ART & ANTIQUES, 1988

ESSAY

ARTISTS WHO KILL

And other acts of creative mayhem.

By Alexander Theroux

Illustration by Edward Gorey

Artists live dangerously. Creation is a risk that can mix perception with obsession, that can open the floodgates to violence. A violent tension can also exist between the artist and society. Worse, artists always compete with themselves, often fighting against the drive to create as passionately as for the chance to. A blank and empty canvas, arguably, remains as much an obstacle to art as an opportunity for it. It might also be said that in a very real way, artists often regard part of themselves as an enemy. The world is a club to which many of us don't feel we belong. We suspect half the time we not only succeed, but even exist, through chance or luck or even sham.

Art intimidates artists, and intensity wounds. An artist may not feel worthy of creating; may feel, with terror, he can't do it—or do it again—and that further and newer attempts at his craft will only prove his emptiness or reveal him a fraud.

Are painters any different in their fury than the average man? Are they any less or more prone to violence than the rest of us? Isn't the very act of creative change often effected *through* violence? But if violence is the result of a heightened sensibility, isn't a contradiction involved? How can someone with the talent to create at the same time so readily destroy? Does the strange and intimidating power of the one carry with it the power of the other? What Zoroastrian mystery is at work?

One answer is that artists, supremely men of passion, often live on the edge of the law, no matter how propagandists outside their world try to drag them into the national morality. They seek kinship, even to a terrible degree, with the irrational and inexplicable. Confrontation is involved in almost all they do; the testing of emotions, flirting with conflict, asking the unavoidable if sometimes unanswerable questions.

Who is shocked that Francis Bacon paints human screams? "I think probably the best human cry in painting," he once said, "was made by Poussin." He was speaking of *The Massacre of the Innocents*. The idea of "making" almost always involves plumbing one's soul. We've often been told how art moderates and tempers the emotions; a palliative, the Aristotelian catharsis that purges the viewer of pity and fear. What then of Bacon's painted figures as victims of aggression? His nightmarish distortions of friends, businessmen, ecclesiastics, and animals, all set in ominously confined spaces? His triptychs of grotesque male forms writhing in sequence across panels? Can we assume that his *Head Surrounded by Sides of Beef* (1954), for instance, means he's not likely to go marauding through the night or shove bamboo splints under a visitor's fingernails? Perhaps. (One of his favorite lines is reportedly, "I give champagne to my real friends; I give real pain to my sham friends.")

A large number of artists can be found whose very work is directed against their own attempts at trying to work. Existential dread began to be popular during the 1940s and '50s, but a great deal of slashing and burning has always gone on.

Alexander Theroux's most recent novel is *An Adultery* (Simon & Schuster). A collection of his essays will be published next spring.

A magnificent *Pietà*, barely visible in a corner of the Duomo, reveals the battering hammermarks of Michelangelo's frustrated fury. Cézanne would fly into rages against himself, indiscriminately slashing his own canvases. In fact, Cézanne, according to Giacometti, never really finished any of his paintings—he merely abandoned the job in despair. "After Vollard had posed a hundred times the most Cézanne could say was that the shirt front wasn't too bad. And he was right. It's the best part of the picture," Giacometti told his friend, James Lord (who was posing for him), bemoaning his own inability to paint Lord as he saw him. Giacometti, in fact, is a prime example of artistic anxiety. He had elaborate rituals of avoidance when facing a blank canvas and would often become irrational and tear up piles of his drawings, feeling that they were all "hopeless." Jasper Johns has been said to burn his work and there are reports of Winslow Homer carting off his watercolors and burying them in a swamp.

Cézanne's Anxiety, Van Gogh's Crows

Violence has often characterized the world of painters. Gauguin was seriously hurt in a brawl with sailors in Brittany in 1894. (Van Gogh, in fact, once attempted to kill him with a razor and was supposedly stalking him earlier the same day he cut off part of his own ear.) When he was an old man exiled in France, Goya claimed he had not only once been knifed in the back in Madrid but fled Spain and the small town of Fuendetodos, where he grew up, because of a fatal street fight there. Benvenuto Cellini, whose work as a goldsmith took him from Florence to Mantua to Rome, was often obliged to move because of his brawls and intrigues. Gustave Courbet, a passionate Republican, did time in prison (and eventually went into exile) for the role that he played in 1871 in tearing down the Colonne Vendôme, a Napoleonic monument in central Paris detested by the Communards.

