ON THE BEAUTIFUL AND THE ABJECT: 
A STUDY OF ARTISTIC CREATIVITY AND MADNESS

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ABSTRACT

The rise of abject art in recent decades has created much public controversy and censorship by governments globally. Despite forced closings of exhibitions focused on abject art and destruction of artworks by enraged viewers, shockingly horrible and disgusting images seemed to reappear in the works of important contemporary artists. The present study examines the depiction of both the beautiful and the disturbing ‘dark’ element in artistic production and attempts to provide a rationale for the existence of both. Since works of art emerge through lived experience, they reflect both the artist’s psychology and the social conditions of the time, as experienced by the artist. Through psychoanalytic theory and current philosophical conceptualizations of ‘abjection’, the purpose of this work is to: first, examine the unique psychological patterns that operate in creative individuals in general, and in artists in particular; second, provide a framework for understanding the element of the ‘abject’ in art as a necessity arising from unconscious material
in the artist’s psyche and as an expression of larger social forces that shape the mood of artists and audiences alike; third, explore the unique communication between artists and audiences through images and understand the psychological effects such images may elicit for the benefit of all. Although future research may be necessary to further elucidate the many variables influencing artistic creativity and its manifestation in works of art, the necessity of art itself as an expression of personal and social contexts is evident from the findings.
For my father; for the beauty of his soul

“For the ones like us who are oppressed by the figures of Beauty”

—Leonard Cohen, *Chelsea Hotel #2*
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INTRODUCTION

Beauty has no obvious use; nor is there any clear cultural necessity for it. Yet civilization could not do without it.

—Sigmund Freud, Civilization And Its Discontents

One of Kant’s most memorable observations about beauty is that “it pleases universally without a concept” and that “there can be . . . no rule in accordance with which someone could be compelled to acknowledge something as beautiful” (Nehamas 2007, 46). Conventional ideas about the nature and purpose of art have forged an unbreakable link between art and beauty. Since the birth of civilization, the primary role of art has been to inspire, to educate the viewer, and to document the history and shared beliefs of a particular culture. In ancient times, beauty was the underlying value of art. By the Renaissance era the artist was expected to create the illusion of an idealized world, a world of harmony and balance — both inherent qualities of beauty. Traditional aesthetics dictated that the purpose of art was the embodiment of beauty and the depiction of a dream world, a better world to which man could aspire.

With the advent of modern times and the catastrophic events of the last century which indelibly wounded human consciousness and drove many to despair, the art-as-beauty thesis
ceased to work as it obliged us to look at and understand art from an older perspective, no longer our own. The 18th-century ideal of art as the representation of an imaginary world of harmonious beauty is a concept unintelligible for our radically changed world of art. Nor are artists required and expected to reproduce such visionary images of harmonious beauty for our esthetic pleasure. If anything, artists are now inclined to interpret rather than blindly represent or imitate images and events invading our consciousness. “Great artists are not transcribers of the world; they are its rivals,” Andre Malraux (1976, 56) once said, himself questioning long sanctified traditional theories of 18th-century aesthetics associated with such famous names as Kant and Hume, and before them Plato and Aristotle.

Socially disturbing imagery emphasizing self-referential artistic motivation and challenges to the status quo began in the years between the two world wars with the provocative — for their time — images of the Cubists, Dadaists, and Surrealists juxtaposing the artist’s personal agenda against that of the viewer and of society at large. These non-representational, difficult to understand images were the first attempts to break with traditional elements in art, especially impersonal, intellectual concepts of the beautiful as dictated by traditional esthetics. Senseless bloodshed and repeated genocides during the last century radically changed the emotional landscape of humanity and tragically put into doubt all hope of mastery of
human destructive drives by means of high art and culture. Western notions of a refined civilization and a progressive, advancing society based on the principles of social balance and justice also fell into doubt. These events asserted most dramatically that the primitive, raw, and violent aspects of human nature were still very much part of "civilized" society, urgently seeking expression and an outlet.

Beauty began to fade from artistic and social discourse. Contemporary art of the last few decades not only ignored beauty but effectively strove for something other than beauty. The focus of contemporary artists has largely revolved around the creation of art that is politically and socially relevant, as well as art that is downright disturbing, violent, and disgusting. This they achieved through the use of alternative techniques and shocking imagery for maximum emotional impact. Rather than enchanting audiences with beautiful images and with the inspiration and pleasure such images can bring, artists preferred to engage viewers through confrontation, repulsion and emotional disquiet. “The impulse of modern art was [the] desire to destroy beauty,” American artist Barnett Newman declared (Nehamas 2007, 13), partly as an attack on an outmoded European tradition which had for centuries made beauty one of its highest ideals. Whereas in times past beauty was celebrated as the central aim of art, the modernist avant-garde movement has been intensely suspicious with beauty and its symbols, shifting instead to an infatuation with the shocking, the horrifying, and
the abject. This discomfort with beauty has been explained by arguments as to the inability of the concept to express larger world concerns with disease epidemics such as AIDS, the threat of nuclear annihilation, existential angst, and a sense of meaningfulness invading the psyche.

As a result, the idea of the beautiful has been devalued as superficial — because it is irreducible to other forms of discourse, political for example; suspicious and irresponsible — because it distracts the mind from serious issues; destructive to the objectives of special interest groups — for example, the feminist political agenda, which claims that depictions of women as beautiful reduce them to the level of objects of pleasure in a male-dominated society (Scarry 1999). Therefore, the contemporary art world, uncomfortable with the beautiful, finds solace in the non-beautiful, the shocking, and the abject, because its raw approach is thought to address frankly and acutely personal, social, and political concerns of our time, in a way that the beautiful is considered unable to engage.

Andy Warhol’s controversial print, *Big Electric Chair*, (1951) is the very image of death, albeit by suggestion, and a reference to violent ending of lives facilitated by modern technology. The glossy orange, pink, and yellows of the print are even more disconcerting considering the horror and trauma suggested by the image of a killing machine, although neither victim or executioner are present. It is up to the viewer’s imagination to fill in the gap at will, but as a reference to a
highly controversial political subject, the image chillingly hits home.

In Jake and Dinos Chapman’s *Zygotic Acceleration, Biogenetic, Desublimised, Libidinal Model* (1995) multiple human hybrids are fused together, with bodies grotesquely formed and inverted so that mouth takes the place of anus or a penis the place of a nose, upsetting the viewer’s sense of form and bodily equilibrium. The adolescent figures are frightening and menacing as though to suggest perverse sexual practices and the horrific possibility of genetic manipulation gone wrong.

*Untitled #175*, from Cindy Sherman’s *Disgust* series (1987), merges vomit and decaying food with a pair of sunglasses and a woman’s body, her figure outside the picture but reflected in it as a mirror image. Intentionally transgressing all limits of propriety and good taste, the images in the series are a "meditation" on the formless and the repulsive in relation to the female figure and provoke intense aversion from the spectator. Sherman’s work challenges a patriarchal order by confronting it with a formless, unclean, and "polluting" (because of menstruation) female body, subjected to religious prohibitions and purifying rituals in the Christian tradition (Kristeva 1980).

Sexually provocative images also emerged challenging accepted notions of privacy and propriety as well as Christian traditional beliefs of sexual practices as shameful and dirty. On one hand, Jeff Koons’s *Made in Heaven* (1991) series depicted explicit sexual acts between the artist and his then wife,
Italian porn star Cicciolina. On the other, Andres Serrano’s *History of Sex* (1996) series and Robert Mapplethorpe’s *X Portfolio* (1978) erased all boundaries of social regulation of sexual transactions and rules of hygiene through explicitly depicted deviant sexuality that puts in question the very boundaries of the body, as well as the sites of erotic activity, challenging the social order to its core.

With Damien Hirst’s body of work, the concept of the ugly and the disgusting in art perhaps reached its limits. In *A Thousand Years*, a work which debuted in the *Young British Artists* exhibit in 1992, a putrescent severed cow’s head surrounded by feeding maggots is exhibited in a glass case on the bare floor of a London gallery. If beauty was initially conceived as inessential in contemporary art, Hirst’s work declares that for art to be art it had to be disgusting. What began with Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917), the concept of the anti-aesthetic, ordinary object presented as a work of art, concludes terminally with Hirst’s decaying cow’s head, because it is doubtful that anything else can be said on the matter, that anything more disgusting can be presented as art, or that the concept of beauty in art can be eradicated any further.

The initial indifference and subsequent complete renunciation of beauty in art led in some respect to a crisis as to the purpose and function and future of art. “It is uncertain whether art is still possible; whether, with its complete emancipation, it did not sever its own preconditions,” Theodor
Adorno (1997, 2) states in his Aesthetic Theory. And further: “to say that art is not identical with the concept of beauty but requires for its realization the concept of the ugly as its negation, is a platitude” (Adorno 1997, 60). In his re-conceptualization of Hegelian dialectics concerning art, Arthur Danto (1987) speculated and affirmed the "end of art" as we had known it, exactly as Hegel had already suggested (Danto 1987). Absent stylistic and philosophical constraints, there was no longer any specific guiding principle. Therefore, anything could be conceived as art, as long as it was accepted and shown as such in a gallery or museum, as long as it had entered an institution associated with the "art world."

In addition, the idea of "anything goes" in the art world, anything as long as it is novel and "stands out from the crowd," has contributed to the creation of art deliberately meant to offend, conceived for its shock value, its transgression of taboos, and the visibility of offensiveness. That too, however, has resulted in a damaging impasse. With media globalization, the proliferation of Internet, and ready availability of images, the perceptual and emotional threshold of viewers is beginning to change, perhaps reaching saturation with raw depictions of violence and horror.

Perhaps it is no accident, then, that beauty slowly began to reemerge in critical discourse as a concept that was ousted but is now, from its outcast position, all the more challenging, oppositional, and newly appealing. Art critics such as Dave
Hickey, Wendy Steiner, and Arthur Danto have come to its defense, referring to it as a "necessary condition of life as we would want to live it," according to Danto (Beech 2009, 13). Dave Hickey’s pivotal 1993 text Enter the Dragon: On the Vernacular of Beauty inaugurated a renewed interest and scholarly discourse on this long dismissed concept. For Hickey, the role of beauty is to capture the attention of audiences so as to communicate the message the image intends, whether this message is benign in nature or not. In this function, the value of beauty is in the pleasure it provides.

Inspired perhaps by Hickey, museums and critics chose to reconsider beauty. In October 1999, only six years after the controversial Whitney biennial aptly titled Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art, the Hirshhorn museum in Washington, D.C., opened an exhibition called Regarding Beauty: A View of the Late Twentieth Century. Danto, following the tragedy of September 11 2001, regained his appreciation for beauty when he saw the appearance of improvised shrines throughout New York City and wrote that regardless of its role in the visual arts, beauty was “central to human life” and that “the need for beauty in the extreme moments of life is deeply ingrained in the human framework” (Beech 2009, 65).

In the view of revivalists, beauty is a conscious choice and “a no-brainer; we must have gone some way off target as a culture if we do not prefer beauty to ugliness, vulgarity and bad taste” (Beech 2009, 13). Wendy Steiner argues against the
“vilification” of beauty and the “cultural deprivation” we have suffered by 20th-century modernist aesthetics. She urges a new conception of beauty, not so much as the quality of a thing but as a kind of "communication" between "self" and "other" which can be emotionally and spiritually exalting when the "other" is perceived as beautiful and the "perceiver" participates emotionally in the "other’s" beauty. Beauty as an experience of empathy and equality is uplifting and self-expanding, not oppressive and contemptible, as the modernists had campaigned. Steiner believes that: “The ‘power’ of beauty is a mystification of the perceiver’s magnanimity, but how grateful we are to a force that can show us ourselves so great in spirit” (Beech 2009, 48).

Numerous artists resisted the impulse to produce abject art and unashamedly continued to create works of art inspired by beauty. Asked in a 1993 interview what she would like her pictures to convey, Agnes Martin replied: “I would like them to represent beauty, innocence and happiness; I would like them all to represent that. Exaltation” (Beech 2009, 193). Marlene Dumas, her art focused on female models and long appreciated as a meditation on beauty, argues that: “One cannot paint a picture of / or make an image of a woman / and not deal with the concept of beauty” (Prettejohn 2005, 195).

Perhaps the renewed interest in beauty is a result of the catharsis experienced after decades of the abject in art. Having entered the absolute darkness in images of violence, horror, and
disgust, the human psyche may be ready to rejoice in beauty again. Everything in nature is cyclical, and so perhaps it is in art. The necessity for the expression of both pleasure and pain, exaltation and distress, is very much part of human nature, and this is reflected in the art we choose to create and admire. Breaking convention and the search for new inspiration have always been part of artistic activity. The abject, shocking, and disgusting in art was certainly a drastic dismissal of traditional aesthetics and an attack to the status quo.

