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The Cosmological Comedy of Illogical Creation

Mixed Media Sculpture

Often it is only the product of my struggle that is recognized. I have spent years of my life being praised for the skills that I developed to cope with life inside my own mind. It is lonely and isolating and frequently reaches that dangerous precipice of unmanageable loathing. My most personal work focuses on walking that tightrope and unearthing the bitter, disgusting truths that are easiest to hide, but I have never focused on the way I see the world. It is much more vulnerable; I cannot hide behind the worst parts of myself. I must present it all and let the audience draw their own conclusions. The illogical and whimsical nature of this piece intends to realize a physical manifestation of my creative headspace, to subvert presuppositions on the nature of art, and to encourage the viewer's active participation in both my art and my process. The art world and society's expectations emphasize the mythical exchange of pain for greatness. My goal is to tease apart my madness from my suffering so that I can return to creating with the joyous abandon of my childhood. My mental illness does not define me. I am an amalgamation of all that was, is, and will be. We all have our burdens to bear. This is mine.

The Obscene Joy of the Mad, Absurd, and
Nonsensical



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OS48

Author's Note: When I cannot breathe from the weight of the world crushing my ribs, when tears well and spill until I am blind I have art. I have always had art. I have also always been slightly neurotic. It creeps in and out, like the tide taunting the skittish sandpipers, but I am stuck in the sand. Sometimes it feels as if my brain is rotting and if I was to pull my hair in a fit of panic it would unspool through the follicles on my scalp into miles of fine worms, all made up of my brains. I pick at my skin. One day I won't have any left. Hopefully that day comes after I die. There is a man who lives just around the corner, no, not that one. The other one, the third on the left. He is waving at you. I think a small maggot has moved in, just below my brain stem. Sometimes I can feel it move. If I listen closely I can hear it putting up pictures of its family. I think my teeth are planning on unionizing. They never get a second to rest, I grit them together even when I am sleeping, and when my heart has been ripped out to feed the beast of despair, and my ribs collapse inwards I do not brush them. It hurts to love the world so much and not feel a thing for you. I wish I could think and play at the same time. Perhaps I could if I thought the right way. Or the left way. Or any way at all. I get my rights and lefts turned around. I do not find my own thoughts particularly compelling, especially on Wednesdays, and in the month of July. I have a complicated relationship with the word crepuscular. It's beautiful but it itches terribly. Walk with me. Try and follow along, even when it's difficult, when I go left and say right, when sharp rocks cut at your heel, try and stay by my side. It's unbearable without you. I know it's hard to navigate here, but I have learned. Follow me. Please.

From before Shakespeare put quill to paper to the silver screen, the idea of madness has captivated people. Countless characters, both historical and fictional, have been branded as such. Yet the concept itself has remained elusive in its scope. Although the word is often tied to mental

illness and insanity, the furtherment of psychological research has rendered it moot as a technical term. How can the myth of the tortured artist be reconciled with madness' link to creativity?

Madness is not inherently a descriptor of illness. Although many assume that the two are synonymous, there is an extensive history of the word being used in conjunction with intense emotions. It is of great import to note that it is often not the emotion being felt that is branded as mad but the person receiving the label. For much of history, the mind and the mentally ill have been severely misunderstood. People fear what they do not understand, and those seen as deviant from the stringent norm weren't worth the trouble of understanding. Those labeled "mad" were subject to torture disguised as treatment, while the morbidly inclined could pay a penny to watch the lunatics. This pay-per-view treatment of the mentally ill, disabled, and marginalized people continues even to this day. Unfortunately, the idea that physical traits are an indicator of one's mental state is not only deeply incorrect, but also extremely hurtful and stigmatizing. Humans are not born with these biases, they are taught, often from a young age, to make these unsubstantiated judgments. This pertinent analysis of this is found in Jennifer Eisenhauer's "A Visual Culture of Stigma: Critically Examining Representations of Mental Illness":

Wilson, et al. (1999) examined one week of children's television shows from two channels and they found that 46.1% of the week's episodes contained one or more references to mental illness. The majority of these references were in cartoons (79.7%). Unlike the still images of early artwork and medical illustrations, the examination of media includes the layering of both the verbal and the visual. In this study, the most common words documented included crazy, mad, closing your mind,' nuts, 'driven bananas,' twisted, deranged, disturbed, wacko, cuckoo, loony, lunatic, loon, insane, and freak (p. 441). The

physical attributes of the characters with mental illnesses depicted included unruly hair, widely spaced and/or rotting teeth, a prominent nose, heavy brows with thick arched brows (for villains), narrowed artificial eyes (for villains) and large round eyes (for comedic characters).⁶

An astute reader may notice the uncanny similarity between this list of physical features and ones associated with racist and antisemitic stereotypes. With all of the progress made in the field of psychiatry, the fact that a word that is so outdated is still in circulation is abhorrent; especially when there is now vocabulary to have healthy and productive conversations about mental health, its endurance is proof of the continued stigmatization of anyone outside of the norm. In fact, the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)⁷ makes no mention of “madness” at all. As a technical term, madness has been made obsolete, but the stigma around it continues into a more broad fear of the other.