As an individual, the American painter James Abbott McNeill Whistler—who published his letters under the title *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*—was arrogant and irascible, a compulsive quarreler. His ego was legendary. When someone once told him that the two greatest painters who ever lived were Velasquez and himself, he reportedly replied, "Why drag in Velasquez?" He went bankrupt after suing John Ruskin for libel when Ruskin criticized his work, particularly *Nocturne in Black and Gold: Falling Rocket*, 1874, asserting that Whistler's paintings were "only flinging a pot of paint in the public's face." In fact, at the time of his death in 1903, he was so disreputable no public gallery in England owned one of his works.

Delacroix despised Ingres. Cellini hated Baccio Bandinelli, a Florentine sculptor. Pietro Torrigiani not only broke Michelangelo's nose in a fistfight but starved himself to death from sheer spleen.

Envy is also violence. Delacroix despised Ingres. Watteau snubbed Nicolas Lancret. Daumier accused Manet of reducing painting to the "faces on playing cards." Cellini hated Baccio Bandinelli, a Florentine sculptor, who enjoyed the favor of the Medici through whom he got the commission for his *Hercules and Cacus*, done in direct emulation of Michelangelo's "David." Pietro Torrigiani, whose masterpiece is the tomb of Henry VII, not only broke Michelangelo's nose in a fistfight, but actually starved himself to death from sheer spleen. Wyndham Lewis set out to kill the philosopher T.E. Hulme, who had bested his rival in a love affair with the painter Kate Lechmere and declared he preferred Jacob Epstein's work to Lewis's. He marched in, according to one observer, seizing Hulme by the throat, but the bigger man dragged Lewis out to Soho Square, where he hung him ignominiously upside down from his trousers on the iron railings and calmly returned to his soirée. And Raphael's painting, *St. Cecilia*, was so overwhelming in its power that it supposedly caused Francisco Francia to die of depression—was this suicide?—at his own inferiority.

And what of Henri Rousseau's death? It was also a suicide of sorts, for the Douanier, although he'd been married twice before, nevertheless died of a broken heart in the Necker Hospital in Paris on September 2, 1910, after having been repeatedly turned down by the woman he wanted to marry.

Artists' suicides abound. Antoine Jean Gros drowned himself. Emanuel de Witte was found hanging from a bridge. Nicholas de Stael threw himself out of his studio window in Antibes. "Pascin," the pseudonym of Julius Pincus, a Bulgarian Jew, strangled himself in 1930 on the opening day of his exhibition at the Georges Petit Gallery. Three French surrealists—Jacques Rigaut, Jacques Vache, and René Crevel—made elaborate preparations for their suicides months and even years prior to the actual event. (Rigaut, who earlier had written "suicide is a vocation," shot himself; Vache took an overdose of opium with a friend; Crevel attached a cardboard label with his name printed on it to his left wrist and gassed himself.) Other painters who took their own lives were Benjamin Hayden, François Lemoyne, and Wilhelm Lehmbruck, the haunted German sculptor. Claude Monet, who saw 200 of his paintings sold by auction in lots of 50 francs each, tried to commit suicide in 1867. In 1898 Paul Gauguin tried the same thing in Tahiti, hospitalized, suffering mentally—his beloved daughter Aline had died the previous year—and afflicted with syphilis.

And, of course, Vincent van Gogh, unwilling to continue a life which he thought was becoming a burden to others, committed suicide not during one of his mental attacks but during a period of depression, borrowing a revolver on the

pretext that he wanted to shoot crows. He had been living in the Café Ravoux, an inn in Auvers-sur-Oise, a village twenty-two miles north of Paris where his brother, Theo, had arranged for him to live under the sympathetic eye of Dr. Paul-Ferdinand Gachet. These were to be the artist's final few months. (Incredibly, Van Gogh completed seventy paintings during the seventy frenzied and prolific days he lived in Auvers.) It was on July 28, 1890, a Sunday, that Van Gogh went into the countryside, set his easel against a haystack, and shot himself in the side with the revolver. The bullet missed his heart. Somehow, he dragged himself back to the inn and, without a word to anyone, went upstairs to his attic room. The innkeeper discovered him only sometime later. It was Adeline Ravoux, the landlord's thirteen-year-old daughter, whom Van Gogh had painted a month before his suicide, who was with him when he finally breathed his last. Van Gogh had lived on for several days in indescribable agony before he succumbed. His coffin was placed in a room on the ground floor of the café and surrounded by canvases he had just painted, including the portrait of Adeline (on the auction block with a $15-million-plus estimate as I write). His palette and brushes were arranged at the foot of the coffin.

