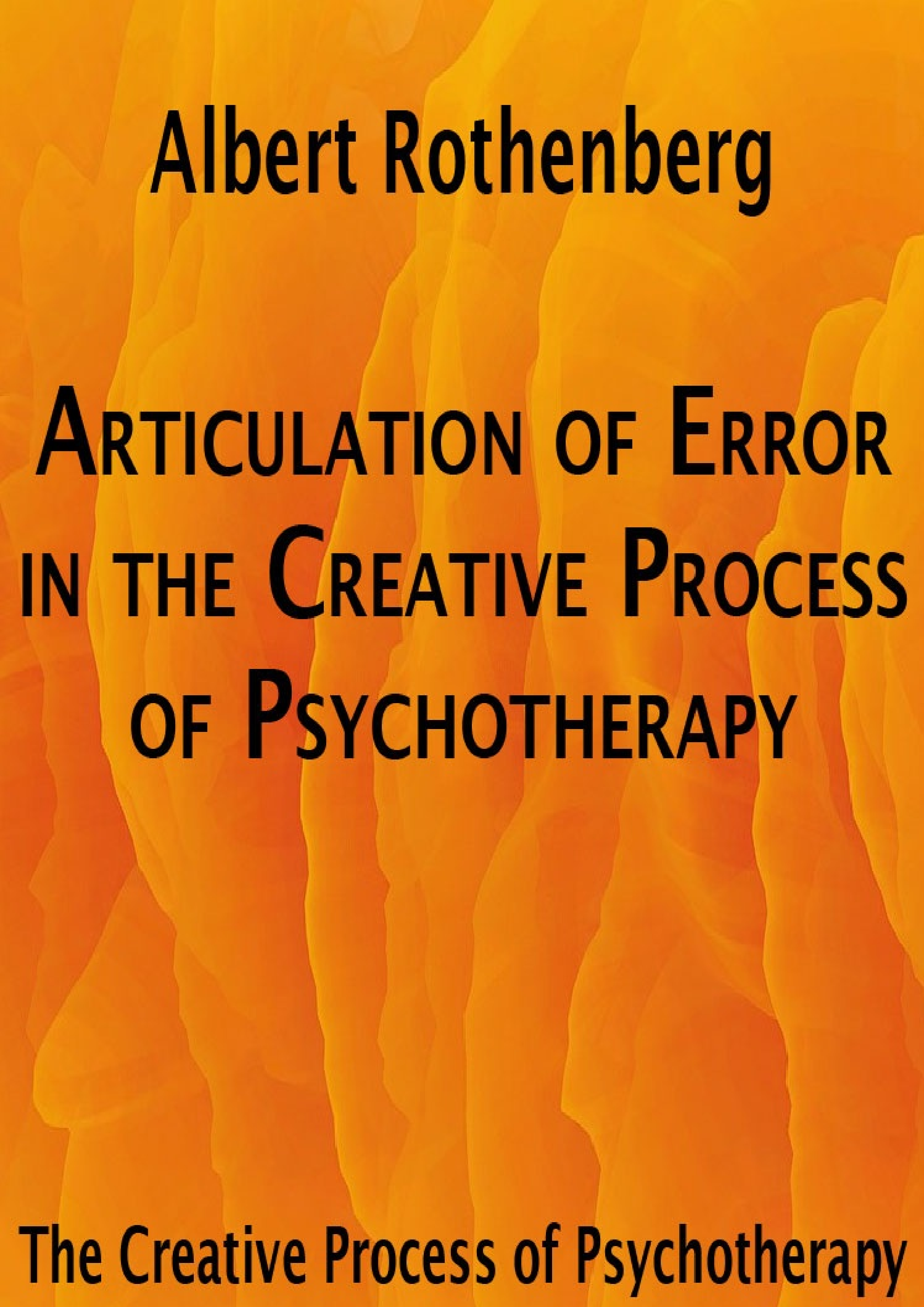

Albert Rothenberg

Articulation of Error in the Creative Process of Psychotherapy

The Creative Process of Psychotherapy

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e-Book 2015 International Psychotherapy Institute

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Created in the United States of America

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By the Same Author

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I am now, both in topic and approach, especially involved in risk. Having reached some high ground between the complex and converging paths of creativity and psychotherapy, I shall not yet pause to survey and take stock. Instead I shall hazard a rocky and seemingly divergent incline of errors, risks, and mistakes. I shall attempt to relate the psychology of error to the practice and theory of psychotherapy as a creative process.

What does error have to do with creativity or, more complicated than that, with the creative practice of psychotherapy? Some years ago, in one of my research explorations of the creative process in visual art, I met with a woman sculptor who did large scale abstract work in perfectly smooth white plastic material. These sculptures had perfectly clean lines and perfectly even coloration and were obviously proportioned according to exact specifications. I marvelled at their seeming perfection, and she described to me the detailed engineering process involved in creating such elaborate and elegant works. Then she took me over to look at one of the large surfaces more closely. Pointing to a gnarled and slightly raised blemish on the surface on one of her works, she said, “Do you see that blip on the surface there? Well, that’s *me*"

This sculptor’s dramatic and metaphoric reference to the single error on an otherwise absolutely perfect constructed sculpture may readily be related to poetic and philosophical conceptions of the human condition. To err is to be human. The sculptor's equating of her self and her own individuality with the error on her creation is consistent with philosophical emphases on celebration of humanness and of individual style and performance. There are surely other meanings, too, both aesthetic and psychodynamic, but we can surmise that she may also have felt uncomfortable and disavowing about the mechanistic and technological perfection of her creations. The unbroken sleek lines and machine-produced smooth surface in those works of art certainly produced some discomfort in me.

There is, I believe, more than personal psychological issues to be taken from this sculptor's remark, however. It is not only that erring is human and that artists assert their humanness or individuality in the errors they make, but error itself and a special orientation to error are intrinsic to the creative process. Both commission of errors and handling of errors are important and special matters in creative processes. First, errors are not merely allowed but, given a requisite very high level of technical skill, they are actually courted to some extent in the process of creating products in art, as well as in other fields. Second, in a significant way, errors are linked and integrated into such created products. The sculptor was not merely acknowledging an error in her creation; she was embracing that error and including it as a significant part of the product itself. Indeed, she considered it to be the sign of her handiwork and style, and thereby indicated what is referred to as the artist's "signature."

