

Fantasi och Kreativitet i Barndomen

L.S.Vygotsky

October 11-12, 2009

What is imagination? Something negative or positive? In Swedish, and maybe in a host of other languages as well, the same word is used both for the constructive notion of imagination proper and the slightly tainted notion of phantasy, meaning a somewhat less than firm grip on reality. To Vygotskij the former sense is the interesting one. Imagination differs from mere memory in the sense of creating something new, not just faithfully adhering to something old. Yet, imagination is intimately connected to the memory, because memory provides the raw material out of which new combinations can be fashioned. The richer the memory, i.e. the larger the store of past experiences, the more sophisticated the imagination. Thus the imagination of an adult is far richer than that of the child, in contradistinction to the common view that the life of the child is more imaginative than that of the adult. It is true that the life of the child is more fanciful, but that only means that it is less grounded in reality. It is a fancifulness born out of immaturity not one expressing an overflow of imagination¹.

In what way is the child creative, i.e. in what way does the child express its imagination? Through play. Play is an enacting in which many elements occur. Basically it is a narrative expressed basically through the motor system. Not only human children play but also young animals, and the purpose and the form show striking similarities, especially initially. A more focused form of expression is drawing. All normal children draw spontaneously. The early drawings of a child are very primitive, they are not based on sight but memory, thus their expression are not systematic but more impressionistic reminiscent of an oral presentation in which only some features are presented. The early drawings of people by the hand of a child show a head and limbs attached to the head. The purpose is schematic, heads and limbs are the essential features of a human, the torso is secondary. Not that children are not aware of torsos, but their instinct to draw does not stem from a desire to represent, it has nothing to do with the visual, it is a motor exercise and a narrative. Closer scrutiny of the drawings of children reveal different stages of maturity that a child undergoes. Children's drawings are not, sentimental claims to the contrary, works of art. The desire to draw may share essential features of an artistic act, but it is not individuated, it follows a general developmental scheme. At the onset of puberty most children lose their spontaneous desire to draw. This is not because their emotional life dries up and they are less imaginative, on the contrary, puberty involves an intensification of the emotional life and a concomitant increase in imaginative powers, it

¹ On the other hand why are the memories of our childhood so much more emotional than our later memories? Could it be that the emotional life of a child is so much richer? Or could it be that the emotions of childhood are a retrospective lay-over, never present at the time of their formations? If so would it mean that death in childhood is less traumatic for the afflicted, (as opposed to the survivors) than it would be later in life?

is simply that the critical powers increase and the pubescent child is simply dissatisfied with their performance, their drawing skills are simply inadequate to the demands of their imagination. It is not that they become less artistic, on the contrary it is only that they enter the stage in which the notion of artistry starts to make sense. The artistic skills of most children are simply not up to the demands they put on them.

What about myself? As a child I was a most ardent drawer of pictures, literally doing hundreds of drawings each week. In this activity I was very much encouraged by my mother, and I remember fancying myself good at it. My father was a skilled draughtsman, and although not supplying as much enthusiastic encouragement as my mother, he on the other hand provided an inspiration, and I was rather disappointed that he did not draw as much as I would have liked him to do. In some ways my pictures were sophisticated, I used perspective from a very early age, no doubt influenced by the very many pictures which were available to me. I remember from a very early age, four or so, looking through my fathers art books, always being very sensitive to the charms of a picture, and I still am very much attuned to visual charm, definitely more so, or at least far more knowledgeable so, than to the charms of music, the art of choice for most people. What strikes me looking at my old pictures is their crudeness in execution. I lacked any particular skill. But the rather unsatisfying pictures I produced never bothered me, I used to proudly show them to my mother, blissfully unaware of how short they were from the ideals of other pictures of which I was surrounded. As Vigotskij remarks, for the child the process of creation, is far more important than the results, and this indeed beautifully explains my own endeavors and the enthusiasm with which they were executed. Still I was not entirely unaware of standards, and those tended to be so objective, that I could freely admit my own shortcomings without jealousy when compared not only to the masters but also to more accomplished peers. My delight in drawing and painting was pure, and very little connected to competition. I probably reached my peak at the age of ten or eleven, i.e. just before the onset of puberty. By that time I was accomplished enough to be able to draw from a model, and the portraits I did at the time were probably as good as I would ever be able to do. At thirteen my desire to draw vanished². Due to instruction in drawing the interest may have been artificially prolonged. The cutting off point was being told by my art teacher at school, that my drawings were substandard, and that I did not really deserve a passing grade. That was a shock to me, but not one that seemed to have cut very deeply. (My mother on the other hand was concerned that my desire to draw would be killed by the verdict.) Throughout my teens I almost never drew. Total abstinence would have been hard as drawing was still on the schedule, but I did so without any enthusiasm. Vygotskij claims, and this seems to confirm with my own experience. that most adults do draw as pre-pubescents, never having proceeded beyond the last stage of universal natural development. Some exceptional individuals, perhaps one or two in each class, have such innate skills, that those can match their desire to express themselves. My

