

# Styron Leaves Las Vegas: Philosophy, Alcohol and the Addictions of Experience

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*This essay examines the relationship between wording, authorship, depression and addiction. Styron's own experience was of tumbling into acute depression, following the withdrawal of his habitual low-level alcohol habit. The paper examines the way in which such depressions may be described as emptinesses of being congruent with a philosophical (Sartrean) perspective: it compares them with the wild excesses and hyperactivities associated with alcoholism in *Leaving Las Vegas* and *The Great Gatsby*. The paper makes several theoretical associations between alcoholic behavior and the act of writing itself.*

## *Addiction:*

2. a. The state of being (self-)addicted or given to a habit or pursuit; devotion. OED

Addiction is the state of being addicted, of /\*\*\*not being able to stop. Words are addictive: they pile up in the dictionary, in the pages of academic journals and on the ever-waiting computer screen. Wordlessness, writer's block, is generally recognised as the prison of the professional writer: the act of being unable to write is itself viewed as a failure, a lapse from cultural questions of writerly legitimacy, a failure of devotion to the novelistic, poetic or academic-cultural form. Words may be seen as a form of cultural addiction, and the silence of the blocked professional writer as a kind of necessary 'cold turkey,' an occasional and involuntary visit to non-verbality, where questions of communicative precision and wordful evocativeness are enforcedly laid aside. Yet at the same time some of the greatest acts of writerliness have come from the prison of inarticulacy, silence and inner chaos of being: whether expressed in terms purely of writerly identity, political acts of silence or a deeper crisis of form. This paper seeks to examine the relationship between writerly addiction, acts of writing as meaning-making and the inverse consequences of writers' encounters with inner worlds of nonsensicality, or chaotic states of behaviour: it explores the relationship between mental health, the role of the writer and the making of meaning in the context of addiction, both in the context of the printed page and the

desperate silences of clinical depression.

The relationship between clinical depression, writer-philosophers and the history of addiction is paradoxical. Opium addicts such as Hazlitt, and writer-thinkers such as Irving Welsh, have tended to explore the wilder frameworks of human behaviour with reference to addiction, either as a metaphor for wider patterns of human behaviour or a behavioral phenomenon in its own right. Like populist accounts of addiction in the media, the presence of addiction in modern fiction is often expressed as a trope of either (false) glamour or self-conscious hyperactivity. By contrast, clinical depression is hardly a subject calculated to acquire kudos in the annals of literary history. Predominantly characterised by its sufferers' inability to co-operate, communicate or even, in extreme cases, get out of bed, it is a topic unlikely to be of interest to any but the most de-focused reader. Addiction, as Styron points out, is cool: alcoholism, for example, is practically a badge of the professional literary American writer. As such it has often been described, articulated, and discussed and publicly thematised; it is, in his own words, "so legendary as to provide in itself a stream of studies and books." (Styron: 1990, 39) There is certainly no stigma attaching to it; almost the reverse in fact. Yet clinical depression, which as he points out is an equally devastating disease, and which has been equally a disease associated with a writer's life, does not merely suffer from stigma in a general social sense, but has barely been discussed in print. This is perhaps surprising, but also revealing. Like non-productive experiences of 'writer's block,' clinical depression is a particularly hard disease for writers to admit to and also grapple with, indicating as it does a destroying experience of wordlessness and primal inarticulacy. In this paper I grapple with the relationship between Styron's addictive behavior prior to his outbreak of clinical depression, explore the ways in which some other writers have treated addictive behavior, and examine the ways in which addiction and depression may be seen as opposite symptoms of the same 'writerly' disease, known as the inarticulacy of despair.

