

Chapter 13

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The Genius of Psychic Terror: Pablo Picasso

“I have sat with so many [wives of geniuses.] I have sat with wives who were not wives of geniuses who were real geniuses. I have sat with real wives of geniuses who were not real geniuses. I have sat with wives of geniuses, of near geniuses, of would be geniuses.” Gertrude Steinⁱ

Name a painter: likely Michelangelo, Leonardo, van Gogh, and Picasso come to mind. Name the modernist painters in order of importance: after Picasso some thought might be needed as to who comes next. Is there a painter more valued in the world, at least in monetary terms? In 2015 Picasso’s *The Women of Algeria* was sold for \$174.4 million, the highest amount ever paid at auction for a work of art. Is there a painter more known around the globe than Picasso? In 2010 more than 700,000 attended the Picasso Exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum in just seventeen weeks; later that year 400,000 lined up for a different show at the Seattle Art Museum. Indeed, to mount a block-buster exhibition, a museum curator need only round up the paintings of Picasso and the multitudes will flock. Happily, there is much to choose from, because Picasso created more than 50,000 works of art.

Picasso has been called THE genius of the twentieth century. Perhaps more than any single painter, he changed the direction of art, inaugurating the modernist style. He was a pioneer of Cubism, and later of collage art, and then neo-classicism. He was the first to paint most fully his own mind, rather than the object before him. After Picasso, no subject matter was off limits to artistic expression. And still today his *Les Femmes d’Alger* and *Guernica* are iconic works known to every art lover. As someone who had often sat at table with Picasso, Gertrude Stein understood that he was a real genius.

What made Picasso one? With Picasso many of the familiar, and a few unfamiliar, enablers generated an explosion of creative capacity: motivation, curiosity, egotism, and sadism among them. These agents of genius will be identified and analyzed below. But sometimes, as with Shakespeare and Mozart, the capacity to create defies a complete explanation. It borders on the magical, and Picasso knew that. “Painting isn’t an aesthetic operation; it’s a form of magic designed as a mediator between this strange, hostile world and us.”ⁱⁱ He viewed himself as a sorcerer and “shape-charmer.” Art for him was the eternal quest for the essential truth resting behind the visible object. As he famously said: “Art is the lie [trick] that reveals the truth.”

The Self-Education of a Prodigy

Pablo Diego José Francisco de Paula Juan Nepomuceno María de los Remedios Cipriano de la Santísima Trinidad Ruiz y Picasso was born in Malaga, Spain, in 1881. Ruiz was his father’s family name and Picasso his mother’s--the reason painter Pablo chose the latter will become clear in a moment. At the age of fourteen Picasso’s family moved to Corunna and then Barcelona. At sixteen he was entirely on his own, living alone in Madrid, and at eighteen he made his first trip to Paris, moving there permanently 1904. Thereafter, France was Picasso’s adopted home.

A prodigy is something outside the bounds of nature, and Picasso was certainly that. Family members said that he could draw before he could talk (Einstein was also a late talker). The first word he uttered was *piz*, his baby word for *lapiz* (pencil).ⁱⁱⁱ When he wanted something he would simply draw it as, for example, “the long, twisting, sugar-dusted fritters one buys hot from stalls all over Spain.”^{iv} Said Gertrude Stein: “Picasso wrote painting as other children wrote their a b c’s.”^v

As a painter, Picasso had a natural advantage, as would a musician with perfect pitch. Imagine that you are that one person in 10,000 who can instantly and accurately identify any musical pitch. You can also go to the piano and reproduce the melody of a tune at pitch on only one hearing. Already you have a head start in your profession.

Similarly, Picasso seems to have had a “perfect eye” for drawing. Once he saw something he could immediately imitate it, be the object a corn fritter or a painting by Velazquez. This sort of eye-to-hand duplicative ability is genetic and cannot be taught—any more than absolute pitch can be taught. It comes immediately and effortlessly. Moreover, like Mozart, Picasso had the ability to “see” a work of art in his mind--if not fully formed, then at least in most of its particulars. He could start a work from any arbitrary point and end up with a coherent final product.^{vi} As we see in the 1956 film *The Mystery of Picasso*, this gift of conjuring--instantaneous conceptual thinking--stayed with him until the very end.