Many art critics, including Danto, however, foresee a return to the values of the past. Examples of art favoring a modernized classicism of sorts are beginning to emerge, as in the works of Mangold and Rockburne inspired by classical antiquity (Prettejohn 2005). Even in Mapplethorpe’s controversial photographs, images such as Thomas (1987) and Ajitto (1981) show distinctive classical influences of sculptural perfection and a peculiar fusion of Dionysian and Apollonian elements projected on the subject’s body. This return to the values of the past was eloquently phrased by Schiller, who advised the artist to seek inspiration in the past and “Then . . . let him return, a stranger, to his own century; not, however, to gladden it by his appearance, but rather, terrible like Agamemnon’s son, to cleanse and purify it” (Prettejohn 2005, 196). In his own inimitable way, Andy Warhol, discussing beauty, said virtually the same: “You have to hang on in periods when your style isn’t popular,
because if it’s good it’ll come back, and you’ll be a recognized beauty once again” (Beech 2009, 173).

The objective of this study is to examine the concept of artistic production in terms of psychological motivation and to demonstrate that artists’ unconscious influences as well as their conscious memories and lived experiences play a significant role in the creation of art; art that pleases and art that revolts. At the same time, perceptive artists are able to give voice not only to their own personal experience but that of the prevailing social and political climate thus creating a record of their era. From this perspective, it will be seen that art in all its forms, in its most beautiful or its most abject, has value in that it is an indelible record of human experience and an expression of larger collective trends.

According to Danto: “the redemptive task of art is not to make . . . surplus beauty, but to beautify what is initially as remote from beauty as the emissions of the flesh often are” (1987, 203). We may forget statistics and specifics about the AIDS epidemic, but Mapplethorpe’s images which emerged during those years and the artist’s death from the disease will speak of the horror of those times long after the devastation is over. Equally, the public controversy that ensued and the culture wars that immersed an entire nation in doubt and dispute — and still reverberate more than two decades later — is a telltale sign of art achieving its purpose to record and inform, albeit by disruption and upheaval. In this respect, the contemporary art
world mirrors the real world by representing ideas with which our culture is preoccupied. It is in this spirit that it will be argued that art is inextricably entwined with the psyche of man, the soul of our culture, the spirit of the times, and that the images are an attempt to construe meaning out of chaos and provide the catharsis par excellence that is art.
CHAPTER 1

ART: THE PARADOX OF THE BEAUTIFUL AND THE ABJECT

Art is not only real,
it is even more real than life!
—Marcel Proust, In Search Of Time Lost

One of the most important attractions in Washington, DC, is a painting hanging in a narrow space inside an old mansion, now an art museum open to the public. Usually, all one can hope for is a view from a distance, at best through openings between people’s heads. Whether by imitation of other viewers or true appreciation of the object displayed, a mere glimpse incites visitors to utter soft sounds of contentment and nod their heads in approval. Those with the privileged views gaze long minutes, immobile, almost in a meditative state of awe and bliss, while others, exasperated, await their turn for a better viewing.

Such is the magic of Jean Renoir’s magnificent The Luncheon of the Boating Party, its appeal as strong now—or perhaps even stronger—as in 1881, the year it was created. Repeat visits do not diminish the effect; if anything, the effect is intensified as new details and new meanings emerge. By all accounts, this is a picture of beauty, a picture of sweetness and light.
Can one say the same of Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ*? A photograph of a small plastic crucifix submerged in a glass container with the artist’s urine caused a scandal in 1989—public outrage at the National Endowment for the Arts for having funded the work, death threats to the artist and eventually, vandalism and partial destruction of the work in its exhibit at the artist’s retrospective in Australia. Despite Serrano’s and several art critics’ explanations that the work was intended as a critique of the commercialization of images of Christ in contemporary society, the show was canceled and the photograph continued to create controversy and strong negative response from audiences and critics alike.

Chris Ofili’s *The Holy Virgin Mary* created a public outcry of almost equal intensity in 1999 with its depiction of a black African Madonna surrounded by a collage of female genitalia cut from pornographic magazines and balls of elephant dung shaped as cherubim and seraphim, reminiscent of images of Mary and the Immaculate Conception. Rudy Giuliani, mayor of New York City at the time, took issue with this particular work and the entire *Sensation* exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, suing the museum and famously exclaiming that this was “sick” art and that “there is nothing in the First Amendment that supports horrible and disgusting [my italics] projects” (ARTINFO 2007, accessed on February 12, 2011).

A great work of art addresses its audience at a very personal level, possibly even beyond the meaning the artist originally intended. Each encounter increases familiarity and
personalizes the unique dialectical exchange between the object/image and the subject/viewer. In an era of high-speed communication, frenetic and chaotic living, the immortality and timelessness of Renoir’s *Luncheon of the Boating Party* may be indicative of the unique ability of the artist to capture the essence of a universal Truth of existence; or Being, to refer to Martin Heidegger. Heidegger stated that a work of art opens up more than its own Being—it opens up the Being of a new world, the Truth of which is to be experienced personally and directly (Chessick 1999).

A great masterpiece speaks of that in our human nature which relates to the ineffable and our higher origins, regardless of our location in space and time; of the concepts of Beauty, Truth, and Good inherent in good art, as Plato, Aristotle, and the ancient philosophers of esthetics would argue. Referring to these concepts, Oscar Wilde shared his esthetic sensibilities with audiences of his time, by acknowledging Plato’s influence in artistic creation as follows:

Plato had, of course, dealt with many definitely artistic subjects, such as the importance of unity in a work of art, the necessity for tone and harmony, the aesthetic value of appearances, the relation of the visible arts to the external world, and the relation of fiction to fact. He first perhaps stirred in the soul of man that desire which we have not yet satisfied, the desire to know the connection between Beauty and Truth, and the place of Beauty in the moral and intellectual order of the Kosmos. The problems of idealism and realism, as he sets them forth may seem to be somewhat barren of results in the metaphysical sphere of abstract being in which he places them, but transfer them to the sphere of art, and you will find that they are still vital and full of meaning. (Chessick 1999, 401)
Even though few of us enjoy with any regularity the experience of simply “passing time” in great company in beautiful surroundings, unperturbed by the demands of hectic work schedules and busy lifestyles, or multitasking and projecting on the next project, the participants of the celebrated *Luncheon of the Boating Party* speak clearly and unapologetically of their contentment with being part of a joyful gathering. They may even elicit in the viewer a sad envy and unrequited longing for exactly such an experience of slowly “passing time,” an experience that may no longer be possible in our current mode of living. Yet—and here is the magic of great art—we can relate to the image and its features despite the lapse of time and change in circumstances.

Fast-paced living means that even museum visits are now scheduled on tight timetables. One can no longer wander aimlessly and be a *flaneur*, in the style of Marcel Proust, who had the time to absorb the minute details of life around him and turn them into great literature; one can no longer “tarry” with a work of art, even though “tarrying” (*Verweilen*) is an inextricable part of experiencing art (Chessick 1999, 414).

Whether Renoir was conscious or not of the artistic value of the image he was painting is uncertain. Most likely, he must have felt the desire to document a scene that was dear to him, something he had often seen or had experienced himself. By painting the scene, he has captured not only a personal truth but something essential in human nature as well, a primordial Truth which continues to fascinate. It is the beauty and beauty’s
meaning to human consciousness that gives this painting enduring appeal and unquestionably qualifies it as a great work of art.

Wittgenstein said that when the eyes see something beautiful, the hands want to draw it. In Plato’s *Symposium*, Diotima tells Socrates that beauty begets more of itself in the creation of children, art, and laws; and that beauty’s creations serve to make beauty more evident, more pronounced and discernible to its perceiver. Beauty inspires and calls to be recognized, remembered, replicated in drawings, in photographs, in literature, and in prose.

The beauty of Beatrice inspired Dante Aligheri to write a sonnet and then another and another in La Vita Nuova. A Florentine woman inspired Leonardo da Vinci to immortalize the beauty of her face, which millions of eyes have stared with equal intensity and no less admiration in the hundreds of years that passed since the painter first saw Mona Lisa. In perpetuity, such works of art will be duplicating for viewers the sensation of awe before beauty that a single perceiver experienced in an isolated point in space and time.

But, is there any rationale for art such as Serrano’s *Piss Christ*? Elephant dung decorating an image of the Virgin Mary? Robert Mapplethorpe’s sadomasochistic images? Bill Henson’s images of sex, violence, and dismembered bodies? Or Tracey Emin’s *My Bed*, where the artist displays her actual bed with rumpled sheets, stained underwear, cigarette butts, and residue of sex and body functions? The viewer is made to feel like an unwelcome intruder witnessing a scene that is normally
hidden from the public. How are these images to be understood, translated, explained in the minds of viewers? What is the reason for their existence? What could be said about the artist, one who conceives and executes images of such horror and disgust? Other than the inherent shock value of the image, is there any artistic or other merit to such art? Obviously, there is nothing here of the meditative, blissful feeling that The Luncheon of the Boating Party or Mona Lisa elicit. The absence of beauty in all its forms is glaringly obvious.

In viewing such art, audiences are exposed to images that elicit strong visceral reaction. Rage, hatred, disgust or at best apathy and confusion was the general reaction at the first viewing of some of the artworks mentioned above. Yet, the intensity of public response was probably stronger than anything some other benign and beautiful images ever produced. ‘Disgust’ (das ekel in german, degout, in french) is the direct antithesis of anything beautiful. The ‘abject’ or ‘disgusting’ is symbolically excluded from normative social interaction, ejected from aesthetic values, yet returning in one form or another, as though to serve as a demarcation of its antithetical opposite—the beautiful.

An examination of art and artistic creativity from different theoretical—especially psychoanalytical—perspectives may be helpful towards a better understanding of art that is considered aesthetically disturbing and perhaps unappealing, as is an increasing amount of artistic production, especially of the last few of decades of the twentieth century.
CHAPTER 2
ART AND CULTURAL VALUES

Born of the spirit and born again
(aus den Geistens geborene
und wiedergeborene).

—Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Lectures on Aesthetics

Artistic beauty, thought Hegel, was superior to natural beauty, the reason being that artistic beauty was ‘born from the Spirit and born again’. Art begins with its creator. An image invades the mental sphere of an artist before ever being depicted on a virgin canvas or placed as an installation within the four white walls of a gallery or a museum. Because art does not appear in a vacuum, by itself, it makes sense to look at the conditions of its production, especially the psychological influences and motivations of artist-creators and the personal meanings that they attempt to communicate, first to themselves, and then to the world.

We often talk about artists as creative people. Art and creativity are almost synonymous in the minds of most of us. It is true that there is scientific creativity, business creativity, technological and social creativity, and many more types. Volumes have been written to describe how the latest advances in physics and medicine come about and the Nobel prize winners who
are rewarded for their creative ideas; and about those driven college students who become the next business moguls by inventing the next generation gadget or internet application that we all cannot live without; and about those who, with or without personal merit, “creatively” and astutely use their social connections to reach the top of the ladder.

However, the *sine qua non* of art that reaches the public eye is almost always an individual who *must* be creative—perhaps not technically excellent, but by necessity creative. Jeff Koons’ balloon dogs and vacuum cleaners (and the debate continues as to whether this is really art) is factory-produced art, but its inception and the specifics of its execution are entirely the products of Jeff Koons’—the artist’s—creative inspiration.

Besides the artist’s psychology and the concept of creativity, there is an audience that responds to the art, as viewers, as critics, as collectors. In its response function, the audience is just as important in the ongoing dialogue between artist and society, as the work of art itself. Something from the artist is communicated to the audience through a work of art and the audience, through its response, communicates something of their own psychology and tastes back to the artist.

It is of interest to examine the effect of art—good or bad, beautiful or “awful”—on viewers and see what social purpose if any it may serve, especially that type of art, which is considered shocking, controversial, or “sick” and which keeps returning despite strong social movements against it. Fair questions to consider are: why it keeps getting produced; why
people buy it; and why artists do not limit themselves to art that is “safe” and uncontroversial. The personal and collective function of ‘disturbing’ or ‘abject’ art will be discussed here from psychoanalytical as well as social-philosophical perspectives.

