

## *On the Development of Artistic Talent\**

PINCHAS NOY, M.D.

*Dept. of Psychiatry, Hebrew University-Hadassah Hospital and Medical School*

### ABSTRACT

A hypothesis about the developmental sources of the artistic talent is presented.

The gifted artist is characterised by his special ability to utilize primary process function in structuring the artistic creation. This ability is confined to one specific medium of communication — sounds, sights, expressive movements, etc.

The artist differs from the 'ordinary' man in that he is able to relate to his specific medium in a twofold way — once, as to a set of concrete objects and events organized according to primary process function and second — as to a logically organized communicative medium of signs, symbols and signals.

It is proposed that the beginning of the developmental path of any artistic talent is rooted in that infantile stage of transition from primary to secondary process organization.

Much has been written in the psychoanalytical and psychological literature on problems of art, creativity, and the psychodynamics of the artist, while rather little has been said about the sources of artistic talent. Implicitly or explicitly, talent is regarded by most authors to be "a gift from God," as it was termed by Phyllis Greenacre [1], or, in the words of Freud [2], as a "Psychological mystery." It has been taken for granted over hundred of years that artistic talent is given at birth and that as such it is beyond psychological investigation. Much information can be found in the literature on the structure of works of art, the structure of the personality of the artist, the needs he gratifies by means of his creation, yet the question of "why" has been left untouched — why is it that the artist can make use of his specific capacity in resolving inner problems, whereas ordinary people cannot do so.

A number of assumptions, based on the knowledge about art that has been gathered in psychoanalytic literature, will be proposed to explain some properties, seemingly at the root of artistic talent.

Art is regarded by psychoanalysts as being structured according to the rules of primary processes, as are the dream and the joke. For 50 years psychoanalysts have endeavoured to decypher the hidden symbolic contents of art. During the last 15 years interest has been steadily growing also in its formal aspects.

---

\* Presented at the 10th Convention of the Israel Neuropsychiatric Association, Tel-Aviv, May 1966.

Its forms and designs and their structural rules have increasingly become objects of analytic investigation. Most authors, among them Kris[3], Bychowski [4], Ehrenzweig[5], Schachtel[6] and Arieti[7], stress the connection between the structural rules of art and infantile or psychotic modes of thought organization. They all regard the intricate, logically inaccessible structures of pure art as revealing primary processes.

As an example let us look at Bach's "Art of the Fugue." Among the intricacies of its structure such processes as inversion, mirror reversal, condensation can be recognized, which are familiar to the psychoanalyst from the structures of the dream, of infantile thinking, or of the paleological thinking of the schizophrenic. Accordingly, it may be claimed that the artist's ability to use primary processes in structuring his creation makes for what is considered to be his particular endowment. In other words, the specific artistic talent consists in the artist's free use of an ability, to apply which, except in dream or disease states, ordinary people have lost the power. Starting from a similar assumption, Kris[3] and Bychowski[4] coined the term "regression in the service of the ego." This concept draws a picture of the artist as, from time to time, losing control of logic dominated reality, then delving down into the depth of the unconscious, to bring up from there the chaotic material, that is shaped into the work of art in the secondary, the cognitive, process. This romantic picture may perhaps suit the moments of inspiration experienced by great artists, but it falls short of describing talent, as it is understood by the professional artist. That is the talent which is assessed by every teacher of art when selecting student-candidates, be it for music, painting or drama, which can be measured by specifically designed psychological tests.

At least ninety per cent of the artist's work is being performed as a daily routine, just as other people do their work, without inspiration or a "sinking down into the depth of the unconscious" or "regression." The musician who is able to listen to and distinguish simultaneously ten different sounds may even be surprised to know that others cannot do so. It seems justified, thus, to say that the special capability of the artist to use primary processes, rather than resulting from a change in the inner dynamic balance, such as a weakening of the defence mechanisms, regression or even inspiration, is for him no more than one secondary cognitive function among the others, he has like everybody else.

