Childhood's End

The creative artist and poet and saint must fight the actual (as opposed to ideal) gods of our society—the god of conformism as well as the gods of apathy, material success, and exploitative power. These are the "idols" of our society that are worshiped by multitudes of people.

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At the age of four, a child I knew drew extraordinarily vibrant, imaginative trees. Crayon, chalk, colored pens, and silly putty were all useful. These trees were remarkable in how clearly they showed the bulbous lobes and branchy veins of individual leaves in a kind of cubist, all-the-way-around view that would have delighted Picasso. Meticulous observation of real trees, and a certain daring that is characteristic of four-year-olds, combined to produce these striking artworks.

By the age of six, this child had gone through a year of first grade and had begun drawing lollipop trees just like the other kids. Lollipop trees consist of a single blob of green, representing the general mass of leaves with details obliterated, stuck up on top of a brown stick, representing the tree trunk. Not the sort of place real frogs would live.

Another child, age eight, complained of the day her third-grade teacher pretended that negative numbers don't exist. While the class was doing subtraction tables, a boy asked, "What's 3 take-away 5?" and the teacher insisted that there is no such thing. The girl objected, "But everyone knows it's minus 2!" The schoolteacher said, "This is the

third grade and you're not supposed to know about those things!"

I later asked this girl, "What does a minus number mean to you?" She said without hesitating, "It's like looking at your reflection in a pool of water. It goes as far down as you go up." This is original mind in action, the purest form of Zen.

This clear, deep voice is latent in us from earliest childhood, but it is latent only. The adventures, difficulties, and even suffering inherent in growing up can serve to develop or educe our original voice, but more often they bury it. It may be developed or undeveloped, excited or inhibited, by the way we are raised and trained and treated in life.[35] Because most of our institutions are built on the Lockean fantasy that the newborn person is a *tabula rasa* on which knowledge is built up like a pyramid, we tend to erase our children's innate from-the-top-down knowledge and try to fill them instead with simplistic bottoms-up knowledge. "As up I grew," wrote e. e. cummings, "Down I forgot."[36]

Schools can nurture creativity in children, but they can also destroy it, and all too often do. Ideally, schools exist to preserve and regenerate learning and the arts, to give children the tools with which they may create the future. At worst, they produce uniform, media-minded grown-ups to feed the marketplace with workers, with managers, and with consumers.

The child we were and are learns by exploring and experimenting, insistently snooping into every little corner

that is open to us—and into the forbidden corners too! But sooner or later our wings get clipped. The real world created by grown-ups comes to bear down upon growing children, molding them into progressively more predictable members of society. This devolutionary process is reinforced throughout the life cycle, from kindergarten through university, in social and political life, and most especially in the world of work. Our newest and most powerful educational institutions, television and pop music, are even more thorough than school in inculcating mass-produced conformity. People are grown as a kind of food to be gobbled up by the system. Slowly our eyes begin to narrow. Thus the simplicity, intelligence, and power of mind at play become homogenized into complexity, conformity, and weakness.

We need to recognize that every bit of our culture is school; we are presented moment to moment with affirmations of some realities and denials of others. Education, business, media, politics, and above all the family, the very institutions that might be the instruments for expanding human expressiveness, collude to induce conformism, to keep things going on a humdrum level. But so do our everyday habits of doing or seeing. Reality as we know it becomes conditioned by the tacit assumptions we come to take for granted after innumerable subtle learning experiences in daily life. That is why creative perceptions seem extraordinary or special to us, when in fact creativity is usually a matter of seeing through those tacit assumptions to what is right in front of our noses. A story is told of a French railroad passenger who, upon learning that his neighbor on the next seat was Picasso, began to grouse and grumble about modern art, saying that it is not a faithful representation of reality. Picasso demanded to know what was a faithful representation of reality. The man produced a wallet-sized photo and said, "There! That's a real picture—that's what my wife really looks like." Picasso

looked at it carefully from several angles, turning it up and down and sideways, and said, "She's awfully small. And flat."

