

AMERICA'S PROTEAN CREATIVITY:
Gestalt Therapy and Creative License¹

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I hope the publication of Creative License: The Art of Gestalt Therapy². I hope the publication of Creative License: The Art of Gestalt Therapy³ signals a return to the home territory of Gestalt therapy after many years of being buffeted by the winds of moneyed interests', by ideas about professionalism, modernism and postmodernism, twelve step programs and other currents of the contemporary world,. Creative License, composed of several dozen articles on aspects of creativity from the Gestalt perspective, represents a considerable and concerted effort on the part of members of our community of interest to promote the spirit and practice of gestalt therapy. I am sure it will be utilized in many training programs worldwide. As it should: it represents the best thinking of many of our most distinguished practitioners on matters close to us.

What Is Creativity?

From my earliest involvement with Gestalt therapy forty years ago I have always felt that the understanding and appreciation of play, invention and the creative life by Gestalt practitioners was one of the great strengths of our approach. It has dawned on me only relatively recently how conflicted, contradictory, insufficient and altogether mixed up is Gestalt therapy itself, in its origins and thinking about the nature, role and purpose of creative activity. Taylor Stoehr's book on Paul Goodman's contribution to the formation of Gestalt therapy, Here, Now, Next⁴ began to crystalize this for me.

Stoehr's description of Goodman is of a brilliant and restless man who was however incapable of the essential aspect of writing fiction, who (according to Goodman himself and virtually all of his perceptive critics and friends) could not allow his characters to come alive on the page without controlling them. His major fictional work, The Empire City, is a novel of ideas, a raucous picaresque which parades a

¹ Accepted for publication in the Fall 2005 issue of the International Gestalt Journal.

² Spagnuolo Lobb, Margherita, and N. Amerndt-Lyon (eds.). Vienna, New York: Springer, 2003.

³ Spagnuolo Lobb, Margherita, and N. Amerndt-Lyon (eds.). Vienna, New York: Springer, 2003.

⁴ Stoehr, Taylor, Here, Now, Next: Paul Goodman and the origins of Gestalt Therapy. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1994. (A Gestalt Institute of Cleveland publication).

battalion of charming, antic characters, who serve as the mouthpieces of their author's ideas but do not become full-blooded, three dimensional human beings.

This is nearly identical to the portrait of Goodman as a Reichian therapy patient (noted by several sources, including Stoehr in his introduction to Nature Heals⁵), maintaining his grip on the course and content of his own analysis. While it is in contrast to the enthusiastic and lyrical descriptions within Gestalt Therapy (Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman, 1951) of figure formation and creative adjustment, and I knew Goodman hadn't written Gestalt Therapy by himself, it made the book appear to me to be a kind of ego-maniac's wish fulfillment, and gave me pause — did he know what he was talking about?

I talked to myself about this in the following fashion: though he was a prolific writer, Paul Goodman was not the author of Gestalt Therapy. He was a co-author, and, in the scholarly fashion of the time, the junior author: the least experienced therapist of the three, the only one of the listed authors who both had the time⁶ and talent to turn Fritz Perls' manuscript into a book. Goodman was not the only artist, I said to myself, among the first group of Gestalt therapists: Frederick S. Perls had been an actor in his early life and was a painter later on, and Laura Perls was an accomplished pianist, and the couple were also refined and educated people conversant with literature and the fine and performing arts. (Others among the Gestalt generations of therapists have been creative artists. The ones who come to my mind include, notably, Rennie Fantz, Joseph Zinker, Gerry Kogan, Michel Katzeff, Richard Borofsky, Walter Arnold, Bruce Robertson, Guy-Pierre Tur, Susan Gregory and Miriam Polster.) Thus, I reasoned, even if I doubt Goodman's qualifications, there have always been many others in Gestalt therapy who are qualified firsthand to speak about artistic creativity.

"Creative License"

Creative adjustment stands in a central place in Gestalt therapy, and the editors of, and contributors to, Creative License: The Art of Gestalt Therapy refer often to Perls, et al.'s discussion of it. But Gestalt Therapy is itself vague about creativity and creative adjustment. It doesn't distinguish creative freedom from innovation or invention, nor make clear what creativity is, or how it occurs. It appears to be invention in the service of adjustment. Nothing in the present volume makes any more than a passing effort to further define the topic they are referring to.

The title of the volume under review is Creative License. "License" is typically linked in its English-language usage with "artistic," — artistic license — not with

⁵ Goodman, Paul, Nature Heals: The Psychological Essays of Paul Goodman, ed. Stoehr. Highland, New York: The Gestalt Journal Press, 1991.

⁶ He was paid \$500 by Fritz Perls for this job: a significant amount of money in those days, nearly a quarter of Goodman's income for a year.

“creative”; artistic license means the liberties an artist will take with the literal truth in the making of his artistic truth, and more generally artistic license refers to the freedom of an artist to have things his own way. “License” has significant and contradictory meanings in English. It suggests approval and certification but also excess.

Frankly, I am not sure what the title is supposed to convey. The reader doesn’t actually find out what the editors mean by creativity, because creativity is only defined by linking it to Gestalt concepts. In the preface, the editors mention some terms which they think pertain to creativity, as they have been iterated in Perls, Hefferline and Goodman’s text, in the few writings by Laura Perls and Fritz Perls’ early book. They call creativity existential, experiential, and experimental, dialogic, and an ego function, They say it is related to Rank’s conception of will and call it “inspiring and intriguing,” and synonymous with normality in human life. They link it to dental aggression⁷ and of course to creative adjustment. Editor Nancy Amendt-Lyon continues in this vein in her article on conceptual elements of creativity, mentioning experiment, intuitive comprehension, and play, and applies concepts from gestalt psychology such as good form.⁸ That is, creativity is almost synonymous with Gestalt therapy as a whole. This is tautological, and concerns creativity as a concept rather than a phenomenon.

Nor is this limited to the editors’ preface. Hodges’ chapter starts, “Gestalt therapy *is* creativity” (p. 249), Amendt-Lyon’s says Gestalt therapy is “permission to be creative, quoting Zinker (p. 10).”, and Kitsler’s contribution is titled “Creativity as Gestalt Therapy,” He says that in the old days, practitioners and patients alike thought of themselves as creative artists,⁹ but this is really no better. This circular reasoning and definition by reputation defeats entirely the reader’s attempt to be enlightened about creativity. And anyway, if we want to know about it, don’t we have to look at it first hand — empirically, and phenomenologically — rather than looking at theory?

Many of the essays in Creative License amply repay the reader’s effort. Though Daniel Stern, the well known developmental analyst, is not a Gestalt therapist, his appearance in Creative License rewards the reader. Stern tries to push open the Gestalt envelope in his remarks. He talks about “implicit knowledge” — does he mean what is know out of awareness, in the background, or what is “sensed in the foreground, but not explicit? We Gestalt therapists, noses to the contact boundary, need more specificity than Stern provides. He says we read minds, and we do, of course. Stern asserts that “our minds are not separate or isolated, and we are not the

⁷ See Ego, Hunger, and Aggression (1943, 1947.)

⁸ P. 13.

⁹ P. 101

only owners of our minds.¹⁰ “ It is part of what Stern calls his “theory of mind,” and in our perfectly good terms, he is saying we are often confluent with each other. Stern describes how the present moment is transformed by meeting another person meaningfully, and calls it “the upsurge of a fresh present.”¹¹ How rich and how correct!

There is much more to appreciate in Stern’s interview-chapter. I especially liked his suggestion that a field perspective means that “awareness is no longer an individual matter but a cultural one, a mutual sharing,” and his suggestion that “Gestalt therapy might develop this aspect at a theoretical level” is a sharp jab where we need it. He takes the Gestalt position, convinced that we can see creativity in our activities and our personal encounters because creativity comes out of vital, lively important activity. This reader is struck with Stern’s easy use of Gestalt-like ideas.

I can usually count on Michael V. Miller, with his erudite and literate sensibility, to freshen our outlook, and he doesn’t disappoint. Shortly into his essay, in a paragraph of his meditation on “staying with”, he describes artists “letting events assume their own proportions,” a good example of Miller’s flair for finding language that resonates. Sometimes, though, his discussion barely escapes the tautological, as when he mentions the idea (which he attributes to Polster) that sequences in time are composed from the principle that “one things leads to another.” Elsewhere, as when he defines “staying with” as an organic commitment to what is important — “if it feels good, important or useful...”¹² he lacks incision: Isn’t there any other, more nuanced way to describe how the creative person determines how to proceed on the path of making things besides these feel-good terms? In general, though, Miller’s contribution is an evocative riff on how artistic genius thrives.

Miller is unfortunately mute about that special genius which his subjects demonstrate, the brilliance in Cezanne’s ability to represent ordinary life and, at the same time, suggest the movement and delight of the ever-present life force shaping every face and body and tree and rock face and hillock, or Miles Davis’s ability to find a voice which calls beauty, loneliness and heartbreak out of each of us to join his own beautiful, sad heart as it breaks. Miller does tell us something more general about how these geniuses work, and perhaps no writer can do justice to these things. Miller seems to occupy a place in the middle, planted halfway between a close-up description of what artists do and the distant and theoretical. He’s not first hand but where he can still see, a place where the the humane and sensitive critic resides. He reminds us of the importance of “unfolding” and what unfolding holds within itself, and he recognizes the significance of emergence. “The unfolding process, he writes, “as it

¹⁰ p. 23.

¹¹ P. 29. Stern borrows this formulation from Merleau-Ponty

¹² P. 134.

surfaces, differentiates, melts, gives rise to differences again, and so on."¹³ He describes how artists absorb themselves in their art, and find out what is there and what can be made of it, and reminds us of the wealth of surprises which come from hanging out and hanging in there. (It might remind older Gestaltists of concentration therapy, which Miller calls "disciplined commitment.") While I'm at it, though, I do wish Miller could have found some other term than "commitment," that nineties term for contriving the course of love by problem-solving. An old fashioned, heartfelt word like "devotion" would do better.

There are other pleasures in the book. Richard Kitzler's memoir of the inception and growth of Gestalt therapy on the sunny streets of New York City in the nineteen forties, is one. Kitzler is one of the few people from that halcyon time who are alive and still practicing, and his description of being a patient, student and therapist at that time is a must for Gestalt therapists.¹⁴

Daniel Bloom's paper on aesthetic values in therapy waves the flag for Phenomenology, but there isn't any phenomenology in its pages — only ideas about it and about aesthetics from Perls, Hefferline and Goodman, Hume, Locke, and Descartes, Blake, Dewey and Keats. A goodly crew. His is the only essay in Creative License in which I found a reference to beauty, Keats' best-known epigram, "Beauty is truth; truth beauty." If I understand Bloom, he concludes by speaking in praise of the Gestalt approach for its effective encouragement of the fullest vitality of human experience, burning as brightly and beautifully as Blake's tyger.¹⁵ I was grateful, also, for Bloom's reminder that, in this world in which we are not only connected but interconnected and interleaved, clarity is necessarily muddled — deliciously, and as it should be. Bloom reminds us that there is no way that we can actually be untouched by the world outside us.¹⁶

Edwin Nevis's article, "Blocks to Creativity in Organizations," wades daringly into the topic. He mentions Mozart, Shakespeare, Picasso and Einstein in his first paragraph as exemplars of creative work. In his second paragraph, Bill Gates' Microsoft Corporation and the newly emergent global mail giant FedEx (née Federal Express) join that quartet as originators of ingenious solutions, our own epoch's examples of creativity and license, if not art.

At first thought Nevis's assertions are risible, at least. Is he joking, suggesting that Microsoft can be put alongside the creative geniuses of the European artistic tradition? Nevis seems to be confusing monopoly and the success from illegally

¹³ P. 154.

¹⁴ Ideally, this should be read in conjunction with another article of his, also filled with memoir (1996),

¹⁵ Spagnuolo Lobb and Amendt-Lyon (2003), p. 75.