Of course, there is always the question of whether there is really any art to speak of, never mind artistic creativity, as such. Many brilliant observers object that it is absurd and unacceptable practice to include vacuum cleaners and cadaver parts in formaldehyde (as does Damien Hirst, complete with proliferating insect populations) in the same category as Mona Lisa and The Luncheon of the Boating Party, and then refer to both as art. Serious critics have questioned the entire concept of contemporary art and attacked its current social conceptualizations.

Jean Baudrillard (Toffoletti 2011), the internationally known and greatly respected critic of our constantly changing visual landscape, has this to say about the current state of art and its creation:

Even the ‘creative’ act replicates itself to become nothing more than the sign of its own operation—the true subject of a painter is no longer what he or she paints but the very fact that he or she paints. The painter paints the fact that he or she paints. In that way, at least, the idea of art is saved. (Toffoletti 2011, 46)

It may be that art is reduced to just that: an idea. It is the concept of art that we are perhaps involved with rather than real objective art. Perhaps, the proliferation of art (some good, most bad) is precisely so that at least the idea of it is
preserved, so that the concept of it is not entirely lost. One need not have the drawing skills of Picasso to produce a collage. One need not be a Renoir to install her own bed on the floor of a gallery space and throw some objects of her personal interest on it, as did Tracey Emin with *My Bed*, her own version of ready-made art. Here is Baudrillard again:

Art is disappearing because there is too much of it. Art is everywhere, there is more art than ever before. Art is null because the art object itself has disappeared. Art has no longer the power to surprise or present novel perspectives because art is indistinguishable from everything else, it is absorbed into everything else. (Toffoletti 2011, 50)

Unlike other art critics, Baudrillard will not even venture to judge art as good or bad, or proffer any assumptions on its possible economic, political or social (never mind esthetic) value. This is because there is no meaning or truth behind the images shown, as in times past. The image, such as Emin’s, *My Bed*, is the image and nothing further, in Baudrillard’s words:

Images are no longer the mirror of reality, they have invested the heart of reality and transformed it into hyperreality where, from screen to screen, the only aim of the image is the image. The image can no longer imagine the real because it is the real; it can no longer transcend reality, transfigure it or dream it, since images are virtual reality, it is as if things had swallowed their mirror. (Toffoletti 2011, 46)

Assuming Baudrillard’s diagnosis is correct, it remains to be seen why audiences—intelligent and cultured audiences for the most part—respond to such (non-)art, take the trouble to go see it, even in places as far as Basel and London or wherever the next mammoth art fair may be held, and why such art sells,
sometimes so well that all works in an art fair are pre-sold to wealthy patrons with little or nothing left for the common folk to buy during the fair. What drives this frenzy? Is it because, as Baudrillard would argue:

The viewer literally consumes the fact that he or she does not understand it and that it has no necessity to it other than the cultural imperative of belonging to the integrated circuit of culture . . . the consumer moves through it all to text his or her non-enjoyment of the works. (Toffoletti, 2011, 56)

Baudrillard describes the current state of affairs as the “conspiracy” of art and insists that art is a “nullity.” Or is there more to the story than simple and unleashed consumerism, bordering on the desperate acquisition of a sense of culture, although true culture can be acquired but not bought? As another intellectual giant, of older times, Oscar Wilde would say about his era:

We live in the age of the overworked and the undereducated; the age in which people are so industrious that they become absolutely stupid. (Chessick 1999, 401)

Is art produced in such a way so as to have instant appeal, not only for a small elite, but for the many, the busy, the uneducated and the uncultured? (It is probably less intellectually demanding to look at Emin’s My Bed than to try to decipher the multiplicity of meaning behind Picasso’s Guernica). Is Baudrillard right? Would Oscar Wilde be appalled at our lowly, uninspired even vulgar creations that we choose to call art?

Is art and the market that drives it just a sign of our times dictated by market economics benefiting the “acquisition-
oriented” affluent? Are artists responding to a ‘preexisting demand’ in order to meet the needs of an established ‘clientele’? (Bourdieu 1996, 142). Is taste guided, not by personal educated preferences but by larger social dynamics, mirroring associated social class fractions, and mostly toward the acquisition of ‘cultural capital’? As Pierre Bourdieu theorized, symbolic goods, “especially those regarded as the attributes of excellence” (such as art and culture), are “the ideal weapons in strategies of distinction” (1996). The expression of status-induced familiarity with the tastes of the highest levels of the social hierarchy serves itself as a marker of distinction and bridges temporarily the gap between class economics.

These debates will continue for a long time, but here are some thoughts on creativity, artists, viewers, and this thing we insist on calling “art.”
CHAPTER 3

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A MAD MAN

Art is a wound turned into light
(L’art est une blessure devenue lumière).
—George Braque, Cahiers de George Braque, 1954

A work of art is the result of the artist’s personal inspiration and psychological drive to create something tangible of his unique experiences and perceptions of the world. In former times, the artist’s vision would find expression in personal or impersonal images but all within the grasp of the human mind and within the framework of life experiences of the average man. We all harbor romantic images of artists so thoroughly engrossed in their work that they forget there is a world out there. Their art turns them into loners and ascetics because their muse will not allow them to desert her even for a moment. Artists, we think, are in the service of a higher power and live through and for their creativity.

With the advent of modern times, the landscape has changed dramatically and the artist has to grapple with overwhelming complexities of existence driven by historical or socio-economic factors that seem to be out of anyone’s control. The early years of the twentieth century plunged humanity into bloodshed and a sense of existential despair from which we may
never recover. Such current events as floods, fires, and earthquakes; social and political unrest; and the ever-present threat of a nuclear disaster that unleashes destruction on a mass level only serve to intensify human angst about an uncertain future.

With continued rapid technological advances in modern warfare, fluctuating economies, natural disasters, and fast-paced lives that leave little or no room for introspection, the artist is faced with the task of interpreting for himself and others not only his or her own demons, but those afflicting society and threatening the dissolution of life as we know it.

The father of psychoanalysis, the ever-debated but never outmoded Sigmund Freud, who also took a great interest in art in his later years, expressed his concerns about the ominous effects of war on the human psyche:

My conversation with the poet took place in the summer before the war. A year later the war broke out and robbed the world of its beauties. It destroyed not only the beauty of the countrysides though which it passed and the works of art which it met with on its path but it also shattered our pride in the achievements of our civilization, our admiration for many philosophers and artists and our hopes for a final triumph over the differences between nations and races. It tarnished the lofty impartiality of our science, it revealed our instincts in all their nakedness and let loose the evil spirits within us which we thought had been tamed forever by centuries of continuous education by the noblest minds. . . . It robbed us of very much that we had loved, and it showed us how ephemeral were many things that we had regarded as changeless. (Chessick 1999, 225)

Artistic insight and sensitivity may qualify the artist as a conduit, an interpreter of his own and society’s malaise, and drive him to create something tangible of his unique
perceptions of the world. This, however, is a process that is more often than not associated with personal suffering. The pressures of contemporary life may contribute to a higher likelihood of destructive tendencies for the artist, especially when combined with genetic predispositions toward pathology, substance abuse, or violent tendencies.

Famously creative twentieth-century artists who spoke about the darkness of the times in their work, in a so-called 'confessional manner,' and subsequently killed themselves, include: poets Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton; writers Virginia Woolf and Ernest Hemingway; photographer Diane Arbus; painters Vincent Van Gogh and Mark Rothko, musicians Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, and Curt Cobain. Many of these artists seem to go so deeply into the darkness of their own psyche and that of the society we live in, that they cannot come back into the world of conscious rationalization of existence and a mundane non-examined life (Cropley and Cropley 2010, 178). In Modern Man in Search of a Soul, Carl Jung expressed this tendency as follows:

The disturbing vision of monstrous and meaningless happenings that in every way exceed the grasp of human feeling and comprehension makes quite other demands upon the power of the artist than do the experiences of the foreground of life. (Beeman 1990, 7)

It has been known for hundreds of years that humans, according to their particular sensibilities and inclinations, process information and experiences differently. The particular way experiences are filtered affects the way that these experiences are transformed in consciousness and then integrated into creative work. Incoming images do not originate only in the
outside world. A large part of the contents of consciousness stems from unconscious, long forgotten or repressed material. Dreams, free associations, fantasies, wishes, and daydreams originate in the dark, unknown corners of the mind and generate “internal traffic” (Feldman, Csikszentmihalyi, and Gardner 1994, 33) between conscious and unconscious processes.

It is precisely this material that has been associated with artistic creativity, but also with madness. When unconscious material enters consciousness, either temporarily or permanently, quite often this results in sudden solutions, new insights, and acts of creativity that emerge “out of the blue,” provided that the energy is harnessed appropriately and put in the service of conscious goals.

Jung, in his defense of the collective unconscious processes operating in the psyche and common to all of us, argued that “consciousness is phylogenetically and ontogenetically a secondary phenomenon. It is time this obvious fact were grasped at last. Just as the body has an anatomical history of millions of years, so does the psychic system” (Feldman, Csikszentmihalyi, and Gardner 1994, 34). Great artists, according to Jung, have broad appeal with the public, or provoke the opposite, broad negative reaction, precisely because their art shows signs of a more “collective” rather than personal psychology (Mayo 1995).

The birthing process of a work art is fraught with numerous dangers and may come at great cost to the artist, who often pays a high price for greatness. Psychoanalytic theory supposes that unconscious material nascent in the psyche will
step up to the threshold of consciousness, if it collects sufficient energy. Although not in itself pathological, the instinctual nature of the material may create a conflict with consciousness and result in pathology in some cases. This is because the energy needed for its assimilation comes from consciousness. It is this conflict that necessitates expression of the dilemma in some form or other, and in artists, it is the incentive behind a work of art.

In other words, art arises out of psychological pain. Although psychological pain is not unique to the artist—every individual experiences such internal conflicts to some degree—it is uniquely available to and more accessible by the artist because, by temperament or will, he or she is unlikely to repress or block disturbing emotions. As a matter of fact, he or she may do precisely the opposite: become absorbed, dwell on the suffering, and explore these painful emotions.

It has been postulated that in distressed emotional states one is more likely to seek a resolution of the conflict, and that creativity arises at precisely such moments. Happy, well-adjusted individuals may not have the same incentive to uncover and dwell on negative emotions. In a non-artist, the same conflictual material may remain undisturbed and dormant. An artist, on the other hand, intuitively recognizes the wealth hidden in subconscious material and will purposefully allow it to come to the surface, disturbing or painful as it may be. The need to express oneself and find a solution for the distress experienced may lead to creative ideas and meaningful art. In a
positive feedback loop, one who desires to create great art may decide to explore just such distressful psychological content, so that the association between the creative production and the negative but rich psychological state is forged and maintained.

A “normal,” conventional person may have developed socially prescribed methods to deal with distressful symptoms; medication, psychotherapy, escapism, television, entertainment, and so on. An artist, on the other hand, will allow the unconscious and autonomous complex to infiltrate his entire being and take over his conscious, self-willed existence. His creative fire will eventually work the incoming material out, but this requires energy expenditure from consciousness, a condition which Pierre Janet termed abaissement du niveau mental, or a decrease of conscious mental processes [my translation] (Mayo 1995, 92).

This may lead to apathy and isolation or regression to primitive, infantile behavior so often witnessed in artistic personalities: vanity, selfishness, ruthlessness, self-destructive tendencies. It can also result in work depicting horrific or disgusting images, which are directly related to the recently dormant imagery in the subconscious. In such cases, the artist’s usual lack of conformity to a social norm may be a blessing in disguise because he is free to dwell on negative emotional states outside of social conventions, such as a nine-to-five work schedule or other obligations.

Free to respond to the demands of the unconscious until psychic balance is restored, the artist may in the process produce art that resonates not only with his own psychological
malaise, but with that of the era he is living in, as well. In other words, his art is a product and result of the zeitgeist. Art may provide the social map in which an individual’s experience is taking place. Consequently, a work of art not only expresses the artist’s personal psychology but provides an intimate link to that of society. In that sense, from a long-term perspective, the art represents society over and above the personal ideology or fate of its creator. Jung states:

That is the secret of great art, and of its effect upon us. The creative process, so far as we are able to follow it at all, consists in the unconscious activation of an archetypal image, and in elaborating and shaping this image into the finished work. By giving it shape, the artist translates it into the language of the present, and so makes it possible for us to find our way back to the deepest springs of life. (Mayo 1995, 93)

Essentially, art and artists are products of their time. They are the translators and interpreters of their social and universal currents, which filtered through the sieves of their own personal experiences produce art that speaks of themselves and of the times they live in. At a price.
CHAPTER 4
THE PRICE OF GREATNESS

I say unto you: one must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star. I say unto you: you still have chaos in yourselves.

