

EXTREME EXPERIENCE AND HEIGHTENED CREATIVITY: FOUR HYPOTHESES ON THEIR CORRELATION

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Abstract

Once a prospective doctoral researcher came up with a proposal to work on the suicide notes written by farmers for whom life had become impossible due to drought and debts. Though the case was not one of *creativity* [in any academic sense] *under duress*, I was inspired to pursue interdisciplinary theoretical research, bringing together insights from psychology, philosophy, history, and literary/creativity studies, to explore the relation between extreme experience and heightened creativity: the connection between unbearable experience – war, genocide, and domestic violence – on the one hand, and paradigm shifts in thought, experimental art, and path-breaking discoveries, on the other. Creative process is elusive, complex, and often unamenable to empirical verification. I began by trying an existing explanation on the correlation: the theory of *sublimation* – channelization of anger and resentment into productive endeavours. A *second* explanation is that it is precisely the preceding experience that the consequent achievement requires for its *raw material*. Viktor Frankl's *Logotherapy*, based on the *will to meaning*, even in the most harrowing circumstances, as the source of survival, needed the experience of the concentration camp. A key factor here is the ability of victims to utilize possibilities provided by *narrativization* – by deducing and creating alternative meanings/implications from the same event. Further integrated psycho-philosophico-literary investigations into the cognitive processes that underlay the work of certain twentieth-century thinkers and writers who wrote amidst menacing macro-historical developments, offered *two supplementary explanations*. The inability of available *external forms* – limitations of language, existing models of thought or forms of art, modalities of interpersonal relationships – to capture the overwhelming intensity and true extent of extreme experience compels the experiencing subjects to break these forms/paradigms, and develop radical alternatives. Besides, when experience is overwhelming, the human psyche salvages the most delicate and vulnerable aspects of reality which it considers valuable.

Keywords: *Extreme experience, heightened creativity, sublimation, external forms, narrativization.*

1. Introduction

A few years ago, a prospective doctoral researcher came up with a proposal to work on the suicide notes written by farmers for whom life had become impossible due to drought and debts. Though the case in question was not one of *creativity* [in any academic sense] *under duress*, I, who was also teaching a course entitled *The Holocaust: Paradigms of Thought* at that time, was led to use this as a point of departure for interdisciplinary theoretical research, bringing together insights from psychology, philosophy, history, and literary and creativity studies, to explore the relation between extreme experience and heightened creativity. *Prima facie*, instances of such a possible correlation are many. Hungarian author Imre Kertész and Polish-American theoretical chemist Roald Hoffmann, Nobel Prize winners in Literature and Chemistry, respectively, were Holocaust survivors. Acknowledging Kertész's contribution through writing 'from the edges,' the Nobel Committee lauded his "writing that upholds the fragile experience of the individual against the barbaric arbitrariness of history."¹ Hoffmann was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1981 along with Kenichi Fukui, "for their theories, developed independently, concerning the course of chemical reactions."² Hoffmann, also known for his artistic interests, published poetry and plays and explored convergences between art and science, especially with a series entitled *Entertaining Science*, which he hosted at New York Cornelia Street Café. Fukui, who was engaged in the Army Fuel Laboratory of Japan during World War II, believed in the possibility of scientific breakthroughs through

¹ <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2002/press-release>.

² <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/chemistry/1981/press-release>.