¹⁶ This is not indexed in any edition of Perls, et al, but has long been a staple of nonconformist thinking.

market muscle with intrinsic merit and the judgment of history. Who can call Microsoft — the U.S. corporation which achieved its dominance through the clever marketing of mediocre goods and intellectual theft and maintained it by criminal practices — anything more than a minor and craven form of ingenuity?¹⁷ What can Nevis have been thinking? Does he really think we should consider bandits like Ned Kelly, Jessie James, Jay Gould (the nineteenth century financier and robber baron) Robin Hood, the Red Brigades and Gates in the same class as Mozart, Shakespeare, Picasso and Einstein, Marx, Beethoven and Rembrandt?

But on further reflection I think that's exactly what he is thinking, and I think Nevis is onto something. He is recognizing that creative activity requires a willingness to break the rules, to suspend what is given — in this case, the legal and social order of things, and to reset the borders of the permissible. This attitude — exceptional, lawless, violent and reprobate — exists in parcels and pockets everywhere, and has long had a home in the United States. From a certain perspective — which I will develop further below — we could even say that the United States was founded on this kind of exceptional action, seeing things differently and insisting on making a place for another way of doing things. In this way, as in many others pertinent to our understanding of creativity, the U.S. of A. is the venue par excellence of creative adjustment.

Nevis goes on to say that while we don't know what creativity is, we know how to nourish it, because it is our birthright: the way we live if we are able to live freely is in a creative way. Invention is how we live, Nevis says, "using one's competence and energy to tend the boundary of what is possible ... to allow our potential to flourish."¹⁸ Nevis attempts to define creativity, though his stab at it, "using one's competence and energy to extend the boundary of what is possible in any walk of life and at any level of complexity,"¹⁹ is not compelling or on target; it's circularity is not so much the problem is its vapidness: how can these words suggest the genius and mystery of creativity?

It's a great pity that none of the authors is able to remain brave and undaunted in the face of their awe and resignation and to speak about this mysterious and putatively unknowable phenomenon, creativity. The exception is Miller. He refers many times to the deep currents in his subjects' artwork. His terms, "staying with," and "letting events assume their own proportions" hint at what is implicit more forcefully than anyone else.

Todd Burley reminds us that we are different, under the skin and in the brain as

¹⁷ The Microsoft story has been told many times over the last 25 years, notably in the testimony by computer experts and executives in the suits brought by the U.S. by federal and state agencies against Microsoft's business activities and the trials which ensued. A recent book tells it well, once more: Made In American: From the Steam Engine To The Search Engine: Two Centuries Of Innovators. Evans, H., G. Buckland, D. Lefer. New York: Little, Brown, 2005.

¹⁸ P. 292.

¹⁹ P. 292.

well as on the surface. He says the modes of the brain are differently active in each of us, and making something new takes a lot of brain power. He says creativity depends on “large-scale processing and coordination of multiple distributed areas of the brain.”²⁰ But we don’t know much, Burley says, and he doesn’t suggest where we go from here, if we are trying to make a place for true invention, and not just randomness. Is there is a neuropsychology literature about leaps of insight, or brilliance? He doesn’t speak about it.

Creative License and Creativity

Creative License’s failure is not that it did not tell its readers what creativity is. It’s failure is that it did not notice that it did not tell us. The beauty, the bewildering and fascinating beauty of creativity is that it cannot be defined or duplicated. It is like life, which is part of the materia of existence in some mysterious fashion, and something special as well, something extra. Existence is animate or inanimate, but we can’t add life to what is not alive. Though every spring it appears, dazzling displays of apple and cherry blossoms and ground-lying crocuses. Life comes of itself. It seems to be the same with creativity.

The editors and the authors, for the most part, have not tried even to catch a glimpse of the beast in its shadowy habitat, or to distinguish it from similarities like invention and innovation. There is a kinship between invention and creativity, but only creativity is the real thing, the magical stuff on the bandwagon. Invention and its cousins are man-made, clever problem-solving at best. Innovation is only the adaptation of what has been invented or created to the earth-bound requirements of utility. Nearly every author repeats the words and concepts which refer to ideas about creativity written so long ago. It’s true, the authors add their own terms as they describe the major and minor aspects of invention — innovation, developing clever products, the truly unusual or “paradigm-breaking,”²¹ the various ego functions, etc. — but no one develops anything which respects and illuminates the phenomena of creative life, love or work which the reader can carry away with him. The curious reader is left alone to try to understand the efforts of Edison and Monet, Marconi and Proust, Ford Maddox Ford and Henry Ford, Gates and Michelangelo, and the avowed link between quotidian creativity and these extraordinary examples.

While many of the authors mention art and artists in their essays — the subtitle of Creative License is “The Art of Gestalt Therapy” — there is very little evidence in the book that art-making was on their minds when they were thinking about creativity. Part of their confusion is that, in thinking about creativity, they have confused what is artistic with what is new. Innovation, invention and these others are concerned with novelty. But art is not always centrally about the new, though it may be, and it is

²⁰ P. 80.

²¹ These last two are Nevis, p. 292.

never totally about the new. What is inventive: seen for the first time, is only a part of what is artistic. Sometimes it plays a very small part, or even no part at all.

For example, Rembrandt's use of chiaroscuro and Picasso's habitual use of two or more perspectives simultaneously in his paintings and sculpture, and Van Gogh's expressionistic touches in his trees, fields and skies — painting these objects so emphatically you can't help seeing as he does — might be new ways of representing things, but it isn't what makes their work artistic, or creative. By themselves they are just good ideas. It isn't what touches and moves us about their work.

What touches us is the way these creative novelties have been visibly shaped by their creators' intentions and creative intelligence — their hearts and souls — so that we, their audience, are moved directly by the artist in a way which is miraculous and powerful. We are awakened by them, brought by their art to a fresh recognition of something we are shown.

Many artists do not have anything "new" to say. William Christie or Paul McCartney (since 1970), or Gerard Depardieu or Jordi Savall, but they take us over the familiar ground we know so compellingly, in a fashion so true, that we are moved. This is most obvious to me in classical music performances, where the players are playing the music for the umpteenth time: yet if they do it well, as the American conductor and composer Leonard Bernstein²² put it, it is as though it had just been written and was being played well for the first time.

But Bernstein's is the viewpoint of an American, oriented to novelty, and the confusion between novelty and art is endemic in Gestalt Therapy as well, a function of the new world and Gestalt therapy's origins in it. (In a section below, I shall attempt to convince the reader of this.) In fact, we are not moved so deeply by innovation or novelty — it touches us in a different part of our being. Again, if we pay attention to our reactions²³, we are not touched by what is new, though we are often surprised or startled, or relieved, or even thrilled by innovations or novelty. It is harder to articulate the particular reactions we have to works of art, especially because the works and the reactions are so various. One common response is that the artist has managed to open his own being and allowed the audience to know him, his unique way of being in the world. In reading a novel, say, the reader will feel as though the writer's person is known to him, not just the words on the page but the author's being as well.

Another way of describing something artistic is to say it has the ability to "capture life itself."²⁴ This does not refer to the feat of imitating life so perfectly that the verisimilitude is photographically exact — a definition that would have no

²² I can't find a cite for this; it's from his fifties U.S. "Omnibus" music education TV shows.

²³ I am suggesting here that you consult carefully your own reactions.

²⁴ This is from an essay on Caravaggio, "The Battle of Light With Darkness," by Ingrid D. Rowland. New York: The New York Review of Books, Vol. LXX, No. 8, May 12, 2005, p. 10.

meaning anyway in nonrepresentational arts — but a more subtle and emotional meaning, that the artist has succeeded miraculously in making it seem to his audience that the essence of life — the life force itself, perhaps — is present in the work of art and that the artist has made the audience sense it.

The author of the essay I quoted a moment ago attempts to describe the Renaissance painter Caravaggio's development from an earlier painting to the same subject painted five years by writing,

In the five years between 1601 and 1606, in other words, Caravaggio transformed his work from the imitation of nature to its refinement through imagination and through spirit. In the second version of the Supper at Emmaus, he is no longer showing off his skill, but meditating in paint, and however muddled his personal life may have been, his wisdom as a painter could fathom mysteries as deep as this tired Christ, his hostess's quiet reverence, and the fiery faith of the apostles.²⁵

That is, the artist leaves the impression with the viewer is that he has indeed fathomed these mysteries, plumbed the depths of the event he portrays — a meal the resurrected Jesus takes at a tavern — so thoroughly that they become visible to us on the canvas.

The essayist is writing about depth in the medium of oil painting, and not about other arts — most arts — which do not have subjects, such as nonrepresentational art, or non-narrative dance, or music without words. They work their magic upon us without any reference to the familiar. We have responses to arts which exist without any subject except the art materials being used: paint, notes, clay, sounds and instrumental timbre, oil, ink, fabric and fiber.

She draws our attention to yet another quality of the artist's creativity when she writes about deep mysteries. She is referring to depth, depth of feeling and depth of perception and depth of comprehension. Depth, with its suggestion of being greatly moved and greatly touched — being deeply moved or deeply touched — is a quality of response which is part of our reaction to profound works of art and, of course, in any situation, a response which goes beyond the surface, beyond the shallow and the superficial. It is a facet of emotional response which suggests something quite specific without being able to be precise about what it is. The depths suggest at least a three dimensional field (length, width, depth); they reside well back from the surface layer, or outside the boundary ("deep in a forest"), or far away from the location of the individual ("deep left field"), usually in a direction we might call downwards or backwards, away from our conventional location toward the core or center, or thoroughgoing ("deep disgrace, deeply in debt, deep sleep, deeply seated"). Depth implies profundity, tapping a fount of wisdom, a response which is far-reaching

²⁵ Op. cit.

and intense and often hard to comprehend, or hard to easily comprehend (“a deep mystery”). In psychology it is a time-honored way of referring roughly to what humans are capable of, or composed of (depth psychology, “deep neurosis, the depths of one’s being.”)²⁶ Depth is different than, though related to, complexity — the way in which figures or elements are composed of many and varied qualities, even ones in which elements appear to be contradictory. A tapestry is woven of many colors, of threads of black and white; a rap song has spoken and vocal lines which overlap, interleave and are overlaid.

Of course, creativity is not always deep — far from it! — and the variety of creative activity, from inventing a photo copier to inventing a new configuration for jazz groups, is attested to in the articles in Creative License. What is not mentioned there, though, is this dimension, depth, which is brought into relief by looking at art.

This unremarked dimension of depth is intrinsic to all life. I remember, many years ago, when I lost my closest friend. I went to see his body, on display at the funeral home. I had never before seen a body without life. First I saw that “he” was not there, in his body, any more. And then I saw that the body he had inhabited seemed to have compacted, as though the layers of his being were gone, leaving only this flattened shell. As though a edifice of many stories had been collapsed into one floor, the depth of his being was no longer visible in his body. I hadn’t realized these layers were present in my vision — until they weren’t. (This was not because there was something special about this man — though of course to me there was — but that this perception of depth is a function of life, of the life all of us live, which we have the capacity to see. It is the depth in life.)

Without considering depth, we can consider many areas of invention, high-speed mail delivery, kludgy operating systems and the like, and but in the area of art and our emotional response to it — and our emotional responses altogether — we are lost without it. For that reason it must be part of any discussion of creativity. There is nothing in Gestalt theory that would help us think clearly about this, nor any way to relate these ideas about the different kinds of depth in art and in ourselves to Gestalt thinking. `

Creativity, “Creative License” and Gestalt Therapy

Remember the editors’ list of the concepts associated with creativity: dental aggression, creative adjustment, style, and dialogic relationship, polarities, the ego functions....? This list is generally comprehensive from the point of view of contemporary Gestalt theory. At the same time it is entirely inadequate from the point of view of their subject: creativity. Many other elements of creating which need to be accounted for in making sense of creative acts and the work of the creative

²⁶ See the deeply suggestive entry at “deep” in Merriam-Webster New Collegiate Dictionary. Springfield, Massachusetts: G. and C. Merriam Co., 1977.

intelligence are absent, such as abandon, ineffability and inspiration. At the same time, they have not utilized other Gestalt concepts (stay tuned) relevant to a description of the phenomenon of creativity.