A rebellious resistance to formal education seems only to have to have enhanced Picasso’s natural gifts. The more the father pushed for conventional learning, the more the boy pushed back toward the art he loved. In class young Picasso was disruptive, preferring to go to the window sill, look out and draw. To get to the next level of school in Corunna, he had to pass a mock examination. At this moment the nine-year-old decided to try, because his father had promised him a set of paint brushes: “They’ll see how I can concentrate. I won’t miss a single detail . . . the little eye of the pigeon is round like a 0. Under the 0 a 6, underneath that a 3. their eyes are like 2’s, and so are the wings. The little feet rest on the table, as if on a horizontal line . . . Underneath it all, the total.”^{vii}

Obviously, abstractions were not Picasso’s forte—he thought visually rather than symbolically. At a very young age Picasso intuited that the pursuit of any sort of “higher” education would be an impediment to his own higher calling. According to his lifelong friend Jaime Sabartés: “He displayed only the profoundest indifference, especially toward words and numbers. He wanted only to scribble on all the papers on which he could lay his hands, to copy . . . everything he saw.”^{viii} Picasso was no Einstein--but Einstein was no Picasso. Einstein played chess and Mozart’s sonatas on his violin; Picasso played dominos and listened to guitar music in cafés. Genius follows more than one muse.

An *idiot savant* is someone with an extraordinary capacity for pattern processing in drawing, music, calculating, or remembering; yet the expertise is limited to only one such area of human experience? Was Picasso an *idiot savant*? Very much the opposite. Those who knew Picasso describe him as highly intelligent and possessing special interests in archeology, history, philosophy, and politics. And contrary to the *idiot savant*, Picasso delighted in irony and ironic constructions of his own making. Typical of these is his oxymoron regarding the difficulty he had had with arithmetic: “I’d be distracted by the thought that it was necessary to pay attention.” But somehow Picasso learned what he needed: “He cannot say how or when he learned what he knows, but it does not matter; he must have absorbed it while not preoccupied with wanting to learn it. He must have been taken unawares while thinking about something else.”^{ix} As with most

geniuses, Picasso learned not formally, but intuitively. Said he: “However great we may be, we are all, in a measure, autodidacts.”^x

Being an autodidact requires curiosity, motivation, and a dash of egotism—all of which Picasso possessed. Picasso also had, for better or for worse, a mentor: his father José Ruiz y Blasco. José Ruiz was a painter whose one claim to fame was his capacity to depict pigeons. According to son Pablo, Don José had little patience with the most detailed part of the job, the feet, and these became the task of the son. “My father would cut off the legs of a dead pigeon and pin them down on a board, in a convenient position, and I would copy them minutely, until they met with his approval.”^{xi} Eventually, when Picasso was about age fourteen, “He gave me his paints and his brushes, and never went back to painting.” When Pablo was seventeen he began to use “Picasso” as his professional name, and not Ruiz. Picasso was more unusual in Spain and had a more distinctive ring, and his father seems to have been something of an embarrassment. As Picasso later joked: “Don José was an exemplar by virtue of his ineptitude”—a mentor by negative example.

The incompetence of father Picasso, however, bestowed a gift upon the son—the foundation of a craft. As Picasso later said to the young Modigliani: “One can never draw enough. No one has done more drawing than I have. . . . By the time I was fifteen I could do faces and figures and even large compositions—often without models, because, simply by practicing on pigeons’ feet, I had learned how to capture the mystery of lines, even of nudes.”^{xii} Picasso also briefly studied form and line in an official setting at the Barcelona School of Fine Arts. But although five or six years younger than the other students, “he paid no apparent attention to what the professors were saying, [but] instantly grasped what he was taught.”^{xiii} More to his liking was the time Picasso spent in Madrid where he studied, not from professors in the academy to which he had been sent, but rather at the feet of the great masters in the Prado Museum, copying the works of Velasquez, Zubarán, and Goya. Vivaldi was copied by Bach, Bach by Mozart, Mozart by Beethoven, and Beethoven by Wagner. The great ones always learn their craft—but on their own.

What Made Picasso Picasso?

