

Depression and the Spiritual in Modern Art: Homage to Miró

edited by Joseph J. Schildkraut, M.D., and Aurora Otero, M.D. Chichester, England, John Wiley & Sons, 1996, 244 pages, \$68.00.

Two Spanish-speaking intellectual giants had unique views about the relationship between art and science. Octavio Paz tells us that "for good poetry, repetition is degradation; for science, repetition is the regularity that confirms its hypotheses. The exception is the poet's reward and the scientist's punishment." On his side, Santiago Ramón y Cajal calls science "the noblest and most humanitarian enterprise... a lively poem of intense action and tacit heroism." Who was right? Are art and science doomed to the cautious distancing of a non-dialogue? This book provides perhaps the most insightful answer to these questions as 22 scholars from both sides of the Atlantic join in proclaiming a new level of convergence, a true meeting of the minds that is as broad and resounding as it is intimate and tender. It is a book in which knowledge of the sciences (in this case, psychopathology) deals harmoniously with the extraordinary perceptions of the artists. In doing so, it becomes what the reader always wants: a most pleasurable journey.

The volume includes the proceedings of a symposium held in Barcelona in May 1993, during the city's celebration of the 100th anniversary of the birth of Joan Miró, the great Catalan painter. As Schildkraut writes in the Foreword, art and depression, creativity and suffering interrelate in the realm of spirituality to give rise to the greatest of hopes. The artists as messengers of humankind's deepest emotions give the rest of us the *synesthesia* or cross-sensing that makes us transcend.

Part I, Mood Disorders and Artistic Creativity, opens with a conceptual and historical overview of creativity and mental illness by Nancy Andreasen. Risking the use of too broad a concept of creativity (extended to even physical abilities), the great phenomenologist that Andreasen is comes through with a fascinating description of the personality and cognitive traits of the artist and the almost "dissociative state" that governs his/her creative feats. Kay Jamison follows with an excellent review on mood disorders, creativity, and the artistic temperament. Regarding the "mad genius *versus* the healthy artist" debate, the author takes the middle-of-the-road view that "a bit of madness and turmoil is part and parcel of the artistic temperament." Similarly, she makes the point that any attempt to arbitrarily polarize thought, behavior, and emotion into clear-cut "sanity" or "insanity" is destined to fail.

Obiols presents the neuropsychological perspectives on art and creativity. He does a true biological anthropologist's job, traveling through the protoartistic territory of primitive cultures to arrive, with MacLean in the 90s, at the understanding of the limbic system as a "modulator or generator of feelings," preceding experiences such as those of a creative nature. The hemispheric specialization leads to the consideration of the prefrontal lobe as a regulator of emotions and of the archaic components of originality. Creativity "as a process of conversion from chaotic to ordered states" would then be based on the plasticity of the human brain and on its "creative fringe" that generates the "new orders" of problem-solving and artistic production.

The first of several inciting clinical cases is presented by Gastó's work on the pioneer of *Art Informel* in Catalonia, J. M.

de Sucre. The intimidating complexity of this painter's personality (not unlike that of many other creative giants) weaves into issues of independence, individualism, soul-searching, and identity. Perhaps this is also the first inkling that, in the end, this book will not succeed in establishing a psychobiological basis of aesthetics (which, of course, was not its intent). The last chapter in this section (by Salzman) deals with the treatment of the depressed artist. Overcoming the temptation to be simplistic, the author deals with difficult problems: the wish of some creative individuals not to be treated, whether pharmacologic treatment interferes with the creative process, and the outcome of untreated creative persons with a mood disorder. While depression often stimulates creative people to seek treatment, normal or mild mood fluctuations do not necessarily require treatment, and if so, the goal would be to reach a kind of "controlled cyclothymia." Finally, the question is asked whether bipolars behave differently than unipolars with regard to creativity and psychopharmacology.