The reason for this is that their list isn't drawn from the wealth of ideas which are found in the writings in Gestalt therapy.²⁷) Rather it is drawn from the current version of Gestalt theory — a condensed and simplified one²⁸ — which has been created and propounded in the period since the death of Fritz Perls.²⁹ The ideas which have been eliminated make it a more sophisticated and refined theory, especially in the areas of the self and the creative adjustments at the contact boundary.³⁰ The center of this new Gestalt therapy is the ego. But the ego functions are least suited to understanding the phenomena of creativity. A partial list of these concepts would include spontaneity, confluence, curiosity, middle mode and concern (with its elements of ego-loss and figural confluence.) Imagination, must be included as well. It is absent from Creative License though it is perhaps the single most essential element in the work of the creative intelligence.

It is disturbing to realize how inadequate Gestalt theory is to this serious subject. It is essential that our approach be able to lead us into the mysteries and uncertainties in the heart of living. Nothing could be more real than mystery, creativity, imagination. Even though they are not "obvious," they are present, part of "real life." It is in the nature of our lives that we live in realms ineffable and impenetrable, hard to see and to sense, and to articulate.

There is this tension about Gestalt therapy. It is a psychotherapy — a practical matter, a praxis — intended to bring awareness, clarity and enlightenment to darkness, and reason where before there was fear, superstition, and ignorance. But, at the heart of the matter, at the center of our growing edges, is creativity. A mystery.

The solution is to learn to see in the dark. We have to bracket off our dependence on theory and step away from our concentration on the figure and try to become aware of the vital background: the mysterious and unknowable. We know what we are looking for; we know it when we see it. We are looking for what is alive when we are caught up in the obvious. The background has a mind of its own, which

²⁷ (I have in mind not only Gestalt Therapy and Ego, Hunger and Aggression but also Perls' later books and works by Pursglove and Polster and Polster and Polster as well. I have listed these in the Bibliography.

²⁸ Two articles published concurrently discuss this, ca. 1995, at some length. See first the more extensive one by Kitsler, "Isadore From: A Critical Appreciation" and also mine, "Reflections and Memories: The Contribution of Isadore From", both in Studies of Gestalt Therapy: 4/5 International Edition of Quaderni di Gestalt. Ragusa-Siracusa: HCC Publishing House, nos. 4-5, 1995-1996, pp. 19-46 and 63-84, respectively.

²⁹ I will discuss this in the forthcoming "The Persecution and Assassination of Fritz Perls, His Odyssey and His Remarkable Escape, and the Future of Gestalt Therapy: A Memoir."

³⁰ See Kistler's lucid and painstaking discussion of this, Ibid. pp. 34 - 41, and my own discussion in Ibid., p. 67 and on.

has always served as the source of the brilliance and artful power of the present. We all know this. And, if it is so obvious to us that creative living is present, can its source be far away?

What would we do in therapy to begin to find something so near and so far? What would you do, if you knew that something important was right in front of you, but you couldn't see it, and it disappeared when you tried to look at it straight on — and when you turned light on it?

An Awareness of Gestalt Therapy

There is a section in Gestalt Therapy³¹ where the authors observe that the self is considered "otiose" (passive) in the psychoanalytic view: a receptacle which "does nothing"³² except receive impressions. Action and feeling falls onto it, and passive mental activity: ideas and emotions emanate from it. They examine the situation which warrants this observation: the analytic treatment setting, the patient lying on the couch and the analyst sitting comfortably behind him, out of sight, and the reports of the patient. Perls, et al. conclude that the self as seen through psychoanalytic eyes is an artifact of the treatment situation, one which positively breeds otiosity.³³ These fundamental conclusions about the nature of the self, that the self is otiose, led to psychotherapy procedures in which the infant is considered too immature to take any part in who he is becoming. Thus, the patient in analytic therapy is also considered incapable of more than sucking and gulping the instructions and interpretations fed to him. Perls, et al. conclude that in a situation such as this, the biases of the observers have produced the conclusions they have come to.

We can see something similar happening here, in Creative License. Two tendencies within contemporary Gestalt therapy have created Creative License, as we find it. The first I have mentioned already: the condensation of Gestalt thinking. Many important ideas are no longer in common currency. (Another telling example: there are no longer any references to Egotism, the fourth of the original loss-of-ego functions described in Gestalt Therapy³⁴ (along with Retroflexion, Introjection, and Projection.) It hasn't disappeared from Perls, Hefferline and Goodman's book³⁵, and we haven't run out of uses for it, but it has no place in contemporary thinking, it isn't used, and it isn't taught.) The concepts which would tell us most about creativity are also unused and untaught, victims of the same downsizing. These include the middle mode and the entirety of the theory of concern.³⁶

³¹ "The first section of the Chapter, "Critique of Psychoanalytic Theories of the Self," p. 384.

³² Op. Cit.

³³ Ibid.; the discussion spans pp. 384-393.

³⁴ The contact boundary disturbances.

³⁵ On p. 456, in the section "Theory of the Self."

³⁶ In the chapters on final contact, in Perls, et alia, pp 416-419.

The reason for this goes back to the tendency, from the inception of Gestalt therapy, taken over from psychoanalysis, to stress the ego at the cost of what else humans are. It is not very different from developing an anatomy of the human body based on only one arm.

This is of course given form and substance in Gestalt Therapy. Perls himself continued to advance this bias with his emphasis on “I am I and you are you...” and the pervasive seeking after what I want and what I need and making choices, rife within Gestalt practice in recent years. Other biases of the past three decades have only set this in stone, and it is no coincidence that learning Gestalt theory has become de rigeur in Gestalt training during this same period.

The New Scholasticism

The second reason for the inadequacy we have seen in Gestalt thinking is that writing and thinking about Gestalt therapy has become a scholastic activity, the province of theorists, instead of an empirical activity. Gestalt therapy is still an experiential approach in practice, in spite of our training methods, which increasingly steer novices away from what is in front of them and toward conceptualization. When we reflect upon Gestalt therapy, the study of the text, Scholasticism, has replaced our phenomenological method and our empiricist attitude.³⁷ The evidence of Creative License confirms, on page after page, that we no longer start from what’s happening in front of us: the phenomenon. It is as though that everything worth saying in Gestalt therapy was said in 1951 and there is nothing more to be learned by going back to the phenomena themselves. All that is left for us is explication of the text. This is largely true even in locales where homage is paid to phenomenological investigation.

Judged by our literature, we don’t seem to anymore believe that an adequate explanation of a phenomenon can come from a thoroughgoing description of it. This is in spite of numerous statements, , both definitional and hortatory, from the founders of Gestalt therapy and its forebearers, about the centrality of experience: it is experience that teaches. Laura Perls said, “The actual experience of any present situation does not need to be explained or interpreted; it can be directly contacted, felt and described here and now.”³⁸ The editors of the volume under review wrote that creativity is “existential, experiential, and experimental” — itself a paraphrase of the assertion that it is Gestalt therapy itself that is existential, experiential and experimental.³⁹

Reflective of this is the longstanding dearth of case studies and analyses of therapy hours in the Gestalt literature, which is largely comprised of applications of a

³⁷ This is the point of my comments about the progenitors at the beginning of this, that they were generally more sympathetic to the arts than to theory and philosophy.

³⁸ From a paper given to the American Orthopsychiatric Association in 1973, according to Kitsler, Ibid., p.32, who quotes her and adds the emphasis.

limited number of principles drawn from parts of a few major works and repetitions of the theoretical principles.⁴⁰ Journal articles utilize the same simplified and increasingly rigidified ideas from the “bible⁴¹” which Perls, Hefferline and Goodman offered more than fifty years ago. There is very little empirical, clinical investigation, only academic research informed by behaviorist values. This river is running upstream, from theory to practice. An idea has swept Gestalt training, that learning to do Gestalt therapy first requires learning concepts which are then put into practice. Though we used to think experience is foremost, now we teach our students that they should learn the ideas — which are someone else’s considered experience — first, and learn the practice of Gestalt therapy from that.

I can write that things didn’t use to be that way,⁴² but I would be oversimplifying the past, and as Einstein said, things should be as simple as they can be — and not any simpler. But I think the river used to run the other way, with experience upstream at the tributaries of phenomena, and practice and constructs coming at the end, down at the delta. Laura Perls, again: “The actual experience of any present situation does not need to be explained or interpreted; it can be directly contact, felt and described here and now.”⁴³

When Gestalt therapy began, trainees were inspired by what their teachers did and said. Students learned from the demonstrations of brilliant people doing therapy, and then from listening to the sense they made. The teachers knew what they were doing, of course, but many of them were unburdened by conceptualization. They worked in a realm of inspiration and imagination which lends itself to suggestive concepts rather than discursive, elaborately constructed frameworks. Personal reports, heuristic ideas, sloganizing and experiments in conceptualization provided a context which left room for the therapy demonstrations to take shape.

Anyone who has trained in the arts, learning a musical instrument or writing or painting or dancing, knows that you learn by immersing yourself in the culture of the discipline; you are told some things and you struggle to grasp what they mean. You learn to handle a brush, or to put your hand just-so, with this arc of the wrist, or you read. For the most part you imitate — with feeling. That is, you do what you are told and what you see others doing, and in this way you try to penetrate to the heart of the actions, trusting your organismic intelligence to turn rote learning into your own

⁴⁰ The beginning of Bloom’s article in the present volume, pp. 64-67, illustrates this.

⁴¹ This term is used about Gestalt Therapy, in the city of its birth, though one of its authors believed it was only an experiment, a first draft at the theory (see Stoehr (1994) p.), and another pronounced it obsolete (Latner, 1996, p.).

⁴² I know not all Gestalt therapy fits this shoe. There are many who have never cottoned to Gestalt Therapy or have followed the freewheeling and nearly example of Fritz Perls in his last years. And others, long established like Erving and Miriam Polster — who developed a way of talking about Gestalt therapy which takes some of these difficulties into consideration — and others of that original Cleveland group as well.

⁴³ In Kitsler (1996), p. 32; the emphasis is his.

unique understanding, inchoate though it may be, of what you are learning. You practice what you hear, what you see, or what you are told to do, whether it is pushing some red oil paint across a prepared canvas or a piece of charcoal across a sheet of paper, or pulling a bow or pick across a string. And you “stay with it,” you hang out with it, and one thing leads to another: you learn from your experience.

This is how we used to learn to do therapy, too — from doing it and watching how trainers did it, and then trying out what we saw, and seeing what came from that. Not from a blueprint or a book. These days even the therapy examples are tidier. They are harnessed to illustrating a theoretical point. The cart goes before the horse. Examining what happens in therapy doesn't any more inspire how we think or what we do in Gestalt therapy.

Gestalt Therapy and the New World

Gestalt therapy is a child of the Americas. Its father was an immigrant psychologist. Its mothering was split among many people, nearly all of them native born Americans. Though many of them had strong intellectual ties to Europe, most of them were native-born Americans, in ways they took for granted, but we should. The young baby was, of course, shaped by its parents. The family was a discordant family, and the child was fought over. They fought about what the child was, who was the best parent, they fought for the child's love and allegiance. They fought to make the child affirm the worth of the parents, and they fought about what the child should be when it grew up. (This happens in families.)

I'd like to proceed, then, by showing with creative adjustment how Gestalt therapy became what it is, and how it has become, in the present day, a stunted part of what it could be; then I'd like to suggest what a more ample approach to creativity might entail, what an adequate description of creativity might involve, and to point to where we might look in Gestalt therapy to find it.

