

Wesley, P. (1987). The Wellsprings of Literary Creation: An Analysis of Male and Female "Artist Stories" from the German Romantics to American Writers of...

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### The Wellsprings of Literary Creation: An Analysis of Male and Female "Artist Stories" from the German Romantics to American Writers of the Present: By Ursula R. Mahlendorf. Columbia, S.C.: Camden House, 1985. 292 pp.

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Marshaling various strategies, psychoanalytic literary criticism seeks to penetrate the "impenetrable barrier" of artistic form that Oscar Wilde valorizes in his critical dialogue, "The Decay of Lying":

Art begins with abstract decoration, with purely imaginative and pleasurable work dealing with what is unreal and non-existent. This is the first stage. Then Life becomes fascinated with this new wonder, and asks to be admitted into the charmed circle. Art ... *keeps between herself and reality the impenetrable barrier of beautiful style or decorative or ideal treatment.* The third stage is when Life gets the upper hand, and drives Art out into the wilderness (italics added).

Such an endeavor is not without risk. Art may—temporarily—be driven "out into the wilderness"; too much psychoanalytic criticism naïvely equates the figurative with the wild. But, of equal concern to psychoanalysts, criticism of this genre may ensnare psychoanalysis as well, so that a double exile occurs.

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- 573 -

A case in point is *The Wellsprings of Literary Creation*, an examination of seven works of fiction that depict a period in an artist's life or describe a creative moment. Stemming from widely different literary eras, these works portray a variety of artists. Some, like Mozart and the eighteenth century German poet, Lenz, actually lived; some are totally fictional. Nathanael in E. T. A. Hoffmann's *The Sandman* is familiar to psychoanalysts from Freud's paper, "The Uncanny"; he is a poet of sorts with a comic if fatal propensity to equate automata with living people and his life with romantic melodrama. The artist of Kafka's *Josephine, the Singer, or the Mouse-Folk* is—ostensibly—a mouse; this late novella, like much of Kafka's other work, is so dauntingly opaque and beautifully enigmatic that it defies the very enterprise of interpretation itself, much less the confident conclusions Mahlendorf draws.

Mahlendorf finds the wellsprings of literary creativity in mother-child symbiosis and its later developmental vicissitudes. Drawing on Kris, Winnicott, Balint, Kohut, and Mahler, she asserts that creative writers experience a close tie with their caretakers that is traumatically disrupted. As a result, they are left with "fluid ego boundaries" and abilities to blur inner and outer reality and to hold opposites in mind simultaneously. Through their mature artistic productions they reintegrate and gain mastery over these background deficits/assets, more or less successfully. Moreover, she postulates that we are privy to these presumed inner psychological processes through the window of their fiction.

Mahlendorf summarizes her findings in her final chapter, "The Anatomy of the Literary Muse":

The creative process of the writer as described in the artist story of our day embodies the important processes of the writer's psychological development... Moreover, we will relate the writer's life patterns (especially the pattern of the earliest symbiotic relationship that conditions the succeeding stages) to the style of the artist's creativity (i.e., the response patterns to the symbiosis) (p. 187).

Aesthetic form is therefore more importantly rooted in a writer's early development than even matters of content (p. 216).

Nietzsche cautioned that all philosophical questions are ultimately about epistemology; this is good advice when we enter the thickets of psychoanalytic literary criticism. How do we know what we think

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- 574 -

we know? What are the assumptions that precede a selection of evidence, structure the fashioning of an argument? These considerations are notably and regrettably absent in Mahlendorf's book, though they are at the very heart of applied psychoanalysis and of psychoanalysis itself. All criticism—including the book review you are reading right now—grounds itself in a perspective. We see nothing until we have a way of seeing; however, the way of seeing requires explication as much as the seen. Oscar Wilde talks of style as an "impenetrable barrier" before life; Mahlendorf sees style as a clear pathway to the artist's early life and psychosocial development. Which of these critical views is a tinted lens, which a transparent window?