We often make the mistake of confusing education with training, when in fact these are very different activities. Training is for the purpose of passing on specific information necessary to perform a specialized activity. Education is the building of the person. To *educe* means to draw out or evoke that which is latent; education then means drawing out the person's latent capacities for understanding and living, not stuffing a (passive) person full of preconceived knowledge. Education must tap into the close relationship between play and exploration; there must be permission to explore and express. There must be validation of the exploratory spirit, which by definition takes us out of the tried, the tested, and the homogeneous.

The conformity that is taught by the big school that surrounds us resembles what biologists call monoculture: If you walk in a wild field you see dozens of different species of grasses, mosses, and other turf in each square yard, as well a rich supply of tiny animals. This is nature's insurance that changes in climate and environment will be matched by requisite variety in the plant life. But if you walk in a domesticated field you will see only one or a few species. Domesticated animals and plants are genetically uniform because they are bred for a purpose. Diversity and flexibility are bred out in exchange for maximizing certain variables that suit our purpose. But if conditions change, the species is locked into a narrow range of variety. Monoculture leads invariably to a loss of options, which leads to instability.

Monoculture is anathema to learning. The exploratory spirit thrives on variety and free play—but many of our institutions manage to kill it by putting it into small boxes. They tend to divide learning into specializations and departments. A certain amount of specialization is necessary to handle any large task, or any large body of knowledge. But

the barriers we set up between specialties tend to become overdeveloped. The professions acquire an inertial mass that deadens everything they touch. We confront a proliferation of disciplines and -ologies, most of which function primarily to protect their own professional turf. We fragment learning at the expense of the richness and flexibility that should be inherent in a living body of knowledge.

One of the many catch-22's in the business of creativity is that you can't express inspiration without skill, but if you are too wrapped up in the professionalism of skill you obviate the surrender to accident that is essential to inspiration. You begin to emphasize product at the expense of process. It is possible for an artist to have stupendous technical prowess, to be able to amaze and delight audiences with dazzling virtuosity, and yet there is—something lacking. We all at one time or another have had the experience of hearing a fantastically impressive performance of a concerto, in which this mysterious something is not there. The superficial brilliance pulls an automatic reaction ("Wow!") from us—it's like meeting a beautiful person of the opposite sex who turns out to have no brain, or no heart. One instinctively says this "Wow!" in some form or other, even if on second look there's not much there.

On the other hand, most of us have also had the experience of hearing an unsophisticated performance that may be full of wrong notes, or a piece of child-song, or a performance by a street musician in which we are moved to tears, immobilized with a palpable feeling of awe. There is something godlike about these rare and special performances, something that cannot be intended. "Like a god" means that the listener feels he is in the presence of raw creative power, the primal force that made us. That is what a god does: create. He takes us back to origins, as did Einstein in returning to such basic and childish matters as learning about space and time and looking at them freshly:

> The normal adult never troubles his head about space-time problems. Everything there is to be thought about, in his opinion, has already been done in early childhood. I, on the contrary, developed so slowly that I only began to wonder about space and time when I was already grown up.[37]

The professionalism of technique and the flash of dexterity are more comfortable to be around than raw creative power; hence our society generally rewards virtuoso performers more highly than it rewards original creators. It is relatively easy to judge and evaluate technical brilliance. Spiritual and emotional content are not so easy to evaluate. They are intuited directly, subtly, and often become apparent to the world at large only after a considerable passage of time.

The worst piece Beethoven ever wrote, the boring and pompous *Battle Symphony,* was the most popular in his own lifetime. Bach's *Brandenburg Concertos,* now among the most beloved music of all time, were sent off to the Margrave of Brandenburg as supporting material for a job application. Bach did not get the job. Bizet lived for only a year after the premiere of *Carmen.* During that time the opera was a failure, roundly condemned for its lack of accessible melody.

There are certainly exceptions to these ironies as well. Some artists have the good fortune of presenting revolutionary, original work, yet being perfectly in tune with their times.

