

## Chapter 1: Psychoanalytical Views of the Artistic Temperament

The connection between depression and its influence on the artistic temperament has been studied extensively in the field of psychoanalysis. Austrian psychologist Sigmund Freud is considered the founder of psychoanalysis and his research includes the study of behavior and the unconscious mind. In 1885 and 1886, he attended the clinical hysteria demonstrations involving female patients from the psychiatric ward of the Salpêtrière Hospital, conducted by French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot.<sup>1</sup> This research played a significant part in Freud's own development of theories on the unconscious mind and its application to psychoanalysis.<sup>2</sup> It is regarded as the first of three phases of his work, in which he argues that hysteria is derived from a traumatic childhood event repressed by the subconscious mind.<sup>3</sup> The second phase involves a topological model, using psychoanalysis to map the mind. During this phase Freud wrote his essay '*Mourning and Melancholia*', and its content led into the third part of this research.<sup>4</sup> This last phase includes the concepts of narcissism relating to the ego, id and super-ego, described for the first time as a structural model of the mind.<sup>5</sup>

In his 1917 essay '*Mourning and Melancholia*', Freud discusses how mourning results from a specific understandable event, whereas melancholia is pathological and

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<sup>1</sup> '*The Salpêtrière in the Age of Charcot: An Institutional Perspective on Medical History in the Late Nineteenth Century*', Micale, Mark S., *Journal of Contemporary History*, (1985) (p. 721).

<sup>2</sup> '*Madness, Mania, Melancholy: The Artist as Observer*', Karp, Diane, *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin*, (1984) (p. 17).

<sup>3</sup> '*Freud's Mourning and Melancholia*', Bradbury, Mary, *Mortality*, (2001) (p. 213).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid* (p. 215).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*

does not require any significant reason.<sup>6</sup> He noted melancholia can resolve itself by moving into a state of mania, and this is an important link, as it tends to be the time when creative production is most prominent.<sup>7</sup> “The work of art, as Freud has indicated, is an expression of its creator’s most essential human qualities. The work may also be interpreted purely psychologically as a manifestation of the personality dynamics of its creator, especially his affectivity. Painting and other forms of artistic expression are often non-verbal manifestations of these unconscious affects or feelings”.<sup>8</sup> Here Freud asserts the connection of applying psychological insight gained within a melancholic state into artistic practice. This coincides with his discovery that thoughts or ideas residing within the mind but outside awareness, can influence thoughts and behaviors.<sup>9</sup>

In *‘Black Sun’*, psychoanalyst and philosopher Julia Kristeva states, "Rather than seek the meaning of despair, let us acknowledge that there is meaning only in despair".<sup>10</sup> In this writing Kristeva argues through a psychoanalytical perspective how melancholia and art coincide as a powerful combination. Melancholia is viewed as illuminating for art practice, but simultaneously it can inflict complete devastation and misery. Interestingly, Kristeva discusses melancholia as a more serious chronic affliction compared to depression, which she describes as milder. In a 2006 interview with *Hypatia*, a journal of feminist philosophy, Kristeva was asked about melancholia and responded that to express

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<sup>6</sup> *‘Mourning and Melancholia’*, Freud, Sigmund, Hogarth Press, (1917) (p. 243).

<sup>7</sup> *‘Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament’*, Jamison, Kay Redfield, Simon and Schuster, (1996) (p. 105).

<sup>8</sup> *‘Art, Madness and Human Interaction’*, Vernon, McCay and Baughman, Marjie L., College Art Journal, (1972) (p. 420).

<sup>9</sup> *‘The Different Schools of Psychoanalysis’*, Thompson, Clara, The American Journal of Nursing, (1957) (p. 1304).

<sup>10</sup> *‘The Portable Kristeva’*, Julia Kristeva, Columbia University Press, (2002) (p. 182).

emotion, especially melancholia, the artist must have first felt it, endured it and then transcended the pain through actually making the work. Although she acknowledges not all artists suffer depression to the point of institutionalization, there is a necessary underlying element of melancholy.<sup>11</sup> Kristeva states, “Works of art thus enable us to establish less destructive, more pleasurable relations with ourselves as a way of endowing despair with meaning to assume an existence on the basis of its very vulnerability to the other.”<sup>12</sup> Here she suggests a kind of release in creating a work and transferring emotional engagement to the work and from oneself.