I've wondered many times how Van Gogh's last declaration related, if it did, to his famous painting of crows flying above the Auvers wheatfield that was the subject of so many of his other paintings. But isn't that finally the tragic point of it all, that the Songs of Experience are an absolute part of the Songs of Innocence? "Cézanne's anxiety," said Picasso, "that is what interests us."

It was inevitable that someone who spent time ripping the headlights off parked cars, crushing drinking glasses in his hands, and punching his fists through panes of glass would end in violent death.

Rothko's Dark Passage, Pollock's Desperate Freedom

Mark Rothko, the abstract expressionist, took his own life in New York City in 1970. His paintings—almost always unnamed (or with nondescriptive titles like *Number 10, 1950*)—he once described as showing "a clear preoccupation with death." Personally, I agree; I have always found something depressing and secular and logically positivistic about his work. What about those nameless paintings? Rothko was born in Latvia after which his family moved to Portland, Oregon. Although his early work consisted mainly of northwestern landscapes, cityscapes, portraits, and nudes, he soon went through a surrealist phase, where vague totemistic forms and strange biomorphic apparitions emerged out of shadowy, almost monochrome tonalities.

In his mature art, he was solely interested in relationships of form and color. He sought to convey basic human emotions by isolating the viewer before an abstract but powerful image: almost invariably rectangles suspended one above another creating the impression of a horizon that recedes. Eyes appear and disappear in his paint. There is something especially unsettling and confessional in his later canvases. His reductive approach was deadly and frank: "We wish to reassert the picture plane. We are for flat forms because they destroy illusion and reveal truth." Toward the end of his life, the vagueness with which his paintings always had something to do seemed fully to infect his work. In the 1960s, some of those large dark canvases, purplish-maroon like a bruise, reflected a growing despondency and became alarmingly empty.

Rothko's canvases became bleaker. And sadder. And more abstract. His light, lacking modeling and shadow and paragraphed in rectangles, seemed to have no location, no perspective. Only two rectangles remained in his paintings, the lighter area always below, as if conquered, the darker on top. Was this then his real vision? Could Antonio Porchia, the Argentine aphorist, be right when he wrote in his strange book *Voices*, "Truth has very few friends, and those few are suicides"? At the end, color utterly evaporated. Gray, then black rectangles, reached like famine or a spreading plague to the very edges of his paintings. The work became all mask. His last black paintings are virtually featureless, blank and frontal and staring, like the Boscoreale frescoes he habitually used to visit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

And then it ended, on February 25, 1970. His marriage had broken up. He was drinking heavily and sinking increasingly into depression and paranoia. His friends say he was suffering terrible anxiety and guilt and had become unproductive. Worse, he felt he was being ignored by the art world in favor of younger artists aping his style. At sixty-six, alone in his studio on East Sixty-Ninth Street, he took a razor, slashed the ulnar veins in his arms, and quickly bled to death.

There have been many passive suicides. Maurice Utrillo was an incurable alcoholic. Toulouse-Lautrec's excessive drinking extinguished his prodigious vitality. Ralph Earl, the Massachusetts portrait painter, killed himself from drinking. So did Modigliani, who was also addicted to drugs.

And Jackson Pollock ended a life that was going nowhere in the final years when filled with rage and disgust one desperate afternoon he drove his car straight into a tree. All his life he chainsmoked Camels and drank beer, not—as Baudelaire said of Poe—as an epicure, but barbarously, as if he were performing a homicidal function. I suppose it was inevitable that someone who spent time ripping the headlights off parked cars, crushing

drinking glasses in his hands, and punching his fists through panes of glass would end in violent death, and leave a surfeit of contradictions for others to solve. "The artist who destroys himself," notes critic Brian O'Doherty, "becomes the relic of his genius, that is very like his pictures."

O'Doherty goes on to explain, "The artist is encouraged to cooperate in his own self-destruction, while having an inkling that he is not free to do otherwise, leading to an imperfectly understood resentment that erodes his belief in his own freedom. This in turn he finds intolerable, leading again to further excesses. Only by destroying what the public feels is its vested interest—that is, himself—can the artist exercise the last freedom available to him." Unfortunately, that last freedom available to him allows no other.

Blakelock's Icy Moonlight

Finally, we should remember those tragic deaths of the spirit, where the mind is killed in a madness sought like a sanctuary from the murderous insistence of life. Seraphine de Senlis, that unique and gifted painter of flowers, died in a lunatic asylum, as did the painters Carl Hill, Gino Rossi, Johan Jongkind, and Ernst Josephson. Edvard Munch suffered all his life from agitations and powerful inner torments, and used his art to express (and thus in part surmount) the profound personal disturbances that made his streets echo with fear, filled landscapes with death, turned women into vampires. A nervous breakdown in 1908 forced him to undergo electroshock treatments (his work was never the same).

