. He captures this struggle in the *Genealogy of Morals*, writing, "How much one is able to endure: distress, want, bad

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<sup>126</sup> Daniel R. Ahern, *Nietzsche as Cultural Physician*, (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1952), 1.

<sup>127</sup> Hayman, "Nietzsche's Madness", 32.

weather, sickness, toil, solitude...born as one is to a subterranean life of struggle: one emerges again and again into the light, one experiences again and again one's golden hour of victory."<sup>128</sup>

This contrast led him to think of sickness and health in the broader terms of weakness and strength. He theorized that the will to power constituted the most fundamental organic drive. In other words, organic matter from the protozoa to the human body is locked in a constant struggle to overwhelm the other organisms that share its environment.<sup>129</sup> Similarly, Nietzsche viewed culture as the peculiar product of the engagement between human bodies, and, therefore, believed that its problems required "...*physiological* investigation and interpretation."<sup>130</sup> By physiological, of course, he was not thinking along the lines of our contemporary conceptions of human physiology. Genetics, neuroscience, and evolutionary psychology had not yet entered into the equation, rather this physiological approach was above all defined as something *other* than the distinctly metaphysical or idealist philosophies of the past. Like so many of Nietzsche's postulates, it received more of its definition from what it is not than what it is.

These examinations of the will to power led Nietzsche to some very unorthodox conclusions about what is "healthy" and what is "sickly" for the individual and for society. In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault argues that madness is an exclusionary historical construction which draws a stark line between sane and insane.<sup>131</sup> Following Foucault, we might say that Nietzsche was conscious that he fell on the wrong side of this dichotomy and that much of his philosophy is an attempt to refigure himself as the 'sane' one and to indict everyone else as diseased. Since power struggle, for example, is the most basic drive, healthy organisms embrace, without compunction, the instinctual side of self. This means that the axis of motivation rightly

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<sup>128</sup> Nietzsche, *The Basic Writings*, 480.

<sup>129</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufman, (New York: Knopf Doubleday publishing group, 1968).

<sup>130</sup> Ahern, *Nietzsche*, 15.

<sup>131</sup> Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*.

centers on opportunism, passion, irrationality, selfishness, and even cruelty. According to Nietzsche, this does not imply the abolition of a moral framework, but rather that common virtues need to be reevaluated to complement his epiphany on human motivation. Furthermore, Nietzsche viewed cultural sickness as being rooted in false value systems. He believed that the two primary ailments of modern culture were the aesthetic decadence of art and philosophy and the slave morality of Christianity.

Decadence was a term that Nietzsche applied to artists and intellectuals with increasing liberty as his career progressed. He saw all forms of decadence as having a similar origin; that is whenever the atomistic is favored over the whole, decadence will be the inevitable byproduct. In politics, it was John Stuart Mill's "freedom of the individual" that he thought had refigured decadence as a virtue. Likewise, in literature when "...the page gains life at the expense of the whole-the whole is no longer a whole."<sup>132</sup>

In music it was the presence of this "miniaturism" that caused his violent break with Richard Wagner.<sup>133</sup> In the second half of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche had praised Wagner for rejecting musical traditions of the preceding century which he saw as analytical and dispassionate in favor of more mythical and monumental directions. When Wagner began to gravitate towards the Volkisch movement and its ingrained anti-Semitism, however, he broke ties with characteristic dramatics. Nietzsche made his growing distaste public with the publication of *Human all too Human* in 1878. But his most scathing criticism can be found in *The Case of Wagner* (1888), where he writes:

I place this perspective at the outset: Wagner's art is sick. The problems he presents on the stage—all of them problems of hysterics—the convulsive nature of his effects, his

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<sup>132</sup> Nietzsche, *The Basic Writings*, 626.

<sup>133</sup> This is Nietzsche's explanation for the break, others have suggested that it was a bi-product of the Lou Salomé break and her residual admiration for Wagner and actually had little to do with Nietzsche's philosophical epiphany.

overexcited sensibility, his taste that required ever stronger spices, his instability which he dressed up as principles, not least of all the choice of his heroes and heroines-consider them as physiological types...all of this taken together represents a profile of sickness that permits no further doubt. *Wagner est une nerveuse* [Wagner is neurotic].<sup>134</sup>

Here we see how Nietzsche's criticisms of Wagner as a decadent are leveled on the grounds of sickness and health.

Nietzsche understood that by making claims against the decadence of a "miniaturist" he handed his own critics a bombshell. His aphoristic style, which packs each page with meaning but leaves his books virtually impossible to synthesize, marks the epitome of miniaturist philosophy.<sup>135</sup> Nietzsche blamed the dilemma as a common curse of his generation, but circumnavigated it by employing a means versus ends equation; explaining that he intended to retain his own miniaturism in an effort to destroy decadence once and for all.<sup>136</sup>

In Nietzsche's eyes, philosophical decadence was somewhat disparate from artistic decadence. His primary criticism of decadent philosophers was their adoption of philosophical systems. He writes that, "...The will to a *system*: in a philosopher, morally speaking, a subtle corruption, a disease of the character: amorally speaking, his will to appear more stupid than he is."<sup>137</sup> In his opinion, systems thinking was "childish" and far too inflexible to adapt to the natural complexity of the philosopher's craft. It was a sign of sickness, decadence, and the hyper-rationality he viewed as the crisis of the modern-age.

Nietzsche also used the physiological language of sickness and health in his criticism of Christianity. He indicts the Christian conception of redemption through love as, "...*sickness*,

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 622.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>137</sup> Kaufman, *Nietzsche*, 59.



beyond any doubt, the most terrible sickness that has ever raged in man.”<sup>138</sup> Specifically, Nietzsche saw Christianity as the product of exhaustion, a world view that attracted the weak and destitute, that promised a second chance to those who were too sick to flourish in earthly life.

Nietzsche’s public conceptions of sickness and health were often disparate, if not diametrically opposed to the prevailing definitions of the nineteenth-century. In some practical respects, however, his personal understanding of these themes was very much in line with that of his contemporaries. Foucault has discussed at length the confidence that medical discourse of the classical period confided in the influence of environmental factors on both physical and ‘moral’ health.<sup>139</sup> This is a distinction that is certainly not lost in the nineteenth-century. The high mountain air as well as the dry sea breeze was thought to have powerful regenerative qualities. Nietzsche’s adherence to this assumption is made evident by both his writing and his actions. He was perpetually on the move, trying to find a climate that might offer him some relief. He spent several summers high in the Swiss Alps in Sils-Maria, otherwise favoring Italian cities such as Genoa, Rapallo, and above all, Turin. In a desperate letter to Franz Overbeck in 1883 Nietzsche writes, “I, with my physical style of thinking, now see myself as the victim of a terrestrial and climatic disturbance, to which Europe is exposed...it is for the best by the sea!”<sup>140</sup> Speaking of Zürich and Basel he reflects that, “...the climate in these cities goes contrary to our *productive* powers, and this constant torment makes us ill.”<sup>141</sup>

This climatic sensitivity filters into Nietzsche’s philosophy as well. In *Ecce Homo* he metaphorically romanticizes his time spent in the high altitudes, explaining that, “Philosophy, as I have so far understood and lived it, means living voluntarily among ice and high

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<sup>138</sup> Nietzsche, *The Basic Writings*, 529.

<sup>139</sup> Foucault, *History of Madness*, 110.

<sup>140</sup> Nietzsche to Franz Overbeck, February 11, 1883, *Selected Letters of...*, 206-207.

<sup>141</sup> Nietzsche to Elisabeth Nietzsche, March 31, 1885, *Selected Letters of...*, 238.

mountains...[t]hose who can breathe the air of my writing know that it is an air of the heights, a *strong* air.”<sup>142</sup> On occasion Nietzsche went so far as to make direct connections between the weather and his productive capacities. During the brutal winter of 1882-1883 he wrote that, “The enormous burden which lies on me as a result of the weather has transformed itself into thoughts and feelings whose pressure in me was *terrible*...as a result of ten absolutely clear and fresh January days, my ‘Zarathustra’ came into being, the most *liberated* of all my productions.”<sup>143</sup>

Although more often melancholic and reflective, Nietzsche also experienced moments of electric bliss and empowerment. The most sustained period of this manic inertia was the summer and fall of 1888, when in a single year he worked through six books, nearly the equivalent of his entire career prior to that date. It proved to be an unsustainable pace, and things quickly unraveled in January of 1889. The extreme polarity of Nietzsche’s moods was likely the product of his broader experience with syphilis. Whatever the source, these shifts may offer valuable insight into the multiple voices and self-contradictions which emerge in his philosophy as well as his adherence to a naturalistic style.

The philosophy of naturalism, first formalized by Immanuel Kant, holds that individuals should approach life on naturalistic terms. In other words, just as nature is defined by the cycles of the seasons and the life cycle of birth, maturation, decline and death, so too should individuals perceive their own roles in the world. As we have seen, Nietzsche applied this “physical way of thinking” to his dichotomy of sickness and health. It also informed his famous distinction between the “historical” and the “supra-historical” man made in part II of *Thoughts out of Season*, “The Use and Abuse of History.” The “historical man” rests all his faith in a future

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<sup>142</sup> Nietzsche, *The Basic Writings*, 674.

<sup>143</sup> Nietzsche to Peter Gast (Köselitz), February 19, 1883, *Selected Letters of...*, 208.

which is informed by the past while the “supra-historical man... does not envisage salvation in the process but for whom the world is finished in every single moment and its end attained.”<sup>144</sup> Nietzsche’s supra-historical man lives for the moment which is enriched by a deep familiarity with the past and is therefore able to face the struggles of life with stoic determination. Here Nietzsche quotes the tortured Italian poet, Giacomo Leopardi: “Nothing lives that were worth thy pains, and the earth deserves not a sigh. Our being is pain and weariness, and the world is mud-nothing else. Be calm.”<sup>145</sup> In Nietzsche’s view, history is most valuable to both the individual and the nation in a naturalistic sense. It should be worn like a pair of spectacles which enhance perceptions without masking or distorting realities.

Another possible product of Nietzsche’s psychological polarity is the stylistic point of multiple voices. The use of multiple voices in the history of philosophy is quite limited and Nietzsche certainly stands out as a master of its employment. Although there are several examples of alternate voices, the madman’s pronouncement of the death of God and the figure of Zarathustra are the most salient.

“The Madman” is the one hundred and twenty-fifth aphorism in *The Joyful Wisdom* in which Nietzsche depicts, “...a madman who on a bright morning lighted a lantern and ran to the market-place calling out incessantly: ‘I seek God!’”<sup>146</sup> Once an audience gathered he declared to them, “*We have Killed him,-you and I! We are all his murderers!*”<sup>147</sup> After smashing his lantern, his final pronouncement is that the murder of God is not complete, but will continue to be the

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<sup>144</sup> Kaufman, *Nietzsche*, 122-123.

<sup>145</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, vol. 5, trans. Thomas Common, *Thoughts out of Season* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1924), 14-15. (In recent translations this title has been recast as; *Unfashionable Observations*).

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 10, *The Joyful Wisdom* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1924), 167. (In recent translations this title has been translated more literally as; *The Gay Science*).

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

most profound endeavor of the age.<sup>148</sup> This famous aphorism has inspired multiple interpretations, and it would not be original to suggest that this madman was a metaphor for the philosopher himself. Whatever Nietzsche's intention, it remains that he used the voice of a madman to reveal one of his most passionate beliefs.

*Zarathustra* represents the philosopher's most sustained experiment with alternative voices. Kaufman notes that, "The choice of Zarathustra as his great protagonist may have been suggested to Nietzsche by his own dualistic tendencies. Here was the founder of a great dualistic religion, the prophet of light and darkness, Good and Evil..."<sup>149</sup> Indeed, these notions of Yin and Yang figured into his philosophy long before the writing of *Zarathustra* in 1883. Dionysus, Nietzsche's most prevalent symbol, was a dualistic god as well. Edith Hamilton points out that like wine, Dionysus could be both a blessing and a curse upon man. The natural beauty of his worshipers contrasted with the horrors of the frenzy and the orgy.<sup>150</sup> Whether we choose to call it dualism or polarity, Nietzsche's attraction to this phenomenon was likely informed by his own cycling between sickness and health, madness and sanity, energy and lethargy.

Dionysus is Nietzsche's most original and emblematic symbol of health and balance. Ironically, it was also a symbol for instinct, overflowing passion, and madness. As a trained classical philologist, he had an intense admiration for the classical world. This nostalgic classism inspired him to search for the origins of Ancient Greece's cultural supremacy. The early fruits of that search were a series of lectures at the University of Basel, followed by the publication of his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*.

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>149</sup> Kaufman, *Nietzsche*, 171.

<sup>150</sup> Edith Hamilton, *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes* (London: New English Library Limited, 1942), 56.

The unfavorable reception of *The Birth of Tragedy* marks a significant turning point in Nietzsche's life and work. Feeling oppressed by the rigidity of institutional intellectualism, he broke virtually all ties with the University of Basel by the early 1870s. This liberation and resistance to categorization is plainly evident in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Part philosophy, part history, part aesthetic treatise, it is a bizarre and profound work. In its pages, Dionysus is vividly reborn into modern aesthetic philosophy.

It is possible that this first encounter with Dionysus preceded the onslaught of Nietzsche's madness. If either the classic story of his contraction of syphilis in 1865 or the unlikely explanation of congenital transmission is accepted, however, then it is probable that he was experiencing at least mild psychological symptoms at the time. This assumption is reinforced by letters pre-dating 1872 which note not only physical illness, but "excitability of nerves" as well.<sup>151</sup> Whether or not Nietzsche's madness played a role in the original formulation of this symbol is of secondary importance since the Dionysian model continued to factor into his philosophy for the next eighteen years. During this period an interesting evolution occurred. In 1872 Nietzsche had been excited about Dionysus, but remained wary nevertheless. He emphasized the return of a balance between the Dionysian and Apollonian that Socratic philosophy destroyed, and narrowed his argument to aesthetic applications. As Allan Megill points out, however, "the alteration in his view of art as one moves from his 'early' to his 'mature' writings is most clearly indicated by the all but total disappearance of the Apollonian: the word occurs only twice in all the works that Nietzsche published, or prepared for publication in the 1880s."<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche to Herman Mushacke, August 30, 1865, in *Unpublished Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed/trans. Kurt F. Leidecker (New York, Philosophical Library, 1959), 38. see also; letters (5) and (8).

<sup>152</sup> Allan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) 45.

In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche begins his contrast of the Apollonian and Dionysian by suggesting a physiological distinction. He compares the Apollonian to a dream state. The implication, of course, is that a dream is always an illusion, and that there is always, “a glimmering awareness that is an *illusion*.”<sup>153</sup> The Dionysian, on the other hand, is intoxication and *in vino est veritas*. In a state of intoxication, “Man is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art: the artistic power of the whole of nature reveals itself to the supreme gratification of the primal Oneness...”<sup>154</sup> Here we see that Nietzsche is not speaking narrowly of chemical intoxication, rather he refers to intoxication as surrendering to the sublime and the mythical by shelving the dogmatic and analytical. It is the process by which man allows himself to be overwhelmed by passion, emotion, and instinct and herein lays its strength.

