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CREATIVITY and MADNESS

New Findings and Old Stereotypes

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6 Self-destruction and Self-creation

Creation and destruction, although opites, are closely related to each other. Patients of any type who are aged in psychotherapy often come to a point when they are preoc-ied with thoughts of suicide. Yearnings for death, oblivion, escape, leclaimers of total surrender fill the therapy hours. It is a frighten- time for the patient and sometimes for the therapist as well. But h thoughts often signal a turning point: the patient is confronting ic conflicts and the full brunt of his fear of change. With sudden act, the patient has come to see that the locus of difficulty is within self. Although the source of his problems may originally have been ernal—harried by an overbearing spouse, cursed by bad breaks or lty upbringing by unfeeling parents—the patient realizes that only an set things right. He feels that he must change himself, and he is ified of change; death seems a far preferable alternative. For the ient in the throes of such an experience, the options are overlming. He feels a total dissolution of the person he has been and a ultaneous sense that he could make himself anew; he could mold self totally into a person he wants to be. In the face of such united potential and freedom, the patient yearns to retreat into obliv-. He is hovering between self-creation and self-destruction.

Creation and destruction are intimately related to each other in experience of life, and in artistic production too. Artists knowingly out to destroy a previous style by the creation of a new one, and in essential sense, the production of anything radically new always olves destruction of the old. Art involves nullifying the modes and ns of the past and our ordinary ways of looking at the world. Poetry

shocks our sense of grammar and syntax, music our sense of functional sounds, and even representational art changes our view of a face or scene. Scientific creation even more clearly results in radical change or obliteration of existing beliefs and practices. Although destruction, in this sense, may seem somewhat abstract and impersonal, there is a personal and concrete relationship between it and creation in art as well. While they are engaged in creating, artists must frequently cope with destructive feelings, both consciously and unconsciously. The artists' wishes to hurt, maim, humiliate, even to annihilate other persons often provide fuel for the creative process. As I shall clarify further in Chapter 12, creating always involves a movement toward basic self-knowledge, a process of simultaneously unearthing unconscious material through dynamisms such as the homospatial and janusian processes while attaining artistic and pragmatic goals. A key motive for engaging in creative activity is often an attempt at unearthing and working through the sources of destructive feelings particularly. In other words, artists and other types of creators frequently create in order that they not destroy; or they explore a scientific problem, literary theme, visual image, musical idea, or poetic metaphor as an unconsciously motivated means of uncovering the sources of disturbing, frequently destructive feelings. For example, a poet subject of mine, mentioned earlier, was moved by the experience of seeing a horse appear suddenly at a barren desert site. He decided to write a poem about the incident, and in the course of writing it, he became dimly aware of hostile feelings toward women; he sensed that, in some way, the horse unconsciously represented some specific women in his life. In another case, a novelist, writing about college students, gradually became aware of a resemblance between one of the characters he created and his own brother. Unwittingly, he had given his highly negative character—the villain of the piece in fact—some of his brother's attributes. Realizing this, he became aware of some long-standing feelings of sibling rivalry and hostility. As a third example, a scientist—here my data are inferential rather than direct—shifted to a dramatic and creative solution to a problem in the presence of someone toward whom he had destructive feelings. While working in his laboratory, he looked up at one point because he heard someone come in. Rather than being his expected collaborator, the visitor was a representative of his scientific rival, a man who had criticized him sharply. Then, while the visitor worked in another part of the laboratory, the scientist arrived at a ground-breaking solution of a problem he had worked on for years.

Scientists, of course, seldom become aware of the unconscious roots of their ideas because of the nature of the scientific enterprise.

