

Androgyny and Creativity

This paper came about as a stage in a sequence of thought prompted by the women's seminars in Oxford, especially with regard to an anthropological analysis of women in literature. The main point in putting the concepts of androgyny and creativity together is to try to find a formula by which I can convey how useful they have been not only to my thinking, but also in terms of a more personal approach to my work.

Androgyny is not a familiar term. Derived from the Greek andro (male) and gyn (female), it defines a condition in which the characteristics of the sexes, the human impulses expressed by men and women, are not rigidly defined. It suggests a spirit of reconciliation between the sexes, a full range of experience open to individuals who may, as women, be aggressive, as men, tender; a spectrum into which human beings fit themselves without regard to propriety or custom. Our present definition of sexual roles is under scrutiny. We are the heirs of the Victorians in this. I have been concerned in previous papers with the biological and medical repercussions of this. (J. Blair J.A.S.O. Vol. V. No. 2. 1974). Juliet Mitchell in her book on Freud has suggested that alternatives to the Freudian view can, at this stage, either be a simple reversal, as in the work of Mary Jane Scherfey, or in the realms of science fiction, since we have no way of knowing what personality developments would be possible in a non-patriarchal system. The sexual revolution pioneered by de Beauvoir and Greer rests very much on adopting the male roles for women. To a certain extent the recent history of the women's liberation movement in America exemplifies the limitations of this more than those of Europe, perhaps because of the climate of opinion which has grown out of the puritan and capitalist ethos with its stress on individualism, competitiveness, achievement, and material advance. Many of the social problems of our time, colonialism, exploitation of the third world, ecological exploitation, racial hierarchies etc. have recently been put in the context of a 'masculine' emphasis on competitiveness and aggressiveness. When thinking in terms of male and female dichotomies, this has suggested to many women that the alternative value system of peace, nurturance, mutual aid, sharing of power and world resources, compassion, understanding, and self-denial, which have traditionally been considered 'feminine' provide the answer to world social problems. It has been thought that while aggression and competitiveness have endangered human survival, gentleness and lovingness are regarded as 'feminine' and out of place among rulers, thus condemning us to continued self-brutalisation and even self-destruction. It was these ideas which suggested to me that I should look at Ghandi's non-violent political praxis in the light of female-maternal ideology. This thesis is not original. In a paper given at a seminar in Oxford in 1971, Cohen tried to explain the anti-Vietnam War movement and the Hippie and Yippie movements in terms of the contrasting domestic value system, which he called female, and the sudden exposure of the youth of America to the public political value system which he called masculine. It was not so much a conflict of the Hawk and the Dove, as what Rivers encountered during his work in psychiatric hospitals during the first world war, where the new school of psychiatrists suggested that the condition of shell-shocked soldiers should be attributed

to the ethical conflicts of youth raised for peace and suddenly exposed to war. Needless to say the traditional view was unsympathetic to the soldiers whom they regarded as effeminate. The contradictory value systems have been subjected by Reich to an analysis in terms of male authoritarian competitive and self-perpetuating structures, which fitted neatly into Capitalist - Communist dichotomies, and by Norman O. Brown into Authority-Father, and Egalitarian-Brother ideologies.

At face value the biological and ethological approach to anthropology gives credence to the authoritarian-aggressive infrastructure of man-made power structures. Augé's Marxist-structuralist approach suggests that it might be impossible to think outside these patterns of dominance and subservience. Thus it seems that whatever alternative approaches are used alongside the modern anthropological analyses to give wider perspective, Structuralist, Marxist, Ethological, psychological, the conclusions are the same. Perhaps it is outside the domains of anthropology to be concerned with biological, psychological, or economic bases for political power structures, but I believe several factors undermine this view. Firstly there is the practical demand that a science of man has, at least at the rational ideological level, to sully itself with some type of social engineering. (See Young, 1972). Secondly, the concerns of women's liberation have forced the science of man to look seriously at whether or not there are basic biological and psychological differences that can be related to ideological differences. Thirdly, accepting that the women's liberation movement has reached the stage of institutionalised recognition in International Women's Year, where are we to take it from here? How are we to be comfortable living in a society where at some level or another we find ourselves living 'against nature'. It seems to me daily more difficult to maintain an integrity of rational and emotional understanding from the boudoir to the the polling booth. Of all so-called revolutions it seems least appropriate to see the women's revolution in terms of a power-struggle. It might be considered by the media that Japanese women received the Queen as a symbol of women's liberation, or that Mrs. Thatcher's success was a blow for the cause, but such facts are so far from what the majority of women concerned with liberation are interested in, that further classification is necessary. In the context of the categories available to us it is easier to view Mrs. Thatcher as a man-woman, in contrast, say, to Eva Peron.