A better understanding of the Dionysian follows an exploration of Nietzsche’s criticism of the Apollonian. He saw the Apollonian as a search for understanding, a desire to make sense of the world on some imagined plain of the ideal. The main problem is that “Understanding kills action.”<sup>155</sup> In other words, the neglect of primal drives and instincts breeds sickness and weakness, alienating man from the strength of human duality. Beauty has two faces, one keeps an eye on perfection and one accepts the tragedy of the human condition.

In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche tells us that man is *more* than just a rational being. This does not mean, however, that he is simply irrational. Therefore his Dionysian explorations into the *terra incognita* of rationality represent a lifelong struggle to define the frontier between sanity and insanity. He lived and wrote from this frontier, finally stepping beyond its boundaries in 1889. In 1886, fourteen years after the publication of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche added an attempt at self criticism to the original edition. Therein he claims that this book contains the

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<sup>153</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 14-15.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

secrets of the Dionysiac, written from someone “who knows...the initiate and disciple of his god.”<sup>156</sup> The Dionysian gave force and purpose to Nietzsche’s life, just as his life has given shape to the Dionysian. Indeed, no one has done more to shine a light into the darkness spanning between the rational and the irrational and to undermine it as a binary construction.

In mapping-out the interdependence between Nietzsche’s health and his philosophy, one merely expands upon a process initiated by Nietzsche himself. He understood that philosophy must be more than an occupation, it must be a way of life. Again, the duality that permeates so many of his symbols and themes is informed by this relationship. Like Dionysus, the ‘god’ of philosophy was both a blessing and a curse.

In *Ecce Homo*, at both the zenith and the twilight of his career, Nietzsche reflects on a lifetime of sickness: “...being sick can even become an energetic stimulus for life, for living *more*. This, in fact, is how that long period of sickness appears to me *now*: as it were, I discovered life anew, including myself...I turned my will to health, to *life*, into philosophy.”<sup>157</sup> This dynamic of Nietzsche’s thinking explains a great deal about the stoicism that permeates his philosophy. In 1881 he writes, “To my sickness I owe a loftier health, a health that grows stronger through all attacks that do not utterly destroy it! To my sickness I owe my philosophy.”<sup>158</sup>

Likewise, Nietzsche saw philosophy as the ultimate therapy for his illness. In 1880 he wrote to his doctor:

My existence is an *awful burden*-I would have dispensed with it long ago, were it not for the most illuminating tests and experiments I have been conducting in matters of mind and morality even in my state of suffering and almost absolute renunciation—the pleasure

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>157</sup> Nietzsche, *The Basic Writings*, 680.

<sup>158</sup> Elisabeth-Förster Nietzsche, *The Life of Nietzsche* vol. II, 361.

I take in my thirst for knowledge brings me to heights from which I triumph over all torment and despondency. On the whole, I am happier than I have ever been in my life.<sup>159</sup>

For Nietzsche, philosophy was a “concocted medicine,” a “strip of *cloudless sky*.”<sup>160</sup>

For most of 1888, Nietzsche felt truly well for the first time in almost two decades. His illness, however, was not in remission, but rather had ramped up to a feverish pace. His feelings of empowerment and megalomania owe to the bizarre effects of syphilis’s final attack on the brain. Discourse on the disease tells us that, “the last expressions of sanity before parietic dementia sets in can be characterized by mystical vision, messianic prophecy, grandiose self-determination, clarity of expression, and extreme disinhibition.”<sup>161</sup> When reading Nietzsche’s work from 1888, these symptoms seem more like themes. One could certainly call *Zarathustra* an exercise in messianic prophecy just as *Ecce Homo* could be characterized as grandiose self-determination. With chapter titles like; “Why I am so clever” and “Why I am so wise,” it is clear that this fine madness of Nietzsche’s final year of expression helped give birth to his most egotistical philosophy.<sup>162</sup>

The connection between Nietzsche’s madness and his philosophy was first made by an opponent. In 1902 a Leipzig neurologist, P.J. Möbius, published *On the Pathological in Nietzsche*. Therein, he argues that Nietzsche’s work showed signs of progressive paralysis as early as 1881. He used this observation to warn the public against Nietzsche’s writing, and to dismiss him as a mad philosopher.<sup>163</sup> While Möbius should be commended for his perception, he

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<sup>159</sup> Safranski, *Nietzsche*, 178.

<sup>160</sup> Nietzsche to Salomé, June, 1882, *The Unpublished Letters of...*87.

<sup>161</sup> Hayden, *Pox*, 175.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, Hayden should be credited with the connection between the final stages of Nietzsche’s madness and the nature of his work during this period.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 180-181.



failed to see that precisely because of this madness Nietzsche produced such shattering insights. As Nietzsche phrased it, it was due to his illness that he was able to, “taste all good and even little things, as others cannot easily taste them.”<sup>164</sup>

In Nietzsche’s case and others, however, one must be careful not to reduce the complex connections between madness and creativity into romanticized generalizations about “mad artists” and “mad philosophers.” Syphilis made Nietzsche’s life difficult, painful, frustrating, and lonely more often than not and eventually crippled his creative capacity entirely. His experience with it, however, should certainly not be used as an argument for the manifest dismissal of his philosophical insights. If one were to simply ignore the collective works of the mentally disturbed artists and intellectuals of the past, it would be unfathomable how much of the western canon would become obscured in the process. Libraries and museums would literally be at a loss for what to do with all that empty space. Nietzsche’s experience with madness offered him a unique vantage point on the human condition. Madness provided a weapon that he wielded both consciously and subconsciously in the battle to forge out new moral and aesthetic systems. That said, one should not personify madness as having its own intrinsic creative capacity. Madness only has the potential to bracket genius, not to produce it independently. In Nietzsche’s talented hands, however, this potential was fully realized.

In retrospect, Nietzsche’s final chapter of *Ecce Homo* “Why I am a Destiny” is haunting. He writes, “I know my fate, one day my name will be associated with the memory of something tremendous—a crisis without equal on earth, the most profound collision of conscience, a decision that was conjured up *against* everything that had been believed, demanded, hallowed so far. I am no man, I am dynamite.”<sup>165</sup> He goes on to prophesy wars the likes of which the world has

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<sup>164</sup> Nietzsche, *The Basic Writings*, 680.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 782.

never known, and that the “concept of politics will have merged entirely with a war of spirits... It is only beginning with me that the earth knows *great politics*.”<sup>166</sup> The rise of Fascism and Nazism fulfilled this prophecy perhaps beyond his wildest expectations. Their architects like Gentile, Mussolini, and Hitler constructed their own sovereign programs from the fragments of his complete thought; consciously eschewing his hatred of both anti-Semitism and rigid ideological structures. Nietzsche also predicted that his work would create shifts in the field of psychology and a new crisis of Christianity. Whether they realized it or not, the twentieth-century’s intelligentsia across the moral and political spectrum engaged in a posthumous dialogue with his philosophy. His greatest contribution to the next century was a product of this dialogue. That was to bring human irrationality back into the accepted zone of artistic and intellectual life.

Nietzsche wrote that to the Dionysian man “the artistic power of the whole of nature reveals itself to the supreme gratification of the primal Oneness.”<sup>167</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke was certainly a poet in search of primal oneness. In many ways he picked up where Nietzsche’s philosophy leaves off by creating poetry and prose which explore the subconscious to which Nietzsche attached such great value. Moreover, he was driven towards those inner spaces by a like motive; an experience with madness which undermined his ability as well as his desire to distinguish between the reality of his life and the reality of his art.

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 783.

<sup>167</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* 18.



### *Rainer Maria Rilke*

René<sup>169</sup> Maria Rilke was born in Prague, on December 4, 1875 to Josef and Phia Rilke.<sup>170</sup> When Phia and Josef married, Josef had aspirations as a soldier in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He apparently lacked, however, the charisma and stamina necessary to transform his military service into a career and was forced to settle for a minor office with the railway. Phia was especially affected by this social failure which left her Victorian pretenses and aristocratic tastes unsatiated. Thus with René's birth, "a mismatched couple obtained a new weapon with which to fight and spite each other."<sup>171</sup>

There is some dissension among biographers over the comfort and happiness of Rilke's childhood experience, centering on Phia's relative successes and failures as a mother. David

<sup>168</sup> Luigi Russolo, *Nietzsche's Madness*, 1909.

<sup>169</sup> René would change his name to the more masculine, German sounding 'Ranier' at the behest of Lou Salomé

<sup>170</sup> Jeffrey M. Paine, "Rainer Maria Rilke: The Evolution of a Poet," in *The Wilson Quarterly*, vol.10, No. 2, spring, 1986, pg. 151.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

Kleinbard, for example, portrays Phia as a self-important and detached maternal figure who passed on her egocentricities to her son, ultimately constructing lasting neuroses in his personality.<sup>172</sup> W.L. Graff offers a more sympathetic view of Phia, recognizing genuine love and concern in her negotiation of the amorphous moods of her sensitive, vexing child.<sup>173</sup> A clear portrait of Rilke's childhood remains elusive because we are restricted to his often self-contradictory adult reminiscences of early life.

Childhood is one of Rilke's most recurrent themes. Graff tries to explain Rilke's obsession with it by looking at childhood on its own terms, crowning it "...the glorious age in which the human being is king and lord in the realm of imaginary, yet truly possessed, reality."<sup>174</sup> This characterization explains, in part, Rilke's intense nostalgia. Throughout his life, Rilke remained distrustful and therefore disconnected from outward realities, those existing on the inter-personal, societal, national, and political levels. He tended to reject these external realities as illusory, favoring always an inner, we might say Dionysian, reality as the more genuine of the two worlds. He viewed the creative process along with the progression of human existence in these terms, consciously choosing not to draw distinctions between the two. In his advice to an aspiring young poet he urges, "There is only one single way. Go into yourself...test the deeps in which your life takes rise...the creator must be a world for himself and find everything in himself."<sup>175</sup> As we shall see, this heightened aestheticism, or tendency to see art, language and poetry as occupying the primary realm of human experience, is linked to both his schizophrenia and his exposure to Nietzschean thought.

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<sup>172</sup> David Kleinbard, *The Beginning of Terror: A Psychological Study of Rainer Maria Rilke's Life and Work* (New York: New York University Press, 1993).

<sup>173</sup> W.L. Graff, *Ranier Maria Rilke: Creative Anguish of a Modern Poet* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969).

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>175</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, ed/trans., by M.D. Herter Norton (New York: Norton and Company, 1993). 20-21.

If the thematic importance of childhood in Rilke's work does, indeed, stem from his identification of childhood as symbolic of an inwardly perceived reality which he desired to cast across the entirety of life, then the symbol reflects both the positive and negative aspects of the experience. Childhood is not only sundrenched memories and the warmth of parental tenderness, it is also a host of irrational fears and the terrible frustration of helpless impotence confronted by a world which resists understanding. Frequently, this was the side of the childhood paradigm which he chose to invoke. In Rilke's loosely autobiographical and only novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, Malte's childhood fears are resurrected in the aftermath of a mental breakdown. Malte writes, "All the lost fears are here again... I have prayed for my childhood and it has come back, but I feel it is still just as heavy as it was then, and it has been no use getting older."<sup>176</sup> In light of Rilke's biography, this is a hauntingly resonant observation. In many ways the poet did remain in a kind of purgatory between childhood and adulthood by burrowing ever deeper into an egocentric, inner consciousness.

As a young poet, Rilke wrote in the "...worn-out shreds of the imagery of romanticism: easy sentimentality, languishing figures in the moonlight, a dim chivalric past."<sup>177</sup> In maturing, however, he began to sense the shift in the European cultural atmosphere and the pressure to move towards a new aesthetic orientation. These pressures coincided with the nature of his illness to encourage him to approach the creative process on different terms.

In 1901, Rilke spent some time at an artist's colony outside Bremen where he met the young sculptress, Clara Westhoff, whom he would marry the same year. Initially, Rilke made marriage work on his own terms by redefining the institution as "two people protecting one

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<sup>176</sup> Ranier Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, trans. Burton Pike (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2008). 46-47.

<sup>177</sup> Rilke, *The Notebooks*, vi.

another's solitude".<sup>178</sup> Although he made a genuine effort in the first years, the result seems to have been little more than a fatherless daughter, a neglected and socially stunted wife, and the painful reinforcement of Rilke's fears that he might truly be incapable of maintaining mutually nurturing relationships. But before Rilke's already perpetual absences were ritualized through divorce, Clara opened a connection for him with her celebrated mentor, Auguste Rodin.<sup>179</sup> Rilke thus left his wife and child after just over a year of profoundly unsatisfying marriage for Paris to write a monograph on Rodin. The experience was life-defining. He was able to learn more from Rodin's visual art about the poetic process than he had ever been able to glean from other writers. Above all, he valued the way that Rodin's sculptures broke off with outward realities in a way which gave them their own vibrant, autonomous existence. Although, perhaps predictably, a social chasm quickly emerged between the aging, adored sculptor and the young, frustrated poet, Rilke would forever try to capture that inner resonance in the forms of language that Rodin had captured in matter.<sup>180</sup> Paris itself, however, had a more profound impact on him than the old master did. It was there that he came closest to losing his sense of self in the endless stream of humanity and began to conceive of how art might provide a shield of salvation.

In many ways, Rilke found Paris to be completely overwhelming. The unceasing stimulation of the city's sights, sounds and people overloaded his hypersensitive circuitry. On the one hand, he had never felt so alone, isolated, and alienated from the exterior world. On the other hand, he felt a deep and unsettling connection with the "others", those who had failed to assimilate into the city's massive, organic, unity. He felt that these outcasts recognized him as one of their own and quietly urged him to join their ranks. Rilke's personification of Paris would

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<sup>178</sup> Paine, "The Evolution of a Poet," 156.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

provide the antagonist for *The Notebooks* where the reader confronts Malte in the throes of an intense psychological and creative crisis.

Although individual encounters with schizophrenia vary widely, certain aspects of the illness assume a relative universality. When we compare these findings with what is known of Rilke we can begin the process of unraveling his highly structured though cryptic language and mapping out the headwaters from which the poet's themes and images flow.

First-person accounts of schizophrenics describe the illness as, "...robbing them of access to themselves as well as others, and as leading to profound feelings of alienation and estrangement coupled with painful yearnings for comfort, companionship and caring."<sup>181</sup> One of the primary causes of this social estrangement stems from fears of identity loss or engulfment.

Schizophrenics often lack a concretized notion of self and, therefore, have difficulty determining the point at which their personality leaves off and the personality of others begins.<sup>182</sup> Thus every social encounter presents the grave danger of psychological disintegration.