Inevitably, the genius moves to the metropolis or a university. In 1904 Picasso abandoned Spain for Paris, taking up residence in the heights of Montmartre, then a scruffy suburb where progressive artists could live cheaply and look southward down on the rest of humanity. Van Gogh had lived there and so too the composer Erik Satie. Penurious painters clumped together in a tenement building called the Bateau-Lavoir because it appeared to be just that—a laundry boat. Picasso’s quarters therein were squalid. But “poverty coupled with genius” attended him, said the poet Max Jacob.^{xiv} And so, too, did other artists and their ideas. Among his intimates were painters Utrillo, Derain, and Braque, and poets Jacob and Apollinaire. Soon Picasso would meet Gertrude Stein and through her Henri Matisse. Said Stein of this period: “Paris was where the twentieth century was. It was where we had to be.”

In 1907, in his hovel in the Bateau-Lavoir, Pablo Picasso painted *Les demoiselles d’Avignon*, a masterpiece that proved to be the opening salvo of Modernism in the visual arts. The work so frightened fellow artists Stein, Matisse, and Braque that Picasso thereafter refused to let it go; he carted this gang of disjointed prostitutes around with him for three decades before selling the canvas to the Museum of Modern Art in 1937.

Had Picasso stayed in Malaga and not gone to Paris, *Les demoiselles* would not have seen the light of day. The genius needs diverse materials so as to think translogically and thus

creatively. As famed mathematician Henri Poincaré said in Paris about this time: “to create consists of making new combinations of associated elements.”^{xv} In *Les demoiselles* two new external experiences coalesced in Picasso’s mind, awaiting only the catalyst of his imagination to kindle the violent outburst. In 1906 Picasso confronted the work of Cézanne in a retrospective exhibition of that artist in Paris; and in 1907 he discovered African masks at the Museum of Ethnography at the Trocadero, across from the Eiffel Tower. The exposure to Cézanne brought a new awareness of the power of pure form in art. The African masks did the same but added an element of primal terror. Picasso united these two elements and ignited them with the flame of his own psychic furor, and the course of the history of art was irrevocably changed.

Soon after Pablo Picasso came to Paris in 1904, another painter of Spanish descent arrived, Cesar A. Villacres. Born in 1880, a year before Picasso, Villacres also painted in Montmartre. Indeed, in the author’s living room hangs an oil by Villacres entitled *Place Clément*, painted from the vantage point of the Bateau-Lavoir. Picasso’s terrifying *Les demoiselles* is now worth hundreds of millions of dollars, but Villacres benign *Place Clément* would fetch only a thousand at best. Picasso was a genius and Villacres was not. But what made Picasso Picasso? In a word: imagination.

Pretend for a moment that you are watching Picasso paint. Actually, you are urged to do so in the twelve-minute film *The Mystery of Picasso* (portions available on YouTube). What you see is the working of the “transformational imperative.” Once under the force of his creative intuition, Picasso not only sees the possible but also what the possible could become; then the newly become begets a becoming once more as the imagination races forward. The transformational imperative can play out in a set of keyboard variations by Bach, Beethoven, or Brahms, or in a set of sculptures or paper cutouts by Matisse. In the film *The Mystery of Picasso*, the artist starts from an obscure point to draw a bouquet of flowers, which he turns into a fish, and then a rooster, and finally a clown-like cat. Had the camera not run out of film, Picasso’s imaginings could have run on forever--the ultimate flat-line of creativity. Notice too his laser-like stare. Many of his contemporaries commented on his Picasso’s intensely focused eyes.

Concentration (maybe obsession) is a constant companion of the creative mind. Picasso could stand upright before a painting for three or four hours at a stretch: “I asked him if it didn’t tire him to stand so long in one spot. He shook his head. ‘No,’ he said. ‘That’s why painters live so long. While I work I leave my body outside the door, the way Moslems take off their shoes before entering the mosque.”^{xvi} Let’s follow Picasso inside his door. According to Françoise Gilot, Picasso’s muse between 1943 and 1953, his concentration started with a lengthy contemplation of the object to be painted, in this case Gilot’s naked body:

“You’d be better posing for me nude,’ [he said.] When I had taken off my clothes, he had me stand back to the entrance, very erect, with my arms at my side. Except for the shaft of daylight coming in through the high window at my right, the whole place was bathed in a dim, uniform light that was on the edge of shadow. Pablo stood off, three or four yards from me, looking tense and remote. His eyes didn’t leave me for a second. He didn’t touch the drawing-pad; he wasn’t even holding a pencil. It seemed a very long time. Finally he said, ‘I see what I need to do. You can dress now. You won’t have to pose again.’ When I went to get my clothes I saw that I had been standing there just over an hour.”^{xvii}

Once something was on canvas, the concentration continued but now disembodied from the plastic act. Picasso, like Leonardo before *The Last Supper*, would simply sit and contemplate his handiwork.

