

ART AND PSYCHOTHERAPY IN MEXICO *

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"For four years before treatment I had produced no art and had done nothing but drink. After starting treatment with Dr. Salvador Roquet he sent me out to the Mixe Indians to teach them how to make pottery. Instead they taught me. I showed them how to mold clay and produce objects and I painted a portrait of a fellow worker. But, basically, they showed me how to live, and my self-respect returned. My first paintings that marked the beginning of my recovery were automatic. They started with childish drawings of gross sex mingled with violence, first toward others and then toward myself, ending with love and figures of Christ and Francis of Assisi — though my pictures of the Virgin were never completely free of ill-will, for I had never liked the Virgin."

These, greatly condensed, were the words of a Mexican artist, Pedro Alatríste, a patient of Salvador Roquet, M.D., at the Instituto de Psicosisintesis in Mexico City. He was one of four artists to testify about their own experiences and to speak at a workshop on "Life, Love, Death, and God" held at Agua Viva monastery and Conference Center near Mexico City in December, 1976, and sponsored by the Instituto de Psicosisintesis. Attendants came from Mexico, the United States, and Porto Rico. Part of the presentation was an exhibition of the paintings of these artists and a description by them of the change in style both in their lives and in their paintings as a result of the highly original psychotherapy developed by Dr. Roquet.

Dr. Roquet was a public health doctor before he became a psychiatrist. As the result of a psychoanalysis administered by Erich Fromm, he learned of

the theories and techniques originating in the practice of Sigmund Freud. Through his public health work he came into contact with the Mexican Indians and was impressed by the wisdom of their shamans and healing techniques. From the combination of these two strains, with the addition of an experimental administration of mescaline by another doctor in the 1950s, Dr. Roquet developed his unique treatment modality. In this he had made use of art in two ways.

First, he had used it expressionistically. As with the case of Alatríste, already a painter, he encourages his patients to express themselves along the lines of any artistic gifts they may already possess. Perhaps it is for this reason that his patients comprise a large proportion of performing artists — concert pianists, sculptors, poets, dancers, etc. Even where no artistic expression had preceded the treatment, patients are encouraged to express themselves creatively. For example, at one point in the group treatment process participants are encouraged to relieve their long hours of therapy and tension through improvised dancing. Many a patient who has never expected to find himself dancing has been surprised to find this taking place, and his tensions relieved.

Second, he makes use of many forms of art to release fears and conflicts from the unconscious. His Freudian background has taught him the ubiquity of sexual conflicts, and he does not shrink from suggesting these to his patients through art that his critics have often claimed were pornographic. But more potent than sex he believes that the fear of death constitutes an even more universal source of repressed fears. Consequently, along with a background of suggestive music, the walls of his treatment

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room are covered with paintings done by former patients depicting death and the fears formerly experienced in therapy by these artists. There are also sensory overloads of pictures projected against these paintings and along the walls with the addition, at times, of sound movies usually showing scenes of death and violence along with other disturbing themes.

An unusual feature of his therapy, derived from Indian shamans, is Dr. Roquet's frequent habit of administering his therapy in large groups, sometimes as many as 35 patients at a time. The stimulus of many taking the therapy simultaneously adds to the sensory overload at the same time that it teaches communication with others at a deep level of consciousness, and so teaches what is one of the aims of his therapy — the value and the demonstration of love. This love is developed through the combination of sensitivity and reason, neither of which, according to Dr. Roquet, is competent to bring about this desired event by itself.

But he has also borrowed another feature from his shamanic friends. From time immemorial they have made use of the hallucinogenic plants indigenous to Mexico and have taught Dr. Roquet these uses. Along with synthetic drugs associated with them he often administers just enough of these psychodislectics to help repressions to emerge from the unconscious and make them memorable. The complete therapeutic session may take over 20 hours. Several hours after the therapy has been started the combination of these artistic and pharmacological stimuli has produced an overload which will bring about in most a fragmentation of the personality. At this time weeping, hostility, terror, and paranoia — all carefully watched by a team of doctors and clinical psychologists — has been stimulated through the suppressed conflicts and fears now beginning to emerge from the unconscious. From the beginning to the end of the session no one is allowed to leave the treatment area except under escort to go to the bathroom. Therapists do not communicate with the patients except to minister to their most elementary needs. Any necessary comfort or support at this point will come from other patients. This feature also Dr. Roquet has learned from his shaman friends.

At the end of this period of what he calls "chaos," perhaps some ten hours after the beginning of treatment yet before the influence of the drugs and the sensory overload has completely worn off — following two or three hours of rest — comes what is

called "psychodrama." This is not derived from Moreno any more than the term "Psicosintesis" (psychosynthesis) comes from Assagioli. In the psychodrama patients are called on one after the other to tell about their internal experiences endured during the "chaos." These will be varied. One middle-aged man, in a sudden burst of weeping that surprised himself, expressed his resentment against his mother who had visited him only once during his enforced two-year stay in the hospital when a boy. He had not been aware of his bitterness. A man in his seventies, who had boasted that he was ready for death and not afraid of it, became hostile. It was only later that he came to see death as a normal event and so released for creative and zestful activities energies wasted in repression. A young woman was given a portion of *Madame Bovary* to read and her identification with Emma was poignant. Another young woman was finally enabled to "let go" and so solve her dilemma as to whether to bring up her children as Americans or Mexicans.