Creative Adjustment as a New World Attitude

Psychoanalytic adjustment was the result of the process of therapy, in which the patient was helped, corrected and modified through self-understanding in order to finally reflect what he was capable of in the world he lived in — in the actual conditions of his life, not the anachronistic conditions of his childhood. Even given his unconventional insights, Freud tended to encourage his patients to comply with social morés, biting the bullet and fitting in. Freud confronted this choice daily in his life as a Jew and became a pariah such as we can scarcely appreciate in these freewheeling days, from the approbation which was aroused by the dissemination of his ideas, especially those about the sexuality of children.

Gestalt Therapy added a perspective of mutuality to adjustment, a field perspective, asserting that adjustment had to be a give-and-take; the individual could alter the environment— even re-make it, or create it differently — as well as change himself to suit it⁴⁴. This process was called creative adjustment, recognizing this importance of this give-and-take in healthy growth. It was in line with Gestalt therapy's characterization of healthy life itself as an improvisation — one creative act after another.

This attitude — remaking the environment — is a New World one. It is quintessentially American, isn't it? — the source and epitome of the great appeal of the United States to the rest of the world⁴⁵. This is not like grafting young vines onto the old world's similar but more rooted ones. It is a wholesale re-creation of what it means to be human in western civilization, an extension of the ideas of the enlightenment and the force of humanism. I want to proceed by looking at this strain in Gestalt therapy, especially at the way it has influenced the concept of creativity. In this light, I hope we can revise our estimate of Gestalt therapy and to see more clearly what creativity is.

The American Background

Distinctively American attitudes are embedded in Gestalt ideas. They have shaped Gestalt therapy and make it especially potent, but also deficient in certain areas, and one of them is creativity. I will quote extensively from a commentator about early America, the singular authority in early American studies, the Count Alexis de Tocqueville, a Frenchman who toured the United States in 1831. Tocqueville's two volume Democracy in America is read and spoken about to this day in the United States.⁴⁶ A recent description is typical, calling Democracy in America "a refined, detached series of reflections on the effects of American democracy on character, commerce, culture and belief: why the arts in American are more concerned with utility than beauty, why Americans tend to be restless, why democracy encourages a fervent religiosity."⁴⁷

⁴⁴ The authors mixed their new field concepts with atomistic ones. An example of the latter is on p. 247 of Gestalt Therapy (1951), where they claim Gestalt therapy's outlook implies an autonomous criteria for health, after being at pains to explain how everything involves the field. If nothing is autonomous in a field, their assertion cannot be correct. From the perspective of the 21st century, the book is in transition from individualism to a new holism in which the individual as a concept is an anachronism.

⁴⁵ And now, in the early twenty first century, a source of fear and despair as well.

⁴⁶ The Frenchman is still so ubiquitous in the thinking of Americans about themselves that an American journal, The Atlantic Monthly, recently (May 2005) asked a contemporary French writer to travel in Tocqueville's tracks and publish the results. Opinion about Tocqueville is not uniform, however. A recent reviewer called his book an "often woolly-headed work that is not even that well written" and went on to point out that Democracy in America is immensely flattering toward its subject, and Americans love to be flattered. (Lazare, Daniel, "L'Amérique, Mon Amour". The Nation, April 26, 2004, www.thenation.com/?i=20040426&s=lazare, posted april 8, 2004..

⁴⁷ Rothstein, Edward, "Connections: Touring an America Tocqueville Could Fathom." The New York Times, April 10, 2005, p. E1.

Tocqueville wrote more than 200 years after the country was first settled and 50 years after the nation was established. In the first chapter of volume two, he wrote that no country in the world pays less attention to philosophy than does the United States. "Yet," he wrote, "the inhabitants of the United States use their minds in the same manner, they have a philosophical method common to the whole people."⁴⁸ His list of the principles of the American attitude is these four items:

1. to avoid the bondage of systems and habits of all kinds, including family maxims, class opinions, and national prejudices
2. to accept tradition only as a means of information, and existing facts only as a lesson to be used in doing otherwise and doing better;
3. to seek the reason of things for oneself, and in oneself alone;
4. to tend to results without being bound to means, and to strike through the form to the substance.

Tocqueville wrote in the introduction to volume one of Democracy in America that the entire book was "written in a kind of religious terror," his reaction to his realization that what had been unfolding for centuries in America comprised an "irresistible revolution" whose fervor took him aback. America had left behind the ruins of the old world while erecting a strange new one in which equality is the guiding principle.⁴⁹

In sum, then, the common American approach is based on personal experience, is goal-focused, and utilizes the past as only a source of information to solve problems. It is not otherwise bound by the ties of principle, family, class, kin, or country which were common elsewhere at the time, and it consists only of a desire to cut through to the heart of the matter in pursuit of its often mercenary goals. Everything else comes from these American first principles, including freedom and tolerance, hard work, unrestrained optimism, and unmitigated invention, the ferocious engine which has propelled the United States and drawn the attention of all nations to it.

This, from a recent essay on jazz by a European writer attests to the vibrancy of the creative inherent in the American attitude:

To the early historians of Jazz, the music's African essence was indisputable. More recent critics, however, have seen the African influence as only one of its aspects, giving equal weight to the heritage of European harmony and form, and stating that the true essence of jazz is America's protean creativity.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Tocqueville, Alexis de, Democracy in America, Vol. II, Chapter 1, "Philosophical Method of the Americans."

⁴⁹ Rothstein, again. Ibid. Rothstein comments, "In democracy, much is lost as much is gained," and refers to the French revolution as well as the present effects of "sentiments of religious terror" in the face of democratic revolution."

⁵⁰ Geoffrey Smith, "Jazz Starter Collection: 48. Abdullah Ibrahim." London: BBC Music April, 2005, p. 89.

And America's protean creativity is sui generis, like the rest of the country. It is as deep in the United States, and as unique to it, as the experiences of its settlers, those who fought to establish it, both those who resided in the United States and those who emigrated to it.

In the secular world, though, and from its beginnings, America did not accept moral suasion unless it was couched in the American attitude. So, for example, the ninth of the ten commandments given to Moses on Mt. Sinai is, "Thou shall not bear false witness against thy neighbor." But Benjamin Franklin put an American twist on this: "Honesty is the best policy," he wrote in Poor Richard's Almanac.⁵¹ That is, if you have a have a policy, and policies save time — then, as policies go, honest gives the best outcome; it is better to be honest than to be dishonest because honesty leads to better outcomes than does dissembling.⁵² Isn't it reminiscent of a distinguished teacher's ⁵³ screed on behalf of Gestalt theory, "the most useful thing is a good theory."?⁵⁴

If you read Gestalt Therapy with an eye for these American attitudes, you will readily see how the strains of American thinking, already well established fifty years after the nation's establishment in 1776 — empiricism, trust in the individual and in his own experience, an anti-authoritarian refusal to trust in the experience of others, or to give over one's freedom to the dictates of authorities or tradition; straightforwardly looking for the heart of the matter, and treating life as a series of problems to be solved — are embedded in it, taken for granted so thoroughly that it is neither recognized nor remarked upon.

The American attitude is also a wholesale embrace of the ego functions as a way of living. We do, we make, we create; we insist. Perls, himself fluent in German and familiar with Freud's writing in the original German, nevertheless continued to use the pretentious English invented by the medical profession for psychoanalysis.⁵⁵ But Freud intended the lingo of analysis to stay close to the familiar. The "ego" is the I or the me; and the me-functions give a better suggestion of what is meant by these artifacts of psychoanalysis taken over into Gestalt therapy. The I-functions are what we do which has the character of our own actions and intentions, and it is in this area, more than any other, that the American attitude stands on a common ground with Gestalt

⁵¹ Franklin was an American founding father, one of the most influential in the early days of the republic.

⁵² Again, we say "Crime doesn't pay." Based on a calculation of the cost-benefits involved, criminal activity does not offer a sound return to the incipient thief. If it did, I suppose, we would decide to be criminals.

⁵³ This is Isadore From, a member of the New York circle, formerly a philosophy student and diplomat, a spokesman for Gestalt theory, and an influential early teacher of Gestalt therapy.

⁵⁴ From, a native son of a small town in the American midwest, would also reflect his native breeding by saying that a major purpose of a theory in Gestalt therapy is to provide a blueprint for therapy.

⁵⁵ See the whole of Bettelheim's fascinated account of the distortion of Freud's work during its translation into English, in Bettelheim (1982).

Therapy's. Gestalt Therapy stands on the shoulders of the American attitude — and modern day Gestalt therapy displays many of the same virtues and shortcomings, with its emphasis on personal responsibility and personal experience, freedom, problem solving, and being successful and making money in the economic climate.

Parenthetically, the American nature of Gestalt therapy is the reason that Gestalt Therapy was published as it was, with the practical section of awareness exercises and studies first, and the explanatory theoretical chapters after. The first section was prepared by Fritz Perls with the assistance of Ralph Hefferline, and was put in the book earlier than the theory section — not only because Perls, et al. and their publisher Arthur Ceppos wanted to sell books (perish the thought!)⁵⁶ but because it is an American book written and published in America by Americans to be sold and read and to make money. That is the American way of doing things. It is a practical book about the practical application of a new approach to psychotherapy — itself a practical activity.

But I am leaping ahead of myself. First, I want to make it clear how much America influenced the native-born American child, Gestalt therapy, in those critical formative years when influences have such an important effect on later growth. We can see this American attitude in the book, displayed in its ideas and words. Here is a good example; the authors speak with a single voice about their approach:

“Our approach is unitary in the sense that we try in a detailed way to consider every problem as occurring in a social-animal-physical field. From this point of view, for instance, historical and cultural factors cannot be considered as some complicated or modifying condition of a simpler biophysical situation, but are intrinsic in the way any problem is presented to us.”⁵⁷

“Problem” occurs twice in this short quotation. It is easy to miss this, since the point of the paragraph is not problems but living in the field. Here's another small illustration, from the sections where Perls, et al. discuss figure formation: they frequently describe the end of figure making as “growing into the solution.”⁵⁸ Problems and solutions, the American approach. You can think of it as a version of drive-theory, where, in this American way of looking at it, the “organism” is driven to solve problems. It is also the typical mode of thought of Americans: Americans are problem-solvers.

That Organism and the rest of the armamentarium of gestalt psychology terminology was taken into Gestalt Therapy is consistent with the American

⁵⁶ That this could be a critique says more about the critic.

⁵⁷ F. S.. Perls, Ralph Hefferline and Paul Goodman: Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality. New York: The Julian Press, 1951, p. 228.

⁵⁸ P. 418

fascination with technology. This attraction to the modern and the new was an outgrowth of the American propensity for solutions and its antipathy to tradition. Though Perls himself was hardly wedded to gestalt psychology — he even preferred “concentration therapy” to “Gestalt therapy” as a name for his new approach — and Goodman’s knowledge was a quick study based on a then-recently published book,⁵⁹ allying themselves with gestalt psychology must have seemed appealing and practical in the temper of those times.⁶⁰ Gestalt psychology was avowedly scientific, and science, another handmaid of the American way, had in those days a reputation as an unmitigated good thing that it has since lost. It conferred a cachet which legitimized Perls and his colleagues’s project. So, Gestalt therapy’s vocabulary, already filled with the scientific airs from the medicalized English language psychoanalytic terms — ego, id, projection, introjection — was augmented with new terms like figure and organism.

If the reader attunes himself to noticing these traces of the American attitude in Gestalt Therapy they are on every page.⁶¹ Yet another example of this technological underpinning comes from Isadore From, a native of Indiana in the American midwest, an member of the Perls’ circle in New York and an prolific teacher of Gestalt therapy, who said often in his classes and workshops, “the most practical thing is a good theory,” and quoted Lewin, “a good theory tells one where to look, that is, orients the therapist,”⁶² and “theory is a blueprint for therapy.”⁶³ As though doing therapy is just another kind of construction project, like erecting a house or building a bridge: first you make the plans, then you know what to build.