In an effort to get a firmer grip on these slippery concepts, I want to concentrate for a while on the other idea in my title 'creativity'. This is a very loose term, and my concern with it is the result of six months' research on dreams. Leaving aside the neurophysiological aspect of the necessity of dreaming, I would like to look at some of the more useful ideas of the psychologist anthropologist Anton Ehrenzweig, who studied under Mary Douglas. From child psychology he took the ideas of syncretic and analytic vision. These he used to contrast the rational-logical faculty in analytic order, and the syncretic-creative faculty. It is easiest to give an example of the latter in terms of the conscious-unconscious dichotomy; when a painter is adding a brush stroke to his work, he is not at that precise moment considering which colour to add where,

but almost suspends conscious thought and allows his hand to be guided by some unconscious or preconscious. When it is done, it is right or wrong, and then perhaps can be verbalised and analysed. This is not to say that an artist is more visually than verbally orientated, which goes without saying. Another example of syncretic thinking might be a scientific breakthrough such as the discovery of a formula explaining the valency linkage explaining the odd behaviour of a gas. The scientist was supposed to have stumbled on this while in a day dream holding the problem in his mind but thinking at the same time of sausages, and from this he created his model to explain the scientific problem. In the simplest terms I want to define creativity as the ability of the human mind to bring out original ideas and creations from all the number of mathematically possible combinations of the impressions stored in the unconscious mind. Dreams, day-dreams, fantasy and play often give easier access to this facility than reasoned logic, which is more of a post facto rationale in terms of which the innovation can be more fully appreciated. This is the aesthetic fun of structuralist analysis. The original creative thought or act is not available to conscious scrutiny.

Theories of creativity have been linked to sexual differences for a long time. Since biologically men fall into the extreme of idiot or genius more often than women, according to statisticians, the genius is more likely to be male. But at this point 'male' has to be requalified. There were too many great homosexual artists and innovators for the category to be clear-cut. (The subject of Leonardo fascinated Freud, for example). Furthermore the theory of sublimation has long confused the picture of creative endeavour. So many different threads compose the picture we have of artistic ability. First of all it is interesting simply to look at one fundamental factor of the allocation of time; men have been used to taking advantage of the servile position of women to create the leisure for both artistic and scientific creative work. A good example of this is in the writings of Alma Mahler, whose musical talent was sacrificed in her effort:

"to recognise that it was my mission in life to move every stone from his path and to live for him alone. I cancelled my will and my being. He saw in me only the comrade, the mother and housewife, and was to learn too late what he had lost. His genius ate me up although he meant no murder". (Werfel 1959, 45).

It was not just the rigid economic cares, the transcription of his work, and her alienation from the musical circles because of these that illustrate the necessity of sacrificing one creative autonomy for the other, but also a type of sexual jealousy. She wrote:

'I happened to say in a letter to Mahler that I could not write anymore that day as I had some work to finish, meaning composition, which up to now had taken first place in my life. The ideas that anything in the world could be of more importance than writing to him filled him with indignation, and he wrote me a long letter, ending up by forbidding me to compose anymore. It was a terrible blow. I spent the night in tears. Early in the morning I went sobbing

to my mother and she was so horrified by this unreasonable demand, that, deeply as she loved him, she urged me to break with him. Her unqualified support brought me to my senses. I recovered my calm and confidence and finally wrote him a letter promising him what he wished and I kept my promise ... I buried my dream and perhaps it was for the best. It has been my privilege to give my creative gifts another life in minds greater than my own. And yet the iron had entered my soul and the wound has never healed". (ibid: 45)