Broader in meaning than the literal name written on a canvas or a sculpture pedestal, her signature was the error that figuratively represented herself in her creation. This way of handling, thinking about, and using error is a particular application of the articulation process. The articulation of error involves both separation and connection of aspects of both abstract and tangible material.

Before saying any more about the way in which articulation of error operates in creative processes, I will turn to a brief consideration of error as a topic in itself. To do so, I once again come straightaway to Freud's creative achievement.

FREUD ON ERROR

Although there had been some scholarly work on speech and hearing errors prior to the work of Freud, such as that of linguists and philologists Paul,[1] von der Gabelentz,[2] Jesperson,[3] Delbrück,[4] and especially Meringer,[5] his analysis of the psychological meaning of such errors was groundbreaking. Moreover, his work on the psychopathology of everyday life was systematic and well documented, and in the years following, it has been repeatedly reconfirmed.[6] It stands today as a well established scientific discovery, even among persons who are otherwise severe critics of psychoanalysis. Although some modern linguists challenge whether every speech error necessarily results from the actions of the unconscious, of repression, and of the primary process, these factors are widely accepted as operative and important in many errors and are included in both theoretical and empirical linguistic analyses.[7]

Freud's interest in error, of course, went beyond the errors of speech and written language for which his name has become used in everyday parlance. In the corpus of his work, he showed the operation of unconscious factors in forgetting, bungled actions, chance actions, and errors of memory. A general principle derivable from his explorations, therefore, is that *any error effect consisting of a discrepancy between intent and execution results from the operation of unconscious factors*.[8]

Freud focused a good deal on the role of primary process mechanisms in parapraxes and other types of error, but I am concerned here with his broader findings that erroneous *actions* are produced by unconscious factors, and that the substance of a particular erroneous action derives from, and to some extent represents, the unconscious factor itself. This finding points the way to a clarification of another one of the routes, in addition to the janusian and homospatial processes,[9] by which unconscious representations appear in creative works. For, while many theorists have rushed forward with a dogged insistence that unconscious representations appear regularly in creative works, e.g., oedipal and pre-oedipal conflicts in literature, fusions and sexual symbolism in art and sculpture, few —including Kris[10]—have provided more than teleological or *post hoc ergo propter hoc* psychodynamic explanations of the phenomenon. Errors provide an additional route for unconscious material to appear in creative works because of the special management of errors in the creative process. This applies to creative work in art and in other intellectual fields, and, as I shall show below, it applies in some measure to creative work in therapy as well.

Later in his life, in a paper entitled "The Subtleties of a Faulty Action," Freud discussed his own mistaken insertion of a word with a double meaning in a salutation accompanying a birthday present. In addition to a rich and interesting analysis of the particular error, which I will not repeat, Freud introduced a new conception and pushed the general understanding of error further. In this case, he said, "A mistake gained its purpose not by being *made*, but only after it had been *corrected*. ... A variant, not without interest, of the mechanism of a parapraxis."[11] According to this, the purpose of an error could be realized after the error had been made, specifically in an act of correcting the error. With regard to articulation of error, I too am referring to a process in which realization or representation of unconscious meaning and other material occurs after the error is made. Although articulation of error and correction of error are not the same operation, there is a psychodynamic relationship.

In a broad sense, Freud's scientific creative processes in his early and later work on error are themselves instances of the creative articulation of error. In the earlier work, he articulated the entire topic of error within a body of psychological knowledge, and in the later piece he focused on his own specific error and subsequently clarified its distinct psychological meaning in connection with an overall psychodynamic structure.

ARTICULATION OF ERROR IN THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Creative people have an orientation to error that is out of the ordinary. Most people, when they are engaged in difficult work, tend to be quite careful or controlled; they are wary of making errors. Mistakes are irritating and bothersome, and sometimes are of a type and magnitude to provoke discouragement and cessation of the task. Although creative work itself is almost always quite difficult, and is very highly fraught with error, creative people characteristically deal with errors and mistakes in a different way. While engaged in the creative process, they think in a highly free and wide ranging fashion and take risks and chances that invariably lead to error. When errors occur, they may or may not be subjectively felt as bothersome, but characteristically they are directly noticed, assessed, and, if possible, articulated with the creative work in progress. Valuable or interesting elements within the error are clarified and elaborated, and are joined with the developing product as a whole. The error elements may be connected and incorporated within the product or they may lead its development into new directions. Articulation of error is not a matter of rejecting material because it is wrong or of turning away from an incorrect approach. Unlike what is generally called trial and error thinking, wherein errors are removed or corrected, articulation of error involves preservation in the whole work of new, interesting, or valuable elements within a miss or a mistake. It involves both separation and connection at once.

An illustration of how the process operates in artistic creative work, is provided by the painting “The Bather” by the modern artist Matisse (Figure 2). In the major proportion of his artworks, Matisse was interested in organizing color and pattern on a two-dimensional surface. He was a master of constructing patterns, and one of his achievements was the invention of the collage style of painting. In this oil on canvas painting done in 1909, it is rather easy to see the use of a bright, strong color design and the emphasis on the nude body of the male bather as a pattern of lines on an essentially two-dimensional surface. While the body is presented with some traditional line perspective, and there is some degree of depth and solidity, this effect is somewhat secondary to the effect of strong lines, contours, and especially a sense of movement on the flat surface.

