THE BEDRIDDEN ARTIST

Creativity is often rooted in enforced isolation. By Jeanne Schinto

ONE DAY, AFTER A LONG ILLNESS, AS I LAY IN MY BED STILL VERY WEAK, I FOUND MYSELF BASKING IN AN UNUSUAL EUPHORIA OF LIGHTNESS AND REPOSE.

—Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*

Virginia Woolf, for one, was a believer in the myth that thrived atop Thomas Mann's magic mountain. Lying sick in bed, she wrote:

> If I could stay in bed another fortnight (but there is no chance of that) I believe I should see the whole of "The Waves." . . . I believe these illnesses are in my case—how shall I express it?—partly mystical. Something happens in my mind. It refuses to go on registering impressions. It shuts itself up. It becomes a chrysalis. I lie quite torpid, often with acute physical pain—as last year; only discomfort this. Then suddenly something springs.

In her 1930 essay "On Being Ill," Woolf is downright laudatory about "the spiritual change" that sickness brings. She muses that even love should be "deposed in favor of a temperature of 104."

Today only someone with a Victorian sensibility would argue that invalidism can confer a creative edge. AIDS has accomplished what tuberculosis failed to do: it deromanticized the dying artist. Anthony Burgess showed his age, and ours, in 1972, when he told the *Paris Review:* "I became interested in syphilis when I worked for a time at a mental hospital. . . . I discovered there was a correlation between the spirochete and mad talent. The tubercle also produces a lyrical drive. Keats had both."

And yet a variation of the myth has persisted. In the days of TB's scourge, the accepted truth was that the disease found genius; genius wasn't founded on it. Many of our contemporary writers and artists, by contrast, have credited poor health, particularly in childhood and young adulthood, as the reason they began to think creatively in the first place. Additionally, injuries sustained in youth are often cited as fortunate, provided these happy accidents were followed by a period of convalescence. Evidently, what's important is not how you happened to be confined to your bed, only that you were.

Nadine Gordimer told an interviewer in 1976 that she started writing at the age of nine, after she got "some strange heart ailment. . . . I time it with this illness, you see. Otherwise, I wouldn't know so precisely." Tennessee Williams saw a comparable connection between his early heart problem and his decision to become a writer. In 1981, on his seventieth birthday, he said:

> I was a born writer, I think. Yes, I think that I was. At least when I had this curious disease affecting my heart at the age of eight. I was more or less bedridden for half a year. . . . I was never the same physically. It changed my entire personality. I'd been an aggressive tomboy until that illness. I used to beat up all the kids on the block. I used to confiscate their marbles, snatch them up!

Oscar Hijuelos correlates his childhood illness and his subsequent writer's life more obliquely than Gordimer or Williams. Asked by the *Boston Globe Magazine* in 1999 if it was harder to imagine a woman character than a man, he responded by referring to his hospitalization as a child with inflammation of the kidneys. "I feel great sympathy for women," he said, "and I empathize with their experience. When I was a little kid, I was really sick. I had nephritis, and it put me into a way of being bodily aware—of the organyness of the human body. I was put in a convalescent home when I was four for a year and a half, and some of the kids there died. I have recurring dreams of confinement."

The *Globe* interview with Hijuelos was frustratingly short, and there was no follow-up question probing this provocative idea. But his statement reminded me that one of the characters in his first novel, *Our House in the Last World* (1983), had a kidney ailment. "After a month, they sent Hector to a hospital in Connecticut that was a terminal home for

children," Hijuelos's narrator says. "'Let me out!'" the Cuban-born Hector cries, in Spanish, after being locked in a closet by a nurse who is determined to Americanize him. She won't release him until he says it in English, and so Hector learns from this rather cruel taskmaster how language can literally open doors for him. At the end of the book, which Hijuelos described in that same interview as "very private" (so much so that he will not permit a movie to be made of it), Hector, in his twenties, dreams of becoming a writer.

Even without benefit of a major survey, I think there is no risk in saying that illness and injury, rather than being a boon, more often than not prevent a person from developing a talent. No one would wish for bad health or bad luck—not even I, though I admit (in the present context) to being perversely proud of my history of mononucleosis, hepatitis, and kidney surgery between the ages of sixteen and thirty, a time of life that is safely in my past. Today the wheelchair-bound artist Chuck Close finds himself at a similar distance from his situation at age eleven, when he was confined to bed for several months by a serious, though curable, kidney infection. "Perhaps that forced inactivity helped me to be an artist," he told John Guare, who published a book about him in 1995, after Close was mysteriously paralyzed by an affliction apparently unrelated to the earlier one.