Part II presents provocative views and reflections on the spiritual in modern art. Tàpies, after quoting Miró's call to "rediscover the magical and religious meaning of things," goes on to suggest that the West is "frequently dogged by ancient institutions that want to monopolize and sometimes even immobilize changes." He proposes the "apophatic approach" which, recognizing the limits of human rational understanding in relation to the transcendent or spiritual, resorts to an "anthropological mysticism" that deals with the processes by which our unconscious mind creates symbols or is seduced by myths, prophetic intuitions, the fantasies of children, the hallucinations of "mad people," or the language of dreams. The rational balance may include the respectful acceptance of God's will "which might ultimately prove to be the ancestral voices of nature itself." Giralt-Miracle studies Tàpies' work and his rich symbolic repertory. The artist has a hunger of the absolute, and matter and spirit become one. Another side of the "spiritual revolution against materialism," or art as a redeemer, is found in Ballard's brief note on Kandinsky. This is further elaborated by Oberhuber's observations on the artistic form and spiritual experience which, although a strongly European-centered viewpoint, is quite a scholarly piece that suggests a therapeutic, liberating angle in creativity.

The work of Chillida, a Spanish sculptor, is explored by Corredor-Matheos, who makes us see the beauty of silence emerging from the void of sculptures, the role of limits in the configuration of space, but also the incitement of art as an object of contemplation and a source of learning. A stronger dependency on religion and God "does not necessarily imply that one must accept the idea of divinity": it is perhaps enough to believe in the inscrutable, inaccessible nature of what is real and, consequently, in the mystical condition of art. Chillida is presented as the opposite to the "tortured nature" of works by artists like van Gogh, Munch, Wols, Pollock, and Beuys and justifies the view that the artist has a decisive role in healing the wounds of the "age of fragmentation." Then, Chillida himself reflects on the "special sensitivity or perception" of artists,

whom he describes as “wanderers...trying to reach the unreachable.” He makes fascinating connections between the work of poets and musicians.

Part III, the heart of the volume, is devoted to the life and work of Joan Miró. Schildkraut and Hirshfeld give us a cogent and moving clinicopsychological portrait of Miró's life, and explore the interrelatedness of his tragic temperament, his depressions, his spirituality, and his artistic creation. Looking at the artist as sufferer, they also delve into plastic-poetic-nostalgic-symbolic connections to convey Miró's art as expression of his obsession with inner turmoils, his struggles with death, life, and self-destruction. The beauty of one of Miró's greatest works, the 1938 engraving and drypoint *Portrait of Miró*, with the inscribed phrases “Rain of Lyres, Circuses of Melancholy,” provides a rich depiction of the depressive and visionary strivings of a man who, in the end, overcame childhood humiliations, doubts, dreams, and a relentless task of self-discovery. Jung helps the authors to put the viewer back in touch with the spiritual forces “repressed by the culture.” Lomas, a lecturer in art history, discusses his views on Miró's self-portraits as vehicles of self-observation throughout an inner storm. A self-portrait implies becoming “another,” somebody else, the fading of a personal identity, the anguished travel “between castration and disavowal” from a reality that throughout Miró's life was tinged with political extremism and nationalism. That lost identity becomes the black border of a number of Miró's works—a boundary and a challenge, a frame and a protest.

In “Chaos as a Stimulus,” Malet speaks of chaos as the state of confusion and disorder which, in some cases, is the origin of the creative act. She postulates that Miró's creativity “was stimulated more by difficulty and the desire to overcome chaos than by any alteration in his state of mind.” This provides certainly a different frame to the dialogue between clinicians and artists, art critics and historians. Miró wanted nothing to constrain his freedom, not even political pressures and, Malet says, decided to flee from the references that were closest to him: he wanted his work more linked “to tradition rather than culture,” a questionable proposition unless Malet defines culture in shallow terms.

The artistic rebelliousness (translated into “violent” paintings and more intense work by Miró) is further elaborated by Jeffett. Around 1930, Miró issued a statement in which he proclaimed “the assassination of painting” and turned to collage and sculpture as his main channels of artistic expression. Jeffett sees this as another expression of Miró's struggle with both personal and artistic identity. Miró's “assassination” attempt was, in retrospect, an affirmation of painting as a vehicle for thought, as a poetic locus for mental activity. Jeffett proposes an enthralling thesis: “The presence of the artist in the work is only achieved in his absence, in the measure of the difference separating one work from another and each work from the artist. In fact, the ‘murder plot’ should be considered a call for abolition of distinctions between art and life.”