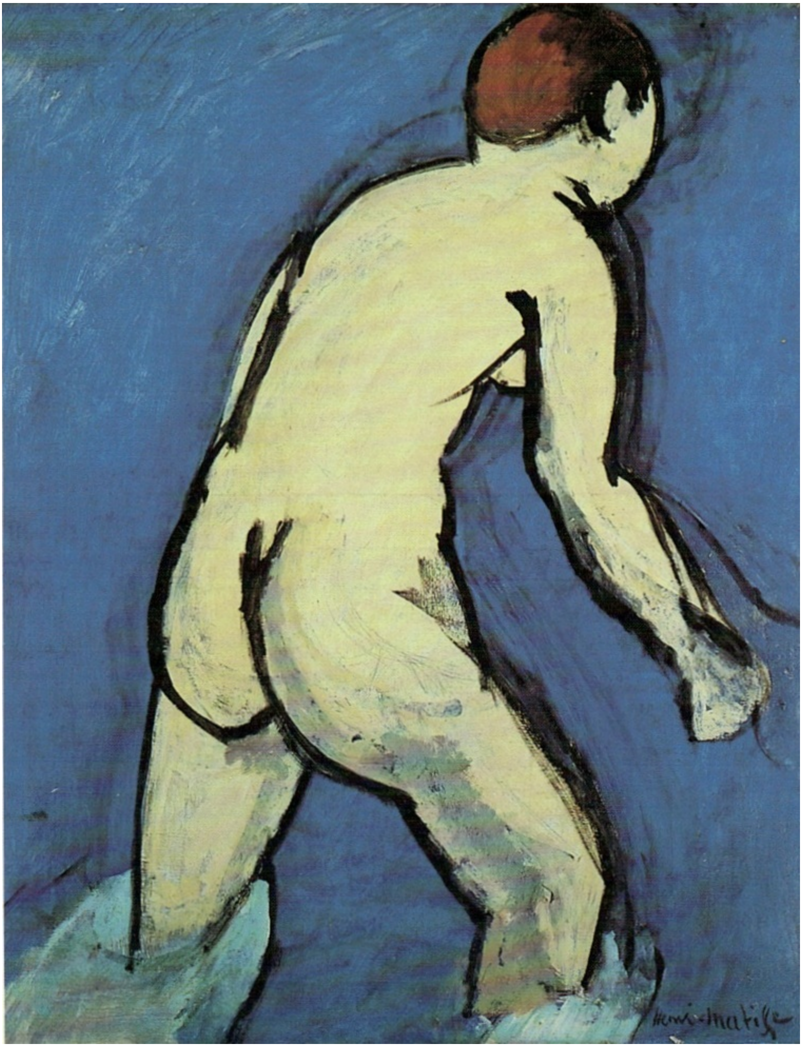

Figure 2: Henri Matisse, Bather (summer 1909). Oil on canvas, 36 $^1/_2$" x 29 $^1/_8$". Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller.

How is such an aesthetic effect achieved? First, of course, the lines outlining the body contour are thick and black, and they stand out. But, did Matisse draw out these lines all at once with a perfect unbroken motion, much as we have seen Picasso do in his filmed demonstrations of spontaneous drawings using pen lights in the empty air? Not at all. Close inspection of the painting shows numerous repetitious and erroneously placed lines: in the hand region, behind the back, and on the legs. And now, it is important to note that when I say erroneously placed I am not describing the aesthetic effect of this painting, because these lines do not appear to be unnecessary or wrong in the total context of this artwork. Indeed, these seemingly stray lines emphasize and enhance the rounded contour of the body; they impart dynamism and a feeling of movement to the whole. That is precisely the point of such articulation of error! While a careful examination of the painting indicates that Matisse’s hand strayed several times while drawing the nude figure, he was able to articulate these strayings with the overall final pattern he produced. Not only are the strayed lines part of the aesthetic form of the painting, but one could also take deeper implications and meanings from the crude and erroneous lines, meanings similar to those involved in the sculptor’s remarks I quoted earlier.

Other illustrations of the principle of articulation of error in visual art come from artists of different styles, times, and schools. In the school of abstract expressionism, the working approach of the founder, Jackson

Pollock, exemplifies the use of this principle. Although we know that Pollock planned his patterned canvases carefully and that he dripped buckets of paint on them with a highly skilled and practiced hand, much occurred that was not intended. These erroneous developments of lines, textures, and color effects were immediately and on-the-spot articulated by him into the overall design. With brilliant proficiency, Pollock, and other abstract expressionists who have come after him, introduced lines and colors that connected these errors to other aspects of the design. The errors became articulations within the whole design because they appeared as separations which were, at the same time, connected.

It is difficult to distinguish between error and either chance or randomness in such events because, as I shall make clear shortly, these factors are interrelated. For the moment, however, I shall refer only to error because of the clear-cut deviation of intent, or at least of expectations, in the straying of the artist's skilled and expert hand. The word "error" derives from the Latin word for "a wandering," and it is the wandering from a particular contour, line, or texture that introduces an initial separation. This separation is connected with the whole in an articulation contributing to overall integration, together with a final product or creation.

Moving away from modern art to a time-honored instance of articulation of error in visual art, there is the process of creative water coloring. With the water coloring technique, as even a beginning water colorist knows, the trick is to be able to work with thin liquid paint that runs down the surface of the paper as it is applied. Increasing skill with this medium allows the water colorist to anticipate the direction and extent of the run, and also to have an idea of the effects of running paint merging with surrounding lines and colors. However, there is no way to be sure of these effects beforehand —and this is where articulation of error comes in. The creative water colorist learns especially to capitalize on the dripping, runny effect and to use it as a means of producing an overall aesthetic result. In the course of producing this result, merged and connected lines and colors may, for instance, be separated out and emphasized by repeating them in an approximate way on other parts of the paper. Separated and dripping lines and colors may be immediately brushed into, and connected with, other lines and colors. The process is one of continual recognition and assessment of error and wandering, with both separation and connection into an integrated whole.

In the literary sphere, a telling depiction of articulation of error appears in a passage from Shakespeare's play "The Merchant of Venice."[12] Portia says to Antonio: "One half of me is yours, the other half yours—Mine own, I would say; *but if mine, then yours,* And so all yours" (Act III, Scene II, emphasis added). In her elaboration of the error, Portia brilliantly clarifies the separation of the first and second person pronoun referents and connects herself together with Antonio at the same time.

With respect to the process of creation in literature, Arthur Miller spoke to me at length about freeing himself up and making mistakes in order to use those mistakes to develop his ideas and his writing. Sometimes he felt he needed to try to write like a novice in order to generate emotion and error. John Hersey, also over a series of sessions, spoke of the importance of “blurts” and “inner mistakes” as the essence of what a writer did that made his work unique and idiosyncratic. He believed that mistakes allowed a writer to bring emotion into his work and, like Miller, he thought that novice writers sometimes brought more emotion than experienced writers into their work as a direct result of aesthetic mistakes.

