THE ROLE OF THE ACCIDENT IN THE CREATIVE ACT

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When the artist gets deeply involved with the work in progress things inevitably happen that seem out of his control. At times these "accidents" in the work are welcome and at other times they act back on the person as though they were projections of unwanted parts of the self that have come to haunt him. In other words, the accident may be perceived by the artist as an opportunity to take the work beyond convention or personal limitations or it may be perceived as a disruption that interrupts the work in progress. These different perceptions and reactions to the accident occur not only in art but also in other life pursuits as well as in psychotherapy. Accidents can be experienced as challenges or opportunities for unforseen change for the better or as disruptions, interruptions; annoying events that block us from what we intended to do. The accident seems to require a temporary giving up of a sense of control and mastery and a loosening up of our sense of direction which tends to induce anxiety.

I would like to examine more closely what happens between the person and the work in the face of an accident but I would first like to examine how artists in the past dealt with accidents. Has the generally positive attitude that most contemporary artists seem to have toward accidents always existed? Art historian H.W. Janson has surveyed the

history of the accident in art and I will be drawing freely on his investigation.

An awareness of images made by chance in rocks, clouds or blots is probably as old as mankind itself and evidence has been found in the art of the Old Stone Age. Thoughts about this awareness are not recorded before classical antiquity. For a long time these accidental images were explained by attributing a hidden purpose to change which was perceived as an agency of the divine (words such as Fate, Fortuna, Nature would be used). This view was mostly characteristic of prescientific cultures but has not lost its appeal even today.

During the Renaissance these accidental images were acknowledged as rudimentary and ambiguous; they were made explicit only by the beholder's imagination. This view was later capitalized on by psychologists who draw inferences about a person's state of mind by examining how he or she perceives ambiguous figures. The view of the accident as an agent of the supernatural or as an ambiguous stimulus that stirs up one's imagination are both linked with past and present ideas concerning the nature of creativity and are responsible for many of the myths that people hold today.

Classical antiquity confined attention to chance images of three kinds: rocks, blots and clouds. In Pliny's

Natural History there is a story of a panting dog by a Hellenistic painter Protogenes where the artist was trying to represent foam until in a rage he hurled a sponge at his panel. The dog "was wondrously made." For Pliny, this was the work of Fortuna which surpasses any human intention. Fortuna reserves those "strokes of luck" only for the greatest of artists as if on occasion she takes pity on their ambition to achieve the impossible. Cicero replied skeptically that perfection has never been achieved by accident. We can see the germ of the controversy between magic and scientific thinking even then.

Rationalistic explanations of chance correspond to the classicistic taste that dominated Roman Art of the Augustan era. The story of the sponge throwing painter, in contrast, reflects an admiration for spontaneity. This is an almost romantic attitude that seemed to have existed in Hellenistic art.

Images in clouds were noted also by Aristotle but they were not given the significance of the miraculous images made by Nature or Fortuna in rocks and blots. In fact, the ancient painters seem to have been repelled by clouds - the skies in ancient landscapes are completely devoid of them, certainly not because of any lack of skill to represent them. The most widespread chance images of the middle ages were stones and gems that were cut to reveal an almost perfect painting. In the famous "Agate of Pyrrhus" Apollo could be seen with his

lyre and the nine muses, each with her proper attribute, rendered not by art but by nature. This was seen as evidence of the miraculous generative powers of Nature. The ancient's love of gems continued undiminished in the middle ages.

During the Renaissance Leone Battista Alberti wrote a treatise De Statua (about 1430) where he examines the etiology of sculpture. The artist must have observed certain shapes in tree trunks, clumps of earth, which through some slight changes could be made to resemble a natural shape. Alberti's is the earliest statement of the idea that what sets the artist apart from the laymen is not his natural skill but his ability to discover images in random shapes, i.e. his visual imagination. This ability gives rise to the desire to make these images more explicit by adding to or taking away from them. In a treatise on painting, written a few years later, Alberti describes it as a mere rational method of representing the visible world; he attached singular importance to a scientific perspective as the governing theory of painting.