“He walked to the other end of the atelier and sat in a wicker armchair with a high Gothic back that appears in many of his paintings. He would cross his legs, plant one elbow on his knee and, resting his chin on his fist, the other hand behind, would stay there studying the painting without speaking for as long as an hour. After that he would generally go back to work on the portrait.”^{xviii}

Once back at work, the trance-like concentration continued, often witnessed by Jaime Sabartés.

“Even while he is attending his palette, he goes on contemplating the picture from a corner of his eye. The canvas and the palette compete for his attention but he does not abandon either; both remain within the focus of his vision, which embraces the totality of each, and both together. He surrenders body and soul to the activity which is his *raison d’être*, dabbing the bristles of the brush in the oily paste of color with a loving gesture, with all his senses focused upon a single aim, as if he were bewitched.”^{xix}

“Such a phenomenon [the act of creativity] would not occur if Picasso merely imitated or copied what he saw; [however,] when he creates, he is like a somnambulist and obeys only the mandate of the intuition which spurs his ideas.”^{xx}

Sometimes Picasso is bewitched and sometimes a somnambulist. Gilot mentions the importance of dreams to Picasso, as if these imaginings might account for the strange forms that appear in his mature works:

“I dreamed that my legs and arms grew to an enormous size and then shrank back just as much as in the other direction. And all around me, in my dream, I saw other people going through the same transformations, getting huge or very tiny. I felt terribly anguished every time I dreamed about that.”^{xxi}

Invention, fantasy, dreams—the power of the imagination differentiates a Pablo Picasso from a Cesar Villacres. Picasso’s imagination was endlessly inventive, and his capacity to convert his visions into lines and colors was fast and fluent. But as the film title (*Le Mystère*) suggests, the working of Picasso’s imagination is not fully explicable. Likely this is good, for it were comprehensible, the process might be replicable by all. Without some mystery, there is no genius.

Other Necessary but Insufficient Causes

An extraordinarily vivid imagination is not all that made Picasso a genius. Among his personal characteristics was self-confidence—that is to say, an unswerving belief in the correctness of his vision. Only with self-confidence could Picasso, or any innovator, persevere against indifference, hostility, and outright failure. The dismal public reception accorded Georges Bizet’s *Carmen* did not cause him to lose faith in what is today perhaps the world’s most popular opera. The first four failed launches of a SpaceX rocket did not dissuade Elon Musk from trying a fifth

(successful) one. The perplexed reaction accorded *Les demoiselles* did not deter Picasso from continuing along the revolutionary path that would lead soon to Cubism. He believed in the semi-magical state of genius and that, because he was one, he was both empowered and protected.

Picasso's self-confidence bordered on the delusional, and it started early, with his mother. "If you become a soldier, you'll be a general. If you become a monk, you'll end up as the Pope!"^{xxii} When he was twenty-five, in 1906, Picasso created a masterpiece, his famous portrait of Gertrude Stein. Yet she and her friends were taken aback and said that the portrait didn't look like her. Picasso's retort: "Don't worry, it will." By this Picasso meant not that Stein would age into her portrait, but rather that he would change the world of artistic perception to the point that his vision would be seen as *the* vision of what art is supposed to be. Picasso saw himself as, if not God, at least someone who had earned the right to criticize God. "God is really only another artist. He invented the giraffe, the elephant, and the cat. He has no real style. He just keeps on trying other things."^{xxiii}

If you believe you cannot fail because you are always right, why not risk everything? A high tolerance for risk is another hallmark of the genius and of Picasso. As he said: "Painting is freedom. If you jump, you might fall on the wrong side of the rope. But if you're not willing to take the risk of breaking your neck, what good is it? You don't jump at all. You have to wake people up. To revolutionize their way of identifying things."^{xxiv} This high risk tolerance applied to his personal life as well. To enjoy a tryst with his seventeen-year-old lover Marie-Thérèse Walter, Picasso would sneak into her tent at her youth sports camp, and later he installed her in an apartment across the street from where he and his wife resided on the Rue La Boétie in Paris. Perhaps Picasso's provocatively perverse risk-taking was also in the service of art, because the risk heightened the erotic and with the erotic came a hint of violence, erotic violence which Picasso later would express with paint on canvas.

