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Part I

Creativity and mental illness:
the state of the field

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1 A socio-historical overview of the creativity–pathology connection: from antiquity to contemporary times¹

George Becker

Writing around the turn of the middle of the twentieth century, the renowned literary critic Lionel Trilling (1945/1950, pp. 160–161) published an essay, “Art and neurosis,” in which he sought to expose as an insidious “myth” what he called “one of the characteristic notions of our culture,” the idea of an intimate connection between artistic creation and mental illness. However, like two noteworthy earlier critiques, Charles Lamb’s (1826) *The sanity of true genius* and George Bernard Shaw’s (1895/1909) *The sanity of art*, Trilling’s essay remains little more than a footnote in the rapidly expanding literature on the topic of creativity and psychopathology. Indeed, the belief in a close connection between genius or, more generally, creativity and illness has sprung ever deeper roots in the cultural fabric of Western society, a development that received new impetus from the weight of support from both clinical and non-clinical studies published over the course of the past three decades. Before then, few of the studies expounding a pathology position were focused on clinical diagnosis. Most of them, based primarily on biographical and anecdotal accounts of those viewed as geniuses, produced highly conjectural findings. However, starting in the 1980s, one witnesses the continuing use of historical sources regarding the eminent, in addition to clinical studies in the form of psychiatric and psychometric approaches. These clinical studies involved comparisons of living creative with living non-creative individuals. Notwithstanding dissenting views, the combined force of the most recent studies has led to something resembling a consensus, one that views the link between creativity and illness as a genuine, pervasive, and timeless phenomenon with decided biological roots that most often takes the form of manic-depressive illness or related types of mood disorders.

This study locates current thinking regarding the relation between creativity and psychopathology in the historical context of the changes in

¹ This chapter is a revised and expanded version of ideas originally proposed in Becker (2001).

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the intellectual assumptions regarding the nature of creative individuals and of the creative process more generally. As this examination will show, the association of creativity with clinical madness is a decidedly modern phenomenon. Far from having been a source of concern over the course of many centuries in Western society, as supporters of the pathology position tend to assume, this association does not predate the 1830s. Even though speculations regarding the mental state of individuals during the act of creation predate this point in time by centuries, they typically fell short of the verdict of clinical insanity.

It was the Romantic movement in literature, it will be shown, that provided the single most powerful impetus to the establishment of this medical verdict. By selectively adopting and redefining certain cultural axioms from the past, the Romantics produced not only a logical connection between creativity and madness but also one in which madness was simultaneously a piteous and exalted condition that stood in sharp contrast to what they regarded as dreaded normality. These redefinitions, although they tended to benefit the Romantics by providing them with a new and clearer sense of their own identity, simultaneously invited a system of logic that precluded the possibility of total health and sanity on the part of creative individuals. As such, it left them defenseless against the label of clinical madness. This logic proved so compelling, in fact, that many Romantics, in departure of the behavior of creative individuals during previous centuries, openly testified to spells of mental affliction, expressed concern over the possibility of becoming clinically ill, and attested to manifestations of madness in their midst. While many of these pronouncements were of a vague and general nature and frequently expressed by reference to “divine mania,” melancholia, and other concepts derived from antiquity, members of the medical profession tended to treat the Romantics’ “admissions” as evidence of a decidedly serious mental condition. As this examination will show, it was the medical profession, equipped with what then were regarded as the latest clinical concepts and diagnostic categories in conjunction with its reliance on the Romantics’ pronouncements regarding their mental condition, that over the course of the latter part of the nineteenth century helped to establish the connection between creativity and psychopathology as medical fact. As noted, recent research has served to strengthen belief in this connection.

Given that contemporary thinking on the nature of creative individuals has roots in concepts dating back to antiquity, I open with a brief overview of relevant conceptions during three periods of Western history: Greek antiquity, the Italian Renaissance, and the Age of Enlightenment. In regard to the latter, I devote particular attention to the introduction

of a new model of the creative individual, the man of genius, and the prevailing view regarding the operations of his mind. Next, I examine the Romantics' reformulation of historically antecedent ideas as well as the concept of genius and the functions these changes tended to serve. I proceed to examine the reception of the Romantics' changes in the field of philosophical–psychological speculation and the rising medical specialty of psychiatry up to the middle of the twentieth century. From there I examine some of the recent contributions to the literature. I conclude with discussion of some of the implications of this historically informed overview for current debates concerning creativity and attendant mental conditions.