Leonardo, who wrote his Treatise on Painting in about 1480, recommends that painters look for landscapes as well as figure compositions in the accidental patterns of stained walls, varicolored stones, clouds and mud. But Leonardo states more clearly than does Alberti that chance images are not objectively present but must be projected into the material

by the artist's imagination. This is a crucial idea, as we shall see later. Unlike Alberti, Leonardo took the chance-image theory from the remote past to the present and from sculpture to painting. By this time there seems to have been a new awareness of the unstable and subjective character of chance images - the images are now in clouds rather than in trees or rocks. There is a wide variety of figures made of clouds in sixteenth century painting, e.g. Raphael introduced cloud angels in his work, Correggio depicted Jupiter as a cloud. The human soul, hitherto shown as a small figure with all the substance of living flesh was given a cloudy "ectoplasmic" shape. El Greco was the first to depict a soul that way and clouds became an accepted pictorial device for representing incorporeal beings. Leonardo did not favor homemade accidents, nor did he reveal how the images found in spotted walls are to be transformed into works of art. Apparently he thought of this process as taking place in the artist's mind rather than on the surface of the painting.

So far the accidents we are talking about have one feature in common: the artist finds them, or pretends to find them among the random shapes of the outside world. He does not create them but merely discovers them and makes the resemblance complete while leaving the identity of the stone, foliage or clouds, untouched. Leonardo's advice to painters had little practical effect until the dawn of the modern era.

British landscape painter and drawing teacher Alexander Cozens, revived Leonardo's idea. In 1786 he published an illustrated treatise entitled "A New Method of Assisting the Invention in Drawing Original Compositions of Landscape." He recommends large ink blots to serve as a store of compositional suggestions. These blots are to be made quickly and in quantity using paper crumpled up and stretched out again. One then selects a particularly suggestive sheet of blots, places a piece of transparent paper over it to make a selective tracing. Cozens cautions us to "preserve the spirit of the blot" by not adding anything that is not suggested in it. This method permits the artist to produce his chance images at will without having to seek them out in the world of nature. He defines his ink blots as "a production of chance, with a small degree of design."

The purpose of Cozens' blotscapes is to free the artist from involuntary servitude to conventional schemes of landscape composition by making him relinquish deliberate control of his movements as much as possible in the beginning; the selective tracing of the blot is intended to redress the balance. Cozens seems to have been after freeing the artist from conventions but with sufficient control in the selective tracing to balance or correct excesses. One of the negative legacies of this search for freedom is in the relatively minor role that purposeful activity is relegated to nowadays. There is as much value in the generation of new ideas as in good editing,

otherwise the work becomes self-indulgent. If the artist devalues purposeful activity he will tend to avoid or shy away from the necessary editing.

There is something of a parallel to Cozens' work in the development of the ideas about accidents in Eastern Civilizations. Toward the end of the T'ang dynasty in the 8th century A.D. there were Chinese painters using methods similar to Cozens' ink blots. Their style, called i-p'in (untrammeled) is known from literary accounts such as the one about Wang Mo.

> Whenever he wanted to paint a picture, he would first drink wine, and when he was sufficiently drunk, would spatter the ink onto the painting surface. Then, laughing and singing all the while, he would stamp on it with his feet and smear it with his hands, besides swashing and sweeping it with the brush. The ink would be thin in some places, rich in others; he would follow the shapes which brush and ink had produced, making these into mountains, rocks, clouds and water. Responding to the movements of his hand and following his inclinations, he would bring forth clouds and mists, wash in wind and rain, with the suddenness of creation. It was exactly like the cunning of a god; when one examined the painting after it was finished one could see no traces of the puddles of ink (S. Shimada, 1961).

These painters had a catalytic effect upon the development

of Sung painting analogous to that of Cozens on the Romantics. Descriptions of their method provided future artists in both China and Japan with a model of the creative process stressing individual expression and an exploratory attitude towards the possibilities of ink. A recurrent element in later accounts is the claim that the work - usually a landscape - looks as if made in heaven or brought forth with the suddenness of divine creation, rather than something made by man. The picture seems effortless, a work of nature, not a work of art. This aesthetic ideal led the Chinese to the discovery that if they sliced certain kinds of marble in a particular way the surface suggested mountain ranges and mist-shrouded valleys characteristic of Sung landscapes. They framed these marble slabs like paintings and supplied some evocative inscription. Some of them must have reached the West with the expansion of China trade in the 18th century and may have helped to stimulate the train of thought that produced Cozens method.