The author's basic assumption is that fiction about artists is truth about the author of the fiction. She states that "when an author composes a story about another artist, he lays bare the psychological roots of his own creativity" (p. xv). She asserts that artist stories reveal facts about their author's inner conflicts and personality development in remarkable detail. She does remind us at one juncture (p. 210) that writers represent only aspects of their creative struggle in their fictional narrators and artist-protagonists; also, they differentiate narrator and protagonist, often depicting the narrator as overcoming the psychic conflicts the protagonist succumbs to. Nonetheless, this

type of critical inquiry in effect erases the boundaries between author, narrator, and protagonist. Each reflects each, even if in reverse. Artist stories plausibly lend themselves to this type of critical approach, but is the plausible necessarily true? Or wholly true? Much psychoanalytic thought would dissuade us from such a convenient explanation. Too, what alternative understandings of art are excluded by seeing it as an embodiment of the author's psyche? As Meyer Abrams points out in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, only since the early nineteenth century has such a focus on the artist's mind and personality, though always extant in literary theory, predominated over alternate understandings of art; for example, that art copies physical nature or that art teaches right values. The view that in the artist story the author is writing about himself is only one among many possible understandings of such works. In the realm of psychoanalytic literary criticism, where so much is asserted, often so unconvincingly, attention to the nature of the evidence for such assertions and to

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- 575 -

alternative understandings is as sorely needed as it is usually absent. This text does not correct this lack.

With fiction so easily equated with fact, this text banishes the art in art, an exile the author would herself protest. Art as illusion—profound, beautiful, even transforming illusion, but illusion nonetheless—is ignored in such formulations. These stories are *fiction*, and that fact Mahlendorf glosses over. Consequently, her assertion that they provide evidence for a realistic reconstruction of authorial character is at least open to serious question. In their fiction about artists, are writers necessarily being less fictional than with other subject matter? We may suspend disbelief and permit ourselves to feel as if such accounts bring us into direct, unmediated contact with the artist and artistic creation. But what is the writer doing with us, artistically and technically speaking, to induce such experiences? How is he using language, plot, or characterization to create certain effects in us and make us view the creative artist in a particular way? Writers through the ages have depicted artists and the moment of artistic creation. How do changes in the intellectual and literary climate, and the social and even economic locus of the creative artist, frame or at least influence such portraits? Deliberately or not, writers may want us to view the creative individual differently at different historical junctures. Is art then, as Oscar Wilde might say, a particularly beautiful way of telling lies and getting us to believe them? If so, we flounder in dense underbrush if we equate such accounts with psychological findings about the creative individual.

In addition to repressing the fictionality of fiction, other methodological problems abound in the author's use of biographical material. Such accounts are not necessarily objective; biographers have vested interests in their subjects and autobiographers may be particularly tempted to present themselves in a certain light. Scholarly inquiry can help fill in these gaps, but since any fresh inquiry is itself rooted in a perspective, it creates new gaps at the same time. Apart from these crucial demurs, the way Mahlendorf uses such material vividly exemplifies the quandaries of all psychobiography. For example, here she is describing the father of Eduard Mörike, the nineteenth century German author of the subtle and light-hearted short story, "Mozart on the Way to Prague":

... stern, self-disciplined, dedicated to life's serious business, [he] had little time

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- 576 -

for his children. In an autobiographical account, Mörike mentioned his father's neglect with resentment and regret... The mother was a happier person, devoted to her children... Mörike was lonely and sensitive. He liked to hide in the attic and write poetry. When he was eleven his father had a stroke. During the following three years, the boy watched his father die (p. 81).

Later, noting Mörike's problematic career as a clergyman, his residing with his mother and sister, and his semi-invalidism, she concludes:

In Mörike's life we find a suspension between paternal and maternal poles similar to that observed in the Mozart novella. Estranged from the awe-inspiring father, over-attached to the loving mother, the adolescent *must have* felt the father's illness as a punishment for which he, the son, was to blame... [T]he invalidism *must also have had* the function of atonement, protecting him against his oedipal feelings, and keeping him in pre-oedipal dependency (pp. 82-83, italics added).