It is by invisible hands that we are bent and tortured worst.

You aspire to the free heights, your soul thirsts for the stars. But your wicked instincts, too, thirst for freedom. Your wild dogs want freedom; they bark with joy in their cellar when your spirit plans to open all prisons. To me you are still a prisoner who is plotting his freedom.

But the worst enemy you can encounter will always be you, yourself; you lie and wait for yourself in caves and woods.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra

Creativity is an innate gift, a rare capacity of a few endowed individuals to bring forth innovative work by breaking apart established ways of thinking and replacing them with new, original patterns. The creative individual is able to discern relations and perceive images where most of us see none.

Successful creativity is usually marked by the spark of genius, a quality that is not quantifiable and therefore, not easily or adequately explained as of yet. From the point of view of psychoanalytic theory, Ernst Kris (Russ 1999) postulates that there is frequently a history of early trauma in the lives of
creative people and that creativity may be related to, or be a direct result of such trauma.

Other theorists have looked into personality factors and life patterns of famous individuals to determine if similar characteristics and challenges could be found. Such research is by no means definitive, nor can it be extrapolated to include every creative person that has ever lived. It can provide, however, a window for interpretation or a basis through which some discernible patterns may emerge. At the very least, it may offer incentives to creative researchers to arrive at creative solutions in future research of creativity.

"The only difference between me and a 'madman' is that I am not mad," Salvador Dali once said. Nonetheless, the correlation between psychological disturbance and creativity is too powerful to be dismissed. Depression, manic-depressive illness, suicidal behavior, psychotic symptomatology, and other grave emotional instabilities have afflicted some of the best and brightest creative minds in history (Diamond 1997, 257; Rothenberg 1990, 6). The artists listed below exhibited psychopathology, from debilitating depression to extreme psychosis, with symptoms that occasionally impaired their ability to function and required psychiatric treatment or tragically led to suicide.

The list is almost endless: Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche (philosophers): Hector Berlioz, Anton Bruckner, Gustav Mahler, Sergey Rachmaninoff, Robert Schumann, Camille Saint-Saens (composers); Hans Christian Andersen, Joseph

More fortunate artists may be spared these grave trials and death. But their creative demons may bring about conditions of emotional imbalance, neuroticism, anger, and rage, especially when the creative flow is slow or stuck. In an ideal situation, an artist operates under conditions of flowing creativity: an unobstructed exchange between forthcoming subconscious material and conscious willful manipulation of such. Celebrated art critic Arthur Danto described these creative states as a non-dualistic experience, as follows:

high moments of artistic work, those moments of pure creativity, when artist and work are not separated by a gap of any sort, but fuse in such a way that the work seems to bring itself into existence. At such points—and any creative person lives for these—there is none of the struggle and externality that marks those phases of artistic labor in which inspiration fails and the work itself refuses to cooperate . . . . [Materials] are . . . agents of selflessness, which is the state at which . . . so much of Oriental philosophy . . . aims. (Krausz 2009, 194)

Psychologist Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi perhaps the best-known investigator in the field of creativity has described this state as ‘flow’: “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself
is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it” Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 4).

Although these blissful states surely exist (perhaps Renoir found himself in just such a state of creative ‘flow’ when he was painting The Luncheon of the Boating Party), more often than not, creativity is not the child of happiness and bliss. In most circumstances, it undoubtedly arises out of severe inner conflict and an internal struggle, which activates old traumas and repressed material; or out of existential angst or personal adversity, which must be dealt with creatively for the psyche of the individual to survive such excruciating psychological distress.

Ludwig van Beethoven must have experienced precisely such a dilemma when he realized that he was slowly becoming deaf and unable to hear his own music. He continued to compose even when completely deaf, in supreme defiance of his predicament and eloquent demonstration of what Nietzsche termed amor fati: a poor helpless human not only coming to terms with a merciless fate, but coming to love and accept a bitter destiny imposed from above without the possibility of escape. Legend has it that he died with his finger pointing to the sky, as though in rage against God, and a strange grin on his face, perhaps what Julia Kristeva has called an ‘apocalyptic smile,’ a human response of coming to terms with the horror and absurdity that is sometimes forced upon us. We laugh because in the face of absurdity and horror, laughter is the only defense mechanism that prevents the mind
from succumbing to complete despair, loss of perspective for life, and loss of faith in the reason for our existence.

Only through a creative shift in consciousness can such conflicts be resolved and creative solutions emerge. A creative person adjusts himself to the circumstances he finds himself in and goes on to create in the world. As psychologist Otto Rank observed: “the neurotic is the ‘artiste manqué,’ the artist who cannot transmute his conflicts into art” (Diamond 1996, 258). When the creative flow proves to be impossible, neuroticism or even more aberrant behavior—anger, rage, violence—results. Occasionally, however, even such frustration and impotent anger may find their sublimation in artistic activity of social value.

Artist Niki de Saint Phalle famously found an outlet for her boundless rage and strong hostility against men and the male-dominated art world by expressing her murderous impulses in collages with blades, scissors, and knives, instruments which are symbolically castrating. She then proceeded to create her well-known “shooting paintings” by firing bullets at paint-filled balloons positioned in front of a white unused canvas, another symbolic gesture directed at male anatomy perhaps.

According to one unnamed writer: “the resulting tir . . . were born out of violence, or as de Saint Phalle would write ‘I shot against daddy, against all men—my brother, society” (Diamond 1996, 297). Having been sexually abused by her father, the artist created a prolific career by sublimating her murderous impulses and impotent rage resulting from past trauma and the despair and helplessness she must have experienced as a child.
Louise Bourgeois makes constant references to her own traumatic childhood through her art. Her father’s infidelities, and the role imposed on her by her mother to spy on her father, created a burden of responsibility too heavy for a child and a sense of disenchantment with adult sexual improprieties. In her artwork, the Spider, a giant steel structure with slender legs that could pierce like daggers and protruding egg sacs, Bourgeois recalls the image of the simultaneously protective and destructive mother, as well as early childhood anxieties of confronting the maternal body.

As an archetypal symbol of the weaver of destiny, the spider is ambiguous suggesting both protective and murderous drives and therefore the anxieties that shape the psyche on its early stages of development and influencing the individual throughout life. The spider that weaves the web of destiny and threatens to destroy all life caught in it surely has symbolic connotations referring to the artist’s experience of her own mother. Bourgeois acknowledged her mother’s powerful influence in her work when she declared: “je ne me fatiguerais jamais de la representer—I shall never tire of representing her” (Nixon 2005, 276).

Then there is that famous photograph of the artist, well advanced in years, holding an oversized sculpture of a phallus, the way one carries a doll, an evening purse, and grinning playfully for Mapplethorpe’s camera. “The glint in the eye refers to the thing I am carrying,” Bourgeois confessed (Nixon 2005, 73). The sculpture is titled Fillette, little girl (my
translation), which in this case is neither little nor female;
but in its current disjointed and impotent state, that which
might have caused fear, curiosity, or disgust in a young child is
now little more than a benign, non-threatening, perhaps
decorative (as an evening purse would be) object to "smile"
about. As though to say that in her old age, Bourgeois had come
to terms with the trauma (or that which had indirectly caused it)
of her childhood years and that now she could face it
(symbolically hold it) and smile at it, the mischievous smile of
the grown woman who through her own sexuality has perhaps
accepted that of her father’s and his transgressions, at last.

As psychoanalytic theory would have it, “infantile
phantasies persist in adult life: what remains is to understand
not only why these phantasies recur but how they evolve”, Nixon,
Bourgeois’ commentator explains (2005, 9). The evolution or
resolution of infantile drives may be documented in the evolution
of the artist’s creative activity. Bourgeois herself recognized
the change in her art over the years and described it as: “a
change from rigidity to pliability . . . Rigidity then seemed
essential. Today it seems futile and has vanished” (Nixon 2005,
9).

One could argue, to use the rationale of psychologist
Rollo May, that artists like Bourgeois creatively transformed
reality to bring personal material and factual reality into
greater accord. Nevertheless, May believes:

. . . creating, actualizing one’s possibilities, always
involves destructive as well as constructive aspects. It
always involves destroying the status quo, destroying old
patterns within oneself, progressively destroying what one has clung to from childhood on, and creating new and original forms and ways of living . . . . Every experience of creativity has its potentiality of aggression or denial toward other persons in one’s environment or towards established patterns within one’s self. (Diamond 1996, 256)

The positive and negative sides of creativity, of good and evil, light and dark, beauty and ugliness, the base and the sublime may thus be engaged in the creative process and called upon by the creative individual in the course of artistic work.

For all his unprecedented talent and extraordinary body of work, Pablo Picasso will be remembered as the quintessential temperamental genius given to fits of uncontrollable rage. A misogynist par excellence, he expressed virulent hatred against women in violent, abusive, and sadistic behavior toward his many mistresses and wives (Diamond 1996). The painting that broke with tradition and created a world stage for his later work, Les Demoiselles d’Avignon, was reportedly drawn in a fit of mad rage against the prostitutes depicted in the painting and whom he often visited. One of them gave Picasso a serious and painful venereal disease from which he long suffered.

Les demoiselles in question are depicted as a mass of fragmented body parts. Their raw sexuality absent of any decorative, flattering element was a revolutionary and unprecedented depiction of women up until then. It is as though Picasso’s rage mentally tore the women apart before putting their images on canvas. Picasso’s emotional dysfunction has been interpreted by analysts as originating from his misogyny and
uncontrollable instinctive urges. The images certainly speak to that effect.

The fragmentation in Picasso’s art prompted Carl Jung, to describe the artist as “less mad than as evil . . . as ‘a man . . . who (did) not turn toward the day-world, but (was) fatefuly drawn into the dark; who (followed) not the accepted ideals of goodness and beauty, but the demoniacal attraction of ugliness and evil” (Diamond 1996, 260). Nevertheless, Picasso’s psychopathology was counterbalanced by his exceptional artistic talent, his ability to transform his anger and rage into celebrated works of art.

Psychoanalyst Otto Rank elaborated on the sublimation of unpleasant experiences into art by saying that:

... art may be a victory over destructive unconscious material by transforming this material into something creative and new. The conflict between the artist’s lower and higher self is intense as the artist cannot fall back into collective values that he has long renounced. He is forced to build a personal creation to transcend the intense inner conflict. This may lead to the creation of great art that resonates with the audience since, on some level, each individual has grappled with the same internal conflict (i.e. oedipal complex). (Chessick 1999, 272)

Psychological tension manifesting as stress may appear when an individual perceives a challenge in the environment or in his or her own psyche, in the form of simultaneous and conflicting emotions. In creative individuals psychic tension, “essential tension,” according to philosopher Thomas Kuhn (Russ 1999) is an indispensable and inevitable component of original work. Because they have many more original ideas than the average individual, creative individuals may experience a greater degree of tension.
These original ideas, often a result of influx of unconscious material, are far removed from living experience or factual data. Psychic tension creates uncomfortable states of disequilibrium and imbalance, which the individual is, by necessity, intrinsically motivated to resolve. The tension between what is and what could be, or the reconciliation between cognition and affect, may be resolved through originality and creativity.

Artists are far more likely to experience tension arising from conflictual emotional material, often not easily explained through conventional and rational means. However, artists like Picasso have the means to transcend language and express these tensions through images. Personal creativity may be precisely that: the ability to interpret personal experience through meaningful and original constructs, or in the case of artists, powerful images.

“Happiness in intelligent people is the rarest thing I know,” Ernest Hemingway said (Russ 1999, 165). Unfortunately, madness is not.
CHAPTER 5

MADNESS AND CREATIVITY

The lives of men of genius show how often, like lunatics, they are in a state of continuous agitation.

