

Gerard, D.S. (1985). Chaos and Control in the Creative Process. *J. Amer. Acad. Psychoanal.*, 13:129-138.



(1985). *Journal of American Academy of Psychoanalysis*, 13:129-138

Chaos and Control in the Creative Process

Desy Safán Gerard, Ph.D.

This article is an attempt to throw some light onto the role of destruction in the creative process. This notion is mentioned frequently in the psychoanalytic literature, not only in relation to the work of the artist but in relation to the analytic process and to development in general.

My interest in writing this paper stems from wanting to put forward what I have learned from an attempt to document with slides my own paintings in progress. I have been doing this for the last two years with the idea that I might use these slides to illustrate the creative process in a more meaningful way than by showing the finished work itself or slides of it. I have been surprised to find that on occasion I have been unable to determine the sequence of these slides when I get them back from the processing lab. Luckily the lab numbers them which solves the problem of reconstructing how I went about doing what I did. I have also been struck by the visual evidence of the destructiveness I seem to engage in each time the painting seems to be acquiring too much structure. If one looks at the progression of the slides one can see that the attempts to develop some formal qualities over, say, a sequence of four slides are now followed by a purposeful, deliberate collapse of such structure in the next slide. Out of this new chaos something begins to emerge in the next few slides until things seem to be under control again. But the structure is again destroyed as evidenced in the next chaotic slide. These sequences of chaos and control out of which something is finally born is characteristic of all the paintings I have documented in this way. I believe that this phenomenon is not idiosyncratic of my work but of the work of many artists and certainly other artistic activities including that of the analyst at work.

Desy Safán-Gerard is an Assistant Research Psychologist at the Department of Psychology, UCLA.

It is only when the work begins to have a life of its own that we profit from interacting with it. I would like to begin by taking a closer look at how this happens because it is, as you will see, so intrinsically related to our subject. We can then turn to the main subject of the paper, that of chaos and control and how the artist develops the work out of their alternation.

At some point during the work the artist has the feeling that he or she is discovering, uncovering or finding something that is in the material rather than carrying out a vision. In other words, something has happened within the elements of the painting that was not intended. I am aware of my creating form and color and then I “find” interesting elements in the painting pretty much as one does in a projective test. In the finding there is a fresh sense of an “other” in front of my eyes. It is then that I sense that I had better stop to consider what it is saying to me. A communication starts between the painting and myself that did not exist earlier when I was blinded to its existence as separate from me.

Experimenting with free drawings, Marion Milner (1957) found that in the drawings that were at all satisfying to her “there had been an experiencing of a dialogue relationship between thought and the bit of the external world represented by the marks on the paper ...” (p. 115). When we perceive the painting as a mere extension of ourselves this “dialogue relationship” is not possible. We could then call what we do a narcissistic act since it is done to the object, not with the object, and it is carried out by the person for the person. If on the other hand, the painting becomes this “other”—having desires of its own, demands of its own—there will be a transcendence of the preoccupation with the self (Rank, 1932).

One could distinguish two main phases of the creative process. In the first phase one is merely adding the elements to it as a need to put outside of us something in our experience that has not been properly assimilated. [Bion (1962) has called these undigested elements “beta.” According to him they are suited for projective identification, for acting out, and cannot become part of dreams or thoughts.] The artist is aware that he or she is doing something to the work and the work is serving his or her needs but he or she is confused, mixed up, or fused with it. In the second phase the artist loses a sense of his or her own impact and, by and large, experiences him- or herself at the service of the work. It is at this point that the communication between the artist and the work begins to take place. The work not only contains what was put into it but something new seems to begin to happen and we develop a true concern for it. However, once we reach this stage

- 130 -

we seem to oscillate back and forth many times between the first phase where we are fused with it and the second phase where there is true appreciation of its separate existence. The painting having a life of its own can involve not only the artist but also the model. Writer James Lord (1964) posed eighteen times for a portrait of him made by his friend Giacometti and has written an account of Giacometti's comments about painting and about himself as he worked on the

portrait. He writes: “an exceptional intimacy developed in the almost supernatural atmosphere of give and take that is inherent in the acts of posing and painting. The reciprocity at times seems almost unbearable. There is an identification between the model and the artist via the painting which gradually seems to become an independent, autonomous entity served by them both, each in his own way and oddly enough, equally” (p. 23).

