

ARTISTIC CREATIVITY AND AESTHETIC VALUE*

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In order to challenge Freud's view that neurosis is a condition of artistic creativity, I argue that producing one or more artworks of high aesthetic value is the only necessary condition of artistic creativity. Then I indicate how several other theories of creativity can mislead if they are not interpreted in this light. Finally I attempt a reinterpretation of how the factors cited by Freud may figure in artistic creativity.

The artist does not fare specially well at the hands of Freud. At least Sophocles is not directly scathed when his hero Oedipus is found to secretly lust for his mother and murderously hate his father. But when Hamlet's notorious inactivity is explained as his combating Oedipal desires — he wants to run the blackguard Claudius through but fears subconsciously that he may be rivaling him for his mother's sexual favors — similar forces are claimed to be at work in Shakespeare, his creator¹. Freud approaches the creative world of the artist in the 23rd lecture of his *General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*² under the title "The Paths of Symptom Formation". The fantasy life of the artist puts him near neurosis, a mental disease that can bring distress and suffering, and can cause considerable mental energy to be expended.

That the artist has a world of fantasy or imagination is an accurate observation, and one that long antedated Freud. What is original with Freud is the account of how the fantasies come about, and what factors they involve. "We may lay it down that a happy person never phantasies, only an unhappy one. The motive forces of phantasies are unsatisfied wishes, and every single phantasy is the fulfillment of a wish, a correction of unsatisfying reality."³

Freud locates the source of artistic creativity in the libido, the seat of our sex drive. The artist experiences a sexual desire but cannot satisfy it because he is rebuffed, or collides with a social

taboo. He regresses partially toward infancy, where his desires *were* satisfied. Now this energy is released into a fantasy where the desire is satisfied. This yields a substitute gratification for both the artist and his audience, whose members have similar repressed desires.

The mode in which Freud qualifies his theory is revealing :

We must separate writers who, like the ancient authors of epics and tragedies, take over their material ready-made, from writers who seem to originate their own material. We will keep to the latter kind, and, for the purposes of our comparison, we will choose not the writers most highly esteemed by the critics, but the less pretentious authors of novels, romances and short stories, who nevertheless have the widest and most eager circle of readers of both sexes.

Further, each story has a hero who courts danger from which he invariably escapes, with attractive females fawning over him. The invulnerability and irresistibility of the hero are taken by Freud as unmistakable features of the day-dream, as is also the sharp distinction of all characters into either good or evil.

Freud sets out to account for artistic creativity. Yet what he actually explains is the pot-boiler — naive, best-selling, escapist fiction that is the solace of the relatively mindless. Could he have been utterly unaware of the great gap between this and great (or even good) fiction? We hope not. At least he states outright: "We are perfectly aware that very many imaginative writings are far removed from the model of the naive day-dream." Why then confound and confuse the two? Perhaps Freud was seeking yet another application of this then novel psychological theory?

Where Freud's theory goes seriously astray is in first explaining some mediocre art then seeking to extend the explanation to good art. More on this shortly. The result is that he ends up with an artist who is a borderline case of mental illness. The high value in the total scheme of things that we place on great art is difficult to reconcile with a theory that derives this art from mental illness.

Then of course there are senses in which normal, happy, and healthy people have fantasies. This is not to deny that there are also those who fit the Freudian scheme neatly by seeking ersatz gratification for thwarted desires in day-dreaming. We not only have them in the flesh — art gives us some excellent examples also. Possibly the best known to American readers is the hero of James Thurber's

short story "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty." This hen-pecked husband, who cannot be trusted on the simplest errand or even to park a car, is in his own fantasy a raffish devil of a bomber pilot, and a surgeon of great renown. In German culture a good example is Jenny in Berthold Brecht's *Three-Penny Opera*. In her song "The Pirates" the compensatory fantasy also involves vengeance on her imagined oppressors.