A closer inspection of the characteristics of the gifted artist will show that he is not so entirely free in his use of primary processes, that, in fact, he cannot apply them outside the one area of his particular artistic activity. As regards other areas, he is just like everybody else: he conceals his dreams, uses the same defences, expresses indirectly his unconscious wishes and neurotic symptoms.

If only a few studies are concerned with the psychology of talent in general, no attempt has been made to explain the specific limitation of talent to use the unconscious in merely one area. Even when viewing talent as regression, the question has never been raised, why one artist, when sinking into regression to lift material from the depths of his unconscious, expresses, what he has lifted up, in sounds and tones only, whereas another does so merely in shapes and colours.

In "Metamorphosis," Schachtel (1959) [6] tried to understand which property or properties are at the root of any artistic talent. He points out, there, that artistic work is preceded by a specific mode of relating to objects, of seeing and contemplating, without which the artistic talent cannot exist. In fact, Schachtel reinstates here an opinion stated 50 years earlier by the English aestheticist Roger Fry (1909) [8]. Both speak of different perceptual models of relating to objects and events. The ordinary adult person sees objects in a utilitarian way, as a source of information, as signs to convey something to him. You look at your watch to learn the time and nothing more. Indeed, if 95 out of a hundred persons were asked to sketch the dial of their watch, they could not do so. This is merely to show that in spite of having looked at the watch thousands of times, they cannot remember the details of what they have seen. The reason is that the watch was never looked at for itself but as a sign to inform on the exact time. Yet if the same person were to buy an expensive ticket for a watch exhibition, he will doubtlessly recall the shapes of several watches, even having seen them only once. Roger Fry [8] pointed out that the first of the two ways of relating to objects is the ordinary, the routine one, while the second is that of aesthetic contemplation. Schachtel shows that this second form corresponds to the way in which the child relates to objects. He says: "The resemblance consists in the freshness, spontaneity, interest and openness with which the object is approached and reacted to (p. 240)." Schachtel[6] thinks that this approach constitutes the "creative experience" and "is possible only if the person opens himself fully toward as many object aspects as possible, that is, optimally toward the totality of the object." (241). He discards the second, the "ordinary," mode of perception as tending "to stagnate and atrophy. . . an alienation of man from the objects and from his own sensory capacities." (p. 238).

Irrespective of his rating the two approaches as positive or negative, this idea of Schachtel's contains a valuable core to help understand what makes the artist's approach unique.

In order to trace these two perceptual models to their genetic sources, it seems worthwhile to digress briefly and recall the development of infantile modes of communication.

The infant, being still incapable of abstraction, lives in a world of objects, of experiences and concrete events. The emerging ability to use the secondary process is stipulated by the capability to substitute symbols, signs and signals for concrete objects. This enables the child to develop, among others, the ability to use speech. The development of such secondary communicative systems depends on the child's power to isolate the object or the concrete event from the sign or signal representing it. The word, while being learned, is still an object valued as equal with the represented object, a feature, again manifested in the magic or compulsive thinking of later life. With the continuous development of speech this own value of the word recedes until it remains only as a sign that stands for an object. A word such as "table," for instance, has no value of its own beyond the object it designates. This development includes almost all objects and experiences encountered in life. They lose their primary significance, being gradually turned into symbols and signals, i.e. into sources of information to help man find his way and act within his surroundings. A person travelling by bus will see through the window some detail in the landscape, from which he may learn how far he has still to go. While talking to somebody, some facial expression of the partner will indicate that he wants to wind up. The lover, listening to his girl's tone of voice, will find out what she wants him to do, and he will thus know how to respond. Still, the scenery, the facial expression, the tone of voice, all serve as sources of information, as instruction guiding the response rather than being objects in their own merit. It can hardly be imagined that these persons, in spite of being alert to the signs and able to grasp their messages, would be able to describe the landscape or the particular facial feature or to recall the specific tone. If we encounter a person who is capable to put into colours and lines the landscape seen, or to re-enact the facial expressions and features observed, to imitate faithfully the sounds heard, we wonder: "How comes that he has caught exactly that tone of voice, and can even reproduce and imitate them so well?" Usually, we will call such a person an artist and declare that he was born with this gift of painting, acting or imitating. It is clear, though, that such a specific ability to recall and reproduce what has been experienced depends, in the first place, on an ability to see and observe all those signs which ordinary people are not concerned with consciously.