Barbara Rose, another art historian, takes us further through this captivating pathway. Her thesis is that an artist finds his vocation by transcending the fear of failure: the difference between the artist and the neurotic is that the artist or the genuinely creative individual has the ego strength to risk failing and to go on experimenting in a zone of uncertainty without the security of validation. For Miró, mortals “cannot aspire to complete happiness.” His quest for spiritual transcendence was a self-effacing, devotional activity looking beyond earthly life and rebelling against the constraints of such life through “a radical kind of art.” Miró had to have “the conviction of faith” that challenged taboos in a nonviolent way, at

once revolutionary and romantic. That such leanings were the result of “Spanish mysticism” remains a hypothesis, however.

Part IV deals with an intriguing series of studies on the abstract expressionists of the New York School, a group strongly influenced by Miró's oeuvre. It starts with a classic 1961 paper by Rosenblum on “the abstract sublime” defined not only as “greatness of dimension” but also as boundlessness, a numbing phenomenon of light and void present in the work of painters as diverse as Ward, Still, Friedrich, and Turner (the “romantic sublime”) or Pollock, Rothko, and Newman, the “abstract sublime” New Yorkers. Schildkraut, Hirshfeld, and Murphy present a case study of the prevalence of psychopathology in 15 of the New York abstract expressionists. The figures are eloquent: depressive spectrum disorders, alcoholism or alcohol abuse, suicide or single vehicle accident, psychiatric treatment, and history of suicide in the family significantly surpass the general population's levels. The authors advance the notion that “depression in the artist may be of adaptive value to society at large.” This is further elaborated in a well-conceived paper by Kareen and Hagop Akiskal on the life and suicide of Arshile Gorky, the name adopted by Vosdanig Manoug Adoian, an Armenian painter described as the vital link between European modern art and American abstract expressionism. Adoian/Gorky had a hellish life practically from the beginning, including his immigration to America at the age of 16. A tender linkage with his distant homeland—and the memories of his beloved mother—could not, however, prevent an identity crisis that led to his name change and eventually to clinical depression. Gorky used painting as confession and reminiscence. His early agonies or tragedies probably created a strong urge to his “quest for immortality through creation,” as a way to combat his deep sense of loss, humiliation, and low self-esteem. The Akiskals tell us about the period of “intense nostalgia” in the artist that may have contributed to his striving for unattainable objects, interpersonal collisions, poverty, and the “terminal agonies” including disfiguring surgery, his wife's desertion, and final, total isolation. While suggesting a “cyclic melancholy” in Gorky's temperament, the authors remark the artist's ability “to create in spite of the limitations of existence”: the attempt at unifying sadness and beauty was transformed into abstract expressionism. Gorky hung himself “to give birth to the purest form of art.”

I said earlier that the book is an intellectual feast. It is a gift to the mind as it is a gift to the senses—the reproductions of masterpieces are dazzling. Wherever art, science, and spirituality meet, it must be the closest place to paradise. When these fields are impregnated by the insights of great clinicians, art historians, and scholars, their views illuminate the debate on crucial topics such as personality, cognitive styles, cultural background, identity, existential quests, religious beliefs. The somewhat blurred boundaries of normality and abnormality are perhaps determined by the physical or biochemical closeness of mitochondrial structures but sewn by each person's unique way of handling life. Perhaps a chapter on the therapeutic value of art in its many forms would have rounded up the extraordinary scope of the book. However, it is clear that through its subject, it asks the basic questions that human beings ask of life, fate, and society. And it tells us that such questions are not and cannot be answered by purely rational knowledge. Miró knew that in the most lucid of ways. His anguish was ours, his triumphs were also ours. In a tremendously sophisticated way he knew that beyond rationality, mankind, in the words of Vaclav Havel, clings stubbornly “to the old certainties of the tribe.”

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