In the externalization of the experience of the first phase we are afforded the chance to tease out the elements put into it for a proper assimilation into the self. Joan Riviere (1958) has described how Freud exhorted her to write about a psychoanalytic idea that had occurred to her; “Write it, write it, put it down in black and white ... get it out, produce it, make something of it—outside you, that is; give it an existence independent of you.” This is not unlike what happens in painting. There is a need to put out there all we have, to see it, to find it, to find out what it is, to do something with it, to give it life. Much of what is put on the canvas at these times is voluntary but some elements are experienced as accidental and reacted to as “messy” or “bad” (Ehrenzweig, 1967; Safán-Gerard, 1982). These are generally projections of split off parts of the self that find their way into the work. Then, just as the infant does, we begin to separate the good from the bad elements of it, keeping the good, getting rid of the bad (Klein, 1935), hoping we will reach compromises and an eventual acceptance or transformation of the bad in it.

Sometimes we may finish the work before the integration of its elements. In such premature closure we may be simply using the canvas for evacuating an unassimilated experience. In this case we would have gotten rid of the bad elements and kept the good ones but we would still be functioning exclusively in the first stage where there is no separation between subject and object and no growth or development can take place. If, on the other hand, we stay with the good and bad elements long enough, experiencing them, moving them around and transforming them during an often lengthy and painful process, we may come to accept an imperfect painting or an imperfect world where good and bad can coexist. After all, creativity is not evidenced

- 131 -

by having new ideas. An idea, as an interpretation, is simply the beginning of a process (Mason, 1982). The integration taking place in the painting has a counterpart in the internal self-representation. Ambivalence is now tolerated and there is an enrichment in our appreciation of reality and ourselves.

The distinction between these two phases in the creative process might seem to imply that the first phase is merely a requirement to get at the second one where integration takes place. This is certainly not the case. It is only in the state of fusion that aspects of the self can be inadvertently and unconsciously slipped into the work. Those who have written about the value of primary process, states of fusion, or of transitional phenomena for the creative process have pointed this up with respect to psychological development (Stokes, 1955; Noy, 1969; Rose, 1971; Milner,

1952; Winnicott, 1953). Summarizing this view Rose (1980) says, "Even though becoming one with or blurring the boundaries between self and object is associated with psychosis or primary narcissism, to merge in order to re-emerge may be part of the fundamental process of psychological growth at all developmental levels" (p. 36).

The initial state of chaos, fragmentation and unhappy accidents create anxieties that have to be tolerated. What seems to help here is a process that Ehrenzweig, analyst and art teacher, has called unconscious scanning (1965), a kind of diffused attention that enables the artist to perceive the underlying unity of the work, the substratum of what on the surface appears chaotic and fragmented. Squinting at a painting or having it around to look at it on and off while doing other things are ways of engaging in this diffused attention. Involving oneself in a familiar area of the painting to lower the anxiety generated by these accidents and coming back to the accident after this interval of time is still another way to tolerate the fragmentation (Safán-Gerard 1982).

The need to externalize an experience or to create the conditions for finding something of value in our communication with the work has to do with our very early experiences of the mother, more precisely of the nourishing function of the mother represented by the breast (Klein, 1929). There seem to be two conditions where nourishment from the breast is impaired: one having to do mainly with the infant, the other having to do mainly with the mother. If in infancy, one's vulnerability is perceived as a terrifying experience, what one takes from the mother is taken too fast, too greedily, and is not experienced as nourishment. This may lead to a later feeling that there is too much inside and a need to get rid of it or put it out there, sort things out

- 132 -

and take it in slowly (Mason, 1983). In the case of not having a "good enough mother" (Winnicott, 1953), we have a similar situation since the unconscious transforms the absence of something good as the presence of something bad one wants to get rid of (Klein, 1935).

In either case we will subsequently need a good container that will hold these experiences for us, slowing down the process of discrimination and eventual assimilation. In the absence of a "good enough analyst" one may turn to an artistic activity that can provide the arena for a "second chance at digestion." The unintended accidents that turn up on the canvas are, in this light, none other than the bits and pieces of this "bad" object which has turned out to be bad either as a result of our own greedy incorporation or as a result of its deficit or absence. The bad internal object is often the result of our own destructive attacks and introjection of damaged, broken up parts of mother or the breast. In sorting out these bits and pieces on the canvas we are reconstructing, putting together and repairing the breast so that we can finally have it and properly nourish from it.

I believe that ultimately this is what we are after, the nourishment, and not, as is most commonly believed, self-expression. For Segal (1957) “all creation is really a re-creation of a once loved and once whole, but now lost and ruined object, a ruined internal world and self” (p. 390). She quotes Proust: “I had to recover from the shade that which I had felt, to reconvert it into its psychic equivalent. But the way to do it, the only one I could see, what was it—but to create a work of art?” (p. 389). Let us now examine what the artist actually does or goes through to nourish from this separate object.

