Anderson Responds

Further Reflections on the Psychology of Artistic Creativity

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The Central Point

Arthur Miller is often thought of as being one of the two foremost American dramatists in the mid-20th century, the other being Tennessee Williams. Asked how he writes his plays, Williams replied, "I think that all plays come out of some inner tension in the playwright himself. He is concerned about something, and that concern begins to work itself out in the form of a creative activity." Later in the interview, he added, "I think I write mainly from my unconscious mind" (Alfred J. Devlin, ed., *Conversations with Tennessee Williams*, 1986, 124, 129).

Williams' statement captures the central point of my essay: artists create out of their inner, most personal preoccupations and conflicts. None of the commentators disagreed with that claim. The point made most frequently is that there is more besides the personal wellspring of creativity that I highlighted. They asserted, and I could not agree more, that other factors, such as historical and ideological forces and personal experiences besides inner conflicts, also contribute to the creative product. Commentaries such as those by Ken Fuchsman and Don Carveth supplement my focus on the basic psychological source of creativity.

Two of the commentaries in particular added to my explanation of the psychology of creativity. Alan C. Elms accepts that artists make use of their inner concerns in their work and then present the function they accomplish by doing this. He argues that they may be expressing, defending, or seeking restitution as they feed their personal conflicts into their works. William Todd Schultz also accepts the validity of the psychological analysis of art and artists and then explains the value of this form of analysis.

My only major objection is with the use, by two commentators, of the disparaging term, *reductionism*. My claim is that personal motivations fuel a work of art, but I neither state nor imply that the meaning of the work comes down to those motivations. Tobias Van Assche notes that "knowing Miller's life story" is useful "as long as it is not presented as the only correct way to interpret the play." I would go even farther. I would say that Miller's life story does not give us any way of interpreting the play.

Reductionism refers to the view that a work of art is not what it seems to be, that the fullness of the creative product may be ignored. Rather, in this view, the work *really means* some simple formula that is not known to the artist but is known to the psychoanalytic interpreter. I never try to interpret *The Crucible*. Instead, I was providing a framework for understanding the process of creativity. I was arguing that the creator is energized, stimulated, and motivated by inner concerns. Those concerns provide the fuel, but they do not give us an inner key to the work of art.

Do All Artists Draw from Deeply Personal Sources?

Still, there is no question that I stated my position in a broad way: "In creating their work, artists rely on that which haunts, obsesses, troubles, and moves them….What possibly could feed artists' imagination except their inner concerns, conflicts, and preoccupations?"

Lisa Ruddick commented that in many instances, my perspective helps account for artistic creativity, but she questions if my framework applies to all artists. She believes "that it is theoretically possible for an artist to produce outstanding work without infusing it with his or her psychological conflicts. This would especially be the case when the medium is an abstract one." In looking for an example of a work of art that lacks emotional meaning, she quotes a spare poem by William Carlos Williams about a cat climbing over a jam closet.

The easy answer would be to make a small emendation along the lines of what Tennessee Williams once said: "All work is autobiographical if it is serious. Everything an artist produces is his inner history, transposed into another time" (Donald Spoto, *The Kindness of Strangers: The Life of Tennessee Williams*, 1985, 114).

The scribble of a poem about the cat might be seen as not being serious.

Yet even with that poem, it does not seem far-fetched to speculate that the author's emotional dynamics might have motivated it. Ruddick quotes a blogger who comments, "The first time I read this poem, I BRISTLED with excitement, literally." The blogger's emotional reaction might mean that he has tuned into the psychological dynamics that fueled the poem; Williams may have felt that he was sometimes on the verge of falling if he did not walk carefully through life.

I cannot claim to know that all art, including painting and music, is fueled by the artist's inner concerns. But what has struck me repeatedly is that, even in those areas, when I have had a chance to learn in detail about the artist's inner life, there is a vital connection between the work and the artist's personal dynamics.

Some years ago, an outstanding painter was in psychoanalytic therapy with me. When she spoke about what she was aware of as she was painting, she talked about her attention to process, such as how she handled the edges of objects or how she made use of light and shadow. But when we spoke in depth of a finished work, she could see each piece had a new psychological meaning to her. One self-portrait, for example, expressed a feeling of sadness that she was not in touch with as she was painting.

David M. Terman, a psychoanalyst, has studied the life and work of composer Gustav Mahler. I asked him whether he thinks that Mahler's works reflect his emotions. Terman (in a private communication) replied:

> In that sense, he was the most autobiographical of composers. His longing for, and love pleas to, [his wife] Alma are all over his 6th, 9th and 10th Symphonies. His preoccupation with death is in many of his songs, for example, "*Kindertotenlieder*" and the third of the "Songs of a Wayfarer"….The dreadful blows of fate…are in the devastating last movement of the 6th Symphony. Almost everything he wrote is impregnated with the experiences of his life.

Creative Collaboration

Noticing my emphasis on the individual artist, Monisha Pasupathi, Vimala C. Pasupathi, and Benjamin Armintor point out that many artworks are the result of collaboration. They ask, "How does the collaborative aspect of authorship affect the claim of a work's reflecting the internal conflicts of a single individual?"