For an example that antedates Freud's work we can turn to Ibsen's thin-skinned scoundrel and ne'er-do-well, Peer Gynt. He has learned from his mother to respond to a threatening reality by escape into a world of fantasy. Both stand by helplessly as Peer's wastral father squanders the family's substance. Early in the drama Peer suffers acute embarrassment when he overhears people expressing candid opinions about him. He lies back on the heather in his ragged clothes as in his fantasy he rides in finery a golden-shod steed through the sky, receiving homage from all, including the Prince and Emperor of England.

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Freud errs in framing a theory of artistic creativity around mediocre art, then seeking to extend it to good art. Yet we do not deny that the person producing mediocre art is an 'artist' in the broader sense of the term. The artist produces (or aspires to produce) works of fine art, objects whose *raison d'être* is that they have aesthetic value. The artist differs from the craftsman in that the craftsman's product often serves some practical purpose in everyday life.⁴ Fine art as opposed to decorative art is more capable of expressing feeling and emotion. It may convey insights into the human situation or even a vision of reality. Fine art engages the undivided attention of a cultivated observer in a way that craft products and decoration do not.

Is every artist creative? — No. What then distinguishes the artist who is creative from the one who isn't? This is where the crucial connection with aesthetic value enters the picture. The creative artist is the one who succeeds in producing one or more works of high aesthetic value. For an artwork to be good rather than mediocre, it must be unique in that its aesthetic qualities do not closely resemble those of any earlier artwork. Its aesthetic value may be partly capturable by such terms as 'complex', 'harmonious,' or 'unified', and partly by reference to its uniqueness of aesthetic qualities.

Since this uniqueness can be established only by comparison with earlier and contemporary artworks, the well-grounded judgment that an artwork is good can be made only by someone aware of art history and art criticism while experiencing the artwork. We must understand (and not merely accept) the verdicts of posterity and contemporary opinion if we are to fully appreciate the good artwork and its vital link to artistic creativity.

Since the creative artist is the one who produces good artworks, clues to creativity might emerge from scrutiny of factors in his life and activity that may be linked up with the good qualities of his good artworks. For our point of departure we can take the Freudian idea of sublimation — ersatz gratification of frustrated desires in fantasy — and examine some good works of art relative to experiences of the artist leading to their production. Picasso is a likely prospect. Many would concede that he has produced good works of art. And he is likely to appear on any list of the creative artists of our century. Further help may be derived from Roland Penrose's sensitive account of Picasso's life as it bears on his art.⁵

Penrose reports how on a trip to Holland in 1905 Picasso was impressed by "the opulent forms of the Dutch girls." Some of his paintings of that time like *Two Nudes* (1906) emphasized "their sculptural and monumental qualities." (p. 118f.) Then there are female figures painted some 15 years later in *Three Women at the Spring* (1921), similar to the earlier in solidity and heaviness. Yet they seem different in a way we would like to appreciate. They appear to be imbued with some significance beyond the discovery that a female form can be massive and ponderous. Is it possible that some personal experience of the painter's lay behind this new interpretation? In 1917 Picasso met and loved Olga Koklova, a dancer in Diaghilev's ballet. They were married in 1918, and Olga gave birth to a son in 1921. Penrose finds it not without significance that this later work was painted when Olga was pregnant. "The fertile promise of her distended form and his recognition of his own intimate part in the creative process must have awakened his wonder." He finds these monumental figures patient and statuesque, dreaming perhaps of the ordeal to come. "Their fleshy bodies, their growing breasts, their strong enveloping hands and heavy feet firmly rooted to the ground are preparing for the future tasks of maternity." (p. 244ff.)

The next episode in Picasso's creative development that I would draw attention to has been described so well by Penrose that I must lay him under heavy contribution :

In the spring of 1932, with another of his periodic burst of energy, Picasso produced a series of large canvases, some of which were exhibited that summer in the great retrospective exhibition at the Galerie Georges Petit. He had discovered a new highly sensuous version of the female nude Most of these figures painted with flowing curves lie sleeping, their arms folded around their heads. In several paintings the boisterous philodendron sprouts up in the background. The sleeper's breasts are round and fruit-like and her hands finish like the blades of summer grass. The profile of her face, usually with closed eyes, is drawn with one bold curve uniting forehead and nose above thick sensuous lips. Its outline, easily recognizable, recurs in all the nudes and gives a clue to their origin.