Clinical psychologist Kay Redfield Jamison, herself afflicted with mental illness, concludes after years of researching psychological aspects of creativity, that artists with depression are “pry to their unconscious streams of thought, but they must contend with unusually tumultuous and unpredictable emotions, a touch of fire”.<sup>13</sup> Here she theorizes that while depression is awful, it can also provide artistic benefits. Her studies indicate that the creative thought process tends to mirror that of mildly manic states: emotional intensity, grandiosity, diversity of thought, restlessness and the ability to make unique connections of ideas.<sup>14</sup> The evidence of the intersections presented by Jamison seems to point to a strong relationship between suffering from depression and the creative process. Viewing painting as a projection of responses expressing the artists’ deep, inner psychic process in reaction to an altered state of consciousness allows for an extension of depression into a

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<sup>11</sup> ‘*Crossing the Borders: An Interview with Julia Kristeva*’, Middtun, Birgitte Huitfeldt, Hypatia, (2006) (p. 168).

<sup>12</sup> ‘*On the Melancholic Imaginary*’, Kristeva, Julia, New Formations, (1987) (p. 17).

<sup>13</sup> ‘*Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*’, Jamison, Kay Redfield, Simon and Schuster, (1996) (p. 104).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid (p.105).

visual state as a reflective, artistic interpretation.<sup>15</sup> This idea has also been referred to among other noted psychologists, including J. P. Guilford who executed a long series of systematic psychological studies into the nature of creativity, and the results back this theory.<sup>16</sup>

Pliny Earle, an American psychiatrist and one of the founding members of the American Psychiatric Association, noted in an essay on art and mental illness that, “It is well known that insanity not infrequently develops, or gives greater activity to powers and faculties of the mind, which, prior to its invasion, had remained either dormant or but slightly manifested”.<sup>17</sup> It is interesting to consider everyone possessing the capacity for obscure, dark places within the mind, but only accessible through what most would describe as an illness or disorder. An example from one of many psychological studies investigating this correlation is a wide ranging study conducted by psychiatrist Dr. Arnold Ludwig in which 1004 prominent 20th century scientists, businesspeople, military officials, public workers and artists, (amongst other professions) were selected from biographical data presented in the *New York Times Book Review*.<sup>18</sup> The results found an overwhelming prevalence of mental disorders in creative people, 87% of poets, 77% of writers, 73% of visual artists, more than twice the rate of similar illness within the non-artistic fields studied.<sup>19</sup> When specific psychiatric symptoms were categorized the artistic group was two to three times

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<sup>15</sup> *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*, Jamison, Kay Redfield, Simon and Schuster, (1996) (p. 105).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> *The Prinzhorn Collection: Selected Works from the Prinzhorn Collection of the Art of the Mentally Ill*, Prokopoff, Stephen, University of Illinois Press, (1984) (p. 8).

<sup>18</sup> *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*, Jamison, Kay Redfield, Simon and Schuster, (1996) (p. 61).

<sup>19</sup> *Strong Imagination: Madness, Creativity and Human Nature*. Nettle, Daniel, Oxford University Press, (2001) (p. 144).

more likely to suffer from all aspects of disorders including; depression 50% of artists vs. 24% of others, mania 11% vs. 3%, severe anxiety 11% vs. 5% and suicide 15% vs. 5%.<sup>20</sup> Similar studies over the last century involving other control groups and points of reference arrive at the same conclusion.

Psychological and scientific evidence presented above is just a small portion of extensive studies, writing and research available on this subject. The conclusions, although percentages may vary slightly, consistently reinforce this centuries old observation of an interaction between states of consciousness that produce creative impulses. The next chapter examines some of the historical evidence of the phenomenon, particularly within the context of art history, starting with the first written records by Hippocrates on melancholia and Plato on the artistic temperament.

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<sup>20</sup> *Strong Imagination: Madness, Creativity and Human Nature*. Nettle, Daniel, Oxford University Press, (2001) (p. 145).