Cozens' accidents seemed sheer chaos to his contemporaries and an occasion for endless ridicule. However, his method must have had a liberating effect on Constable and Turner, the great Romantic landscape painters of the early 19th century. The method must have been also a precursor of the Rorschach ink blot test. A parlor game with ink blots became popular in England and in 1850 the German physician and poet Justinus Kerner produced Klecksographien, ink blots on folded paper,

modified slightly, and wrote descriptive poems about them in his Hadesbuch, published in 1890. Kerner's work may have been known to Hermann Rorschach who used the same technique with oral interpretation to infer characteristics of the person projecting images onto them.

The aesthetic attitude of the Romantics not only favored impulsiveness at the expense of rational control, it also began to question the idea that painting was less art than music. Arguing this view, Whistler began in 1860 to call his paintings harmonies, nocturnes and symphonies to stress the conviction that descriptive values in painting are as secondary as they are in music. His attitude was far more extreme than Cozens' in defending and advocating for the accident. At this point, however, we begin to approach a different situation where accident and intention become inseparable. There is no way to tell how much Whistler used accidents because representation, the aim of art since the beginning of time, began to give way to a new primary reality, that of the brush stroke itself. We have lost the frame of reference that enables us to differentiate between accident and purpose.

In theories keyed to Cubism and abstract art the subject of chance images is disregarded. We seem to go back to a form of rationalism. But even under the discipline of an abstract style, the artist's imagination remains basically iconic, ready to find images where none were intended (e.g., Picasso's story

to Francoise Gilot. During his most austere phase of analytical cubism he and Braque worked in related styles. He once found a squirrel in Braque's work that Braque did not intend. Braque tried to paint it out but Picasso insisted he still could see it.)

Dada and Surrealism came to acclaim accidents as the basis of aesthetic experience. Marcel Duchamp, the most influential member of the movement was an advocate and practitioner of chance effects. Dadaists expected not so much chance images but "chance meetings", unexpected juxtapositions of objects which, by their incongruity would have a liberating effect on the imagination. In their search for freedom they were against all conscious discipline and for them the creative act was to be totally spontaneous, a belief that creates problems of it's own for the creator. Surrealism added to this the theoretical framework of Sigmund Freud for its view on the unconscious. Surrealist painters returned to the use of accidents that would reveal the unconscious in iconic representation, and again sought likeness, a trend not only characteristic of surrealist artists but of others loosely linked with the movement. The result of all this was a renewed awareness of the connection between accidents and inspiration or imagination.

I have chosen this topic because I think the experience of the accident and its resolution is what makes creative activity a growth experience. I am also using the creative act as a paradigm for many work or life situations that confront

us with the unexpected. Therefore learning about the vicissitudes of the creative act and in particular the vicissitudes of assimilating the accident can have implications for a variety of situations one would not call artistic. One could say that these situations demand an artistic solution or an artistic attitude.

We might then ask ourselves the question, what does the artist _do_ when faced with an accident in his work? I think it would be fair to say that first of all he gets anxious and/or annoyed. For a while he may stop working or he may leave the work in anger. Then he may look at _how_ it happened, then at what happened to the _work_. His anxiety has to lower before he can look at the "mistake". Then, if we are talking about a painter, he may begin to work in another area of the painting acting as if nothing really happened but knowing that something did. What is he doing? He has gone to a more familiar area of the work where he is doing a little editing or perfecting. He is trying to lower his anxiety level enough so that he can go back to the troubled accident area and look at it again, anew. He may do this shift from the familiar to the accident several times, each time just looking again at what he did. Each time there is less judging of what he did as an isolated accident and more as a given that has to be worked into the painting (or out of the painting along with some non-accidental area).

While working on the familiar the accident was relegated to the background - when working with the accident, _it_ becomes the foreground. Each part of the painting is at times foreground, at times background. Once the anxiety about it is reduced, the accident becomes just one other part that has to be worked on. Eventually the painting is seen as a totality, as a new Gestalt where the parts are to work together. Usually the artist takes some steps back at this point, squinting his eyes in order to blur the details so that he can see the total picture. This requires that he go back to work on a part of it that has to change again to become part of the totality.