Sartre, Virginia Woolf, Tolstoy, Camus and Sir Philip Sidney have all been identified as sufferers of the disease formerly known as melancholia, and it is thought that Coleridge wrote one of his finest poems, *Dejection: An Ode*, whilst suffering from one of his periodic melancholic fits. In the writerly life, it is as if periods of loquaciousness grapple with periods of inarticulacy, despondency and despair. Depression takes many

forms, but one of the characteristic aspects documented by clinicians is a sense of separateness, of being cut off from and unable to communicate with other human beings. In this sense the relationship between depression and writing is clearly ambiguous. Depression represents that which is beyond words, beyond meaning, beyond form even: the kind of chaotic and life-threatening event which makes it impossible even to find the 'shaping spirit' to turn on the light, put on the radio, or even, at a more basic level, get out of bed. Beyond that is a different level of depression: the sense of depression encountered at a level not so much of inability to function but the sense of the meaninglessness of existence, the point where daily life itself seems incompatible with notions of truth, behaviour, ontological validity or hope. This is the philosopher's approach to clinical depression: Sartre clearly wrote much of his existential philosophy out of a spirit not so much of solemn, detached enquiry, as personal anguish. His puritanicalism stems from a sense of the urgency of making sense of the very anguish and non-being which lies at the centre of life, the point where all our meaning systems and points of reference break down.

When we come to read Styron, such distinctions matter. Styron himself drew productively upon the French existential tradition, aligning himself effectively with the philosopher-writer tradition. He was conscious of having learned much, particularly from Camus. "I received the stab of recognition that proceeds from reading the work of a writer who has wedded moral passion to a style of great beauty and whose unblinking vision is capable of frightening the soul to its marrow." (19) Such frightening visions applied to Camus' own life, too, since his own despondency and suicidal tendencies were well known. Famously, and as alluded to by Styron, the "Myth of Sisyphus" states that "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide." Amongst writers of mutual acquaintance, Styron notes, there was much gossip about Camus' own depression. Camus was for him not just a novelist but a prototype thinker: "a great cleanser of my intellect, ridding me of countless sluggish ideas, and through some of the most unsettling pessimism I had ever encountered causing me to be aroused anew by life's enigmatic promise." (20) Clearly, then, Camus' own depression and ontological visions of despondency function as a backdrop to Styron's own life and work. Despair is a thematic problem for Styron, as well as a practical one.

In that sense, Styron's authorial choice to describe not his own long-standing (and productive) habitual alcohol usage, but his own alcohol-free period of despair and despondency, makes sense. Alcoholism in Styron's text is not so much a symptom of social disease or disorder as a productive (and absent) signified of productivity, personal stability and unified output. By contrast, the arid (and parched) zone of clinical depression is described in detail, self-consciously and non-judgementally foregrounded in the canonical mental health text *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness*, in what amounts to an appeal to re-engage with the basic questions of ontology promoted by Camus and Sartre's imaginative engagement with despair.

*Darkness Visible* is therefore a text which works on many levels. Asking the basic question, "what if suicide?" it demands that the human experience of suffering in this manner be taken seriously. As such it functions as a sympathetic manual of the disease for clinical depression sufferers, but also as a way of expressing some of what is meant by the primal scream at the heart of human behaviour, the moment when all meaning-making systems cease to make sense, when for no apparent reason the distinction between self and external reality ceases to be valid, and where the mind and body's sense of reality is dominated by "anarchic disconnections," "bifurcation of mood" and "murky distractedness." (12)

This matters particularly because it is so very sudden. It is also very much in contrast with what had happened to him before. At the peak of his career, at an award ceremony in Paris, Styron was laid low by clinical depression and unable even to attend the celebratory, almost-certainly alcohol fueled lunch: a "gathering murk" was laying waste his being, and a new phrase was entering his ontology. Addiction had been replaced by ontological crisis. Something that had functioned as a method of interior calibration and emotional stability had been removed. The point matters little whether he was functionally dependent or merely emotionally accustomed. In the absence of alcohol, he had simply broken down.

Break down is of course a phenomenon with a particular medical (urgent and ontological) meaning and as such has a particular relevance to crisis-driven literature. It is also, however, a meaning with a particular function in our terms of reference to contemporary forms of critical inquiry, where meaning and form have been signified into meta-state-