One approach would be to consider how the individual psychology of each of the collaborators contributed to the final product. I looked into the creation of the classic film, *Casablanca*, when I taught a course on the psychology of film. The screenplay resulted from the collaboration of a number of writers. One of the reasons for the film's effectiveness is that it synthesizes a love story (between Ilsa and Rick, the characters played by Ingrid Bergman and Humphrey Bogart) with a political story (about the resistance of the French and their allies to the Nazis). The screenplay underwent many revisions. The brother team of Julius and Philip Epstein, in their rewrite, made the love story more engrossing by increasing the appeal of Ilsa and making her a more sympathetic character. Howard Koch, in his rewrite, improved the political story, especially by bringing Rick into this story. In the play, he was just a disappointed lover; in the Koch version, he becomes a former freedom fighter who cares about the struggle against the Germans (Harlan Lebo, *Casablanca: Behind the Scenes*, 1992). It may be that the love story resonated with the Epsteins because of personal reasons, and, therefore, they were motivated to and able to improve that part of the screenplay. Similarly, it may be that Koch, for personal reasons, related to the political story. I am hypothesizing that in a collaboration, the personal psychology of the artists moves them to make their individual contributions to the joint product.

It would be equally fruitful to consider how co-creators inspire and play off one another, as in the collaboration between composer Giuseppe Verdi and librettist Arrigo Boito. In creating two operas based on plays by Shakespeare, they inspired each other. Verdi respected Boito's understanding of Shakespeare and his ability to capture in Italian the power of Shakespeare's English. Boito, though a composer himself, recognized that Verdi had a genius he did not possess.

Miller's Jewish Background

"Professor Anderson's essay," writes Irene Javors, "would be amplified by investigation into Miller's Jewish background." Let us see what such an investigation in relation to *The Crucible* reveals.

In his autobiography Miller speaks about the pervasive influence of his Jewish background. He had a bar mitzvah but had little interest in Jewish observance and was a non-believer from an early age. Imbibing from those around him an assumption of Gentile anti-Semitism, he felt as if he were living in "a beleaguered zone surrounded by strangers with violent hearts" (*Timebends*, 26).

Some of his most powerful early memories involved sitting next to his loving great-grandfather in the synagogue. On one magical occasion, his great-grandfather, after telling him to cover his eyes, went up to the Holy Ark that housed the Torah scrolls. As Miller recalls, "I peeked through the fuzz of my eyelashes and saw the most astonishing thing—about fifteen old men, bent over and covered completely by their prayer shawls, all of them in white socks, *dancing*" (*Timebends*, 39).

When Miller had the idea of writing about the Salem Witch Trials, he made a research trip to the Salem Historical Society. He noticed an etching in which several girls are screaming and gesticulating while a few men are "shrinking back in pious outrage." He recalled, "Suddenly it became my memory of the dancing men in the synagogue on 114th Street as I had glimpsed them between my shielding fingers, the same chaos of bodily motion." "In this picture, adults fleeing the sight of a supernatural event; in my memory, a happier but not less eerie circumstance." He concluded, "I knew instantly what the connection was: the moral intensity of the Jews and the clan's defensiveness against pollution from outside the ranks. Yes, I understood Salem in that flash, it was suddenly my own inheritance" (*Timebends*, 338).

Elsewhere he explained more about what he saw as the connection between the Salem Puritans and the Jews of his childhood. "They were putative ur-Hebrews, with the same fierce idealism, devotion to God, tendency to legalistic reductiveness, and the same longings for the pure and intellectually elegant argu-

ment" (*Timebends*, 42).

What I make of these comments is that they reveal Miller's conflicted feelings about Judaism as he encountered it in his early years. In some ways he felt attracted to it and admired it, and to an extent it was a part of him. But his chief reaction was critical, as reflected in *The Crucible*; he saw the religious adherents as being dangerously destructive in their dogmatic belief that they had the truth. The play further implied the same accusation against the zealous anti-communists of the early 1950s.

Looking at Miller and Judaism gives me an opportunity to make a comment about the writing of psychobiography. Javors makes an arresting speculation, noting that, in gaining possession of Marilyn Monroe, Miller "managed to surpass his father, brother, and all the gentile men—Monroe was the ultimate sexual conquest for Miller. He had overturned the stereotype of the Jewish male who isn't supposed…to get the blonde."

In what I have seen (and I do not pretend to know all the material about Miller's relationship with Monroe), there is no evidence that Miller's ability as a Jew to obtain a blonde Gentile was a major factor in his attraction to her. Miller speaks candidly about Monroe's appeal to him. He points to her great beauty, her overwhelming sexual allure, and his sense that she needed to be taken care of and that she saw Miller as the person who could rescue her.

In other words, Javors is right to point to the importance of Miller's Jewish background, and there is also value in a commentator speculating, as she does, on what the influence of Miller's Jewishness might be. However, psychobiographers are in a different position. They may start with hypotheses, but they must be careful to interrogate the evidence and to let the evidence determine their conclusions.

***James William Anderson**'s biography may be found on page 259.* ❑

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