ıe problems they deal with seem completely external to themselves, ıd there is rarely a reason to explore a specific idea or image in a way ıalogous to the extrapolations and explorations of art. Yet creation in ıy field is a healthy means of dealing with destructive feelings. Be-use creation has the *potential* for increasing self-knowledge, there is e possibility of creative persons freeing themselves from their psy-ıological past and making themselves, or aspects of themselves, ıew. In other words, creation in the arts and sciences can facilitate lf-creation. As Yeats wrote,

> Those friends that have it I do wrong
> Whenever I remake a song
> Should know what issue is at stake
> It is myself that I remake.[1]

ıe Case of Sylvia Plath

ıe poet Sylvia Plath was unable to turn creation into self-creation. though much of her poetry is full of vibrant and beautiful images, ere is another strain in her work which, I think, foretells her tragic icide at the age of thirty-one. Strong drives to destruction as well as eation appear in her poems. There are new images of the ominous, adly side of homely kitchen things and of living bodies and flowers. ıese images transform both the living and the deadly: they make ath seem beautiful and life seem threatening. The quiet, resigned ythms of her lines contrast with the bitterness, resentment, hatred, d annihilation in and behind the words, producing a strange excite-ent and vitality. But, while her destructive feelings are often fused to poetic creations, there is little working out of them and little dication of any insight and unearthing of the unconscious sources of r concerns. For example, in one of the poems she wrote shortly fore she took her life, *Edge,* there are striking excesses.

> The woman is perfected.
> Her dead
>
> Body wears the smile of accomplishment,
> The illusion of a Greek necessity
>
> Flows in the scrolls of her toga,
> Her bare
>
> Feet seem to be saying:
> We have come so far, it is over.
>
> Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,
> One at each little
>
> Pitcher of milk, now empty.
> She had folded
>
> Them back into her body as petals
> Of a rose close when the garden
>
> Stiffens and odours bleed
> From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower.
>
> The moon has nothing to be sad about,
> Staring from her hood of bone.
>
> She is used to this sort of thing.
> Her blacks crackle and drag.[2]

The lines beginning the poem are beautiful but chilling: "The woman is perfected/Her dead/Body wears the smile of accomplishment." Looking at these lines retrospectively, with knowledge of her suicide shortly thereafter, we can, of course, see a clear statement of her intent. But this is not the excess I am talking about, because there is poetic creation in these lines despite their macabre tone. The lines are paradoxical, exciting, and stimulate a progression of thought. Soon after these lines, however, there are the strange and disjunctive ones: "Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,/One at each little/Pitcher of milk, now empty./She has folded/Them back into her body as petals/Of a rose close when the garden/Stiffens and odours bleed."

I believe these latter lines to be uncreative because, in them, destructiveness has become excessive. The children are returned to the mother's body simply because she can give no more. She and her breasts—the pitchers of milk—are empty and dried up. The children are enfolded back into her womb, back into the past, because that is where they came from. They are destroyed simply because she is destroyed. Furthermore, they are called *serpents,* a name whose negativity is only slightly modulated in this context by the adjective *white.* In parallel with the destructive exorbitance in these lines, the poetic images introduced are inconsistent and jarring. Serpents do not go with pitchers of milk, and the petals of the rose do not close as other flower petals sometimes do. It seems that the rose is used primarily because of its rhyme with the word *close*; such rhyme disjoined from meaning is, I think, distinctly unpoetic and uncreative. The images and metaphors are fragmented, and the ideas expressed, negative and hostile.

I call attention to these lines to show how precarious is the balance between destruction and creation in art, just as the balance between self-creation and self-destruction is precarious in life. Sylvia

Plath begins her poem with an assertion of triumph over death, the *smile of accomplishment,* but she cannot carry her triumph further. A sense of victory over death is, and should be, associated with a subjective sense of freedom—for most of us, that is. In this poem, however, there is no freedom; there is only the bringing of the children back to their origins, back to entombment in the past.

There is reason to believe that the aesthetic problem with destructive feelings in this poem closely reflected Sylvia Plath's problems with destructive feelings in her life. She committed suicide approximately seven months after her husband, the poet Ted Hughes, separated from her. Left with the total responsibility of caring for her two very young children, she seems to have been constantly embroiled in a struggle with hostile feelings toward them. Many of her unfinished poems during this period suggest such a struggle, and the circumstances of her suicide indicate it as well. Here is an excerpt.