It is not always true that the books, the music, the movies, the TV shows that sell well are trashy or mindless, but it is true often enough. Artists who want and need to sell their work may thus be afflicted by no less than two judging spectres. One spectre whispers menacingly in the right ear, "Is this good enough?" The other whispers menacingly in the left ear, "Is this commercial enough?" This tension reflects the values of a society that considers the product more important than the process. What's wanted is a sure thing, the assurance that we are getting a product whose value has been ratified by the authorities. None of this can be specified a priori if we are dealing with raw creativity.

We block creativity by labeling it as unusual, extraordinary, segregating it into special realms like art and science. We segregate it further from ordinary life by establishing systems of star performers. The value of one's work is not dependent on its quality but on one's name. In 1988, van Gogh, who could not sell a painting in his lifetime, sold, as a dead man, two paintings for fifty million dollars apiece. If an artist becomes a star—or even better, a dead star—he or she becomes an identifiable product that can be packaged. When an artist changes and develops over the years, as is natural to any creative person, such change is met by howls of protest from the marketers. Sometimes an artist (or teacher, scientist, or spiritual guru) starts with something extraordinary, becomes a star, and then their gift is either frozen or perverted.

The growing and risky edge of creative work is devalued, treated as a frill or extracurricular activity decorating the routine of ordinary life. There are few mechanisms available for the artist to construct a self-sustaining way of living and working. "One gathers," says Virginia Woolf,

> from the enormous modern literature of confession and self-analysis that to write a work of genius is almost always a feat of prodigious difficulty. Everything is against the likelihood that it will come from the writer's mind whole and entire. Generally material circumstances are against it. Dogs will bark; people will interrupt; money must be made; health will break down. Further, accentuating all these difficulties and making them harder to bear is the world's notorious indifference. It does not ask people to write poems and novels and histories; it does not need them. It does not care whether

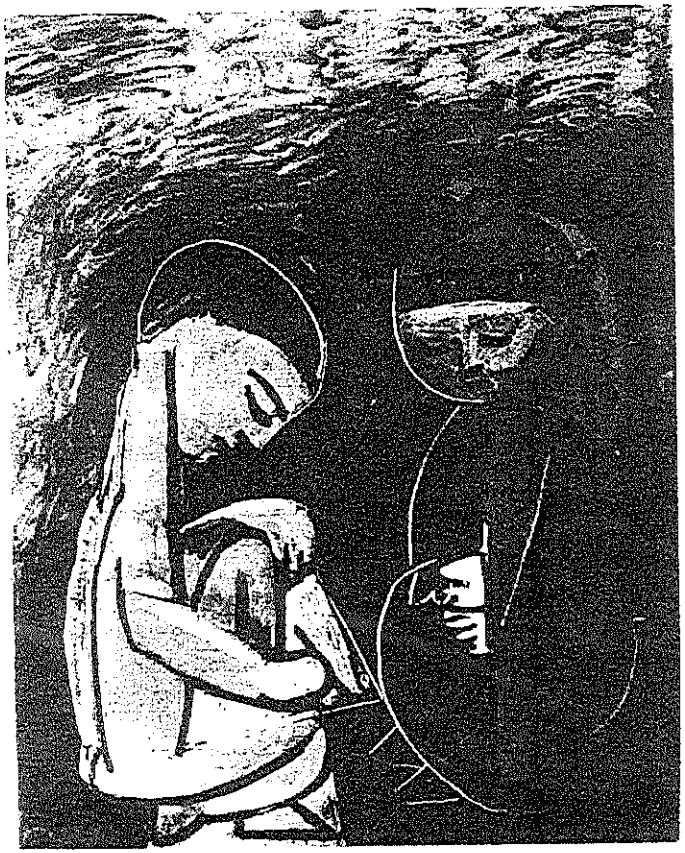
> Flaubert finds the right word or whether Carlyle scrupulously verifies this or that fact. Naturally, it will not pay for what it does not want. And so the writer, Keats, Flaubert, Carlyle, suffers, especially in the creative years of youth, every form of distraction and discouragement. A curse, a cry of agony, rises from those books of analysis and confession. "Mighty poets in their misery dead"—that is the burden of their song. If anything comes through in spite of all this, it is a miracle, and probably no book is born entire and uncrippled as it was conceived.[38]