Another who died in an asylum was Ralph Albert Blakelock (1847-1919), whose wife and family of nine children lived in poverty, while he was forced to peddle—for pittances—some of the most luminous and haunting forestscapes in American art. In 1913, in fact, Blakelock's ***Moonlight*** sold at auction for $13,900, the highest price ever paid for a work by a living American artist. (And in 1916 his ***Brook by Moonlight*** sold privately for $20,000.) Blakelock never realized a penny of it, if he realized it at all.

According to his biographer, Abraham Davidson, Blakelock, who had no dealer, was defeated by his desperate poverty. "Partly because he was small, weighing only about 100 pounds, and partly because he was a poor businessman who wore his anxiety on his sleeve, dealers took particular delight in knocking down his prices." In the 1880s a disreputable Third Avenue junk dealer named Robert Fullerton paid him $100 for thirty-three paintings, $3.03 apiece. His family was evicted from their home on twenty-one different occasions. During one particularly rough winter, the Blakelocks stayed alive by cutting ice out of the Hudson and selling it. By the 1890s, his eccentricities had become pronounced. He wore his hair long and carried an old dagger prominently. "I am sure he wore it only because he thought it artistic," his wife said. "I was never afraid of him."

On September 11, 1899, the day before his ninth child, Douglas, was born, Blakelock brought one of his best pictures to a collector, who offered half his asking price. Blakelock refused and left, but then changed his mind and went back. This time the collector offered even less; Blakelock accepted. He took the money home, showed it to his wife, then threw it in the kitchen fire. The next day the normally gentle artist became violent and was committed by his wife to the Long Island Hospital at Kings Park. "He threatens to kill the members of his family," the admitting physician wrote. "He threatens to kill his son because he bought a new coat. Claims he is the Duke of York."

"He threatens to kill the members of his family," the admitting physician wrote of Blakelock. "He threatens to kill his son because he bought a new coat. Claims he is the Duke of York."

Diagnosed as suffering from dementia praecox, Blakelock was transferred to the State Hospital for the Insane at Middletown, New York. Imagining himself fabulously wealthy, he designed his own money from scraps of paper and torn shirts, signing the bills "A-1" for Albert the First, and giving multi-million-dollar benefactions to collectors and the National Academy of Design. Blakelock lived out his life shuttled between the asylum and the dubious care of a self-appointed and autocratic guardian named Beatrice Van Rensselaer Adams who took over his life. She intruded in his affairs, bullied him, and sequestered him from his family, then living in a two-room cabin in the Catskills for $4 a month. He was a mere skeleton at the end, only seventy-six pounds. Ironically, on December 23, 1941, Mrs. Adams—once wealthy, finally a homeless vagrant—was diagnosed as suffering from dementia praecox at Kings Park Hospital, where she was taken after collapsing on a street near Grand Central Station. Only a few blocks away, an exhibition of paintings by Blakelock was simultaneously being held.

Caravaggio's Severed Heads

Degas once remarked that a painter paints with the same passion that a criminal commits a crime. It's an interesting analogy, a poetic one, which raises all sorts of questions about the creative urge touching on terror and desperation and need. There are instances, moreover, when the analogy emerges into bold truth, and the passionate mind that can do one, instead chooses the other—and the artist becomes a murderer.

Caravaggio—whose real name was Michelangelo Merisi (which he took after his birthplace near Milan)—was a man of

strange habits. One contemporary called him "*stravagantissimo*" (very eccentric) and said his excesses cut ten years off his life. He went through the streets with a sword and a dagger ever at the ready and a shaggy black dog called "Cornacchia" (Raven) who did tricks. A servant boy carrying a rapier followed him.

As a painter he was a technical wizard. After studying under teachers of little originality (he had been a mason's laborer) he struggled in his own work for more dramatic, more realistic effects, and the result was a sort of concrete paganism. He painted religious characters as if they were everyday people. His saints, Biblical characters, his angels–even his portraits of Christ–had an earthiness appalling to the patrons of the day. A basket of fruit appears in many of his paintings, and is almost always either bruised or rotten. He produced an unusual number of severed heads.

