

The Senses Grow Skilled in Their Craving: Thoughts on Creativity and Addiction*

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For art to exist, for any sort of aesthetic activity to exist, a certain physiological precondition is indispensable: intoxication.

—Nietzsche

The connection between creativity and addiction is nearly as legendary as that between creativity and madness. Many people expect creative individuals to abuse substances and are hardly surprised upon discovering that yet another famous artist has ended in a rehabilitation facility or died from a drug overdose. For many, writing has become synonymous with alcoholism and music with narcotics addiction—the chemical playing both muse and demon. One is left to wonder how it has come to pass that the relationship between artists and substance abuse is now taken as a given, and whether such a tie is justified or merely part of the popular myth of the unstable artist. Thus, if there is a strong bond between creativity and addiction, is the creative process helped or hindered by drugs? What meager literature on this rich subject exists consists in few empirical studies, many of them from abroad. Here I explore the mystifying bond that exists between the worlds of substance abuse and the arts, between the chemically induced altered state of consciousness and the work created under its influence, and the connection of those dyads to psychological

sensitivity.

Altered States

The power of chemical substances to manufacture dramatic alterations in sensation and perception, to steep consciousness in trance and phantasmagoria is both frightening and fascinating. Common expressions, like “it is the alcohol/drug speaking” or a person “under the influence” of a “mind-altering” or “mind-expanding” drug refer to the transformative power drugs possess to modify one’s state of mind, perception, affects, body, brain, and behavior.

Depersonalization, the alteration in one’s experience of self so that there is a detachment between the observing and experiencing aspects of the self, is often assumed to occur in states of mental illness. Yet, under certain circumstances, depersonalization is a welcomed rather than aversive condition. For example, those practicing meditation or mindfulness are not necessarily frightened or disoriented by states of depersonalization. Substance abusers,

too, seek experiences that intentionally invoke depersonalization and may even find such experiences liberating, as well as uncanny or terrifying. Writing about the effects of mescaline, poet Henri Michaux described his familiarity with depersonalization: “There isn’t one me. There aren’t ten me’s. There is no me. ME is only a position of equilibrium. An average of me’s, a movement in the crowd” (Plant, 1999, p. 158). *Derealization*, the alienation in one’s experience of reality, is often thought to go hand-in-hand with depersonalization and is also a common consequence of hallucinogenic drug use. William Burroughs described how hallucinogenics “shift the scanning pattern of ‘reality’ so that we see a different ‘reality’—There is no true or real ‘reality’—‘Reality’ is simply a more or less constant scanning pattern” (Ibid., p. 114).

The multiple self-states revealed in both depersonalization and derealization may also culminate in dissociation. The notorious “black out” of memories in alcoholics who awaken from drunken binges epitomize

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mizes dissociation caused by a substance. In our postmodern age, it is often argued that we all dissociate but that there are degrees to which our self states converge or diverge from one another. Multiple personality is located at the extreme pole of dissociation. Robert Louis Stevenson's Hyde, a callous and murderous man, who is totally distinct from his Jekyll, the respectable doctor, perhaps best illustrates the process of dissociation created by drugs. To a much lesser degree, Freud, too, described how cocaine produced a new man, one more "silly," "daring and fearless," and even more "simply normal" than his usual "wretched self" (Jones, 1953).

Artists make use of substances for the express purpose of perceiving life through a new, fresher, or deeper lens, one that is difficult to come by naturally. Hallucinogens, or psychedelic drugs, as they came to be known, have been ingested to explore inner and outer worlds and possibilities.¹ Anaïs Nin expressed the novel perceptivity LSD bestowed upon her: "I could see a new world with my middle eye, a world I had missed before. I caught images behind images, the walls behind the sky, the sky behind the infinite" (Plant, 1999, p. 195). Octavio Paz wrote of the heightened emotional responsiveness and susceptibility inspired by drugs: "Drugs arouse the powers of analogy, set objects in motion, make the world a vast poem shaped by rhymes and rhythms" (Ibid., p. 59).

Thus, artists turn to substances to have their senses reinvigorated. John Cheever lamented that getting old dulls the senses. Picasso once referred to this very phenomenon when he exclaimed that it took him an entire lifetime to learn to draw like a child. Many artists underscore the hard-earned capacity to retrieve and employ a perspective marked by simplicity, freshness, and even "primitiveness" in the service of their art.

