

Writer's block

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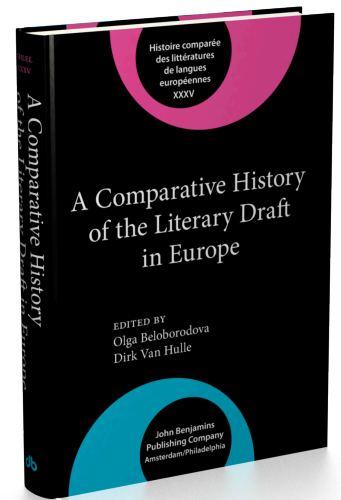
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1.3.1 Writer's block

Diane Purkiss

This chapter explores writer's block by analysing the rewards of the writing process and its causation using a mixture of behaviourism and neuroscience, in an effort to move beyond the idea that writing is about rational intent. In particular, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow is used to describe the pleasure available to writers and it is suggested that this in itself explains writing. A short section on the invocation to the Muse suggests that difficulties in composition occur throughout writing history. Through three case studies – John Milton, Ernest Hemingway, and J.R.R. Tolkien – the highly individual experience of writer's block and its remedies are demonstrated.

Keywords: muse, Milton, Ernest Hemingway, J. R. R. Tolkien, writer's block, writing process, flow, trauma, manuscript

In order to grasp writer's block, we have first to think about writing. Why do it at all? Those who feel the urge to write have what Chris Paling terms “a peculiar need to be heard in a certain way. If, therefore, you write and your books don't sell or reach an audience, then they're not doing the job.” Here, we can see, writing is already desperate. Paling continues “the core of it – [is] screaming in the dark for your mother to lift you out of the cot” (Paling 2021: 16). Paling's ideas show that writing is a coping mechanism, but it is already evident that it can be a negative rather than a positive coping mechanism – punitive, addictive, and disappointing. To think about writer's block, we have to set aside our idea of writing in which writing is always teleological, pressing towards perfection, and writing actions and choices motivated by reason. Instead, we must be willing to enter a world of more tangled, complex, and contradictory motivations, and choiceless choices.

Confronting a blank piece of paper (or a blank screen) is a challenge and also an opportunity. Whatever writing process an individual writer adopts in order to get past that formidable initial silence contains within itself the seeds of its own failure. In this chapter I will consider the emergence of writing impediments and difficulties, up to and including complete blockage, from the writing process adopted by the writer; we will witness the growth of vices, spreading plagues of dysfunctionality that spring from tiny and originally sensible decisions. We will also see the intrinsic individuation of the writing process and its impediments, alongside some commonalities.

The idea of flow

The writing process can be understood through the theory of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who in *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (2008), showed that people are happiest when

they are in a state of flow – a state of concentration or complete absorption with the activity at hand and the situation. The most constructive work is done in a state of total concentration which almost seems effortless at the time, referred to as “flow.” The author must remain open to the message whispered by the unconscious, while at the same time maintaining critical judgment.

Flow theory proposes that when one is actively engaged in an activity where the skills possessed are balanced to the challenge of the activity, they can approach an optimal state of experience called “flow.” Several conditions contribute to this psychological state. A well-accepted summary of Csikszentmihalyi’s theory is as follows: complete concentration on the task; clarity of goals and reward in mind and immediate feedback; transformation of time (speeding up/slowing down); the experience is intrinsically rewarding; effortlessness and ease; there is a balance between challenge and skills; actions and awareness are merged, losing self-conscious rumination; there is a feeling of control over the task. The concept was originally introduced and described in a 1987 article (Massimini et al. 1987; Oppland 2016). Moreover, the *conditions for flow* arise from the balance of challenges (or opportunities) and skills (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi 2021: 283). The experience of flow in everyday life is an important component of creativity and well-being. Indeed, it can be described as a key aspect of eudaimonia, or (intrinsically rewarding) self-actualisation, in an individual.

