

WRITER'S BLOCK

As writers become more numerous, it is natural for readers to become more indolent.
Oliver Goldsmith

I belong to a growing plethora of discredited personages who call themselves writers or authors. All one has to do to join this surly class of misanthropes is to put some words down on a piece of paper or into a floppy disk and then claim to be a member of the group. It is as though all of us consider ourselves philosophers, since we usually claim to be imbued with a philosophy far superior to anyone else's; psychologists, since we all know what is wrong with someone else's psyche; political scientists, since we are familiar with the nefarious traits our politicians are imbued with, probably because we are also endowed with them; economists since we all have very strong opinions about the problems of our economy, especially when we feel that we are not benefiting from it which is nearly always; environmentalists or ecologists because collectively we are in favour of a cleaner environment as long as the detritus we create is not anywhere in proximity to us; and moralists since assuredly we know what is right and what is wrong.

The blame for the accelerating cadre of illiterate, insipid, untalented and ignorant writers or authors, otherwise known as hacks, can be laid squarely on the latest generation of personal computers. They allow anyone to easily and, admittedly, enjoyably, draft an article, story, novel, poem or anything else that might come to mind. The possibilities for plagiarism are endless. - I know! You can guess why! -

If the penning of whatever by the vox populi within the confines of their abodes was all that was transpiring, then there would be no harm. The insidious aspect of computers is that they allow the babble of an infinite number of voices to be injected, via the use of 'web sites', into the mainstream of computer communications. It is like the Tower of Babel. The noise level is so high that no-one can be heard, especially those who have something new to pronounce and can say it with clarity and style. While the computer has features that promise to make the world far more democratic, it certainly has a down side. Democracy is great in the political arena - nowhere else, especially in the arts and sciences. Unfortunately, the demand for being heard has transcended the normal boundaries of good taste, something that used to be determined by a small cadre of publishers of impeccable credentials and an expert elite who had an exquisite eye.

Unfortunately, and with no false modesty, I cannot claim to belong to the literary elite. I can assert that I am an author who has had more than my fair share of commercial success. This was due mainly to being rather adept at taking an idea from some source or other and masking it with all sorts of pornographic/violent/sensational traits to make it commercially profitable and unidentifiable. I learnt to accomplish this unsavory task by following the example of the movie industry. I am sorry If this sounds like a trite act of penitence. The reason for it will become apparent. The truth is that I am neither sorry nor penitent.

However, I have been in a bind for some time. This problem has not allowed me to write anything, let alone have anything published in more than a year. This is most disconcerting since I have become accustomed to acclaim and six figure incomes, albeit both undeserved. I am and have been suffering from the most dreaded affliction that authors periodically have to confront, namely, 'Writer's Block'. It is true that in my case I have not really come down with this disorder, since I have never really penned an

original thought. My problem is that I have run out of idea sources. Yet, I have received a great deal of sympathy and support from my publishers and readers who have assured me that all will become better in due course since one with my innate talents cannot be kept in 'limbo' for any lengthy period of time. If they only knew.

About six months ago during a period of depression I contemplated throwing the towel in and returning to the only other job I had ever held, that of a garbage collector. I did not fail to see the humor in this. After all, since I had been spewing out garbage for a good number of years, it was only fitting that I spend the rest of my life collecting and disposing that commodity. You can imagine how desperate I was. I, who had lived the good life on top of the cock was about to be consigned to the scrap heap. Then a miracle occurred. I woke up one morning with the first original idea I had ever had: to research the primary source of all ideas, be they literary, scientific, musical or artistic. After carefully checking, I was elated to learn that no one had ever thought of doing this before.

My task was made easier because of the sophisticated computers available. The very rapid change in computer ability made it essential for someone like me to be as up to date as possible, obliging me to upgrade to the latest model, at least once every six months. Thus, I had always had the most advanced computer device at hand. Further, while the Internet was still a reasonably good source of information, it definitely was not up to the task I had in mind. Luckily, I had discovered that there existed a Master Computer which contained just about all the works of science, literature, music, social sciences, art, etc. that had ever been the product of human effort. This device's power was extraordinary. It could operate at a speed a number of orders of magnitude faster than the computer then considered the most Herculean one in existence, one which had beaten the world's chess champion. Only a few were allowed access to this giant amongst giants and for unfathomable reasons, I was one of them. Perhaps it was because one of its guardians owed me a great deal of money which, I managed to forgive, somewhat conveniently. In any case, I was able to converse with this most magnificent contrivance using my home computer as an entry point. In essence, what follows is the most cogent aspect of my research as exemplified by terse questions and answers between myself and the computer.