Allowing the painting a separate existence lead to chaos and fragmentation. We usually begin to control it as a way of lowering our anxiety, a common response to ambiguity and chaos and also as a way to deny that we need something from it. Incidentally, creative people tend to be more tolerant of ambiguity in perception than less creative people. They also tend to prefer irregular and chaotic shapes rather than ordered and symmetrical ones (Barron and Welsh, 1952). One could say that they seem less frightened by poorly understood aspects of their personalities; that they actually prefer chaos may reveal their willingness or need to engage in this understanding. In Kleinian terms, we could say that in allowing the chaos and controlling it we are moving back and forth from the depressive position to the paranoid-schizoid position, a view also held by Ehrenzweig (1967). Between these tendencies we sometimes find ourselves in a special state where the work seems to be doing itself through us. We are merely the medium, the empty tunnel for the connection between a powerful

- 133 -

source and the work in progress and we feel very humble and very powerful at the same time. We seem to be in the middle between the me and the you in what Winnicott has called a “transitional space.” We become connected, energized, or “in the rhythm.”

Ehrenzweig considers this to be a manic phase of the creative process. It is the thrill of this state that is most commonly associated with the joys of creativity. The oceanic feeling (Freud, 1930) is one where all opposites seem to merge and where self and other, death and rebirth become one. The manic-oceanic feeling is different, however, from that of pathological mania which simply denies death. For Ehrenzweig (1967) there is a prerequisite, for “death and destruction has to be faced and the experience of dying worked through before the oceanic manic level of liberation and rebirth is reached fruitfully” (p. 186). This state never lasts too long, however. We begin to feel that we are losing control and fear that we are under someone else's control. We tend to feel persecuted by what is out there in the painting and start to take control by putting it in its place and having it again become our vehicle.

After a while, however, our controlling it leads to a situation where there is too much structure, no ambiguity, and the life seems to have gone out of it. There is both

a sense of having lost it, having been lost in it, and a wish to restore life into it. At these times one realizes that for it to have a life again we have no choice but to attack and destroy what we have put into it. This attack on the work is not only meant to destroy its surface structure but also the ego functions that are now protecting us from the confrontation with some internal conflict, a kind of progression in the service of the id. Since we need to get in touch with the inner conflict, the source of all creativity and development, these attacks are a necessity. In some extreme cases, however, they may lead to self-destruction; having lost the boundary between self and other characteristics of this manic phase and in the attempt to destroy the surface structure that stands in the way of what it is the artist is searching for, he or she may go too far.

During the act of destruction the artist is concerned that there may not be anything worthwhile left after the attack. In his account, Lord was dismayed at Giacometti's continual destruction of the work in search for some elusive quality. He had to learn to trust Giacometti's judgment that such destruction was necessary. Segal (1955) quotes the painter Elstir, in Marcel Proust, who said, "it is only by renouncing that one can recreate what one loves" (p. 199). At these moments all the artist has is the courage to destroy in hopes that the creation survives. The sense of otherness of the object goes together

- 134 -

with our realization that the object survives our destructive attacks (Winnicott, 1971).

I have developed trust that the painting that survives is one I could not have destroyed, even if I wanted to and this brings me great relief. I may not be able to create but alas, I am not that able to destroy either. The loving feelings I experience toward the painting at the moment of destruction have always puzzled me. It is a willingness to destroy what I have done, my investment of time, energy, for it to gain something that I cannot give. It is more than just repairing the damage I may have done. The paradox of destroying the work while loving it or destroying the work because of the love for it has its parallel in the feeling an infant may have when he destroys the mother in fantasy. As Winnicott writes, "The subject says to the object 'I destroyed you,' and the object says, 'Hello object! I destroyed you.' 'I love you.' 'You have value for me because of your survival of my destruction of you.' 'While I am loving you I am all the time destroying you in [unconscious] fantasy'" (1971, p. 90).

If I am exercising too much control, the painting is in danger of becoming only what I want to put into it and will therefore be unreal, whereas only the one that survives my attack becomes real. For Winnicott "the object that survives the subject's destructive attacks is in the process of becoming destroyed because real, becoming real becomes destroyed" (1971, p. 90). The real has to be destroyed because the real may reveal a truth that is hard to accept, that of destruction and death out there or inside of us. This juxtaposition of destruction and the real may also represent the

need to accept death and life instincts operating side by side and the need in creativity to give expression to both (Milner, 1957).

Rose (1980) has observed that “patients who retain elements of an underlying fusion with the mother complain of not feeling real” (p. 51). They have been unable to destroy the mother in fantasy so that they can have a mother out there and a less fuzzy sense of self. He quotes from a letter of a former patient who was able to break out of such fusion: “Now I am beginning to know where I leave off and the rest of the world begins, I am able to look at the ocean and the dunes and the trees and touch and feel and then depart. I then do ‘have’ this beauty after all because I have it in my mind ...” (p. 61). Whereas before she might have had occasional oceanic experiences of fusion with nature now she could look at it with some distance. What was beautiful about it could be appreciated but remained outside of her. By renouncing it she had actually gained it as something that was now also in her.