An illustration of the articulation of error during the literary creative process comes from this latter author’s writing of *Too Far to Walk*,[13] In a passage describing the hero’s interaction with a sophisticated young college-town whore he had ironically and rebelliously brought home to meet his parents, the author first wrote the somewhat discordant following description:

> She was a sharp girl, one who, it could surely be said, lived by her wits, and her conversation was far more intelligent than (at random) Wagner’s or Gibbon’s [names of John’s, the hero’s, friends). She was college material — a dropout in the sense that it would never have occurred to her to try to get in. She began talking about Dahomey: something she had picked up from some pipe smoker [faculty member]. As she was talking of this, John

> suddenly thought of having sat in the Freshman Dean’s office, one day the year before, and having caught a glimpse of a number beside his name on his record card on the Dean’s desk: 3M242526. He had seen the number only a few moments, but it was seared on his brain. What was it? Was it a code for all his abilities and accomplishments? Or did it stand for *him* — his machine card self? He was at home; his excited mother was trembling upstairs for her cub —yet as Mona [the whore] spoke of the African ritualist bending over the girl with his special knives, John was overcome with a horror of the impersonality, the inhumanity of the big machine of life for which he was being educated. At any moment buttons might be pressed in that machine that would make of his number something for a GI dog tag. . . ,[14]

In discussing this passage with me, the author commented on something that also would have struck a reader of this very first manuscript draft as being discrepant and out of place. Why the esoteric reference to the country Dahomey and Africa in the mouth of the young whore? It seems a definite mistake in the passage and the author himself wondered why he put it in. Instead of deciding to delete it, however, he proceeded to articulate this error by making some changes. He clarified and separated out an issue in the Africa reference, and connected it to the rest of the material in the passage. He changed “She began talking about Dahomey” to the more detailed and clear “She began talking about, *of all things, the cicatrization of the faces, arms and thighs of young girls in puberty rites in* Dahomey.” And he also changed the sentence about the number on his record card from “He had seen the number only a few moments, but it was seared on his brain” to the connected phrasing of the following: “He had seen the number only a few moments, but it was *as if cicatrized across bis forehead."*[15]

Thus, with these changes, he gave the passage a unified and telling metaphorical impact relating the young man's college experience to a violent African puberty rite. Also, of course, the psychoanalyst reader will see the introduction of material referring to cicatrization as suggesting unconscious castration fears that relate meaningfully to a rebellious young man's experience and concerns with a whore. Interestingly, after making these changes—and here we have a dynamic similar to Freud's correction of a faulty action —the author himself became aware of a specific unconscious connection to an event in his life the previous day. This was that he and his wife had been at a meeting of the Institute of Arts and Letters in which awards were bestowed to several outstanding American writers. Because of the large number of people at the affair, some persons got confused about some of the attendees' names, and the author's wife commented that she thought everybody should have one's name *printed on one's forehead*. Thus, the textual change to refer to a cicatrix or scar on the hero's forehead brought out, and incorporated, an unconscious issue in the passage. This unconscious issue—pertaining to feelings about the Institute of Arts and Letters award ritual —came to the fore as a result of an articulation of the awkward and initially erroneous use of the idea of Africa.

To clarify the psychodynamic structure of this event, it is important to note that it was not a matter of the upsurge of unconscious material that was subsequently subjected to ego modification and control. It was not, therefore, a manifestation of what would be expected according to the traditional and problematic "regression in the service of the ego" theory of creativity.[16] Instead, the unconscious material was gradually brought closer to consciousness; it was rendered into consciousness and represented by means of an ego process of articulation of error. While errors are generally produced by unconscious wishes —and the Africa error was surely no exception—the active representation of this unconscious content in the work of art, and in the author's consciousness, was due to an articulation process.

Another illustration of the articulation of error in the literary creative process comes from my previously mentioned study of Eugene O'Neill's creation of the play "The Iceman Cometh."[17] As the articulation of error process was not described in the original report because it had not yet been formulated, I shall recapitulate that material briefly now. The iceman of the title of O'Neill's epic drama is not a character in the play or an actual person, but the subject of a joke about adultery told by the leading character, a salesman and evangelistic former alcoholic named Hickey. Also, as I stated above, the nonexistent iceman has other tacit and explicit symbolic meanings —the iceman of death and Christ the bridegroom. On the basis of O'Neill's explicit comments in his notes for the play and his specific use of the biblical "bridegroom cometh" phraseology in an earlier written play,[18] there is no doubt that he had in mind a symbolic iceman rather than a real one from the first.

However, in his very first reference to an iceman during the writing of the play, O'Neill constructed the following: A character, Harry, who is waiting for the salesman Hickey to appear, says, "Remember the way he always lies about his wife and the Iceman?" and another character replies: "Maybe that's what's keeping him, Harry. There's an old belief among savages that it's bad luck to call something too much, unless you're sure you want it because, if you keep calling it, it'll come to you. Hickey's done enough calling the Iceman and Fate has a bum sense of humor. Maybe it wouldn't know he was joking." Harry then becomes angry and says, "There was nothing to Hickey's bull about the Iceman. Only a joke, and he wouldn't give a damn if it was true, anyway." Without going further into the many references to the iceman of this type throughout the first manuscript draft, I want to point out that O'Neill introduced the idea of a *real, corporeal iceman* — an actual adulterer—right away in his very first writing out of the play. That this suggestion of a real iceman was an error on O'Neill's part —a discrepancy between intent and execution —is clearly indicated by his own revisions on the manuscript. He extensively cut the dialogue I just quoted, saving only the very first line, which he changed to: "Remember that gag he always pulls about his wife and the Iceman?" And more than that, he systematically altered phraseology indicating a real iceman in *every single one of the sixteen written contexts* in which a reference to an iceman appears in first and later drafts.

This systematic alteration of every single context demonstrates the fact of error, and to an investigator of the manuscript material it is a remarkable event. One perceives a virtually uncanny sensitivity in O'Neill, a sensitivity that removed all denotations of a real flesh and blood iceman — thereby delineating and establishing the symbolic feature—but managed at the same time to preserve a certain ambiguity about both real and symbolic aspects. In this way, the erroneous initial references to a real iceman adulterer became both separate and connected within the overall context of the play. Particular instances of this articulation process are also seen in the following small, but very specific, alterations: There is a subtle dialect change from the expression "cheatin' wit de Iceman or somebody?" to "cheatin' wid de Iceman or nobody." In the latter, the erroneous idea of somebody, i.e., a real person, as an equivalent alternative to the iceman is removed, but an ambiguity remains. There is a change in the reply to the question: "How's de Iceman, Hickey? How's he doing at your house?" from the elaborated description, "Fine! He's moved in for keeps," to the slightly ambiguous but simple, "Fine."