> She hates
>
> The thought of a baby—
> Stealer of cells, stealer of beauty—
>
> She would rather be dead than fat,
> Dead and perfect, like Nefertit[3]

Turning on the gas in the kitchen stove early in the morning while her children were sleeping nearby, she made no provision for protecting them from the fumes that took her own life. They only survived by chance when an *au pair* woman came to the house. It is impossible to know now whether or not Plath had consciously intended to murder her own children, but there is little doubt about the expression of that type of destructive feelings toward children in the poem *Edge.* The *serpents* are white and are unbrutally enfolded into the mother, but they are murdered, nevertheless.

I believe that Sylvia Plath could not turn her hostile feelings into poetic creation in these lines because she was using poetry primarily to *control* rather than create. In other words, she attempted to express destructiveness in poetic form in order to expel it. Such an attempt at expiation and indirect expression functions only to exert control over feelings, not to change them; it strives for balance—a static rather than a progressive state. Good poetry does not do this; it both expresses and gets beneath the feelings—provides understanding, and develops and uses them in a dynamic way. The writing of good poetry involves the poet's freeing herself or himself up from the past through attaining a degree of understanding—partly through the use of the homospatial and janusian processes—and involves a movement into the future. One of the sources of our own enjoyment of poetry is our vicarious identification with the poet's personal struggle for understanding enlightenment and freedom. In the case of this particular poem, Sylvia Plath could not fully turn destructiveness into creation and could not liberate herself enough from the past to move toward the future. As we now know, this state portended her self-destruction.

Just as a need to control interferes with turning destructiveness into creation in art, so it interferes with turning self-destructive feelings into a process of self-creation in life. The following case of a patient yet unable to create any type of art illustrates this.

A Suicidal Patient

A seventeen-year-old college girl sat on the ledge of her window on the second floor of the dormitory. It was pitch dark, and no one saw her sitting there, including those in a nearby dormitory room. For a long time, she sat there thinking about jumping and flying and vaguely about killing herself. Several times, she wondered whether anyone would come by and notice her there. For what seemed like hours, nobody did; she jumped.

Although she did not kill herself, she seriously injured her back and pelvis. Immobilized in a body cast for seven months, she also began intensive psychiatric treatment. For some years prior to the jump, the girl had suffered from symptoms of incipient schizophrenia. She had experienced severe disturbances of thinking, including delusions about religion and about food. Following her jump, she began the heavy use of psychotropic drugs such as marijuana, LSD, and amphetamines. Finally, drug use and schizophrenic disturbance led to the need for her psychiatric hospitalization.

She was a highly intelligent girl, able to maintain excellent grades at a very competitive Ivy League college in spite of her symptoms and drug taking. Her ambition was to become a great writer, but unlike Sylvia Plath, she had done very little actual writing. The few poems she had completed showed some measure of talent, but she had never made any sustained effort at the novel she hoped to write.

In the course of psychotherapy, she revealed an exceptionally entangled relationship with her mother. Both were highly interdependent on each other in the manner often referred to as *symbiotic.* In spite of many attempts at becoming independent, she found that she was constantly at the mercy of other people, especially her mother. She tried constantly to fulfill (what she thought were) her mother's

xpectations. Also, she hated her body but engaged in sexual activity ecause "others" wanted her to. At the time she jumped from the vindow ledge, she fully believed that she might fly, and she did feel a listinct sense of control over both her body and the environment while alling.

As this patient improved, she gradually became aware that one of he underlying reasons for her jump was an overwhelming fear of leath. Paradoxical as this may sound, she felt so much at the mercy of leath, so much at the mercy of forces outside of her control, that ommitting suicide was for her a means of establishing control. Rather than waiting for death to take her, she would take command nd kill herself. Either flying through the air or choosing her own leath would amount to the same thing: she herself would be in ontrol.

Persons who engage in rational discussions of suicide often insist hat killing oneself is an act of freedom. Arguing that self-destruction s a basic human right, they push further to assert that it is also an act f free choice. Although I do not intend to enter into a discussion of the norality of suicide here, I will assert that it seldom results from a state f subjective freedom. Almost invariably, it is an attempt to regulate sychological forces over which one feels one has no control. It is a tate of subjective fatalism or determinism wherein no alternatives are ossible except those already given. One merely thinks of directing the iven rather than transforming it. Destructive feelings toward others, or example, are turned against the self rather than being understood nd thereby overcome. Sylvia Plath's hostility toward her children ould have resulted from her conscience-motivated enslavement to er motherhood (rather than from the heightened feminine con- ciousness wrongly attributed to her by women's liberationists). Knowing this and forgiving herself for it, she might have been able to ecome a different kind of mother.