–Arthur Schopenhauer, The World As Will And Representation

The association between madness and creativity is well known. It is widely believed that creative people are emotionally unstable, have a higher incidence of schizophrenia, and are prone to alcoholism, drug abuse, and higher rates of suicide than the general population (Cropley and Cropley, 2010). Psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut agrees that there are indeed internal fluctuations of affect associated with the creative process, nevertheless:

I do not claim that creative people are of necessity suffering from structural defects that drive them to seek archaic merger experiences. I suspect, however, that the psychic organization of some creative people is characterized by a fluidity of the basic narcissistic configurations, i.e., that periods of narcissistic equilibrium (stable self-esteem and securely idealized internal values: steady, persevering work characterized by attention to details) are followed by (precreative) periods of emptiness and restlessness (decathexis of values and low self esteem; addictive or perverse yearnings: no work), and that these, in turn, are followed by creative periods (the unattached narcissistic cathexies which had been withdrawn from the ideals and from the self are now employed in the service of the creative activity: original thought; intense, passionate work). Translating these metapsychological formulations into behavioral terms, one might say that a phase of frantic creativity (original
thought) is followed by a phase of quiet work (the original ideas of the preceding phase are checked, ordered, and put in to a communicative form, e.g. written down), and that this phase of quiet work is in turn interrupted by a fallow period of procreative narcissistic tension, which ushers in a phase of renewed creativity, and so on . . . . (Chessick 1999, 145)

It is not unusual to refer to creative people as mad geniuses. Aristotle first said, and Seneca echoed his words several hundred years later, that “no great genius was without a mixture of insanity” (Rothenberg 1990, 149). More often than not this “mixture of insanity” is a diagnostic category known as bipolar or manic-depressive disorder, a psychiatric affective illness prevalent in about 4 percent of the general population (NIMH online). In more serious manifestations, it may be complicated by psychotic ideation and threatening behaviors. It is further complicated by the ingestion of substances, illegal drugs, alcohol, or unregulated prescription medication.

In manic-depressive disorder, the patient exhibits the type of affect described by Kohut above, only in a more debilitating manner, with periods of complete anhedonia, poor or excessive sleep and eating habits, uncontrollable crying spells as though grieving for no apparent reason, morbid withdrawal, lethargy, and inability to function on any level.

On the opposite spectrum, there is continuous exuberant mood for no apparent reason, reduction or absence of sleep for days in a row, extreme tastes in choice of clothing and excessive spending for unnecessary items (it is not unusual, for example, for patients to buy two dozen of the identical t-shirt), anger, irritability or violent behavior, and abnormally long hours of
exhaustive work without any signs of fatigue. It is as though something takes over the person and operates through him or her with little or no possibility of conscious control by the individual. Psychiatry has postulated neurotransmitter malfunction and the ancients talked of demonic possession. The result is the same. The individual suffers and the suffering is obvious to the world.

In artistic creation the same personal suffering is obvious in the artist’s work and quite often permeates it completely. The suffering is obvious in Nietzsche’s writing, as well as in the ‘confessional works’ of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, written as though to speak of their distress and warn of their intention to commit suicide. Even Picasso’s Blue Period could not have emerged out of a joyful period in his life. The same is true of T.S. Elliot’s masterpiece, The Wasteland, written after the poet’s nervous breakdown, or Van Gogh’s masterpiece, Starry Night, depicting the nocturnal view from the mental asylum of Saint Remy, shortly before his suicide.

The connection between artistic creativity and emotional disturbance has been explored in recent research, with results confirming the link. The studies are by no means flawless, as is almost nothing in research concerning human psychology, but the results, which should be interpreted cautiously, may be indicative of a pattern worth further exploration. The most quoted research in this area is by Dr. Kay Redfield Jamison, a psychologist and professor of psychiatry at Johns Hopkins.
University, with several publications on bipolar illness and, interestingly, a bipolar patient herself.

Jamison assembled a mixed group of artists from different fields of creative activity: poets, playwrights, biographers, novelists and visual artists (Rothenberg 1990). An astounding 38.3 percent of the subjects reported that they had suffered from and had been treated for affective illness at some point or another in their lives, in comparison to 3.9 percent, the general population (NIMH online).

Another investigator, David Schuldberg (Cropley and Cropley 2010), found that manic-depressive illness seems to be six times more prevalent in creative individuals than in the general population. He concluded that indeed, there seems to be a link between creativity and abnormal patterns of psychological adjustment, which may be clinically pathological when pronounced but relatively innocuous or even productive in moderate levels. As a matter of fact, mood changes may be beneficial to the artist as they may enable them to view their emotional world from different perspectives.

For example, mild depression may bring about a sense of empathy, sensitivity, and the desire and discipline for creative work to start. Mild hypomania, a much less intense form of mania, may facilitate productivity and increase creativity. As a matter of fact, hypomania is often mistaken as a personality characteristic and a social asset rather than the illness that it really is. Characterized by continuous euphoric states, infectious good mood, friendliness, liveliness, heightened
activity, and high rates of productivity, hypomania may be of
great service to poets, writers, and anyone whose work demands
creative thought.

On the negative pole, restlessness, fatigue with routine,
change of jobs or partners, superficial learning, paranoia, and
strings of lawsuits can be the downside if the disease slides out
of the conscious control of the individual (Hershman 1998). A
paranoid hypomaniac, Igor Stravinsky sued almost every friend and
relative because of his irrational fear that everyone he knew was
taking advantage of him (Feldman, Csikszentmihalyi, and Gardner
1994).

“All extraordinary men distinguished in philosophy,
poitics, poetry and the arts are evidently melancholic,”
Aristotle once said. And Socrates added that the poet has “no
invention in him until he has been inspired and is out of his
senses” (Hershman 1998, 8). The results of current research
obviously prove their ancient wisdom.
CHAPTER 6
GENIUS AND CREATIVITY

A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us.
—Franz Kafka, Letter To Oskar Pollak, 1904

Biographies are hardly ever written about people who, whether by chance or temperament, have been spared adversity and suffering. Artistic geniuses usually have had traumatic lives and sometimes their creative work stems from fascination with their own unhealed traumas. They can also have a reputation of being selfish, self-centered, idiosyncratic, highly energetic, excessively demanding of themselves and others, at times shamelessly self-promoting, at others self-destructive, and all around “difficult.” Their individuality and creative activity often takes center stage to the detriment of others who are in their orbit as friends, family, or colleagues. Yet, they also seem to suffer an inordinate amount of tragedy and pain, either by their life circumstances or by virtue of their troubled psyche.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Franz Schubert, and Beethoven were plagued by poverty. Dante was a pauper almost his entire adult life, even while composing the Divine Comedy, his enduring masterpiece, surviving through the kindness of his friends,
moving from city to city, a political exile with no home of his own. He was fully conscious and tormented by his predicament, and while driven to keep writing, as though perhaps to stay alive (at least psychologically), he acknowledged in despair that “bitter is the bread that comes from the hands of others.” He died poor and a beggar; it wasn't until several years after his burial that his manuscript was found and published to wide acclaim which has, to this day, never faded.

How different from Picasso, another exile in a sense, only in his case by choice, who did his pivotal work in a country other than his own and in a different, linguistically and historically, culture. Unlike Dante, he was tyrannical, given to frequent fits of rage, a manipulator of friends and circumstances, as well as a known misogynist, abusive and sadistic toward women in his life. Also, unlike Dante, he came to know great success in his lifetime. Fame and wealth did not make him happy, though. Picasso often became severely depressed by external events and stopped painting. Sometimes selling his work brought on a depressive episode and his creative flow stopped. “Of all—hunger, extreme poverty, the incomprehension of the public—fame is by far the worst. It is the castigation by God of the artist,” Picasso said and withdrew completely from the public eye to be alone, to paint (Hershman 1998, 195).

In contrast to many artists like Dante who perish in undeserved anonymity, others like Picasso suffer the detrimental effect of success on creativity. Impossibly grand success can be an obstacle to continuous creative work because it insulates
artists from the real world, catapults them into the world of celebrity status, and renders their work superficial. Not surprisingly, many choose to retreat from public life and live the life of a recluse. Picasso did and he continued to create great work.

It is very difficult to pinpoint the reasons for creative genius, the constellation of factors that differentiate talented, bright unknowns from the celebrated extraordinary geniuses. Although as part of our human condition we all have to come to terms with loss, grief, adversity, and the contents of memory, few of us can turn these into acts of creation that resonate with large numbers of people.

Naturally, these “different,” driven individuals excite much public interest. Scientific research is now beginning to focus on the special characteristics of personalities that have left an indelible mark with their creations. The necessity of such research has been accurately and eloquently described by Salvatore R. Maddi, a well-known researcher in the field of creativity, as follows:

It is my impression that in the last 25 years we have done quite enough research on the characteristic of creative acts and the environmental conditions that facilitate their emergence. In the future, our efforts should focus upon the personality and motivational factors which, when present, literally force the person into creative endeavor, no matter what the cost in strenuousness and risk. Only when we have done this will our conceptualization of creativity be such that we can convincingly understand the lonely, driven giants whose efforts shape their own and our worlds. (Beeman 1990, 23)

In a recent study, Howard Gardner (Feldman, Csikszentmihalyi, and Gardner 1994) undertook just such research
in an effort to determine patterns that seem to be pervasive across acknowledged geniuses and their creative domains. Gardner, following in the steps of creativity researcher par excellence Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi (1988), the originator of the concept of ‘flow,’ makes the distinction between prodigies and creative people to elaborate his own idea that true creative work involves a ‘fruitful asynchrony,’ that is, a certain degree of tension or lack of fit prevalent in the lives of creative people.

To illustrate, Gardner states that prodigious individuals are talented people whose excellence within their field of activity is acknowledged early on and as a result they are easily accepted and rewarded with acclaim and recognition by experts in their field. Talented child musicians come to mind. Creative people, on the other hand, tend to be societal “misfits”; they usually exhibit a wide and potentially unrelated range of talents that fits no particular specified domain of activity in which they seek work, and may in fact be unsuitable or contrary to the acceptable tastes of judges in the field. These ‘asynchronies’ and ‘initial lack of fit,’ when and if conquered, transcended, and conceptualized in a novel manner, lead to the creation of innovative work that is invaluable, revolutionary, and timeless, Gardner claims (Feldman, Csikszentmihalyi, and Gardner 1994, 72).

Motivated by growing public interest in biographies of famous people as well as the fact that the lives of such people are usually well documented, Gardner chose to study seven famous ‘creators,’ all of the same era, the last century, in order to control for historical factors exerting similar influences on all
individuals in the sample. The people studied were contemporaries of one another—although not necessarily within the same cultural environment. They all excelled in different domains of activity. Gardner chose his sample of individuals so that each would exemplify one of the seven different human intelligences that have been described in psychological literature (Feldman, Csikszentmihalyi, and Gardner 1994, 73): Mahatma Gandhi, for interpersonal intelligence; Martha Graham, kinesthetic intelligence; T.S. Elliot, linguistic intelligence; Igor Stravinsky, musical intelligence; Pablo Picasso, spatial intelligence; Albert Einstein, logical-mathematical intelligence; and Sigmund Freud, intrapersonal intelligence.

Gardner's findings are surprising and perhaps contradictory of commonly held popular beliefs about creative geniuses. The research showed, for example, that across the board these individuals were raised in strict, authoritarian, "proper" rather than warm families. The family environment, though not warm, clearly placed high value on learning, achievement, and the highest levels of education for the young 'creators,' although the parents may not have had such high education themselves. As children, they were taught a code of ethics that reinforces strict conscience and morality, although not necessarily of the religious kind. This strict ethical code may serve them as a guide in adulthood but can also be turned against themselves or against others who do not aspire to follow the same moral code.
The families of young ‘creators’ are usually neither wealthy, nor socially powerful; nor are they close to poverty levels, however. The families can almost always provide adequate means of existence and reasonable financial comfort and support. They are usually located outside or away from the local centers of social and political power but within reach of information on current events and within a community or social network that permits access to resources such as schooling, work, travel, or mobility to a bigger town or a higher socioeconomic level. In other words, although not raised in large metropolitan centers of activity, these individuals hardly lived isolating existences in remote places.

Interestingly, these ‘creators’ were in a way emotionally estranged from their biological families and plagued by a sense of not belonging. Although family ties were often ambivalent, there usually emerged another individual with whom they had close ties growing up, either a grandparent or other distant relative, a nanny, or a teacher. In all cases, the family environment quickly perceived the child’s special gift (intelligence) and encouraged further development in that area of ability, although it might not have been obvious from the start how such a gift could be applied to a standard career.

Eventually, this pattern emerges: the young ‘creator’ outgrows her family environment and verges out of the limits of her hometown, to a larger city or another country where she feels she has better opportunity to exercise her particular talent, to be with people of the same area of interest, and to test herself.
against others with the same gift in order to see where she stands. Although the young ‘creator’ may find her place in her chosen field of activity immediately, more likely than not there is experimentation with different careers until the proper outlet is found.