Rilke describes these fears of personality engulfment in lurid detail in *The Notebooks* through the eyes of his stylized alter ego. In one of the novel's most bewildering scenes, Malte is trying on costumes. Initially, he is amused by the strange bearing that the outward transformation has on his inner self. "Hardly had I put on one of these outfits than I had to confess to myself that it had me in its power, that it dictated my motions, the expression on my face, indeed even my ideas."<sup>183</sup> But when he tries on a mask, the real terror begins to take root. "It was too convincing."<sup>184</sup> When Malte unsuccessfully tries to free himself of the guise, "...the

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<sup>181</sup> Larry Davidson and David Stayner, "Loss, Loneliness, and the Desire for Love: Perspectives on the Social Lives of People with Schizophrenia," in *The Psychological and Social Impact of Disability*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, ed. Robert P. Marinelli & Arthur E. Dell Orto (New York: Spring Publishing, 1999). 225.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>183</sup> Rilke, *The Notebooks*, 76.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

most extreme thing happened.”<sup>185</sup> He writes, “I lost my senses, I simply broke down. For the length of a second I had an indescribable grieving, and vain longing for myself, then there was only He.”<sup>186</sup>

Rilke uses physical disintegration as the most recurrent symbol of personality engulfment and psychological disintegration. On the corner of rue Nôtre-Dames-des-Champs, Malte walks towards a poor woman holding her face in her hands. Upon disturbing her, “The woman took fright and raised herself up out of herself, too quickly, too violently, so that her face remained in her two hands. [He] could see it laying there, its hollow form.”<sup>187</sup> Similarly, Malte remembers a terrifying experience from childhood wherein he drops a pencil and when he reaches down to pick it up he observes his hand as a separate entity, animated by its own thoughts and desires.<sup>188</sup> Moreover, when Malte visits a doctor’s office, he finds himself surrounded by the disfigured rejects of society. Their physical deformities are posited as the outward manifestations of equally gruesome inner states. It was here that Malte receives “...the first public confirmation that [he] belonged to these outcasts.”<sup>189</sup> These vivid, terrifying images are the product of Rilke’s transcription of unique, abnormal psychological states into the form of prose.

Indeed, the cathartic nature of art as an existential necessity is not something that goes unobserved by either Rilke or Malte. Art provides the sole consolation for all the fear and terror invoked during time spent in such close proximity to madness. Through Malte, Rilke transposes this psychological transformation into a creative and aesthetic transformation. Thus an experience which initially appears to be a profoundly negative and hopeless descent into chaos is

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>188</sup> Kleinbard, *The Beginnings of Terror*, 33.

<sup>189</sup> Rilke, *The Notebooks*, 40.



reworked into a positive soaring towards new aesthetic heights. “As far as Rilke himself is concerned it all is like a mud bath designed to bring health and strength.”<sup>190</sup>

This is what is implied by Malte’s fragile reassurances when he writes, “I am learning to see. I don’t know why, everything penetrates me more deeply, and doesn’t stop at the place where it always used to end. There is a place in me I knew nothing about... Yes, I’m beginning. It is still going badly. But I want to make use of my time.”<sup>191</sup> Henceforth, the reader becomes convinced that Malte is, indeed, “learning to see” on extraordinarily penetrating perceptual levels. *The Notebooks* is a disjointed, aphoristic collection of impressions, distorted memories, and historical allusions. Its aesthetic value, therefore, is not the product of the well-worn institutions of the *roman*: plot, irony, and character development. Like the novels of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, its *raison d’être* and literary force rest solely on the power of its visual, emotional, and psychological insights. In short, it is a kind of disinherited literary piece with the body of a novel and the soul of a poem. By recognizing the potential power of his excruciatingly hypersensitive emotional and perceptive states, Rilke was able to uncover a deep well of creative blessings imbedded in the curse of his mental illness to produce works like *The Notebooks*.

A heightened sensitivity to both environmental and psychological stimuli is one of the main hallmarks of the schizophrenic experience. The following patient perspective clearly articulates this aspect of the illness: “[Schizophrenics] must go through life experiencing surrounding with greater intensity than others do. Sounds are louder, lights brighter, colors more vibrant... In addition, I believe [schizophrenics] are more sensitive in an interpersonal sense as well. I have noticed that others like myself are easily able to pick emotional non-verbal cues

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<sup>190</sup> Graff, *Rainer Maria Rilke*, 246.

<sup>191</sup> Rilke, *The Notebooks*, 3.

which may be “hidden”.<sup>192</sup> What would appear at first glance to be a series of disabilities is, for the modern poet, a collection of super-human creative powers. While Rilke seems to have more or less always understood his profound sensitivity as an artistic boon, it took an outside influence to make him think of writing as playing an innately cathartic role in his life. This influence would come from Lou Salomé, the only person with whom Rilke ever seems to have been able to establish a deep connection.

When Rilke met Salomé in Munich in the spring of 1897 he was a bored, apathetic student, struggling unsuccessfully to outgrow his embarrassingly imitative poetic style.<sup>193</sup> She, by contrast, was a highly experienced, cosmopolitan woman who possessed an uncanny knack for finding her way into Europe’s elite intellectual circles. At 21, Salomé studied as a sort of disciple under Nietzsche at the apex of his career. The lonely philosopher was instantly smitten by her and proposed marriage shortly after their meeting. She vacillated, but ultimately turned him down.<sup>194</sup> After publishing a book on Nietzsche in 1893, she began to court a position in Freud’s growing entourage.<sup>195</sup> The aspiring poet’s attraction to Salomé was no doubt fueled by these connections; however, he also found in her the rare, splendid gifts of empathy and intuition.

Their initial relationship was characterized by a mixture of love-making, philosophizing, and emotional outbursts. After a short, but intense stint as lovers, Salomé became increasingly annoyed with Rilke’s self centered immaturity as well as the unpredictable nature of his moods. She recognized a duality in the poet early on that suggested he might be suffering from some form of psychological abnormality. In their voluminous correspondence she refers to this

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<sup>192</sup> Esso Leete, “The Interpersonal Environment: A Consumer’s Personal Recollection,” In *Surviving Mental Illness: Stress, Coping, and Adaptations*, ed. A.B. Hatfield and H.P Letley (New York: The Guilford Press, 1993), 119.

<sup>193</sup> Paine, *The Evolution of a Poet*, 153.

<sup>194</sup> Graff, *Ranier Maria Rilke*, 84-85.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

stormy, hypersensitive, and morbid side of Rilke's personality as the *Gegenüber*, literally translating to the 'over and against facing', or 'alter ego.'<sup>196</sup> She broke off the relationship in 1901, leaving him, however, with the reassurance that she would always be willing to help him through times of mental and creative crisis.<sup>197</sup>

That crisis came roughly a decade later after the completion of the *The Notebooks*. Feeling emotionally depleted and on the verge of lapsing into the old terrors he had suffered in Paris, Rilke wrote a desperate letter to Salomé in December of 1911. He pleads, "Can you understand that in the wake of this book I have been left behind like a survivor, stranded high and dry in my inmost being?"<sup>198</sup> In this letter and the following two, Rilke toys with the idea of undergoing psychoanalysis. He is not, however, without reservations. The problem with psychoanalysis as he saw it was that it, "...makes a clean sweep of things, and to find [himself] swept clean one day might be even more hopeless than this disarray."<sup>199</sup> Similar to Virginia Woolfs' criticisms of psychoanalysis, he feared that the employment of the Freudian method might leave him with a, "...disinfected soul...corrected with red ink like a child's exercise in school."<sup>200</sup> Surprisingly, given Salomé's rising status as a psychoanalyst, her response was to insist that he not seek psychiatric help and continue to use his work as a kind of "self treatment". Thus, she reinforced and legitimized both Rilke's fear that in exorcising his "devils" he might be in danger of losing his "angels" and his belief that formal therapy might be appropriate only if he were truly serious about no longer writing.<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> Ranier Maria Rilke, *Uncollected Poems*, ed/trans. Edward Snow, Bilingual Ed. (New York: North Point Press, 1996), xviii.

<sup>197</sup> Kleinbard, *The Beginnings of Terror*, 91.

<sup>198</sup> Ranier Maria Rilke and Lou Andreas-Salomé, *Ranier Maria Rilke and Lou Andreas-Salomé: The Correspondence*, ed/trans. Edward Snow and Michael Winkler (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2006), 175.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>200</sup> Ralph Freedman, *The Life of a Poet: Ranier Maria Rilke* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 326.

<sup>201</sup> Rilke and Salomé, *The Correspondence*, 185.

Prior to this fascinating exchange, Rilke seems to have thought of his art as part of the problem rather than a pure solution. Art placed the artist “in danger” because he had to first succumb to “his personal madness”. Lou, however, encouraged him to recognize the other side of the paradox, that art brings “enormous aid” to the artist by providing him with tangible evidence of his own integrity and authenticity. “If he seems close to insanity at times, the completed work reveals the internal ‘law’ which has remained invisible in his disordered thoughts...affording the artist ample ‘justification’ for his deviations from accepted norms.”<sup>202</sup> Although Rilke lived out the remaining short years of his life on the narrow ledge of sanity before succumbing to leukemia at 40, creative maturation brought with it a growing confidence in his ability to stare undauntedly into this inner void. Armed with this epiphany on the cathartic potential of art and grounded in reality by Salomé’s empathetic encouragements, Rilke moved into the hitherto unexplored aesthetic horizons for which he is most famous. This informs the guarded triumphalism with which he begins *The Duino Elegies*; “For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror, that we are still able to bear, and we revere it so, because it calmly disdains to destroy us.”<sup>203</sup>

*The Elegies* are arguably Rilke’s most influential collection of poems. They also contain the seeds of postmodern thought. The strongest connection between *The Elegies* and post-modernism is Rilke’s adherence to a heightened aestheticism, which we have already defined in his case as the tendency to see art, language and poetry as occupying the primary realms of human experience. Nietzsche’s philosophy can be credited with triggering a widespread drift away from positivist, Enlightenment definitions of reality. Prior to Nietzsche’s appearance, philosophers built their conceptions of reality upon either theological or scientific foundations.

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<sup>202</sup> Kleinbard, *The Evolution of a Poet*, 43.

<sup>203</sup> Ranier Maria Rilke, *The Duino Elegies*, Trans. A.S. Kleine, 2001, ([www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/German/Rilke.htm](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/German/Rilke.htm)), I.

Nietzsche, however, rejected both, seeing the present as a philosophical and intellectual “no-man’s land,” an illusion. His solution was aestheticism, which for him means embracing the world as an illusion rather than trying to dispel it or explain it away. Thus for Nietzsche, like Rilke, the most genuine reality exists on the planes of thought, emotion, and instinct. As Allan Megill argues in *Prophets of Extremity*, this aestheticism was reincarnated throughout the primary blood lines of post-modern thought. It reappears, for example, in Heidegger’s concerns over authentic versus inauthentic being and Foucault’s focus on historical discourse as an imaginative product. The logical consequence of thinking along purely aesthetic lines is that artists, philosophers, and intellectuals, are burdened with the enormous responsibility of producing culture rather than merely explaining it or representing it. If, as Nietzsche proclaims, “God is dead,” then the torch is handed down from the creator to the creative.

This is, indeed, Rilke’s primary effort in writing *The Elegies*. In these poems the artist as creator achieves something akin to eternal transcendence. Death cannot be avoided as such, but the artist can cheat it, circumvent it by capturing and retaining its inner essence. Likewise, he can manipulate time. Rilke is definitively post-historicist. He derails history and time from their linear tracks. In *The Notebooks*, for example, he explores the lives of a variety of historical figures such as Charles VI, Pope John XXII, Boris Godunov, and the false Czar Demetrius. “But these historical facts and figures never jell into an explicit narrative or view of history. Instead of exploring historical consciousness, the novel ritually evokes historical signifiers.”<sup>204</sup> Rilke’s treatment of these figures destroys time, or rather destroys the distance that it imposes. As in the *Elegies* and *Sonnets to Orpheus*, time is stripped of its weight and unity; it becomes light, airy and infinite. The primordial is freed to resonate alongside the present without the imposition of

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<sup>204</sup> Derek Hillard, “Rilke and Historical Discourse or the ‘Histories’ of Malte Laurids Brigge,” in *German Studies Review*, Vol 29, No. 2 (May 2006), 299.

the artificial order of context. If this enigmatic and vexing treatment of time reads like an artist's rendition of Nietzsche's eternal return, it may not be entirely coincidental. Although Rilke never discusses Nietzsche at length in his diaries or letters, we must keep in mind that he was under the lifelong influence of Lou Salomé, Nietzsche's wayward disciple. It stands to reason that whether implicitly or explicitly, Rilke was likely to have been exposed to a heavy, though filtered, dose of Nietzschean philosophy. And like Nietzsche, this break with historicism enforces his proto-post modernist view of the world.

As Erich Heller explores at length in *The Disinherited Mind*, the similarities between Nietzsche's philosophy and Rilke's poetry persist beyond aestheticism and post-historicism. Heller also draws connections between Nietzsche's "superman" and Rilke's "angel" as well as the respective symbols of Dionysus and Orpheus. But according to Heller, their closest union lies in their joint rejection of the cultural isolation of rationality and irrationality into separate and mutually exclusive spheres: "Nietzsche's and Rilke's distrust of, and *legitimate* antagonism to one profoundly *invalid* distinction between thought and feeling...the distinction on which both rationalism and romanticism thrive, spending their forces in an ultimately futile struggle to assert the superiority of one of the other."<sup>205</sup> When Heller wrote this a half-century ago, he was probably unaware that he was defining the post-modern condition in a nutshell as the product of the destruction of the firewall between thinking and feeling.

### *Conclusion*

For both Nietzsche and Rilke, criticism of the cultural status quo was spurred on by their own personal, organic struggles with irrationality. In Nietzsche's case, it was the steady

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<sup>205</sup> Erich Heller, *The Disinherited Mind: Essays in Modern German Literature and Thought*, (Philadelphia: Dufour and Saifer, 1952), 119.

onslaught of syphilis, in Rilke's, the unbearable sensitivity imposed by schizophrenia. In philosophy, Nietzsche found a reason to persevere through a lonely and often miserable existence. In art, Rilke discovered a medium through which he could triumph over his potentially destructive illness. Schizophrenia made the outside world a painful and dangerous reality which encouraged him to turn inward and sound out the depths of his own soul. Although what he found there often frightened him, he was able to give it form and meaning by setting terror alongside bliss and projecting them onto the page. Thus he writes in *The Elegies* with guarded triumphalism that "after all, we have not failed to make use of these spaces, these generous ones, our spaces. (How frighteningly vast they must be, when they are not overfull of our feelings, after thousands of years)."<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> Rilke, *The Elegies*, VII.

