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CONTEMPORARY PSYCHOANALYSIS

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Psychoanalyst, Artist and Critic

H. N. Levitt, Ph.D. 

THE PSYCHOANALYST IS SOMEWHAT like Racine who enclosed the irrationality of passions in a concise, chaste, rational dramatic form that reflects, for us, the measured harmony of Louis XIV's Versailles Gardens. This pattern of a rational presentation of the irrational created, for Racine's audiences, an intolerable tension relieved only by the final deaths, suicides, and painful enlightenments of his tragedies.

The psychoanalyst also attempts to define the irrational through a rational, fictive structure. When he succeeds, it is because the living organism has performed for him, and he is called upon to rearrange and interpret the vagaries, inconsistencies and contradictions in that performance. His problem is mainly one of language: to assemble from his particular experience sentences that are, or lead to, generalizations. The deeper semantic problem of determining *what* anyone means by anything he says, or says he does, further complicates his work. It would be easier if people thought and spoke mathematics.

When the psychoanalyst attempts to practice his craft of rearrangement and interpretation without the living organism before him, he is at a disadvantage. This is most evident in the criticism of literature, when he analyzes the impulses, drives, and preoccupations of dead writers by studying their works and words and the commentaries of their contemporaries. At the heart of the dilemma is an assumption that the family history, letters, notes, essays and diaries of the writer provide revealing insights into his neuroses and they, in turn, provide insight into the form and content of his work. The assumption is deceptive, and often leads to unsound critical conclusions. Once made, it generates a misleading double vision in which criticism becomes a psychoanalytical conclusion, and a piece of fiction is treated as though it were a man.

One of the meanings of "fiction" given in the Oxford English Dictionary is "the action of 'feigning' or inventing imaginary incidents,

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existences, states of things, etc., whether for the purpose of deception or otherwise." This kind of deception, this invention of imaginary states of things, is both the artist's obsession and his strength. What the writer says about himself often is not to be trusted; certainly it is not accurate evidence to be applied to an appraisal of his work. Even if the neuroses of the artist were understood to a reasonable degree, the precise nature and extent of their bearing on the fundamental matter of a work of art, at best, would be arrant speculation. Cases in point are a number of biographical/critical studies of Eugene O'Neill, in which the artist's copious, often misleading statements of his family and their interrelationships are allowed to intrude on what should be serious, objective criticism of his plays.

In his much-quoted essay, "Oedipus and Hamlet," Freud has this to say of the relationship between Shakespeare's father's death and the writing of *Hamlet*:

Just as all neurotic symptoms, like dreams themselves, are capable of hyper-interpretation, and even require such hyper-interpretation before they become perfectly intelligible, so every genuine poetical creation must have proceeded from more than one motive, more than one impulse in the mind of the poet, and must admit of more than one interpretation. I have here attempted to interpret only the deepest substratum of impulses in the mind of the creative poet.

Nevertheless, Freud steps very lightly when discussing Shakespeare's possible neurotic structure, and concentrates instead on comparisons between Oedipus and Hamlet, in which repression in the emotional life of humanity (in the movement from fifth-century Greece to Elizabethan England) is seen as a strong reason why essentially similar material is treated differently. Oedipus murdered his father, but Hamlet finds it difficult to murder his father's murderer because his conscience tells him he is no better than the culprit. Oedipus married his mother, but Hamlet peevishly admonishes his mother for lying with her husband.

Oedipus and Hamlet are two lies created by Sophocles and Shakespeare. But the Muses said to Hesiod: "We know how to tell lies like the truth; and we know how, when we wish, to tell the truth." The truth is the thing itself, the created work of art. It is not revealed by anything extrinsic to its being. Plato resented the poet's objectivity, and the fact that he is able to hide behind his characters, thereby making it difficult for the audience to know

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what is true. Plato saw all poetry (tragedy) as lies; poetry is "a making," and therefore, is false. But one of his pupils, Aristotle, respectfully suggested that the truth in tragedy is revealed in the *katharsis* (purification, purgation) experienced by the audience after having felt pity for the tragic sufferer and fear for themselves, and after having subsequently transcended those feelings, to reach a kind of

plateau of enlightenment. Aristotle seems to suggest that the enlightenment occurs as an emotional reaction.

Therefore, the two ideas of the truth of tragedy are an inner-directed Aristotelian view grounded in individual, sensory experience, and an outer-directed Platonic view oriented to the values of society. It is not suggested anywhere that any truth concerning the *intrinsic* meaning of tragedy is capable of being revealed by an evaluation outside the thing itself, such as a study of the possible attitudes, fears, or neuroses of the artist, or even a sociological or historical study of his contemporary world.

Psychoanalysis also searches for inner-directed and outer-directed truth among the lies of memory. The evocation of the past in the labors of the patient is analogous to the use of memory in the creation of dramatic art. Both the artist and the analyst seek to impose a rational construction on life. And just as a life may be observed only through the ordering of recalled memory, so a play may be experienced only through the logic of its events. Nothing outside of the hierarchy of those events bears any relationship to the structure of their meaning.

Lear dies because Shakespeare made him die. Hamlet does not equivocate; it is the action of the play to balance alternatives. Therefore, Hamlet is revealed by his thoughts. There is no logic other than that which feeds the dramatic construction. Analyses of Hamlet's neuroses are games in which systems of words are developed to explain systems of words. Hamlet has no neuroses; he *is* a neurosis. He is a fictional symbol of an obsession, and, being a symbol, is therefore irreducible.

What we think of as "Hamlet," is nothing more than a body of poetic language deftly organized so as to appear, among other things, the articulation of a consistent obsession. Hamlet is a reflection in a mirror of one aspect of a human dilemma. Hamlet appears to be a man because an actor *pretends* the language is his own, and is created from impulses in his being. We do not want to be reminded that the actor has been given the words first, and

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then has had to make himself aware of the inner and outer reasons for their expression, so as to trick us into believing the words came from impulses.

"Lies like the truth," "tricks and deceptions," these are the practices of fictional art. To intrude on this craft with analogies made from deductions of Hamlet's author's life may be an interesting diversion, but we learn nothing more of the essential meaning of *Hamlet* in the process.

Besides, the psychoanalyst more comfortably appears as the artist, rather than the critic. As the dramatist must develop a "spine," a central metaphor, or action, on which to base his play, so the analyst must search for a "through line" of repression, a pattern on which to base an understanding. As the artist must have that sense of the totality being more than the combination of its elements (acting, setting, sound, rhythm, movement, and light), so the psychoanalyst must perceive a sense of the *Gestalt* of a life, the totality of it being more than the sum of its neuroses. And as the artist must love, in the Greek double-sense of possession and contemplation, so the psychoanalyst must "possess" and contemplate with compassion.

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