It sometimes seems as though there were a vast unconscious collusion of our institutions to constrain the normal mode in which we conduct our lives into a kind of blocked and rigid mold. We suppress, deny, rationalize, forget the muse's messages, because we are told that the voice of inner knowing is not real. When we fear the power of the life force we become stuck in the dull round of conventional responses. "Something lacking!" The frozen state of apathy, conformism, and confusion is normative, but must not be taken as normal. Everyone gets cavities and colds, but that does not make them normal or desirable. Creative living, or the life of a creator, seems like a leap into the unknown only because "normal life" is rigid and traumatized.

It is easy to look around us and see innumerable factors that undermine the creative life. But I think every culture contains its own defenses against creativity. It is sometimes tempting to idealize or romanticize some other time and place where the creative life seems to have been more integrated into the fabric of life as a whole. I've met artists who wished they could have lived in the Renaissance; but in the Renaissance artists viewed themselves as the degenerate descendants of ancient Greece; and the Greeks saw themselves as degenerate descendants of a long-gone Golden Age (probably Cretan); and so on.

Aaron Copland drops an interesting remark while telling us what it felt like to be a composer in America in the early part of this century. Art, music, and literature were treated, then as now, as frills. Concert music was listened to by only a tiny part of society, and that part wanted to hear only European masters, not American music or new music; and classical-music audiences then as now believed that the only good composer was a dead composer. This was even more true in the 1920s, when Copland was developing his art, than today. But instead of complaining, he tells us, "The fun of the fight against the musical Philistines, the sorties and strategies, the converts won, and the hot arguments with dull-witted critics partly explain the particular excitements of that period."[39] That attitude takes all the crassness and stupidity of the world and makes it the occasion for a game. This is pearl making at its best. Copland's remark indicates that whatever he may find in the world, if a creative person has a sense of humor, a sense of style, and a certain amount of stubbornness, he finds a way to do what he needs to in spite of the obstacles. (Independent wealth helps too.)

But we have not yet gotten down to the marrow of the matter. We have been talking as though there were something called "society" that defends itself against creativity by all the means we've mentioned above: education, specialization, fear of the new, fear of raw creative power. There is no such thing as society, there is no such thing as institutions, schools, the media, and the rest of it. There are only people doing their imperfect best at doing their imperfect jobs. The marrow of the matter is that however we might restructure society, however many resources an enlightened regime might bestow on the fostering of creativity and the arts and sciences and freewheeling education dedicated to the deep exploration of mind, spirit, and heart, we would still be in the same soup. There is something called growing up, which happens to us no matter what our circumstances. We all have



learned what it feels like to be betrayed for the first time, the second time, the third time, when our innocence gets stripped away, and we jump from innocence to experience. There is a point, or rather a long series of points, at which our innocence and free play of imagination and desire col-

lides with reality, with the limits of is and is not, with the limits of what can and cannot be.

Everything we have said so far should not be construed merely as an indictment of the big bad schools, or the media or other societal factors. We could redesign many aspects of society in a more wholesome way—and we ought to—but even then art would not be easy. The fact is that we cannot avoid childhood's end; the free play of imagination creates illusions, and illusions bump into reality and get disillusioned. Getting disillusioned, presumably, is a fine thing, the essence of learning; but it hurts. If you think that you could have avoided the disenchantment of childhood's end by having had some advantage—a more enlightened education, more money or other material benefits, a great teacher—talk to someone who has had those advantages, and you will find that they bump into just as much disillusionment because the fundamental blockages are not external but part of us, part of life. In any case, the child's delightful pictures of trees mentioned at the beginning of this chapter would probably not be art if they came from the hands of an adult. The difference between the child's drawings and the childlike drawing of a Picasso resides not only in Picasso's impeccable mastery of craft, but in the fact that Picasso had actually grown up, undergone hard experience, and transcended it.