## CHAPTER III

Great Waves of Melancholy: Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, Manic-Depressive Illness and  
the Will to Art*Introduction*

On March 23, 1941 Virginia Woolf wrote to her sister Vanessa of her recent relapse into depression: “I feel I have gone too far this time to come back again...It is just as it was the first time, I am always hearing voices, and I know I shan’t get over it now.”<sup>207</sup> Over the course of the next few days she sank deeper into the final major mental breakdown of her life. Virginia’s doting husband Leonard, who had carefully monitored her mental condition for almost three decades, sensed the abrupt change in his wife. He called on Octavia Wilberforce, Virginia’s longtime physician and friend, but the meeting went poorly. Octavia tried to reassure Virginia that she was a great success and that her work was very important, but Virginia changed the subject and began obsessing over her undying grief for her father and her lost childhood.<sup>208</sup> Leonard and Octavia agreed that the situation was dire and rather than hospitalizing her against her will they tried to relieve her anxieties by keeping her occupied with tasks around the house and in the garden.

On March 28<sup>th</sup> she put on her wool coat and picked up her walking stick and slipped out of the house. As she walked towards the river Ouse not far from their Sussex home, she picked up rocks and stuffed them into the pockets of her coat. When she walked out into the current the water must have filled her boots as the rocks pulled her down into the swollen waters. A few hours later, Leonard got up from his writing desk and began searching around the house for her. Instead, he found two letters sitting on the mantel. One was addressed to him, the other to

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<sup>207</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, v. 6 (London: Harcourt Brace, 1980), 485.

<sup>208</sup> Jeffrey A. Kotterly, *Divine Madness* (San Francisco: Jossy Bass, 2006), 123.



Virginia Woolf's sister, Vanessa.<sup>209</sup> Therein, he found what he must have expected. Woolf's suicide note detailed her surrender, her hopelessness, but also her profound love for Leonard and her wish that he would not blame himself for her death. She wrote, "If anybody could have saved me it would have been you. Everything has gone from me but the certainty of your goodness. I can't go on spoiling your life any longer."<sup>210</sup>

Twenty two years later on the night of February 9<sup>th</sup>, 1963 after a prolonged relapse into manic-depression Sylvia Plath carefully prepared to end her own life. Her husband, Ted Hughes, was not nearly as well equipped nor as willing to negotiate his wife's erratic moods as Leonard Woolf had been with Virginia. Thinking himself part of the problem rather than part of the solution, Hughes left Plath and their two children in the previous months and was living openly with his pregnant mistress, Assia Wevill.<sup>211</sup> Plath found a flat in London that was once the upstairs of William Butler Yeats' home. She hoped that some of his old magic might rub off on her there.<sup>212</sup> It seems to have worked as the "writing block" that plagued Plath throughout much of her life evaporated and she furiously wrote poem after poem that would come to be recognized as her greatest work.

"The Edge," her last poem written only a few days prior to her death, prophesies the final act. "The woman is perfected. Her dead body wears the smile of accomplishment, the illusion of Greek necessity."<sup>213</sup> The "Greek necessity" is a reference to the myth of Medea's revenge and suggests that her original plan was to take the children with her.<sup>214</sup> "Each dead child coiled, a white serpent, one at each little pitcher of milk now empty. She has folded them back into her

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<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>210</sup> Woolf, *Letters*, 408.

<sup>211</sup> Ronald Hayman, *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Birch Lane Press of the Carol Publishing Group, 1991) 3-17.

<sup>212</sup> Jillian Becker, *Giving Up* (New York: St. Martins, 2002), 3.

<sup>213</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper and Row, 1981). 272-273

<sup>214</sup> Hamilton, *Mythology*, 129-130. Medea avenges Jason's infidelities by killing his mistress and then killing his two sons before ascending into the afterlife.

body, as petals of a rose...”<sup>215</sup> In the end, however, she would commit suicide, not murder. She cracked the window in the children’s room, taped the door and stuffed a kitchen towel underneath it. Then she turned on the gas and laid her head on the oven door.

The nexuses between the lives and works of Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath provide two of the clearest and most compelling portraits of the relationship between madness and the artistic temperament. This relationship is characterized by many features that are shared commonly among the mentally disturbed artists and intellectuals examined in the previous chapters. First, there is a strong interdependence between personal wellbeing and art. Neither artist was willing or able to separate their lives and their art into separate, mutually exclusive spheres. Their art was their life just as their life was their art. Second, they thought of their writing as a coping mechanism and a way to exorcise the demons by which they were perpetually tormented. By ritualizing them in print, Woolf and Plath were able to externalize, organize, and therefore legitimize their individual encounters with madness. Third, the specific nature of their mental illness is reflected in their art. Woolf and Plath both suffered from manic-depressive illness. The bi-polarity of their personalities, the chronic lows and soaring highs, lend a unique form to their literature and poetry.

Indeed, these women’s struggles with madness appear to have been a cornerstone of their creative impulse; without it, it is unlikely that their work would have the same form and resonance that have propelled it to the heart of the modern literary canon. Plath and Woolf’s contribution to the history of madness and creativity is especially strong because they both provide a richly detailed record of their thoughts in the form of a journal which they kept faithfully from adolescence until the final weeks of life. Therein events and actions are

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<sup>215</sup> Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 272-273

overshadowed by deeply emotional and psychological considerations. It is with these tools that we can draw clear lines between mental illness and the artistic temperament.

Many have argued that without at least a cursory familiarity with the biographies of Woolf and Plath the poignancy of their work is somehow diminished. This, of course, neglects its high autonomous value. It can be said, however, that reading Woolf and Plath through the lens of their lives is an entirely different experience from reading them otherwise. The following chapter explores the difficult lives of these two women in an effort to uncover the various ways that their struggles with manic-depression affected their work explicitly and their thoughts about the creative process more generally. As in the previous chapters, there is a tendency to favor the writers' own explanations of this relationship over subsequent analyses; not because they are always the most reliable, but because in order to chart how their experiences with mental illness affected their writing it is just as important, if not more so, to recreate their individual understandings of the origins and virtues of madness as it is to reexamine their lives through today's clinical conceptions of manic-depressive disorder. Although each case is treated more or less separately, notable similarities and differences are highlighted.

### *Virginia Woolf*

Virginia Woolf spent her childhood in a large, beautiful home at Hyde-Park Gate in London which hid within its walls what one biographer has described as, "a circus of family dysfunction."<sup>216</sup> Her father, Sir Leslie Stephen, was a literary critic of waning fame who had once been connected with some of England's most prominent Victorian authors such as Henry James, Alfred Lord Tennyson and William Thackeray. After a short, unhappy marriage to William Thackeray's daughter, he married Julia Duckworth, the heiress of the Duckworth

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<sup>216</sup> Kottler, *Divine Madness*, 106.

publishing empire. Julia had also been married previously, and brought with her three children from that marriage-Gerald, Stella and George. After her marriage to Leslie, Julia had four more children, Vanessa, Thoby, Virginia, and Adrian. Thus with Laura, Leslie's daughter from his first marriage who was kept in the attic because of some unspecified psychosis (probably autism), there were a total of eight children in this blended family.<sup>217</sup>

Woolf provides an immortal portrait of her father and mother in her novel, *To the Lighthouse*.<sup>218</sup> Therein, she captures the essence of their personalities in the characters of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay as well as the uneasy dynamic which governed their marriage. Like Leslie, Mr. Ramsay is stormy and unpredictable, a veritable tyrant in his own home. Yet he is also pitiable in his incessant obsessing over the question of his fame and intellectual significance. Mrs. Ramsay, on the other hand, is the rock of the family, the quiet, melancholy engineer of the family's affairs. Although she is a fountain of maternal nurturing even to outsiders, she is strangely detached and inaccessible, like a ghost who haunts her own granite world of sadness and exhaustion. Their marriage is an exercise in conflicts: respect versus pity, love versus resentment, intuition versus misunderstanding, optimism versus pessimism, all of which Woolf uses to create a dissonance in prose which must have resembled the dissonance of reality that pervaded her childhood home. Despite his personality flaws, Leslie provided Virginia with an eclectic education that would serve her well as a modern novelist. Virginia was obviously the most intellectually curious and gifted of the eight children, but there was only enough money to formally educate the boys in the family. In compensation, Leslie gave her an adequate private

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>218</sup> Virginia Woolf, *To The Lighthouse* (London: Granada Publishing, 1977).

instruction which consisted of unlimited access to his well furnished library and the simple instructions to always read what you like and never pretend to like what you do not.<sup>219</sup>

In the past, a great deal of focus has been placed on Virginia Woolf's childhood and her relationship with her parents. In the golden age of psychoanalytic literary criticism the young Virginia was "put on the couch" by numerous writers in search of the biographical rather than biological origins of her illness. In these quests, a variety of factors have been over emphasized, such as the incestuous abuses of her half brother George Duckworth, repressed heterosexuality followed by neurotic homosexuality, detachment from her mother and improper grieving. The result has been a confusing and contradictory portrait of the relationship between Woolf's life and work.

This is not to downplay, however, the trauma of her childhood. Virginia was, indeed, sexually molested by her older half brother George from a very early age, although her beautiful older sister Vanessa received the brunt of his advances. She once referred to her and Vanessa as sharing the camaraderie of "Greek Slaves."<sup>220</sup> They even slept in the same bed for mutual comfort and protection. Virginia and Vanessa bonded in the midst of a veritable domestic war and remained very close up until Virginia's suicide. As if the omnipresence of George was not enough, James Stephen, Virginia's first cousin was a frequent and unfortunate visitor to Hyde Park Gate. In addition to raping Virginia's half sister Stella, James was once suspected of being Jack the Ripper before being permanently institutionalized.<sup>221</sup>

The hereditary currents of mental illness were deep on both branches of the family tree. Sir Leslie was periodically treated for cyclothymia, a broad diagnosis which suggests cyclical

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<sup>219</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, Intro. by Michael Cunningham, (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), xv.

<sup>220</sup> Kottler, *Divine Madness*, 114.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*, 108-109. Discussed also in: Thomas C. Caramagno, "Manic-Depressive Psychosis and Critical Approaches to Virginia Woolf's Life and Work," in *PMLA*, Vol. 103, no.1 an., 1988), 13.

mood swings that were considered intrinsic to generations of Stephenses including his grandmother, father, brother, and nephew.<sup>222</sup> Moreover, given the genetic trajectory, Leslie is most likely the primary biological source of Virginia's psychological difficulties since mood-affective disorders seem to be transferred across gender lines; for example, mother(s) to son(s) or father(s) to daughter(s).<sup>223</sup> Julia Duckworth also suffered from profound, if not clinical, depression. Woolf's remembrances of her mother always feature melancholy and pessimism as static qualities of her personality. According to a study sponsored by the National Institute of Mental Health, if one parent has manic-depressive illness their child has a 28 percent chance of being affected by either recurrent depressive illness or manic-depressive illness. If both parents are affected by either manic-depressive illness or recurrent depressive illness and one of them is manic-depressive then the chances of genetic transmission increase to 75 percent.<sup>224</sup> If this were true in Leslie and Julia's case, then it would help to explain why all of the four children they had together were affected by either recurrent depressive episodes, isolated depressive episodes, or as in Virginia's case, full blown bi-polar manic-depressive illness.<sup>225</sup>

Therefore, as Thomas C. Caramagno has argued in his book *The Flight of the Mind: Virginia Woolf's Art and Manic-Depressive Illness* and his article "Manic-Depressive Psychosis and Critical Approaches to Virginia Woolf's Life and Work," psychoanalysis is not a reliable tool of literary criticism in Woolf's case or any other. The basic problem with psychoanalytical approaches is that they see neuroses as being either consciously or subconsciously self-imposed. This wrongly places the blame for the disorder with the patient and distorts broader perceptions of their personality and the literature for which it is responsible. To achieve a deeper

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<sup>222</sup> Thomas C. Caramagno, *The Flight of the Mind: Virginia Woolf's art and Manic-Depressive Illness* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 100.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>224</sup> Jamison, *Touched with Fire*, 194.

<sup>225</sup> Caramagno. *The Flight of the Mind*. 100.

understanding of the relationship between both Woolf's and Plath's life and work we must begin by looking at its biological origins.

The other name for manic-depressive illness is bi-polar disorder, a name which is more vividly suggestive of the duality involved in the experience of those who suffer from it. Manic-depressive illness tends to negate the relatively homeostatic nature of moods. While the healthy individual regularly experiences mood shifts which are perceivable, but moderate, those who suffer from bi-polar disorder shift, often rapidly, from one extreme state to another. As Kay Jamison notes, it is a common misconception to think of this polarity as being a juxtaposition between happy and sad. It is far more complex than that. More basically, this duality of moods tends to be marked by periods of intensity and periods of lethargy. Therefore although manic periods in the cycle do usually correspond with more euphoric, ideal, and positive emotional states, the energy drawn from them might also be redirected in a variety of other ways.<sup>226</sup>

According to Edward Wolpert, those experiencing manic states may feel:

As if their imaginations have gone into overdrive [and are] unable to restrain their racing thoughts, espying great significance in ordinary events; experiencing seemingly profound insights, delusions, or hallucinations; interpreting or imagining actions by nurses or friends as proof either of God's greater glory or of a sinister conspiracy against them—evidence that may result in even more desperate attempts to “read” the environment by imposing meaning and order on a world that spins faster and faster out of control.<sup>227</sup>

Edward Wolpert's description of manic states meshes well with Woolf's own writings about her flights into madness. In January of 1924, after revisiting the room where she was nursed through one of her most prolonged breakdowns in 1913, she wrote in her diary; “I've had

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<sup>226</sup> Jamison, *Touched with Fire*.

<sup>227</sup> Wolpert quoted in: Caramagno, “Manic Depressive Psychosis,” 14.

some very curious visions in this room too, lying in bed, mad & seeing the sunlight quivering like gold water, on the wall. I've heard the voices of the dead here. And felt, through it all exquisitely happy."<sup>228</sup> The previous fall, she recorded ("for psychological purposes") an extraordinary night when she missed her train because of being paralyzed by emotion. She said to herself, "I am meeting it; now the old devil has once more got his spine through the waves." "And such was the strength of my feeling that I became physically rigid. Reality, so I thought, was unveiled. And there was something noble in feeling like this: tragic, not at all petty."<sup>229</sup>

As Woolf matured as a writer she came to refer to her style as the effort to capture and describe "moments of being," which she explained as those fleeting minutes when the world suddenly seemed profoundly sad or sublime and when the *terra incognita* of everyday life revealed itself in a great flood of perceptions. This came to her naturally; the problematic aspect of writing was how to deal with the rest of life, because, "Every day includes much more non-being than being [and] a great part of everyday is not lived consciously."<sup>230</sup>

Even as Woolf developed her own unique style, the literary tendency to structure a story using a mosaic of psychological impressions rather than a linear narrative is common in many modernist novels. The term, "moments of being," as a stylistic signifier could be used, for example, to describe Rainer Maria Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (although *The Notebooks* mark a more radical departure from traditional plot structures than any of Woolf's fiction). James Joyce's *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses* as well as Marcel Proust's *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* might also fall under the same umbrella. This does not suggest that Woolf's mental illness played no role in the formation of her style. On the contrary,

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<sup>228</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Anne Oliver Bell and Andrew McNeillie, vol. 2. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1978), 283.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, 270

<sup>230</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings*, ed. & intr., by Jeanne Schulkind (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 70.



we must keep in mind that Rilke, Joyce, and even Proust battled with their own psychological problems. No work of art, however, is created in a vacuum and the sociological element is omnipresent. Like Rilke, Joyce, and Proust, Woolf's condition made her well adapted to emulate and manipulate a budding literary style which demanded acute sensitivity and a vibrant imagination to scratch at surface realities in search of unsounded depths.