Self-creation

As the student-patient I have described continued to improve, she gain became preoccupied with thoughts of suicide; but now she was overing between self-destruction and self-creation rather than only rying to control feelings and impulses derived from the past and her eed to feel and do only what others wanted. I say this because she xperienced an important turning point into self-creation when she ecame aware, in a therapy session, that one of her reasons for want- ng to give up and not change was her fear of death—the same fear

previously underlying her suicide attempt. If she did not change—if, in other words, she never grew up—she would never have to face death. Irrational as such a position is, it is one of the unconscious bases, universal in people, of a fear of growing up and changing.

Death is the ultimate and absolutely fated event in life. When we feel totally at the mercy of forces from the past in our life, we also fear death most intensely. In such a subjective state rather than one in which we feel the strength of a sense of freedom, we resort to attempts at control. These attempts, whether they are aimed at overpowering death by choosing our own time to die or at harnessing destructive feelings—overwhelming destructive feelings are almost invariably derived from past attitudes and orientations—by denying them or turning them against the self, are only efforts to gain power and a false sense of freedom. Control, as I have said, is static; it keeps past forces in check but does not change them.

Nothing can, or will, alter the fact of death, of course; and that is just the point of engaging in self-creation, of choosing to make oneself into the person one wants to be. Self-creation does not deny the fact of death; it rather removes death's determining effect on life. In opting for self-creation, we accept the inevitability of death but move on through our exercise of freedom to experience life in its fullest. Recognizing and accepting fear of death as underlying her fear of change, the patient began, slowly and arduously, to explore new situations, to try new ways of reacting to people, and to make choices that helped her define herself.

Self-creation comes out of diverse types of activities. Hardly is it necessary for everyone to engage in psychotherapy in order to become self-creating. Seldom, in fact, except in psychotherapy, is self-creating dramatically opposed to self-destruction in the manner I have described. Engaging in artistic creation often facilitates self-creation because good artists use their art to help them define themselves and achieve better understanding of their own feelings and thoughts. Artistic creation is frequently an exercise in experiencing a subjective sense of freedom, and this is one reason why persons facing death do well to engage in creating art, even if they have never done so before.

But artistic creation can offer traps for self-creation as well. If art is used primarily for control of unacceptable feelings, as in the lines I presented from Sylvia Plath's *Edge,* it serves a constrained and constricted subjective state rather than a free one. Furthermore, if artistic creation is undertaken primarily for its effect on others, primarily to get something from others that one cannot find in oneself—I am not now talking simply about getting accolades or recognition of artistic

achievements—it defeats self-creation. Such a purpose is evident in the poem *Edge* and, up until the present time, in the young patient's ambition to be a great writer.

The final portion of the poem *Edge,* "The moon has nothing to be sad about/Staring from her hood of bone./She is used to this sort of thing," reads, to me, like a simultaneous anguished lament and a call for help. The poet was crying out against an indifferent universe, one that does nothing about death or troubling destructive feelings and acts. In this poem, as in many of the others written shortly before her death, Plath was writing a kind of suicide note. By *suicide note* I do not mean a piece of writing that explains a person's self-destructive act after the fact, but rather one that is meant to be discovered. Such a suicide note is a cry for help that says, "please stop me." Another such poem, *The Detective,* which presents clues to a suicidal purpose, was published posthumously.

What was she doing when it blew in
Over the seven hills, the red furrow, the blue mountain?
Was she arranging cups? It is important.
Was she at the window, listening?
In that valley the train shrieks echo like souls on hooks.

That is the valley of death, though the cows thrive.
In her garden the lies were shaking out their moist silks
And the eyes of the killer moving sluglike and sidelong,
Unable to face the fingers, those egotists.
The fingers were tamping a woman into a wall,

A body into a pipe, and the smoke rising.
This is the smell of years burning, here in the kitchen,
These are the deceits, tacked up like family photographs,
And this is the man, look at his smile.
The death weapon? No one is dead.