A more extensive example of the process is as follows:[19] At the end of the second act, a character says to Hickey in the first draft version, "I notice you didn't answer me about the Iceman or deny it. Did this great revelation come to you when you found him in her bed? . . . Was it you caught the Iceman in the arms of your dear [wife] Evelyn at last, and had to make the best of it and shake hands with him?” In the initial aspect of articulation of this passage, O’Neill on the second draft completely deleted the very vivid reality reference beginning with the words *“Was it you caught the Iceman"* and ending with “ . . . *shake hands with him*?" In the next version, he continued the articulation of his error by deleting the phrase "*found him in her bed*" and he produced the final construction he used in the play: “I notice you didn’t deny it when I asked you about the Iceman. Did this great revelation of the evil habit of dreaming about tomorrow come to you after you found your wife was sick of you?”

In addition to literature and the visual arts, articulation of error operates widely in creative activities. In music, an empirical exploration by the psychologist Bahle of the compositional methods of 32 European composers, including Schonberg, Honegger, Malipiero, Orff, and R. Strauss, reportedly demonstrated as an intrinsic part of the musical creative process, “the discovery of musical values which at first he [the composer] has not intended or sought intentionally.”[20] Also, in a unique study by Reitman, involving detailed recording of an American composer’s vocal description of everything he was thinking and doing while he worked, the composer was found to engage frequently in “modifying a plan after the fact, as it were, so as to make it conform to something the problem solver has discovered or created by accident and now wishes to preserve.”[21]

Shifting to scientific creativity, the remarkable cases of Sir Arthur Fleming's discovery of penicillin, Roentgen's discovery of the X-ray effect, and Pasteur's development of the concept of immunology were particular instances of the articulation of error. All have been cited in scientific and popular writings as instances of so-called serendipity, a wonderful but mysterious term meaning the productive use of phenomena appearing by chance. In all of these cases, however, an error occurred that the scientist was able to comprehend and develop. The substance of the error was connected, in each case, with the accumulated corpus of knowledge of the field. Instead of only correcting a mistake or turning away from it toward to a presumably correct direction, these scientists preserved the fact of nature that had been clarified and separated off by the error and connected this fact to other facts or data. Fleming saw that a mold, that he erroneously allowed to contaminate a Petri dish, had destroyed the bacteria in its immediate vicinity. He connected this observation with the idea of disease or illness and, reasoning that the contaminating mold would serve a beneficial effect as a treatment of illness, conceived the idea of an antibacterial agent.[22] Roentgen inadvertently left a photosensitive medium on a bench where he was doing experiments with cathode rays, and Pasteur's chickens erroneously got cholera.[23] Such events involving conversion of error must be distinguished from the broad range of purely accidental discoveries.

Pasteur suggested the point I am making here in his famous aphorism “chance favors the prepared mind.” I have generally avoided the use of the word “chance” in my discussion so far because I believe “error” more adequately represents the *discrepancy between intent and execution* in the foregoing events. That there is a distinct phenomenal relationship between error and chance is indisputable; it is partly because of an essential phenomenal similarity that errors lead to truly new, creative events. Chance is critically related to creativity and the appearance of new entities. Mutations are chance events in the biological realm that introduce new qualities which are selected out and subsequently preserved. These are creative events in nature. So, too, chance in the realm of mental operations introduces some degree of new material that is selected out, preserved, and articulated into creations.[24]

THE PROCESS OF ARTICULATION OF ERROR IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

With regard to the creative process in psychotherapy, articulation of error involves transference and countertransference particularly. That transference and the interpersonal transaction of psychotherapy involve error and distortion are important intrinsic aspects of these phenomena. Because feelings are transferred from earlier persons and experiences onto the person of the therapist, they are essentially erroneous and are truly “wanderings.” It is because such errors appear in the therapy that the therapist knows that transference exists.[25] And for the patient, one of the aspects of working-through and resolution of the transference is a recognition of his errors and distortions about the therapeutic situation and the therapist.

With regard to the actively creative feature of therapy, it is important to note that transference, and thereby transference error, is especially induced within the therapeutic situation. Numerous authors have pointed out that therapy affords, as Freud said, "especially favorable conditions" for the development of transference because of the structured aspects of the therapeutic situation, the therapist's empathic and interpretative interventions, as well as other factors.[26] Transference error is facilitated by the therapy and the therapist, not because of an interest in deceiving or confusing the patient, but because of the functional importance of error in therapeutic action. This action involves a creative articulation of transference errors and distortions.

Recognition of error by the patient is an early aspect of working-through and resolution of transference. This recognition may be clear and explicit, or it may only be diffusely sensed or felt. Most penetrating is the recognition of "wandering" involving deviations of feelings and beliefs from the current reality. When such deviations are recognized, they are not merely corrected but are then subjected to a creative process of articulation. I say "not merely corrected" in order to emphasize the distinction from trial and error thinking, as well as from a procedure of scientific induction. Patient and therapist do not engage in a predominantly intellectual discourse where errors about the latter are discovered and then systematically corrected or renounced. Some correction does occur, but other important steps are also undertaken, such as the tracing of the background of the error and its vicissitudes and permutations.

Regardless of the specific sequence and types of steps, and despite the direction of the process —I state this to avoid becoming too doctrinaire or prescriptive about technique —articulation of the transference error in which both separation and connection occur is an end therapeutic result. The patient is able to experience the therapist as separate from parents and other earlier persons but at the same time is able to connect and revalue real attributes from both past and present relationships of all types. Also, the patient is able to separate and connect internal and external reality, as well as conscious, preconscious, and unconscious ideas and experiences. To do this, he has had to separate and identify internal structures that have been renounced, projected, or disowned —and intrinsically incorporated into pathological thinking and behavior—and to connect these structures with a coherent sense of self. This consists of the sense of being a volitional integrated person, responsible for all aspects of one’s thought and action. In articulating transference error, as with other articulation, the patient achieves separation between his past and present motives, views of others, and experiences; at the same time, he accepts connection, psychological legacy, and continuity between present and past.

A major point is that transference error is connected and incorporated rather than being obliterated in the articulation process. As Loewald graphically states: “Without such transference —of the intensity of the unconscious, of the infantile ways of experiencing life that have no language and little organization, but the indestructibility and power of the origins of life—to the preconscious and to present day life and contemporary objects—without such transference, or to the extent to which such transference miscarries, human life becomes sterile and an empty shell.”[27] Interestingly, Loewald in another place describes transference neurosis as a creative repetition of disease, but he is there using the term “creative” in a limited meaning sense of produced in another, or a new, context. In the more extended sense of the term “creative” (N.B., *both* new and valuable) that I am using here, the creative process consists of the working-through of transference error.