Mahler realised the grave mistake he had made in forbidding Alma to compose when he found her song by accident. "God how blind and selfish I was in those days" he remarked. When one of her songs was performed he was more excited than over his own works. Hearing that it had gone well he said "Thank God" over and over. On his death she wrote "It was as if I had been flung out of a train in a foreign land. I had no place on earth". "I lived his life. I had none of my own". (ibid). Clara Schumann's fate was not dissimilar. She was a lot more established as a musician than he was at their marriage. He was jealous of her reputation and forbade her to practise. She was completely responsible for the family and finance and when Robert went to the asylum she supported her family, farmed out to relations and friends, by playing the piano. Brahms worshipped her as a figure on a pedestal, the consort of his hero. Because of the existence of marriage as an institution that reinforces and reproduces gender division, a woman of her capabilities felt that she had to step down and take second place. As with Alma, her wifely duties, her familial duties and her deference to accepted ideas of female behaviour prevented her compositional development. This pattern of behaviour can be cited again and again through specific cases, but provides a sad defence to such criticisms as Schopenhauer's:

"the entire sex have proved incapable of a single truly great, genuine and original achievement in art, or indeed creating anything at all of lasting value; this strikes one most forcibly in regard to painting; the reason being that they lack all objectivity of mind, which is what painting demands above all else. Isolated and partial exceptions do not alter the case." (From H.R. Hays 1966, p.208).

His view of women as procreators and playthings is identical to Neitzsche's. Even their virtues of sympathy, philanthropy and pity he saw as a result of their inability to be objective or rational or to form abstract ideas, thus they could only be affected by the mood of the present.

So far I have only reiterated the kitchen sink argument in explanation of the female's apparent lack of creative participation in culture. The women I have cited both felt compensated for the deprivation of their creative autonomy through their husbands' gifts and by a determined effort to devote themselves to the creative sphere of child-bearing and rearing. At this particular historical epoch it is important to note that there was a major polarisation of male and female spheres. To my mind this provides enough of an

objective theory of the non-creativity of women, and unlike Schopenhauer, I believe the exceptions to be of paramount importance if one wants to see under what conditions women could provide innovations in culture. To recap; biological creativity in women was enough of an ideal for female kind. In the words of Schopenhauer:

"She expiates the guilt of life not through activity but through suffering, through the pains of childbirth, caring for the child and subjection to the man, to whom she should be a patient and cheering companion". (op. cit. 1966). It is the man's role to ensure his immortality through creative participation in all aspects of culture. Freud's sublimation theory suggests that the greatest creations are the result of a type of sexual deviance, in that the natural sexual energies are channelled, because of some alien influence in childhood, to the achievement of a tangible cultural innovation. If one carries psychological explanation of creativity far enough most artists can be categorised as abnormal in one respect or another because of the megalomania necessary for such self-confidence in the face of public criticism, or obsessiveness in dedication to their work, or the frustration of a tremendous narcissism. Out of these grow theories of the artist as eunuch and the artist as stallion, both of which are simplifications. When emphasis is placed on the cultural context rather than the psychological neurosis, the case against women becomes clearer. A pyramid of arguments is used to explain and justify female exclusion from male culture; their biologically defined role in society, the economic necessity of freeing man from menial tasks, their psychological unfitness because of their participation in the inferior world of infants, and finally the fact that all their ingenuity and wit must be used to mould themselves into feminine ideals to ensnare a man who will support them economically while they carry out their biological function of procreation. Women who fail in this, and achieve a position in the male dominated world, like the composer Ethel Smythe, Florence Nightingale, George Eliot, Charlotte Bronte et al, are castigated as men or lesbians, and too unattractive to fulfil their lives in the accepted way.

Gustav Bychowski in his paper 'From Catharsis to Work of Art' (1951) presents a far more satisfying attempted explanation of creativity. He sees the complexity of cultural factors, conscious and unconscious, contributing to the expression of cultural innovation. The creative individual manages to:

"transpose the individual conflicts and complexes onto a vast screen of a social group, a nation, or humanity. In studying this point our analysis of great artists of the past comes out to help and supplements our clinical observations. The latter deals most often with individuals severely handicapped in their creativity by neurosis. We see them struggling, for instance, for the expression of their feeling of social injustice, or of injustice inflicted particularly by the male society on women. Time and again they launch the attack, disguising their individual hurt and rebellion in fictional form."