Reflections on the mental state of creative individuals before the Romantic age

The ancient Greeks were the first in Western society to reflect on the nature of creative individuals. Given the Greeks' disdain for physical labor, their reflections typically excluded sculptors, painters, and others who created with their hands, and instead were narrowly focused on seers, poets, and those given to cerebral expression. As we shall see, the examination of the Greeks' pronouncements on the nature of the creatively gifted in their larger cultural context leads us to question the common practice of citing these observations as evidence of a long-standing recognition, dating back to antiquity, of an intimate connection between creativity and clinical madness.

Critical to an understanding of the ancient Greeks' ruminations regarding the nature of the creative process are the concepts of demonic possessions and melancholia. The "demon," which the Greeks conceived as a semi-deity that presided over a person, a locality, or some other discrete entity, was believed to be endowed with powers to shape the destiny of each in either a positive or negative fashion. Somewhat different from this general view of the term, in the Socratic conception the demon was regarded as a divine gift granted to a few select individuals only. According to this view, the poet, priest, philosopher, and sage communicated with the gods through the intervention of their demon. It is in this sense that Socrates called on his demon and attributed most of his knowledge to intimations from it (Cahan, 1911). This conception of demons as the benevolent agents of the gods was generally endorsed by Plato and others and found support in Plato's doctrine of divine madness, or *enthousiasmos*. In this view, the poet, who himself is devoid of talent, is seen as divinely inspired, as an agent or servant of the gods. Inspiration and the gift of prophecy, however, were attainable only during particular

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states of mind, such as the loss of consciousness due to sleep or a mind affected by illness or possession (Rosen, 1969). Importantly, to Socrates, Plato, and other contemporaries, the divine disturbance that invited prophetic or poetic activity was clearly distinguished from clinical insanity. Unlike the latter, the inspired madness of seers and poets was conceived as a virtue, a state of mind greatly desired. To quote from Plato (1974), “Madness, provided it comes as a gift from heaven, is the channel by which we receive the greatest blessings . . . [It] is a nobler thing than sober sense . . . madness comes from God, whereas sober sense is merely human” (pp. 46–47). Sharply distinguished from its dreaded clinical counterpart, Plato’s divine madness is conceived as a temporarily granted blessing from the heavens.

Another claim frequently encountered on behalf of the idea of a long-standing recognition of a creativity–pathology connection involves an assertion, attributed to Aristotle, that extraordinary talent is characterized by a melancholic temperament. Aristotle’s reference to melancholia has its origins in the then current humoral theory. This theory, closely identified with Hippocrates, the father of Western medicine, stipulated that disease resulted from imbalances in the four basic bodily fluids, or humors: blood, black bile, yellow bile, and phlegm. Each humor, in turn, was believed to be endowed with variable basic qualities such as heat, cold, dryness, and moistness. If the humors and the corresponding qualities were properly balanced, the person was deemed healthy. When internal or external factors produced an excess or deficiency of one or more of these humors, disease would result. Significantly, in the humoral theory, differences in human temperament were similarly determined by an individual’s composition of humors. Accordingly, a preponderance of blood in the human body was believed to engender sanguine types; of phlegm, phlegmatic types; of yellow bile, choleric types; and of black bile, melancholic types.

Building on Hippocrates’ theory, it was Aristotle who was first to postulate a connection between the melancholic type and profound creativity. The often quoted reference to Aristotle frequently involves a shortened, declaratory version of the author’s opening question on the subject. “Why is it,” the author (1984) asks in the original, “that all those who have become eminent in philosophy or politics or poetry or the arts are clearly of an *atrabilious* [i.e., melancholic] temperament . . . ?” (pp. 1498–1499). Clearly, the author views the connection between the creative and the melancholic temperament as a given. However, in the same way that not all or even most or many of those individuals seen as belonging to one of the three other types of temperament were seen as subject to the mental or bodily afflictions associated with these types, Aristotle’s

linkage of creativity with melancholia was not meant to suggest that all melancholic individuals were subject to the mental illness of melancholia. Indeed, as Aristotle (1984) argues, “To sum up, owing to the fact that the effect of black bile is variable, atrabilious persons also show variation . . . And since it is possible for a variable state to be well tempered and in a sense a favorable condition . . . the result is that all atrabilious persons have remarkable gifts, not owing to disease but from natural causes” (p. 1502). In short, a closer reading strongly suggests that to Aristotle the attribution of melancholia was simply descriptive of a type of individual, the *homo melancholicus*, who, depending on the particular combination of his fluid substances, could be either a sane person of distinction or a clinically afflicted individual (see Wittkower and Wittkower, 1963).