In Woolf's personal philosophy, these "Moments of being" imbed themselves in one's memory while the rest of life is lost. In her unpublished memoir, "A Sketch of the Past," she recorded some of these moments from her childhood, such as the time when she overheard her father saying that a family friend, Mr. Valpy, had committed suicide. The next thing she remembered, "...is being in the garden at night and walking on the path by the apple tree." "It seemed to [her] that the apple tree was connected with the horror of Mr. Valpy's suicide. [She] could not pass it...[She] seemed to be dragged down, hopelessly, into some pit of absolute despair from which [she] could not escape."<sup>231</sup> Woolf came to see these perceptive "shocks" as a source of her talent as an author. At age fifty-eight she wrote:

I still have the peculiarity that I receive these sudden shocks, they are now always welcome: after the first surprise, I always feel instantly that they are particularly valuable. And so I go on to suppose that the shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer. I hazard the explanation that a shock is at once followed by the desire to explain it...I make it real by putting it into words.<sup>232</sup>

In retrospect, we have to assume that Woolf was exaggerating in her assertion that she came to always welcome these "shocks," since only a year and a half after writing this she received a series of them from which she would never recover. It does suggest, however, that over the

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 72.

course of her career she came to view her writing as a coping mechanism which allowed her to explain and externalize intense emotional experiences.

Kay Jamison's explanation of how manic-depressive illness affects the creative process is that "the interaction, tension, and transition between changing mood states, as well as the sustenance and discipline drawn from periods of health...is critically important: and it is these same tensions and transitions that ultimately give such power to the art that is born in this way."<sup>233</sup> This assessment seems to have particular resonance in Woolf's and Plath's cases, especially Jamison's focus on the tension created in the transition between mood states. In Woolf's diaries it is striking how she repetitiously describes the slow painful process of moving between manic or depressive episodes back towards a tenuous equilibrium. In the winter of 1930 after a minor breakdown which stalled progress on *The Waves*, she wrote:

I believe these illnesses are in my case—partly mystical. Something happens in my mind. It refuses to go on registering impressions. It shuts itself up. It becomes chrysalis. I lie quite torpid...Then suddenly something springs...I [have] a tremendous sense of life beginning...& this I believe is the moth shaking its wings in me. I then begin to make up my story whatever it is; ideas rush in me; often though this is before I can control my mind or pen. It is no use trying to write at this stage.<sup>234</sup>

The imagery of the chrysalis is vivid. In this passage and many others, Woolf sees the transition between illness and health as a kind of creative renaissance. In 1929, for example, she wrote that, "These curious intervals...are the most fruitful artistically—one becomes fertilized...Six weeks in bed would make a masterpiece."<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> Jamison, *Touched with Fire*, 6.

<sup>234</sup> Woolf, *Diaries*, vol. 3, 287.

<sup>235</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, ed. & intro., by Leonard Woolf (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 143.

Lest we begin to romanticize Woolf's mania and depression, however, it should be understood that she was not able to write during her most severe breakdowns during which she was frequently incoherent. Of this experience she wrote, "I know the feeling now, when I can't spin a sentence, & sit mumbling & turning; & nothing flits by my brain which is a blank window."<sup>236</sup> Her first major breakdown occurred in 1895 when she was only thirteen after Julia died of influenza and exhaustion. Biographer Jean O. Love has suggested that Julia's death was perhaps less upsetting for Virginia than Leslie's maddening and frightening mourning for her.<sup>237</sup> In addition to his raging and auditory outbursts he wrote a long letter addressed to the Duckworth children that the Stephen children referred to as the "Mausoleum Book," intended to eulogize Julia and manipulate the children's memory of her. More specifically it, "...justif[ies] himself and his conduct toward his wife to elicit forgiveness and absolution from the Duckworth children whom he suspected of blaming him for making their mother unhappy by his exorbitant demands."<sup>238</sup>

The precarious balance of Virginia's home life literally fell apart in her mother's absence. When Virginia was taken in to see Julia shortly after her death she had a hallucination of a man sitting by her side. She could neither eat nor sleep and experienced a kind of listless delirium that would become the hallmark of her subsequent episodes. Julia's daughter Stella, Virginia's older half-sister took over the management of the home in Julia's absence and, horrifyingly, filled in as Leslie's surrogate wife. Even though she eventually escaped this bizarre spectacle by marrying, she died tragically from malaria contracted on her honeymoon.<sup>239</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> Kottler, *Divine Madness*, 112.

<sup>237</sup> Jean O. Love, *Virginia Woolf: Sources of Madness and Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 2.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>239</sup> Kottler, *Divine Madness*, 113-114.

Woolf's second major breakdown came a few years later in 1897 after a stream of George's incestuous advances. George had first abused Virginia when she was only six, but now at age fifteen, conscious of her own sexuality, of love and its myriad meanings she became aware of the disgusting, obscene and destructive nature of the situation. As Quentin Bell writes in the pioneering biography of Woolf, "...he came to pollute the most sacred of springs, to defile their very dreams. A first experience of loving or being loved may be enchanting, desolating, embarrassing or even boring: but it should not be disgusting...Virginia felt that George had spoilt her life before it had fairly begun."<sup>240</sup> Bell goes on to infer that these early experiences with physical love motivated Woolf's lifelong distaste for, and abstinence from, heterosexual intercourse. Indeed, it seems that Virginia may never have willingly had sex with a man, even her husband, Leonard Woolf. She did, however, have multiple affairs with women including Vita Sackville West and Ethel Smyth.<sup>241</sup> It has even been suggested that in her youth, the affection between her and her sister Vanessa was more than platonic.<sup>242</sup> The inference that Woolf's homosexuality was a reaction to incest, made by Bell and others, falls into the category of the dubiously psychoanalytic and is illustrative of the multiple distortions that have pervaded controversies about her. It is more likely the Woolf's natural sexual orientation was lesbian and that childhood abuses played the role of reinforcement rather than origination.

Similar connections have been made between Woolf's third and fourth breakdowns in 1904 after her father's death, and 1913 after her marriage to Leonard. Initially she seemed to take her father's death in stride, but soon spiraled into another manic freefall. She was conflicted between feelings of relief, grief and guilt. Psychoanalytical critics like Shirley Panken, following the tradition of Quentin Bell, see this particular breakdown as the result of those conflicted

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<sup>240</sup> Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), 44.

<sup>241</sup> Kottler, *Divine Madness*, 118; *Love, Virginia Woolf*, 279.

<sup>242</sup> Kottler, *Divine Madness*, 114.

emotions culminating in a new neurosis rather than another inevitable cycle of neuro-chemical imbalance. During this illness she had auditory hallucinations, thinking she heard King Edward using foul language in the garden and birds singing Greek choruses. She even jumped out the window, but was luckily on the first floor.<sup>243</sup>

After recovering, Woolf found a new lease on life. The Stephen children were finally freed from the shackles of dysfunction. Vanessa married Clive Bell, an event that Woolf thought of as betrayal of their domestic pact. Thoby and Adrian went to Cambridge, and she capitalized on an opportunity to move away from Hyde Park Gate with Thoby in 1906. She lived with him for the next six years and began working seriously on her literary career. During this time, Woolf molded herself into an eminent artist and intellectual with an acid wit and a keen eye for criticism. Through Thoby, she was introduced to a group of intellectuals who called themselves “the apostles” which would eventually evolve into “the Bloomsbury group” and then simply “Bloomsbury”. It included some of the most prestigious minds in England such as Bertrand Russell, E.M. Forster, Lytton Strachey, Roger Fry, and Leonard Woolf.<sup>244</sup> The members of the group were promptly impressed by Virginia’s anti-Victorian cultural and political orientations as well as her brilliant capacity to analyze and create. Leonard Woolf in particular was smitten by Virginia and began to court her. Virginia was reticent. She warned Leonard of her propensity towards madness, her “asexuality” and that her work would always come first. None of this deterred his persistence and she finally gave into his goading. The honeymoon was a disaster. Leonard, who might have thought that he could uproot Virginia’s sexual austerity quickly

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<sup>243</sup> Jan Ellen Goldstein, “The Woolfs’ Response to Freud: Water Spiders, Singing Canaries, and the Second Apple,” in *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 1974, 443.

<sup>244</sup> Kottler, *Divine Madness*, 115.

learned of his underestimation. For whatever reason, however, he agreed and slowly adapted to her boundaries.<sup>245</sup>

Soon after the honeymoon in 1913, Virginia experienced the fourth and most severe breakdown of her life which ebbed and flowed for almost two years. During this time, she often turned violently against Leonard in vitriolic displays of hatred and verbal abuse. Jamison has nicknamed this phenomenon “Virginia Woolf scenes” for the purposes of generalizing this tendency among manic depressives.<sup>246</sup> Although Leonard continued to provide for her care in the background, he was forced to avoid actually seeing her for months at a time. His descriptions of her behavior during that time coincide with *the flight of ideas*, a recognized symptom of manic episodes:

She talked almost without stopping for two or three days, paying no attention to anyone in the room or anything said to her. For about a day what she said was coherent; the sentences meant something, though it was nearly all wildly insane. Then gradually it became completely incoherent, a mere jumble of dissociated words. After another day the stream of words diminished and finally she fell into a coma.<sup>247</sup>

Although the disaster of the honeymoon and the difficult adjustment to married life has traditionally been seen as the immediate cause of this particular breakdown, it was also the time after which she had just completed her first novel, *The Voyage Out*. She obsessed over its reception and had difficulty, “wean[ing] [her] mind from it.”<sup>248</sup> Even so, she sent it off for publication a full year before her first serious suicide attempt when she took 100 grains of veronal, a powerful sedative, and very nearly died. Woolf lived under the constant threat that

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid., 115-116; Bell, *Woolf*.

<sup>246</sup> Caramagno, “Manic Depressive Psychosis,” 13.

<sup>247</sup> Kottler, *Divine Madness*, 116.

<sup>248</sup> Goldstein, “The Woolfs’ Response to Freud,” 444.

anything, or nothing, might precipitate a crisis, but like all of her illnesses, except the last, Woolf emerged in 1915 prepared to cope with her next entrance into that other world of insanity, which she describes vividly in *Night and Day*:

Being a frequent visitor to that world, she could find her way there unhesitatingly. If she had tried to analyze her impressions, she would have said that there dwelt the realities of the appearances which figure in our world; so direct, powerful, and unimpeded were her sensations there, compared with those called forth in actual life. There dwelt the things one might have felt, had there been cause; the perfect happiness of which here we taste the fragment: the beauty seen here in flying glimpses only.<sup>249</sup>

To use Woolf's own language, these "moments of being," made rare by the monotony of everyday life, were synonymous with periods of illness during which all perceptions seemed deeper and pregnant with meaning that could only be conceived when sanity had returned.

So how did a woman so disturbed, who had suffered so much and lived so consistently on the razor's edge of balance, go on to produce so many brilliant novels, essays, reviews and biographies? The answer is consistent with that provided for all the artists and intellectuals examined in this study. As Nietzsche phrased it, "He who has a *why* to live, can bear almost any *how*." Writing certainly provided Woolf with a reason for being, but it also gave her a means of coping with mental illness. Like Flaubert, Rilke and Plath, Woolf was able to use writing to transform madness into a painful but powerful gift rather than a meaningless curse. In 1930 she wrote in her diary that, "It is this writing that gives me my proportions."<sup>250</sup> Four years later she continued the thought: "Odd how the creative power at once brings the whole universe to order.

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<sup>249</sup> Woolf, *The Letters*, xvi.

<sup>250</sup> Woolf, *A writers Diary*, 160.

I can see the day whole, proportioned—even after a long flutter of the brain such as I’ve had this morning it must be a physical, moral and mental necessity.”<sup>251</sup>

Woolf’s theory of the novel reflects her conviction that art is therapeutic. She was no Victorian. She once wrote to Lytton Strachey: “Plots don’t matter.”<sup>252</sup> To Woolf, the modern novel should be psychological, but not scientifically so. “She worked to create an ordered aesthetic form that, for all its symmetry, would nevertheless accommodate disorder, a contemporary account of the mind’s irregular action. Balanced composition could control chaotic material.”<sup>253</sup> Woolf’s mental illness and life experiences provided her with plenty of inspiration which, through the writing process, she refined into a tangible product. Once her experiences were reborn in literary form, they no longer bore the mark of madness because “*Any discourse*, from the very fact that it is a discourse, can be understood to exclude madness absolutely.”<sup>254</sup> According to Caramagno, “Fiction was good therapy for Woolf because it, too, deals with the subject-object transactions that make a whole, a meaning that ratifies the integrity of both self and text.”<sup>255</sup>

Like Rilke, Woolf’s rejection of psychoanalysis as a viable treatment option illustrates how wedded she was to the idea that writing provided her a genuine means of stabilization. Through a variety of sources, she came into contact with Freudianism earlier than most English intellectuals of her day. Psychoanalytic theory first reached Bloomsbury through Lytton Strachey’s younger brother James. James and his wife Alix made the decision to study psychoanalysis professionally in 1920. They moved to Vienna where they soon impressed Freud

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>252</sup> Jane Novak, *The Razor Edge of Balance: A Study of Virginia Woolf*, (Miami: University of Miami Press, 1975), 3.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., 1-2.

<sup>254</sup> Daniel Ferrer, *Virginia Woolf and the Madness of Language*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), 7.