The appeal childhood sensibili-

ties possess for many artists involves a desire to recapture the ability to look at the world with awe and a sense of wonder, what Baudelaire called the "animally ecstatic gaze of the child confronted with something new" (Knafo, 2002, p. 31). Indeed, the world of the infant and young child is imbued with a dynamic sense of physical and emotional involvement; knowing and feeling are not yet differentiated, and even inanimate objects are experienced as vital and alive. When artists, like Cheever, experience the loss of this faculty, they may turn to substances in order to revive earlier states of knowing and feeling.

A common effect of many drugs is an overacuteness of the senses known as *hyperaesthesia*. William James was cognizant of this effect when he alleged that alcohol's charms lie in the "deepening sense of reality and truth. In whatever light things may then appear to us, they seem more utterly what they are, more 'utterly utter' than when we are sober" (Goodwin, 1988, p. 188). In 1858, Baudelaire wrote *On the Artificial Ideal*, a monograph that traced the transformations in thoughts and sensations that arise from cannabis.² He mentioned both euphoric and dysphoric reactions and elaborated on drug-induced *synesthesia*, a confusion of the senses (for example, he described the sound of color and the color of sound).

I understand the artist's pursuit of altered states in terms of regressive phenomena, regressive in a non-pathological sense, suggesting the goal-oriented need to resurrect early body and self states and object relations, and to induce unconventional and unexpected modes of cognition. Ernst Kris (1952) was the first to depict creativity as constituting what he called "regression in the service of the ego." Kris believed that the creative process is composed of two phases, each of which

involves a shift in psychic level and a corresponding shift in the cathexis of certain ego functions. During the first *inspirational* phase, the artist is passively receptive to id impulses or their derivatives. Kris described this phase as having much in common with regressive processes in that id impulses and drives, otherwise hidden and unavailable, emerge to communicate with the ego. The artist experiences rapture and a feeling of being driven by external forces.

Kris's second, *elaborational*, phase calls for the artist's active use of such ego functions as reality testing, formulation, and communication. This phase resembles work or problem solving in that it entails concentration and purposeful organization. What was originally communicated to the passively receptive ego is now actively elaborated and communicated to others. According to Kris, the inspirational phase donates the content to an art work whereas the elaboration phase is primarily responsible for the transformation of that content into communicable form, communication serving as the primary purpose of art. These phases may follow each other in swift or slow succession or may be interwoven with one other. A continual interplay between inspiration (regression) and elaboration (criticism) takes place during the creative process. The ecstasy of surrender, or being seized and dominated by the unknown, must join with the rigor and pain of standing apart from it, to shape it into something for someone else. It is perhaps not coincidental that a recurring motif on Grecian urns depicts Apollo, god of form and reason, holding the hand of Dionysius, god of intoxication, ecstasy, and intuition.

The sparse research that has been conducted on the effects chemicals (mostly alcohol) have on the creative process demonstrates that they may facilitate Kris's inspira-

¹ The word "psychedelic" literally means to make the soul visible.

² He later published this as *Artificial Paradises* in 1859.

tional phase because they help to reduce blocks and censors, lessen inhibition, and induce relaxation after sustained effort (Koski-Jännes, 1985; Norlander, 1999). Rather than consider drugs as having the power to create an artificial state of consciousness, this view argues that substances uncover buried—child-like— aspects of the mind.

On the other hand, alcohol appears more likely to hinder the second, elaborational, phase of the creative process because it relaxes the artist's focus and concentration, as well as reflective faculties, all of which are crucial abilities for the problem solving and reality testing facets of creativity. It has been found, for instance, that alcohol contributes to a weakening of secondary process thinking (Kalin, McClelland & Kahn, 1965; Gustafson & Källmén, 1989a; Gustafson & Källmén, 1989b). Since most studies refer primarily to the influence of alcohol on creativity, it is possible that different drugs might have dissimilar effects. For instance, amphetamines or cocaine sustain attention, a function of the secondary process. Freud described this effect during the period he used cocaine: "You perceive an increase of self-control and possess more vitality and capacity for work....Long intensive mental or physical work is performed without any fatigue" (in Jones, 1953, p. 82). On the other hand, Storr (1976) claimed that marijuana inspired captivating melodies from his unconscious which he was regrettably incapable of writing down.