What happens if we begin to think of the writing process as the experience of flow? It is likely that everyone reading this chapter is in some sense a writer; I invite readers to think back to experiences where the words seemed to come without effort, and where a bystander self-witnessed their arrival with delight and amazement. Who would not seek such experiences? But now we need to put some pressure on those terms *delight* and *amazement*. This is where the work of Alice Flaherty is helpful, because she brings together psychology and neuroscience in order to investigate the role of pleasure in idea generation and creative drive (slightly rebarbative psychological terms for what I am designating the writing process here): Flaherty uses evidence from fMRI scanning, magnetic imaging that records brain activity while specific tasks are being performed. She proposes a three-factor anatomical model of human idea generation and creative drive, focusing on interactions between the temporal lobes, frontal lobes, and limbic system, based on evidence drawn from functional imaging, drug studies, and lesion analysis. Temporal lobe changes, as in hypergraphia, often increase idea generation, sometimes at the expense of quality. Frontal lobe deficits may decrease idea generation, in part because of rigid judgments about an idea’s worth. The appropriate balance between frontal and temporal activity is mediated by mutually inhibitory corticocortical interactions (Flaherty 2005a: 1–7; Flaherty 2005b).

Mesolimbic dopamine influences novelty seeking and creative drive. Dopamine agonists and antagonists have opposite effects on goal-directed behaviour and hallucinations. Creative drive is not identical to skill – the latter depends more on neocortical association areas. This model illustrates the way that the drive to create may be held in check by the critical frontal lobe. Yet the experience of flow involves the synchronisation of the rational critical self with the creative drive, because the task is at the right level of difficulty – neither so easy that it is boring,

nor so difficult that the creator disengages. As we shall see, most of what might be described as writer's block occurs when this synchronisation fails.

The muse

The pain of not being able to write was well known in the ancient world, and it had a name. The ability to write, and also the sense that most writers' experience of being taken outside what they know and into a larger realm of knowledge or ideas or sounds they did not know they possessed, was personified in the figure of the muse. So durable is the idea of a capricious, sexualised and potentially violent source of inspiration that writers still refer to the muse after the Second World War. Since the Romantic period, the muse has meant heady inspiration. However, in the ancient world, and especially in epic poetry, the muse is more often a kind of Google search function who can supply information that the poet cannot possibly know. She fills in gaps. But either way, the very idea of summoning an external entity to resolve problems with writing points to the fact that there are problems with writing, problems analogous to battle or health crises that require the intervention of deities. In addition, the muse often exacts a price for her interventions, and is far from amiable or kind to those who err or annoy her.

Given that we cannot put writers from the past into fMRI scanners, how can we find out about their writing processes in a way that allows us to understand their block? The answer is manuscript holographs, manuscripts in the hand of the writer. For the purposes of this analysis, transcriptions will not do, and nor will typescripts, so that writers like William Wordsworth, Sylvia Plath, and C.S. Lewis are of limited interest (though not of no interest). The need to make use of holograph manuscripts also confines the study by period. Medieval and early modern writers do not on the whole leave a large enough manuscript archive – speaking, that is, of holograph manuscripts – for modern scholars even to begin to discern their writing process. So what can be done with holograph manuscripts to analyse the writing process, flow, and the failures of flow? A careful and even microscopic examination of holographs makes it possible to detect the presence of flow through an analysis of the speed of writing. Writers typically gather pace and settle to a steady speed during flow. By contrast, constant plots, excisions, and liftings of the pen, including repeated unnecessary ink dipping, can suggest that flow has not been achieved. The number and type of in line edits can also be helpful to those trying to track and map a writing process.

John Milton

A common sign of writer's block is the inability to work on a particular *kind* of writing, despite prolific output in other areas. Think of the unfinished *Canterbury Tales*, the unfinished *Faerie Queene*. Another example is John Milton. To understand the importance of the muse figure for Milton, some background is required. Milton suffered from what I am going to call writer's block for between fifteen and nineteen years – we cannot be more precise than this because of the difficulty in dating his sonnets and the beginning of his composition of *Paradise Lost*, but

the period lasts roughly from the time he wrote his elegy for his friend Charles Diodati in 1639 to around 1654, when he began to compose his great epic *Paradise Lost*. He continued to do his day job – writing pamphlets in support of the parliamentary cause – but the muse of poetry was notably absent, except for a few sonnets, the best of which were after 1654. The fact that he revised and republished his early poems in 1645 is probably a sign that he was stymied; it is a common recourse of blocked authors to begin tinkering with their previous work, issuing it in special editions, celebrating it, reframing it, and generally messing about with it. It rarely works as a means of unblocking, and it did not work in Milton's case either (Parker 1968).