<sup>255</sup> Caramagno, “Manic Depressive Psychosis,” 17.



to the extent that they were entrusted with the translation of his work into English. When they returned to England, James presented the idea of publishing Freud's translated work through the Hogarth Press which Leonard had initiated as a sort of occupational therapy for Virginia.<sup>256</sup>

Leonard Woolf wrote that, "Between 1924 and 1939 we published an English translation of every book [Freud] wrote, and after his death we published his complete works, 24 volumes in the Standard Edition."<sup>257</sup> Moreover, Adrian Stephen, Virginia's younger brother, dropped his study of medieval law at Cambridge and became a professional psychoanalyst.<sup>258</sup>

Thus, Woolf received a heavy dose of Freudianism both, directly from his work, and, indirectly, through her social and intellectual contacts. Freud had a profound impact on her. Her literary style pays homage to Freud by searching out buried realities, or as she put it, "rainbows" that lie beneath the "granite."<sup>259</sup> Woolf, however, could be quite critical of novels she found to be explicitly Freudian. In a review of a novel by J.D. Beresford she attacked the author for, "acting the part of a stepfather to some of Freud's progeny," and judges, "the novel's un-lifelike characters to be the inevitable result of its systematic psychological assumptions [which] simplifies rather than complicates, detracts rather than enriches."<sup>260</sup> Although her novels have Freudian undertones, they do not contain psychoanalytic systems for the development and analysis of characters. Woolf believed that what an author selected to leave out of a novel was every bit as important as what he or she chose to put in it and that scientifically casting a character's personality destroyed the mystery which gave them depth and made them both believable and identifiable.

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<sup>256</sup> Goldstein, "The Woolf's Response to Freud," 441-442.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid., 442-443.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid., 443.

<sup>259</sup> Mitchell Leaska, *Granite and Rainbow: The Hidden Life of Virginia Woolf* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1998), intro.

<sup>260</sup> Novak, *The Razor Edge of Balance*, 50.

Freudianism did find its way into her critical writing. In one of the more recognizable scenes from *A Room of One's Own*, for example, Woolf's fictional heroine goes into the British Museum where she does some hopeless research to try and discover why there are not more famous female writers in history. She soon breaks off her search and begins "unconsciously, in [her] listlessness" to draw a picture. When she awakes from her daydream she finds that she has doodled a sketch of some unspecified professor upon completion of his masterpiece on *The Mental, Moral, and Physical Inferiority of the Female Sex*. He looks mad and she analyzes the picture in a tone of feigned naiveté to illustrate her point:

Drawing a picture was an idle way of finishing an unprofitable morning's work. Yet it is in our idleness, in our dreams, that the submerged truth sometimes comes to the top. A very elementary exercise in psychology, not to be dignified by the name of psychoanalysis, showed me, on looking at my notebook, that the sketch of the angry professor had been made in anger. Anger had seized my pencil while I dreamt. But what was anger doing there?<sup>261</sup>

Although Woolf had mixed feelings about Freud's utility in her artistic and intellectual life, she was consistent in her refusal to undergo psychoanalysis.

In an echo of Rilke's fears that in exorcising his "demons" he might be in danger of losing his "angels" in the process, Woolf associated psychoanalysis with emotional numbness. In her review of Beresford's novel, she goes on to satirize the "new psychology:" "A patient who has never heard a canary sing without falling down in a fit can now walk through an avenue of cages without a twinge of emotion since he has faced the fact that his mother kissed him in the cradle."<sup>262</sup> Given that one of Woolf's primary aims in life was to be receptive to beauty, the

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<sup>261</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harvest, 1989), 31.

<sup>262</sup> Goldstein, "The Woolfs' Response to Freud," 450.

suggestion that a patient might be able to walk through an avenue of singing canaries without so much as a “twinge of emotion” is a less than desirable outcome. “Woolf might well prefer to eschew medical ‘beneficence’ and retain the ‘sickness.’ She reveled not only in sensitivity but in hypersensitivity.”<sup>263</sup> In her journal she noted that, “If we didn’t tremble of precipices... we should never be depressed, I’ve no doubt; but already should be faded, fatalistic and aged.”<sup>264</sup> Woolf’s avoidance of psychoanalysis was not only inspired by her fear of being reduced to a monochromatic emotional spectrum that might destroy her ability to write, but also by the belief that writing itself provided the most effective therapy. Of *To the Lighthouse* she remarks, “I suppose that I did for myself what psycho-analysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest.”<sup>265</sup>

With the exception of the breakdown which culminated in her suicide, Woolf never had another mental collapse on the scale of the one which plagued her between 1913 and 1915. But prior to 1913 she suffered from three major manic-depressive episodes separated by intervals of only a few years. So what changed between 1915 and 1941? How is it that someone whose condition initially appeared critical if not terminal was able to be so productive, or even to survive in the following decades? The answer is complex. First of all, Woolf had escaped the stress and strife of her dysfunctional home and found comfort in Leonard’s loving care. Also, stability tends to come with age, and those diagnosed with bi-polar disorder usually experience their most intense cycles in early adulthood.<sup>266</sup> Finally and most saliently, however, we should take Woolf’s convictions about the cathartic nature of art seriously.

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<sup>263</sup> Ibid., 450.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid., 451.

<sup>265</sup> Woolf, *Moments of Being*, 81.

<sup>266</sup> Caramagno, *The Flight of the Mind*.

Between 1916 and her death in 1941, Woolf had many more brushes with madness, but they primarily coincided with the completion of her novels.<sup>267</sup> So long as she was writing, she could take shelter in that alternate reality. As she was writing the final scene of *The Waves* she almost seemed to lose track of her conscious self, to meld with the text. She describes in her diary that in those moments she wrote with such “intensity & intoxication that I seemed only to stumble after my own voice, or almost, after some sort of speaker (as when I was mad). I was almost afraid remembering the voices that used to fly ahead.”<sup>268</sup> When the novels were complete, however, she was pulled abruptly back into reality, a realm over which she had far less control.

Virginia Woolf’s struggle with madness was integral to her genius as a writer. Life, art, and insanity formed a triangle of interdependencies. Art provided Woolf with a reason to live as well as a means of coping with her madness. Madness provided her with the inspiration to produce novels of exceptional and tragic beauty. “The inner world that Woolf inhabited...inspired her to create in ways that would not have otherwise been possible. Madness was her muse.”<sup>269</sup> The cycle, however, was vicious, and in retrospect it is incredible that she maintained the semblance of balance for so long.

The next artist examined in this study, Sylvia Plath, fell victim to the cycle much earlier than Woolf. Plath was haunted by the biographical similarities she shared with Woolf. They both suffered under tyrannical father figures and shared like suspicions about masculine motives and the gender paradigm. Above all, they shared the common experience of bi-polarity. On the one hand, Plath found Woolf to be a tremendous help. When she set out to write her first and only novel, Woolf’s focus on “moments of being” meshed well with her natural inclination to describe psychological states and perceptions rather than spinning plots. On the other hand,

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<sup>267</sup> Love, *Virginia Woolf*, 3.

<sup>268</sup> Kottler, *Divine Madness*, 120.

<sup>269</sup> Kottler, *Divine Madness*, 117.

Woolf was a dangerous role model. The aspiring poet in Plath could not help but be drawn towards the tragic image of Woolf's suicide as the source of the public's morbid fascination with her life and literature. The greatest similarity between Woolf and Plath is their shared understanding of the relationship between life, art and madness and the effort to achieve a balance among them.

### *Sylvia Plath*

Sylvia Plath was born in 1932, in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts to Otto Emile Plath and Aurelia Shober Plath. In 1936, the family moved to Winthrop, Massachusetts, an inconspicuous Boston suburb, where Plath grew up with her father, mother, and younger brother. By all accounts her father, Otto, was a difficult man. He immigrated to the United States from Grabow, Germany as a young man. He brought with him an affinity for efficiency and absolute control and managed his home accordingly. This had the effect of alienating his wife and children from the outside world. "He was a selfish and self-centered man who was described as stubborn, controlling, opinionated, and antisocial."<sup>270</sup> As a child, Sylvia tried desperately to please him. She would play the piano for him, improvise short rhymes and dances, and although he obviously favored her over her older brother Warren, she could never quite break the icy barrier that encapsulated her father's personality.<sup>271</sup>

Of course, Sylvia's memories of her father's overbearing personality were limited because he died when she was only nine. But by, "scorning the tick of the falling weather," (the refrain of the poem "Lament"), he had set a suicidal example.<sup>272</sup> When his health began to deteriorate he became convinced that he had cancer and there was nothing the doctors could do.

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<sup>270</sup> Jeffrey A. Kottler, *Divine Madness* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2006), 13.

<sup>271</sup> Hayman, *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath*, 20-21.

<sup>272</sup> Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 71.

As his health fell apart, so did his personality and his violent fits of rage became much more frequent as the illness progressed.<sup>273</sup> After a bad ankle sprain his wife, Aurelia, was finally able to convince him to see a doctor. It was at that time they discovered that he did not have an incurable form of cancer, but was suffering from the advanced stages of uncontrolled diabetes. Later, when contemplating suicide, which she often did, Sylvia said she felt as if "...her father was trying to drag her down into the grave."<sup>274</sup> Otto died as much from his stubbornness and depression as he did from any physical malady. Like Woolf, it is probable that Sylvia inherited her mental illness from her father's side of the family.

Otto became a favored source of inspiration for Plath. So many of her poems draw on the twin muses of death and depression, and he provided the most immediate model. Plath derived two of her most marked poetic devices from this distant and distorted image of her father. These images came to represent a sort of duality. On the one hand, the image of the beekeeper coincides with a more idealistic, romanticized vision of her father. On the other hand, the image of her father as a rigid German invokes much darker associations such as Nazism and the tragedy of the Holocaust. Plath's father, however, was not a Nazi. He left Germany well before Adolf Hitler's rise to power. In the poem "Daddy," Plath compares herself to a Jew, who had been oppressed by her German father's memory. The association is strictly imaginative.

Plath's mother, Aurelia, was twenty-one years younger than Otto. She met him as a student while taking one of his biology classes at Boston University. As a young woman, she aspired to be a writer but abandoned those youthful plans for a more practical domestic life with Otto. She saw Sylvia as a way to live out her artistic dreams vicariously and thus began to cultivate her daughter's poetic potential at the age of five. Plath's relationship with her mother

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<sup>273</sup> Kottler, *Divine Madness*, 13.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

was nothing shy of neurotic. Plath's emotional dependence and love for Aurelia clashed with a maddening frustration with her. Aurelia implanted two highly conflicted values in her daughter. While she supported Plath's artistic and intellectual pursuits wholeheartedly, she also tried to impose a very pragmatic and traditional vision of femininity upon her daughter. While Aurelia did not see these as contrasting values, they became the root of a perpetual internal war for Plath. On the one hand she wanted nothing more than to be a "normal girl" and a "normal woman." She wanted to have boyfriends, to be beautiful and to be valued for that beauty. She wanted an ideal husband and an ideal family. On the other hand, she wanted to be a great poet and author, to be immortalized in art like Virginia Woolf, a name among great names, independent and triumphant. Her experience, however, led her to believe that she could not have both. She tried nevertheless, and the result only served to embitter her more deeply.

Indeed, Plath's life and work are marked by several pronounced dualities; social, emotional and aesthetic, the interaction of which formed her personality. As already articulated, duality in her social life centered around what she saw as the conflict between school, intellectual and family life and her poetic and literary existence. More succinctly, she saw a fundamental asymmetry between gender and societal expectations and her artistic aspirations. When she was eighteen, Plath wrote in her diary, "...What is my life for and what am I going to do with it?...I want to live and feel all the shades, tones, and variations of mental and physical experience in life...I have much to live for, yet unaccountably I am sick and sad. Perhaps you could trace my feeling back to my distaste at having to choose between alternatives."<sup>275</sup>

Indeed, Plath was aware of the dualisms in her own personality. We get some sense of this even in her intellectual work. When she returned to Smith College in 1954, after her first

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<sup>275</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath: 1950-1962*. ed. Karen V. Kukil (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), 44.

break down she wrote a senior thesis on the twin, mirror image, and the double in Dostoevsky's novels, *The Double* and *The Brothers Karamazov*. After graduating from Smith College with honors, Plath was awarded a Fulbright scholarship to study modern English literature at Newnham College in Cambridge, England. There she expanded the idea in her graduate thesis to include the novels of James Joyce.

The duality in her emotional life, of course, was reinforced by the duality of her social life. It also stems, however, from a more basic biological origin, namely the manic-depressive illness which she bore in common with Virginia Woolf. Jamison's tension theory of manic-depressive illness' effect on the creative process has particular resonance in Plath's case as well. Plath's poetry and prose contain an underlying tension between social, emotional, and aesthetic dualities which is reflective of her persistent efforts to balance madness, art and life. She always seems to imagine herself to be on the edge of an existential precipice, futilely holding on.

Plath's aesthetic duality is the most difficult to articulate clearly and is interwoven with her social and emotional dualities. Biographer Edward Butscher borrows D.H. Lawrence's somewhat disconcerting appellation of the "bitch goddess," to signify the duality of aesthetic voices in Plath's poetry. He explains that, "the 'bitch,' of course, is a familiar enough figure—a discontented, tense, frequently brilliant woman goaded into fury by her repressed or distorted status in male society; and the 'goddess' conveys the opposite image, a more creative one, though it, too, represents an extreme."<sup>276</sup> The duality of the "bitch goddess" also coincides with his titular themes of "method" and "madness" with which Butscher hopes to show how method played a mediating role between madness and the poetic product. While Butscher's distinction is descriptive, a much earlier one made by Friedrich Nietzsche between Dionysian and Apollonian

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<sup>276</sup> Edward Butscher, *Sylvia Plath*, xi.



aesthetics provides a model that is more germane to this study as whole.<sup>277</sup> As we have explored in chapter two, the aesthetic progression of Nietzsche's own life provides a useful corollary to the transformation in Plath's style.

Nietzsche's Dionysian aesthetic represents the sensual, instinctual, and irrational aspects of art. It is both sublime and tragic, emanating from some non-descript primordial origin. This contrasts with the Apollonian aesthetic, which represents light, structure, and reason and the imposition of order through a constructed illusion. Nietzsche initially argues for a sort of mediation between these two aesthetics, with neither proclaiming dominance over the other; but when he returns to this theme in his later works, it is clear that the Dionysian has eclipsed the Apollonian in his thought.<sup>278</sup> Moreover, Nietzsche's progression towards an aesthetic of Dionysian supremacy coincides with the intensification of his own mental troubles.

A similar process seemed to occur with Plath. As with Rilke's poetry, her early work was imitative, almost Romantic. As she progressed, however, she tried to tap into visceral, subconscious inner worlds. Just as Nietzsche fled farther and farther from the rational structures of the Apollonian towards the irrational chaos of the Dionysian, Plath broke the yoke of tradition and plunged headlong into an instinctual poetic style. According to Butscher, "Myth-making was...external conformation of her own dual reality. In her later poetry and sole novel, she would utilize this knowledge as a means of structuring objective worlds upon intensely personal existential states. The masks of her life would become the mythical body of her art."<sup>279</sup> While Plath remained committed to poetic structures, she infused them with unabashedly personal content. Thus, to understand the poet we find in the later collections such as *Ariel*, we must first examine the chain of biographical events responsible for this transition.

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<sup>277</sup> See: Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993).

<sup>278</sup> McGill, *Prophets of Extremity*, 45.

<sup>279</sup> Edward Butscher, *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976). 152.