ments in their own right, and where signified comes across not so much as a meaning for what is, as much as a term of reference for what may be, what could be seen as and what may very well come to be seen as something else. Such a meta-driven dislocation of meaning clearly fits well with the paradigm of human behaviour explored within texts such as Sartre's *Nausea*, Styron's own *Darkness Visible*, and, from an earlier century, Coleridge's own *Ode to Dejection*; "my shaping spirit" has fled, bemoans Coleridge, and it is as if in this simple statement there is something similar to the paradigm of conscious human intention explored in culturally significant signifiers such as Imagination, Reality and Cultural Representation. What is lost in the crippling experience of depression is the ability to anguish reasonably, that is to say to relate one's anguish reasonably to the state of the world, the state of one's own or the other's behaviour, or the state of one's inner life. This is what changes the relationship between image and reality in such texts: the authorial perspective is such that the shape-shifting inevitable in any account of human consciousness is wholly at odds with the writers' account of what actually is. People are nice, the sea is blue, but inside there is this screaming cry of anguish that will not be comforted. Meaning here has little to do with external signifiers than with an inner world of silent refusal, wordlessness or inability to participate practically in the daily necessities of life: words become in this context less a means to communication than a signifier of silence, or at least, a refusal to be heard. What happens to Styron is, in effect, that he ceases to be able to communicate or even believe effective communication to be possible. "My pain had become so intense that I considered it quite improbable that conversation with another mortal, even one with professional expertise in mood disorders, could alleviate the distress." (51) Visits to the psychiatrist are the textual focus for this speech-anxiety: "on my visits he and I continued to exchange platitudes, mine haltingly spoken now since my speech, emulating my way of talking, had slowed to the vocal equivalent of a shuffle and I'm sure as tiresome as his." (55) Speech loss is symptomatic of the worst stages of clinical depression, but in critical terms it is also a deeply symbolic trope.

As a trope of critical inquiry, addiction is on the surface an entirely opposite, very different problem. Addiction has many aspects which make it relevant to writers of fiction and non-fiction: its perceived glamour, its emotional infidelity, its temptation-seeking fictions of future

pleasure and immediate, almost inadvertently consumed sensate gratification, its glistening promise of future freedoms, escapes from contemporary anxieties, its media-driven glamour, its party-crazed atmosphere. (As one seeks to describe addiction's frenzy, the sentence clauses pile up uncontrollably, almost like the behaviour itself.) The relationship between image, perception and reality—between want and need, in fact—is so very striking in the narrative structure of addiction as perceived by both psychiatrists and story-tellers that the loneliness and desperation of long-term addicts can often be overlooked. A text such as *Leaving Las Vegas* describes a world of frenzied activity which is wholly removed, in a sense, from their inner emotions: addictive behavior clearly acts as a mode of deferral for the chaotic disintegration of form, personality and meaning-making structures which is taking place within. Such a frenzy as it is portrayed shows taboos (of sexual behavior, consumption limits and indicative moral referents) being broken repeatedly, not so much for their own sake but as a rejection of that which lies within. Such texts may clearly be read as parables of anti-consumerism, anti-workaholicism or anti-establishmentarianism: they may also, however, be regarded as a protest against inner structures of meaning and structures of internal reference and restraint which have long since ceased to become meaningful. They represent break-down just as much as Styron's work.

This does not remove the critical imperative to read stories of addiction positively, with a sense of social paradigms being productively troubled and a rebellion taking place against untenable or unbearable systems of social symbolism, or unrealistic and inoperable social norms. It does, however, suggest that inner theories of break-down (and therefore of themes of social responsibility) also need to be read into such stories. In O'Brien's text, just as much as Styron's, addiction is clearly represented as a social disorder with social overtones: where inner turbulence spills over into outward behaviour, wild extremes of emotionalism, or where 'excess' may be perceived as relating less to the fact of addiction itself than to the operations of wild anxiety, turbulence or inner fear. In this sense addiction itself becomes a form of protest, not against the world of inner turbulence itself but against the meaning-making structures of outer society which refuse to allow for such wild extremes. This can, I believe, sit comfortably with a reading of alcoholism or addiction which allows for frameworks of social responsibility as well as social repression. It is equally possible to read John O'Brien's text

as a symbolic way of describing problems relating to repressed and repressive behavior in society, and as issues relating to the addictive and hyperactive behavior of an individual. Mental health studies in literature need to take account of both, and although the Foucaultian perspective is an important one, and so is a textual reading of writerly symbolism which seeks to re-place addiction per se with deeper parables of human behavior, it also important that we recognize the need to perceive society in the mental health context as a giver of care. Protest matters, but so does ceasing to be addictive. Addictions of experience such as are described in this text relate to little more than personal anxieties: it is easy to glamorize such fictional encounters into parables of the Sixties or Seventies, or iconic anti-heroes for a generation, but in fact they are far from the reality of mental health treatment and addictive behavior.