He was known for his ferocious and unbridled temper. On one occasion, in 1604, at the Osteria del Moro, he threw a plate of hot artichokes into a waiter's face and threatened to run him through. In October of that year he was seized by the authorities after throwing a stone at someone. He made vicious accusations against Guido Reni (who, incidentally, admired him) for copying his style, and was arrested for libel. From 1600 to 1610 he is mentioned constantly as an offender in police records. If it seems strange that pettiness can coexist with such brilliance–he was probably the most important Italian painter of the seventeenth century–one need only reflect on how slim a hold even the best of us has on his identity. Possibly genius compounds this.

Caravaggio was known for his ferocious and unbridled temper. In 1604, at the Osteria del Moro, he threw a plate of hot artichokes into a waiter's face and threatened to run him through.

After 1590, Caravaggio seemed no longer satisfied with mere physical beauty. He turned exclusively to religious themes, no more Bacchuses and still lifes. (The wormy fruit in paintings like *Fruit and Foliage* now looked less like a touch of reality than a theological complaint.) All that interested the painter was the form of the shadows falling on bodies, as if to veil in darkness the drama going on within. Never had sacred subjects been depicted so entirely in terms of contemporary low life. He plunged into atmospheres of ever greater gloom, sharpening a style that became more revolutionary and using contrasts of light and shadow laid on with a sort of fury. He began to concentrate on hard clear images and gave increasingly insistent psychological focus to works that were becoming more and more baroque in the original meaning of that term–contorted and grotesque.

In his *Conversion of St. Paul*, a scene commonly depicted with a vision of Christ descending from heaven, a horse fills up most of the composition. ("You can smell the sweat," said Dali.) In the thick murky atmosphere enveloping the scene, no space is left for the shaft of supernatural light that has struck down the saint. Caravaggio almost willfully gives Paul's servant a varicose vein in his leg. The painter has not merely confined himself to depicting the event without idealization, as it actually happened, he virtually prosecutes in the painting all the possibilities he refuses to be deprived of and simultaneously reveals a personality that, rash and reckless–even pugnacious–revels in shocking confrontation.

He loved backgrounds of nowhere. He was famous for disagreeable facial expressions. In the *Death of the Virgin*, one of his most controversial paintings, we see a poor corpse being carried from the morgue, her legs swollen, her face already showing signs of decay. To humanize the Virgin was one thing, but to do so with such truculent insistence on reality was another. His paintings soon began causing scandals and were condemned out of hand by Bolognese artists and critics in Rome, and many were refused by the clergy. Was Caravaggio simply inviting scorn? And what of his anger? Was he intentionally subverting himself? Were his paintings, like his actions, merely desperate attempts to exercise his freedom, the bold refusal to be vanquished by custom or courtesy?

In his later works–*The Entombment of Santa Lucia*, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, and *The Resurrection of Lazarus*–qualities can be found reflecting the misery of his life, his pent-up grief and bitterness. It was also daring to approach *The Calling of St. Matthew* the way he did. Matthew was a publican, someone who dealt with public revenues. Such men were usually social outcasts and classified with "sinners" and other irreligious persons because of the flagrant abuses connecting with the tax-collecting job. Matthew would also have been scorned, being a Jew, for working in the employ of the hated Romans and specifically under Herod Antipas. The setting for the painting is a dimly lit gambling den, an airless two-dimensional world where the seated five men, rich and overdecorated and counting money, could be pimps in a brothel. (The delicate, almost indiscernible halo over Christ's head seems a small concession to the religious subject of the painting.)

And in his terrifying and apocalyptic *David with the Head of Goliath*, Caravaggio seems to be making some sort of despairing personal confession by the macabre way he gave his own face to the severed head of Goliath the Philistine, dripping blood, mouth agape, held up by the hair in the left hand of David. It somehow recalls the words of Picasso, "Art is the child of rejection and suffering, and I paint as others write their autobiographies.

Meanwhile, Caravaggio was nursing an even deeper grievance. He had been gravely offended that he hadn't been offered any of the new commissions for the altarpieces that were being given out in the great basilica of St. Peter's. It was an honor hugely to be prized. In those days, Cardinals had to be sought

out by artists for endorsements the way politicians today are solicited by candidates applying to West Point. Lesser lights like Ludovico Cigoli and Bernardo Castello, and even utter mediocrities, had been preferred. And while Caravaggio was ignored, his behavior only worsened.