Indulgence in drugs or alcohol can additionally represent the way some artists deal with specific anxieties that are aroused by the creative process itself. The regressive pull that takes place during creativity brings with it a great deal of anxiety. The true acceptance of such emotional surrender ultimately means that the artist sustains the threat of loss of self, loss of reality, loss of control, and possible reactivation of trauma. Getting in touch with

unconscious material is not always pleasurable and may, in fact, require the artist to confront spiritual danger and risk feelings of anxiety, terror, and rage. Such an encounter may be colored by primal fears that are frequently experienced in terms of life-or-death. Anxieties generated from the creative process may reach crippling degrees, and some artists use substances to try to bring them down to a level that permits the continuation of creative work.

Sensitivity

The sensitivity of the artist is legendary. When she wrote about the childhood of artists, Phyllis Greenacre (1957) emphasized their enhanced sensitivity to and perceptivity of their surroundings. Yet, whereas this unusually sensitive temperament represents a vital advantage for the creative individual, it can also lead to unbearable states of being marked by vulnerability, self-consciousness, sorrow, and a sense of meaninglessness. Poet, playwright, drug addict, and quintessential madman of the modern avant-garde, Antonin Artaud recounts the excruciating quality of such an existence: "State of nerves, states of mind, state of the world. There are moments when the universe seems to resemble most closely a scalp quivering with electric jolts" (Weiss, 2003, p. 161). Editor William McIlwain expands on Artaud's poignant description when he says that "a writer perhaps can't stand all the things he sees clearly and ...must take the white glare out of the clarity" (Goodwin, 1988, p. 169). Some artists remove the "white glare" by seeking out substances that render the pain of extreme sensitivity more tolerable. Canadian author, Malcolm Lowry seems to agree with McIlwain when he professed that he lacked the usual filters. In fact, Lowry felt that he had been born without a skin and alleged that drinking prevented his suffering a nervous breakdown.

Like Lowry, Robert Lowell wrote of "seeing too much and feeling it with one skin layer missing" (Redfield Jamison, 1993, p. 117).

Capote, Artaud, Lowry, Lowell, and many more creative individuals, are exquisitely, even painfully, sensitive; and they frequently experience sensory overload as a result of having to attend to every aspect of their environment. Substances often moderate or extinguish, the "afferent" side of their talent, emancipating the person from the tyranny of mind, senses, and memory. Thus, substances can create a protective bubble, a safe buffer zone between the self and an impinging external and internal world. Rauch (2000) writes of the "protective layer around the individual's psyche" that drugs provide to shield the artist from environmental invasion. She even identifies the "rush" experienced by intravenous drug users as a clear marker that serves to delineate mind states and establishes a clear boundary between external and internal worlds. This "safe"-zone, a physical and emotional drug-induced "holding environment," aims to set up the conditions under which the artist can continue to live a creative life.

Furthermore, the insecurity inherent in living a creative life derives from a number of sources, not the least of which is the constant confrontation with one's own limitations in previously untested arenas, only to have them scrutinized and evaluated on a constant basis. Such insecurity in artists' lives combines with an already sensitive make-up.

Sensitivity, shyness, insecurity, and isolation are bound to coexist in the lives of many, if not most, creative individuals. Creativity is a solitary occupation; an artist's life demands a great deal of time spent alone in order to generate and implement ideas. While the requisite isolation offers an escape from the stress of social situations, it also produces loneliness and requires the creative person to labor for extended periods of time with little or no emo-

tional support from others. Substances, like alcohol, are known to provide courage for those who lack it. For instance, Fitzgerald was shy and drank to overcome it. Substances also provide companionship for those who seek it. Writers are loners, and alcohol is a loner's disease. Writing and drugs are two forms of companionship. "It's my life, it's my wife," sang Lou Reed of his heroin. William Burroughs referred to his "old friend Opium Jones" (Plant, 1999, p. 150). To convey this relational component, object relations theory has added the perspective of regarding addicts and their drugs as a couple in a sado-masochistic relationship (Seymour Moscovitz, personal communication).