How was Milton's block cured, and cured in such a way as to allow him to produce one of the greatest poems ever written in English? I want to make the daring suggestion that Milton's writer's block was cured by his loss of sight, both by the process of going blind, and by the total darkness that then enveloped him. I suggest that this worked in at least three ways. First, trauma of various kinds is a recurrent theme in overcoming writer's block. Milton's blindness might be such a trauma. As we shall see below, Ernest Hemingway was blocked when trying to write the follow-up novel to his successful *The Sun Also Rises*, until a roof collapsed on his head, concussioning him and requiring that he be rushed to hospital. This promptly unlocked memories of his previous stay in hospital, and on his emergence he wrote *A Farewell to Arms* at great speed. Writers usually seek ways to block out or avoid the real world in the heat of composition, and trauma can provide these.

Secondly, Milton's worsening sight meant that he was assigned an amanuensis as part of his day job as Cromwell's Latin secretary. There are other examples of writers who have been unblocked by hiring a secretary or typist to whom they could dictate. Henry James comes to mind (Sullivan 2013: 83–84). The presence of an amanuensis probably made Milton feel obliged to write; an amanuensis has a fixed schedule which can bring order to a writer's messy life. Thirdly, and most importantly for thinking about Milton and the muse, there may be something in the particularity of blindness, of entering a world of total darkness, that unlocked not just writing in general, but the particular writing of epic. This last requires that we take seriously as descriptions of experiences materials which are often understood merely as convention. It also requires that we investigate an aspect of Milton of which he was not himself entirely conscious; he himself frequently saw his blindness as a curse.

We know that Milton did “see” in the darkness of his blindness. In a letter written on 28 September 1654, he wrote:

as often as I looked at a lamp, a sort of rainbow seemed to obscure it [...] as sight daily diminished, colours proportionately darker would burst forth with violence and a sort of crash from within.

(Milton 2003: 722; Bartley 1993)

The language here is profoundly apocalyptic, as light is fractured into the rainbow, while colours burst forth violently. It has been well understood for centuries that Milton correlated his blindness with an alternative or prophetic kind of vision. It may be that this association partly came about because of visual experiences of this kind as his sight faded. But more importantly, perhaps, the experience of blindness led to a foundational change in his writing process

which may have rebalanced the critical self, silencing it for long enough to allow for flow. Milton formed the habit of crafting his words in the complete privacy of his own thoughts at four am. He then said that he awaited his amanuensis, feeling as if he was waiting to be milked, full of words.¹

Ernest Hemingway

Few authors are better subjects for studying the writing process than Ernest Hemingway. Not only did he spontaneously write about writing in a strongly granular way that has itself solidified into a set of guidelines for other writers, but he has left a very substantial corpus of manuscripts which include many amended rough drafts and significant numbers of unpublished works. Indeed, so extensive are his archived manuscript holdings that they call into question what we think we know about “the Hemingway canon”, and even call into question categories such as “completion”, and “work in progress”; how are we to categorise his unfinished novel about his time in Paris? It has never been published. Does it count as a draft of what eventually became *A Moveable Feast*? But *A Moveable Feast* was not finalised by Hemingway; it is a posthumous construction from his manuscripts by others, and to make matters more complex, it exists in two versions, edited by different members of the Hemingway family, both valuable because both containing different slices of unpublished material. At the John F. Kennedy Center in Boston, there are miles of Hemingway fiction manuscripts, many of them not yet published in any form. The centre’s website claims that there are “more than 1000 manuscript items, ranging from one-line fragments to thousand-page manuscripts”.² Many of the academics who visit the collection do so in search of the answer to a particular editorial question; many, for example, are looking at and for the deleted chapters of *The Sun Also Rises*. The experience of looking at box after box of material calls into question any simple idea of revision as refinement or even as deletion. For Hemingway, revision often involved expansion, sometimes enormous expansion, alongside deletion, and also frequent entire changes of direction. On the face of it, never was any writer less subject to impediments. And yet Hemingway is understood by a rather rigid critical consensus as a writer whose genius faded and was lost over the years. Between the publication of *The Old Man and the Sea* in 1952 and his death by suicide in 1961, Hemingway published nothing of his own. There are very complex reasons for his silence, and it is probably worth noting immediately that it was not caused by an inability to write, but here there is only space to speak of one aspect of his writing process. This was his willingness to abandon work even after writing over 100 pages. Hemingway did this a lot, abandoning many novels after writing more than 100 pages, though he also kept every tiny piece of paper on