“unexpected fusion of remotely related fields.” Fyodor Dostoevsky escaping the gallows at the last moment due to commutation of death sentence, not to mention his Siberian exile and imprisonment in shackles, and then going on to become the author of *Crime and Punishment*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and *Notes from Underground*, is another popular case. Composer Igor Fyodorovich Stravinsky went to the extent of stating that one could be creative only under “huge constraints” (qtd. by Marcus du Sautoy 2015). Though its features can be discerned in a seminal form from late nineteenth century, literary modernism, with its crisis-centered world view, is widely believed to have been triggered by the catastrophes of World War I (We shall briefly explore the work of two authors, one each from the periods of the two world wars). The Great War also prompted Sigmund Freud to go “beyond the pleasure principle” in his theoretical approach to explaining human behaviour, adding a *Todestriebe* (death drive) to erotic behavioural determinations. The ensemble of cataclysmic events which consisted of the emergence of totalitarian regimes in Europe in the second quarter of the twentieth century, World War II, and the Holocaust was paradigmatic in many (uncanny) respects. It altered entrenched notions surrounding human motives, social psychology, rationality, morality, justice, suffering and trauma, historiography, and even reality and representation/representability of extreme experience.

As I have argued in my earlier work on the philosophy and psychology of ‘the other’ in relation to traumatic historical (and personal) episodes, extreme experiences are both a test case for ideas and a pretext for their emergence. Experiences such as that of war, of torture, of terminal illness, of other forms of encounter with death, of prolonged imprisonment, and of chronic isolation, to name a few, mostly from Judith Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery*, are at once overwhelming and delicate – so overwhelming as to trigger shifts in paradigms of understanding, and so delicate as to render fastidious *épistèmes* irrelevant. (George 2010, 109)

The catalogue of experiences could be extended to cover genocide, natural disasters, and domestic violence as well. This paper explores the possibility of subtle connections between unbearable experience on the one hand, and paradigm shifts in thought, experimental art, and path-breaking discoveries, on the other. A famous example of specific cases and an attempted generalization from literary criticism is Edmund Wilson’s *The Wound and the Bow*, which discusses the delicate relation between art and suffering in a quest for the sources of seven writers’ artistry and craftsmanship. Wilson’s studies surrounding Sophocles, Jacques (Giacomo) Casanova, Charles Dickens, Rudyard Kipling, Edith Wharton, Ernest Hemingway, and James Joyce were telling case studies of a possible correlation, albeit in different ways.

2. Extreme experience and heightened creativity: a possible correlation

Indeed creative process is an extremely elusive and complex one, often unamenable to empirical verification and fastidious methodological requirements. By and large, it is a delicate matter of sensitive understanding and informed conjecture. This recognition has a bearing on any methodology whatsoever of such an exploration. Though common, extrapolating the results of contemporary cognitive studies, mostly based on surveys and/or experiments, on to historical instances seems inadequate for two reasons. The first is the singularity of the past case: the combination of factors in each specific case is unique. The second is the presence of long-temporal factors, which cannot often be traced with certainty and/or in totality, involved in creative acts and processes, especially in cases such as those we explore. This also accounts for favouring a multiplicity of hypotheses here. Obviously, the attempt here is not to arrive at ‘laws’ on the said correlation (nor is this an impetus for romanticizing trauma!) but to arrive at probable explanations yielded by available historical, textual, and biographical information, when combined with psychological principles and philosophical insights on the human mind’s propensities to respond creatively to socio-historical situations as also to synthesize and transform world forces, and articulate the cumulative probabilities they lead to.

2.1. Hypothesis 1: sublimation

I began by trying an existing explanation on the correlation: the theory of *sublimation* – in this context, channelization of anger and resentment into productive endeavours. According to Freud, sublimation is a mature defence mechanism which enables socially unacceptable impulses or drives (*Triebe*) to be transformed into socially acceptable actions or behaviour, with the possibility of a long-term conversion of the initial impulse. Though Freud’s theory dealt with sexual sublimation and he is misunderstood as a pan-sexualist, especially on account of his early work, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, he viewed it as “an especially conspicuous feature of cultural development,” making “it possible for higher psychological activities, scientific, artistic or ideological, to play such an ‘important’ part in civilized life” (1961, 79-80). Sublimation was the only one among the several defence mechanisms (others include repression, projection, displacement, and reaction formation) that Freud would consider

psychologically ‘healthy.’ Carl Gustav Jung (1974), who believed in the non-etiological aspects and immense potential of the unconscious, articulated sublimation in an anti-Freudian sense: “sublimation is part of the royal art where the true gold is made” (171). Empirical studies by Emily Kim, Veronika Zeppenfeld, and Dov Cohen (2013), published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, claimed to have provided “possibly the first experimental evidence for sublimation and a cultural psychological approach to defense [sic] mechanisms” (639).