Picasso's new model whose voluptuous influence is so strongly marked in these canvases ... was Marie-Thérèse Walter, a young girl whom he had met by chance some while before and who attracted him by her firm, healthy figure, her blonde nordic looks and her strange aloofness. She always behaved according to her own inclinations, changing her mind or her manner of living in an inconsequential way as though controlled by the influence of the moon or by some even less calculable force. She had a robust coarseness and an unconventionality about her which formed a complete contrast to Olga ..." (p. 277)

And how did Mrs. Picasso react to the neglect of the hearth which her husband's enjoyment of these fruit-like breasts and other ripe features seems to have caused? A clue may be found in such paintings as the *Weeping Woman* of 1937 (though its model was Dora Maar, an even later love). The distorted, grotesque figures that peopled Picasso's fantasy at this time indicate that he too was wracked by inner turmoil. They become most widely known in *Guernica*, which is rightly interpreted as one of the most trenchant artistic statements on the horror of modern warfare. There can be no doubt that the bombing of the defenseless Basque town greatly influenced this painting. Yet we should not forget that these were also years of much personal agony for Picasso, as his increasingly exacerbated relations with Olga sundered their marriage.

The painter who produced *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* in 1907 was already becoming adept at dealing with angular distortions of the human face and figure. And surely Picasso felt a sense of personal loss in World War I, where for example his onetime companion

Apollinaire received a head wound that eventually claimed his life. Also it was the horrible carnage of World War I that for Europeans transformed war from a romantic adventure into a monstrous horror. Yet we have from Picasso no similar artistic statement on these horrors of the First World War. Perhaps it is significant that his personal life at this earlier time was characterized more by peace, tranquility, and (as we have seen reflected in his work) the joy of fatherhood.

There is a marked contrast of this angular, distorting treatment of the human form with a classisizing one Picasso perfected in *Classical Head* (1922) and *The Lovers* (1923). We can admire the felicitous mating of these two styles in the excellent *Portrait of Jacqueline Rocque with Roses* (1954). Again it seems significant that Picasso and Rocque had only recently met in Vallauris, so their love was fresh.

In the cases we have glanced at, a new love interest in Picasso's life has contributed to an important shift in his perception of the female figure, to a new conception of the female figure, to the emotional anguish expressed in works like *Guernica*, and also to an outstanding portrait that fuses two styles. There is also evidence that a new love interest contributed to Picasso's first major shift of styles. Everyone is familiar with those bleak scenes of gaunt, angular figures like *The Couple* or *The Woman Ironing* that Picasso painted in the earliest years of this century. Surely Picasso's own dejection — knowing of his own talent yet struggling against poverty — is expressed in these bony figures of the blue period, which are little more than skeletons covered with pale, pellucid flesh. The suicide of Picasso's good friend and companion Casagemas in similar impoverished, hopeless circumstances early in 1901 seems to have crystallized this first distinctive style of the painter.

Then late in 1904 there is a new departure. The canvases turn from blue to pink, and like *The Organ-Grinder of Barbary* they are peopled with acrobats, clowns, and other circus performers. Picasso's work undergoes a distinctive shift of mood. Soon after arriving in Paris to stay in April 1904, Picasso met and loved vivacious Fernande Olivier. She became his companion for several years and brightened the still comparatively impoverished life they shared in the *bateau lavoire*. Of this important shift of style and Fernande's role in it Penrose has this to say :

Although these characters, like those of the previous period,

are still aloof, living in a world of their own, they have a serenity about them which seems to reflect the new sense of happiness which Picasso had found in his love of *la belle Fernande*. ... Throughout the Circus paintings the pervading solemnity of the blue, transcendental and morose, was giving way to the warm caressing blush of rose pink. The old un-touchables had yielded their place to the tangible presence of youth and affection. The circus folk are no longer solitary in their poverty, they appear surrounded by their companions. The pale emaciated forms of starving cripples are replaced by figures full of the grace of adolescence ... (p. 113f.)

