

Coltrera, J.T. (1998). *The Artist and the Emotional World: Creativity and Personality*. By John E. Gedo.: New York: Columbia University Press, 1996, 288 pp.,....

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## **The Artist and the Emotional World: Creativity and Personality. By John E. Gedo.: New York: Columbia University Press, 1996, 288 pp., \$18.00 paperback**

**Joseph T. Coltrera** 

In *The Artist and the Emotional World*, John Gedo does not so much present a psychoanalytic theory of creativity as make an empirical summary statement of some forty years of clinical work with the creative personality. Gedo prefers the notion of *personality* when addressing the enduring qualities that mark the creative person, rather than that of *character*, with its moral overtones. Gedo goes on, however, to treat the aesthetic of the artist as very much a moral choice, as indeed it is. Consequently, a weathering of superego aggression may be taken as a significant benchmark for terminating a creative patient, along with the rise of directive superego functions to codeterminacy with its punitive ones. And herein lies the great virtue of this book, the possibility of not only an intellectual dialogue but a clinical one as well. Sad to say, few psychoanalytic commentaries offer clinical examples or expositions of their thesis, so that applied psychoanalysis has become almost the last refuge of "wild" analysis. Much to Gedo's credit, his corroborating study of some fifty great creative personalities is conducted in accord with accepted biographical and art history methodologies and rules of evidence.

Like Gedo, I do not believe in the idea of a decisive moment in creative psychopathology. The artist may fall sick, but the sickness does not make the art. To think of the creative person as inherently flawed and deflected from madness only by the creative act is among the oldest of aesthetic theories. In the *Republic* and *Ion*, Plato says the poet necessarily stands apart from other men, mad because the gods

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speak through him and kept from going mad by his poetry. I cannot agree with Gedo, however, that Kurt Eissler (1963) presents the best exposition of an ego psychological approach to creativity. Not only is his exposition flawed by the absence of newer developmental thinking, but it was Eissler who brought Plato to new dominance in modern psychoanalytic thought, writing that "every genius is potentially psychotic because the production of great art may involve the transformation of psychotic-like structures that resemble sublimation" (p. 1097). Believing with Eissler in the daemonic wellspring of creativity, most of psychoanalysis regards the creative act to be closer to the unconscious than to consciousness, nearer to primary process thinking than to the secondary process, and that a personality so topographically compromised is at best unstable. Consequently, artists often come to analysis fearful that their creativity will be interpreted away, and the therapeutic alliance fairly turns on their coming to believe that a good analysis will enhance, rather than resolve, the inherent complexity of their style and form. This very complexity speaks for a developmental approach as more appropriate to the creative personality than is the conflict reductionism intrinsic to the idea of creative psychopathology. What is the aesthetic act if not an imposed empathic bond, causing the eye of the beholder to "see" what the artist sees? Gedo spends much of this work rejecting the idea of creative psychopathology, with its implicit motivational premise of creativity as higher-order wish fulfillment (Freud 1908). While we must agree with Freud that fantasy is integral to the creative imagination, this insight must be expanded beyond its original cathartic premise to a position perhaps closer to Winnicott's object-related notion of play. The role of catharsis in the creative act is as old as Aristotle's *Poetics*, in which aesthetic pleasure is related to tension reduction. The complexities of creative form and act, however, are better served by modern developmental and neuropsychological thinking, which argue for a biology of increasingly organized complexity, inherently integrative but not necessarily reductively synthetic, and compounded of interactions between individual and environment. Developmental concepts intrinsically assume contingent ones about object relationships, with development taken to be interactive from infancy onward (Coltrera 1996).

In a pertinent aside, Gedo points out that in citing psychotic art we must remember that such art is invariably produced during recovery

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from the acute phase of the illness. The imagery of idiosyncratic fantasy begins to be used in the high art of the late eighteenth century, with the work of Francisco Goya and Henry Fuseli, and William Hogarth's quoting the graffiti of an inmate in his reportage engraving *In Bedlam*. The cosmological fantasy and apocalyptic reordering of that anonymous artist, Gedo points out, is characteristic of psychotic iconography. I would point out that it belongs also to the iconography of shamanistic art. At the behest of the relatives of a dead communicant, a Huichol Indian priest, under the consciousness-expanding aegis of peyote, paints his cosmological journey through the underworld. James Ensor and, later, Jean Dubuffet seem to be quoting similarly psychotic iconography in their deliberately primitivized style, *l'art brut*. Gedo thinks that Ensor, obsessively preoccupied with dread of his own death, put his art in the service of adaptive management of his paranoid depression and incipient psychosis, with his work losing its aesthetic power during remission.