In schizophrenia, a similar concrete dealing with signs and symbols can be observed. Authors like Kris [3] and Arieti [7], therefore, could draw on the comparison of artistic and psychotic production to develop their ideas about the peculiarities of art. The schizophrenic, suffering a secondary loss of the ability to use signs for what they represent, returns to their concrete primary content. For example, a schizophrenic, about to attend a concert at Tangle-

wood, explains that he is going to be entangled in the trees. Yet there exists a difference in quality between the artist and the psychotic: Whereas the schizophrenic has lost the ability of relating to the symbol and the sign on the secondary level, the artist has perfect command of it and becomes, thus, capable of relating to signs and symbols in a twofold way: in the secondary as to a sign and in the primary as to an object.

The poet deals with the word as with a sign representing a given content, but at the same time he relates to it as to an object with a specific weight, shade, seize, sound, etc. of its own. The words he chooses to compose a poem are used according to two structural sets: first, he exploits the secondary meaning of the word — that is the logical organization; second, he makes use of the primary properties of the word — that is the primary or paleological organization. In this last form of organization the poet arranges the words as the child plays with blocks, according to their colour, size, weight, etc.

The same principle can be demonstrated in every form of artistic creation. Body posture and motor reponse for instance, are among the signs bearing communicative significance, yet the actor and the dancer will relate to expressive movements as to concrete objects. They see such movements as if with different eyes and can, therefore, remember, imitate and perform them. The painter sees in the world around him not merely signs of information and communication, but sights of an own value, which he, therefore, is able to reproduce.

With this formulation we have limited the artist's ability to use the primary process to one medium of communication or two, whereas in other areas the artist does not vary from other persons. In fact, neither the musician, the painter, the dancer nor the actor find their unconscious more easily accessible than anybody else, except through the one medium in which they work.

So far, only one aspect of the problem has been covered. Although one can reasonably compare artistic talent with the child's ability to use a given medium of communication, the analogy would turn absurd, if it were postulated that the artist is no more than one who has preserved an infantile ability. It can be rightfully claimed that although the artist makes use of organizational ways, which from the point of view of development belong to childhood, this claim cannot be reversed. The three year old cannot be expected to compose a fugue or a song in verses. The primary relation of the child to speech, though being expressed in creating sound associations, does not go farther than mummy-ummy or daddy-addy. No child is expected to create sound associations on the level of E. A. Poe's "The Raven." What we call artistic talent cannot be considered simply as a regression to an infantile ability. It is an ability that has its genetic roots in infantile modes of relation from which it has

continued to grow throughout life, until, eventually, it can attain such high levels that are no longer comparable either to organization forms of the child or the psychotic or to those of the ordinary adult. It was this intrinsic trait of talent, this ability to grow and develop, that aroused opposition against what Kris termed "regression in the service of the ego." Schachtel (1959) [6] and Ehrenzweig (1962) [9], both refute this similitude and claim that talent has nothing to do with regression, on the contrary, that it clearly signifies progress.

Without entering into the question of its being regressive or progressive, we will try to analyse the specific developmental roots which talent seems to stem from. Normally, secondary process functions begin to evolve about the second and third year of life, while the primary ones are being repressed into the unconscious. According to psychoanalytic conception, contents and functions, once repressed into the unconscious, cease to develop further yet not to exist. Even when they can be lifted up and brought back into consciousness in adult life, they will réappear in their primary infantile form, in which they were repressed. Contrarily, the functions that remain conscious continue their development in accord with the developing ego and the changing environment.

