

PSYCHOANALYTIC APPROACHES TO ART AND ESTHETICS

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Summary

Freud always recognized the genius of artists in perceiving deep psychic truths that psychoanalysts have rendered more explicit. This explains his interest in art, almost concomitant with the birth of psychoanalysis and developing along three main lines: the analysis of works of art, of the creative activity, and of the esthetic experience. Various authors' theories are examined, emphasizing how we have passed from the first naïve pathobiographies (authors' unconscious investigated through their artistic products) to the most sophisticated analysis of the structural logic of artistic texts. On the issue of creativity two main theoretic movements have appeared: the first, Kleinian, based on the idea of symbolic reparation of the object; the other closer to the most recent theories on narcissism, based on the hypothesis of an auto-reparative creativity.

Furthermore, we have underlined the modification of the concept of "interpretation," no longer meant as a decoding of cryptic language that hides an unmentionable world of drives, but also as an artistic activity, a construction of expressive means devoted to giving voice to that part of the psyche lacking symbolic capacities. On the experience of beauty, we have dealt particularly with the "uncanny" quality connected with the emergence of repressed or split parts that can more or less seriously upset the actual psychic organization. The article is concluded with a reference to the esthetic implications of the psychoanalytical experience.

1. Introduction

Artists have always shown great interest in the human mind and its passions. With their genius they have offered visions of invisible inner realities and, in some ways, we can refer to them as the first psychologists of humankind. Consequently, psychoanalysis

focused its earliest attentions on art as well. And it was not a marginal attention. In giving to one of his first fundamental discoveries the name *Oedipus complex*, Freud implicitly recognizes a debt to the poetic intuition of the great Greek tragedies with regard to the contents of the unconscious mind. W.R. Bion has even stated that it was not Freud who discovered Oedipus, but Oedipus who founded psychoanalysis, as if at an early stage psychoanalysis was contained in the myths and drama of ancient Greece.

Freud showed great admiration for the deep psychological intuition of artists, not only in several of his works (“Psychopathic characters on the stage,” 1905; “Leonardo da Vinci and a memory of his childhood,” 1910; “The theme of the three caskets,” 1913; “The Moses of Michelangelo,” 1913; “A childhood recollection from ‘Dichtung und Wahrheit’ [Goethe],” 1917; and “Dostoevsky and parricide,” 1927) but also in a number of his statements, the best known of which is contained in the 1922 letter to Schnitzler: “When plunging into your splendid creations I always thought I would find—behind the poetical look—the hypothesis, the interests and the results that I knew were mine . . . I had the impression that you knew through intuition—really from a delicate self-observation, all that I had to uncover in other men through a laborious work.”

Another explicit acknowledgement of artists’ ability to *experience* the activity of the unconscious even though not recognizing it as such and to transfer this experience in their works can be found in “Delusions and dreams in Jensen’s ‘Gradiva’” (1906): . . . creative writers are valuable allies and their evidence is to be prized highly, for they are apt to know a whole host of things between heaven and earth of which our philosophy has not yet let us dream . In their knowledge of the mind they are far in advance of us everyday people, for they draw upon sources which we have not yet opened up for science.

The description of the human mind is indeed the domain which is most his own; he has from time immemorial been the precursor of science, and so too of scientific psychology . . . Thus the creative writer cannot evade the psychiatrist nor the psychiatrist the creative writer, and the poetic treatment of a psychiatric theme can turn out to be correct without any sacrifice of its beauty.

We probably draw from the same source and work upon the same object, each of us by another method . . . Our procedure consists in the conscious observation of abnormal mental processes in other people so as to be able to elicit and announce their laws. The author no doubt proceeds differently.

He directs his attention to the unconscious in his own mind, he listens to its possible developments and lends them artistic expression . . . Thus he experiences from himself what we learn from others—the laws which the activities of this unconscious must obey. But he need not state these laws, nor even be aware of them . . . they are incorporated within his creations.

Freud in this essay provided a brilliant example of the prophetic nature of some literary works in knowledge of the psyche. Half a century later, M. Klein used another narration, *Si j’étais vous*, by the French novelist Julien Green to illustrate projective identification.

In spite of the appreciation of the psychological insights of artists, many psychoanalysts have approached the problem of beauty and esthetic experience with suspicion. It was as if art was so seductive with its exterior qualities that it obstructed the knowledge of what goes beyond appearances, and particularly the knowledge of unpleasant experiences of anxiety, conflict, and pain. Art was then seen as an idealizing cover, a defensive factor that diverts us from deep psychic truth.