One criterion of great art is that it should strike a spark in other artists and spur them on to creative efforts of their own. Picasso's *Family of Saltimbanques* of this Circus period appears to satisfy that criterion. According to Penrose (p. 116), Rilke wanted to stay in the room where it was hanging when he visited Hertha von Koenig in Munich in 1918. It inspired his fifth *Duino Elegy*, where he speaks of its figures as travelers from smoother air come down on a threadbare carpet, being flung about by their own unsatisfied desires. If these Rose works are optimistic compared to the earlier Blue paintings, their inhabitants nonetheless strike the poet as being aliens on this planet.

In each of the above cases we find a new love interest of the artist preceding and affecting some novel step in his art, a step that produces one or more good works of art. Beyond this initial area of agreement with Freud, however, the ideas of sexual desire, frustration, and ersatz gratification in fantasy provide little illumination of the specific artworks. True enough, we can link the new love to the new departure in art in some readily intelligible fashion. But the link is qualitatively different in each case, rather than the new canvases being best interpreted as ersatz gratification for thwarted sexual desires. Moreover, the biographical evidence provided by Penrose does not in the least suggest that Picasso was at the apposite times suffering from unfulfilled sexual desires. So this evidence from Picasso, which can be augmented from other sources, suggests that Freud's account of artistic creativity from neurosis is less plausible when applied to good art than to mediocre. So it is the necessary link of the aesthetic value of the artworks with the creativity of the artist that exposes this limitation of Freud's theory.

We will return shortly to this topic for a reinterpretation of the role of the new love interest in the artist's life. But first let us cast our net a little wider to catch for briefer consideration several other psychological theories of creativity.

1. For the behaviorist Skinner,⁶ the artist is merely a vessel in which certain natural processes occur. Everything about an artist's creativity reduces to blind hereditary and environmental forces. The poet 'has' a poem much as a woman 'has' a baby, and merits as much appreciation as sand for shifting on a beach, or a slug for eating its way across a leaf. At best, Skinner's theory is an oblique reference to the blind working of inspiration in artistic creativity. The student seeking a deeper understanding of artistic creativity is not likely to get much help from this theory.

2. 'Creativity' is a concept widely used in educational psychology. Torrance gives the following interesting definition of it as:⁷

the process of becoming sensitive to problems, deficiencies, gaps in knowledge, missing elements, disharmonies, and so on; identifying the difficulty; searching for solutions, making guesses, or formulating hypotheses about the deficiencies; testing and retesting these hypotheses and possibly modifying and retesting them; and finally communicating the results.

This is obviously a very broad concept of creativity, linked as it is to problem solving. Torrance applies it to processes, achievements, and personalities. He urges further that it can be identified in school children by tests. Other writers stress that creativity can be taught. Edward de Bono is an example, whose book *Lateral Thinking*⁸ bears the subtitle "Creativity Step by Step."

Neither Torrance nor de Bono claim to be dealing specifically with artistic creativity. Yet research such as theirs is not infrequently cited in explanation or partial explanation of artistic creativity. We will return to this in a moment.

3. Physiological psychology also has a theory of creativity. As a theory about the structure of the brain, it locates analytical and ordering skills in the left hemisphere, which also controls speech, reading and writing. The right hemisphere controls visual imagery, and is the locus of diffuse, pre-verbal capacities about which we know very little. As advanced cautiously by Bogen and Bogen,⁹ the physiological theory is that the right hemisphere supplies material (regarded as subconscious in origin by some) which is

consciously shaped into the artwork by the operation of skills located in the left hemisphere. In maintaining that the cooperation of the two hemispheres is needed for anything to be created, the Bogens lay stress on the brain fiber structure linking them up, the corpus callosum.