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1. His nephew John writes that “hee waking early (as is the use of temperate men) had commonly a good stock of Verses ready against his Amanuensis [i.e. scribe] came; which if it happened to bee later than ordinary, hee would complain, Saying hee wanted to bee milkd” (Darbishire 1932; Kean 2005: 28).
 2. “Hemingway Collection Highlights”: <https://www.jfklibrary.org/archives/ernest-hemingway-collection/collection-highlights>

which he wrote including beer mats annotated with story ideas as well as full length manuscripts. Again, even normative writing process bleeds into an impediment.

A more common form of impediment is an unnatural devotion to revision instead of drafting or covering a blank page. However, this can involve a more violent form, deletion block – writing and then scrubbing it out, or even destroying the manuscript of a work adjudged a failure. An important question is therefore what makes writing a particular work abruptly unrewarding, to the point where a writer will abandon or very radically revise a draft. All writers know the experience of looking at a draft with shame and loathing, and all writers develop coping mechanisms to get past that stage. Hemingway confirmed this in the writings that were eventually assembled in *A Moveable Feast*, probably composed at approximately the time of his *Paris Review* interview (Plimpton 1958):

I always worked until I had something done and I always stopped when I knew what was going to happen next. That way I could be sure of going on the next day... But sometimes when I was starting a new story and I could not get it going, I would sit in front of the fire and squeeze the peel of the little oranges into the edge of the flame and watch the sputter of blue that they made. I would stand and look out over the roofs of Paris and think, “Do not worry. You have always written before and you will write now. All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence that you know.” So finally I would write one true sentence, and then go on from there. (Hemingway 2004: 7)

Later he confirms this:

I had learned already never to empty the well of my writing, but always to stop when there was still something there in the deep part of the well, and let it refill at night from the springs that fed it. (Hemingway 2004: 15–16)³

Hemingway also provides a perfect depiction of “flow”: “I took out a notebook from the pocket of the coat and a pencil and started to write. I was writing about up in Michigan and since it was a wild, cold, blowing day it was that sort of day in the story” (Hemingway 2004: 2–3).

The flow is not interrupted by the way “in the story the boys were drinking and this made me thirsty and I ordered a rum St James. This tasted wonderful on the cold day and I kept on writing, feeling very well and feeling the good Martinique rum warm me all through my body and my spirit” (Hemingway 2004: 3). Note that in his depiction of “flow” Hemingway explains exactly what writing implements he uses. He drafted *The Sun Also Rises* in small French children’s *cahiers*, though later he mostly chose unlined onionskin typing paper. Such objects easily become talismans. Hemingway carried in his right pocket, as he roamed in the coffee shops of Paris, a horse chestnut and a rabbit’s foot “for luck”:

The fur had been worn off the rabbit’s foot long ago and the bones and the sinews were polished by wear. The claws scratched in the lining of your pocket and you knew your luck was still there. (Hemingway 2004: 52)