Things strange and unsightly have always been maddening, but queerness has always had its audience, and deviance will always lie under the surface of society, an unspoken constant. Ideological deviance and diversity in thought have helped to birth the idea of the “tortured artist,” the mythologized creative who slaves away in their misery and genius and ultimately dies tragically with their work unrecognized. How is it that we can sit idly by while artists throw themselves deeper into their pain for a chance to be martyred alongside the likes of Van Gogh? It is clear why illness and madness of artists are often incorrectly conflated in the public mind. They so often occur concurrently. But is madness truly an ailment, or just the word we use to describe those who think differently? For Van Gogh, “Such an uncompromising adherence to his own vision in the face of enormous odds is rare enough to be considered abnormal in a world where

compromise and self-preservation are expected of infants. It is not difficult to understand, therefore, why such loyalty to the only ideals he believed in is preferably called madness.”⁸ “Madness” as a label is easy. It takes all the depth and idiosyncrasies of the human experience and flattens it into an easy-to-digest approximation. “Madness” as a quality, however, is not so effortlessly summated. In Van Gogh’s case, he likely suffered from some type of psychiatric disorder, possibly manic depression, but his creativity did not stem from his ailment. Instead, his “madness” was his adherence to his morals, ideas, and artistic inclinations. Despite continued societal rejection in life, this loyalty is what ultimately led to the endurance of his art.

Another case of the “tortured artist” is Oscar Wilde’s imprisonment for sodomy, for which he was arrested and sentenced in 1895. Despite his success as a playwright at the time, he was not spared from punishment for his “deviance”:

Wilde had been convicted of ‘gross indecency,’ but the legal assumption was that any homosexual act was an attempt to commit ‘sodomy.’ All such crimes were categorized as ‘unnatural offenses.’ [...] That Oscar Wilde fully understood the depersonalizing effect of being a prisoner is clear from his use of ‘C33,’ his cell number, as the pseudonym under which the ‘Ballad of Reading Gaol’ was first published in 1897. But it was in fact, at Wandsworth Prison that he seems to have reached the greatest depths of despair. This was partly because the first year of a custodial sentence customarily consisted of solitary confinement and partly because his custodial conditions were only relaxed subsequently as a result of his deteriorating condition.⁹

While it is obvious that Oscar Wilde was not imprisoned to benefit his career as an artist, his arrest and his suffering have nevertheless ingrained themselves into his mythos. As evidenced by his success prior to jailing, Wilde’s creative verve was not sired from his torment.

The view of art as an exchange of mental health for skill is a narrative that has and continues to hurt anyone who so much as passively subscribes to the notion. Limiting the definition of ‘art’ and the ‘artist’ drives many people never to consider the pursuit of their own madness. Running from the unknown has led to the perpetuation of abuse towards those outside the norm. Subjugation only restricts, but when madness is embraced, it becomes beautiful.

To be mad is to be a champion of the irrational. Some of the greatest works of literature and theatre are unabashed revelry in the absurd. No one sets a more evident example of the “nonsense literature” genre than Lewis Carroll. Carroll’s famous poem “The Jabberwocky,” is a pertinent example. It opens: “’Twas brillig, and the slithy toves / Did gyre and gimble in the wabe: / All mimsy were the borogoves, / And the mome raths outgrabe.” Despite being constructed (almost) solely from a nonsensical vocabulary, the world of the Jabberwock is as vibrant as any set in reality. The mind fills the fantastical undulating landscape, and thus the unsettling scene is set for the protagonist to set out on his journey. Deciphering the absurd is an instinctual part of human nature, so much so that it is foundational to children’s literature. However, the nonsensical mirth of children is readily squashed in preparation for adolescence and adulthood. But nonsense isn’t childish. Learning how to accept the absurdity of the world, and laugh in the face of it, is something that is not idly re-learned. One must abandon what one knows of the world, for when up is down and down is up, gravity no longer makes much sense.

In *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* Carroll once again uses the process of structured un-sensemaking to draw the reader down into the rabbit hole with Alice. There is no presupposition that one understands the rules of the world they have stumbled upon. Shires writes:

[W]hat Alice knows is not of much use in Wonderland. Her logic and

her language system fail in this most fluid of worlds, where she changes her size regularly and nearly drowns in her own tears. Where a cat might as well eat a bat as a bat eat a cat, and where a baby turns into a pig, and Alice could be Mabel, words themselves become strange and unfamiliar. By questioning the seemingly natural way in which words express intention and refer to things, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland foregrounds the process of sense-making and sense-unmaking. Alice has enormous difficulty understanding the creatures she meets in Wonderland, and they have just as much difficulty understanding her. Words seem to slip and slide into each other to the point of seeming uninterpretable and thus meaningless.³