² My father used to say that (almost) all children have artistic ability, but most lose it at the onset of puberty. He might have been as much right as he was wrong. I later learned that my mother once got an assignment to study the drawings of children. As she was never of a sustainable temperament, she never took it up. A pity, as my father, as he did with many other things, probably would have done the work for her, and it would have been interesting to see what he would have come up with.

father had been one of those skilled ones, actually dreaming of an artistic career in his teens, but in his twenties he gave up drawing and painting, of which he was quite skilled having even developed a personal style, and photography became his preferred mode of visual expression, a hobby he pursued until his untimely death. I did a few attempts to draw and paint in my twenties. Those experiments were of course far more mature than those of my childhood, on the other hand they were not at all as satisfying, and I soon gave it up, photography becoming as well my preferred means of representation.

What does the child do who gives up drawing? The most likely substitute is literary composition, often in the form of poetry. A child that starts to write, or is given the task to write something, shows a remarkably ineptitude, at least at first. While its spoken language may be quite sophisticated as well as vivid and engaging, its written composition lags many years behind. An eight year old may write on the level a two year old speaks. The written language is very different from the spoken, and it takes many years of practice before it even becomes acceptable. It might be charming and instructive, but with few exceptions it is never literature. The writing of adolescents serves a purpose, a limited purpose, namely one of self-expression, and as such it is important, but it seldom gives satisfaction to any outsider. Few people indeed can express themselves in writing as engagingly as they can speak. I would say that when it comes to prose beyond the factual, the ineptitude of most people when it comes to writing is greater than their crudeness in drawing. Just as most people cannot really draw, but only present schematic sketches to convey information; their writing skills is limited to the communication of factual ideas. On the other hand the inadequacy of their literary efforts is not as immediately apparent as their inadequacy as to visual representation. The written text, being a string of words, does not reveal its flaws as directly as the unforgiving canvas.

As a child I also wrote a lot. My writing was more contrived than my drawing, instead of fulfilling a natural urge, it was a conscious ambition. Its purpose was not the expression of emotion, but a conscious emulation, and thus not innocent of vanity. Still the delight of the process overshadowed the defects of the finished products. I never had a desire for poetry (except possibly as pastiche or parody), my ambition was the full-length book, the creation of a world, in short a playing of God. My writing also dried up at the onset of puberty, and during my teens I wrote very little, except school-assignments, which I incidentally very much liked, and the playing with the English language which I was mastering. One obvious reason for this was that at the time I had decided to become a mathematician, and all my serious creative efforts were geared towards that goal. A first effort to write imaginatively did not occur until my early twenties, significantly because of my mathematical ambition having suffered a severe setback. At that time I had acquired a maturity making possible a sustained effort of several hundred pages. I still keep it, and many parts of it are quite good. Obviously I had some talent, and indeed it proceeded as easily with no sense of effort as I had pictured it to do. Still one cannot help reflecting that as with the child the mere process of writing was what really mattered, far more than the result. Starting in my late twenties I embarked on a conscious project to develop my writing skills by keeping copies of letters. Clearly this expressed a decision of maintaining a second career. In my forties I started to write down regular travel-reports, and in my fifties, I stepped up my epistolary output and started also to systematically write essays.

The process has been long and characterized by a certain tentativeness, as well as marked by a certain lack of urgency. The remarkable thing is that when I think of it, I cannot see how I could have speeded up the process or have had it started earlier. The prolongation of the process of maturity has created the comfortable illusion of an intellectual development as well. Such phenomena go against the grain of nature, and are clearly in the nature of rather pathetic wishful thinking.

Imagination need not only be expressed through drawing and painting and writing, but can, as Vygotskij is at pains to emphasize, also be expressed through other ways of life, notably mathematical and scientific exploration. The healthy adult has found a workable means of creative expression, without which life would be pointless. Thus the author encourages the cultivation of the creative impulse in any child, but warns against it being channeled into narrow furrows. Painting and writing are only accorded the few. The important thing is to identify and encourage what the child really wants to do, anything imposed is going to be counterproductive. This is a very sympathetic and obvious approach to a successful education, the real problem is how to implement it effectively. Without such a sensitive approach the idea degenerates into a pointless 'laissez-faire'.

October 12, 2009 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se