3. Note that the line about “one true sentence” has maddened people.

So far I have been speaking of Hemingway's self-reported writing process, and I have shown how his revision process as shown by his manuscripts correlates powerfully with his own account of what he did. Examining the surviving manuscripts illustrates an aspect of the writing process that Hemingway himself did not mention. The writing process described above can be shown to depend on anger, and the writing out of anger. In his important article on the creation of *The Sun Also Rises*, William Balassi makes the vital observation that Hem, as he calls Hemingway, saw his writing in one-day chunks. This means that the outbreaks of anger and violence can often be related to the beginning of a day's work (Balassi 1986; see also Svoboda 1983). Balassi's own chart cites the *ending* of each session, rather than the beginning, though in many cases the beginning of the session can be reconstructed using Bruccoli's transcription (Bruccoli 1990). Not all the diurnal sessions begin with angry or violent moments, but many do, and we also know that later in his life Hemingway often began his writing day by writing letters, which also became furiously angry in tone, more so as he aged. Balassi further notes correctly that Hemingway's narrative technique changes in his first *cahier* from anecdotes to interrelated incidents. However, Hemingway's short stories had already trained him in what he himself later called the iceberg technique of saying a lot without direct statement, which could be less about a change in style than about the movement from the directly angry voice that speaks in Hemingway's letters to an iceberg of that same anger, lurking within the writing it has helped to power forward.

Critics have tended to correlate Hemingway's aggressive outbursts with literary rivalries, and also with his depression, but there is evidence when the aggressive letters are examined together with the literary output that aggression was not caused by the straightforward rational motives attributed to him, nor by depression, but rather by mania and upswings in mood. The anger/violence-deletion cycle was not just Hemingway's way of launching a writing process early in his career. It persisted. The difficulties he faced creating a follow-up novel to *The Sun Also Rises* are well known and reasonably well understood. Hemingway began on a follow-up novel about a boxer. It was to be called *A New-Slain Knight*, a line he took from the ballad of "The Twa Corbies", a ballad he knew from Arthur Quiller-Couch's *Oxford Book of English Verse*. The novel Hemingway began survives in manuscript, though very few researchers are allowed to see it; a few chapters have been printed as an appendix to the short story collected editions (Reynolds 1999: 247–248).⁴ On 22 November 1927, Hemingway said in a letter to Fitzgerald that he had 50,000 words done on a new novel tentatively entitled "A New Slain Knight". Hemingway had had the title in mind since 1927, when he called it "a picaresque novel for America", the story of "a tough kid lucky for a long time and finally smashed by fate" (Reynolds 1999: 145). As it evolved, it became the story of "Jimmy's father against the world, with no-one but the boy for support, no hawk, no hound, no wife." Reynolds comments that this seems "a curious story for

4. Among those allowed to see the manuscript was Michael Reynolds, whose biography gives a good account of the story. The pieces published in the short story collections are entitled "A Train Trip" (chapters 1–4) and "The Porter" (chapters 13–15).

a newly remarried man to be writing" (Reynolds 1999:147), but Hemingway is – again – portraying the writer himself, lonely and beset, whether in a bull ring, a boxing ring, or a café.

While the process that led to the creation of "Hemingway" in *The Sun Also Rises* has enjoyed much critical attention, the writing process for *A Farewell to Arms* has received less scrutiny. "One morning," writes Michael Reynolds of "A New Slain Knight", by then "Jimmy Breen", "the story began to lose its energy" but the process was slower than that (Reynolds 1999:152). We can to an extent trace Hemingway's loss of faith in the novel. From the letter on 20 October 1927 when he claims to have 30,000 words done on the new novel, "A New-Slain Knight", or "Jimmy Breen", we can also note that the second chapter is written on versos of galleys 50–54 of *Men Without Women*, hence before August 1927. Not only does this tell us the date, but it also tells us that Hemingway was sneaking up on his writing while pretending to do something else, a common ruse to overcome stalemates. More importantly, his notes on the manuscript become more and more self-abusing. Hemingway notes on p.10 of Chapter 8: "fix this up, more birds"; on p.1 of Chapter 9: "more to come on end of Chap 8 [crossed out], re-write all Chicago stuff after arrival – eliminate all the shit, re-write all first part of this"; on p.1 of the first Chapter 14: "Omit all this"; on p.14 of the first Chapter 14: "Cut out all the shit in these last two or 3 chapters"; on p.13 of Chapter 15: "Write New York and voyage across" (MS529b; Reynolds 1999:150).⁵ It looks as if Hemingway is seeking to maintain revision style as taught him by Fitzgerald for *The Sun Also Rises* – write a junk draft, cut out the shit. When this new novel gets "stuck", he does not stop writing it; for him, "block" is not manifest by staring at emptiness but by churning out what does not *work*, and he judged whether or not it worked by its effect on him. What often signals his own loss of faith is actually a *reduced* number of emendations, and even the lack of a typescript at all. In the case of this manuscript, from the parts the estate allowed me to see, corrections slow and eventually stop. The positive reviews for *Men Without Women* did not resolve matters, and the negative ones may not have helped. He was especially annoyed by Virginia Woolf, who called his stories "self-consciously virile" and "dry and sterile" (Woolf 1927:1,8; Reynolds 1999:153). In a letter to Fitzgerald, dated 3 November 1927, Hemingway wrote "am thinking of quitting publishing any stuff for the next 10 or 15 years" (qtd in Reynolds 1999:153).⁶ When he reread the manuscript on returning to Paris, he thought it was "all right part of the time", and at other times "horse manure" (Reynolds 1999:153). He wrote to Maxwell Perkins that he had a third of the book done, and that he was going to put it in the third person. While Reynolds suggests that the plot was the problem, it seems more that Hemingway shifted to the third person to write his way around a very troubled area of rage and distance himself from it. The manuscript turns its attention to writers, and in a manner it treats as related, to "homosexuals", to the warnings Jimmy's father issues against "homosexuals", to his sense that "homosexuals" cannot make good writers, to his grim, furious sense that "lots