If we may extend this older theory of the correlation, going against the grain, going against conventions of one’s discipline/art could be seen as a sublimated reaction to social conventions and socio-historical circumstances. The avant-garde art of James Joyce, who extended the frontiers of fiction with his highly experimental writings, particularly the encyclopaedic *Ulysses* and polyglottal *Finnegans Wake*, could be theorized as a complex imaginative output of several elements: his degenerate home, marked by poverty and domestic violence at the hands of his drunken but life-loving father, his position as an oppressed colonial subject, the strategies of the subaltern, and his revolt against repressive Catholicism and violent, parochial Irish nationalism. Stephen Dedalus, Joyce’s autobiographical protagonist, tells the peasant student Michael Davin (modelled after George Clancy, the mayor of Limerick and Joyce’s friend, who, in March 1921, was dragged out of bed by the Black and Tans and shot in the presence of his wife): “When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets” (Joyce 2001). Having revolted against the institutions he found debilitating, Joyce was drawn to the Zürich and Paris avant-garde, but maintained his artistic (and idiosyncratic) individuality.

2.2. Hypothesis 2: extreme experience as raw material

A *second* explanation is that it is precisely the kind of preceding experience that the consequent achievement requires for its *raw material*. Viktor Frankl’s psychotherapeutic method *Logotherapy*, based on the *will to meaning*, even in the most harrowing circumstances, as the source of survival, needed for its emergence the experience of the concentration camp. Frankl, an Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist, was a Holocaust survivor who overcame the experience of Theresienstadt, Auschwitz, Kaufering, and Türkheim. In *Man’s Search for Meaning*, he argued, based on his own experience as an inmate, which he objectively analyzed as a psychiatrist, that a “striving to find meaning in one’s life” enables people to overcome painful, dehumanized, and even absurd conditions. Friedrich Nietzsche had argued that the “will to power” was the fundamental human impulse; for early Freud, it was pleasure. According to Frankl, the fundamental impulse is the search for meaning; human beings are meaning-seeking creatures. Even if one were to die, the ‘meaning-ful’ thought that one could save someone else or be an inspiring memory for survivors could sustain an individual. Frankl’s experience in the camp shaped both his therapeutic approach and life’s outlook, and, apart from existential psychology, with which he is associated, like Irvin Yalom and Rollo May, even influenced humanistic psychology. Drawing a similar connection between preceding experience and future praxis, Jung (1951) wrote a few days before his death: “Only the wounded physician can hope to heal” (116).

Frankl’s is a case of life-conductive self-theorization of one’s circumstances. It also illustrates the need of *narratives* when one is faced with excruciating circumstances. Clinical psychologist Patrick J. Bracken (2002) compares a person’s world to “a chequered board upon which a game of chess is played, a taken-for-granted frame in which pieces have roles and relationships” (1). The effect of the traumatic experience is that “all the elements of our lives are still present but the background sense of coherence retreats ... it appears that the chequered board has been removed. The pieces remain in place but their connection to one another becomes arbitrary” (1). It is “the meaningfulness of a person’s world” which traumatic experience “destroys” (9). Traumatic experience means termination of a personal narrative. The possibilities of re-narrativization – possibilities of deducing and creating alternative meanings/implications from the same event – have furnished victims of extreme experiences with opportunities to come out of their traumatic labyrinth. One cannot wish away the past; the past has to be incorporated in a meaning-giving (narrative) framework. We live by narratives. We can go to bed contented if we can ‘emplot’ the myriadness of the day into a meaningful and satisfying narrative. In negotiating the world, as social psychologists Susan T. Fiske and Shelley E. Taylor (2013) put it, the human mind is a “cognitive miser.” The mind looks for the simplest way to understand and deal with people and events. Being parsimonious in the expenditure of energy, it endeavours to negotiate the social world with the least cognitive effort. Narrativization, hence, has to be both effective and economical.

