

Laura Fanatico

Professor Chess

4 December 2017

The Madman's Catharsis

Writers have always crossed boundaries. From the unpalatable French existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre to the esoteric horror fiction of H. P. Lovecraft, writers have always explored pathways that others haven't been willing to walk down. I have always read a diversity of genres, but what I have always found most interesting is raw, unfiltered content that plunges the reader into an intense cerebral experience. This semester has provided me with that kind of content. With the texts that we have read, I would like to explore the following theme: how to explore the depths of the human psyche with words. To be more specific, I would like to ask the question: How have Jewish writers explored the cyclic concept of madness as the inspiration for breathtaking creative output and creative output as the cure for madness? Could it be that writing has a powerful therapeutic effect? In this case, I will be using "madness" as an umbrella term. I'm referring to everything on the chaotic spectrum, from mental illness to tumultuous human emotion to trauma.

Throughout history, writers have crossed boundaries by using writing as a creative outlet. And who would need an outlet more than the survivors of a genocide? I will be exploring three texts in this paper, and I would like to start with "Why I Write" by Elie Wiesel. His work was the inspiration for my theme. It begins with the quote "Why do I write? Perhaps in order not to go mad. Or, on the contrary, to touch the bottom of madness" (JAL 907). Wiesel continued to quote another author who claims that the survivor expresses himself because there is no other way. During World War II, millions of Jewish people were murdered (Holocaust). This is the kind of horror that can't be explained away, although the Buddhists may say it was karma and the

Christians may say it was the wrath of God. Many explanations have been offered, but nothing can take away the sheer scale of brutality and death. As explained in this text, Wiesel felt it was his duty to convey his experience as a survivor. In Jewish tradition, to not communicate an experience is to betray it (JAL 907). He felt that if he did not tell his story, he would not only betray the people who were killed but his entire religious tradition. That is a heavy responsibility to carry, but perhaps it always allowed him a speck of relief. Sometimes the only way to process feelings is to purge them. Wiesel admits to the temptation to forget the past and celebrate the present, but acknowledges that it would be the ultimate betrayal to do so. And so he finds himself trapped in what is both a duty and a necessary practice in order to survive the aftermath of a genocide.

In this text Wiesel says “No, I do not understand. And if I write, it is to warn the reader that he will not understand either” (JAL 909). And so, he clearly doesn’t write to elucidate. It is not meant to shed light on any rhyme or reason, especially on a place where no rhyme or reason exists. He adds that anyone who was not there could never truly understand what it was like, in any case. And this must be true. We can imagine, but we cannot know. And this is probably a good thing. To experience pain of that magnitude is next to unbearable. And so, one sees evidence of trauma being the basis for incredible writing. Writing that is excruciating, but true, and poignant in its potency. This is writing that is like a birth, birth to an entity that is speaking for those who had their voices taken away by force. It is too late to save them, but at least they can be heard for generations. Ultimately, Wiesel knew that he was a witness. He identified as one. He knew that in order to pull the victims from oblivion, someone had to speak for them. And so, in his work about the Holocaust, he both expunges his conscience and the stories of

those who were murdered. He both cured his madness and reached the bottom of it all at once, which was undoubtedly necessary for his own survival.

The next text that I would like to use to explore my theme is “The Confessions of Edward Dahlberg.” Any kind of confession is a self-explanatory attempt at release. In this case, it’s a narrative memoir by a Jewish man that explores his difficult relationship with his mother. Personal relationships are some of the most difficult paths to navigate in life, particularly those that are within a family. Dahlberg was raised by a transient single mother who moved them through a string of towns while he was young. He spoke of feeling humiliated by his mother, whom he felt was worn and tired and not respectable. He saw her oldness as weakness. Along with his ruthless assessment of his mother, he was also merciless on himself. “That she was a drudge in a barbershop and spent the pennies she earned on a son more useless than a gnat did not occur to me. Nor did I realize that she was far more honest than Society, which had rejected her” (JAL 379). He both despised the fact that she was romantically active and acknowledged his own carnal desires, which he viewed as weakness.