5. The manuscripts of "Jimmy Breen" are preserved in the Hemingway papers at the John F. Kennedy Library, Boston (MS529b).

6. Dorothy Parker reviewed the book warmly in *The New Yorker* on 29 October 1927.

of American writers are through before they're thirty and most of them are finished by forty five" (MS529b, ch.19: 5; Reynolds 1999: 154).

He was becoming more furious.⁷ Later – after he had escaped – he illustrated his difficulty to Maxwell Perkins:

I work all the time. But I dont think I can make even an irregular schedule and keep up the quality. I know very well I could turn books out when they should come out (And you have been very damned decent about not even asking me too or putting any pressure on me) but we only want good ones...[you] must never ... let the pack know you were wounded.

(Hemingway 2015: 37)

What saved him was to take an accidental step closer to the site of his own trauma. In the most original cure for writing impediments ever, Ernest Hemingway was redeemed by an accident of spectacular proportions: he was in the bathroom of their Paris apartment when a skylight crashed in on his head, necessitating stitches and a stay in the American Hospital at Neuilly. Michael Reynolds writes:

What the paper could not report was the odor of his blood as it streamed across his face, or the pricking of the surgeon's needle closing the wound. He had not seen so much of himself exposed since the night in Italy when the mortar blast turned his right knee to jelly.

(Reynolds 1999: 167)

Reynolds implies that what happened to Hemingway was the unlocking of the trauma memory of his Italian wound, and then "he knew exactly what he should be writing" (Reynolds 1999: 167). This is a lovely and satisfying idea, embodying the world's most radical-ever cure for writer's block. Hemingway began to write much faster and also much more furiously. In the letter to Perkins quoted above (written a fortnight after the accident), Hemingway makes it clear that he is losing confidence in the new *Slain Knight*/boxer novel, and has instead been inspired to write something altogether different:

But I would like to write a really damned good novel – and if the one I have 22 chaps and 45,000 words of done doesnt go I will after I get to America I will drop it and put it away and go on with the other one I am writing since two weeks that I thought was only a story but that goes on and goes wonderfully.

(Hemingway 2015: 374–75)

The new novel was to become *A Farewell to Arms*. He left Paris, and moved to Key West; a new life, and he announced it to Maxwell Perkins in a telegram, which simply said "working hard". He established his writing schedule once more, working in the cool mornings. Just as he had conjured Michigan in *Closerie des Lilas*, so he could now see the Alps only from Key West.

7. *Vanity Fair* parodied his anger as a matador: "As he flung open his dialogue with both hands, the bull charged, tail up. Hemingway swung his plot clear, and, as the bull recharged, brought around his dialogue in a half-circle that pulled the bull to his knees. We all applauded." *Vanity Fair*, 29 January 1928: 78.