On Sunday evening, May 28, 1606, on the Via della Scrofa in Rome, Caravaggio and some friends were attending a game of *palla a corda*–a kind of court tennis–and he got into a fight during the match over a wager he had made with someone. It was Caravaggio who owed the money, a debt of 10 scudi, and it was Caravaggio who refused to pay. A contemporary account of the fight records it as a long and furious one, with four companions scuffling on each side. Ultimately, though Caravaggio was badly wounded in the head, it was his opponent, a fellow named Ranucchio Tommasoni of Terni, whom he fatally ran through the heart. Caravaggio immediately fled. He went south, roaming the countryside, and for his crime was hunted intermittently by the Knights of Malta.

During the next three years he was constantly in and out of trouble. He fled to Naples and to Malta, where he was imprisoned for another attempt to avenge a quarrel. He was always as ready with his dagger as with his brush. Escaping to Sicily, he was attacked by a party sent in pursuit of him and severely wounded. Being pardoned, he set out for Rome, but again came in contact with the law. He finally died in a rage, when, after having been taken off a vessel and summarily imprisoned–it was a case of mistaken identity–he went wandering in a fever along a hot beach at Pontervole in July, cursing and howling at the ship as it sailed away with all his belongings. He was only thirty-nine.

The Devil and Richard Dadd

The Spanish painter, Alonso Cano (1606-1667) also killed someone. An architect and sculptor as well, he claimed to have religious raptures. It somehow never kept him out of duels. A contentious and difficult man, he was forced to leave Seville in 1638 because of a vendetta he had initiated with another painter, Sebastian de Llano y Valdes. He was also said to have risked his life by committing the then-capital offense of smashing a statue of a saint in a rage when its purchaser demanded a discount. He was finally arrested in 1644 when his young wife was found stabbed to death. Cano is generally thought to have done it, though it was never proven (some circumstances pointed to his servant as the culprit, and Cano did not confess though he was tortured).

It is nothing less than remarkable, given his violent life, that Cano's paintings are not only religious but done with such elegance and ease, such classic balance and symmetry that he is still known as the Michelangelo of Spain. One thinks of Yeats's theory of the "anti-self," where the artist is seen as someone always endeavoring to construct by fiction what he lacks in fact, seeking the opposite of what he is.

Voices and visions figure in several cases where artists have killed. The trouble with artists is half the time one cannot ascertain whether they're mad or listening to the Muse.

The story of the "fairy" painter, Richard Dadd (1819-1887), is a case in point. It was Dadd who, ironically enough, killed his own father. Richard, a son by his father's first wife, was the fourth of seven children, of whom four were to die insane. (Both of the wives of his father, Robert, a canvas gilder, died young.) A talented painter, Dadd was admitted to the Royal Academy in 1837. His *Titania Sleeping* in 1841 brought him official acclaim. His paintings, which soon took on an eerie quality, were mostly haunted-looking caves, deserts, and lunescapes, one hundred of which he did for Lord Foley, taking his subjects from Byron's *Manfred* and Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered*. In 1842 he traveled to Egypt, Italy, Greece, and Asia Minor for a year. In Rome he felt an irrational urge to attack the Pope. On his voyage home, he began to imagine his traveling companion, Sir Thomas Phillips, a solicitor, was playing cards for the captain's soul. He suddenly felt his mind was imprinted with a mission to rid the world of the Devil. It was his physician's judgment, however, that his unusual behavior was due to Egyptian sunstroke.

He was convinced he was being pursued. He began leaping for no reason. On August 28, 1843, Dadd asked his father to go with him to Cobham, where he said he wanted to "unburden his mind."

Soon his lapses of self-control could no longer be ignored. One visitor arrived to find Dadd had cut a birthmark out of his forehead because, he said, it was put there by the Devil. He was convinced he was being pursued. He began leaping for no reason. He started stocking his lodgings with vast quantities of eggs and ale, hundreds of shells being later found in his rooms, along with drawings he had made of many of his friends, portraying them with their throats slit.

On August 28, 1843, Dadd, who was only twenty-two at the time, asked his father to take a trip with him to Cobham in Surrey, a childhood haunt of his, where he said he wanted to "unburden his mind." No particular enmity had been recorded between them prior to that night. They took lodgings at a place called the Ship Inn, dined on boiled ham and porter, and then went for a stroll. Then, with a clasp knife (which he had brought along specifically for the job) Dadd–after an initial attempt to cut his father's throat with a razor–proceeded to stab him to death, shoving the corpse into a

chalk pit called Paddock Hole. He later explained that he was simply carrying out a supreme command to destroy the Devil. Dadd crossed the Channel and might have escaped, but was arrested near Fontainebleau after attempting to kill a complete stranger. In 1844 he was extradited to Britain and committed to Bethlehem Hospital (Bedlam) in London without even standing trial. Curiously, there was a marked improvement in his painting in the madhouse. He drew cartoons, Easter scenes, caves. (As one critic put it, the paintings he did there were "strongly interesting though marked by a certain disequilibrium.")