Creative thought is characterized by a gift for ambiguity, a resistance to synthetic closure, a tolerance for unreality, an adaptive flexibility, and above all a gift for radical novelty (Coltrera 1965). Psychoanalytic cognitive and perceptual theory is hard put to understand these according to the dialectic, linear explanations offered by the notion of primary and secondary processes, and is no better

served by the analogical circumlocution of an id regression in the service of the ego. In refusing to accept the id as the natural habitat of creativity, Gedo argues that the simultaneously perceptual and cognitive orders of creative style seem best understood through the holistic assumptions of gestalt theory; he cites in particular the complementary work of Anton Ehrenzweig and Pinchas Noy. (To me, it seems the accruing and fractal complexities of creative style are better served by the nonlinear dynamics of modern chaos theory.)

In casting doubt on the relevance of genetic reconstruction in such elucidation, Gedo implicitly questions the pertinence of developmental considerations as well. "Neither the biographies of successful creative personalities nor their personal recollections, whenever they are questioned about their past, are likely to include much relevant information about ... transactions in early childhood that may have influenced the development of their presumably inborn potentialities" (p. 32). Not only do I dispute this assertion, but seemingly so does Gedo throughout the book, in both passing observations and clinical examples.

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I believe that any genetic approach to the problem of creativity must be premised on modern developmental observations and thinking, so that we are dealing with the childhood of the artist less as conceived by Freud (1910) in his study of Leonardo, and more as seen by Ernst Kris and Phyllis Greenacre. Many assumptions about the childhood of the artist appear to be made without considering critical advances in developmental thinking made after 1945, which took into account not only newer child and infancy studies but more recent neuropsychological ideas as well. So while the absence of these ideas is understandable in Freud, it is not in those who have written after 1950.

Greenacre (1957) believed that creative personalities are protected from the expectable pathogenic effects of childhood trauma by their "love affair with the world," which makes them less vulnerable to inadequate parental nurturing. We cannot fail to be impressed, when we see them as patients, how well their creative imagination has adaptively buffered them from the effects of significant childhood trauma. I agree also with Gedo's clinical addendum that further protection is offered by the artist's sense of self-effectance (White 1963; Coltrera 1965; Klein 1976). In this surprising narcissistic vicissitude, the artist is protected from serious criticism by satisfaction and faith in his or her own competence, offering as it does an autonomous source of self-esteem. This is surprising in light of the extra complement of narcissistic problems the artist seems heir to in development. Gedo believes that empathic acceptance by parents of the creative child's "difference" fosters and validates the sense of self-effectance. Gedo compares the benign acceptance of Gustave Flaubert's seeming simple-mindedness as a child to the traumatic misunderstanding of their "difference" by the families of Friedrich Nietzsche and Marcel Proust, contributing in the one to an embittered misogyny and in the other to an arch bitchiness raised to inspired literary comment.

Perhaps a more complex and clinically pertinent developmental issue is presented by the narcissistic vicissitude intrinsic to creative pairs, that of the secret sharer, examples of which abound in art and literature. Samuel Taylor Coleridge ceased writing poetry following the breakup of his relationship with William Wordsworth and the impending marriage of the latter. Arthur Rimbaud wrote little after the breakup of his adolescent homosexual relationship with Paul Verlaine. Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, who together parsed Cézanne's use of multiple viewpoints to its ultimate declension as cubism, were so each

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the "double" of the other that their work was indistinguishable. Accordingly, their paintings went unsigned. Using the title of a novella by Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Sharer*, Bernard Meyer (1967) examined the secret-sharer relationship between Conrad and Ford Maddox Ford, noting that Conrad's creative work block dated to his break with Ford.