Quite different from the subsequent Roman era and the Middle Ages, when there was little attention devoted to creative individuals, the Italian Renaissance produced a renewed interest in persons esteemed most highly in a wide range of creative endeavors. Unlike the Greeks who devalued manually created efforts, the Renaissance embraced the sculptor and painter along with the poet and philosopher as worthy of admiration and reflection. For these possessors of superior creative ability, the term *genio* was reserved. However, creativity was thought of primarily in terms of an imitation of the established masters and of nature. Unlike the modern conception of the genius, one that stresses originality as the distinguishing feature of the creative individual, the standard of the humanistic tradition involved the *imitatio-ideal*. Although some, like Leonardo and Vasari, insisted that the *genio* should not be just imitatively creative but newly creative (Lange-Eichbaum, 1930/1932), these attacks on the *imitatio-ideal* did not become commonly accepted during the late Renaissance (Zilsel, 1926).

Similar to the Greek descriptions of the poet, philosopher, and sage, the unique attributes of the Renaissance *genio* commonly were described in terms of melancholia and *pazzia*, or madness. Again, a distinction was maintained between the sane melancholics capable of rare accomplishments and those condemned to insanity. The Florentine Ficino, who popularized the Aristotelian idea of melancholy, regarded this type of temperament in its application to distinguished men as a divine gift that constituted a metonymy for Plato’s divine mania. Accordingly, only the melancholic temperament was considered capable of creative enthusiasm. Hence, assessments of scholars and artists in terms of *pazzia* were generally not intended to convey the notion of insanity. When applied to great people, the term referred to qualities associated with the melancholic temperament, such as eccentricity, sensitivity, moodiness,

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and solitariness. Far from being regarded as negative qualities, emulating these manifestations of melancholic behavior was turned into a fad in sixteenth-century Europe (Babb, 1951; Wittkower and Wittkower, 1963). Reflective of this development is Dürer's melancholia engraving, which provides us with a moving self-revelation of the artist in the form of a brooding *melancholicus*.

What was initially a fashionable affectation that conferred prestige became toward the end of the sixteenth century a subject of criticism and derision. Typical of such critiques are the reactions of a painter, Giovan Battista Armenini, who observes:

An awful habit has developed among common folk and even among the educated, to whom it seems natural that a painter of the highest distinction must show signs of some ugly and nefarious vice allied with a capricious and eccentric temperament . . . And the worst is that many ignorant artists believe themselves to be very exceptional by affecting melancholy and eccentricity. (In Wittkower and Wittkower, 1963, p. 92)

As a result of criticisms such as this, by the seventeenth century, the fashion of the melancholic artist was supplanted by the new image of the conforming gentleman artist and the belief that artists should merge unobtrusively with the intellectual and social elites. More than simply an ideal, this new conception was reflected in the actual behavior of artists. As Wittkower (1973) observes, since the Renaissance concept of the *melancholicus* has been supplanted by this newer image, "none of the great seventeenth-century masters – Rubens and Bernini, Rembrandt and Velasquez – was ever described as melancholic . . . It was not until the romantic era . . . that melancholy appears once again as a condition of mental and emotional catharsis" (p. 309).

Before turning our attention on the Romantics, it is necessary to examine developments associated with the Enlightenment. It was during the eighteenth century that the term *genius* was introduced in reference to individuals who displayed a high degree of creative ability (Lange-Eichbaum, 1927/1935; Tonelli, 1973; Zilsel 1926). Different from the Renaissance *genio* and the associated *imitatio-ideal*, the Enlightenment genius was defined as one who was in possession of an innate power that manifested itself in works of great imaginative creation in which the decisive characteristics were profound novelty and the originally creative. Although most commentators on genius acknowledged certain sub-rational components, the leitmotiv most frequently encountered stressed the rational processes of the mind (Fabian, 1966; Tonelli, 1973). Closely tied to the Enlightenment's emphasis on reason along with its conception of a harmoniously functioning universe subject to immutable timeless

laws, the mental processes of genius were stipulated in terms of forces standing in balance and harmony to each other.