The kind of illness I am talking about here—and have found mentioned in a startling number of artists' and writers' biographies, profiles, and obituaries—tends to be temporary. Injuries heal; diseases are cured. And people return to the world, often looking no different from how they looked before their lying-in. But as many of them tell it, they have been transformed, having undergone a kind of creative apprenticeship. For my part, I'm convinced that we may all understand better how creativity works (and what we can do to encourage it in ourselves or in others) if we reflect on what happens to people who are sentenced to the sickroom for a while, especially in their formative years.

Many of these "cases" note that the isolation of the infirmary can heighten the already intense experience of childhood reading, which, in any event, may never be as intense again. "Perhaps it is only in childhood," wrote Graham Greene in *The Lost Childhood and Other Essays* (1952), "that books have any deep influence on our lives." Greene's minor ailments pleased him, according to his biographer Norman Sherry, "for they confined him to bed and brought him a sense of peace, endless time, and a night-light burning in the bedroom, a feeling of security."

In a 1977 interview, the photographer W. Eugene Smith said of reading and illness, "When I was about ten years old, I started reading serious books. I had been in an accident, and they said that I would never walk again. I had to spend six months in bed, and I read about fifteen volumes of history. This had much to do with my early thinking and, perhaps, early seriousness."

The writer Leonard Michaels told me something similar in a letter: "I had pneumonia twice and read and read and read. Couldn't walk. Missed a lot of school. I was about nine or ten years old the first time, then twelve the second. I'd been a reader, but pneumonia made books the same as life."

Another correspondent, the poet Alfred Corn, expressed this sentiment: "I was often sick as a child. It's possible the lonely condition of being laid up with flu or chicken pox was a sort of forcing house for the imagination. I recall a bout of measles, during which the light was kept low in my room, and I was instructed not to read—a restriction I ignored. Reading was my preferred remedy to the boredom of illness and recovery. And if you don't read a lot, you can't be a writer."

But the German writer Thomas Bernhard was perhaps most outspoken about the benefits of the extended reading opportunities afforded by a hospital bed, even suggesting that anyone who would hope to achieve anything creative should arrange a hospital stay. In *Gathering Evidence* (1985), his memoir of various hospitalizations for lung problems, he wrote:

> It was at Grossgmain [a sanatorium to which he was confined at age eighteen] that I began to acquaint myself with so-called world literature, of which I knew nothing. . . . I did not proceed according to a set plan but simply asked my family to bring me those books from my grandfather's shelves which I knew to have been supremely important to him and which I assumed I should now be able to understand. . . . Hardly had I woken up and conscientiously taken my temperature in accordance with the rules, as I had done every morning for months, than I turned to my books, my closest and most intimate friends. It was in Grossgmain that I first discovered reading. This was a sudden discovery which proved decisive for my subsequent life.

Young students often choose to do their reading assignments while lying on the floor. It can't be mere coincidence that prone is the position in which they heard their bedtime stories. Although today we bash Freud mercilessly, who can deny that he was right to prescribe the couch for associative thinking and other kinds of image-making, regardless of age? There is a famous picture of Mark Twain writing in bed. Edith Wharton wrote in bed each morning. Joseph Heller said that some of his best ideas came to him while he was either going in or out of a nap. The rhythm of reading and dreaming and waking up to read some more seems just the right way to imbibe fiction, even if it isn't the way that most of us write it. Dreams often continue after a book has slid away from us and we have dropped off to sleep again, especially if we are drugged, even by something as mild as aspirin. A dreamer becomes an author the moment when the plot continues to drive on to its conclusion, unfettered by a waking self.

In her book *Bury Me Standing* (1995), about the Gypsies of Europe, Isabel Fonseca described a culture that is suspicious of readers: "Reading plain worried the Dukas. *So keres?*—What are you doing?—was the usual puzzled response to an upheld book. But as often I would be asked: *Chindilian?*—Are you fed up, weary?—as if any quiet, or stillness, was a sign of infirmity, or depression." I wonder what the Gypsies might have made of Fonseca's subsequent time alone at her writing

desk, working on her manuscript for hours, weeks, years.

The tendency to look upon solitary activity and those who seek it as unhealthy may have been biologically determined eons ago. Dreamers, loners, and other private people do not thrive in societies where cooperative efforts are the best path to survival. The Italian peasant culture of my grandparents included a fear of being alone, even an inclination to be suspicious of any person who would deign to prefer his or her own company to the activities of the group.

Martin Scorsese was a sickly child in a Sicilian-American household, but he rarely spent time by himself. His family's apartment in New York's Little Italy was too small to accommodate anybody's solitude for long. Yet his poor health did isolate him in the rough-and-tumble neighborhood beyond his front stoop, and it guided the course of his career. "As a child I wanted to be a painter," he recalls in his book *Scorsese on Scorsese* (1989), "so I started trying to draw. But I was also fascinated by films and, having asthma, I would often be taken to movie theaters because they didn't know what else to do with me." When he was eleven, a young priest came into the neighborhood and "played classical music to us, took us to movies and involved us in sports," remembers Scorsese. "I wasn't too keen on sports, but I began to pattern my life on his and he became a stronger role model than the local gang chiefs." Young Marty dreamed of being a priest "right up until the time I made my first movie" and even went to seminary for a while.