However, time and again the artistic form becomes disrupted by individual catharsis, so that what originally and consciously was intended as a work of art, becomes an expression of individual abreaction. Instead of mastery of the artist or, to be more specific, of his ego, over the raw material springing from his unconscious, we see him overwhelmed by its overflowing pressure. In such an aura all the characteristic functions of the creative ego - such as selection, discrimination, mastery and formation, that is, the binding of incoming material by form, become a task impossible to tackle. For an individual to confront his own culture, discover some area of it which in terms of his own individuality proves problematic, and to resolve this with an innovative work which appeals to the mass of his contemporaries, is the best description I can give of creativity. It avoids the jargon of psychology. More specifically for me it bridges the gap we have made between artistic and scientific creativity and it includes the sort of analysis I was trying to follow with my discussion of Ericson's analysis of Luther and Ghandi. (Lorimer 1976: 191-207).

I believe that the most important factor in this deficient view of creativity is the first part which suggests that an individual has to be in touch with as much of his culture as possible. The present period of specialisation makes this an impossibility, but it is essential to see this as the aim of some of the foremost critics like George Steiner, quite apart from the foremost thinkers and artists and poets. Exclusion from the intellectual world of ideas accounts much more for the small number of women artists than their imprisonment in kitchen and nursery. Leisured women as Schopenhauer knew to his cost, spent a great deal of time painting, versifying and writing, but they generally worked in isolation and without education. Instead of the criticism often raised nowadays by critics such as Kingsley Amis, that women's writing is over-concerned with feelings and sentiments, rather than action and ideas, the criticism then was that women were over concerned with form, expert at the technicalities of art but without any worthwhile content. (Schopenhauer's mother abandoned him to relatives when he was nine, and ran a salon. She finally rejected her son in favour of a young poet whom he particularly resented, and they never spoke again. His relationships with other women were equally unsatisfactory).

I have attempted two approaches to a discussion of creativity, but only for the purpose of aiding a discussion of androgyny. I find it easiest to view creativity of all types as ranging between the sort of short-circuited personal manipulation of meaningful symbols employed in isolation by the neurotically disturbed, to the genius who can express in his chosen form significant innovations for most members of his cultural group. Before turning to the importance of the concept of androgyny, I would like to mention one other way in which women get shunted off into the sidings, instead of being allowed to continue on the main track of the arts.

Here again biologically based arguments are put forward to suggest that women have a 'different but equal' role to play in creativity. Their sensitivity, subjectivism, and heightened intuition make them good interpreters rather than original spirits. Female instrumentalists and singers, dancers and actors have some parity

with men because of the 'extra' quality of sensitivity to the male conductor, choreographer, writer or director. The women who do not settle for this rationalised acceptance I imagine to have a more than usual amount of energy and dedication, since they are then reduced to the male arena of the power struggle. Even in that art form which has almost been devalued because of the high proportion of women in that field, novel writing, there has formerly been experienced a great deal of discrimination against women to the extent that pseudonyms were essential. Scott, reviewing Emma in 1815 considered it beneath the sober consideration of a critic because of its female authorship. It is fascinating to note the difference in the reviews of novels by the Brontes and George Eliot when the reviewers thought the authors to be men, and when they knew them to be women. Here for example is the 1859 Economist review of Adam Bede:

"Novel writing has of late years devolved so largely upon women that it is quite rare to meet with a well-matured and carefully executed novel by a man of genius. In novels written by women, the exaltation and predominance of one class of feelings, and the slight and inadequate treatment of all that lies beyond their immediate influence, make even the best of them seem disproportionate and unreal. The life which they represent is a kind of Saturnalia of love and the domestic affections, the practical business part of it being either slurred over or ludicrously misapprehended. Novels written by men are nearly always more in keeping with the actual world, have a wider outlook, and embrace a greater personal sort of knowledge to be gained from them; when they are original and clever and artistically constructed, they are more delightful as well as more profitable than the best novels by women. Adam Bede is one of the best of this class of novels ... After a course of the feverish, self-critical, posted up to the latest dates novels of the present day, reading Adam Bede is like paying a visit from town to the open hill sides, pure air, and broad sunshine of the country which it describes. We trust it may be no longer than necessary for the conscientious attainment of the high standard reached in this book before we shall meet Mr. Eliot again."
(Heilbrun 1973: 76).