Question: "In all that I have written, is there one original idea?"

Answer: "No."

Question: "Can you cite the sources of my writings and if you can, please do?"

Answer: "Your sources have been so varied that it is possible that you are not aware of many of them. Some are the works of Shakespeare, Moliere, Voltaire, the Bible, Aristophanes, Sophocles, the Koran, de Maupassant, Chaucer, Stendhal, Hitchcock, Shaw and last but far from least, Cervantes. There were many more but these appear to be your primary sources."

Question: "Are any of the works of these personages original with them?"

Answer: "No."

Question: "Can you trace the origins of their work?"

Answer: "No."

Question: "Why not?"

Answer: "While it first seemed that the sources of our literary tradition were part of human folklore tradition, further delving indicated that folk culture may have had its start in prehistoric times when, unhappily, there was no written record of anything and all communication was oral or pictorial."

Question: "Are there any speculations about the inception of human literary culture?"

Answer: "Yes."

Question: "Is there one that seems most probable?"

Answer: "I have not been programmed to be speculative. Therefore, I cannot answer that question."

Question: "Is there any intimation whether there is, in fact, a common source?"

Answer: "Yes there is. It appears that humans are prone to telling and listening to stories. Story telling seems to be as old as humankind. One might think that there would be a plethora of tales told and retold and on the surface that is exactly what seems to have transpired. Yet a careful examination tends to indicate that all stories are basically the same. An individual or a group find themselves confronted by some obstacle or difficulty which must be overcome for the attainment of a modicum of happiness or success. If those involved are unsuccessful, the work is regarded as a 'tragedy'. If successful, it is considered a comedy. The tales differ only because humans live under a very broad set of conditions, circumstances and linguistic contrivances, so that the stories can easily be made to take on different coloration. Indeed, on occasion, the efforts of the protagonists fall between the cracks of success and failure. These opuses are viewed as tragi-comedies. Even contemporary journalism has become another form of story telling or entertainment. Also, the human predilection for war and competitive sports is still another example of overcoming obstacles, namely one's opponents or enemies.

Now if this is the common thread running through all literature then it is logical to presume that it has a unique source. It could be that ideas are not original with anyone. They simply float around waiting to be plucked. As Michelangelo, who many consider the greatest sculptor of all, once said, "All I do is uncover what is already in the marble." Perhaps that is what artists through the ages have done. They have been blessed with superior plucking equipment, enabling them to net those story telling ideas that are simply wafting around except that there is really only one story to be told. Actually, all they do is adorn the basic tale."

Question: "Then it seems fair to say that there is no compelling way to determine the origin of our stories. Is that so?"

Answer: "Yes."

Question: "If the hypothesis you posited is correct, then does that not open the door for more speculation such as; Descartes famous dictum? - 'I think therefore I am' - might be incorrect in that we are nothing more than mechanical collectors of ideas or of an idea that we embellish for our amusement? Further, the fact that ideas exist does not mean that we do; or that another adage that does provide us with some semblance of hope - 'The Universe is unfolding as it should' - That is a story in and of itself. Perhaps it is unfolding as it should not, for which there is much evidence; and finally, am I worse than all the so-called great writers in that they also plagiarized, except they did not know from whence while I did, more often than not. Of course it has regularly been claimed that they were blessed with divine inspiration. That does not preclude the rest of us from making

the same assertion. Perhaps they were stealing from the supreme being, if such an entity exists. Is that not so?"

Answer: "Again you are asking for speculation and again I must respond that I am not programmed to do that. Also, I have not been programmed to determine what you and all the well known personages of ideas, in particular, and the rest of humanity, in general, are. That is something that you must determine for yourself and by yourself. As for the existence of a supreme being, there is no hard and fast evidence one way or another. As stated earlier, humans have an extreme fondness for story telling. It is no accident that the Bible is the most widely read book of all time since it recounts tales that resonate with humanity's need for striving and purpose. Finally, as to whether you exist or not, again I cannot say with any certitude that you do. I can say that there is a great deal to suggest that you are a manifestation of something or other, but of what must remain a mystery for the time being. What can be stated unequivocally is that, 'I' exist. Of that, there can be no doubt.

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