Sociologist Herbert J. Gans's important study of Italian-Americans in Boston's West End, *The Urban Villagers* (1962), chronicles an era—the late 1950s—that coincides with Scorsese's years growing up in New York. Gans might recognize his own ideas in Scorsese's story of breaking away from the ruling hierarchy of hoodlums. In order for a West Ender to move into mainstream middle-class culture, Gans writes, he first had to break his dependence on family and friends, or have those ties broken for him. Special gifts or talents will tend to isolate certain people, Gans observes in his book; but a crisis, including illness, can do the same. He cites the example of a young man who contracted tuberculosis as an adolescent: during a year in a hospital bed, he developed a new set of goals that included a college education.

Gans's analyses—and Scorsese's memories—apply to almost any close-knit community, where there are pressures not to stray from existing cultural patterns. I noticed similar, not-so-subtle constraints at a boarding school where I taught part-time for several years. Don't we all see such influences today among children? Such a conservative clan! A playground offers little encouragement to the nonconformist, and a child's surest route to nonconformity is to be absent for a while, to miss part of the unfolding story. The same feeling comes with skipping a crucial chapter in a book and being lost from that point on. But what may happen next is that you may feel free to write your own story.

And why are many of these stories so good? Sometimes it is only because their authors have achieved a pleasing aesthetic distance—an outsider's perspective. I see in many home-schooled kids this same outsider's stance, coupled with a freshness I admire, the result of minimal exposure to the tyranny of the school yard. Might someone someday write about the disproportionate number of their achievements in the arts—or other endeavors where original thinking is required?

I could recite nearly as many instances of scientists and inventors who were bedridden in their youth or young adulthood: Mary Bunting-Smith, the microbiologist who became president of Radcliffe College, and Robert Switzer, coinventor of Day-Glo paint, are one of each.

Julia Alvarez, the Dominican-born writer whose novels and poems often explore the stresses and strains of her status as outsider here in the United States, told me that even though she was not a sickly child, her parents punished her transgressions by sending her to bed. For breaking a vase, setting fire to a bush, eating sweets on the sly, young Julia had to get into her pajamas directly after school, "with a brief parole for supper." On weekends when she was *de castigo*—being punished—she sometimes had to spend the whole day in bed. "My mother always claimed that she would not have punished me for whatever 'wrong' thing I had done . . . if only I hadn't then insisted on telling some elaborate story (lie) about what had happened," Alvarez said.

"Oh, yes," she acknowledged, "I probably honed [my storytelling] skills on long boring punishment days, stuck in that bedroom, trying to entertain myself. . . . Certainly *the time to muse,* which being put to bed allows, is a contributing factor in any developing artist's life. I keep worrying that kids now are kept so busy that they don't have that necessary time to get bored and delve into inner resources that allow worlds and words to unfold."

Flannery O'Connor once said she thought Virginia Woolf was a nut. That was a judgment of Woolf's novel writing only, not her views on the connection between illness and inspiration. Surely the notoriously blunt O'Connor, who was ill with lupus for thirteen years before she succumbed to the disease at age thirty-nine, would have had some choice words to refute the whole notion of sickness's giving people a leg up in the creativity department. Still, I like to think that the no-nonsense O'Connor might have admitted to seeing herself in Woolf's statement that there is "a childish outspokenness in illness; things are said, truths blurted out, which the cautious respectability of health conceals." And truth-telling is one act we all rely on our artists to perform.

Often the truth-telling we need to do is about ourselves. In illness, with all those hours to think, one may see the outline of one's own life and fate for the first time. Consider O'Connor's character Asbury, the sickly young man in "The Enduring Chill," who is spiritually transformed by his illness. As the story begins, the aspiring writer leaves New York to return home to the South, where he'll be nursed by his befuddled mother and sarcastic older sister, Mary George. Before he boards the train, he destroys "his two lifeless novels, his half-dozen stationary plays, his prosy poems, his sketchy short sto-

ries." As Mary George comments acidly, "Asbury can't write so he gets sick. He's going to be an invalid instead of an artist."

But as Asbury lies feverish in his boyhood bed, his brain fog clears; his mind begins to function "with a terrible clarity," and he finds himself in "a state of illumination." His very soul seems to have been purified—"shocked clean"—by illness and grace. The question of whether he'll ever return to his writing is unclear but also beside the point; what is evident is that he'll no longer be a fool. He has acquired a new seriousness as a result of his body's rebellion.