Eliot was described as having a 'masculine' mind; other authors were juggled round to fit into categories of 'masculine' and 'feminine'. There is no doubt that there has always been a market for both types of extreme, catering for societies where the male and female spheres might be considered two cultures. Jane Austen, who is perpetually being represented as 'feminine' wrote against the 'female' novels of her day in her parody of them, Northanger Abbey. The fact that our critical tradition is only just refraining from such simplifications indicates how much we have been dominated by the recent division of western culture into male and female, and how little attention has been paid to studying the society and culture of the historic periods in which these works were created. It is essential to have these two perspectives. When we have them an entirely different picture of the history of the various arts emerges, and I would like to suggest that the analytic tools created by our present concerns

with male and female provide an even better adaptation of appreciative faculties, quite apart from the critical ones.

Here I find it easier to talk about the two areas I know best; the history of European literature and the theatre. I would like to make a few broad generalisations about these. It appears that at certain periods society has produced conditions where either an elitist group or a whole society has permitted the flowering of what has been considered an apex in civilised life. The continued enjoyment of the works of art created by these groups indicates their appeal beyond the vagaries of fashion, they have a universality of application to the human civilised condition. I wish to emphasise the word civilised because this is the central theme. Greek literature, Greek plays, the Renaissance, French and English and Russian culture before the revolutions bear the same trait of uniting the polarised male and female spheres of interest, talents and value systems. This movement away from stereotypes and polar interests I would like to call androgyny, and it is especially significant that high cultural achievement should combine the so-called special abilities of both sexes. Perhaps the most recent example of this might be found in the Bloomsbury group, which has at present acquired notoriety more for the blurring of sexual male and female characteristics than for its work. In this example the life-styles of the group are almost of as much worth as their work, as they are equally examples of creative innovation. The conscientious objector who explained his refusal to fight with the words 'I am the civilisation you are out there fighting for' believed what he was saying, although the objectors still had to suffer trials and imprisonment.

This submerged theme of androgyny does not only occur when women were permitted to contribute to the arts, but also appears in the preoccupation of artists with the role of women as active participants in social life. The idea of 'woman as hero' has been put forward by Heilbrun in her history of male and female in literature, in order to differentiate between the hero and heroine, the latter being merely the passive ideal around whom the action may take place. The female heroes Electra, Medusa, Phedra, Alceste, Portia, Rosalind, Viola, Nora, Henry James' heroines, Anna Karenina, Emma, Catherine, Jane Eyre, Gudrun, and Ursula, (despite Lawrence) all have an autonomy, a moral will, and an active passion. I suggest that the continued popularity of such works is not to be found in terms of plots and themes or artistry of exposition, but more in their appeal to the total perspective of human emotions and problems they convey, which cannot be neatly categorised into polar male and female areas of experience and empathy.

To indicate that these polar stereotypes still operate, if not in real life, then at least in our received impressions of real life, I would like to make use of some Sunday Times quotations from an article on Lord Lucan. I think this expresses superbly things that, for example, Doris Lessing wrote in the Golden Notebook about our notions of the male sphere of aggression, big business, and politics. The context is culturally specific but I do not think this diminishes its universality. Molly, a half successful actress, is defending the way she has brought up her son in the world of artists, writers, actors, politicians, and ordinary people, to her

ex-husband who is one of the biggest men in the city. She says: "My son will grow up knowing something about the world he lives in, which is more than I can say for your three sons - Eton and Oxford, its going to be for all of them. Tommy knows all kinds. He won't see the world in terms of the fishpond of the upper class." (Lessing 1973:39).