Nietzsche has said that it requires a chaos within one "to produce a dancing star." Roquet's treatment has demonstrated many examples of this epigram.

At the workshop referred to at the beginning of this article the four artists were living demonstrations of Nietzsche's prediction, and the fruits of the therapeutic chaos they had endured were hung on the walls or projected on a screen for the participants in the workshop to see. Since many of these same participants had taken the therapy they recognized some of the pictures that had been shown them during their own therapy which mirrored and had perhaps even helped to stimulate the agony that they themselves had gone through.

Fred de Keijzer, another Mexican painter, told how he had given up painting at the age of 18 in order to enter a business and achieve a promising executive position by the age of 21, but he had not been happy. "During my anguish I met Salvador Roquet who invited me to visit the Indians in the Sierra. Due to weather conditions I was not able to report to my job on time and was discharged. But with Dr. Roquet's encouragement I returned to painting. I have found this a struggle — like all life. But my painting also creates itself. I tried to justify it to others until my friends persuaded me to let my paintings speak for themselves. They evolve from my confrontation with death. A great Mexican painter of murals set up a 70-foot wall in order for me to paint. I was trembling with fear, 'Relax, you asshole,' he

yelled to me, and I recovered from my fear. In the same way a woman in therapy screamed at Dr. Roquet, 'Doctor, I am dying!' The answer was 'Go ahead and die!' and she recovered from her fear of death."

Finally, there was the testimony of another Mexican artist, Rodolfo Aguirre Tinoco: "My paintings reflect the changes within me. Man has learned to leave his mark on future generations through creativity. Death is one of the universal themes in the picture which includes all of life, both in its beauty and in its suffering. My paintings try to touch the depths and the mystery of life. My recent work I call 'psychic paintings' which emerge from my unconscious without being acted on by my reason."

"When leaving the Academy my style was expressionism — scenes of reality from the streets and the world but with some impressionistic painting presaging my present style. It is *very hard* to explain my painting since it is unconscious — painting accompanied by feeling, which goes very fast. I paint now to 'free my unconscious,' a wonderful and terrible experience accompanied by music of a strange nature suggesting birth, gestation, and primitive cries."

Any therapist is entitled to ask whether such rigorous therapy does not go too far. If it is effective in some cases, is it not destructive in others? The appearance is that Roquet can do in months what most psychotherapists take years to do, and do it better, and, since he does it in groups, at a much lower cost. Therefore, he can bring the benefits of depth psychotherapy to a much larger population than others can. He has described his theories and methods in greater detail in a monograph based on a presentation at an international meeting in 1975. But his rivals had begun to lose patients to him several years ago. They claimed that hospitals "were full of Dr. Roquet's mistakes." On these serious charges he was arrested and jailed. In Mexico an accused person is deemed guilty until he can prove himself innocent. I am told that if even one of these "mistakes" could have been produced at the trial he would still be in prison. But after five months he was released from jail, completely exonerated. Yet, since his enemies still have ways to harass him, he has hesitated to reopen his Institute until the Mexican Department of Health gives him specific permission.

In the meantime he carries on conventional psychiatric practice with visits abroad, including the

U.S., where, in workshops and seminars he has demonstrated his methods in sessions including all of the features I have described above except for the administration of forbidden drugs and plants.

The Mexican Government has been told by foreigners that if it issues a permit to Dr. Roquet to reopen his Institute, in time Mexico City will become the psychotherapeutic capital of the world. I myself have gone to Mexico at the invitation of Dr. Roquet, have taken the treatment myself, and have observed its administration to at least 150 individuals. In addition I have talked with 50 to 100 of such persons and can report practically unanimous approval amounting to enthusiasm in most cases. As the result of my careful observations and follow-up, I can say that Dr. Roquet is the most gifted psychiatrist I know of anywhere.

In the monograph "The Existential Through Psychodislectics" Dr. Roquet and his colleagues have described his methods and the theories behind them. Though the dynamic behind his therapy is basically Freudian in nature, he goes far beyond Freud, as does Dr. Stanislav Grof (1975), another gifted therapist who has demonstrated that through a combination of art and psychedelic drugs psychotherapy can be enormously advanced. As well as being a gifted psychotherapist Dr. Roquet is also a thorough scientist. He has kept careful records, mostly on tape, of the sessions he has monitored, and has followed up his cases. This usually has been in therapeutic interviews following the lengthy sessions described above. 55% of the patients have taken one or two of the lengthy sessions while the rest have taken from three to as many as 58. As the result of clinical observation and examination Dr. Roquet reports that 83% of his patients have been improved with results reported as "good" in 30% and as "moderate" in 53%.

Results such as these certainly deserve further investigation. Psychotherapists acquainted with the value of the psychedelic drugs and plants as psychiatric tools generally are very optimistic as to their values at the same time that they see the experimentation that needs to be done held back by bureaucratic checks and red tape (Clark et al., 1975.) It is to be hoped that both in Mexico and elsewhere controls may be eased in order to facilitate the careful evaluation of such innovative and important psychotherapy as I have described in this paper.

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