In this context, it is doubly significant that John O'Brien himself committed suicide in the making of the film that came from his work. It demonstrates the non-intentional manner in which a writer's own personal anxieties and pre-occupations can factor significantly on his productivity, sense of professional outcome and work of professional life. As such it may be usefully posited as a kind of counter-cultural statement which is directly oppositional to the direction taken in Styron's work, representing as it does an authorial position taking to an extreme (resulting in suicide) with which philosophers like Camus preferred to grapple with textually, and which Styron himself records as, at times, a significant thematic personal intent. As Styron's text ably demonstrates, themes of despair and inarticulacy can, paradoxically, be highly productive. His is a story, ultimately, of hope: somewhere in the wilderness Styron returns from the outer boundaries of clinical depression, responds to the love of music which he has always carried within him, and makes the powerful and all-important decision to live. Despair is narrated, but in an atmosphere of acknowledgement that, although despair matters, there is that which lies beyond. Whereas Styron's text reflects on despair and immobility, and represents the narrated 'rescue' of the author from these grounds of interior desolation and interpersonal aridity, both the content and context of John O'Brien's far more hyperactive text may be read, paradoxically, as a memoir of despair. In this parable of repressed despair, the hyperactive cycles of extreme addiction play a significant role.

*Leaving Las Vegas* is a text of addiction in the deepest sense. Addiction functions as a trope within the text, but also within the writing style itself. The text is designed to shock. A character-driven portrayal would suggest that the text plays a somewhat similar role to that of the central character (articulated in filmic version by Nicholas Cage), in the sense of deliberately breaking boundaries and attempting social outrage. Styron's text may be usefully compared here, as a memoir of madness which itself seeks to explicate and clarify both the 'murkiness' and unfathomability of interpersonal misunderstanding and despair. Despair is, however, openly acknowledged in Styron's text whereas in *Leaving Las Vegas* it is actively denied. Both Nicholas Cage's character and John O'Brien himself are trying to explore human behavior in a new and frenetic way, and in doing so explore the relationship of outrageous freneticism to the social behavior of 'normal' life. Addictive spirals of behavior play a key part in this: they imply activity and a certain kind of antithetical 'productiveness,' but they also imply a certain wariness about the possibility of making meaning at all. Styron, by contrast, simply sits and waits for the illness to disappear: he finds a psychiatrist, gets irritated by his lack of human sympathy, but chooses to wait patiently for his cure in the normative context of care. Clearly, depression itself encourages such a response: it is a disease of inactivity, but also a disease which necessitates a degree of social acceptance. Addiction, by contrast, is not, and can lead to wild extremes of outrageous behaviour which may usefully then be textually handled as normative and appropriate responses to the excesses and idiocies of the 'outer' world. Meaning made from the chaos of life is clearly an authorial theme of some significance here; however, from the perspective of physicians, mental health practitioners as well as social scientists, there is an aspect of addiction that needs to be taken seriously as a social problem in its own right, as well as a realistic response to the problems of the social world.

It is perhaps significant in this context that there is a deep congruity between that advice which is given in the form of mental health recommendations for those seeking to escape addictions, of whatever form, and that which is given in the form of advice to those trying to construct a novel. Emotional spirals are no good without clear boundaries: emotional outbursts on the page are of no interest (or meaning) to the reader without a clear sense of style, fictional 'tone' or otherwise socially acceptable form. Self-indulgence is a clear danger for both ad-



dicts and writers. Structural issues and issues of inner engagement and disengagement clearly impact both. To function effectively, either as a writer or an addict, inner turbulence must be carefully crafted or otherwise controlled. More precisely, there is perhaps as much a relationship between loquaciousness and writerliness as there is between over-indulgence and addiction: there is also a clear sense of glamour mis-applied, as the writer's wanting to be loquacious has parallels, perhaps, with the addict's wanting to be socially 'read.'