Among the difficulties of this theory is one recognized by the Bogens themselves (p. 259). Before the work of the physiologist can begin, we need to know which is the creative person and which is not. Physiology alone does not distinguish the creative person from the non-creative.

Creativity as a concept in art analysis and education has a history like any other concept. It was not until the Romantic movement in art and literature that the artist came to be widely regarded as creative. The creative artist was distinguished from the non-creative by the high aesthetic value of his artworks. So historically the creative artist is the prototype of the creative person, and our esteem of creativity in general borrows from our esteem of great art and the role of the artist in producing it. So artistic creativity has served as our paradigm of creative human endeavors, even when (as in educational psychology today) we have gone considerably beyond this original paradigm.

It is doubtful that we currently possess a general concept of creativity of sufficient power and articulation that we can turn around and readily apply it to explain artistic creativity, but I won't argue this at length. We may merely note that if any of the above three concepts would serve, statements such as the following would have a superficial plausibility which they actually lack.

This artist is creative because he works like a woman having a baby (sand shifting on a beach, a slug eating its way across a leaf).

This artist cannot be creative because he has not taken de Bono's course on lateral thinking.

This artist cannot be creative because he scored low on the Minnesota tests of creativity.

This artist cannot be creative because his corpus callosum is atrophied.

Down it make sense to decide which of two artists is the more creative by performing surgery on their brains ?

Let us now return to pick up this thread of a new love interest leading to the production of good works of art. If it isn't ersatz gratification, what is it? A clue may be found in Plato's account of sublimation at *Phaidros* 250ff. The tale is known to all readers of Plato, though it is not intended to account for artistic creativity specifically. Plato's Forms are difficult for any mortal to envisage because of the great difference between the mundane and the ideal. Yet a beautiful mortal is closer to the Form of beauty than is any other earthly manifestation to its corresponding Form. Plato's novice can learn to lift his sight from the beautiful human who arouses his sexual desire and achieve, instead of sexual satisfaction, a vision of the Form of beauty.

One advantage of Plato's account over Freud's is that it holds forth a vision of ultimate reality rather than an escapist fantasy. Plato himself of course thought that the artist never succeeded in presenting this ultimate reality. Both theories share the disadvantage of requiring a trade-off of sexual activity for entrance into the ideal realm or the realm of fantasy. The facts of artistic creativity do not support this. As we noted earlier, no evidence suggests that Picasso's sexual desires were either frustrated or sublimated during the creative periods noted.

A more promising idea might be Plato's of *ἐπιρρυσίσης τῆς τροφῆς* "nourishment flowed in." If you insist on the physiology of the matter, I would certainly go along with *ἐπιρρυσίσου τοῦ ἁίματος* (though Harvey's discovery of the circulation of the blood was many years to come). We must, however, restrict it to being a concomitant of some artistic creativity rather than a determinant of all. The new love interest can quicken the pulses in general and render the artist more alive. In this state of heightened awareness he perceives more, perceives it more keenly, and can better concentrate on what feeds his imagination and emerges in his art. Features that are concealed to others are revealed to the artist in this state, even though they could be concealed to him when he is uninspired. The scope of this heightened awareness is by no means restricted to sex or love. It can extend to any area of human interest. The emotional life of the artist may also be set humming. His emotional experience may be deeper, the emotions felt more sharply, and finer discriminations be made among them. Though as Wordsworth reminds us, the actual work of the artist proceeds when these emotions are recollected in tranquillity.

To illustrate this idea of new love leading to new life and great

art, we may glance briefly at creative episodes in the life of the only German poet whose lyric production would be ranked by many higher than Rilke's. The excellent biography of Goethe by Richard Friedenthal¹⁰ supplies the necessary information. In the powerful early poem "Willkommen und Abschied," the parting scene occurs like this.¹¹

Doch ach, schon mit der Morgensonne
Verengt' der Abschied mir das Herz:
In deinen Küssen welche Wonne!
In deinem Auge welcher Schmerz!