2.3. Hypothesis 3: overwhelming experience and the breaking of external forms

Further integrated psycho-philosophico-literary investigations into the cognitive processes that underlay the work of several twentieth-century avant-garde thinkers and writers who wrote amidst menacing macro-historical developments, offered *two supplementary explanations*. The inability of available *external forms*, be it limitations of language, existing models of thought or forms of art, or modalities of interpersonal relationships, to capture the overwhelming intensity, precise nature, and the

true extent of extreme experience compels the experiencing subjects to break these forms/paradigms, and develop radical alternatives. What triggers this development is discernible in situations of grief. Someone who is close to us passes away. We go home for the last rites. When we return to our place of work or study, a colleague or friend asks: “What happened?” Ordinary language is inadequate to convey the experience and emotion. Often the interpersonal relationships are also inadequate to absorb the shock. Trauma, by definition, is an experience beyond ordinary cognitive threshold.

If we compare the relationship, implied or otherwise, between reality and representation/language posited by realism, modernism, and postmodernism, we can see that for the first, reality is *out there* and is knowable and representable; for modernism, the reality is out there still, but has changed so drastically that traditional modes of representation are inadequate to the task, and hence the need to experiment; for postmodernism, reality is constructed in language. Avant-garde modernism emerged as a response to the epistemological inadequacy of the static, stable, mainstream Victorian common sense with regard to apprehension and representation of reality. It is not mere experimentation or innovation but a questioning of the very institution of art and entrenched assumptions thereof – a case of “emergent creativity,” which involves bringing forth a principle or idea that is entirely new, has far-reaching effects on how we perceive reality, and transforms the very basis or received paradigms of the field in which the idea/principle appears. Joyce’s fictional emphasis on the mundane and the commonplace at the expense of traditional narrative expectations as a mark of his shockingly jarring aesthetic is quite well known. He makes Leopold Bloom, the protagonist of his high-modernist magnum opus *Ulysses*, defecate in full view of his readers. One may account for the presence of such elements arguing that by incorporating inconspicuous occurrences, the author is raising a meta-literary question: ‘What will count as literature?’ The Joycean trivia is the transgressive avant-garde response to the arbitrariness of defining and delimiting art through bizarre violation of ‘literary’ expectations. After defecation, Bloom wipes himself with a copy of *Titbits*, where the prize story of “Matcham’s Masterstroke” by Philip Beaufoy has appeared. Material that is conventionally unacceptable as art and frowned upon is self-reflexively brought in contact with the printed word.

Avant-garde movements of the twentieth century covering several arts (painting, music, sculpture, literature) mark an unprecedented epoch in art history. Singularity of the avant-garde, that is, vis-à-vis earlier epochs of experimentation, lies in its meta-engagement with the institution of art. The Dadaists, for example, sought to destroy canons of taste and logic, and show their contempt for bourgeois society. Since then, philosophers and artists have been asking ‘What will qualify as art?’. Using his flippant anti-art (e.g., L.H.O.O.Q), Marcel Duchamp burlesqued the institution of art. With his interrogative meta-art, especially “Readymades,” he showed that any found object could be rechristened as art by repositioning and signing – an idea which inspired George Dickie’s postulate of an Artworld. Both Duchamp and Joyce lay bare the tools and devices of art (lines, colours, frames, words, techniques, conventions, and perspectives) in acts of what the former called “formal decomposition.”