It should be borne in mind, though, that not all the functions that belong to the broad organizational network called primary process are fated to be repressed. The primary process is not communicative nor is it susceptible of reality or the necessity of postponing immediate gratification. Yet in the process of socialization the child is compelled to develop such properties, his channels of communication, his adaptation to reality, and the capability of postponing gratification or contenting himself with part or indirect gratification. It is the exigencies of development, which entail a revolution which changes the intrapsychic modes of organization and is manifested in the emerging secondary process functions which come to replace the primary ones. The secondary process does not, though, discard whatever has been linked with the primary process, because there is no need to do so. Only those functions are being subdued that appear contrarious to the new organization demands. What suits the new organization is kept on, integrated and absorbed into the functional circle of the secondary process, thus continuing to grow and develop. Processes like condensation, inversion, time confusion, presentation through the opposite, etc., obstruct the logical organization of the secondary process and are, therefore, doomed to be removed. Other functions, such as the ability of using symbols, symmetrical activity, organization by rhythms, etc., which fall in with the secondary process, are preserved, integrated and absorbed into it. Schematically, the primary process can be viewed as being composed, let us say, of thirty different functions, twenty of which will be repressed, while

the remaining ten will be kept by and absorbed into the secondary process. The repressed twenty will continue to exist in the unconscious in the infantile forms, yet the remaining ten will continue to grow and develop, integrated with all other functions of the secondary process. Like the others, they pass through all the normal stages of development, in the course of which they gradually but entirely lose their infantile form.

It is proposed here that the difference between the artistically gifted and other persons lies merely in the different modes of integration of primary functions. Returning to our schema, we can say that, while in general ten primary functions are being integrated into the secondary process, in the case of the artist this would be eleven. The one additional function accounts for the specific talent and distinguishes the artist from other mortals men. The nature of this additional function varies from one artist to the other, but it is always linked to a primary concrete relating to some medium of communication, such as language, sound, expressive movement, sight impression, etc. The primary infantile source of such a property explains the similitude between artistic talent and infantile expression and psychotic production, yet its continuous development along with the development of all these secondary functions explains the far distance between artistic achievement and infantile or psychotic production.

\* \* \*

A hypothesis was proposed to determine the developmental source of artistic talent, which is put at the transitional period from primary to secondary process. By no means does this new hypothesis claim to invalidate the age-old assumption about the constitutional origin of talent. What has been shown so far are the developmental modes at the root of talent, without touching upon the reasons for that specific development. By assuming that the difference lies in one additional function being carried over from the primary process and integrated into the secondary, nothing has yet been said about the probable cause of this difference. The little we know points toward more than one cause; we can only assume that the developmental variation is due to various constitutional factors which, in conjunction with environmental factors, they are connected with in reciprocal influence, cause the development described here.

The last question warrants a special study. In another paper, dealing with the development of musical talent[10], we tried to show that the constitutional factor seems to consist of an unusual sensory sensitivity, while the environmental factor is given in the dominant channel of communication used between the infant and his mother in the pre-verbal stage.

## REFERENCES

- [1] PHYLLIS GREENACRE, The childhood of the artist, *Psychoanal. Study Child*, **12**, 47–72 (1957).
- [2] S. FREUD, Five lectures on psychoanalysis (1909) in Standard Edition, Vol. XI, Hogarth Press, London.
- [3] E. KRIS, *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art*, Int. Universities Press, New York, 1952.
- [4] G. BYCHOWSKI, Metapsychology of artistic creation, *Psychoanal. Quart.*, **20**, 592–602 (1951).
- [5] A. EHRENZWEIG, *The Psychoanalysis of Artistic Vision and Hearing*, Julian Press, New York, 1953, 272 pp.
- [6] E. G. SCHACHTEL, *Metamorphosis*, Basic Books, New York 1959, 344 pp.
- [7] S. ARIETI, The rise of creativity: From primary to tertiary process, *Contemporary Psychoanal.*, **1**, 51–68 (1964).
- [8] R. FRY, *An essay in Aesthetics* (1909), in: *Vision and Design*—Roger Fry, Penguin Books, 1961, p. 22–39.
- [9] A. EHRENZWEIG, Unconscious mental imaginary in art and science, *Nature*, **194**, 1008–1012 (1962).
- [10] P. NOY, *The development of the musical ability* (to be published).