Perhaps the model exposition of the Enlightenment conception of genius is Gerard's (1774/1966) *An essay on genius* (see Fabian, 1966, p. xi; Wittkower, 1973, p. 306). Defined as the faculty of invention "by means of which a man is qualified for making new discoveries in science, or for producing original works of art" (Gerard, 1774/1966, p. 8), the creative power in genius was conceived as originating in an active imagination. Asserting that an unbridled imagination constitutes a capricious and irresponsible faculty, Gerard stipulated that it must be "subject to established laws" (p. 70). True genius, to him, was only possible as a result of a synthesis or subtle interplay of four powers: (a) imagination, (b) judgment, (c) sense, and (d) memory. He argued:

Mere imagination will not constitute genius . . . As fancy [imagination] has an indirect dependence both on sense and memory, from which it received the first elements of all its conceptions, so when it exerts itself in the way of genius, it has an immediate connexion with judgment, which must constantly attend it, and correct and regulate its suggestions. This connexion is so intimate, that a man can scarce be said to have invented till he has exercised his judgment. (Gerard, 1774/1966, pp. 36–37)

Gerard was not alone in viewing genius as an interplay of different mental powers. To Kant (1790/1957), the requisites of genius rested on the harmonious workings among the faculties of imagination, understanding, creative spirit, and taste. Concerned over the inherent dangers of an unbridled imagination, he posited the relation between the imagination and understanding as follows:

Abundance and originality of Ideas are less necessary to beauty than the accordance of the Imagination in its freedom with the law of the Understanding. For all the abundance of the former produces in lawless freedom nothing but nonsense; on the other hand, the Judgment is the faculty by which it is adjusted to the Understanding. (Kant, 1790/1957, p. 432)

Weighing the importance of the imagination relative to the judgment, Kant (1790/1957, p. 433) deemed it best to "sacrifice the freedom and wealth" of the former "than permit anything prejudicial" to the latter.

Despite differences in nomenclature regarding the operative mental faculties or powers, the rational, or Enlightenment, conception of genius stressed the measured, harmonious interplay among these powers. To Duff, it was a balance of imagination, judgment, and taste; to Voltaire, imagination worked in conjunction with memory and judgment; to Moses Mendelssohn, genius corresponded to a state of perfection of all mental powers working in harmony; and to Shaftesbury, although he

stressed the irrational traits of genius in terms of revelation and enthusiasm, a true genius did not infringe on the rules of art – he needed knowledge and good sense (see Tonelli, 1973).

The prevailing Enlightenment conception of genius did, therefore, recognize certain natural or sub-rational components rooted primarily in the creative imagination. However, it pointedly established judgment, or reason, as a counterweight to these components and buttressed judgment with memory, taste, sense, sensibility, and so forth. Judgment was not only capable of averting caprice and extravagance but also made madness a virtual impossibility for genius. As Gerard (1774/1966, p. 73) observed, “a perfect judgment is seldom bestowed by Nature, even on her most favored sons; but a very considerable degree of it always belongs to a genius.” Endowed with a powerful faculty of judgment, true genius was most unlikely to succumb to madness, either of the clinical or the inspired variety.

The Romantics’ redefinition of genius and the functions it served

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, under the impact of the Romantic movement, saw a profound change in the prevailing conception of genius. This change had a number of causes. Among these was the Romantics’ reaction against the Enlightenment idea of a universe that, in conformity to immutable natural laws, functioned with the mechanistic exactitude of a timepiece. In place of this mathematical world of Newtonian physics, the Romantics opted for a more mysterious view of the universe, one that found expression in what aptly has been called “Romantic science.” This development, closely tied to the discoveries in the fields of electricity and chemistry during this period, gave expression, in the words of Richard Holmes (2008, p. viii), to a “softer ‘dynamic’ science of invisible powers and mysterious energies, of fluidity and transformations, of growth and organic change.” Reflective of these changes in the conception of science and the universe, the Enlightenment concept of a genius whose mental powers operated in balanced harmony with each other was now supplemented by one that stressed the unbridled supremacy of the faculty of imagination in conjunction with such elements as spontaneity, enthusiasm, childish naiveté, divine inspiration, and the reckless pursuit of truth, beauty, and knowledge.

Critically important to our understanding of this change from the rational to the romantic conception of genius were developments intimately tied to the precarious state of existence of the Romantic poets and men of letters. It should be recalled that the application of the term