- 135 -

For Segal (1955), “It is only when the loss has been acknowledged and the mourning experienced that re-creation can take place” (p. 199). She mentions a patient who could not write. She had had an early dislike for words. The patient felt that using them made her lose the illusion of possessing and being at one with the world. Towards the end of her analysis, as she was able to mourn the loss of her analyst, words seemed to acquire meaning again. She was now sure that she could write provided she could continue to feel sad for a while rather than having a variety of symptoms. Segal writes, “Words acquired a meaning again when she could give up my breast as an external object and internalize it” (1957, p. 396). Symbol formation of any kind seems to be the outcome of a loss; something destroyed out there is re-created in our mind or in the work of art. Rose's patient had been able to recreate the beautiful landscape inside her mind.

In the analytic situation it is the subject's dawning awareness of the limitations of his destructive attacks that create the experience of externality of the object/analyst. For Winnicott (1971), this destructive activity is the patient's attempt to place the analyst outside of his omnipotent control, that is, out in the world. “Without the experience of maximum destructiveness the subject never places the analyst outside and therefore can never do more than experience a kind of self-analysis, using the analyst as a projection of a part of the self” (p. 91). The same can be said of our relating to the canvas: without the experience of destruction of the surface structure the painting would never acquire a separate existence and we would be merely recycling the projections made into it without any enrichment of the self.

Summary

This has been an attempt to understand the alternation of chaos and control in the creative process. As a painting acquires a life of its own, the artist loses control over it but then and only then can he or she establish an enriching dialogue with it. When losing control leads to too much anxiety, the artist will attempt to gain control over the work but this excessive control will lead to a tight structure that will seem lifeless. At some point the artist will have to destroy this structure and create a new chaos in order to start afresh and to seek something of value in it. Milner, Segal, Winnicott and the work of other psychoanalytic writers, as it is pertinent to these ideas, was examined.

- 136 -

References

- Barron, F. and G. S. Welsh (1952), Artistic perception as a possible factor in personality style: Its measurement by a figure preference test, *J. Psychol.*, 33, 199-203.
- Bion, W. (1962), *Learning from Experience*, Paul Heinemann, London. [→]
- Ehrenzweig, A. (1965), *The Psycho-Analysis of Artistic Vision and Hearing*, 2nd Edition, Braziller, New York.
- Freud, S. (1930), *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Standard Edition, Vol. 21, Hogarth Press, London. [→]
- Freud, S. (1967), *The Hidden Order of Art*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1971.
- Klein, M. (1929), Infantile anxiety situations reflected in a work of art and in the creative impulse, in *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works*, Delta, New York, pp. 210-218.
- Klein, M. (1935), A contribution to the psychogenesis of manic depressive states, in *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works*, Delta, New York, pp. 262-289.
- Lord, J. (1964), *A Giacometti Portrait*, The Museum of Modern Art, Doubleday and Company, New York.
- Mason, A. (1982, 1983), Personal communication.
- Milner, M. (1967), *On Not Being Able to Paint*, Second Edition, International University Press, New York, 1950.
- Milner, M. (1952), Aspects of symbolism in comprehension of the not-self, *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.*, 33, 181-95. [→]
- Noy, P. (1969), A revision of the psychoanalytic theory of the primary process, *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.*, 50, 155-178. [→]
- Rank, O. (1932), *Art and Artist*, translated by C. F. Atkinson, Alfred A. Knoff, New York.
- Riviere, J. (1958), A character trait of Freud's, in *Psycho-Analysis and Contemporary Thought*, J.D., Sutherland, Hogarth, London.
- Rose, G. J. (1980), *The Power of Form*, International Universities Press, New York.

Safán-Gerard, D. (1982), The role of the accident in the creative process, Paper presented at the Creativity and Madness Conference, Maui, Hawaii.

Segal, H. (1957), A psycho-analytical approach to aesthetics, in *New Directions in Psychoanalysis*, M. Klein et al. (Eds.), Basic Books, New York, pp. 348-405.

Stokes, A. (1955), Form in art, in *New Directions in Psychoanalysis*, M. Klein et al. (Eds.), Tavistock Publications, London.

- 137 -

Winnicott, D. W. (1953), Transitional objects and transitional phenomena, *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.*, 34, 89-97. [→]

Winnicott, D. W. (1965), *Maturational Process and the Facilitating Environment*, Hogarth, London. [→]

Winnicott, D. W. (1971), *Playing and Reality*, Basic Books, New York. [→]

- 138 -