It might be that the “incentive bonus” detected by Freud in “Creative writers and day-dreaming” (1907) fostered the tendency to devalue the formal aspects of artistic objects. The seductive force that is undoubtedly innate in works of art has been generally considered a deception of the cognitive faculties.

Instead it indicates what Freud underlined, quoting Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*: “Your bait of falsehood takes this carp of truth.” That is, thanks to the poetic imagination, we can grasp the truth through what is not real, with the mediation of artistic pretence. This pretence, differently from objects of fascination, leaves reality unprejudiced. The ability to distinguish truth from falsehood remains perfectly vigilant, even when the psyche is captured by esthetic pleasure.

Real artistic beauty, in other words, seduces because it proposes another world rich in new experiences but also devoid of that illusory omnipotence that compromises judgment. It evokes a *further world* that escapes from evidence, but that lives inside us. An unusual world, not often visited, that may not even be beautiful but that, thanks to formal embellishments, becomes pleasant and accessible.

Therefore, when Freud underlined artists’ ability to anticipate psychoanalytic beliefs regarding the human mind by generating, through their works, unwitting perceptions of the unconscious, or when he admired their intuitive power of heralding ideas that only after a while “we poor mortals” would clearly recognize, he implicitly invited analysts to address the analysts as artists, with the ability to conceive things obscurely inside themselves before recognizing them clearly.

Before anyone else, artists have explored the unconscious with their ingenious introspective work. Psychoanalysts have then added more awareness to those explorations, trying to recognize *clearly* those psychic processes that artistic insight had perceived *obscurely*. In doing so, they followed different guiding principles. At least three can be traced: work, creative activity, and the analysis of esthetic experience.

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Freud S. (1953–1974). Creative writers and day-dreaming. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 9, pp. 141–153. London: Hogarth. [Thanks to their imagination, through which poets are able to elaborate forms so seductive that “disgust and shame” are neutralized, one can grasp psychical truths that are not at all beautiful.]

Freud S. (1953–1974). Delusions and dreams in Jensen's “Gradiva.” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 9, pp. 3–93. London: Hogarth. [Freud has given in this essay an example of the writer's capability to perceive the psyche's problems, as delusion. By analyzing a short story by W. Jensen, he shows how the author is able to give importance, through the psychological events of his characters, to unconscious activity, without enouncing its laws and without recognizing them clearly, but simply by representing them in the narration.]

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Segal H. (1952). A psychoanalytic approach to esthetics. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* **33**, 196–207; reproduced in M. Klein, P. Heimann, and R.E. Money-Kyrle (1955), *New Directions in Psycho-Analysis*, London: Tavistock, 1955. [These works summarize the main Kleinian theories on art and creativity, considered as evidence of a “successful loss.” Thanks to processing of the “depressive position,” the artist creates once again, in the symbolic dimension, the beloved objects lost.]

Winnicott D.W. (1971). *Playing and Reality*, 169 pp. London: Tavistock. [In Winnicott's conception of psychical development, very important is the “transitional area,” a space in children's relation where they have the possibility to play with the omnipotent illusion of creating the world. To receive milk means for children to produce it. This illusory creativity allows them to “transit” from the relation with an imagined object, as the emanation of the self, to the true object-relation with an external world, recognized as other from the self.]

Biographical Sketch

Antonio Di Benedetto has dealt for many years now with the imaginative and creative aspects of psychoanalytical thought and with its correlations with artistic thought. He believes that, just as psychoanalysis has helped to understand the artistic phenomenon, art can be used to understand the psychical phenomenon.

He is the author of the book *Prima della parola. L'ascolto psicoanalitico del non detto attraverso le forme dell'arte* (2000), besides numerous articles on psychoanalysis, esthetics and music for reviews (*Rivista di psicoanalisi, Psiche, il verri, Revue des Etudes Italiennes*) and collective volumes, among which we find: *La cultura psicoanalitica* (1987), *Il pensiero e l'infinito* (1989), *Creatività Psicopatologia Arte* (1995), *Il segreto e la psicoanalisi* (1996), *Le frontiere della psicoanalisi* (1997), *Paesaggi della mente* (1997), *Psicoanalisi e Musica* (1998), *La forma segreta* (1998), *Il sogno cento anni dopo* (1999).