That is, he was in a space safe enough to let him manage his own resurgent trauma memories (Reynolds 1999: 167–170).

In Hemingway's case, writing as a coping mechanism of sorts was also accompanied by a powerful sense of risk, enhanced by his lashing rage early in his writing day, and doubtless therefore accompanied by the release of endorphins. That sense of risk was enhanced for him by his effort to write as diegetically and immersively as possible, to dispense with anything that could get between the reader – himself – and the experience.

J. R. R. Tolkien

Losing your sight or having your head cracked open are not even the strangest ways of curing writer's block known to man. J. R. R. Tolkien found his narrative sequel to his successful children's book *The Hobbit* stuck at the tomb of the dwarf Balin. He later connected the pause in his writing to the unfolding disaster of the Second World War (Tolkien 1966: xxii–xxiii), dating it to 1940–41 (Christopher Tolkien suggests that it was probably earlier, from late 1939 until August 1940, Tolkien 1988: 461). But he did make time to create a manuscript, not one containing the next chapter of his novel, but one that featured in the text – the “book of Mazarbul”, the chronicle of the failed expedition to retake the mines of Moria. It is an insanely elaborate replica of the kind of medieval manuscript damaged in the Cotton fire; Tolkien even scorched the edges and crafted holes in the text.⁸ Why on earth did this work? For one thing, the business of making it gave him exactly the time for thought that he otherwise did not have. But equally importantly, the action of creating a damaged manuscript that replicated the form in which some of his own favourite literary works had survived gave him confidence that his own flaws and imperfections were acceptable. The most important factor, however, was that it represented a commitment to the dark side of the story. He later recounted his struggle to his publisher:

Though shelved (until a year ago) the *Silmarillion* and all that has refused to be suppressed. It has bubbled up, infiltrated, and probably spoiled everything (that even remotely approached “Faery”) which I have tried to write since. It was kept out of *Farmer Giles* with an effort, but stopped the continuation. Its shadow was deep on the later parts of *The Hobbit*. It has captured *The Lord of the Rings* so that that has become simply its continuation and completion, requiring *The Silmarillion* to be fully intelligible – without a lot of references and explanations that clutter it in one or two places. (Tolkien 2018: 205)

8. In fact, Tolkien made his first drawing of the book on the back of the page on which he wrote the manuscript, and went on to make several more versions, including separate pages of the volume. The dating is uncertain for all of them. The Cotton fire occurred in 1731; Robert Cotton's library contained among other things, the *Lindisfarne Gospels*, *Beowulf*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. A great number of the Cotton manuscripts were badly damaged by the flames and the water used to extinguish them, and a few volumes were destroyed in their entirety. See <https://blogs.bl.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2013/02/crisp-as-a-poppadom.html>.

Tolkien struggled to finish writing because he liked planning so much. For him, imagination worked best when it was not supposed to. The first sentence of *The Hobbit* was written on the back of an exam script he was meant to be marking (boredom is a well-known trigger for imaginative solutions). When he was meant to be working on *The Hobbit* sequel, he took time to make additional lists. Moreover, his perfectionism meant that he frequently started the entire novel again from the beginning. These side steps and U-turns are probably efforts to avoid the resurfacing of problematic trauma memories. In the same letter, he explained “and now I look at it, the magnitude of the disaster is apparent to me. My work has escaped from my control, and I have produced a monster: an immensely long, complex, rather bitter, and very terrifying romance, quite unfit for children (if fit for anybody)” (Tolkien 2018: 204). When his work was under his control, however, he was unable to produce anything except lists and plans.

Conclusion

What have we learned? First, writer's block is not just a question of staring at a blank page, but a more various inability, often connected to the phenomenon of “flow”; writers seek flow, and they stop performing tasks where it is absent. Secondly, the cures for it are individual and cannot be successfully transmitted from one writer to another; furthermore, any cure is apt to be temporary. Thirdly, writers themselves are unreliable guides to their own writing processes. This brief exploration of writer's block in relation to just three writers illustrates an underlying principle which may be the basis for further research: however writers write, the process contains its own embryonic blockages and defeats. Further work on the manuscripts of other writers will confirm both the intense individuation of the writing process and commonalities between very different writers.

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