Sensitivity involves a greater capacity for feeling, emotional reactions, and tolerance of extreme affective states; it is the artists' inordinate sensitivity that provides the link between creativity and mood disorder. The connection between affective disorder and creativity is one that has been underscored in several studies (Richards et al, 1988; Redfield Jamison, 1989; Schildkraut et al, 1994; Andreason, 1987), all of which found between 30-80% coexistence of creativity and bipolar illness compared with 7-14% in the control group. These findings should not surprise us if we consider how the temperaments of artists and manic depressives are equally characterized by sensitivity and imagination (Redfield Jamison, 1989).

Perhaps the manic episode more obviously resembles creative processes in its frenzied excitement, visionary grandiosity, and its generation of ideas and connections. The fluency, fluidity, and frequency of thoughts and associations, the intensity of emotional experience and expression, and the sharp focus and power of concentration are present in both hypomanic and creative states. In fact, one criterion for diagnosing mania involves original

thinking, heightened sensitivity, and increased productivity. Of course, shorter art forms, like poetry or painting, are more easily created in a period of hypomania than others (e.g., longer writing projects) that require sustained effort over a number of months. Fitzgerald once apologized to his editor for his excessive drinking while writing *Tender Is the Night*, explaining that "a short story can be written on a bottle, but for a novel you need the mental speed that enables you to keep the whole pattern in your head" (Goodwin, 1988, p. 43). Depression, too, encourages creativity in its sensitivity and compassion for the human condition as well as in its inward gazing and rumination. By cooling the ardor of mania, depression allows a slower pace that is necessary for the production of art.

Whereas Andreason's study observed that writers are at the very minimum 30% more inclined to have mood disorders and to be alcoholics than her nonwriter sample, it has also been found that at least 30% of addicts suffer from serious affective disorders (Krystal, 1995). The striking overlap among addiction, affect disorders, and creativity should not be ignored. Krystal (1982; 1995) argued most convincingly that addicts employ substances to recognize and tolerate their emotional states. Khantzian (1995), too, proposed that addicts self-medicate and find a "drug of choice," or a combination of substances, to regulate difficult affect states. Substances are therefore employed by artists (as well as nonartists) both to increase and decrease sensitivity.

The sensitivity attributed to the artistic temperament is therefore the same sensitivity that may open doors to depression and to an intimacy with life's darker forces. Melancholia, or depression, involves a painful sensitivity, an unwavering vision that considers reality, morbidity, and death in a way usually absent in more normal states. The depressive perspective, by defini-

tion, is one that embraces a particular view of the human condition and one that does not shy away from experiencing guilt, loss, and death. Such terror-driven experiences can act as a bittersweet muse to the creative process, yet they can also be felt as unbearable and lead to addiction. Baudelaire wrote:

One must always be intoxicated. That's the main thing; it's the only issue. In order to feel the horrible burden of Time which breaks your shoulders and bows you to earth, you must become intoxicated without respite.

(Goodwin, 1988, p. 183)

Ultimately, one can say that it is the burden of mortality which is most deeply felt, though perhaps also denied, by one possessing the sensitivity of an artist. In his quote, Baudelaire implies something very important about artistic production: it is a response to the inherent paradox of being a self-conscious creature aware of one's definitive fate, that of being one who can imagine so many things and yet is destined to one final thing alone: annihilation. This consideration, I believe, is crucial to the discussion of artistic sensitivity for the question arises as to whether the artist becomes intoxicated in order to feel the "burden of time" or in order not to feel the burden of time. Needless to say, both are true.

The Cost

As we have seen, the benefits of drug-induced disinhibition are often balanced with deficits in cognition and motivation. Clearly, unless both parts of the creative process—inspiration and application—exist, creativity can not be achieved. Access to the inner world of imagination, derived from unconscious sources, is certainly essential for creative work. But so too is a functional ego capable of judgment, persistence, and control. "Opium enables to give form to the unformed," wrote Jean

Cocteau, "it prevents, alas, the communication of this privilege to anyone else" (Plant, 1999, p. 140). Although for some it seems that chemicals do promote some aspects of creativity, there is no evidence that this is the case with addiction.