Picasso took risks not only because he knew there was something to gain, but because there was nothing to lose. In his mind no penalty was inflicted, and no rule imposed that could not be broken with impunity. It wasn't as if Picasso acknowledged the rules and then broke them; rather, for him rules had never existed--he was not immoral but amoral. "Pablo felt he could permit himself everything with everyone. . . . He said that he had no interest in being fair, that in fact he liked, he *really* like being unfair. It made him feel more like a primitive god."^{xxv} And that primitive god was spiritually old, at least in the eyes of Françoise Gilot: "What made dealing with him so hard was not that I was twenty-five and he was sixty-six years old but that I was twenty-five and he was sixty-six thousand years old."^{xxvi} Was Picasso a primitive in a land before time had rules?

Or was Picasso very young? When does a child learn the rules of civil behavior? When does he learn what is right and what is wrong, what should be done and what should not? In a famous line Picasso affirmed the importance that childlike thinking held for him. "When I was a child I could paint like Raphael, but it took me a lifetime to learn to paint like a child." What specifically did childlike Picasso mean by this? That the child has the capacity to see the simplest and purest of forms, knowing nothing of learned artifice and convention that might disguise truth. Mozart, with his simplest, mature melodies (his *Kinderlein* he called them), might serve as a model of the sublimely mature child. But child-adult Mozart stayed mostly within the rules of harmony and counterpoint, while child-adult Picasso progressively ignored the rules of realistic representation. Ignoring the rules subverts the rules, but it impels change, which is essential to creativity, which is essential to genius.

Why do we have art? It exists in part because some of us wish to enjoy a vicarious romp through the human experience without having much actual skin in the game—someone else lives and explains the meaning of life to us. But art also exists because the artist himself can do no other than obsessively explain and reveal. For some, art is catharsis, and Picasso was one of these continually cathartic artists. The end of one work became the beginning of the next. “There is never a moment when you can say, ‘I’ve worked well and tomorrow is Sunday,’” said Picasso. “As soon as you stop, it’s because you’ve started again”^{xxvii}—the curse of the compulsive genius. And as Gertrude Stein observed: “He always has need of emptying himself, it is necessary that he should be greatly stimulated so that he could be active enough to empty himself completely.”^{xxviii} Again, Picasso himself: “I have only one thought: work.”^{xxix} He worked to reveal the danger confronting him: his own annihilation.

And he worked efficiently. No time was squandered; no thing and no person spared. “Everybody has the same energy potential. The average person wastes his in a dozen little ways. I bring mine to bear on one thing only: my painting, and everything is sacrificed to it—you and everyone else, myself included.”^{xxx} Sometimes, it seemed as if Picasso wished to sacrifice the entire world--destroy it so as to paint it anew, annihilate and revivify it in an eternal ritual of re-creation.

The Sacrifice of Picasso’s Women

“I’m like a river that rolls on, dragging with it the trees that grow too close to its banks or dead calves one might have thrown into it or any kind of microbes that develop in it. I carry all that along with me and go on.”^{xxxi} Most obviously floating dead in the flotsam of Picasso’s life were “his women,”—all except one. Between 1904, when he settled permanently in France, and his death in 1973, countless women entered and exited Picasso’s world. Below are listed the seven most important and the dates of their greatest significance for him. Not given here are their age differences. In a race to outrun death, the chronological lead that Picasso had on his paramours increased: Fernande Olivier was his exact contemporary, Jacqueline Roque forty-nine years his junior.