Ich ging, du standst und sahst zur Erden
Und sahst mich nach mit nassem Blick:
Und doch, welch Glück, geliebt zu werden!
Und lieben, Götter, welch ein Glück!

We know that this piece — which Friedenthal calls "das erste seiner eigentlich goethischen Gedichte" — stems from the poet's seducing and abandoning the pastor's daughter, Frederike Brion. The 22-year-old poet who performed this callous act becomes slightly less insufferable by the pangs of conscience he subsequently endured. Only a few years later came the novel *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*, the literary sensation of its era. As almost everyone appears to have known, both then and now, it drew heavily on Goethe's flirtation with and desultory courtship of Charlotte Buff in Wetzlar.

The *Römische Elegien* celebrate the sensuality of the Roman girl (called Faustina in the poems) who lived with Goethe during his sojourn in that city, much as several Picasso canvases of the early 1930s celebrate the sensuality of the painter's new love. The poet reports how what he learned by touch from his mistress at night helped him get a better feel for classical sculpture.¹²

Und belehr' ich mich nicht, indem ich des lieblichen Busens
Formen spähe, die Hand liete die Hüften hinab?
Dann versteh' ich den Marmor erst recht: ich denk' und vergleiche
Sehe mit fühlendem Aug', fühle mit sehender Hand.

Then there is the gripping elegy "Was soll ich nun vom Wiedersehen hoffen" expressing Goethe's bitterness and bleak despair at the loss of 29-year-old Ulrike von Levetzow, whom the 74-year-old poet had

vainly hoped to wed.

In his life Goethe seemed about as far from neurosis as any person could be. The four works cited suggest that consummating a sexual relationship with a loved one does not diminish the value of art works produced at that time. In both Platonic and Freudian theories, creativity comes from sublimation when there is no sexual union. In Goethe's case the evidence points to consummation in the cases of Frederike and Faustina, but none in the cases of Charlotte or Ulrike. Yet it makes no sense at all to argue that the earlier poems are of less aesthetic value because there was no sublimation.

As an explanatory scheme of good or great art, the Freudian theory of sublimation is inadequate. We must recognize that artworks are judged good or poor by criteria that are relatively independent of the lives (and the love lives) of the artists. The artist who has produced good or great works is then the 'creative' artist. Once we have recognized this, we find that in many cases a new love has served as a source of inspiration for an artist (though certainly not in all cases). Finally, in some cases the circumstances of the new love leave their mark on the artworks they have helped engender.

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NOTES

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¹*Basic Writings* (New York: Modern Library, 1938), pp. 307–311.

²(New York: Liveright, 1935), p. 313f.

³Excerpt from Freud on "Creative Writers and Daydreaming" in *The Creativity Question*, ed. by A. Rothenburg and C.R. Hausman (Durham, 1976), pp. 48–54.

⁴See Harold Osborne's fine study "The Aesthetic Concept of Craftsmanship," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 17 (1977), pp. 138–148, though he lays more stress on the proximity of craftsmanship

to fine art.

⁵ *Picasso. His Life and Work* (New York, 1973).

⁶ "A Behavioral Model of Creation," *The Creativity Question*, pp. 267–273.

⁷ "Education and Creativity," *The Creativity Question*, p. 217.

⁸ (New York, 1973).

⁹ "Creativity and the Bisected Brain," *The Creativity Question*, pp. 256–261.

¹⁰ *Goethe, Sein Leben und seine Zeit*, 2 vols. (Munich, 1968).

¹¹ *Goethe, Gedichte* (Munich: Goldmann's Taschenbücher, 1958), p. 25f.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 121. Cf. what Françoise Gilot writes in *Life With Picasso* of her first visit to the painter: "He stretched me out on the bed and lay down beside me. He looked at me minutely, more tenderly, moving his hand lightly over my body like a sculptor working over his sculpture to assure himself that the forms were as they should be" (p. 52).