After some ten years of sustained production of some of the great paintings in modern art, Vincent van Gogh killed himself at thirty-seven. If his art fended off a profound depression in those productive years, Gedo asks himself, why did he kill himself on the eve of his recognition? The answer, Gedo cogently argues, is offered in the recently rediscovered hospital records of van Gogh's brother, Theo, which reveal that the latter suffered from general paresis. Gedo believes that the intractable course and fatal prognosis of that illness precipitated a suicidal despair in Vincent, who felt himself unable to bear the loss of a sustaining relationship. The brothers' magnificent correspondence, *The Letters*, is both testimony to, and the diary of, their secret sharing. The developmental meaning of such sharing is too often prematurely confronted and interpreted as pathological dependence in the creative patient, with profound depression, work block, and significant masochistic acting out behavior almost invariably following the breakup of the relationship. I have seen this in the reanalysis of a painter who was made to leave his dealer, and with a writer forced to part with his editor. My own analytic custom is to tactfully confront and clarify the "holding" environment offered by the secret sharing, and only then to begin to work through the sadomasochistic bonding that usually maintains these relationships. Secret sharing has a special call on the transference and countertransference, frequently evoking an enactment integral to the work of such analysis. A caveat must now be made, that such enactment be kept to the lee side of the countertransference, so as to avoid the "wild" analytic excesses intersubjectivity seems to foster (Coltrera 1996).

Gedo ends on two studies in depth, of Paul Cézanne and Eugène Delacroix, which essentially summarize his sense of how and why the artist makes and uses art. Cézanne is the flawed rock on which modern art is built. Where Caravaggio openly walked on the wild side, able to paint by virtue of the ego-splitting afforded him by his mannerist style, using the dislocations of light and estranged figures available to *la bella maniera* to populate his canvases with fallen saints and blowzy *putti*, Cézanne by contrast kept his oeuvre separate from his

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profound inner psychic turmoil by the ego-splitting afforded him by a radically innovative change in his painterly style. While Cézanne's early impressionistic work bore testimony to a great raw talent, it also betrayed his paranoid anxiety about women, whom he regarded as sexual predators, so much so that he could not work from the nude model. The nude figures seen in *The Bathers* are treated as if abstract motifs of the landscape. Cézanne could not bear to be touched by anyone and experienced a persistent paranoia toward his own father. The delusional and paranoid wariness that characterized Cézanne were known to his boyhood friend, Émile Zola, who destroyed a lifelong friendship by making Cézanne the model for the isolated and disturbed painter, Lantier, in his novel *L'Oeuvre*. Meyer Schapiro (1968) was the first to observe that the mature Cézanne raised his threatening affects to painterly passion through the safe passage afforded him by his radical use of form, and in so doing gave modern art its aesthetic premise. Similarly, Gedo believes that the later Cézanne eschewed the dangers implicit in content by the ego-splitting offered him by his innovative reliance on form.

The great French Romantic painter Eugène Delacroix, probably the natural son of Talleyrand, was so sure of his destined greatness that he became the art-mad hero of Balzac's roman à clef, *La Rabouilleuse*, whose art protects him from the depredations of life. Gedo chooses Delacroix as the great artist *sans peur et sans reproche*, who summates the heretofore separately considered issues that in Gedo's view are determinants of the creative process. In this construction, creativity buffered the child Delacroix from the great strains put on the family's stability by the mother's sexual transgressions and his own imputed illegitimacy. The substance of Delacroix's driving family romance was the demand that his paintings be the aesthetic equal of the work of his distinguished cabinetmaker grandfather and stepgrandfather. Its shadow was that his art grant him a legitimate place in the pantheon with his putative father, the great statesman Talleyrand. In his twenties, Delacroix immersed himself in the radicalizing artistic and intellectual life of Paris, accepted by the likes of Victor Hugo, Hector Berlioz, Charles Baudelaire, and Stendahl. However, Gedo believes that the secret-sharer relationship with the painter Théodore Géricault proved the defining creative relationship for Delacroix. Upon the death of Géricault, he increasingly withdrew himself from that world, to begin a life of fierce exception to the artistic establishment. Gedo feels that the

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increasingly solitary Delacroix's "love affair" with his aesthetic, his creative self-effectance, gradually displaced his need for the love of others. The inner dialogues of his solitariness caused him to turn to serious writing, to the acute reflections of his journals, and to a significant body of criticism. At the last, his aesthetic became a moral imperative for French painting to abandon the artistic dead end of "Rubéniste" painting for the impassioned Romantic commentaries that became its glory.

One of the virtues of this book is that while Gedo is informed by psychoanalysis, he knows that the necessary validating scholarship goes by the hard way of the reality principle and by different rules of evidence. His clinical examples ring true for me, reminding me of similar patients in my own practice. I am probably most pleased that Gedo does not understand too much too quickly, granting sanctuary to the aesthetic mystery that shrouds beauty and all who make it. So, too, I hope never to lose my own way to the bee-loud glades where beauty goes, by understanding too much and too quickly.

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