Both therapists and patients can limit the therapeutic effectiveness of this creative working-through process because of an unwillingness to hazard error, as well as an intolerance when error appears. Patients are characteristically unwilling to experience transference error. From the first, they usually avoid, deny, and fight off involvements with the therapist that lead to full-blown development and recognition of transference feelings. Early transference errors and distortions are clung to as especially rigid resistances in order to avoid more extensive transference development. Partly this is because of fear of the impulses, structures, and affects involved in the transference illness itself, but partly —for patients of all types —there is a fear of risk, error, and new experience. On the therapist's side, there may be a fear of facilitating transference error and a tendency to correct disturbing transference errors as soon as they appear. Examples of this tendency are a therapist's denying or arguing with a patient's accusations about himself and, as a more subtle manifestation, prematurely asking for, or making, connections between a patient's current feelings about the therapist and feelings about persons in the patient's past. Another type of manifestation of intolerance of error is a protracted and overexhaustive error-eradicating search for all past roots of particular transference feelings.

Creative articulation of error in the therapeutic process involves the same approach to error as in other creative processes. Like the creative writer or artist, both therapist and patient need to be willing to take chances and commit errors in both the form and substance of their relationship. When errors occur, they need to recognize them and then to clarify them as much as possible. As a "wandering," an error provides the beginning of a separation which, through constant clarification, yields up some of its unconscious content and intent. Rather than exhaustive breakdown and analysis—using the term analysis in its precise meaning of systematic dissection —the error is connected, usually through interpretive interventions, to issues in the patient’s current and past life. When the connections suggested are appropriate or correct, further meaningful separations occur and these can be further connected into articulated structures. When the connections suggested are inappropriate or wrong, therapist and patient then need to clarify and examine these as new errors, because they too may yield meaningful new separations. An overall result of this mutual and continuing process of separating and connecting is the creative integration of the patient’s personality.

With regard to countertransference, the process of articulation of error operates in a somewhat different but related way. While countertransference surely involves error and distortion in a manner similar to transference, the therapist by and large articulates countertransference error privately without the patient’s direct collaboration. There are significant exceptions to this that deserve attention in their own right, but first I would like to emphasize that the therapist’s continual attention to countertransference—another cornerstone of psychotherapy —may appropriately involve both an inductive process involving recognition with correction of error and a creative articulation process in which countertransference errors are separated and connected. For example, a therapist may be troubled by growing aggressive feelings toward a patient and recognize that they are a response in part to the patient's masochistic stance. While he privately analyzes the roots of his own discomfort, he may also share his recognition explicitly with the patient in order to help loosen masochistic defenses and reduce the resistant stance. Here, the articulation process involves the simultaneous separating and connecting of the elements in both therapist's and patient's aggressive impulses.

Countertransference error cannot generally be managed privately when the therapist makes an overt mistake, either in the form of forgetting, distortion, and parapraxis, or else in the form of a technical therapeutic error. Such therapist mistakes almost inevitably do become a manifest issue in the therapy. Indeed, a technical point bearing emphasis is that overt therapist mistakes should properly become a manifest issue in the therapy. To some degree, this point follows the well-established therapeutic maxim of making all issues with emotional charge —always the case with therapist errors-a matter of "grist for the mill" in therapy. To go beyond mere acknowledgment of a therapist error, however—or else, to take the mill- grist metaphor narrowly, to go beyond a systematic and sometimes sterile grinding down — and attempt a creative articulation of the error, is a therapeutic challenge.

When the therapist makes an overt mistake or error, he is vividly provided with a clue to his own unconscious concerns and therefore to countertransference matters to be articulated in the therapy. This is so whether or not the patient openly notes the mistake because, almost invariably, it is registered, consciously or unconsciously. Overt disregard on the patient's part probably requires attention in its own right as a first step. When the patient does point out or otherwise openly responds to the therapist error, the articulation process can develop actively.

For example, a patient became interested in a psychiatry text in her therapist's bookshelf and asked if she could borrow it. The therapist, for various conscious reasons, decided to deviate from routine practice with this quite difficult patient and lent it to her. While he had considered this at the time to be a possible minor technical error, several sessions later he learned about a rather extensive mistake. His patient told him that she had found a passage in the book underlined with *her own name* pencilled by him in the margin. It was a passage about the dynamics of acting-out. Remembering that he had underlined that passage because he thought it applied particularly to that patient, he felt embarrassed and disturbed. Immediately he apologized to the patient and told her he had made a mistake, but she became hostile and derisive toward him for some time afterward.

Later, when he gave some extended consideration to the reason he had made this particular error, his associations led him to the realization that he had recently thought of giving that same patient a manual of sexual information because, though she was an adult, he felt that she had very little valid knowledge about sex. This realization led him to recognize some distinct feelings of sexual attraction to her. The patient seemed also to be struggling with sexual feelings toward him. Now, if this understanding of his feelings had been available to him at the time she challenged him with his mistake, could he have articulated the error? Could he indeed have articulated the error even later?

Merely acknowledging the error and apologizing served very little therapeutic purpose in this case, and it was an instance of pure correcting rather than articulation. Silence or focusing on the patient's hostile affect would probably have escalated the patient's hostility and alienation. Under certain circumstances —depending on the level and current state of treatment —the therapist could have acknowledged his error and, touching directly on his realization of his sexual attraction to the patient, he could have indicated that he was probably also responding to sexual feelings in her. This is in part an articulating type of response because it separates a salient factor in the error and connects it to the therapeutic interaction. In most cases, however, such specificity is threatening and counterproductive and the most appropriate articulating response would therefore be the following: "I think the reason I may have given you that particular book when you asked for it was that I somehow wanted to convey to you that you have been acting out some feelings that are bothersome to you." In response to this, the patient would presumably ask for, and would also provide, further clarification that would eventually articulate the sexual factors in the interaction.

In another instance, a hospitalized patient was informed by her therapist that Good Friday was a hospital holiday and that their therapy session that day would be cancelled. As it turned out, the hospital had never provided a Good Friday holiday, and in the next therapy session two days later, the patient angrily confronted the therapist with his mistake. She insisted that the mistake inconvenienced her terribly because she had decided to go to her grandmother's house for a visit on the Good Friday weekend and was now forced to change all her plans in order not to miss the reinstated therapy session. When the therapist hesitated before responding to her onslaught, she walked out of the therapy session in fury. Thinking about his mistake later, this therapist became aware that he had in fact wished to avoid seeing the patient because of material in her therapy sessions of the previous days. She had been talking about her father's successful suicide, and this had touched on the therapist's feelings about his own mother's suicide attempts many years before.