Perls, et al. use similar words. “The therapist needs his conception,” they say, “in order to keep his bearings, to know in what direction to look,”⁶⁴ They then go on to acknowledge the difficulties which the practitioners of “this art or any other art” will have trying to keep track of an abstraction in the heat of the actuality of the present moment of therapy, especially since it is so important that they “not impose a standard rather than developing the potentialities of the other.”⁶⁵ The reader must wonder at these repeated cautions: won’t the refined and educated awareness of the therapist, shaped by his assimilated Gestalt ideas, be sufficient to the matter at hand

⁵⁹ A Sourcebook of Gestalt Psychology (ed., Willis). New York: The Humanities Press, 1950. This is according to Kitsler, Ibid., p. 25. Kistler’s article (see the Bibliography) is an excellent perspective on the history and development of Gestalt therapy.

⁶⁰ I am aware they had other stated reasons, reasons they advanced in a letter to one of the founders of the school gestalt psychology.

⁶¹ P. Ibid.

⁶² Quoted in Kitsler (1995-1996), p. 35.

⁶³ Quoted in Müller, B. , "Isadore From's Contribution To The Theory And Practice Of Gestalt Therapy". *Studies in Gestalt Therapy: International Edition, Quaderni di Gestalt*, No. 2, 1993. Ragusa - Siracusa, Italy: Human Communication Center Publishing House.

⁶⁴ Perls, et al., p. 448..

⁶⁵ Op cit.

spontaneously.

The significance of all this is that Gestalt Therapy, an American text, expresses itself with an American state of mind the same one Tocqueville described.

A important part of the American mind state is the conviction that that life is a problem — a problem which, however, can be solved, for sure, and soon! Americans apply themselves to solving problems with great energy and skill. This is the optimistic, practical side of the American persona, what is referred to as “American ingenuity and know-how,” and “the can-do” attitude. If creativity is about making new things, Americans are the ones to do it. If it is normal for humans to be “creative,” it is more normal for Americans, because everything in the country’s culture is directed towards this.

This is better suited to some ways of doing Gestalt therapy than to others. Organizational development practice and training, for instance, and the large scale training of therapists in groups (what has become the standard method) are well suited to a goal-centered problem-solving Gestalt therapy. These use a ratiocinated method, similar to a production line, with a curriculum and a syllabus and interchangeable teachers and interchangeable students.

This works in favor of a simplified problem-centered approach — it is easier to teach and easier to learn, in the sense that there are economies of scale inherent in teaching this way. It doesn’t work as well for the more subtle aspects of life, including learning and doing therapy, which can only be considered problems by extreme applications of pretzel logic, or in moving from the generalized present to the particular moment. It isn’t applicable, for instance, for teaching the sophisticated nuances and intricacies of what occurs between two people in therapy. These matters of exploration, sympathy, empathy, and receptivity are not goal-centered but present-centered and timeless. The standard method of Gestalt therapy in a group is the one in which someone works, that is, offers a problem, and for the teacher-therapist to work with the trainee-client to find the solution. But therapy which requires exploration, sympathy, empathy, and receptivity and a taste for the unknown, putting goals and aims in the back seat. In order to sit in the dark, you need to turn out the lights and hang out, sitting there long enough to attune your receptivity and wait for what comes out of the woodwork. Meanwhile the production line lags. In therapy and training the subtle and unacknowledged pressure is to entertain the onlookers, and to get on to the resolution of the problem.

Tocqueville reminds us that in America the past must justify our present concern with it. So, as elsewhere in America, history and context has always found an uneasy home in Gestalt therapy. The goal-oriented Gestalt method slides over the vague or discordant parts of the foreground and contradictory intimations from the

periphery in the rush to a solution. The result is premature figure formation. The method's schemas can't abide muddy figures, vagueness or uncertainty, or being patient with contradictions, even if they are in the nature of things. Figure formation has been replaced, sharpened up into the Cycle of Awareness, that sleek conceptualization which makes no place for the comprehensive workings of the phases of figure formation which allow for the contributions of the background.

In the United States, we see how quickly our immigrants to our shores become Americans. They are here because they are already incipient citizens, drawn to the United States by their belief in its principles, the energy and the lighter gravity of a place without tradition. The forces which shaped the authors of Gestalt Therapy shaped the text itself. Two of the three authors of Gestalt Therapy were native born Americans and the principal author, Frederick S. Perls, was an immigrant. In my view, he had the same appetite as other immigrants to the United States for freedom and the limitless possibilities of action and thought which the United States promises. Like so many before him, Perls wanted a safe haven for his own precious child, a home where it could grow up and flourish. Gestalt therapy is the child of Europe and its intellectual traditions in the same way the United States itself is. But what does this mean? Not much, I think. A Chevrolet, that quintessentially American car, has a name pronounced with a French "ch," and a French "ay" at the end, but it's not a French automobile.

It is with all of this in mind that we can understand the way Gestalt therapy speaks, and about its difficulties with creativity. However inadequate they are, the formulations about creativity in Creative License reflect the way Americans think about it: the field is ignored, the background is ignored, questions of beauty and grace and genius and brilliance are ignored. Creativity as seen in Creative License is a recapitulation of American attitudes, and so is seen as a seeking after the success of the new.

(However, the aphorism attributed to the Danish existentialist Søren Kierkegaard is apposite here. "Most men pursue pleasure with such breathless haste that they hurry past it Life is not a problem to be solved, but a reality to be experienced."⁶⁶)

I hope you see the collision of principles here, how the conceptualization of creativity we are given from Gestalt principles is at odds with Gestalt therapy's commitment to awareness — to sense and perceive and apprehend the fullness of the present. How can this be done when we are rushing to find a solution to a problem?

Transcendentalism and its Offspring, and John Dewey

⁶⁶ Maybe that's why there are two dozen web sites where this quotation is cited, all of them based in the U.S. I went through all of them (and searched a dozen of Kierkegaard's books) looking for the origin of his sentences, to no avail.

Although Americans are loath to discuss philosophy, several American schools of thinking, both philosophical and religious, took root in the United States, articulating the American creed which Tocqueville described. In the vanguard of one school, which arose roughly coincident with Tocqueville's tour, were Ralph Waldo Emerson,⁶⁷ Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry Thoreau. They were associated with the school of thought called American Transcendentalism, which was succeeded several decades later by its offspring, American Pragmatism, associated with Charles S. Peirce, William James, George Herbert Mead and John Dewey. The Transcendentalist ideal was a meld of American ideals, especially those having to do with the ability of individuals to apprehend truth without the mediation of authorities, and with Protestantism theology.

Pragmatism was a popular movement with a large following which found its fullest focus and articulation in the writings of John Dewey. Dewey, to this day the most important influence in education in the United States, was the most influential philosopher of the first half of the twentieth century in the United States, a man whose many books were popular among the reading public. He has had an enduring effect on American thought and his ideas comprise the basis of all teaching methods and attitudes in every school of education in the United States. His stress on the relation of experience and action, to conceptualization and learning — summarized in the phrase, "learning by doing" — has become how Americans think about education and learning.

Dewey spent many years at the University of Chicago (as did Mead and Peirce) in the departments of Philosophy and Education (the University and departments where Paul Goodman graduated and where he was eventually to earn his doctorate.) As his thinking developed Dewey moved towards eliminating authoritarian methods of teaching and rote learning in favor of learning through experimentation in practical activities. He was active in movements to advance social equity and women's suffrage, and ran a school at the University of Chicago where he experiment with his ideas about schooling.

The line of thought and attitude, from Tocqueville's early America to Dewey, and through him to Perls, Hefferline and Goodman is, I hope, obvious. Dewey and Pragmatism have remained virtually unknown and unacknowledged as influences to Gestaltists in the United States, and the rest of the world community of Gestalt activity⁶⁸ knows even less. I suppose this is not so surprising. U.S. homemade attitudes

⁶⁷ Emerson, especially was a giant of the age, and articulated for many Americans the depth, insight and spiritual aspiration of the American attitude in his many books. In *Circles* (Emerson, Ralph Waldo, *Collected Essays*. New York: Perennial Library, 1981, p. 226) he wrote, "People wish to be settled. Only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them."

⁶⁸ I have only seen a few mentions of any of this outside Stoehr, one a lengthy draft and presentation by Richard Kitsler on Peirce, unpublished to my knowledge, and the other in this present volume, in Bloom, p. 71. Bloom (p.64) says this remains ahead of publication.

of philosophy, hardly noticeable in a country where no one takes much mind of philosophy, become wallpaper. Like others floating in the cultural background of the United States, these attitudes are not linked to European influences any more than anything else in the United States. Sandor Ferenczi was touted by a presenter at the recent conference of the European Association for Gestalt Therapy in Prague as a grandfather of Gestalt therapy. I suppose this is true, but Gestalt therapy, with its emphasis on practicality and utility and disregard for tradition and ancestry, is so far from European philosophy. Gestalt therapy is an American son and in the U.S., we are both obsessed with family⁶⁹ — “I have a grandfather in the Czech republic” — and turn our backs on it as soon as we can, moving far across this big country to New York or Los Angeles or Seattle as fast as we can, packing up and moving on average every five years. So much for family⁷⁰

The Empirical Method Applied

...The novel I now began to write wrote itself: “I am an American, Chicago-born — Chicago, that somber city — and go at things as I have taught myself, free-style, and will make the record in my own way: first to knock, first admitted; sometimes an innocent knock, sometimes a not so innocent.”

The narrator was a boyhood friend whom I had lost track of thirty years ago, when my family had moved from Augusta Street. I often wondered what had become of this handsome impulse kid.... In Paris, where the book was being written, it was Charlie (Augie) who resisted influence and control. Childish and fresh, he sat at the checkerboard and shouted “I got a scheme!” I, the writer, might be hampered, depressed, Charlie, however, was immune, defying Grandma Lausch. She took a dim view of his schemes. He, however, was prepared to light out for the territory...

The book had taken off, writing itself very rapidly...⁷¹

-- Saul Bellow

Let’s look at what artists say about what they do. It makes sense, no? To find out about what you don’t know, it seems like a good idea to ask those who know about it.

Here are some accounts of the creative process of artists reported by the artists

⁶⁹ I’ve heard it called ancestor worship.

⁷⁰ The Bush administration’s back-of-the-hand to Europe is only one symptom of this.

⁷¹ This is from Bellow’s recently published memoir of the writing of The Adventures of Augie March. The last line alludes to Mark Twain’s own adventurer, Huck Finn. “Reflections: ‘I Got A Scheme!’”: The words of Saul Bellow.” Introduction by Philip Roth. New York: The New Yorker, April 25, 2005, p. 76-79.

themselves, starting with the paragraphs with which I started this section. The artists — painters, musicians, writers, a literary psychologist — are from North America and Europe. They include Bellow, the Nobel Prize-winning novelist born in Montreal and grown to manhood in Chicago, the Dutch painter of the late nineteenth century Vincent Van Gogh, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, born in middle Europe in the middle of the eighteenth century, the American jazz pianist and composer Carla Bley, the English poet John Keats who died early in the nineteenth century, and the Canadian pianist Hélène Grimaud, now resident in the United States. These quotes are culled from their own writings and utterances.

I have introduced this section with Bellow's reminiscences, written to another writer, Philip Roth. He describes a process remarkable for his involvement and his detachment from it, "it wrote..." and "I wrote....".

Van Gogh writes to his brother and patron, Theo, in the midst of a painting trip the painter made to the south of France at the end of his life. "I have a lover's clear sight or a lover's blindness. I shall do another picture this very night, and I shall bring it off. I have a terrible lucidity at moments when nature is so beautiful; I am not conscious of myself any more, and the picture comes to me as in a dream..."⁷²

The pianist Hélène Grimaud spoke in an interview on my local public broadcasting radio station. She said, "In playing music, risk is essential. Without risk, there is no surprise, without surprise, there is no magic; without magic, there is no art." The kind of risk Grimaud is talking about is exemplified by Bellow, who begins an entire novel by following the single line which had come to his mind, "I am an American, Chicago-born...."