The article on Lord Lucan avoids value judgements or apparent bias. The journalist has presented the facts through the mouths of Lucan's friends. Here are some of the descriptions of the man which I believe indicate the 'totally' male world in which he lived. John Aspinall of Tiger fame, and married to the dead racing driver's widow Lady Sara Courage says of him:

"Lucan was my fifth, sixth or seventh best friend. I had known him for 20 years. I saw him as a figure like myself - born out of his own time. His qualities were the old fashioned ones - loyalty, honesty, reliability. He had the dignitas of an aristocrat without the impertinence that goes with great name or possessions. Lucan was really a leader of men. In fact he wasn't - but in more rigorous times he would have found a better role in life. In other words he would have been a valuable acquisition to a country. He wouldn't have had any difficulty getting loyalty from his men. He was a warrior, a Roman. He was quite capable of falling on his sword, as it were? ... He lived in the boys clubs a highly civilised patrician kind of life. He was a gambler, hated foreigners, and niggers, and had the genetic concern with politics bred into the landowning classes." (Fox, 1975 32).

Dominick Elwes described the, dare one call it, the other, female side of his nature, or his cultural interests:

"Lucan had a collection of Hitler's recorded speeches, many books on psychiatric illness - he was trying to get his wife certified to get back his children whom he saw as his last hope of immortality, and countless detective novels. His wardrobe contained rows of identical pin-striped suits. He also had a grand piano, had taught himself to play Bach and latterly Scott Joplin rags. This was one of the things he disguised from the world because people would have thought it soppy." (ibid. 32)

"He didn't really like women or sex. I think he saw women as an inferior race. He was often embarrassed in their company. If anything, I would say that he would perform only the occasional boff de politesse". (ibid. 34)

Perhaps it is unfair to use an attempted wife-murderer to present the polar male ideal, but I am dealing with stereotypes. To give a glimpse of the female stereotype I would like to refer again to Alma Mahler's description of her living death after her husband's death - her feeling of having no part in the world or life of her own. When reading this I was reminded of a talk given by a publisher

who said that he had to read hundreds of novels a year by women who had tried to put into literary form how it felt to be annihilated after their husband's death and to try to find a way of life for themselves afterwards. He always returned them with a short letter of condolence saying he had learnt a lot, and one of their passages had been most original. This seems to be a sad illustration of art as catharsis, though they believed they were passing on useful information to others. Novels about women as complete human beings not handicapped in the race of life by either innate or socially conditioned imperfections suggests the androgyny of the female hero from the Iliad to the Golden Notebook. It is more difficult to isolate the androgynous male but it is indicated by Joyce's Ulysses rather than the Odyssey.

I see the androgynous ideal as the result of permitting human beings to identify with all areas of life. The renaissance female artists were all trained like men in their father's studios and supported not only themselves but their husbands and families on their earnings. (Spare Rib 1973: 11-13).

The protected woman is crippled for life, for living. I think George Eliot expressed this better than anyone. In Middlemarch she did not permit the happy ending, the marriage of true minds and bodies, until the characters of Dorothea and Lydgate had become 'whole'. They were not to find happiness in the marriage ideal of searching for the other half - Dorothea as a sort of Milton's daughter, servant to a great man. Lydgate found that what he was missing was that Dorothea could be not only 'a real friend to a man' but also in another world, a sexual partner. The middle way of Middlemarch depends on an androgynous combination of all the dichotomies we align with the concepts of male and female. At this point I feel like doing a reversal of structural analysis, ending with the gestalt image of the whole, but I will give the last word to George Eliot:

"We women are always in danger of living too exclusively in the affections; and though our affections are perhaps the best gifts that we have, we ought also to have our share of the more independent life - some joy in things for their own sake. It is piteous to see the helplessness of some sweet women when their affections are disappointed - because all their teaching has been that they can only delight in study of any kind for the sake of a personal love. They have never contemplated an independent delight in ideas as an experience which they could confess without being laughed at. Yet surely women need this sort of defence against passionate affliction even more than men".
(Heilbrun, 1973, 76).

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(paper given in 1975)

Androgyny and Creativity: paper given in June 1975

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