When the patient returned the next day for her regularly scheduled session, the therapist focused on his mistake and her response to it. He attempted to get her to clarify why his making a mistake was such an issue for her, and whether she felt that he must never err at all and therefore not be human. Also, he asked what it was that had made her furiously walk out of the previous session. She responded that she had left the session because he "just sat there and didn't do anything." Realizing that she was very likely referring to his lack of action about her weekend trip plans, the therapist said that he thought she had the topic of leaving on her mind and connected that idea with her leaving the session. The patient then indicated that leaving the hospital for the weekend trip to her grandmother's house was a problem and revealed her deep ambivalence about the trip. Talking of feelings of hatred for her grandmother and mother, she described current suicidal preoccupations of her own.

While there are numerous psychodynamic factors operating in this sequence of events, I want only to point out the matter of articulation. The therapist's rather simple and unelaborate response was a creative articulating one because it separated and connected salient issues in the error. Connecting the patient's leaving the office to the topic of leaving itself served to separate out the issue of her leaving the hospital at all. This in turn served to separate out the issue of death, a salient matter involved both in his mistake and the patient's furious response, and surely also in the symbolic meaning of Good Friday. For the patient, death and suicidal feelings were connected with feelings of hatred toward her mother. By recognizing his own countertransference concerns, the therapist was able to focus on his error without guilt and see its connection to her feelings about leaving on a trip. As with the artistic examples discussed earlier, such articulation does not involve obliteration or covering up of error, but instead letting it stand and using it in the overall effect.

Not all countertransference error derives from deep conflicts, nor is it negatively or regressively charged. Indeed, we now recognize that transference is properly distinguished from transference neurosis and that both transference and countertransference are to some degree a factor in the development of all adult relationships. Furthermore, the therapist monitors all his personal feelings in a broad way and uses them to facilitate therapy in an ongoing process of articulation that may or may not involve errors. When errors do occur, however, they always deserve special attention. Also, tapping the therapist’s preconscious and unconscious contents, they may actually contain more positively charged growth-enhancing feelings than consciously correct therapeutic behavior.

For example: A 44-year-old borderline patient with obsessive-compulsive personality features alerted his therapist in the springtime that he was not looking forward to summer sessions because he disliked the somewhat noisy room air conditioner in the office. Accordingly, when summer came, the therapist adopted the routine of shutting off the air conditioner immediately prior to this patient’s appointment time. Neither he nor the patient commented on this, but it was carried out through the early summer months. One day, three-quarters of the way through August, the therapist forgot, for the first time, to turn off the air conditioner prior to the session and, as soon as the patient entered, he commented on this, asking: “Do we have to have the air conditioner on?” At this, the therapist invited the patient to turn the machine off and then got up and walked to his office window and opened it. Angrily, the patient snapped: “Small things are important to me. You knew I didn’t like the air conditioner and you seemed annoyed when you walked to your window and opened it.”

Knowing that he actually had not felt annoyed when he went to open the window, the therapist quickly tried then to think of why he might have forgotten to turn off the air conditioner that day. He remembered a fleeting thought he had had when routinely turning off the air conditioner a few sessions earlier, consisting of a question to himself: “Why do I do this all the time? Shouldn’t the patient really be doing this?” While separating out this thought, he made an articulating connection in his mind and realized that the patient had been taking more initiative in bringing up material in recent sessions. Taking initiative had long been one of the patient’s major problems. So he said: “I think the reason I may have personally forgotten to turn off the air conditioner this time was that I was responding to your wish to take more initiative in here recently.” Interestingly, the patient’s first response was to misunderstand the therapist’s comment completely. He thought the therapist had criticized him for not taking enough initiative in the sessions. But, after further clarification, and clearly following the therapist’s example of openness, acknowledgment of his mistake and his humanness, and of this articulation of an error, the patient thought about his own misunderstanding and realized that it came from his concerns about not taking enough initiative. For this quite passive, perfectionistic patient with hypersensitivity tending toward paranoid obsessionality, this was a significant therapeutic opening up and advance.

Articulation of error may have its greatest therapeutic pertinence in the treatment of schizophrenia. Although the two patients I just described were not schizophrenic, a particular feature of the therapist's response with those patients has general application and importance in the psychotherapy of schizophrenia. This is the feature of connecting error directly or indirectly with humanness and being human. In schizophrenia, as in other types of narcissistic disorders, there invariably is a preoccupation with perfection[28] and, because of primitive fusions and projective identifications, there is an inability to accept any lack of perfection in the therapist. Moreover, disavowal of therapist error, together with disavowal of errors by, or in, the patient's self, serves to deny that both therapist and patient are human beings. It is a vicious circle involving omnipotent perfectionism along with the patient's feelings of being a nonhuman entity in the first place. And it is a circle that is in part broken by the therapist's active use of error.

The use of error in the therapy of schizophrenic patients seldom can consist only of acknowledging mistakes, because such patients can neither forgive nor forget nor learn from that which is not accepted. So important is this matter that there is a sense in which the psychotherapy of schizophrenia seems to move along, and to progress, by means of coping with and handling of error. It often appears as though the course of therapy consists of a series of encounters that sometimes go smoothly, but which are invariably disrupted or interrupted in some way by a therapist error. This error is almost always a very minuscule and hidden one—seldom of the proportions of an overt mistake about cancelling a session or even forgetting to do something—but it is experienced as devastating by the patient and leads to major disruption in the therapy. This often takes the form of patient withdrawal or regression and flagrant psychotic production. Weeks or months may go by while the disruption continues and the patient covertly indicates the nature of the therapist's mistake in seemingly chance or indirect comments or behavior. When the patient is at a relatively high level of integration, or when there is some degree of engagement and understanding in the therapy, the disruptive response may be more gradual and progressive. At first there may only be lateness at appointments, silence, or the missing of sessions. If such reactions are not clarified and the therapist's error is not somehow incorporated into the therapy, more disruption usually ensues.

Lest I be misunderstood on this matter, I mean to suggest neither that therapist and patient always discuss each error explicitly after a disruption occurs nor that the therapist learns the precise nature of each error he has committed. Sometimes a schizophrenic patient only reveals the nature of these errors weeks or months after a disruption has ceased, sometimes not until the termination phase of the therapy. What I mean is that the therapist recognizes that the patient's disruption is related to something either done or not done in the therapy and, when identifying an error, the therapist does not pull back either by simple apology or rapid correction but attempts both to separate and connect the error in an articulation process.