However, this is not all to say that madness exists without logic. This evokes the saying, "there's a method to my madness," imploring the audience to avoid the misconception that the logical and illogical cannot exist simultaneously. Just as "The Jabberwocky" uses classic storytelling scaffolding to make sense of its nonsensical locution, so does the artist create coherently illogical pieces. The draw of fantasy and the unreal sing an alluring siren song, and the abandonment of self for the purpose of "sense-unmaking" is an experience many only have during childhood. As such, it is an experience that tantalizes with the forbidden promise of the titillating unknown:

Fantasy, nonsense, and parody each question the status of the real in a different, and differently disturbing, way, pushing language and meaning toward dangerous limits of dissolution. Such flirtation with limits of sense-making and, in some works, such dissolution of sense, proves pleasurable because it terrifies. In other words, anarchy is both joyous and disturbing. The effect produced is rather like that of the wildly abandoning experience of viewing oneself in a distorting mirror at the circus funhouse for the first time.

I am sure we all remember the excited terror of such a first metamorphosis; it is akin to, though a secular version of, the Greek idea of ecstasis (being "out of or "beside" the self). For all those years, we thought we were never anything but ourselves - yet there we are: spatially different, even multiple.³

Although one cannot objectively view art or even wholly define it, one interpretation is that the nature of art is to elicit emotion in the person viewing it. Confusion itself is a emotional reaction to art, and when one is forced to confront their confusion they must also reflect on themselves. The truly fabulous part is that this concept transcends boundaries of medium and language.

Cosmological comedy, or the theatre of the absurd is another attempt to identify the joy derived from the illogical nature of existence. Theatre of this genre seeks to deconstruct not just the audience's view of the world, but to force them into participating in the dissolution of the soul. Wengener writes, "few, question the whole state and destiny of man, proclaiming the irrationality and apparent meaningless-ness of existence, defying the absurdity of life by its very affirmation,"¹¹these champions of madness, revelers in the surreal create worlds which help dissect and examine our very nature. These explorations often leave more questions unanswered, and yet we continue to giddily devour that which ask of us to tear appart our very being. Is that not a form of madness in itself?

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This source outlines how the idea of "madness" has been seen as an essential part of the creative process. It also explores ideas of irrational action and how it can be and has been enacted deliberately. The author asserts that it is not mental illness that marks someone for greatness in a creative field but that mental illness can expose people to the irrational thinking that is often (but not necessarily) part of the creative process. They conclude that the creative process is a rational-composite process consisting of modal asymmetry and rational irrationality.

2. Jaanus, Maire. "Happiness and Madness." *University of Minnesota Press, Culture/Clinic*, Vol. 1 (2013), pp. 43-65, <https://doi.org/https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/cultclin.1.2013.0043>.

This article entitled "Happiness and Madness" explores Freudian psychology, religion, philosophy, and mythos relating to a wide range of views on the seemingly inseparable bond of joy and madness. Although the selection of Freudian theory is not particularly applicable to the topic of this essay, it provides an interesting counterpoint to the hedonistic view that the point of life is to pursue happiness. It ends with the question, "Does that once again indicate that we may not all be insane, but we are very likely all mad," (Jaanus 64) a poignant thought and a guiding question throughout my research.

3. Shires, Linda M. "Fantasy, Nonsense, Parody, and the Status of the Real: The Example of Carroll." *West Virginia University Press, Victorian Poetry*, Autumn, 1988, Vol. 26, No. 3, Comic Verse (Autumn, 1988), pp. 267-283, <https://doi.org/https://www.jstor.org/stable/40001965>.

The concept of "logical disordering," as used in much of Lewis Carroll's body of work, is introduced in this article, which clarifies why so much of Carroll's writings are so sensibly nonsensical. It also introduces the idea that distortion is entertaining because of its unpredictability. That unpredictability then breeds the terror that we find so titillating. Nonsense, madness, and fantasy within the *Alice* stories are analyzed within the context of history, etymology, psychology, and literary analysis with a deft hand, making this an ideal source for this essay.

4. Tolpin, Marian. "Eugene Ionesco's 'The Chairs' and the Theater of the Absurd." *The Johns Hopkins University Press, American Imago*, SUMMER 1968, Vol. 25, No. 2 (SUMMER 1968), pp. 119-139. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26302477>.

For a well-rounded view, it is crucial that not just nonsense literature is part of the scope of the research. A close cousin to literary nonsense is the theatre of the absurd, and this analysis of one of the great playwrights of the genre was incredibly informative. Tolpin posits that absurdity helps an audience suspend disbelief and commit more to what the piece is truly about. The ridiculousness of a given scene also heightens the sense of emotions for the audience and the characters in the play. In doing away with the conventions of the world as we know them, Ionesco invents a world that, at first glance, seems indiscriminately odd but is a world in which the audience can weave their conclusions from the absurdist tale.

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Love, both erotic and platonic, has been associated with the idea of madness since Bacchantes danced with his maenads (their names translating to "the raving ones"). This mythos has been the basis of much of modern Western views on the matter, including the Victorian era. Gaining a better understanding of the ideological climate of the time helps contextualize how we have built up our ideas of "madness" and how often its salacious and deviant history informs how we currently think of the "mad."

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