If drugs can open the gateways of the artistic unconscious and set free one's creative reserves and sublime sensitivities, they can also coerce their users to partake in a frightening journey to hell in which they feel lost and trapped, desperate and unsupported. When this happens, Baudelaire's "artificial paradise" transforms into Artaud's "theater of cruelty," a theater filled with pain and delirium. Baudelaire himself, who once declared intoxication through wine the savior of modern man, eventually confessed that "what hashish gives with one hand it takes away with the other" (Ibid., p. 160).

Thus, a powerful double-bind exists for the artist who relies on intoxication to boost creativity. With the prolonged use of drugs, the same forces that initially enhance reality intensify the avoidance of reality; those that facilitate inspiration eventually drain motivation. Alert consciousness diminishes, and reality becomes increasingly frightening and undifferentiated. Timothy Leary's famous injunction from the 1960s to "Turn on, tune in, and drop out" delineates the progressively antisocial process that takes over with long-term drug use. Even Dr. Jekyll, in Stevenson's story, can finally no longer keep his two polar opposite selves apart, and one night, the transformation from Jekyll to Hyde takes place without the drug. Hyde, who is evil incarnate, takes over Jekyll's good and moral personality irrevocably and permanently.

It is perhaps important at this point to say a few words about the similarities that exist between the life of the artist and that of the addict. On some level, creativity can be regarded as a form of addiction. "Stories are my refuge," wrote

Stephenson, "I take them like opium" (Ibid., 140-41). The parallel process that transpires in the creative person and in the addict is evident in the ways both descend into the unknown underworld of the unconscious (Leonard, 1989). Yet, unlike the artist who chooses to regress in the service of the ego, even though the choice may feel fated, the addict is dragged down, often without choice, and is held prisoner by addiction. Leonard claims that artists who are addicted face a "double descent"—the one of their addiction and the other of their creativity. Some creative artists, like Louis Armstrong and Ray Charles, descend with the help of drugs or alcohol and continue to create. Some, like Eugene O'Neill and John Cheever, find they must renounce their addiction in order to create. Raymond Carver said that writing "under the influence" made his work inferior, adding that he considered giving up drinking to be one of his greatest achievements. Still others continue their addictions to the early loss of their creativity and/or their lives. Truman Capote, Charlie Parker, Jack London, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, and Jackson Pollack are only a few who died young due to their addictions.

We all mourn the creative lives that are tragically cut short by addiction. We also rage at the decline or destruction of the artistic output of abusers. What songs by Charlie Parker, Jimi Hendrix, and Elvis, to name only a few, could have been written had they not died so young as a consequence of drug addiction? What paintings could we now observe if it weren't for the alcoholism of Jackson Pollock or the narcotics addiction of Jean-Michel Basquiat? What countless works of art might we know today if it weren't for the destructive effects of addiction?

It is far easier to use judgmental terminology to condemn artists who become addicts than to understand them. I have endeavored to illumi-

nate some of the reasons behind the bond that exists between creativity and substance [ab]use. As a result, I would hope that the encounter with a creative addict who strives to break free of mediocrity and limitations will evoke empathy rather than quick, easy answers delivered in black-or-white terms. Addiction is a terrible matter, but so too is a human consciousness that loses its capacity to imagine and embrace new possibilities. In the end, both states can be said to have one important feature in common: dogma. Addiction can be viewed as a dogma in that it narrows the world down to the closed system of taking the drug over and over again. At first, the drug appears to be the vehicle that liberates the user from the confines of social conformity, yet the senses grow skilled in their craving and, eventually, one needs more and more to get less and less. A consciousness that cannot break out of its narrow confines, one that cannot question or find newness and joy, is equally immersed in dogma. It needs more and more (e.g., material possessions) to get high, and it narrows the world down to a closed system of following the cultural herd and embracing values that no longer delight and inspire it. The senses grow skilled in their craving. Studying the association between creativity and addiction highlights both the precious and the precarious states of being that artists inhabit and strive to sustain. The manifold reasons many artists turn to substances reveal the constant internal and external challenges encountered in creative lives. Some of these challenges concern receptiveness to regressive pulls and unconscious forces. Others result from the artists' needs to fine tune their exquisitely sensitive temperaments and affect states. Clearly, destruction of conventional reality is necessary for creativity, and substances are employed in the service of this destruction. Yet, the paradox of the infatuation with drugs is that the tables eventually

turn, and the master becomes a slave, one left to succumb to the creativity-destroying and life-limiting processes of addiction.

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