It is painful to be suddenly aware that one must kill part of what one has created to give a full life to the piece. It is a daring moment indeed but how can one justify the hours spent in developing something if it is not to be used? How does one come to terms with the loss? The only way to understand this is by acknowledging that at some point in the creative process our waste of time and effort - our involvement - is immaterial. The work is emerging as separate from us and we will do to it what _it_ needs. From being lovers with the work, we become mommies and daddies. This idea, that the work begins to emerge as something separate from us is very important. It requires an internal recognition and acceptance that we _are_ separate from the other, and the work is like the other. The joy, the delight with what is happening between us gives way to an altruistic attitude, a true concern with what is happening

to *it*. The *me*, the ego has merely become background, while the painting has become "figure", center stage.

A writer friend of mine told me how an accident was responsible for the final version of a novel. He had been working on it for months. He teaches at Stanford, writes systematically every morning and goes to the campus only in the afternoons. He went to the dentist and while he was sitting in the chair the dentist captivated him with a story that would be perfect for his novel, only that he would have to throw away 200 pages of it that now would not make sense. He struggled with this dilemma while driving home but by the time he arrived home he went straight into his study found those 200 pages and threw them away immediately. It seems that this is not an uncommon event for him. Someone that has not yet been able to give a work in progress "a life of its own" might find this story painful, as though he, his sense of self, his pride would also be thrown into the waste basket, especially if he had not yet written the material that was to replace those 200 pages.

What can one learn from the artist and his way of assimilating the accident? First of all, we don't assimilate everything at once. We have to take an experience in parts and only then integrate them in a way that is enriching and meaningful. As with digestion, the experience has to be broken into parts. As with digestion there is a timing that

is dictated by our bodily processes, not by our will. When we face an experience we cannot assimilate the impasse feels like indigestion: we will try to get rid of it through any means available. Sometimes we get rid of it by putting it inside of somebody else. The other person is perceived as though he had the thing we wanted to get rid of. Babies do this when they put their hatred inside the parent and then react as though the parent was a monster out to get them. Patients do that with us many times as part of the transference. Spouses do that with each other in what becomes a danse macabre.

An unwanted accident can at times be the result of an unwitting projecting onto the work or putting into the work an experience we cannot digest, or, we might say, an unwanted part of the self. These accidents are the pictorial equivalent of a slip of the tongue. Our unconscious is revealed. From the work, it does to us what it did inside of us. Therefore our first inclination is to eliminate it by washing over it, covering it up with paint. The artist is able to contain this impulse by distancing himself from the accident. He may work on other areas of the painting, thus lowering his anxiety enough to be able to look at it again. In the process the accident may become integrated into the painting and reintrojected back into the self, thus enlarging and enriching the self. "Taking back from the work on a conscious level what has been projected into it on an unconscious level is perhaps the most fruitful and painful result of creativity". (Ehrenzweig, 1967, p. 57).

Of course we do not need a major accident to reach this kind of feat of integration. We could say that there is an ongoing stream of minor accidents in our interaction with the work. The artist has an idea and the materials provide a resisting medium with mutual impact between idea and medium. The creative act would not occur if there were not a true conversation between the artist and his work. The artist has a passive but acute watchfulness for subtle variations in the medium's response and what he does in each successive brush stroke is <u>contingent</u> upon how the canvas responded to his last brush stroke.

A desire to control what happens on the canvas with a disregard for what the canvas says about it, may be efficient but sterile. If the artist fails to relate to the work itself, the creative process goes stale. This will certainly become apparent to the viewer who will not be touched or moved by it. There is no growth for the artist, nor for the viewer, as a result of pseudo-creativity.

In our work with patients we expect them to learn from their experience. This involves having experiences and being able to think about them and assimilate them. Otherwise all the experiences that are unpredictable and unwanted would be gotten rid of either by denial or by projection, putting them into someone else. I compare the experience of the patient unable to think with that of the artist unable to create. As we have seen, the artist works on the different parts of the

painting before he connects them and deals with the whole. If an art teacher were to suggest to a student that he look at the whole picture before he has assimilated the parts, the student would react as though caught in the middle of an undigested meal. There would be an impasse with the teacher and the student might begin to doubt his talent.

Patients dealing with experiences they cannot truly think about express distress and feel as stuck as the artist confronted with an accident. Rather than suggesting to a patient to look at the whole picture or think about the whole situation, the therapist may suggest that he deal with each part of the experience separately with the less distressing, more familiar one first. Once the person's anxiety level lowers he will go back on his own to talking and thinking about the experience that had earlier felt foreign and unthinkable and make it his own.