In its single-minded focus on the creative thread, Bellow's memoir is also reminiscent of Elmore Leonard's comments in an interview⁷³ Leonard, a popular crime novelist, was asked who he writes his novels for: "I write them to find out what happens. I don't write for anybody else." To see how it comes out, the elements of curiosity and surprise, as though he's going to the movies, a spectator in his own creative process!

Carla Bley's report is from an interview she gave to the English jazz critic Alyn Shipton.⁷⁴ Shipton asks Bley about a composition, "an extended composition," he writes, "that deconstructs twenty-first century patriotic North American songs with the same verve Charles Ives brought to his orchestral works," and he asks her if she had "intended to play such musical games with her national heritage?"⁷⁵ Bley replies:

⁷² A letter from Arles dated circa September 27, 1888. This, and all of his letters, are available indexed by date, at www.vincentvangoghgallery.com.

⁷³ "Leaving Out What Will Be Skipped" by David Carr. New York: *The New York Times*, May 12, 2005, p. E1.

⁷⁴ Shipton, Alyn, *Handful of Keys: Conversations with Thirty Jazz Pianists*, New York: Routledge, 2004.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4-5.

Actually, no. I just kept going writing this piece until it was over. I have no control over the direction a composition takes once I start to work on it. I didn't set out to include "The Star Spangled Banner" and in fact I was developing the first theme, which is an original piece of mine, when I realized that the two numbers shared the same opening notes. So I started by just popping in the opening line of "Star Spangled Banner" as a quote, but as the next three months went by and I worked further on the piece, that tune began to creep in further and further to the whole fabric of the composition, so that the entire second section was "The Star Spangled Banner." There was nothing I could do to stop it, or to hold the irreverent stuff in check, except that I got rather misty-eyed towards the end, and it became quite beautiful.⁷⁶

I want to finish with Freud, who, in this interview,⁷⁷ pleads to be considered as an artist, and, in support of his brief, points out that medical analytic practitioners lag behind artists in applying his ideas.

"Everybody thinks that I stand by the scientific character of my work and that my principal scope lies in curing mental maladies. This is a terrible error that has prevailed for many years and that I have been unable to correct. I am a scientist by necessity, and not by vocation. I am really by nature an artist.... And of this there is an irrefutable proof: which is that into all countries into which psychoanalysis has penetrated it has been better understood and applied by writers and artists than by doctors. My books, in fact, more resemble works of imagination than treatises on pathology.... I have been able to win my destiny in an indirect way, and have attained my dream: to be a man of letters, though still in appearance a doctor. In all great men of science there is a leaven of fantasy, but no one proposes like me to translate the inspirations offered by modern literature into scientific theories. In psychoanalysis you may find fused together though changed into scientific jargon, the three greatest literary schools of the nineteenth century: Heine, Zola and Mallarmé are united in me under the patronage of my old master, Goethe"⁷⁸

The grace, beauty and clarity of Freud's writing has been remarked upon by many readers and writers, among them Bettelheim, Einstein and Hesse. Thomas Mann praised Freud's essays for the brilliance of his style.⁷⁹ (And here, we must also

⁷⁶ *Op. cit.*

⁷⁷ He submitted to this interview by the Italian journalist Giovanni Papini in 1934. In Hillman, James, *Healing Fictions*. New York: Station Hill Press, 1983.

⁷⁸ In Hillman, James, *Op. cit.*, p. 3.

⁷⁹ See Bettelheim's appreciation and the praise of others is in *Freud and Man's Soul*, p. 9.

thank him for reminding us of how important imagination is in daily life and creative activity.)

These accounts speak consistently about a roughly similar experience. They suggest something which is proceeding according to an impulse which has little to do with will or volition, or the artists' intentions. "Dream-like," it is the experience of being in the presence of something magically compelling, which is occurring on its own. Yet we recognize it as our own. It is both our own, and not our own.

This contradiction (though not a conflict!) signifies the presence of the middle mode of final contact, when we are whole, unified, and when the "I"-ness of ordinary experience is gone, submerged in the whole. Van Gogh says something similar, "the picture comes to me..." Van Gogh receives it, he is confident and expectant and open. Something unexpected, surprising, beyond the realm of the usual. Even though these people live this way much of the time, they still tell us that it is surprising. I suspect it is in the nature of the experience. Even though being surprised is part of creativity, the artist ceases to be surprised that he is surprised. There is again that contradiction: surprised-not surprised.

There is an element of danger in this, Grimaud uses the word risk, but out of the uncertainty comes magic. It is the realm of the imagination, to Freud (who is an authority on the inner life!) the distinctive quality of the work of an artist is imagination.

(This is far in conception and experience from the term popular in Gestalt therapy these days, "co-creating," a term which pretends to speak about the same conjoint process but is hard to reckon as anything but a grudging admission of mutuality: only the social environment is included in it. Along with this goes a large dose of self-congratulation in the suggestion that we are "co"-partners with the magical infinite. Here, though, we can see from their reports the actual worlds these artists inhabit; in comparison "co-creating" elevates the me-functions when nothing is less important.)

Mozart is often put forward as a perfect, almost unreachable form of creative activity, but I think his is only a more refined and more transparent version of what we've heard before, taking into account that his is an older cast of mind. By this, I mean he is more trusting of his creative intelligence and the creative imagination, and so his creative acts seem more fluid and less of a struggle. Struggle had not yet come to have the proportions it achieved later in that century, when it was an intimate part of the mythos of the age. In a way, Mozart is a perfect case of artistic creativity. He tended his creative gift and was on intimate terms with it. I think also that he lived in an age where perfection was looked for and recognizable, and the virtues which characterize it — order, balance, symmetry, serenity — influenced how he viewed the way he wrote music and shaped the rest of his experience. In comparison, the

Romanticism which shaped and characterized the next generation of composers — Beethoven, for instance, and Schubert — stirred up and destabilized their compositional imagination and methods, and this turmoil in turn effects the way they are seen, and saw themselves. The romantics relished storms, emotional extremes, and abrupt changes in music's tempo, volume and mood. Such an era is also more likely to perceive the writing of music, and those who do it, in the same fashion. (Our own culture's view of artists as tortured and struggling souls beyond the pale of social adjustment, is a vestige from the Romantics.⁸⁰ Beethoven, still the epitome of this, died in 1825, and harbingers of the departure of the Romantic sensibility were present in 1880, though in music Mahler, Strauss and Elgar were writing Romantic music fifty years after Stravinsky's Le Sacre du Printemps.)

Mozart's description of how he composed is from a description Mozart gave in a letter to his father. It is given here in a editor's paraphrase:

Mozart wrote that after receiving a commission for a work of music, if he accepted it and kept the possibility of the completed work in his 'mind' as an open-ended possibility, at some point the finished work would break into his consciousness. Mozart calls this "a round volume of sound." An entire piece, complete down to every phrase, note and nuance, flashed into his mind in its completed form — a unity of perfection. No matter what the length of the piece, the whole of it was perceived by Mozart in a single instant [as we recall a dream].

Mozart wrote, "no one knows how hard I have to work at this before being able to make a score in pen and ink." The hard part was reaching to find the music, to receive the 'round volume of sound,' at its instantaneous presentation. Mozart had fused with the field of music. The music, completely composed in the field of music, was available to be received, and Mozart, reaching to find it with an effort of receptivity, was then able to receive it.

It was an immense task [for Mozart] to translate this instantaneous Eureka! gestalt into the thousands of individual little inkblots of paper so that an orchestra could translate it into our world of sound. Mozart might spend days working out the translation in his head. When this inner translation was complete and he was ready to turn it into the notes on paper, he would often have his wife read him stories to occupy his ordinary attention [*pace* Miller] so that his musical mind could transcribe the thousands of notes more easily.

But to liken Mozart's creative procedure to IT [the Buddhist and Taoist concept] breathing through him, as though he were just a channel,

⁸⁰ It is fading, replaced with a view of artists as celebrities with large bankrolls.

an amanuensis for the muse, would be at best a disservice. His own comment was, 'no one knows how hard I have to work at this,' before all was ready for the easier part of pen and ink.^{81 82}

What is essential to this kind of creative intelligence is a profound receptivity joined to a enormous musicality. The artist is able to open himself to the creative forces which are working to write the music. Who can say what they really means — where these forces reside, within the artist or without — somewhere in the field which comprises the entirety of the artist's universe? But the artist says his creative activity is not directed by him. He works at balancing his instinctive talents, his intellectual abilities, and his creative intelligence in order to be attuned to the creative forces available to him.

Next, let's look at a letter from Keats. The English poet marries his profound, acute and sophisticated sensibility with ideas from his epoch and from his immediate experience. His intimate knowledge of how he writes poetry informs his appreciation of Shakespeare, whom he lauds. The quality which Keats values most in the Avon playwright and poet he calls "negative capability," by which he means the ability, essential to creative activity, to tolerate uncertainty and suspend the urge to resolve the emergent before it reaches the fullness of its potentiality. His sharp jab at the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge for, as he calls it, leaping too quickly from the murky waters of the creative well to the dry banks of reasoned mediocrity also helps us by giving us a contrasting portrait of someone without this ability to suspend the urge to fix the form of what is emerging. His words corroborate and extend what we have understood from these other reports. This is from a 1817 letter (a few decades after Mozart's) to his two brothers:

... I dined with Haydon Horace Smith, and met his two Brothers, with Hill and Kingston, and one Du Bois. They only served to convince me how superior humour is to wit in respect to enjoyment. These men say things which make one start, without making one feel; they are all alike; their manners are alike; they all know fashionables; they have a mannerism in their eating and drinking, in their mere handling a decanter. They talked of Kean [the Shakespearean actor] and his low company — would I were with that company instead of yours, said I to myself!

I had not a dispute but a disquisition, with Dilke on various subjects; several things dove-tailed in my mind, and at once it struck me

⁸² Pearce, Joseph Chilton, *The Biology of Transcendence: A Blueprint of the Human Spirit*, Rochester, Vermont: Park Street Press, 2005. Pp. 195-199. The author gives neither a source nor a citation for the letter from which he draws his paraphrase, and I haven't been able to find it in Mozart's collected letters, so I've been forced to present this admittedly unsatisfactory version.

what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously. I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason. Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetratum of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge. This pursued through volumes would perhaps take us no further than this: that with a great poet, the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration.⁸³

Creativity according to Keats seems again to be an entirely different sort of event than the book under review discusses. "Caught from the Penetratum," could be rendered as, "captured from the interior of the rich stew of percolating images, the place where beauty speaks the truth and the truth is comely. I can't see how this is anything like Rank's will, or problem-solving, or the description of creative adjustment we've been given, with its emphasis on free choice or acts of will — chewing and destroying and making new of what was already present. That's some other agenda, but doesn't appear to be the creative phenomena's. Would you could say Einstein was solving problems. Picasso and Rembrandt? Keats of course is after truth and beauty. And Mozart is not solving problems, either. If we're not going to look at our own creativity in the making, it makes more sense to look at our own creativity as these artists look at theirs. Most of us range within our capacities in a middle-mode kind of way, an all-embracing, flexible and unified un-self conscious way, not a willful way. After all, biting and chewing are only machine actions without appetite and savor — and pity the poor person who eats to get to the end! This all-embracing middle mode way blends our talents and our receptivity to the rest of the universe as it acts on us, in a mutuality of engagement.

Concern And The Middle Mode

In the concluding pages of their book, Perls et al. introduce Concern,⁸⁴ and their discussion of it conjures a world of description with the potential to describe creative events adequately. It does this using familiar Gestalt concepts re-cast to portray what is singular about creativity.