The moment of “crystallization” and decision to follow a specific path is usually followed by intense activity and specialization in this area, accompanied by long hours of isolation and training to acquire expertise. Stubbornly pursuing the chosen goal at the expense of personal gratification or affective relations with others is a frequently occurring pattern. The creator at this stage becomes conscious of the fact that he or she is different from other people, is more than content to be so, and will go to great lengths to maintain that difference. This is the phase where usually some support (emotional and/or financial) from others is crucial in order to maintain the high pace of activity and the specialization that is required for future achievement. Gardner believes that it takes about ten years of laboring toward an idea or a goal before the first breakthrough emerges.

It takes a very special personality to labor through such unspecified territory and with no foreseeable tangible rewards. However, such is the case of ‘committed creators.’ They feel compelled to continue on their chosen path no matter the personal cost, and at times in the face of negative critique and repeated failure. Even so, Gardner states that the ‘creator’:
. . . seeks to retain her creativity; she will seek marginal status, or heighten the ante of asynchrony, in order to maintain freshness and to secure the "flow" that accompanies formidable challenges and exciting discoveries. In cases where there is an outpouring of works, a few of them will stand out as defining, both for . . . herself and for members of the encompassing field. . . . Moreover, because her life's work has transformed the domain and the field, her effect continues to be felt for many years afterward. (Feldman, Csikszentmihalyi, and Gardner 1994, 75)

Gardner agrees that the sample here is too small and the results descriptive rather than normative to establish validity. In addition, not every creator exhibits every single characteristic, or is limited to only those patterns found. However, two other characteristics of note emerged, and those were true of each 'creator' studied. First, whereas most people need a sense of stability and predictability, creative people seem to thrive on 'asynchronies' and challenges; they seek them out and will try hard to reestablish them, if for whatever reason they seem to be fading out of their lives. As a matter of fact, these "lacks of fit" seem to characterize them and their lives more than anything else.

The 'asynchrony' may be a noticeable gap between the individual's different abilities. Picasso's exceptional spatial intelligence was counterbalanced by his extremely poor academic performance. Freud's remarkable linguistic ability and insight into human nature was in sharp contrast to his extraordinarily weak bodily-spatial cognition or his ineptitude in music. Einstein was a miserable failure at school in almost all subjects except physics and mathematics (Feldman, Csikszentmihalyi, and Gardner 1994).
Or, the ‘asynchrony’ can manifest in their work, which often creates tension with the established values of the times and those who set them. At first, before gaining in popularity, Picasso’s cubist paintings were shocking and incomprehensible in comparison to the representational paintings that were admired at the time. Equally, Freud’s ideas shocked the establishment with the introduction of sexual themes in his theory of human development (Feldman, Csikszentmihalyi, and Gardner 1994).

In addition, both men experienced a sense of marginality, a sense of not belonging in the societies they chose to live in. Picasso left his native Spain for Paris at a very young age, as many artists did, but never managed to blend in. His bad manners and lack of social graces were too noticeable to facilitate entrance into the snobbish milieu of high culture in Paris. He remained an outsider from both French and Spanish cultures for his entire life. Freud, a Jew and medical doctor, hated his life in Vienna. Although he spent his entire life there, he never felt welcomed or integrated and often clashed with the gentile establishment.

Einstein, German by birth, born and raised in Munich, spent his entire adult life outside Germany, mostly in Switzerland and in the United States. He never earned advanced degrees, except several honorary doctorate degrees awarded after he became famous. As a student, he managed to exasperate and alienate his professors to such an extent that they made it impossible for him to find a teaching position after graduation. He was employed as a lowly clerk at a patent office instead, and
even this job came through the intervention of a friend. He regarded his “autocratic” professors with disdain and contempt for their ignorance and he dared show it. They made sure that he remained outside of the prestigious academic establishment. Had he entered their ranks he might or might not have achieved his enduring contributions. As a perennial outsider, he surely succeeded in doing so.

All these men were dissatisfied with the status quo and were of such strong temperament as not to hesitate to go against it, thus continuing the ‘asynchronies’ in their lives and their marginalized status. The process of psychological and geographical deracinement, a complete and irreversible severing of connections from home and family, society, and tradition, much like a tree pulled from the ground with roots exposed, seems to be a necessary though painful condition in the lives of those who wish to or are meant to follow unique life paths.

Overall, there is a distinct sense of marginality found in creative individuals, either from the very start—by virtue of place of birth, religion, gender—or acquired with time, cherished and fostered by the individual who will go to great lengths to maintain this sense of being different and an outsider. Gertrude Stein eloquently described this Ulyssian sense of individuality in artists when she said as follows:

"... everybody who writes is interested in living inside themselves in order to tell what is inside themselves. That is why writers have to have two countries, the one where they belong and the one in which they live really. The second one is romantic, it is separate from themselves, it is not real, but it is really there. (Chessick 1999, 199)"
The second defining characteristic of ‘creators’ is a sense of childishness in their personality structure with childhood traits seemingly retained in adulthood, although inappropriate or non-desirable. Pervasive self-centeredness, temper tantrums, silliness, impatience, stubbornness and selfish behavior are some such features found by Gardner. But even in cases where these are not pronounced, in most instances creative people seem to retain at least some archaic childlike characteristics and a fondness for the child they once were, by resorting to behaviors uncharacteristic for adults such as ignoring conventions, asking “basic” questions, showing fascination with otherwise routine subjects, or wanting to get to the bottom of an issue that may be unimportant or cliché (Feldman, Csikszentmihalyi, and Gardner 1994).

On the other hand, all of the individuals studied seem to have been inspired by their early childhoods when, as adults, they created original works and achieved their biggest career breakthroughs. Whatever fascinated their children’s mind before it was socialized by school and social convention, that same attraction seems to be at the center of their adult creation. Stravinsky’s music, especially his revolutionary Sacre du printemps, is a fall back to the strange rhythms he was exposed to as a preschool child. Freud’s theories of children’s psychosexual development go back to his own childhood when he had to try hard to gain his mother’s affections. Einstein’s problem-solving talent was already evident in childhood when his uncle would give him difficult math problems to solve as entertainment
during lunch. “When he solved them, Albert yelled triumphantly like a soccer player scoring an unlikely goal” (Taylor 2008, 141).

In addition, two other unexpected findings emerged from Gardner’s study and both were true of all individuals in the sample. First, they all experienced a sense of withdrawal and isolation immediately prior to a major breakthrough. All ‘creators’ seemed to withdraw from social occasions or contact with others and lived in solitude, mentally exploring as yet undiscovered areas of their domain. Surprisingly, in all cases, there seemed to be mental and emotional support from one significant other in their lives, as though to reassure them of the worthiness of their effort and validate them as human beings, that they were normal and that they had not gone mad.

Freud was receiving such support in voluminous correspondence with his friend, Wilhelm Fliess, though Freud would not see him in person, preferring solitude and indirect communication, as discussed above. Einstein, thinking in seclusion for interminable periods of time, was emotionally encouraged by his wife, Mileva, when he would re-emerge and received intellectual support from a group of scientists with whom he shared a continuous dialogue about his revolutionary ideas. Martha Graham, too, had one single confidante and supporter, Louis Horst, as she was developing her innovative forms of dance in Frontier and Appalachian Spring.

While most humans are relentless in the pursuit of security and happiness, the ‘creators’ in this study seemed to
willingly forego both in order to pursue their endeavors. In exchange for continuous outpouring of ideas, they willingly gave up all pleasures of life so as to focus uniquely on their work. Freud and Gandhi chose celibacy early on; though married, Freud and Einstein withdrew from family life and avoided sexual relations with their wives. Graham, Eliot, and Gandhi chose excessively ascetic and isolating lives, although they did not have to. Their almost masochistic tendencies are counterbalanced by Picasso’s and Stravinsky’s ruthlessly sadistic behavior toward friends and lovers. These “Faustian bargains” according to Gardner, were struck so that the ‘creators’ would continue their work undisturbed by social and family demands.

Other researchers report additional personality traits of the creative few. Psychiatrist Rothenberg (1990), for example, conducted over 2,000 hours of interviews with scientists and artists who have been recognized as outstanding in their field. Some of them have been awarded the Nobel Prize, the Pulitzer Prize, and other prestigious awards in their area of expertise. These interviews were conducted on a weekly basis and during a period of time where the artist or scientist was actively engaged in creative work.

In terms of personality patterns, the main finding that emerged in this study was that, contrary to popular beliefs, people in this sample did not seem to be particularly eccentric, erratic or rebellious in their everyday behavior. As in Gardner’s study, eccentricity manifested in terms of ignoring prescribed social roles. Additionally, a certain degree of
introversion and self-preoccupation was evident, although some did show mild signs of extroversion. Overall, creative people seem to question authority and follow their own moral code, however in doing so, they seem to adopt authoritarian attitudes in terms of their tastes and judgments and are likely to impose their attitudes on others.

Surprisingly, creative individuals were found to be rather rigid, detail-oriented and perfectionist in their work habits, rather than spontaneous and easy-going. Their working days are rarely structured in a nine-to-five mode, because the majority tends not to be employed in conventional work environments. They do, however, follow their own self-imposed work schedules, however erratic they may seem to outsiders. Rothenberg found that many of the people studied seemed to have superstitious habits believed to aid in their work such as working at a special desk, sharpening a certain number of pencils, counting the number of pages finished the previous day, and other such rituals. By and by, however, they were hard-working and methodical in their own way.

Interestingly, many creative people in this study did not have exceptionally high intelligence as measured by performance on conventional IQ tests. Their intelligence quotient was usually a little above average but, not by much. However, many outstanding creative individuals—artists, writers, scientists—seemed to excel in a trait or ability that served them well in their chosen endeavor, i.e., superb manual dexterity required in
music, outstanding linguistic capability required in writing, or natural ability with math.

More than anything, all individuals without exception seemed to be unusually motivated and driven to create. There seems to be an intrinsic need, a systemic demand for the “creator” to create, regardless of and beyond desire of fame, success, and monetary reward. Even in the presence of all these, the absence of the preferred creative activity would have devastating results for the person. It is difficult, for example, to imagine Picasso doing anything other than paint. Or Einstein doing anything other than think. The gift or ability these people are born with is pervasive and shapes their lives and character.

Much has been said about genetics and genius. Is genius inherited? Is ability or talent in a certain area a family trait? More often than not, it is not, according to Rothenberg (1990). His findings point to the direction of young geniuses being influenced by one or both parents’ interests or unrealized professional wishes. But the offspring achieves a degree of aptitude and recognition that is beyond anything heredity could have accounted for.

For example, Mozart’s father was a musician, Picasso’s father an art teacher, and Einstein’s father a failed mathematician. None of these parents achieved anything remotely comparable to the accomplishments of their sons. In other words, although there seems to be some sort of creative interest in the family that the child may choose to focus on, the outcome of
their effort is all their own achievement and success (Rothenberg 1990).

Another study of creative personalities by Brent Taylor (2008), mostly a review of biographical material, corroborates the findings of other investigators. For example, despite popular notions of celebrities fighting for the spotlight, Taylor found that if anything, creative individuals are rather introspective and loners, outsiders who prefer not to join societies or groups but rather prefer to be on their own, work on their own projects, and assume authorship and personal responsibility for the quality of their work.

Taylor’s study examined biographical material of seventeen creative people, some of them famous artists like Frida Kahlo and Andy Warhol, celebrities in the performing arts like Madonna, Elvis Presley, John Lennon, Brad Pitt, and Angelina Jolie, celebrities in sports and adventure like David Beckham, Tiger Woods, Amelia Earhart, and Edmund Hillary; writer celebrities Dan Brown and J.K. Rowling; scientific geniuses Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud; and artistic media and fashion moguls Coco Chanel and Walt Disney.

Initially these individuals appear to have little if anything in common. Einstein and Madonna are on diametrically opposing sides of the spectrum, yet Taylor argues that the same pervasive personality characteristics and life patterns in a way define all these creative individuals. First, they all possess a strong temperament that will follow its own judgments even though this may not endear them with the establishment. Einstein
alienated his professors, Freud his colleagues, and Madonna first
the school nuns and later the church itself with her
exhibitionistic tactics and provocative messages.

Second, there was clearly some sort of childhood trauma
that they all had to overcome: death of a parent (Madonna,
Lennon, Chanel [both parents], J.K. Rowling); financial hardship
(Warhol, Einstein, Presley, Earhart, Disney); death of a sibling
(Presley, Freud); racial, ethnic, sex discrimination (Woods,
Freud, Earhart, Warhol); grave illness or accidents (Warhol,
Kahlo). It is the ability to turn adversity into personal
strength and gain that distinguishes these icons.