It is possible even to construct a sequence for comparison between interpersonal and textual self-harm, as applied to both writers and addicts. Self-indulgence on the part of the writer leads to lessened productivity, lack of readership, and, in a symbolic sense, acute social isolation. Self-indulgence in the addict leads to financial instability, ill-health, social isolation and death. Clearly one problem is more serious than another; whereas addicts want the respectability of being able to fit back responsibly into society, writers merely want the respectability of having their books read. The issues of breakdown and self-control, however, are strikingly similar. The (recovering) addict tries to control behavior, whereas the (struggling) writer tries either to control mental block or, perhaps less damagingly, to control the loquacious pouring of words onto the page. This enables the text to function effectively without 'breaking down' as a vehicle of meaning. Such issues clearly impact the production and readership of mental health literature, as well as literature itself.

Mental health literature in general often stems from a sense of personal breakdown. Mental health-type literature dealing with clinical depression in particular often falls into a trap of trying to say that which it precisely can't say by attempting to make meaning from the un-meanable or make sense of the unsayable. If that is a writer's job, then Styron and others like him have benefited precisely from their encounter with the devastating worldview available to sufferers from clinical depression, their sense of unbearable non-being and nothingness being converted into a productive nihilism of social engagement and philosophical activity in which the free spirit of inquiring rationalism has played a part. It could be argued that rationality, in this context, plays a similar role of containment to the meaning-making structures of society that enable an individual in crisis to deal with a 'break down': rationality, thinking through, informs the way out of a crisis of meaning-mak-

ing and points the way back to a mechanism of personal operation to deal with the inner or outer world.

Loquaciousness and inarticulacy, as well as social systems of authority and containment, are therefore significant themes in the production of any piece of literature dealing with the topics of mental health. Addiction and depression are, for Styron, particularly problematic tropes. He describes how his own descent into the black despair of paralyzing depression followed immediately upon his decision to break with the habit of a lifetime, and stop regularly consuming (over-using) alcohol.

The trouble of was, at the beginning of this particular summer, was that I was betrayed. It struck me quite suddenly, almost overnight. I could no longer drink. It was as if my body had risen up in protest, along with my mind, and had conspired to reject this daily mood bath which it had so long welcomed and, who knows? Perhaps even come to need. (40)

As he describes it, alcohol had been a faithful friend and invaluable aid to his writing and personal life for many years:

I used alcohol as the magical conduit to fantasy and euphoria, and to the enhancement of the imagination. There is no need to either rue or apologise for my use of this soothing, often sublime agent, which had contributed greatly to my writing; although I never set down a line while under its influence, I did use it—often in conjunction with music—as a means to let my mind conceive visions that the unaltered, sober brain has no access to. Alcohol was an invaluable senior partner of my intellect, besides being a friend whose ministrations I sought daily sought now, I see, as a means to calm the anxiety and incipient dread that I had hidden away for so long somewhere in the dungeons of my spirit. (39)

The dungeons of his spirit and the visions of creative ‘sublimity’ are placed in contrast in a clear reference to a Romantic metanarrative of emotional exaltation and writerly sublimity: habitual alcohol usage was, as he acknowledged, an emotional addiction of a particularly writerly form. He was, he tells the reader, “like a great many American writers, whose sometimes lethal addiction to alcohol has become so legendary as

to provide in itself a stream of studies and books.” (39) We read in this line echoes of the wild, *Leaving Las Vegas*-style parties described by F. Scott Fitzgerald, but also the sombre extremism of Hemingway. Styron clearly places his writing along a continuum of writerly productivity and dependency upon alcohol which associates productivity and writerly respectability with the maintenance, amongst other matters, of a steady stream of words: as the bourbon, wine or beer flowed into the writer, in ‘canonical’ traditions of American literary history, so the narratives took shape. Words flow out as ethanol flows in, and fluidity of writing style and the lubrication of the creative imagination clearly go hand-in-hand. Styron might want to separate himself out from the wild alcohol dependencies of a John O’Brien, or Fitzgerald, and is keen to distance himself from the idea of acute pathology of dependency, but alcohol clearly plays a form in his conscious self-definition as a writer, at least in terms of its signifying power not merely as a way to align himself with other writers, but also to produce. Lubrication of the style, the human mouth and the creative imagination: alcohol as a means of heightening the moment but also a ‘senior partner’ in its shaping. Literary questions of identity are clearly important here. Are we seeing genuine literary dependency or a form of self-conscious definition? But at a deeper level, alcohol is a shaping force for both coherence and articulacy. It is not merely that the words flow, but that they flow precisely and in order. In this sense the association of alcohol with his ‘intellect,’ rather than mere fancy or embodied identity is particularly significant. Alcohol is not just articulated as an inducer of creativity; it is also a significant shaping partner. In particular, it is presented as an enabling structure, enabling him to encounter new visions of creativity but also to make sense of his forms and themes.