Concern is their term for a way of being which is capable of embracing

⁸³Keats, John,, Selected Letters: John Keats (ed. Hazlitt). London: Oxford University Press (Oxford World Classics), 2002. P. 41.

⁸⁴ Pp. 363-365.

uncertainty and is receptive to imagination and to the creative intelligence.⁸⁵ In the context of the rest of the book, their way of describing concern is revolutionary. Concern is, first, a condition, the condition of giving ourselves to the figures which emerge and evolve in our lives, putting ourselves at the figure's service. Since we are absorbed in the figure, the figure calls the tune. Living in concern, we live in a unity with the rest of the field. We participate in figures which emerge, and in which we are consumed. Each figure is a gestalt of our interests, appetites, and talents and the demands and requirements of the rest of the world related to the figure as it develops, emergent and vital. In this way we are embedded in the field as it lives. Here, then, we can see that Gestalt Therapy contains a workable way of thinking about creativity which is adequate to its subject and which speaks the radical language of the phenomenon.

Their discussion of concern is in the concluding sections of the last chapter of "Creative Adjustment." Here, they describe the phases of figure formation, pre-contact to contact, to final contact to post-contact, from the perspective of the figure itself and also in the experience of the individual. The last two sections of the chapter describe final and post contact. Entitled "Unity of Figure and Ground" and "Concern and its Object," they are a masterpiece of careful self-observation, fine discernment and creative thinking. For me, they are the pinnacle of the brilliant collaboration that marks Gestalt Therapy⁸⁶ and one of the places in the book to which I have returned again and again.

The universe of Gestalt therapy the authors had previously created was fluid and in process. It was a world where the ego and the individual plays a large part. These qualities are transformed. It is as though, in the universe of Concern, atoms are speeded up, new conditions and new elements are created. It is a hithertofore unknown universe. Instead of fluidity and the sense of time passing which is a normal constituent of awareness, passing time is absent; concern is timeless. Where self, ego and id were prominent, now the self is faded, become "selfless," supplanted by an all-looming figure. Where boundaries and contact were central, boundaries are dissolved and the original idea of contact — as the locus of oneself and other, where they meet and are both divided and unified — is transformed. There is contact without an other. No more "meeting of differences," because in concern the places of meeting, the contact boundary, is dissolved.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ It has been pointed out to me that the term "concern" and Perls, et al.'s way of discussing it owe a lot to Heidegger, though their attempt to integrate it into the discursive structure of Gestalt Therapy is their own. See Heidegger, M. Being and Time. New York: Harper & Row, 1962, pp. 83-100.

⁸⁶ Teaching in various locations in the Gestalt world, I find this section completely unknown, it's gist and concepts and even "middle mode," unheard of. See my comments throughout on the devolution of Gestalt therapy.

⁸⁷ This is pages 416-419 of Gestalt Therapy, and especially 418-419, "Concern and Its Object."

In these passages, the authors rise brilliantly to the occasion of describing ordinary everyday life, life lived fully and artistic activity. They step out beyond the intellectual commitments of the book's prior sections into a new world of Gestalt therapy. In their own actions, composing these paragraphs, they provide for the reader a demonstration of what they are themselves describing in the sections. It's a clinic in the phenomenological method, risky and breathtaking, but grounded in the phenomenology of abandon, absorption, engagement — concern. For me it is nothing less than a fabulous, inspired and inspiring high-wire act!

These pages take Gestalt therapy further from its roots in individualistic psychology into the field approach.⁸⁸ Even their method of exposition changes; always poetic, it works effectively here by evoking the world they could hardly suggest with a more precise style.

The word "concern" itself has several meanings in English. Perls, et al. use the word in its older and more noble meanings, including involvement and engagement, sympathy, sifting and mingling, with a suggestion of confluence and the joining of important things.

Final contact is, they say, a condition, not an event moving in (and through) time. It is a timeless state in which there awareness is virtually all awareness of the foreground; in final contact, there is practically no background, since the boundary has disappeared.⁸⁹ Final contact alters the nature and relation of the foreground and the background. The foreground and background, by definition distinct and divided, practically cease to exist in final contact. The foreground and background seem to "mingle," to merge. Though there is aware contact — something is being experienced — there is none of the "meeting of differences" contact which characterizes contact at other times. Though Perls, et al. wrote earlier in their book, "Experience occurs at the boundary between the organism and its environment," in concern there is experience but no boundary, no barrier which separates and joins.⁹⁰ There is no me-and- you, no me-and-object, no I-and-it. There is no Other. "In final contact is the timeless occurrence of I and Thou in Gestalt therapy."⁹¹ This is where any advocate of an I-and-Thou approach must start (though none have) — with the recognition of the dissolved boundary and the pervasive confluence of final confluence.

Ordinary awareness includes the sense of time passing, but concern is different, timeless. So they say concern is a condition; it is "static or final" with no sense of time passing or processes unfolding. They describe the passage of time as an essential aspect of awareness, given in the creation and destruction of the figure, but in concern,

⁸⁸ Significantly, it's the one place in this notably articulate book where they apologize for the inadequacy of the descriptions, their "poverty of language."

⁸⁹ P. 416.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 227

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 417.

awareness is, experience is, but time is not.

The authors say that final contact is the “actualization” of the self at the same time that it is also the dissolution of the sense of oneself. They are playing here on the two meanings for self which they have developed throughout the book. One is the self (taken from Freud), the entity which I identify as “me.” The other is the self they describe in their theory of the self and its functions: that fluid alternation of the functions of the ego, id, and personality in relation to the environment, the individual-in-touch-with-the-world, roughly figure formation from the perspective of the one who is living.

Both of these selves are dissolved in final contact. The first, “me,” disappears into the figure; the other, the-self-in-the-world, (really, a theoretical self defined by theory) also dissolves into the figure, in a kind of “spontaneous absorption.” The self ceases to be itself; Perls, et al. say it is “self-forgetful.” The figural object becomes a Thou: in this timeless moment one is in love with it. That’s what it means to be absorbed in the figure: to be in love with it. And if concern is a timeless state which can persist indefinitely, then we can be in love as long as we can live fully —indefinitely.

In thinking of the content of concern, what we get concerned about, Perls, et al. distinguish it from motives and appetites. “Let us,” they posit, thinking on their collective feet, “call this selfless feeling ‘concern.’” Just as the appetites are distinguished by a need or desire and a me-function, the concerns are distinguished by a feeling of selflessness. This absence of self is a negative capability which is, as we experience it, the substantial quality of selflessness. They catalog some of the concerns: “compassion, love, joy, serenity, insight, aesthetic appreciation...despair, and mourning,” and point out that all of them lack the sense of time passing which ordinarily colors motives, emotions and appetites. Appetites and emotions move the figure along, but concerns do not. They are “static” and “final” as is concern, the condition — they hang out with the figure. (In concern, the authors have abandoned their off-again on-again acceptance of the drive theory-model.⁹²)

It is possible to find these qualities of concern (timelessness, selflessness) in any actualized figure, not only “the concerns” To put it another way, any figure can be concerned. Any situation with the potential for us to become fully absorbed has the possibility of “concern.” Concern arrives when the foreground and background join, when time is no longer passing, when we disappears into the figure and are thoroughly engaged. Concern is how we live our life when we are fully in it; if we do not stand apart from our lives, we are full of concern.

Concern is essentially “selfless,” without any sense of the individual at all — although we can still be self-aware, especially in retrospect. Concern is a unitary experience. It is the union of figure and ground; in concern the field is undivided.

⁹² You know: I get hungry, the figure of food begins to form....

Though concern unifies the individual and the remainder of the field, figure and background, it is the individual — the sense of being a “me,” who has a separate existence — who “practically” disappears into the fully formed figure. When Perls, et al., write, “the individual practically disappears,” they mean that the individual disappears from the purview of his own awareness. By “practically,” they mean both that the individual retains a minute sense of his continued existence; the primary experience though is of selflessness and union. Still, there is usually someone who is experiencing selflessness, if only in recollection. We can say the individual continues to reside in the far periphery of the foreground — in what I could call “the aware-background.”

We are now in the ballpark of the way Mozart and most of the other artists I quoted described their own creative process, and . Certainly this description of concern suggests the state of mind in which we are abandoned to the compelling figure. It is also a suggestive description of love, loving and falling in love from the perspective of passion, contact and the contact boundary.

Perls, Hefferline and Goodman also use the concept “the middle mode” in their discussion of concern. The term comes, they say, from the study of language syntax, where the usual active and passive voices (equivalent to the ego and id functions) is, in some languages, joined by another voice, the middle voice⁹³ This occurs in modern Greek, which adds a voice, the “medium” voice, to its active and passive ones. In the medium voice, action and receptivity are unified and inseparable.

“Middle mode” comes up elsewhere, earlier in Gestalt Therapy, to help fill out their discussion of the meaning of spontaneity.⁹⁴ Here, describing concern, the authors use it’s singular qualities to describe the unifying of the individual and the environment in the figure. The self is exactly balanced and spontaneous; this is a synthesis, not simply a combination, but a new gestalt, in the embracing middle. They call this the middle mode, and this wonderful and suggestive concept denotes the melding of the organism/environment field — where environment means not only the physical ecology but the entire material and spiritual world. This can be seen in the intensely experiential way they view the self, changing to meet different circumstances. In their paraphrase of Aristotle, “when the thumb is pinched, the self is in the painful thumb.”⁹⁵

By the time they reach Concern 50 pages later, their ideas are a little different. The middle mode has given up more of its individualistic tone as boundaries are themselves dissolved in the absorption of final contact. Where the middle voice spoke from both side of the fence of ego-active and id-passive, now it speaks in the center of

⁹³ Here, they say (p. 417) that in concern, “one has grasped the “middle term,” and I hear the allusion, “the middle way.”

⁹⁴ P. 245, for instance.

⁹⁵ P. 373.

activity and passivity, inside the experience of being carried along in the material, spiritual and imaginative universe.

Middle mode might be the selfless experience of ecstasy, or ordinary life, but it is an integration of total involvement in the timelessness of every day. Earlier, Perls, et al. invoked Aristotle — “when the thumb is pinched, self exists in the painful thumb” — now they might say the self disappears in the pinched thumb,. The pinch is part of the event, one is not detached from the pinch but rather not separated from the pinch: thumb-and-pinch-and-pain are one self-less and absorbed moment.

The selfless self, they say, is “spontaneous, middle in mode (as the ground of action and passion) and engaged with its situation,”⁹⁶ and they remind us that feelings exemplify what they mean by middle mode, because they are always spontaneous and engage us: they cannot be willed or compelled.⁹⁷ Now they say that this “disinterested” self, the underlying self we display when we show our emotions, always middle mode and spontaneous, and thoroughly engaged, is the proper feeling of self and is synonymous with what is meant by soul.⁹⁸ They don’t define soul further, but at least they have gotten to the heart of the matter, the quintessence of our body, mind and spirit.

Imagination

A similar discussion of the lines which define and divide us exists in the realm of the imagination and imagining — making up things and making images — though the differences are also important. We tend to think that imagining is an event contained entirely within our physical bodies, but there is no reason to think so. Though we may know that we ourselves have made nothing, the outcome of the act of imagination is a image. Whether or not we know who has been imagining, our experience is often that imaginings, the images which come from the exercise of the imagination, are not ours. One writer put it this way:

There seems to be an implicit understanding that the imagination is not owned, not contained within oneself, even though the experience of it is intensely interior. This sense of being in the service of the imagination-- not its master--is a trademark of an authentic experience of creativity.⁹⁹

An act of imagination, inspired by an exercise of imagination, may be lasting or ephemeral : a painting or a happening or a meal. It will be evident to everyone, the audience and to the creator both, that what has occurred is an act of imagination.

⁹⁶ 376

⁹⁷ Earlier in the book, feelings were id-functions. But now they have separated the id dimension from the It dimension, allowing for a middle mode, not just an id-function.