Third, none of these successful people excelled in
school; most had passable grades and those who did better than
average (Madonna, J.K. Rowling) quit school either to follow a
dream career (Madonna) or at their parents’ request (J.K.
Rowling, whose father convinced her to study to be a secretary
rather than a teacher). A flourishing academic career is not an
asset or an advantage or a prerequisite for future greatness,
with the exception perhaps of Amherst educated Dan Brown, who
continues to research his books excessively as though for
academic not creative writing; even he, however, did not study
beyond a college degree.

Fourth, all were outsiders. They did not belong in
professional groups, did not participate in group activities at
school. Rather they spent long periods of time alone or in
environments where they could perfect their skills (J.K. Rowling
writing till late at night; Madonna practicing in dance class;
Presley singing alone in his room; Einstein thinking in places where he could not be disturbed). J.K. Rowling was perhaps as outside of society as anyone can be. Her biographers report that hardly anyone remembers her at all. Neither her schoolmates nor colleagues in the few brief jobs she ever held have any recollection of who she was or what she did. No one asked could say what she looked like. It was as though she had been invisible to the world.

Fifth, none of them held conventional jobs for any significant length of time. Either they were by nature disinclined to be in other people’s hierarchies or they just did not fit in. They had no obvious career path to follow and were loosely connected to people and organizations that could welcome them into a settled and secure job. They took the risk of going toward the unknown and were forced to create a unique career for themselves. They succeeded. Others do not.
CHAPTER 7
THE EMERGENCE OF CREATIVITY

Between suffering and acting out, aesthetic activity is forgiveness.
—Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Crime And Punishment

It is by drawing from the gold mine of memories and activities from childhood, and continuing to follow that magic invisible thread of inspiration as adults, that creative individuals achieve unique accomplishments in their lives. Whereas most people are socialized to look at life and the world according to standards they learn in school and from adults in their environment, creative individuals seem to continue a dialogue with their inner child—the child of their preschool years—throughout adulthood, although they may be entirely unaware of this internal process.

Whereas most adults consciously choose socially acceptable and prescribed lives, something in the lives of ‘creators’ defies the pattern of routine ‘regularity’ and retains elements of the unexpected, the vibrant, and authentic patterns of living, still flowing from their early impressions and experiences. The door of consciousness does not shut the unconscious out completely. Repressed material remains accessible and available for use. Creative thinking exercises the ability to access primitive, pre-
linguistic, instinctive material, a process which psychoanalyst Kris (1952) termed “regression in the service of the ego” (Kolodny 2000, 64). In other words, the creative person is able to regress but not in a maladaptive way. The regression is healthy and adaptive as it brings up material to be elaborated in the consciousness of an adult who possesses the mechanisms of rational understanding and healing, absent in the mind of a child.

If a child is experiencing trauma, it may well be that, as a defense mechanism, the child picks up or discovers an activity, a talent, an ability the performance of which distracts the mind and eases the pain. By virtue of this activity, the distressing psychological material is buried in the unconscious mind and the activity is the displacement mechanism, which helps turn pain to joy and forgetting. All the while the child continues to favor the newly found occupation and becomes better and more skillful at it with time. If later in life the adult retains or redisCOVERS the favorite activity of childhood, by engaging in it, he reenters the world of the child, and by necessity, the experiences and emotions that were part of that world.

If the activity was originally used to displace angst and distress, it is natural that the same activity years later may touch upon the same emotions, although the original causal factors may well be forgotten or buried in the treasure box of the unconscious. Uncovering the box will reveal the riches of unity and oneness with others experienced in childhood before
differentiation occurred, but will also reactivate the pain of long forgotten, emotion-laden material, which the process of differentiation initiates.

If these unrecognizable but intense emotions are sublimated and expressed in art or in any other creative endeavor, something immensely valuable may emerge. Something of beauty, terror, awe, bliss, or even ‘disgust.’ Is this the thread between an unconscious, hidden image and a manifested, actualized product of the creative mind? Is this the meaning and reason behind good art, bad art, beautiful or ugly art, but art that speaks to us in a profound way?

Destructive or constructive creativity, whatever end it serves, it all emerges from the mind of its creator; from the unconscious mind. Einstein solved the problem of gravity. Oppenheimer often referred to his creation, the atomic bomb, as “that sweet problem” (Polenberg 2002, 108). Creativity is the product of both the personal and, if Jung is right, the collective unconscious. Some of us may be born with greater reserves of collective unconscious material than others, and this may be the instrumental factor for products of great creativity. If so, genius may be the product of factors that are over and above the individual, his or her genetic code or conditions of upbringing.

This may be what makes Mozart, Einstein, Picasso unique and superb in what they did and what no one else could do: a synchronicitous constellation of factors inherent in the individual, having little or nothing to do with genetics,
environment, schooling, or anything of human creation. Such inborn predisposition toward a unique creative life, on one hand, in conjunction with chancing upon the external conditions, an outlet, where these gifts can be applied on the other (absent these, talent cannot manifest—there can be no child musician without an instrument to play), this may be the explanation behind meteoric personalities that appear and change the world with their creations.

If that is so then we need to create room for, or at least try to understand, all manifestations of the creative, those that please us and those that do not. If they all emerge from deep unconscious waters, then there must be some value to their manifestation, whether they are appealing in their presentation or not. Jung used to say that in cultures where only the light positive aspects of existence are allowed into consciousness, soon bloodshed and destruction eventually follow, with an almost perfect inevitability. This is so because by universal law it is impossible for the positive to exist without the negative, or for light to be everpresent without an interval of darkness. When we give room and acknowledge the dark element, it does not take over the psyche. When we suppress and ignore it, it will strike back in fateful ways. War, illness, catastrophes, and all social and personal evils have their root in this repression of the ‘shadow,’ as Jung called it.

The artist who paints the ‘abject,’ the scorned, the unwanted, may be giving voice to this darkness. The artist may be acknowledging for himself or herself that not everything in
nature is pure and sweet, and they may want others to see, through the medium of their art, the dark visions that may have emerged from their unconscious and that they themselves experienced. “A picture comes to me from miles away: who is to say from how far away I sensed it, I saw it, painted it? And yet the next day I can’t see what I have done myself,” said the great Picasso (Barrett 2011, 27). No wonder he could not better articulate his inspiration. Unconscious material usually appears in images that are not easily explained through the use of language but can be depicted in painting, as his 1907 Les Demoiselles d’Avignon which revolutionized visual art.

Commentaries on this painting by William Rubin based on Erwin Panofsky’s iconological method (Barrett 2011) emphasize the fact that the depiction of female raw sexuality in a most undecorative and unidealized way is an allegory toward disease, degeneration, and death, which probably tore through Picasso’s psyche when he realized he had contracted venereal disease from one of the prostitutes he had recently visited. In other words, he was painting his feelings of rage, disgust and loathing, toward the abject. This is the genesis of painting that speaks to the artist himself and to the viewer, of the psychological experience of anger, death, and darkness.

Whether or not we are ready to face this ‘darkness’ for ourselves or are unwilling to share the artist’s burden is a different matter. As long as art is not imposed on us, we can choose whether we want to be subjected to its content or not. However, the fact that such disturbing art exists, that it is out
there, available if we want it, is probably a good thing because it unleashes intense emotions that must be released in the artist and in the viewer, regardless of whether or not either of them is aware of the process of catharsis taking place internally.
CHAPTER 8
KRISTEVA AND THE ABJECT IN ART

[Artists] have seen something in life that is too much for anyone, too much for themselves.
—Deleuze and Guattari, What is Philosophy

With the above in mind, let us consider the ‘abject’ from the perspective of a theorist who introduced the concept, philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva. In her renowned 1980 treatise on the subject, aptly titled Pouvoirs de l’Horreur (Powers of Horror), Kristeva elaborates on three familiar emotional states that are indicative of the current times of dreary existential crisis in which we find ourselves: horror, absence of love, and melancholy.

Individuals in Western societies are plagued by increasing rates of depression and a growing sense of meaninglessness. Increasingly, therapists and analysts seek to find explanatory links to inner malaise not only within the individual and his or her psychological constitution but also with his or her relationship to the social milieu. Kristeva’s elaborate examination of ‘abjection’ and ‘horror’ indicates that these tense emotional states can be found in individuals, societies, and cultures, and portrayed in art and literature, as
well. The universal horror of being, already brought up by Freud decades earlier in his observations about the devastating effects of war on the human psyche, is elaborated in psychoanalytic discourse with the objective of bringing its hidden elements to light. Such is the power of ‘horror’ that if it remains hidden, unexamined, a fundamental part of existence escapes our understanding and endangers our very ability to cope.

Starting from elementary descriptions of the individual experience of the ‘abject,’ subsequently progressing to more refined conceptualizations, Kristeva uses graphic examples to introduce the reader to the concept. For Kristeva (1982), the violent reaction we experience before abject matter serves to demarcate a defining and protective space between self-identity, the I, and the other, that which is not part of the self, the rejected or abject:

Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection. When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk—harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail paring—I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire. Along with sight-clouding dizziness, nausea makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it. “I” want none of that element, sign of their desire: “I” do not want to listen, “I” do not want to assimilate it, “I” expel it. But since the food is not an “other” for “me”, who am only in their desire, I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which “I” claim to establish myself. (Kristeva 1982, 3)

Perhaps a more terrifying phenomenon that almost universally induces feelings of abjection is the presence of a corpse, the antithetical image of life, a direct violation of the experience
of living in the spectator, and the most devastating and
definitive reminder of our ultimate fate. A corpse, says
Kristeva:

... is death infecting life. Abject. It is something
rejected from which one does not part, from which one does
not protect oneself as from an object ... . Imaginary
uncanniness and a real threat, it beckons to us and ends up
engulfing us. (Kristeva 1982, 4)

She subsequently elaborates the feeling of extreme horror
further, distinguishing between the intensity of sensation two
different abject images produce:

If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place
where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the
most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached
upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, "I" is
expelled. (Kristeva 1982, 4)

And elsewhere, she describes the threat to the identity of the
'self' caused by the most abject of the abject—the corpse. By
breaking the wall between life and death, by invading the limits
of the 'self,' by the very idea of 'death' infecting the body,
the corpse is shattering to the image of the living self:

Deprived of world, therefore, I fall in a faint. In that
compelling, raw insolent thing in the morgue's full
sunlight, in that thing that no longer matches and
therefore no longer signifies anything, I behold the
breaking down of a world that has erased its borders:
fainting away. (McAfee 2004, 47)

The abject for Kristeva was for Freud the 'repressed,'
similar but not identical concepts. Both the abject and the
repressed possess an element of the uncanny, das Unheimliche,
loosely translated as the alien [my translation], that which is
not home-like, the unfamiliar. Freud spoke of the high
likelihood of the “return of the repressed” material, safe in its
repressed state, because entirely inaccessible by the conscious
mind, but dangerous upon emergence into consciousness because laden with self relevant traumatic content. On the other hand, the abject according to Kristeva, is veiled from view but always in our peripheral vision, invading consciousness from time to time and demanding acknowledgement. Such is the nature and power of all that is rejected and abject in nature: destruction, death, rotting food, filth.

Freud traces the “uncanny” back to a period in the beginning stages of childhood where there was not as yet a clear demarcation between self and the world, where the oneness of everything was pervasive in the child’s mind. For Freud, “the uncanny is something which is secretly familiar, which has undergone repression and then returned from it” (McAffee 2004, 49). Freud’s ‘return of the repressed’ is Kristeva’s ‘maternal abjection.’ Both see it as a longing, on one hand, to return to the undifferentiated state of being one with the mother and the external world, accompanied by deep anxiety, on the other, at the prospect of losing one’s differentiated, adult self and individuality.

Since this is a life long “threat” looming in human consciousness, societies have invented practices to prevent individuals from “losing” themselves. Abjection is that which inherently ‘disturbs identity, system, order’ (Lechte 1990, 160). Cleansing and purification rituals, religious prescriptions of dealing with the “unclean” (menstruating women, for example) or the banning of certain foods, have emerged not because there is something wrong with the people or the foods themselves, but only
so as to preserve the identity of the self within the social
system, Kristeva argues. But as cultures evolve and religions
lose their influence, art becomes the means by which the abject
is engaged in order to be subsequently “expelled” mentally,
eventually purified, and perhaps even sublimated.

In its rejected, expelled state, the abject, disgusting
material remains peripheral and readily available to awareness.
Abjection is in a way related to perversion, a strong desire to
look even when the image is appalling or horrifying. It
exercises a sort of simultaneous seduction and repulsion on the
individual and creates an approach-avoidance type dilemma.
Approaching the abject may cause a collapse of the sense of self
and self-identity. Avoiding it creates the anxiety of dismissing
the urge to return to that original undifferentiated state of
being. These antithetical forces of attraction and repulsion
prevail throughout an individual’s lifetime and are seen even in
children in their fascination with frightening stories. In
adults, the fascination could be with horror films and horror
literature, or gruesome imagery in art and media.