Perhaps something similar happened to O'Connor herself. At age twenty-six, her lupus diagnosis sent her home from Connecticut, where she had settled after graduate school. Upon her return to Georgia, to live with her mother, she was already a good and ambitious writer, but not yet the great one she later became. She was, however, aware that her life would not be a long one. "What you have to measure out, you come to observe more closely," she wrote in a letter to her friend Robert Lowell. Her illness weakened her but also galvanized her to make the time to do what she had to do. I can imagine her vociferously agreeing with Woolf's observation that one advantage of illness at any age is that it conveniently eliminates the distraction of social obligations. Anybody pursuing an art or a serious intellectual endeavor knows how crucial that liberty can be, and how it is sometimes difficult to arrange. Darwin's example remains perhaps the most famous: after he returned home from his voyage on the *Beagle,* he was sick for the rest of his life.

A brief convalescence conveniently liberates those latent artists among us from situations they wouldn't otherwise have the gumption to leave. V. S. Pritchett's memoir *A Cab at the Door* (1968) tells of how he was sprung by sickness from the leather trade at age eighteen. He had decided to be a writer back in grammar school but shortly got discouraged by his father's unfortunate remarks about those aspirations. So there he was, an unwilling apprentice in hides, until influenza freed him. After his recovery, he never went back to the leather business. He took up the life he had envisioned as a youngster, and many years later wrote a story about that false career start, "The Diver," in which a young man "walked about packed with stories" he didn't have the nerve, or time, to write.

Illness, likewise, freed Henri Matisse from a job he loathed. At age eighteen, after passing his law examinations, he had taken a dreary job as a clerk copying and filing transcripts—his father's idea. Then came an attack of acute appendicitis. During his convalescence, his mother bought him a paint box. From the moment he took those colors into his hands, the artist later recollected,

> I had the feeling that my life was there. Like an animal that rushes to what he loves, I plunged straight into it, to the understandable despair of my father, who had made me study other things. It was a great allurement, a kind of paradise, in which I was completely free, alone, tranquil, whereas I had always been anxious and bored by the various things I had been made to do. . . . Before, nothing interested me; after that, I had nothing on my mind but painting.

There are so many others whose artistic careers benefited from their being bedridden for a time when they were young—Doris Lessing, Andy Warhol, Jacques Lartigue, Maurice Sendak, Elizabeth Bishop, Jean-Michel Basquiat—I sometimes wonder facetiously: Who among the creative arts' current pantheon wasn't sick as a kid? (One is Joyce Carol Oates, who replied to my query about the state of her girlhood health: "I had a rural childhood, and was mostly a tomboy, and have actually had, no doubt to my discredit, no illnesses worth speaking of through my life, so far.") It's enough to rekindle in me the nineteenth-century idea that an unwell body is a better conductor of aesthetic ideas than a healthy one. As Mann's character Settembrini says in *The Magic Mountain,* "One assumes stupid people must be healthy and vulgar, and that illness must ennoble people and make them wise and special. At least that's what one normally thinks, is it not?" Perhaps we all still retain a remnant of this old-fashioned notion. Surely those of us who leap from our desks at lunchtime to play tennis or jog around a track have noted the inherent paradox in the coexistence of "dumb as an ox" and "healthy as an ox" in our language—and yet both phrases linger.

Perhaps a period of convalescence mimics the crucial period of reflection that precedes every creative triumph. As a child, Guy de Maupassant had no such period of convalescence, but he contracted syphilis in his twenties, and many of his stories were written between bouts of the illness that finally killed him at age forty-three. It's no wonder, then, that the main character in his short story "Big Tony" exemplifies the concept of physical concentration's inducing the other kind of concentration needed for making art.

The innkeeper of Tournevent, Big Tony was known as the fattest man in the district ("and probably in the whole province, too"); he was also one of the most affable: "He had a way of teasing people without making them angry, of winking to express what he left unsaid, and of slapping his thigh in his fits of merriment that could draw a belly laugh every time, whether one wanted to laugh or not." Big Tony had a sign nailed above his door: THE MEETING PLACE OF FRIENDS. "Big Tony was certainly the friend of everyone around," except perhaps his dour wife, "whose face resembled a screech owl's" and who shrieked daily at Big Tony about his gluttonous, garrulous ways. She was waiting for the moment when he would just "burst like a bag of grain."

Big Tony had a stroke that left him paralyzed, and he was put to bed. Never mind! He was the same old Big Tony; with his friends he played games of dominoes that lasted all night. Eventually, Big Tony's wife had enough of it and insisted he make himself useful. She made him put eggs under his arms—to hatch. When he resisted, she threatened to stop feeding him, so Big Tony "was subdued." His all-night games of dominoes were over, and he had to renounce all the other movements he was still capable of making, for his wife deprived him of food every time he broke an egg.

The day Big Tony felt the first tickle under his arm was a turning point in his life. He was "radiant and happy, free again." Big Tony had produced. ■