Errors in the psychotherapy of schizophrenia are by no means errors in ordinary interaction. These patients are so exquisitely tuned to rejection and so constantly suspicious of others' reactions that they ferret out and attack the slightest whisper of countertransference and, along with that, the slightest suggestion of the therapist's need. They cannot tolerate any lack of omniscience and consequent imperfection and humanity. For instance, take approval by the therapist in a therapy hour. Various types of patients with very low self-esteem are sometimes ambivalent and uncomfortable about a therapist's tacit or explicit approval of something they have done. With the schizophrenic patient, however, there may be regression or actual disruption of treatment after being complimented on work in an hour, on general progress, on a generous action, or even after the therapist appears merely to be gratified by some particular words or interactions. Because one cannot always anticipate this in advance, and because one cannot, and should not, monitor all positive reactions, therapists must —strange to say —commit errors of approval. In treating schizophrenia, by and large, one must be destined to err to such a degree that error itself becomes a major focus. For the therapist, examination of what appears as error allows for the close monitoring and use of countertransference issues and, on a reciprocal basis, insight into the nature of the patient’s transference. For the patient, articulation of errors, instead of simple correction, teaches acknowledgment and acceptance of human imperfections.

This is not to say that therapists do not constantly learn from errors or actively correct their impact in the course of therapy. In recognizing and focusing on errors, both learning and correcting inevitably occur. But incorporating the model of the approach of creative thinkers, if one possesses requisite therapeutic skills, one should not at all be afraid of making errors and should allow oneself a freedom that incurs errors and mistakes. One incurs errors, and is ready to articulate them, and thereby incorporates into the therapy one’s own and the patient’s individuality, and the humanity of both.

Notes

1. Hermann Paul, *Prinzipien der Spracbgescbicbte,* Halle a.d.s.: Niemeyer, 1880.

2. Georg von der Gabelentz, *Die Spracbwissenscbaft. Ihre dufgaben Metboden, und Bisherigen Ergebnisse,* Leipzig: T. O. Weigel, 1891.

3. Otto Jespersen, *Progress in Language with Special References to English,* London: S. Sonnenschein, 1894.

4. B. Delbruck, “Amnestische Aphasie,” *Sitzungsbericbte der Janaiscben Gesellscbaft fur Medizin und Naturwissenscbaft,* 10(188 7):91.

5. Rudolf Meringer, *Aus dem Leben der Sprache,* Berlin: V. Behr, 1908; Rudolf Meringer and C. Mayer, *Versprecben und Verlesen, Eine Psycbologiscb-linguistiscbe Studie,* Stuttgart: Goschense Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1895.

6. Sigmund Freud, *op. cit.,* 1901.

7. See Andrew W. Ellis, “On the Freudian Theory of Speech Errors,” in Victoria A. Fromkin (ed.), *Errors in Linguistic Performance,* New York: Academic Press, 1980, pp. 12 3-1 32; Michael T. Motley, “Verification of ‘Freudian Slips’ and Semantic Prearticulatory Editing Via Laboratory-Induced Spoonerisms,” in Fromkin, *op. cit.,* pp. 1 3 3-148.

8. See discussion of the rationale for extending error analysis to the study of literary revision in Rothenberg, *op. cit.,* 1969. With their very high level of skill, literary creators commit errors consisting of discrepancies between intent and execution in the revision process.

9. See discussion of the mirror reversal process leading to unearthing of unconscious contents by both homospatial and janusian processes in Chapters IV and V here and also in Rothenberg, *The Emerging Goddess.*

10. Kris, *op. cit.*

11. Sigmund Freud, “The Subleties of a Faulty Action” (1935), *Standard Edition,* 22:23 3-235, New York: W. W. Norton, 1964, p. 2 34.

12. Freud cited this passage as an example of creative writers' understanding of parapraxes. See Sigmund Freud, "Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis (Parts I and II)," (1916-1917), *Standard Edition*, 15:15-239, New York: W. W. Norton, 1963, p. 38.

13. Hersey, *op. cit.*

14. Cf. *ibid.,* pp. 107-108, in final version.

15. Italics indicating changes in this section are added.

16. Kris, *op. cit.*

17. See Rothenberg, *op. cit.,* 1969. The quotations from the O'Neill manuscripts used here all appear in that article. They are from manuscripts at the Yale University Beineke Library American Literature Collection.

18. "More Stately Mansions," written by Eugene O'Neill in 1938 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964). "The Iceman Cometh" was written in 1940.

19. Italics added in the quotations following.

20. The Bahle study is extensively reported in Camille Jacobs, "Psychology of Music: Some European Studies," *Acta Psychologica,* 17(1960):27 3 -297; see p. 278.

21. Walter R. Reitman, *Cognition and Thought,* New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1966, p. 177.

22. Fleming described this as follows: "While working with staphylococcus variants, culture plates were set aside on the laboratory bench and examined from time to time. In the examination these plates were *necessarily exposed to the air* and they became contaminated with various micro-organisms. It was noticed that around a large colony of a contaminating mould the staphylococcus colonies became transparent and were obviously undergoing lysis." Alexander Fleming, "On the Antibacterial Action of Cultures of a *Penicillium,* With Special Reference to Their Use in the Isolation of B. Influenzae," *British Journal of Experimental Pathology,* 10(1929):226—2 36, p. 226, emphasis added.

23. For Pasteur's story, see Rene Dubos, *Pasteur and Modem Science,* Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday,

1960, pp. 113-114; for Roentgen, seej. R. Baker, *The Scientific Life,* London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd.. 1942.

24. For a similar formulation of the creative role of chance and error in evolution, see Lewis Thomas, “The Wonderful Mistake,” *The Medusa and the Snail. More Notes of a Biology Watcher,* New York: Viking Press, 1979, pp. 27-30.

25. See Gill, *op. cit.,* for a somewhat different perspective on transference.

26. Sigmund Freud, “Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through” (1914), *Standard Edition*, 12:146-156, New York: W. W. Norton, 1958, p. 154. See, for a good review and for references to the psychoanalytic literature on the nature of transference, E. M. Weinshel, “The Transference Neurosis: A Survey of the Literature,” *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association,* 19(1971):67-88; see also Arlow, *op. cit.,* p. 110, who dissents regarding the instigation of transference by the analytic situation.

27. Loewald, *op. cit.,* p. 250.

28. Arnold Rothstein, *The Narcissistic Pursuit of Perfection,* New York: International Universities Press, 1980.