Essentially, when faced with abject matter, we do not
like what we see. Our conscious mind does not want to be exposed
to horrific images. Nevertheless, there is indisputably a
fascination with the forbidden images of abjection and a charged
instinctual drive to face them. The dilemma is not resolved by
repression, but by the discharge of affect through a kind of
laughter that Kristeva calls ‘apocalyptic laughter’ (Lechte 1990,
166), “for laughter is the way of placing or displacing
abjection” (Menninghaus 2003, 384). The element of laughter is key in the theory of disgust, as an act of ejection in itself, much like vomiting. However, the difference lies in the fact that in overcoming disgust with laughter, the result is “a successful (and, in this case, comical contact with the abject), without the psychotic disintegration on the part of the subject” (Menninghaus 2003, 384).

Either way, the abject creates strong states of affect in an individual and these intense emotional states validate our human experience and create our unique psychic space. Through creative practice a variety of disturbing emotional states may be transferred symbolically into works of art. According to Kristeva, the production of art (along perhaps with psychoanalysis) is one of the most important means by which healing of the self and its connections with others can be achieved.

Kristeva, following the elaboration of the concept of felix culpa, introduces an additional function of the abject in art, a model by which the sinful and evil lodged in the psyche is represented in such a way as to conform to the conditions of aesthetic ideals, a similar function to Christian confession of sin through the use of language. In other words, art becomes a type of confession:

Felix culpa is the possibility of speaking sin (i.e. evil abjection) and thus of coming to terms with it, of controlling it rather than being controlled by it, if not of eliminating it as Hegel thought. But, argues Kristeva, the history of the Church shows that felix culpa provoked the ‘fiercest censorship’ and ‘punishment’. For this reason, the artist, and in particular the writer, have
tended to provide the means of the felix culpa. (Lechte 1990, 165)

Thus, by the model of spoken sin as happy sin, art asserts abjection so that vileness and evil can be exorcised through the viewing of it and offer the release of affect by way of “apocalyptic laughter.” Art then is a means by which abjection is depicted (rather than articulated or verbalized) and “ejected” from the psyches and therefore controlled and purified (catharsis).

Equally, the reception of art by audiences may provide the key to understanding the arousal of a variety of emotions, particularly the sense of fear, loathing, and disgust associated with abject art. Also inherent in the viewing of abject art, however, is the possibility of healing of the seduction-repulsion dilemma in the psyche of viewers. The resolution of this dilemma, for artists and audiences alike, may be the most important incentive toward creativity and art.

Such was the influence of Kristeva’s work in Europe and in the United States that shortly after publication of Powers of Horror abjection became the main topic of discussion in critical, political, and intellectual discourse. In its 1993 exhibition titled Abject Art, the Whitney Museum of Modern Art confirmed the undeniable fact of the existence and social relevance of abjection and trauma already seen in the works of Cindy Sherman, Robert Mapplethorpe, Mike Kelley, Matthew Barney, Kiki Smith, and Gilbert and George, among others. Kristeva’s theory of ‘disgust’ (degout) in the face of the lowly, the base, and the despicable
resonated with the social problems of AIDS, homosexuality, and offensive artworks that had already stirred much public debate. Mapplethorpe’s art depicting sadomasochistic pleasures; Cindy Sherman’s stills of female body parts, vomit, menstrual blood, hair, bodily wastes and decaying food; Gilbert and George’s *Naked Shit Pictures* (Menninghaus 2003) had already caused unparalleled controversy.

The ‘disgusting’ was an attempt by artists to return to the “real” (*le vreel*), away from the imaginary, the deceptive, and the classical aesthetics of beauty and symmetry meant to pacify the gaze. By presenting reality as is, art demonstrates its power to de-sublimate and destroy culturally accepted modes of seeing, in favor of the ‘real’ in nature. Abject art, art that is deliberately meant to shock, generates strong affective reaction and powerful instinctual defenses on the cultural system (the viewer, society) to preserve its integrity. To the amusement of “bad boy” and “bad girl” artists, public outcry from conservatives may be perceived as the stern “father” response to symbolic “infantile perversion” and “oedipal naughtiness,” according to art critic Hal Foster (Menninghaus 2003, 398). The strong response may be exactly what these artists wanted in the first place, by being “naughty.”

On the other hand, repeated viewings inevitably mute the shock; apathy and indifference enter the picture. Thus, the anti-aesthetic evolves into the an-aesthetic and by necessity a return to the beautiful (Menninghaus 2003). The abject without the contrast of the sublimated beautiful would lose its meaning.
and value. However, as a cathartic element in the service of healing the psyche of both artist and viewer, its function, according to Kristeva, cannot be denied. John Lechte, Kristeva’s student and commentator states as follows:

Kristeva shows that to be challenged by art is to be confronted by the void of non-meaning and the prospect of our own hell, our own suffering caused by a loss of identity inducing our melancholias and the truly tragic aspect of being. Kristeva shows, too—in her writing on love and art—that this suffering is also the way to a ‘resurrection’ a renewal of the self in language. Once, to ‘travel hell’ was possible: for God was love (agape); now, God is dead and we are alone and afraid of the challenge of the void. Kristeva does not say how people can now be induced to accept this challenge. And for some she will be seen to be silent where she should be most illuminating. (Lechte 1990, 219)
The sublime is the artistic conquest of the awful.
—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*

Wittgenstein famously said that: “what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence” (Chessick 1999, 400). The emerging ‘repressed’ or the peripherally present ‘abject’ may be difficult or almost impossible to put into words. We are reminded of the difficulty Picasso had in explaining where his images come from. With art, it is not language but the artwork that speaks by itself to both artist and viewer. Although most artists would undoubtedly say that once created, the work of art has a life of its own outside that of its creator, they nevertheless seem to draw extensively from personal experience, and in the process “graft” a lot of pain and suffering they find difficult to deal with onto the artwork itself (Cropley and Cropley 2010, 278). In this way, art is a better and more efficient communicator of experience than language.

Art extends the possibility of discourse by offering a new visual language as a means of communication between artist and audience. As a matter of fact, the images may engage the spectator’s gaze in a more direct way than words, and engender a
visceral and more memorable response rather than a mere intellectual one. In this sense, art can provide the means of getting in touch with and coming to terms with the demonic and abject in our nature, not only for the artist but for the viewer as well. In psychoanalytic terms, art can provide cathartic resolution, a purging of painful emotional states. Kafka thought that from the viewer’s perspective, art serves as follows:

. . . [it] can be a cathartic experience, reviving and ‘cleansing’ the viewers’ repressed or subconscious destructive impulses. Great art is art that draws us in and inspires us to feel fear, anger, sadness, joy, awe, desire, horror, disgust. Through art, these impulses/passions are activated and transformed in the viewer into higher sublimated constructs/feelings. (Diamond 1996, 257)

The difference here is that the viewer undergoes the cathartic, cleansing process from a safe distance, whereas the artist had to emerge himself completely into the proverbial “dark wood” in order to draw from the well of fear and sadness the inspiration for his art and enable his own psychic healing. Here is where the therapeutic effect of art emerges. All art that is the authentic child of its creator and not just a superficial cliché has the ability of opening up the heart. Art, like love, Kristeva says, opens up the psyche to the other and makes it available to adaptation and change (Lechte 1990). Sachs, also a psychoanalyst, believes, like Kristeva, that a work of art creates a bond between the artist and the audience by:

. . . bringing the artist out of isolation and through self-elimination of the artist in the artwork. A great work of art resonates to an extent that a “oneness” is formed; the person enjoying the art, participates in it, becomes emerged in it, as did the artist who created it. By simultaneous dissolution of self in the art, artist and
audience join a greater whole and each becomes personally enriched by the feeling of self, merging into oneness. (Chessick 1999, 272)

Hegel saw art as a means of raising existence out of ordinariness and endowing it with a feeling of wholeness so as to afford us "a breathing space in which to feel at one with ourselves and the world" (Chessick 1999, 362). Renoir’s *Luncheon of the Boating Party* undoubtedly has this effect of raising the spirit and lifting the soul in the realms of beauty and light, in the oneness that we all knew as children and forgot as adults.

On the other hand, twentieth-century artists like Picasso, Francis Bacon, or Lucien Freud, employing images of brutality to depict the frightening, realistic aspect of our times, may still aim toward the transcendent and the sublime, but do so by taking a different path than the classicists. The difference between the beauty of the classical and the horror of the abject may be like a flourishing of the mind in the first case and a punch to the stomach in the second, but they both address the same living body and remind us of the fact that we are human because we perceive and are alive because we feel.

The value of the good art, regardless of the beauty or horror of the image, lies mostly in engaging the viewer and rewarding him or her with a kind of self-understanding that is unique in its immediacy and transformative function. In the Hegelian tradition, German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, asserts that our response to art constitutes a mode of self-understanding: “the work of art has its true being in the fact
that it becomes an experience that changes the person who experiences it."

Our experience of the aesthetic, too, is a mode of self-understanding. Self-understanding always occurs through understanding something other than the self, and includes the unity and integrity of the other. Since we meet the artwork in the world and encounter a world in the individual artwork, the work of art is not some alien universe into which we are magically transported for a time. Rather, we learn to understand ourselves in and through it. (Gadamer 1998, 92)

Understanding “disturbing” or abject art is at times difficult and alienating without an in-depth look at the artist, his or her psychological motivations, the creative process itself, the factors contributing to creative genius, as well as the psychology of audiences at the receiving end of the spectrum. “Our culture requires that we suppress most of our anger, and therefore, most of our creativity,” Rollo May once said (Diamond 1996, 255). If Freud’s sublimation theory is true, it follows that violence decreases through its mediated negotiation in cultural manifestations and forms, including art. With the advent of the shocking and abject in art, anger has found an outlet and creativity has hopefully been preserved, at least to an extent. Tolstoy’s theory of art expresses the same psychological concepts:

The emotional impact of looking at great art makes something accessible that was only felt vaguely before and is now understood in an integrative way although perhaps not adaptable to verbal communication. Great art and architecture open ways of affirming a sense of self in time and place through their immediate emotional impact, opening up unconscious memories informed by experiences of fusion and separation, pleasure and pain. (Russ 1999, 110)
It is true that what we called art a century ago is very different from the art we see at present and that Baudrillard’s critique of art as a nullity, a conspiracy, and an absurdity cannot be dismissed. Nevertheless, in all its manifestations, great art when found, inevitably produces a liberating and transformative experience and reinstates momentarily our original nature, the missing sense of wholeness and unity with others with which we all began life.
ADDENDUM

The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of true art and true science.

—Albert Einstein, The World As I See It

Julia Kristeva was a brilliant student studying literature and French (intellectual and linguistic ability) in her native, then communist Bulgaria, when a teacher informed her that the French government was offering scholarships to study in France and that the exams would be held at the French embassy (opportunity to test ability) (McAfee 2004). Her teacher went with her to the embassy (support from outside the family) where she took and passed the exams. Although the scholarship money would not be available until much later, she left Bulgaria immediately for fear that the school principle, who was away on a business trip, would prevent her departure upon his return, as imposed by communist party rules (challenge of authority and of status quo).

Kristeva arrived in Paris with five dollars in her pocket. By chance, she met a Bulgarian journalist who helped her with room and board (financial support) until she could get her bearings. Undoubtedly, he also helped with emotional support socializing a young immigrant from the communist East to the ways
of the West (*self-created asynchrony*). Kristeva received a
doctorate degree; she was offered a professor’s position at the
university, married a French intellectual, and published some of
the most pivotal philosophical and psychoanalytic texts to world
renown (*creative breakthrough*).

She never returned to live in Bulgaria (*deracinement*). Her creative work was entirely done in France, where she still
lives. (*Gertrude Stein: writers have to have two countries, the
one where they belong and the one in which they live really*).
She entered psychoanalysis to understand her own ‘dark’ side and—
as is the goal in analysis—her childhood experiences and traumas.
She then wrote about depression and melancholia, abjection, and
horror to great acclaim, probably drawing from her own childhood
experiences as they emerged in analysis. Her *linguistic* and
*intrapersonal* abilities served her well in her creative work
(*writing*) and in her distinguished career as one of the most
brilliant minds of our times.

And so it goes . . .
REFERENCE LIST


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