Fernande Olivier (1904-1911) a Picasso Cubist painting of her sold for \$__ million in 2016

Olga Khokhlova (1917-1955) first wife until her death, mother of their son Paulo

Marie-Thérèse Walter (1927-1935) mother of Maya, he painted her twice as often as any other woman

Dora Maar (1935-1943) photographed Picasso painting mural *Guernica* in which images of her appear

Françoise Gilot (1943-1953) mother of Claude and Paloma, successful painter still living in New York

Geneviève Laporte (during the 1950s) first met Picasso when she was a high school student

Jacqueline Roque (1953-1973) second wife until his death in 1973

Such a list might suggest that Picasso’s women followed in sequence, but instead they came in clumps. When Picasso summered in Mougins in 1938, new mistress Dora went along, but so too, at a distance, did wife Olga and Marie-Thérèse. When Picasso was resident in Paris in 1944 on Rue des Grands Augustins, Olga, Dora, Marie-Thérèse, and Françoise danced about. In this residence Dora and Marie-Thérèse once came to blows. Marie-Thérèse won the fight and thereby grew in Picasso’s estimation. Picasso not only put up with such chaos, he instigated and sustained it. Why? Because, as Woody Allen said, ending the film *Annie Hall*, absurd as they were, he needed the relationships. Similarly, degrading as they were, Picasso needed sparks to fly among and toward him so as to power his art.

Verbal abuse was the opening volley. Two sayings Picasso often repeated were: “There is nothing so similar to one poodle dog as another poodle dog, and that goes for women, too;” and “For me, there are only two kinds of women—goddesses and doormats.” Typical of the personal barbs was the one shot at the still-hemorrhaging Françoise Gilot after the birth of her second: “You look like a broom. Do you think brooms appeal to anybody? They don’t to me.”^{xxxiii}

Then there was the physical abuse. Olga was knocked down and dragged by her hair around the floor of the apartment on Rue La Boétie. Dora was knocked unconscious in the studio in Rue des Grands Augustins. Françoise was nearly bitten by three Mediterranean scorpions while Picasso laughed delightedly—deadly *Scorpio* was his zodiacal sign. Once in Golfe-Juan he burned Gilot’s face with a lighted cigarette. Burning seems to have appealed to Picasso: “Every time I change wives I should burn the last one. That way I’d be rid of them. They wouldn’t be around now to complicate my existence. Maybe that would bring back my youth, too. You kill the woman and you wipe out the past she represents.”^{xxxiii} Perhaps because they, too, were creators, Picasso feared and hated women.

Having terrorized his women in life, now-energized Picasso set about transferring his psychic state into visual form—his art. “He first raped the woman . . . and then he worked. Whether it was me, or someone else, it was always like that,” recounted Marie-Thérèse Walter.^{xxxiv} Brush in hand Picasso subjected the pleasingly curvaceous body of Marie-Thérèse to his sexual fantasies; more than once he added to her forehead a large penis, presumably his own (Figure 00.00). The beautiful, talented Dora Maar began in Picasso’s mind as a stylish fashion icon but became progressively “The Crying Woman,” her features made increasingly angular and disjointed—from fashionable goddess to hysterical doormat (Figure 00:00). Marie-Thérèse, Dora, and Françoise each appear in psycho-dramas involving the vulnerable woman and the Minotaur, she the potential victim, he the frightful beast bent on rape (Figure00:00). As Picasso looked on one of these drawings he mused: ‘He [the Minotaur] is studying her, trying to read her thoughts, trying to decide whether she loves him *because* he’s a monster. Women are odd enough for that, you know. It’s hard to say whether he [the Minotaur] wants to wake her or kill her.’^{xxxv}

More could be said, but the point is made, and Picasso knew it well. He was a monster. But in his mind only a monster could subdue another monster, and for Picasso that other monster was the specter of his own death. Destroy it before it destroys you. This is what his art required. “They [the public] expect to be shocked and terrorized. If the monster only smiles, then they’re disappointed.”^{xxxvi} Of course this monstrous fight left collateral damage, the female victims.

The list of the dead and wounded is long, but Picasso didn’t much care. “Nobody has any real importance for me. As far as I’m concerned, other people are like those little grains of dust floating in the sunlight. It takes only a push of the broom and out they go.”^{xxxvii} Accordingly, out went his children (except Paulo) and grandchildren, all of whom he refused to see, and out went friends such as Stein and Braque, leaving only Matisse, who died in 1954. And then there is the obituary list: first wife Olga, half crazed, stalked Picasso wherever he went until she, too, died in 1954; Pablito, barred from his grandfather’s funeral in 1973, committed suicide by drinking bleach; son Paulo died of alcoholism in 1975; Marie-Thérèse hung herself in 1977; second wife Jacqueline shot herself in 1986; Dora Maar underwent electric shock therapy and joined a semi-monastic convent, dying 1997. The sole survivor: Françoise Gilot, raised her children Claude and Paloma, later married Dr. Jonas Salk, discoverer of the polio vaccine, and

pursued a career as a successful painter. Her memoir *Life with Picasso*, which Picasso tried to suppress in a Parisian court, sold over a million copies.