There is no body in the house at all.
There is the smell of polish, there are plush carpets.
There is the sunlight, playing its blades,
Bored hoodlum in a red room
Where the wireless talks to itself like an elderly relative.

Did it come like an arrow, did it come like a knife?
Which of the poisons is it?
Which of the nerve-curlers, the convulsors? Did it electrify?
This is a case without a body.
The body does not come into it at all.

It is a case of vaporization.
The mouth first, its absence reported
In the second year. It had been insatiable
And in punishment was hung out like brown fruit
To wrinkle and dry.

The breasts next.
These were harder, two white stones.
The milk came yellow, then blue and sweet as water.
There was no absence of lips, there were two children,
But their bones showed, and the moon smiled.

Then the dry wood, the gates,
The brown motherly furrows, the whole estate.
We walk on air, Watson.
There is only the moon, embalmed in phosphorous.
There is only a crow in the tree. Make notes.[4]

Knowing that she did show some of this type of poetry to others before she died, it is reasonable to assume a cry for help along with the artistic purpose.[5] I do not, however, mean to pass a moral judgment for having such a purpose in these poems; I want to point out how the writing of the poem subverted self-creation rather than facilitated it. Writing a suicide note in the form of a poem is a self-destructive act: while bewailing people's misunderstanding and indifference, it creates further misunderstanding. If a person hearing the poem calls it a suicide note, the poet as artist is misconstrued; if it is heard exclusively as a poem, the person crying for help is ignored.

This is an extreme example, but as I pointed out about schizophrenic writing, artistic works often fail because they make an undue demand on their audience. Works that in large measure display the conflicts and disturbances of their authors, works that invite the audience to justify or accept them rather than be stimulated or learn from them, are failures as artistic creations and subversions of self-creation.

So, too, the young patient's ambition to be a great writer has not yet served her turn toward self-creation because it is based on a need to affect others and control her feelings. She has felt she must become a great writer in order to prove her worth to the world. Her feelings of lack of worth have been so consuming that nothing short of overwhelming greatness could make her feel acceptable at all. As with her fear of death, she has sought to control and compensate for feelings of worthlessness through fantasies of greatness.

Someday, she may be able to use artistic creation in the service of self-creation; but there are many other routes available to her and to

all of us as well. Primarily, we create ourselves in the everyday choices that move us on in life. We create ourselves when we risk an alternative that closes off the manifold potentialities of childhood and when we strive for understanding rather than control. In the face of powerful urges to adopt a stagnant, backward-looking subjective state ultimately connected to self-destruction, we create ourselves in our acceptance of our freedom and our death.

7 The Perils of Psychoanalyzing (or Scandalizing) Emily Dickinson

Another female writer, Emily Dickinson, has long posed a baffling and exciting literary puzzle and provided an intriguing psychiatric and psychological challenge as well. Totally unknown as a poet during her lifetime, she was the daughter of Congressman Edward Dickinson, Amherst, Massachusetts's leading citizen. The latter portion of her life she spent entirely as a recluse in her parents' house and characteristically dressed only in white. Outside of her sister, Lavinia, who lived with her, and some special family and friends who visited her, she saw no one. Even Mabel Todd, the person who was later to become the major organizer and editor for her poetry and to whom she wrote several poems, never talked with her in person, although Mrs. Todd visited the house many times. The poet once flitted by the living room dressed in a white gown, allowing Mrs. Todd a quick glimpse, and on another occasion, she called down from upstairs to thank Mrs. Todd for playing a piece on the Dickinson piano. Never seen on the streets of Amherst during the latter part of her life, Emily Dickinson was referred to by the townspeople as "the Myth."

When her poetry was published after her death, it was largely rejected by critics of the time but soon received enormous popular acclaim. She is now accepted as one of the greatest of American poets. If ever a creative person invited psychiatric interest, Emily Dickinson is the one. Her extreme isolation and the lack of public exposure of her poetry during her lifetime provide the circumstances for a rare type of naturally occurring psychosocial experiment: she seems to have written poetry primarily for herself, yet she achieved great aesthetic power and popular appeal. Also, her life was so unusual that even literary