Mostly, the work was delicate landscapes, peopled with fairy folk–gnomes, particularly, intrigued him. (He always spoke of them as if they were real.) Dadd became a prolific painter and left behind some 232 works, the finest of which are *Contradiction: Oberon and Titania* (1854-58); *The Flight Out of Egypt*; *The Fairy-Feller's Master Stroke* (1855-64), which is now in the Tate Gallery–you can see the little folk who persecuted him peering through the shrubbery; and *The Crooked Path* (1866). He died of consumption on January 8, 1886, a white-bearded old man.

For Love, Money, and Art

Where love and (one is sorely tempted to write *or*) marriage is involved, there is often murder.

Eadweard Muybridge–he was born Edward Muggeridge in England in 1830, but returned to the Anglo-Saxon form of his name after coming to the U.S.–was tried and acquitted for the murder of his wife's lover. He was one of the great photographers of the American West and invented the zoöpraxiscope, a machine that, reconstructing motion from his photographs (a project on which he collaborated with Thomas Eakins) became the forerunner of cinematography.

Muybridge was in California working on a geodetic survey for the U.S. Government at the time that Gov. Leland Stanford made a historic bet with two other horse-racing enthusiasts–James R. Keene and Frederick MacCrellish. Stanford wagered $25,000 that a horse sometimes has all four hooves off the ground when galloping. The difficulty was how to settle the argument. Muybridge solved the problem by lining up twenty-four cameras to take pictures one after another. The stop-action photos proved Stanford was right.

Two years after that famous photograph of the galloping horse, Muybridge began to suspect that a U.S. Army major was sleeping with his wife. One night Muybridge went to the officer's house, stood outside in the darkness, and called for his wife's lover to come out. When the major stepped through the door, Muybridge cried out, "Here is a message from my wife," and shot the fellow through the heart. A jury at Napa, California, acquitted Muybridge after he invoked the then-popular "unwritten law" of *crime passionel*.

But the artist is by no means limited to the familiar homicide, born of anger or madness. There are several cases of mass murder, as well. One of Japan's most horrific crimes occurred at Tokyo's Teikoku (Imperial) Bank on January 26, 1948, when the painter Sadimacha Hirasawa, pretending to be a Dr. Jiro Yamaguchi, entered the bank at closing time and precipitated an instant panic by announcing a dysentery epidemic. He somehow induced the fifteen bank employees to swallow a medicine he dispensed which supposedly prevented the disease. The "doctor" then fled with 181,400 yen ($600) while the victims collapsed in pain, writhing on the floor. Three of the potential victims, however, survived. A nationwide manhunt for the killer immediately ensued, and a painstaking police investigation led after almost a year to the arrest of Hirasawa.

Inexplicably, the warrant for his execution was never signed. Hirasawa carried on painting in his jail cell. For some reason, the works he produced from then on gained favor in the art world.

It was soon learned that he had attempted two robbery-murders earlier, in both instances posing in the guise of a doctor. At a sensational trial, two of the survivors positively identified Hirasawa, who maintained his innocence but was found guilty and sentenced to death. Inexplicably, the warrant for his execution was never signed by the Justice Minister, and Hirasawa carried on painting in his jail cell. For some reason, the works he produced from then on gained greater favor in the art world.

A curious fact that might be noted in passing is that often only *after* killing someone can–or do–certain individuals begin to get down to the real business of their creative work, as if finding their focus somehow depended in a bizarre way on a purgation of violence, some ritual or other of bloodletting; or perhaps it is just the interminable internment that provides an enforced isolation necessary for their work. There are the cases of Hirasawa and Dadd. Other examples might be ornithologist-murderers Nathan Leopold and the "Birdman of Alcatraz." Another painter-murderer is Conrad Maass, a German nobleman who immigrated to Oklahoma in 1890 with his wife Martha. In 1898 he killed his wife with a shotgun blast, burying her in his dugout home. Sentenced to life imprisonment, Maass began to paint historical and religious murals in his cell at the Oklahoma State Penitentiary in McAlester. He became so extravagantly attached to his art that when he was granted parole in 1920 he refused to leave the penitentiary unless the murals left with him. As this was impossible, Maass chose to stay in jail until his death in 1936. Though they are bullet-scarred from prison riots over the years, his murals have

remained in place and made him a legend among McAlester's inmates. (The "Lifers' Club" there recently raised funds to buy him a new tombstone.)