I would like to illustrate this with an excerpt of a therapy session. Sally, a 22 year old woman I have been seeing for two years, begins talking about her sprained knee. She is quite distressed and talks about feeling confused and overwhelmed. She wonders if the physical therapist she is seeing is really helping her -- she is very angry with him. In treatment he asks her to report to him when the leg starts hurting as he applies different weights to a pulley.

Sally: I think he is hurting me. It is hard for me to know what I feel with the leg, it seems to hurt all the time and I don't know if I am misguiding him...but he ought to know. I don't know if I want to go back there. I don't know if he is really helping me.

Ther.: You would want him to know what is going on with your leg. You get angry with him for not knowing and with yourself for not guiding him.

Sally: I am making it worse by not following his advice and staying off my feet. I went shopping yesterday because I was feeling better but I am overdoing it. I shopped for seven hours (starts crying) I don't know...I am so confused. Everything goes wrong!...

Ther.: (After a while) Tell me about the shopping.

Sally: Seven hours! Of course I cannot expect to get better. I am always overdoing it (continues to cry).

Ther.: There must be something good about the shopping. You would not do it just to spoil your treatment.

Sally: I really enjoy finding the right things for my apartment, left a lamp on hold which will be perfect. And with clothes too. Remember when I started therapy how I talked about hating to make decisions? And the problems with what my mother likes and what I like? Now I feel very confident about my taste and how I put things together. I don't get overwhelmed in a department store anymore, I know how to find what I want.

Ther.: The contrast is very clear: in bed, unable to move

with your leg up and helpless; in a store feeling in charge, competent, creating something new...

Sally: I hate being stuck in bed and needing help and no one there to bring me a cup of tea... I guess when I go shopping I forget everything about being in need or getting angry that no one is there. I can do what I want to do by myself and it makes me feel good... to the point where I forget about taking care of myself... (After a silence) ...I have two exams coming up this week. I will stay in bed all during the week studying... at least I'll have a sense of purpose and that'll help me not to focus so much on my feeling needy. I still have a lot of problems with that and that's why I can't afford to get sick... (pause) ...I'll continue with the physical therapist. It's not his fault really if I can't tell him what I feel. (smiles) Poor guy! I was so angry with him.

As you can see, I have her talk about her shopping experience at the time of impasse. Talking about the shopping breaks up the situation and helps Sally focus on that experience only -- supposedly a good experience -- rather than being overwhelmed by the whole picture. It also distances her enough from the distress so that she can begin to look at what she does. She discovers that in the shopping she has a sense of mastery she misses when she's helpless in bed, with no one there. She finds out why she shops with a vengeance -- to avoid the painful

feelings of need and anger if she were at home and resting. Now that her anxiety is lower she can begin to talk about what she's going to do. Projective identification in which the physical therapist is perceived as harming her is also resolved as she comes to understand at the end that this is not so, and that she was projecting her anger onto him. That understanding means that she has been able to assimilate her own anger at her helplessness. In other words, she takes in her projection.

I have attempted to show that whether accidents are found in nature, purposefully created or the result of an unconscious projecting into the work, they are an opportunity for liberating ourselves from cultural conventions or from our own limitations. As Leonardo pointed out, ambiguity in the images forces us to project something into them. The ambiguity in an image gives us a chance to find out about ourselves whereas less ambiguous images do not allow us such discovery. Clear, unequivocal images give us a reassuring sense of the stability of the world around us: we are able to relax, we don't need to think. Ambiguity, on the other hand, while offering hope for self discovery, has a price: anxiety. We are forced to give up our omnipotence and to recognize that we don't know. Ambiguity forces us to think.

We have seen that throughout history artists have cherished the ambiguous, the accidental, as an opportunity to free the imagination and the self from internal limitations. Freud

attempted to reach a similar goal with his use of free association; the relinquishing of conscious control could allow the primary process to emerge and reveal the inner workings of the mind. I think the artist, the therapist and the patient are all dealing with what emerges as a result of accidents, purposeful or not. We all have to be able to withstand the anxiety of an exploration where parameters are often unclear, where feelings are often confusing, where there is no clear outcome. Yet, we all stay in it because the promise of freedom and higher integration is also there and continues to tantalize.

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