⁹⁸ Pp. 376-377. Bettelheim (1982) reminds us that soul, seele, was Freud’s holistic original term for being. It is synonymous with psyche, It was rendered by the English and American physicians who sponsored the earliest translations into English as the vastly different and diminished “mind.” P. 71.

⁹⁹ This is from one of the essays on imagination in Hampl, Patricia, I Could Tell You Stories: Sojourns in the Land of Memory. New York: W.W. Norton, 2000.

While this is unambiguous, another element of imagination is an ambiguity about its source. We sometimes say “my” imagination, and as often we say “the” imagination. How similar this description is to the experience of concern. Just as we say that we serve the imagination, we also serve the figure, and in our own terms these ambiguities are about the location of our creativity — in the individual or the environment or both, the foreground and background, or both. Who or what dreams the dream. These ambiguities are inevitable if we look at the the phenomenon without preconceptions.)¹⁰⁰ In our terms, then, the imagination is not a function of the ego, but is a middle mode event, just as final contact is.¹⁰¹

The model for creativity in figure formation cannot be the male orgasm — with its driving idea of making everything happen until things explode! As we can see, imagining is another middle mode activity. Like concern, which it resembles, it might come at the culmination of an intense act of creation, a heated or vigorous one. But it might just as well be lithe, graceful, sinuous and well coordinated, integrated into the contours of life. If concern is a condition in one’s everyday life, the everyday go-around of well-being, final contact will simply be another part of living. As though we are living our lives and imagining it at the same time, fluidly and freely. A scientist who studies the human nervous system, a neuropsychologist, described this ongoing living very well. “A person’s waking life,” he said, “is a dream guided by the senses.”¹⁰²

Living With Boundaries and Without Them

What does this look like; how will we recognize it, this condition of concern? And especially, how will recognize the boundary-less condition of awareness which characterizes it?

If we look at psychotherapy, we usually see the meeting of therapist and patient. They are engaged with each other, sorting through the events of the week and the events of the therapy — that incipient liveliness — seeking those structured restrictions of awareness which are the meat of therapy. Let’s take a common occurrence, where the therapist and patient are talking together. Let’s say that the two understand each other. That is, in the foreground they are aware of each other, of the words they say to each other and, peripherally, in the foreground, they are aware that the ancillary aspects of their conversation, body language, voice tone and animation are congruent with their words (Typically, we notice this congruence in its absence, and then the incongruence will rush into the foreground; but if the periphery is in tune, it is harmonious and muted.)

Beyond this, in the near-background, each knows that they are being

¹⁰⁰ This is from another of the essays on imagination in Hampl, Patricia, I Could Tell You Stories: Sojourns in the Land of Memory. New York: W.W. Norton, 2000.

¹⁰¹ Keats’ negative capability again

¹⁰² Rodolfo Llinas, Ph.D., a neuroscience researcher at New York University. In The New York Times, March 21, 1995, p. B4.

understood by the other and, let us say, liked; maybe they are enjoying each other as they are doing this therapy work together. That is, each has a feeling of warmth and pleasure in the other's company. They are sympa or simpatico, they each have a friendly feel about the other. They fee warmly. If they were asked — if this was brought into the foreground, that is — they might well say, yes, this is understood. (They might be deducing this from the what is transpiring, out of touch with anything besides the result of it — but this, being deductive, is mental and cool emotionally.) But let's say that in the background, they are warming to each other. (We might say they are developing a bond.) They grok¹⁰³ each other — they comprehend the entirety of the other, intuitively. And, as part of this, they know that the other has these feelings about them. Some part of this is empathic understanding, a direct apprehension, in the background of experience, of the other. And the rest is a deepening affection.

In this example the contact boundary, with its characteristic awareness of differences, is dissolved for each of them — in the background. In the background of their foreground meeting is another, boundary-less meeting, the concerns called empathy and affection. So, a a boundary which divides them, and also — at the same time — in the background (and seeping into the foreground) they are aware of these unspoken levels of boundary and non-boundary contact experience, where they are warmly appreciative, joined together in a feeling of friendliness and the knowledge of the feelings of the other — and in this last it is difficult (or even impossible) to distinguish one person from the other. (The problem in understanding this is only making sense of this using the tools of Gestalt theory, in which foreground and background are related only in terms of formal, Aristotelian, logic: This is A or not-A: apples are apples, not oranges; backgrounds are not foregrounds. But in experience, this "impossibility" is just a part of things.

This phenomenon doesn't necessarily involve warmth or appreciation, this phenomenon, though the example I used had them, and affection tends in the direction of softening boundaries. Being to be in touch with the foreground-and background in this way requires only that at least one of the participants learn to be able to stay in touch with the boundary events and the boundary-less ones at the same time. It can be that the foreground awareness is boundary-less, in which case one's awareness is primarily of participating in a beautiful union — or a torturous but intimate one; entering the existence of an other, living their life with them, is horrific at some times, as all therapists know. In this case, the experiences which arise from

¹⁰³ Heinlein, Robert, Stranger in a Strange Land. New York: Putnam, 1963. An invented word used through the book, 231 times, which has passed into common usage and is in the current Merriam-Webster Unabridged Dictionary (Springfield, Massachusetts, 2003). According to one character in Heinlein's novel, "Grok' means to understand so thoroughly that the observer becomes a part of the observed - to merge, blend, intermarry, lose identity in group experience" p. 213.

boundary contact (with its distinctive character of making differences lively) are in the background, proximate but not focal.

In this kind of mingle and muddle,¹⁰⁴ some things are well defined — what we see, what we hear, etc. — and others we are as sure of, though they are felt inside us or sensed by organs of sensibility of which we have no physical knowledge: they render fine feelings like affection in us, which are palpable yet not grossly physical.

But all of us are used to being in this territory — and if we're not, we can learn, in the same way that we all learned to be aware of other imponderables like our own breathing and the breaths of others. In touch with these more subtle perceptions and sensation, we know we are liked, or loved, or we love another, or we can see that a couple are not in love, or see as concretely as we feel hungry the desire for company in a child or an animal. After all, how palpable is love, and how well bounded?

It could be that the worst harm of devoting Gestalt therapy to studying its texts is how has taken us away from learning about these other kingdoms of experiential and finding the keys to enter them.¹⁰⁵ Many many such things exist in this also-material world, ineffable and barely discernible, and they give a certain frisson to the whole, like the fine thread of silver through a tapestry which gives it a special radiance.

Conclusion

You will recall that Perls, Hefferline and Goodman introduce their book to us, the readers, in the a charming and skilled host at a party might introduce new guests to each other, by inventing a simple game by which we will make each other's acquaintance. They hang up our coats and offer us a drink, a few hors d'oeuvres and a party riddle: the riddle of the "impossible task."

They write in the introduction that we need to have a Gestaltist attitude in order to grasp the meaning of their book. They call this the Gestaltist "mentality."¹⁰⁶ Nowadays this word is a bit archaic;¹⁰⁷ we might say the Gestalt spirit. And then they tell us the riddle of the impossible task: we need to have this Gestalt mentality in order to understand their book — but in order to get the Gestalt mentality, we first have to

¹⁰⁴ This is surely what Bloom (see above, and his contribution to the present volume) had in mind.

¹⁰⁵ The best wealth of wisdom I have seen are these two: the accumulated writings of Carlos Casteneda, an adept in the line of Yaqui indian shamans of northern Mexico. His books recount the training of his perceptions — indeed, he calls humans "perceptors" — and offers an alternate psychology, based on an acute and surprised phenomenology.

The other is James Hillman, especially the earlier books. In contrast to modern psychology, which relies on knowing based in philosophical reasoning, Hillman's is based in the psychology of the Greeks — it is possible to consider them the original attitudes of the indigenous peoples of Europe — and his radical integration of the forces of nature, the world of spirit, of psyche and men is in accord with the modest humanism which the reading of Gestalt therapy in this present essay recommends. I have listed a seminal work by each author in the bibliography.

¹⁰⁶ I am referring to the introduction, p. ix.

¹⁰⁷ It's inexplicably reminiscent of the syndrome of distortion in the translation of Freud's work into English, for which see Bettelheim, Bruno, Freud and Man's Soul. New York: Vintage Books, 1983.

read the book. Then they show us the way out of the mental maze they have led us into: they tell us we already have the Gestalt spirit. All readers of Gestalt Therapy and all potential readers have the Gestalt outlook. Because, the authors say, the Gestalt outlook is our birthright; it is “the original, undistorted, natural approach to life,”¹⁰⁸ the one we were born with.

Their little game with its “impossible task” provides us with three ways of comprehending Gestalt therapy. First, we can read Gestalt Therapy, and in that way understand what they mean by Gestalt therapy, as they no doubt hoped we will. Or we can take the second road and consult ourselves thoroughly, seeking our own deepest knowledge of ourselves and the world, and in this way find within ourselves the spirit of Gestalt therapy — without ever reading the book. (Many Gestalt therapists have done each of these over the years.) Fritz Perls spoke of this again, years later, when he said Gestalt is thousands of years old, as old as mankind.¹⁰⁹

The third way involves the principle of “holding all.” We “hold all” in therapy when we allow different qualities to be present at the same time, without “judging” them, with out ranking them or eliminating the ones which seem contradictory. So, we are — say — jealous and angry and generous, at the same time and we say to ourselves, well, I am this and that and this and that. I am not any one thing, I am all these. That is holding all. It is an everyday occurrence in therapy, and a revelation too, when we learn we can say yes/and instead of but/no.¹¹⁰ In this way we learn not to reject any part of the whole. We don’t have to be this or that; we can be this and that. This facility of embracing results in something special. These manifold aspects are then neighbors; they begin to live together, to inform and alter each other. We are, say, angry, and our anger lives next door to our joy and our humility. Living in this neighborhood, who we know ourselves to be begins to be changed. You get the picture.

In this same way, if we embrace the alternates Perls, et al. offer us, and take both these paths simultaneously — knowing Gestalt therapy from the book, and from examining our experience — we are on a third path: it is the path we trod if we hold the other two. We read the text — and we find within ourselves our source of

¹⁰⁸ Perls, et al. (1951), p. ix.

¹⁰⁹ In Gestalt Therapy Verbatim (1992), p. .

¹¹⁰ This is discussed in my “The Sense of Gestalt Therapy: Holism, Reality and Explanation. Published first as “Holism: Holding All,” “Alles einbeziehen - Gedanken über Ganzheitlichkeit” in Staemmler, F.-M. (Ed.), Gestalttherapie im Umbruch: Von alten Begriffen zu neuen Ideen [Gestalt Therapy in Upheaval - From Old Terms to New Ideas]. Köln (Germany): Edition Humanistische Psychologie, 2001. Also, in British Gestalt Journal, as “The Sense of Gestalt Therapy: Holism, Reality and Explanation,” 2002; also published as “Lo Holístico: Abarcando Todo.” Mexico City: Figura/Fondo 11, primavera 2002. Published “Holism: Holding All” in French by Bordeaux: Cahiers du Gestalttherapie, 2002. Published in Portuguese as “O sentido da Gestalt-Therapie: Holismo, realidade e explicação,” in Revista Do Encontro Goiano Da Abordagen Gestáltica: O Aqui E O Agora Gestaltico, proceedings, May 2004, Numero 10. Goiania, Brazil.

inspiration and understanding.

In this way we can continue to clarify the nuances of Gestalt thinking and at the same time enter into the wordless mysteries of living, walking confidently if carefully in the darkened field. In the case of creativity, we might even study painting, or piano, or poetry, or dance, to study art from that side of things, and learn about creating by creating — or simply look more closely at the moment-by-moment of doing therapy, not only at its problems and solutions, or to look more carefully at how we live now.

These two together comprise a single gestalt of experience. If we can hold it with us — not as two but as a new one — holding both will reveal the Gestalt approach, and the nature of creativity in a way neither can alone. We have been studying the books of Gestalt therapy for many years. Now we need to read the invisible texts as well.

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