The Moral Dilemma of Genius

To paraphrase what Nannerl Mozart said in 1792 about her brother's sometimes irresponsible behavior, "Mozart was to be excused because he was a genius."^{xxxviii} But is the genius really entitled to a "get out of jail free card?" Had the bard stayed up in Stratford, we might have had one big happy family, but no plays. If Gauguin had remained with his wife and five children in Amsterdam, foregoing the voyages to Tahiti, would we have his colorful Polynesian paintings? Had Wagner not fallen for the wife of another man, would we have *Tristan and Isolde*? Did Picasso have the right to throw his women under his relentlessly approaching bus? Can humanity be sacrificed in the name of art? Can you love the art but hate the genius?

Here, too, morality is an individual decision. Françoise Gilot would likely vote "no," as suggested by her appraisal of Picasso "As an artist you may be extraordinary, but morally speaking you're worthless."^{xxxix} The other of Picasso's women would likely have voted "yes." They understood that they would be immortalized through him, and they were right. But all participated willingly. Only Gilot left. The rest stuck around to be abused. Picasso himself was aware of the moral dilemma: "We are always in the midst of a mixture of good and evil, right and wrong, and the elements of any situation are always hopelessly tangled. One person's good is antagonistic to someone else, and so one has to have the courage of the surgeon or the murderer."^{xl} For Picasso, the end--in this case immortal art--justified the means. "Anything of great value—creation, a new idea—carries its shadow zone with it. You have to accept it that way. Otherwise there is only the stagnation of inaction. But every action has an implicit share of negativity. There is no escaping it. . . . The genius of Einstein leads to Hiroshima."^{xli}

From Prodigy to Genius and Back

Every human is motivated. Some of us are motivated to be happy and "enjoy life"; others are motivated to do good works for fellow humans. Some are motivated to tell their life's story—to lay out the human experience as they see it. Writers do so in books, poetry, or plays; philosophers philosophize, and teachers teach. Picasso, of course, told his story by means of art; it was his autobiography. Although his body is gone, his psychic state remains visible to all at any time in galleries and on the internet. To feed a vividly imaginative psyche, Picasso was compelled to live large in the external world. Life fed the art, and art kept him alive. Said he: "When a man knows how to do something, he ceases being a man if he stops doing it."^{xlii} Doing it, and doing it well, however, are two different things.

In his last years, Picasso raced around southern France in a frantic quest for the fountain of youth. As Françoise Gilot said after he turned seventy: "His constant dread of death had moved into a critical phase and, as one of its effects, had apparently provoked a taste for 'life.'^{xliii} Continual sexual conquests—victims--were needed. But the life of an aging Don Juan, at least to Gilot, had become "grotesque" and "ridiculous." As Picasso's engine of life—his considerable sexual energy--slowed and eventually stopped, so too did the availability of partners interested in his sort of energizing psycho-sexual drama. His last woman, Jacqueline Roque, was more nurse than combatant.

In the end, Picasso's engagement with life-assuring sex was relegated entirely to his mind. A prostate operation in 1965 left him impotent. But although the body aged, the imagination did not. If Picasso couldn't execute, he could still daydream and draw what he saw,

however perverse it may be. Typical of this is what is now called Suite 347, a sequence of 347 drawings done between March and October 1968.^{xliv} Almost all are pornographic, with disguised Picasso drawn in as a voyeur—the ultimate dirty old man. “We don’t do it any more, but the desire is still with us!” he said.^{xlv} Painful as these drawing are to view, his obsession with the procreative force of life—and his own immortality--continued unabated to the end. Like hell-bound Don Giovanni (Don Juan), he seemed to say “No, no, I will not repent.” This genius, at least, was relentlessly consistent.