The shock to his emotional system when he discovered he could no longer drink alcohol was paralleled by the sudden revulsion which took him physically when he tried to drink:

Many drinkers have experienced this intolerance as they have grown older. I suspect that the crisis was at least partly metabolic but at any rate I discovered that alcohol in miniscule amounts, even a mouthful of wine, caused me nausea, a desperate and unpleasant wooziness, a sinking sensation and ultimately a distinct revulsion. The comforting friend had abandoned me not gradually and reluc-

tantly, as a true friend might do, but like a shot—and I was left high and certainly dry, and unhelmed.” (40)

It is possible to also read a bodily revulsion against alcohol in terms of a meta-narrative, which describes a revulsion against the sense-making systems currently in operation in Styron's universe. Clearly a form of low-level alcohol dependency had been in operation. As Styron says with some puzzlement, “Neither by will nor by choice had I become an abstainer.” This ‘need,’ which he identifies as primarily creative, was a puzzle to him since alcoholism was never, as he regarded it, a primary problem. From the perspective of Styron's text, alcohol is not a demon, but a comforting friend. The fact that this abandonment of alcohol was followed by a slide into despondency, in which not only William Styron's creative work dried up but also his very patterns of behavioral normalcy, that is to say his ability to function creatively and effectively as an autonomous human being, suggests that what took place was less a precipitate experience of writer's block than a sudden experience of being abandoned by that which made the world coherent. Break down of habitual comfort was followed by a break down of essential meaning itself. I would suggest that, following Styron's physiological abandonment of alcohol, Styron's inner world collapsed in a similar way to the external break-down portrayed in John O'Brien's text. Both texts deal in a different way with contexts of addiction. However, of the two texts, Styron's is far more thoughtful, and, in a very simple sense, ‘balanced’ where Styron himself writes of clinical depression as the primary signifier, and alcoholism is relegated simply to the puzzling (and absent) signified of productivity and sense-making, John O'Brien's text does the precise opposite. The disturbances encountered by his characters are reflected in the text. The inner world of the characters is barely alluded to, although it is evident that they are extremely angry and disturbed: what takes place is in fact akin to the manic phase of a significant period of clinical depression, the outcome of which is in fact that the characters do no more than behave significantly ‘other’ than the cultural norm, that is to say they experience a manic swing. Despair is the undertow to such behavior: but it is given little place in John O'Brien's symptom-driven text. By contrast, the collapse in behavior for William Styron functions as an active sense of a productive signifier which becomes, paradoxically, the mechanism through which he is able to begin to peer articulately at the

mess of the inner world. Following his withdrawal from the socially and personally lubricating mechanism of alcohol, he goes through a dry period which is characterised by both interpersonal aridity and loss of speech. However, speech is returned to him in the form of making sense of what has just occurred.

Styron writes of this intense relationship between addiction and depression with conviction and certainty. Alcohol connects, protects, but also colludes.

It is my conviction now that alcohol played a perverse trick on me when we said farewell to each other: although, as everyone should know it is a major depressant, it had never truly depressed me during my drinking career, acting instead as a shield against anxiety. Suddenly vanished, the great ally which for so long had kept my demons at bay was no longer there to prevent those demons from beginning to swarm through the subconscious, and I was emotionally naked, vulnerable as I had never been before. (42)

Through social withdrawal from a social lubricant, meaning is un-made in order to be re-made.

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