The interpretation that Mörike's invalidism was a compromise formation is plausible. It could be true. But is it? And can we ever know, given the nature of the data available to us in such psychobiographical inquiries? Then why the phrase *must have*? Does it divert us from the core question, applicable to all applied psychoanalysis, about the status of such reconstructions in the absence of an actual analytic situation? Are they fictions themselves? Or are they, as Freud hoped, persuasive proof for the unbelievers that the truths of psychoanalysis—such as they may be—are not constituted by the analytic situation, but are discoverable in nonclinical realms as well, like art and the parapraxes of everyday life?

Different methodological dilemmas imbue Mahlendorf's examination of a short story by the innovative German writer Georg Büchner (1813-1837) about the poet, Jakob Lenz, who died in 1792. Relying on this fictional work and certain biographical sources, she concludes:

Lenz's relationships [as depicted in the short story] fall into a pattern which reflects his early childhood and allows us to reconstruct his early development and the origins of sensitivity and defenses (p. 49).

In the story Lenz is intensely attached to the rural pastor who offers him refuge. Mahlendorf concludes that this attachment "is a transference in which we can see Lenz's actual father reflected. Büchner's genius knows how to evoke the past relationship in the present" (p. 51). These are startlingly assured reconstructions indeed. But

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- 577 -

who is the Lenz of the story "Lenz," on which they are based? Büchner was never personally acquainted with him; he based his story on a diary kept by the pastor who took Lenz into his home during a troubled period in the poet's life. "Lenz" is a text on a text. Which Lenz is it, then, who has an early development? A fictional character—even one based on a historical person—has no life other than the words on the page, no history prior to the story's beginning. The real Lenz had an early development, but is it knowable to us with such assurance through fictional representation and biographical fragments? To assume so is to profoundly misunderstand the essence of art—and of the psychoanalytic enterprise.

Mahlendorf relies on psychoanalysis as though it were a confirmed body of knowledge to which art and artists can be referred, a truth that both precedes and follows after fiction, enclosing it in a naturalistic snare. She thereby distorts psychoanalysis, as she does art. For example, few analysts or analysands, after even the most thoroughgoing work, would assert that they had recaptured the deep preverbal past with quite the verisimilitude the author claims for her artists. Many, if not all, psychoanalysts would question any one-to-one link between adult psychological functioning and childhood trauma, suspected or proven. Mahlendorf is not perplexed by such questions. In the actual clinical situation it is no easy task to discern what the analysand is allowing into awareness and what he or she is keeping from awareness at any given moment. Resistance is manifold and subtle, and we are always in its net. Yet, the author facetly distinguishes unconscious and conscious, defense and conflict, in fictional texts. Such an arbitrary decoding reveals how little the application of these concepts adds to our understanding of fiction. It also implies that making the unconscious conscious is an easy if somewhat mechanistic job. Even a minimum of clinical experience persuades otherwise.

Psychoanalysis is at its best when it questions itself in its most *heimlich* of settings, the clinical situation. Is psychoanalysis art or science? Both? Neither? Can we even pose the question? Do we find repression, conflict, defense, and transference in the clinical interaction because we have so construed it that no other discovery is possible, so that confirmation is always obtained? Or if we try to free ourselves from "memory and desire," as Bion advised, is real

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- 578 -

discovery still possible? These troubling and salutary questions are at the very heart of our clinical work and cannot be set aside by the construal of interpretation as convincing narrative rather than scientific hypothesis. Such a reframing of our activity does not alter our dilemma. This same dilemma is vividly exemplified in psychoanalytic literary criticism as well. The author of *The Wellsprings of Literary Creation* might have held up a mirror to reflect it for us, but she assumed she was looking through a window onto an originating watery wilderness.

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- 579 -

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