Plath provides an excellent starting point in her novel *The Bell Jar* which was, by her own admission, a thinly disguised literary memoir which traces her life between her freshman year at Smith College in 1951 and her release from the Mclean psychiatric ward following her first suicide attempt in 1953. Reminiscent of Woolf's view of *To the Lighthouse* as an exercise in self-psychoanalysis, Plath equated the writing of *The Bell Jar* to a therapeutic confession. She wrote to a friend that she thought of her novel "...as an autobiographical apprentice work which I had to write in order to free myself from the past."<sup>280</sup> Her mother remembers a telephone conversation in which Plath said that in writing *The Bell Jar* what she had done was, "to throw together events from my own life, fictionalizing to add color—it's a pot boiler really, but I think it will show how isolated a person feels when he is suffering a breakdown...I've tried to picture my world and the people in it as seen through the distorting lens of the bell jar."<sup>281</sup> The title of the novel, the "bell jar," is a device which signifies the heroine's descent into depression. She imagines herself "...sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in [her] own sour air."<sup>282</sup>

The only thing about Esther Greenwood that clashes with what we know about Plath is her characteristic naiveté. Plath uses this naiveté and aloofness to enhance the innocence of her heroine. Esther Greenwood is a victim. She is victimized by her nervous and oppressive mother, the other women around her, the various men who float in and out of her life, and above all, her own mind.

Virtually all the situations presented in the novel reflect stylized versions of autobiographical realities. Plath attended a public high school where she excelled and earned a scholarship to Smith College in Massachusetts, then the world's largest and most prestigious women's institution of higher learning. Smith offered her more than just a chance to get a first-

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<sup>280</sup> Lois Ames, "Sylvia Plath: A Biographical Note." in *The Bell Jar* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 293.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.

<sup>282</sup> Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 207.

rate education; it was an opportunity to escape the torments of a dysfunctional family life and to develop her own tastes and personality separate from her devoted but suffocating mother. Plath excelled at Smith and earned straight “A”s in all subjects. Unsurprisingly, her creative writing classes were her favorite. The summer after her junior year she was awarded a coveted internship at *Mademoiselle* Magazine in Manhattan. This is where we find Esther Greenwood in the opening scene of *The Bell Jar*.

Esther’s good looks and graceful outward manner disguise an escalating inner struggle. The pressure that she constantly applied to herself to succeed was starting to catch up with her. Through Esther, Plath articulates the difficulties of trying to live up to the standard which she had set for herself. She finds that her plans about the future, which had once loomed brightly in her mind suddenly seemed distant and unattainable. As a “scholarship girl,” she had always had the right answers, always envisioned a path that ended in success and happiness. Now, however, as she walked the streets of Manhattan she realized that she was losing control over her own destiny. She writes, “I just bumped from my hotel to work and to parties and from parties to my hotel and back to work like a numb trolleybus...I felt very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo.”<sup>283</sup>

In the novel, Plath frequently shifts between the internship and various moments from her first three years of college. Much of that earlier material focuses on her relationship with Buddy Willard. Just as Esther Greenwood plays the role of Plath in *The Bell Jar*, Buddy Willard is a fictionalization of Dick Norton, one of Plath’s first lovers. His mother, Mildred was very close with her mother, Aurelia Plath; so much so that the Norton boys often referred to her as “Aunt Aurelia.”<sup>284</sup> Norton was in med-school at Yale while Plath was at Smith. She writes of how

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<sup>283</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>284</sup> Hayman, *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath*, 68.

delighted it makes Esther when Buddy gives her an invitation to the Yale formal. She was not elated because she admired Buddy, but because it would win her the respect of the girls in her dorm. After the formal, she began to date him for the same reasons.

After a few months of seeing each other, Esther convinces Buddy to allow her to shadow him for a day at the hospital where he was serving his residency. This scene of *The Bell Jar* is mirrored after an event which made a profound impact on Plath. While Esther Greenwood is unfazed by the cadavers which, "...were so un-human looking they didn't bother [her]," we cannot say the same for Plath.<sup>285</sup> One sight that would continue to haunt her was a hallway lined with, "...big glass bottles full of babies that had died before they were born."<sup>286</sup> Later, when describing the psychological state which had given birth to the novel she writes, "To the person in the bell jar, black and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is a bad dream."<sup>287</sup> It is thus apparent that this image of the bell jar derives from that gruesome spectacle. Later in the day she follows Buddy to lectures on sickle cell anemia and skin cancer and then to a live birth. This experience also continued to resonate in Plath's mind. Esther is astounded to see the woman lying on, "...some kind of awful torture table."<sup>288</sup> When Esther asks Buddy about the pain, he explains that she is on a drug which puts her in a kind of "twilight sleep" and that she will not remember any of the pain. Esther remarks that, "...it sounded just like the sort of drug that a man would invent. Here was a woman in terrible pain...and she would go straight home and start another baby, because the drug would make her forget how bad the pain had been, when all the

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<sup>285</sup> Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 70.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>287</sup> Lois Ames, "Sylvia Plath: A Biographical Note," 296.

<sup>288</sup> Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 73.

time, in some secret part of her, that long, blind, doorless and windowless corridor of pain was waiting to open up and shut her in again.”<sup>289</sup>

This comment is just one of several which help to illustrate Plath’s suspicions about the whole male universe. Esther began to think that, “Maybe it was true that when you were married and had children that it was like being brainwashed and afterwards you went about numb as a slave in some private totalitarian state.”<sup>290</sup> “I knew that in spite of all the roses and kisses and restaurant dinners that a man showered on a woman before he married her, what he secretly wanted when the wedding services ended was for her to flatten out under her feet...”<sup>291</sup> This pronounced skeptical current clashes with Esther’s, and indeed Plath’s, desire for male affirmation. Starting in her high school days, Plath seemed to be in a constant and desperate search for a companion who would complement her twin personalities and somehow weld together her conflicted social values. Understanding this tension between the ideal and the practical, between aspirations and experiences in Plath’s social life is critical because it is one of the key factors that feeds both the content and style of her later and most celebrated poetry. Plath projects this tension through Esther when she tells Buddy that, “If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time then I’m neurotic as hell. I’ll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days.”<sup>292</sup>

As *The Bell Jar* illustrates, things really began to unravel for Plath when she returned home to spend the rest of the summer of 1952 with her mother. She quickly found herself drowning in the depths of her deepest depression to date. Her journal describes her psychological state:

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid., 94-95.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid., 104.

I am afraid. I am not solid, but hollow. I feel behind my eyes a numb, paralyzed cavern, a pit of hell, mimicking nothingness. I never thought, I never wrote, I never suffered. I want to kill myself, to escape from responsibility, to crawl back abjectly into the womb. I do not know who I am, where I am going-and I am the one who has to decide the answers to these hideous questions.<sup>293</sup>

The worst part about this particular bout of depression was that she could no longer write, an experience that was also characteristic of all of Woolf's major, and many of her minor, breakdowns. Writing had always provided Plath with an outlet, a safety valve of sorts through which she could drain off excess emotion. Her journal entries leading up to her first suicide attempt later that summer are riddled with self-criticism, calling herself, "pitifully stupid," and "inadequate". Her writing block contrasted with her characteristic ability to "quell out fury" by "wrenching out" poems.<sup>294</sup>

During this time Plath's morbid fascination transformed into an outright death wish and she began to seriously contemplate suicide. She wrote in her journal that, "Tommorow is another day toward death...Over orange juice & coffee even the embryonic suicide brightens visibly."<sup>295</sup> At first she thought that she would do it "like the Roman philosophers" and climb into a warm bath and slit her wrists, watching her blood "bloom" in the water. In *The Bell Jar*, Esther even tries this method, "but when it came right down to it, the skin of [her] wrist looked so white and defenseless that [she] couldn't do it. It was is if what [she] wanted to kill wasn't in that skin ... but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, and a whole lot harder to get at."<sup>296</sup> Next she

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<sup>293</sup> Kottler, 15.

<sup>294</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*. ed. Ted Hughes (New York: The Dial Press, 1982). 132.

<sup>295</sup> Plath, *The Unabridged Journals*, 185.

<sup>296</sup> Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 165.

thought about hanging herself, but only succeeded in walking around the house with a rope around her neck for half an hour without finding a place to hang it.<sup>297</sup>

It was also during this moment of crisis that Plath tried to reconnect with the memory of her father. While her own preoccupations with death and dying certainly played a role, Ronald Hayman has suggested that her sudden desire to visit his grave for the first time was related to Plath's reading of Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia*, which explains repressed or undemonstrated grief as a possible source of depression. At age nine, this healthy mourning process would have been impossible for Plath.<sup>298</sup> Thus we see Esther Greenwood, going to her father's grave for the first time. It is a profound disappointment. The grave was bordered by a path so that people frequently walked on it. Rather than allowing her to grieve, the visit only reinforces the banality and nothingness which she already associated with death.

This connection with Freud, however, is interesting. We know from Plath's journals that her reading of abnormal psychology was extensive. Likewise, Esther Greenwood spends the last of her savings on abnormal psychology books. In *Mourning and Melancholia* Freud develops his theory of *transference*, which is explained as, "The redirection of feelings and desires and especially of those unconsciously retained from childhood toward a new object."<sup>299</sup> Freud suggests transference as a way to bypass neuroses by channeling obsessive emotional energies towards a new, less destructive object or goal. This would likely have struck a chord in Plath, and may be one of many influences that encouraged her to develop a more personal style.

Woolf and Plath both thought of their illnesses in Freudian terms. In other words, they consciously held their subconscious minds responsible for the setting up and proliferation of neuroses. Caramagno explains that the tendency to assume personal responsibility for psychosis

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<sup>297</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>298</sup> Hayman, *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath*, 31.

<sup>299</sup> Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (1976) "Transference."

is common among manic-depressives because “To understand why they feel so bad, depressed patients tend to think back over the years and center obsessively on...a traumatic experience (to explain their helplessness and life’s emptiness) or the loss of a significant person (to explain their sense of abandonment and loneliness).”<sup>300</sup> Woolf and Plath both fixated on the loss of their fathers as well as their difficult personalities as sources of maddening depression.

Plath’s depression was so profound by the middle of the summer that even her journal fell silent. On July 14<sup>th</sup>, 1953 she sat down and wrote in her journal for what would become the last time until November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1955. It is an eerie break. She gives herself one final pep-talk; “You are afraid of being alone with you[r] own mind... Your room is not your prison, you are... The price of all this is too high. Neurotic women. Fie. Get a job. Learn shorthand at night. NOTHING EVER REMAINS THE SAME.”<sup>301</sup> A little over a month later, on August 24<sup>th</sup>, Plath took forty-eight sleeping pills and hid in the basement of her mother’s house. She left no suicide letter, only a note saying she had gone for a very long walk. After a three-day man-hunt involving the police, neighbors, boy-scouts and rush of headlines about the missing Smith girl, her mother and brother heard moans coming from the basement.<sup>302</sup>

After a brief stay in the local state hospital which seemed to do Plath more harm than good, Olive Higgins Prouty, the wealthy benefactress of Plath’s scholarship at Smith came to the rescue once again.<sup>303</sup> She paid to have Sylvia transferred to the Mclean Psychiatric hospital, which by that point had become known as “the mad poets society.” Mclean housed several famous mental patients including William James, Robert Lowell, and Anne Sexton.<sup>304</sup> Plath did not keep a journal about her experience at Mclean so what little we know comes from an

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<sup>300</sup> Caramagno, “Manic-Depressive Psychosis,” 17.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid*, 186.

<sup>302</sup> Hayman, *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath*, 61.

<sup>303</sup> Lois Ames, “Sylvia Plath: A Biographical Note,” 280.

<sup>304</sup> Alex Beam, “The Mad Poets Society,” *The Atlantic Monthly* (July-August 2001), 96.



interpretation of *The Bell Jar* and interviews with her psychiatrist, Dr. Ruth Tiffany Barnhouse who attended to Plath with unusual tenderness. In 1959, Plath confessed that, “RB has become my mother.”<sup>305</sup> After nearly a year of treatments including electro-shock therapy, psychoanalysis and art therapy, Plath was finally able to overcome the prolonged depressive episode which had nearly resulted in her death and begin to write once again. As the last pages of *The Bell Jar* suggest, however, she was not at all sure that her new-found health would last. “How did I know that someday...the bell jar with its stifling distortions wouldn’t descend again?”<sup>306</sup>

It is no coincidence that Plath’s poems and prose tell us a great deal about her inner life. Plath was deeply influenced by the confessional poetry of Robert Lowell. When she became a student of Lowell’s in 1959, he had recently completed his own sojourn at Mclean which inspired his poem, “Waking in the Blue”. She had always felt oppressed by the effort of writing outside of her own experiences and Lowell’s blatantly personal style provided a liberating model for her.<sup>307</sup> From that point on she withheld nothing of her emotions from her work. Her later poems make it clear that she had not only adopted Lowell’s style, she had mastered it and made it her own.

Virginia Woolf also made a profound impression on Plath. Woolf floats through the pages of Plath’s journal like a sort of ethereal lighthouse. After she bought a “battery” of Woolf’s novels and a copy of her diary in a used book store, she could not help but be reminded of the eerie similarities between herself and Woolf. Woolf’s suspicions about domesticity, suicidal fantasies, instability, and self-doubt provided her with a sort of historical mirror by which to view her own changing reflection. Of Woolf she writes, “Bless her. I feel my life linked to her somehow. I love her...But her suicide, I felt I was reduplicating in that black

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<sup>305</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>306</sup> Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 296.

<sup>307</sup> Hayman., *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath* ,133.

summer of 1953.”<sup>308</sup> And later when writing *The Bell Jar* she noted that, “Virginia Woolf helps, her novels make mine possible: I find myself describing episodes: you don’t have to follow Greenwood to breakfast...Make her enigmatic: who is that blond girl: she is a bitch: a white goddess. Make her a statement of the generation. Which is you.”<sup>309</sup> Idolizing Woolf, however, was a dangerous enterprise. In the fall of 1958 when Plath’s mental integrity began to unravel for a second time she wrote, “[Woolf] I feel cold facing, but merging with.”<sup>310</sup> Woolf’s psychosis, however, was mediated by an outside factor which Plath was never able to rely on: a loving, empathetic, and faithful spouse.

While in Cambridge, Plath fell in love with poet laureate Ted Hughes. Hughes was a tall, handsome older man whose poetry reflected an inner depth that was both novel and attractive to Plath. He suffered, however, from many of the same character flaws as her father. Hughes was moody and egotistical. Although their marriage in 1956 was initially a happy one, that euphoria quickly dissolved. After the birth of their first child, Frieda, Plath found herself being shut ever more tightly into the cage of domesticity that she had feared for so long. In the winter of 1958, she sought psychiatric help and began attending psychoanalytical sessions with a Dr. Beutscher in London.<sup>311</sup> This relapse, however, was different from the first one. Previously she had suffered from crippling depression and lethargy, but now she was overcome by a profound nervous energy that would become transformed into something closer to rage when she learned of Ted’s philandering. Plath became restless and began to suffer from chronic insomnia, which inspired her poem, “Insomniac.” She was prescribed sleeping pills which the poem describes as, “Those sugary planets whose influence won a life baptized in no-life for a while. And the sweet,

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<sup>308</sup> Plath, *The Unabridged Journals*, 269.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*, 289.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*, 340.