A Gentleman's Poison Jellies

A murderer who, like Hirasawa, killed his victims by poison was the art critic, forger, and English painter Thomas Griffiths Wainewright (1794-1852). Most of his best efforts in painting were watercolor and monochrome sketches and drawings in crayon. He exhibited once or twice at the Royal Academy. An acquaintance of Lamb's and Hazlitt's, he was a literary dandy, a perfumed and jeweled exquisite, who wrote affected and fussy essays for *The London Magazine* under the pseudonyms "Mr. Egomot Bonmot," "Mr. Janus Weathercock," and "Herr Vinkbooms." He lisped, loved to wear jewelry—especially rings—and collected antiques.

An orphan, Wainewright came to live as a boy of seven with his uncle, George Edward Griffiths, the owner of Linden House and a large surrounding property. He grew to young manhood and joined a regiment, along the way coming in contact with a small, rather financially pressed family from Mortlake, a widow named Mrs. Abercromby who had a son and one daughter—Miss Frances Ward, whom Wainewright would marry—by her first husband, Mr. Ward, and two daughters by her second, Lieutenant Abercromby. In 1828 Wainewright and his wife went to live with his bachelor uncle. Within a year of their going there, Mr. Griffiths died—"suddenly"—and the house and property, now considerably reduced in value, passed to Wainewright. His financial situation worsened. He subsequently arranged for his wife's mother and two half-sisters, Helen and Madeleine, to make their home at Linden House.

In 1830 he insured Helen's life for several huge sums, which covered, however, only a short period. Mrs. Abercromby thought it callow. She objected and promised to stand in the way. As it turned out, she didn't get the chance. Conveniently enough for Wainewright's purpose, she died "very suddenly" in August 1830. Helen's insurance was then quadrupled. That very December, the poor girl—who was only twenty-one—died in great agony, the symptoms of her brief illness found to be identical with those of her mother and George Griffiths.

It was soon discovered that Wainewright had poisoned them all, using strychnine in jelly. Someone asked him directly how he could have had the cold-blooded barbarity to kill such a fair and innocent creature as Helen (whose portrait he had once done in colored chalks). He reflected a moment or two, then replied, "Upon my soul, I do not know, unless it was because she had such thick legs."

Wainewright's ruling illusion was of his grandeur. In prison he refused, as a "gentleman," to sweep or handle a broom. The sight of him in Newgate and what he learned of his history suggested to Charles Dickens the plot for his melodramatic novelette, *Hunted Down*. Wainewright was banished to the hulks of Portsmouth and then sent to Van Dieman's Land in Tasmania for life, where after mouldering away for years—his sole living companion was a cat—he finally died of apoplexy in 1852. No portrait of the murderer is known to exist.

Asked how he could have the barbarity to kill such an innocent creature, Wainewright reflected a moment, then replied, "Upon my soul, I do not know, unless it was because she had such thick legs.

One wonders if artists who kill aren't somehow convinced of their power over life and death. Is the compulsion to dominate stronger in them than in others? To feel superior? To mete out some sort of aesthetic justice they alone see, or think they see? Is it, for instance, the impulse to shape a plot in a writer gone awry, merely another way for a painter to scumble a figure? Or is his killing an act of ego, a way of preferring one's own life, destiny, desires to another's, a sort of satisfaction some artists have felt due them by right? "Every artist's strictly illimitable country is himself," E. E. Cummings once wrote. "An artist who plays that country false has committed suicide." But is an artist alone in having that autonomy?

And is an artist's compulsion to kill stronger than it would be for others? More legitimate? Easier to understand? And what about the frequency of the artist doing away with himself? Can we always say that his suicide, like Kirillov's in Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*, is an absolute he demands in the same way, and with the same power, he creates?

Clearly, many artists kill for the same reasons—greed, anger jealousy, madness, etc.—that others commonly do. I don' mean to suggest that art is an illness. Many artists are awar that they must live with their devils, their obsessions, an that a good many obviously struggle to come to terms with th fact, often by means of their very own art. On the othe hand, there are others who realize that to rid themselve of their demons would strip them of defenses built up fro their earliest years, and leave them vulnerable.

"Open is broken," wrote Norman O. Brown. "There is n breakthrough without breakage." And so every artist becom his own scandal. Some would go so far as to say that it part of the Art Form, the simple but terrible truth that h the poor creative soul turning for help either to the ve art that at the same time can't redeem him, or away fro it to places where the demons can be even worse.