2.4. Hypothesis 4: salvaging the delicate

Though theoretically productive, the above hypothesis might not cover all cases. Nor does any of the preceding ones. When experience is overwhelming the human psyche also salvages the most delicate and vulnerable aspects of reality which it considers valuable. Let me illustrate with an example from World War II. Having lived under excruciating historical conditions,³ Günter Grass, in his fiction, salvages the ‘little experiential truths’ that could easily be crushed under the juggernaut of a hyper-sturdy Nazi state and a catastrophic war, or brushed aside by historic transformations which threatened to subsume life-trajectories of ordinary people (*kleine Leute*, in the terminology of *Alltagsgeschichte*, history of everyday life). His choice of child-narrators, his unapologetic emphasis on trivia, and his use of magic realism (particularly given the scepticism surrounding the efficacy of fiction and fantasy to ‘do justice’ to historical experience) indicate an attempt to capture and resuscitate singular, elusive human realities in the face of menacingly enveloping macro-historical developments. The psychological basis for the above claim is that when conditions of existence become unbearably harrowing, human consciousness develops a compensatory tendency to utilize even the smallest possibilities.

In *The Tin Drum*, Grass makes Oskar Matzerath, a perpetual child that refuses to grow up, the narrator of German history. This is significant in that children are the least-accounted historical subjects. Grass filters history through little Oskar’s eyes, which enables him to dwell upon delicate realities and enunciate them in even more delicate ways. Oskar narrates the unfolding grand history in terms of how it impinges on his apparently insignificant preoccupations, the tin drum being the most potent symbol in this regard. What is most significant here is the inversion of priorities: repair of drums, playing of cards, the fizz-powder, Jan Bronski’s stamp collection, the eels wriggling in salt, and observation of ants are greater concerns than the fate of Poland. Oscar’s screaming and drumbeating are ways of drawing

³ In a 1978 interview to the French journalist Nicole Casanova, Grass revealed that his mother had been raped by Red Army soldiers when they conquered Danzig during World War II. Grass also belatedly revealed in 2006 that he was drafted into the Waffen SS. A repeated phrase in his Danzig trilogy, of which *The Tin Drum* is part, is “take it off one’s chest.”

attention of the greater world to his own needs. Little people (literally little!) have a higher stake in the delicate because it is their realities that are vulnerable to being brushed aside or trampled under.

Joyce wrote *Ulysses* through the Great War. If one historicizes the everyday, commonplace content of *Ulysses* – dining and defecating, teaching and learning, work and leisure, shopping, sleep, sex, and social camaraderie – one may see that it contrasts with a grand history that consisted of World War I, English colonial domination in Ireland, and the Irish struggle for independence at its peak, followed by a civil war. When cataclysmic events were happening, Joyce was preoccupied with either a narrative situation of extremely ordinary character, most often an exemplary act, or a send-up of what is commonly considered grand. While too much had been happening in the world, very little ‘happens’ in Joyce’s fictional world. But the little that ‘happens’ is of great value.⁴

3. The inward turn

The attempt to salvage delicate realities of life sometimes takes the form of a turn to the interiority of human subjects. Virginia Woolf, a writer who successfully utilized the medium of fiction to represent inner reality intimately, responds imaginatively to the interiority of another person when she makes Bernard reflect in *The Waves*: “I can never read a book in a railway carriage without asking, ‘Is he a builder? Is she unhappy?’” (1992, 61). These words acquire new significance when seen in retrospect against the bombing of Bloomsbury and Woolf’s own psychiatric problems. Woolf (1968) says, “Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day.” The ordinary mind might be in terrible agony. It might have wanted to say something but could not. The world may not lend its ears to what it wants to say. There is no recognition of what happens inside a man’s (or a woman’s) head. Social life is oblivious to it. In *Mrs Dalloway*, Septimus Warren Smith, a World War I veteran suffering from deferred traumatic stress, succumbs to the tragedy of living in a world that does not recognize what happens inside a man’s head. Smith’s suicide affirms that the inner world is more important for him than the empirical world outside. Failure to deal with the extreme might result in collapse.

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⁴ For the historicity of the Joycean everyday, see George 2016.