

January 25, 2021

Dear Mr. Styron,

I recently read your book, *Darkness Visible* (1990). I found it an honest document of your depression. It edified me emotionally.

I learned of your work in 2018 or '19, when I was frantically learning what I could from Wikipedia. *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967) and *Sophie's Choice* (1979) seemed like books I would enjoy. I think I will enjoy them one day.

To supplement my reading, I watched remarks you gave in 1997 at the Turnbull Center at FSU.¹ Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Heller were there, too. Presumably talking all about WWII and the hard problem of atomic power. Incidentally, the atom bomb has been elsewhere lately – *Twin Peaks*, season III; Nancy Pelosi's nightmares... and suicide has been tormenting me, both within and without the dead-funny *Flowers* (2016), or even Bad Bunny's "Si Veo a Tu Mamá" (2020).² Anyway, the lecture contributed to a recognition that may have roots in my reading last year of Harari's *Sapiens* (2014) – namely, that we live in a military state, and only insofar as there is peace is there war. And only insofar as there is wealth (of spirit) is there the absence thereof. Only after the civil unrest of the last year has there been a refinement of opinion and policy on racial justice, public health, and democratic issues. I *boldly* posit that there is a connection between the political and the personal. Poet shit. Phoenixes, tapas, etc., exedra, Excedrin.

I'm not sure that it would be appropriate to commend you for the nuanced way you approach your subject. It seems rather that you expose the myopia in popular culture, simply by telling a story that works against stigma. Unfortunately, historical amnesia isn't on your side. I don't know how people felt about depression in the eighties, except from your angst. Nowadays, 'everyone' is mentally ill and vocal about it. At least we're less angsty. I did bristle slightly at your depiction of depression as a disease. Sure, it is a disease, but I fear that calling it so only perpetuates that stigma, and avoids the necessary examination of its signs and symptoms for their underlying causes. It makes it too easy to seek out a medical 'solution' for sadness; one that absolves responsibility and guilt. So, I am on the more stubborn, Sisyphean, side of the debate between the medical and therapeutic approaches to psychology. That is, the latter. I double down [sic], relying on the same faculties I know to be lacking. The blood pours from the stone, and I still somehow feel that I shouldn't try to flatten my mood by any outright pharmacological means. This comes from an identification I have with my Condition.

Your assertion that depression "verge[s] close to being beyond description" (p. 7) yields skepticism. Indeed, your short depiction treats depression with a sacred yet unvenerated tack. You hold your story with dignity, privacy, and grace. It is clear that yours is a torrid, sordid story; but I neither felt, nor perceived, pity. Perhaps it's only that I know the enervation too well, and took little recourse from witnessing its stations in your book. In contrast, I am so exasperated with pop psychology of late, because it glibly implies that despair can be so *simple*.³ It's like an intern, mustering all their bad faith to show an interest in the mundane work they're (barely) being paid to perform. They put on a good show, but there is no *internal* substance. Not even the knowing hint of it. Perhaps this comes from shame, the euphemistic impulse, or a lack of resolve.

I didn't take particular note of many pages, except some near the end. For one, I appreciated your

¹"William Styron lecture on War and Racism in America (1997)"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cVOPMRE6BOg>

²MALDITO AÑO NUEVO // Y LO QUE ME TRAJÓ.

Watch the music video...

³I am a really bad generalizer don't listen to me!!! There is no more difference between high and low culture anymore!!!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b1DvrvCJiZs>

A comment by Game Account states it well:

Holy shit, this reminds me of one of those scenes from artistic movies designed to be enjoyed under the influence of drugs, like a scanner darkly or something from Quentin Tarantino. You get my crazy vote, love the madness. [sic, sick, sike]

reference to Cesare Pavese. His last words, before his overdose, were «*Tutto questo fa schifo. Non parole. Un gesto. Non scriverò più*». Roughly, “All of this is shit. No words. An act. I will write no more.”⁴ I didn’t know of Pavese, but I think there may be something to learn from him. I think I will one day. He experienced political disillusionment. [checkmark emoji]. Speaking of, if I write a similar letter to Claudia Rankine, for her book *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* (2004), I’ll certainly remark on her reference to Antigone, who stated before her death, “Behold me, what I suffer // Because I have upheld that which is high”. (p. 149) Again, I *boldly* posit there is a connection between the political and the personal.⁵ Big if true. Rankine also wrote:

Sad is one of those words that has given up its life for our country, it’s been a martyr for the American dream, it’s been neutralized, co-opted by our culture to suggest a tinge of discomfort that lasts the time it takes for this and then for that to happen, the time it takes to change a channel. But sadness is real because it once meant something real. It meant dignified, grave; it meant trustworthy; it meant exceptionally bad, deplorable, shameful; it meant massive, weighty, forming a compact body; it meant falling heavily; and it meant of a color: dark. It meant dark in color, to darken. It meant me. I felt sad. (108)

Rankine shows exactly what is lost when we lose ourselves in consumption. But is there not something perverse and decadent in making work about the very things that keep us from making work? Won’t all this theory compound into a self-effacing, relative mess? If not, does the autochthonic monologue, delivered in a ditch, lodge deliverance? Beckett defended the case⁶, and Paglia made her strange objection⁷. Aren’t we supposed to write of Beauty? To transcend into life? When you are depressed, Beauty taunts you:

The fading evening light—akin to that famous “slant of light” of Emily Dickinson’s which spoke to her of death, of chill extinction—had none of its familiar autumnal loveliness, but ensnared me in a suffocating gloom. I wondered how this friendly place, teeming with such memories of (again in her words) “Lads and Girls,” of “laughter and ability and Sighing, // And Frocks and Curls,” could almost perceptibly seem so hostile and forbidding. (45)

Is the Call of such Beauty enough to keep me moving through this “dark wood”?⁸ Did they *really* kill John Henry? Or have I been fooling myself with a fantasy of external focus? The carrot dangling just before me: sublimating, or worse, repressing, my suffering? Is it then more honest to document your hangups without translation? Or is the underlying problem merely a social deficiency? In treating these questions, you assess Kushner’s *Self-Destruction in the Promised Land*, which describes Abraham Lincoln’s unresolved grief over his mother and sister’s deaths.

Kushner makes a convincing case not only for the idea of early loss precipitating self-destructive conduct, but also, auspiciously, for that same behavior becoming a strategy through which the person involved comes to grips with his own guilt and rage, and triumphs over self-willed death. Such reconciliation may be entwined with the quest for immortality—in Lincoln’s case, no less than that of a writer of fiction, to vanquish death through work honored by posterity. (80:1)

Logically, your narrative mind then turns to the proper depiction of depression. You expand on the early statement that depression is indescribable. As an example, a scene from Bergman’s *Through A Glass Darkly* (1961) is summarized. This title, stemming from 1 Corinthians 13:12, concerns the difficulty inherent in perceiving oneself or the world without mediation. Perhaps you only meant in depression, but I would argue that it’s our epistemological sentence. You name so many who have tried to “wrestl[e] with a vocabulary that might give proper expression to the desolation of melancholia.” (82) In your view, there is a refinement at play:

⁴https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cesare_Pavese#La_morte

⁶cf. *Molloy* (1951)

⁵Paula Fox’s *Desperate Characters* (1970) has the pithy line: “God, if I am rabid, I am equal to what is outside.”

⁷cf. *Sexual Personae*’s description of the ‘bower’ (1990)

⁸Dante, p. 83

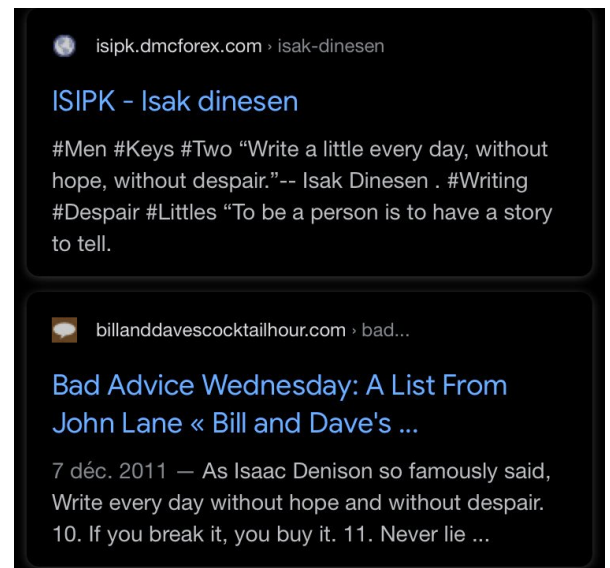
... in science and art the search will doubtless go on for a clear representation of [depression's] meaning, which sometimes, for those who have known it, is a simulacrum of all the evil of our world: of our everyday discord and chaos, our irrationality, warfare and crime, torture and violence, our impulse toward death and our flight from it held in the intolerable equipoise of history. If our lives had no other configuration but this, we should want, and perhaps deserve, to perish; if depression had no termination, then suicide would, indeed, be the only remedy. But one need not sound the false or inspirational note to stress the truth that depression is not the soul's annihilation; [people] who have recovered from the disease—and they are countless—bear witness to what is probably its only saving grace: it is conquerable. (84)

I concur, but there is a temporal, subjective component to mental disorder that should be acknowledged. While depression *is* a product of “all the evil of our world”, its expression and etiology changes alongside evil. I also point out that everyone has to reinvent the wheel, as it were, for themselves.⁹ I can and must accept my own death, on my own, in my own way. This recognition must be kept in good working order throughout a life. Depression functions like a light, glinting off that scythe. And mania functions like sunglasses, staving off that sight. So it *is* temporary, but only vaguely connected to the material conditions of a life. I'd say that the real connection is to the *je ne sais quoi, mais sais* of life. But I cannot blame you for eliding these ideas – In truth, I have returned to this letter in 2023, and infused it with perspective that I did not have when I originally wrote it. Believe it or not, it was much more insular then; preening. Perhaps I've muddied its tone now, with my wry insertions. Especially after I admired how muted, stilted, and dark it was before. And perhaps the *de rigueur* concession of subjectivity is too bookish for a book of such urgency against the death drive. Indeed, it's not at all like I read your book without writing it myself.

You must have a thing with endings. The end of your speech at FSU held the most salience for me. You quoted “Isak Dinesen”, the pseudonym of Karen Blixen. I googled it and was ironically pleased with the top text results. I'll spare you the image results, which are mostly insipid insipid content. But I will provide an image of the text, which is just as parlous..

With respect,
N

⁹cf. Heidegger's *Being & Time* (1927)



The Internet gives you only what you want.