In his teens Picasso imitated the masters and in his twenties created a new standard for what a masterpiece should be. The world watched. In 1966 a million people came to the Grand Palais to see a retrospective of his work. As an old man, however, Picasso’s work became derivative (riffs on Delacroix, Velazquez, Manet, Rembrandt, and Degas) and often cheaply pornographic. Said his former collaborator Georges Braque: “Picasso used to be a great artist, but now he’s only a genius.”^{xlvi} And likewise another erstwhile friend Marc Chagall: “What a genius, that Picasso. It’s a pity he doesn’t paint.”^{xlvii} The prodigious technique and all the celebrity remained, but Picasso’s creations, once frighteningly original, had become variations on the themes of others. “Picasso is only happy when working. Yet he has nothing of his own to work on. He decorates pots and plates that other men make from him. He is reduced to playing like a child. He becomes again the child prodigy.”^{xlviii} The image of a geriatric child prodigy is perverse but apposite: the prodigy only mimics the work of others, but does not create. In the course of his ninety-two years Picasso had gone from prodigy to genius and back.

ⁱ *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (New York, 1933), p. 14.

ⁱⁱ Françoise Gilot, *Life with Picasso* (New York, 1964), p. 248.

ⁱⁱⁱ Anna Huffington, *Picasso Creator and Destroyer* (New York, 1988), p. 21; Roland Penrose, *Picasso: His Life and Work* (New York, 1958), p. 13.

^{iv} AH, p. 20 from Palau I Fabre, *Picasso: The Early Years, 1881-1907*, p. 33.

^v Gertrude Stein as quoted in Gardner, *Creating Minds* (New York, 1993), p. 140.

^{vi} Karen L. Kleinfelder, Karen L. *The Artist, His Model, Her Image, His Gaze* (Chicago: 1993), p. 78.

^{vii} Jaime Sabartés, *Picasso: An Intimate Portrait* (New York, 1948), p. 39.

^{viii} This and the preceding quote are drawn from Sabartés, pp. 36-38.

^{ix} Sabartés, p. 36

^x Gilot, p. 67.

^{xi} Sabartés, p. 29

^{xii} Huffington, pp. 129-130.

^{xiii} John Richardson, *A Life of Picasso: The Prodigy, 1881-1906* (New York, 1991), p. 67.

^{xiv} Pierre Cabanne, *Pablo Picasso: His Life and Times* (New York, 1977), pp. 81-82.

^{xv} *The Foundations of Science* (Lancaster, PA, 1913), p. 286.

^{xvi} Gilot, p. 110.

^{xvii} Gilot, pp. 109-110.

^{xviii} Gilot, p. 110.

^{xix} Somewhere in Sabartés but can’t find.

^{xx} Sabartés, p. 180.

^{xxi} Gilot, p. 113.

^{xxii} Gilot, p. 52

^{xxiii} Gilot, p. 43.

^{xxiv} Huffington, p. 109.

^{xxv} Gilot, p. 331.

^{xxvi} Huffington, p. 328.

^{xxvii} Hélène Parmelin, *Intimate Secrets of a Studio at Notre Dame de Vie* (New York, 1966), pp. 67-68.

^{xxviii} Gertrude Stein, *Picasso* (Boston, 1959), p. 5

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- xxix Huffington, p. 454.
- xxx Loc. cit.
- xxxi Gilot, p. 118.
- xxxii Gilot, p. 324.
- xxxiii Gilot, p. 326.
- xxxiv Pierre Cabanne, quoting Marie-Thérèse Walter in “Picasso et les joies de la paternité,” *L’Oeil*, no. 226 (May 1974), p. 7.
- xxxv Gilot, p. 42.
- xxxvi Huffington, p. 345, quoting Gilot.
- xxxvii Gilot, p. 77.
- xxxviii *Mozart-Jahrbuch*, 1995, p. 164
- xxxix Gilot, p. 81.
- xl Gilot, p. 94
- xli Gilot, p. 95.
- xlii Cabanne, *Picasso*, p. 551.
- xliii Gilot, p. 325.
- xliv Many are reproduced in *Picasso in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, ed. Gary Tinterow and Susan Alyson Stein (New Haven and London, 2010), pp. 300-316
- xlv Braissai, “The Master at 90,” *The New York Times Magazine* (October 24, 1971), p. 96.
- xlvi Huffington, p. 326.
- xlvii Huffington, p. 375.
- xlviii John Berger, *The Success and Failure of Picasso* (New York, 1989), pp. 181.