<sup>311</sup> Hayman, *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath*, xvii-xix.

drugged waking of a forgetful baby.”<sup>312</sup> As the poem goes on to indicate, however, she soon developed a tolerance to them. “Now the pills are worn-out and silly, like classical gods. Their poppy-sleepy colors do no good.”<sup>313</sup>

The first breakdown in 1953 wrecked Plath’s creative abilities. The second, however, seems to have enhanced them tremendously. Between January of 1961 and her death in February 1963 she wrote over one hundred and twenty poems. In her entire career prior to 1961, she wrote only one hundred and thirty-three. Given the nature of bi-polar disorder, it stands to reason that if the breakdown she experienced in college was depressive, then the one she experienced in the early years of marriage was manic. After her release from Mclean, Plath frequently reminded herself of just how important writing was for the maintenance of her mental health. For example, in 1956 she wrote, “...I’ve got to write. I feel sick, this week, of having written nothing lately.”<sup>314</sup> Although the shower of poems began in late 1960 and continued through 1961, it became a torrential downpour in 1962 after Plath learned of Ted’s involvement with Assia Wevill. From that point on she wrote with all the desperation of a woman trying to save her own life. This desperation was synonymous with madness, but, as Butscher leads us to recognize, there was still a method which focuses her chaotic energies into a recognizable form.

This method, however, was anything but rigid or traditional. It was Dionysian in that it sprang from an instinctive, almost guttural emotional level. All her rage and pain flowed freely into verse after verse, dense structures eroded and were replaced by driving rhythms. One of Plath’s most famous poems, “Daddy,” provides a bench mark for what her poetry had become.

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<sup>312</sup> Plath, *Collected Poems*, 163.

<sup>313</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>314</sup> Plath, *The Unabridged Journal*, 269.

“The insistent rhythm makes the poem into a dance of rage—but rage comes from frustrated love.”<sup>315</sup> The first and last lines in particular emphasize this hatred:

You do not do, you do not do  
 Any more, black shoe  
 In which I have lived like a foot  
 For thirty years, poor and white,  
 Barely able to breathe or Achoo  
 Daddy, I have had to kill you.  
 You died before I had time—  
 Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,  
 Ghastly statue with one gray toe  
 Big as a Frisco Seal [...]  
 If I've killed one man, I've killed two—  
 The Vampire who said he was you  
 And drank my blood for a year,  
 Seven years if you want to know.  
 Daddy, you can lie back now.  
 There's a stake in your fat black heart  
 And the villagers never liked you.  
 They are dancing and stamping on you.  
 Daddy, daddy, you bastard I'm through.<sup>316</sup>

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<sup>315</sup> Hayman, *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath*, 32.

<sup>316</sup> Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 222-224.

These later poems preserve Plath's extreme trepidation and begin to prophesy a death which seemed more imminent each day. Take the last lines of "The Elm," for example:

[...]I am terrified by this dark thing  
 That sleeps in me;  
 All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity. [...]  
 Its snaky acids kiss.  
 It petrifies the will. These are the isolate slow faults  
 That kill, that kill, that kill."<sup>317</sup>

Plath's last poem, "The Edge," is as much as suicide note as a poem. With those final lines of verse, she prepared to free herself from a dual life which she found insupportable. The travesty is that to do so meant a reckless abandonment and destruction of that life. In her way of thinking, once the balance had tipped, there was no turning back.

The woman is perfected.  
 Her dead  
 Body wears the smile of accomplishment  
 The illusion of Greek necessity  
 Flows in the scrolls of her toga,  
 Her bare  
 Feet seem to be saying:  
 We have come so far, it is over[...]<sup>318</sup>

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<sup>317</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid., 272.

### *Conclusion*

Although myriad artists and intellectuals have suffered from mental illness, few have been so deeply disturbed as Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath. Nevertheless, they somehow managed to wring out the drops of beauty from lives parched by sorrow. Because they wrote so much about their art and because their art is so illuminative of their lives, the insights they offer help to demystify the relationship between manic-depressive illness and writing specifically and madness and creativity more generally. The clarity of their cases offers keys which may help unlock others which have grown more obscure through the distortions of time.

More so than the other individuals examined in this study, they also suggest a whole other aspect of the madness and creativity connection that lurks outside of the confines of this study. Brilliance on its own is no guarantor of artistic eminence. To find its way into the canons, a work of art must first satiate public and/or scholastic tastes. While Woolf's and Plath's celebrity certainly owes primarily to the excellence of their work, it is evident that their notoriety is also the product of a sort of morbid fascination with the tragic narratives of their lives and deaths. The fact that the majority of Woolf's biographies are framed in the context of her mental illness is illustrative of this point. Likewise, Plath's novel, *The Bell Jar*, inspired a veritable cult following of adolescents in the 1970s and 80s who saw it as a statement of their generation's youthful angst. Therefore, in answering the question of why so many eminent artists are mentally disturbed, one should also consider why so many mentally disturbed artists are eminent. Although it is a difficult, if not impossible, question to answer, it is nevertheless a question that needs to be asked. Its allusive answer rests in the human fascination with subject matter that is gruesome, violent, or tragic, and avoidance of material that is ordinary, mundane or

uninteresting. The prevalence of a tragic sensibility in both public and scholastic tastes should be factored into the nexus between madness, creativity and perceptions of greatness.

## CONCLUSION

Searching out the links between madness and creativity is important for the same reasons that cultural and intellectual histories are important. It is an integral part of the larger effort to determine how the realm of ideas is transcribed into the world of historical reality. As Karl Manheim explains in *Ideology and Utopia*, although ideas or ideologies may “become” realities, those realities will resemble, but never replicate, the original conception. A basic transformation occurs along the pathways leading from design to construction. In order to be realized, ideas must first filter through the medium of context which brings them into conflict with the status quo and alters the initial form.

The transcription dilemma on the societal and cultural levels mirrors the creative process on the individual level. Just as the preexisting traditions, values and assumptions that comprise the status quo mediate between the idea and its final form, the established structures and trends of art and discourse mediate between inspiration and the creative product. While psychosis as a source of inspiration can be an artistic boon by giving rise to intense emotional and perceptive states, it can be overwhelming for the same reasons. Therefore, the creative impulse among mad artists and intellectuals is often motivated by conscious and subconscious desires to externalize and organize their thoughts and impressions. Berlioz, for example, found that musical composition checked his “enormous appetite for emotion” and expressed genuine doubts about his ability to go on living if he were stripped of this expressive tool. Likewise, Woolf and Plath both thought of their writing a means of analyzing, coping with and laying to rest the trauma of past experiences.

The structures of art and discourse, therefore, play a vital role in the relationship between madness and creativity. The implications of these findings, however, transcend their specific



application here. At a moment when artistic and even intellectual structures are devolving into less and less distinct forms, it reminds us of the important role they play as the mediators between ideas and the production and proliferation of culture. This warning has a particular resonance for historians whose task is to translate the scattered and chaotic material of the past into an organized and insightful narrative without destroying its vivacity. Likewise, for the artist, method must be balanced between the rigidity which makes the creative product universal and the flexibility which conducts its energy to the consumer.

While the creative process can ultimately be therapeutic, composition is taxing even to those in excellent mental and physical health. Many of the subjects examined in this study vacillated between moments when they viewed their work as a salvation and others when they thought that it might be the root of their suffering. Flaubert, for example, wondered whether or not his struggles as a writer were the source of his psychological problems. Likewise, prior to the consolations of Lou Salomé, Rilke adhered to the age-old assumption that a poet must first succumb to madness before tapping into the springs of inspiration. None of the individuals we encountered thought of their lives simplistically as a pursuit of existential pleasure. They were far more interested in producing work that was meaningful than seeking out a balanced and happy existence. As a result, they were willing to make deep sacrifices to achieve these aims and their will to create become synonymous with their will to life. They understood the essence of Nietzsche's mantra that, "He who has a *why* to live can bear almost any *how*."

Life and work, therefore, may become even more inexorably intertwined for mad artists and intellectuals than for those who are healthy. Evidence of this strong interdependency litters the primary resource materials. Flaubert, for example, expressed a deep-seated psychological connection with his fictional heroine Emma Bovary. Berlioz was so passionate about his music

that on more than one occasion he launched into public spectacles of compulsive rage when an orchestra botched his work. Likewise, Rilke and Woolf expressed similar difficulties in weaning their minds away from their finished works. A heightened interdependence between the mad creator and the creative product may also be connected to the problem of madness and multiple realities.

Flaubert, Berlioz, Nietzsche, Rilke, Woolf and Plath were all myth-makers in one capacity or another and often had difficulty drawing the line between the myths they were weaving and the lives they were living. Madness undermines the border between real and surreal by presenting two disparate psychological and perceptive states of sanity and insanity which are difficult to unify into the singular concept of self. These difficulties help to explain the mad artists' and intellectuals' tendency to fixate on dualistic themes and to search out "Dionysian inner worlds" for a unifying base. Owing to mental-illness, their societal experiences rarely meshed well with their individual experiences. The "logical" reaction, then, is to create worlds over which one can exercise more control. Just as Nietzsche "killed" the old God and prophesied his own new one, art allowed the other figures in this study to play the god part in their own imagined, but truly possessed, realities.

As explored in chapter two, Nietzsche's delineation between the Dionysian and the Apollonian is, at base, the juxtaposition between conflicting aesthetic realities. He gradually sided with the Dionysian as the more genuine of the two. He believed that in unearthing the Dionysian he had rediscovered man's mythmaking powers and that the myths he was creating were based in realities far deeper than the shallow Apollonian waters of nineteenth-century intellectual, artist and social conventions. The problem as he saw it was that both his spiritual and secular contemporaries had become so wrapped up in the crusade for absolute truth that they

had lost sight of the fact that man, whether conscious of it or not, had always been, and forever would be, the architect of his own truth; an epiphany which informs post-modern structuralism. Nietzsche, therefore, thought of himself as a cultural physician, but he perceived early on that for a number of reasons, both physiological and philosophic, that he fell on the “wrong” side of the conceptual dichotomies between rational and irrational, sane and insane, healthy and sick. His egocentrism, however, would never allow him to accept his own sickness, so he recast it as a “higher health” while criticizing the rest of society for being sick and decadent. Nietzsche seemed to consciously recognize what Flaubert, Berlioz, Rilke, Plath and Woolf may have only perceived subconsciously: that art and discourse, by their very nature, are transcendent of sanity’s conceptual value assumptions.

The multiple and often enigmatic meanings of art and aesthetics complicate this project enormously. It would be far easier, for example, to show how mental illness affects the work of a janitor or a school bus driver. The problem is that “artist” and “philosopher” are extremely vague occupational descriptions which is one reason why approaching each figure individually is so vital. An important insight, however, is cloaked in this dilemma. It helps to answer the question of why so many mentally disturbed individuals are drawn to the arts in the first place. As Arnold M. Ludwig points out, “Unlike other professions, the artistic occupations simply lack the capacity to keep ‘unstable’ people out. The creative arts professions also seem to place a higher premium on the creative products of persons than on their personal behaviors...Small wonder then that those who are more non conformist, eccentric, rebellious, socially alienated or emotionally troubled should find the creative arts so attractive.”<sup>319</sup>

The nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries specifically seem to have provided fertile soil for mad artists and intellectuals for many of the same reasons that the creative fields tend to

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<sup>319</sup> Ludwig, *The price of Greatness*, 5.

attract them more generally. The Romantic Movement, for example, emphasized receptiveness to beauty, instinct, love, emotion and even madness. Flaubert and Berlioz, therefore, were situated within a historical and cultural context which valued their enormous emotional capacities. Likewise, modernism and postmodernism not only accepted, but encouraged artistic and intellectual explorations that undermined purely logo-centric worldviews and encouraged ground-breaking expressions. The widespread diffusion of Nietzsche's philosophy along with new breakthroughs and new mistakes in the field of psychology helped to bring irrationality out of the asylum (at least in spirit) and into the realm of European public awareness.

This study has made some strong claims about the connection between madness and creativity that will no doubt attract criticism. Before we lay it to rest, it is, therefore, necessary to attach some important qualifications to the findings and methods of the thesis and to plot its rightful boundaries. First, and perhaps most significantly, madness has no autonomous agency. In other words, it is a variable that is entirely dependent on the individual who suffers from it. While it may provide inspiration and motivation to creative persons, it has no productive capacity of its own. Madness is more often a destructive force than a generative one, and we must keep in mind that the individuals examined in this study are notable exceptions to that general rule. For every mentally disturbed person who has achieved artistic or intellectual eminence, there are countless others who have been wracked and destroyed by a variety of psychoses. Mental illness does not make an individual creative, but creative persons, partly owing to that creativity, may be able to devise strategies of coping with it that refigure their experiences with abnormal thought as a generative force. The disciplines of art provide especially useful mediums for the employment of these strategies.

Another key qualification is that although this study has applied the term “madness” with, perhaps, uncomfortable liberty (owing largely to linguistic limitations), the types of madness that may play catalytic roles in the creative process only exist within a very narrow margin. This “fine madness” is a rare state of consciousness. Using Nietzsche to illustrate this point, “madness” as a linguistic signifier could be used to describe both Nietzsche’s psychological state in the 1880s, when he produced the bulk of his work, as well as the period after 1889, when he was reduced to the condition of being a pitiful invalid. Likewise, while it is evident that the emotional hypersensitivity of manic-depressive illness was a source of artistic inspiration for Woolf and Plath, it would also eventually culminate in their suicides. Therefore, it is impossible to think of madness in its extreme manifestations as harboring a potentially positive utility. This is another reason why it is critical to examine the madness and creativity connection on the individual level before making generalizations. Even then, these generalizations can only represent tendencies, and one must be careful not to lose sight of the specific experiences which make each individual’s encounter with madness unique.

Like all historical analyses, this thesis does not transcend the problem of interpretation. Literary critics especially may be wary of the use of literature as a biographical mirror. Nevertheless, from Jacob Burckhardt onwards, the idea that art and discourse may be used to determine the *zeitgeist* of an era remains a critical tool of cultural and intellectual historians. It stands to reason, therefore, that creative products, when judiciously interpreted, may help to unearth the essence of their creator.

Finally, and most obviously, the scope of this study relative to the immensity of the controversy it engages in is quite narrow. The method it employs, however, is promising for the further illumination of the subject. Expanding the cast of characters as well as breadth of the

time period may only serve to deepen the understanding of the madness and creativity connection and help us to comprehend, as Sylvia Plath's epitaph reads, how "even amidst fierce flames the golden lotus can be planted."

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