So despite his contempt for her, he also saw his own perceived shortcomings. With writing, he was able to express all of these negative emotions. Dahlberg was also able to process the negative emotions along with the positive ones. Right after he expresses his contempt for his mother, he goes on to call her an “angelic pariah” and mentioned her “good sense”. These conflicting accounts reveal the complex emotions of this man, made more complex by his awareness of being Jewish. As his mother was a barber, one of her clients once said to him, “If you’ll cover your Jew nose with your hand, I’ll give you a dollar” (JAL 380). While this statement is incredibly offensive, Dahlberg admits that all he thought of was the dollar, rather than what was inherently wrong with the statement. He speaks often of not only his mother’s

clients but her suitors as well, and how the attention seemed to lift her spirits. He detested her suitors, and he often did not get along with her herself. But he also understood his deep connection with her. “Was I not her belly, hand and feet, and did she not comprehend her own flesh?” (JAL 386). He loved his mother in his own way, and it was perhaps that love that moved him to despise her ragged clothes and aging body because he knew she deserved better. He knew she deserved better than the suitors that came to her house. With all of these complex emotions, an outlet was necessary. A confession needed to be written. And at the end of it, Dahlberg ultimately says that she was indeed a wonderful person who simply lived an unfortunate life. “...I know that not even Solomon in his liliated raiment was so glorious as my mother in her rags” (JAL 390). It is ultimately a familial love story, one that follows his mother’s life closely and mourns her end. In this way, Dahlberg was able to process his emotional chaos.

It is a well-known fact that “Howl” in all of its turbulent power changed the way that poetry was viewed and written. It’s an explosion of imagery that is both unsettling, brutal, and vulnerable. Allen Ginsberg published it in 1956, and it is arguably his best work. Not only does it “touch the bottom of madness” but it is madness and chaos itself. Bursting with visceral themes like sexuality, drug use, alienation, and commentary on society, it seems like it should all be said on the same breath. Ginsberg claimed to have written it in a creative burst while on peyote, but the annotated version shows his editing and writing process was much more thorough than that. The process, like the poem, was very dynamic. And it wasn’t simply a catharsis for Ginsberg—it was a catharsis for society. It was a raw expulsion of the ugly, vicious, and raw underside of society that no one else wanted to talk about. The beginning of it encapsulates my theme, with “the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness” which shows a destructive force to deconstruct with words. The words are often hard, clipped, and often unappetizing, but it is also

gorgeously lyrical in its own way. "...for the endless ride from Battery to holy Bronx on Benzedrine until the noise of wheels and children brought them down shuddering mouth-wracked and battered bleak of brain all drained of brilliance in the dear light of Zoo" (Howl 1). Certainly, there is something to be said for creativity originating from isolation and alienation. In fact, one of Ginsberg's most revelatory moments was when he was desolate and alone in an east Harlem sublet. It was there that he claimed to hear the voice of God. A living creator, speaking to his son (JAL 831). Some would call this a religious and spiritual experience. I see it as a comforting delusion. But in any case, it coincides with my theme. Whatever you call it, it spawns creativity, which is perhaps a form of delusion within itself. After all, if it hasn't been thought of before, that places it outside the realm of normality. And so, Ginsberg took part in the 1950s and 1960s catharsis of society. With "Howl" he called to attention the blunt and ugly side of America. He would come to the forefront of political protest and activism, calling for liberation of all kinds.

As for me, I have been writing since the age of nine. It started out for amusement, and would later become a lifeline. When I entered high school, having just moved to a new town, I spent some time dealing with depression, which runs in my family. I remember not enjoying the things I used to enjoy, and experiencing a lack of hope and cheerfulness in general. The strangest part was losing enjoyment because my childhood was full of that. But I was growing older, and I was relatively alone at this point in time. Something that never lost meaning to me, however, was writing. I wrote novels and poems and short stories. A lot of them were inspired by other works that I had read, particularly by Vonnegut and Lovecraft but also less well known authors such as Sean Beaudoin.

I was also very inspired by “The Outsiders” by S.E. Hinton. I identified with the alienation of the greasers, and ended up writing a very long novel that sort of followed a similar plot. Interestingly enough, S.E. Hinton was not much older than myself at the time when she published her book. I remember very acutely the feeling of passing in and out of the trance-like state that I entered when writing. In this state, I wasn’t thinking about the past or the future, or even the present. It was like I was so focused that I passed into a slightly different level of consciousness. This laser-like focus continues until this day, making writing an excellent escape from reality. I have to emerge, eventually, back into the real world. Luckily, with the move to a new house and meeting some new friends, I was able to revert back to my normal self. This lapse into depression is something I think about, and whenever it comes to mind I also think of how writing helped me. It was both my catharsis and my oasis. And with that, I recognize its power.

Writing, like the serpent Ouroboros, comes full circle to swallow its own tail. There is always a beginning and an ending, and often a return to the beginning. With that in mind, I return to my question at the beginning of the paper. How does one deal with madness? With trauma? The way that Jewish writers allowed their psyche to be visible was through the output of writing. With this medium they processed every possible emotion on the spectrum of human feeling. Like Wiesel, they were witnesses. Like Ginsberg, they were visionaries. It was with writing that they made themselves indelible. As long as there is madness, there will also be catharsis. And so, the cycle goes on.

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