

Responses to Anderson's Artistic Creativity Symposium

Reductionism and Conscientious Politics

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James William Anderson claims that “art has a deeply personal aspect that is at the heart of its creation,” and that the “artist struggles with a conflict and expresses that conflict in the work.” He views Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* as simultaneously speaking to political issues and stemming from a personal concern. Anderson goes on to claim that “one’s political stance also stems fundamentally from personal concerns.” Like the playwright himself, he sees Miller’s “leveling impulse,” his “siding with oppressed people,” as a defensive evasion of his guilt over his ambition and competitive aggression towards his father and brother. Miller felt he had dodged the guilt arising from oedipal victories by identifying with the oppressed. Anderson writes:

The implication is there is a double function to his identification with the downtrodden. First, it enables him to expose the wickedness of the rulers, thus justifying his right to compete with and outdo them. Second, it offers him a way of denying that he is surpassing his elders; he is not portraying himself as being better than others but rather as being one of the common people. Miller further notes that, at the same time as he took this position, he relentlessly pursued his goal of accomplishment. He declared his “equality with the least of the citizenry,” he noted, “while in the real world working day and night to achieve what glory and superiority my art might win me.”

Anderson insists, “All of this is not to invalidate an artist’s political position. It’s being fueled by personal motives does not give evidence that the position is either right or wrong; that is a separate matter.”

That’s true. It is a fallacy—the *ad hominem* fallacy—to hold that the motives for a person’s beliefs either validate or invalidate them; their validity must be established on other grounds. But in correctly making this point, Anderson evades a more serious issue, that of psychological reductionism. He views Miller’s politics, his “leveling impulse” and his “siding with oppressed people,” as “stemming from a personal concern” and proceeds to identify, as does the psychoanalyzed Miller himself, the personal concern involved as his oedipal rivalry and guilt. But what about Miller’s other operative personal concerns? What about his conscience? Are oedipal concerns our only concerns? Can’t one identify with the oppressed *both* out of guilt *and* out of what Jean-Jacques Rousseau called “pity” or “fellow-feeling”?

In my view we must resist the psychological reductionism that tends to negate the basic psychoanalytic principles of “overdetermination” and “multiple function”; our beliefs and actions have multiple causes and serve multiple functions. As what Freud called a “compromise formation,” a blend, alloy, or compound, Miller’s political stance, like yours and mine, was shaped not only by the id (oedipal aggression) and superego (oedipal guilt) but also by the ego (rational thought and deliberation)—and also by what the psychohistorian Eli Sagan distinguished as a *conscience* irreducible to superego. Whereas the latter is grounded in identification with the aggressor and entails aggression retroflected away from the rival and back against the self under threat of castration, the former is grounded in identification with the nurturer and expresses itself in acts of conscientious concern.

Any truly scientific psychoanalytic approach to politics must be prepared to study the various ways and degrees to which political commitments are shaped by such conflicting motives. Any psychoanalytic approach to left-wing politics that reduces it to oedipal aggression and guilt and ignores the creative, conscientious concern that may *also* motivate it to varying degrees amounts to little more than bourgeois ideology.

I find it sad to think that Arthur Miller’s personal analysis might have strengthened his superego and intensified his guilt rather than achieving what Franz Alexander, Sander Ferenczi, and Eli Sagan felt its proper aim should be; namely, the elimination of the superego in favor of the conscience. Unlike the superego, the

conscience is motivated by love rather than hate. A conscientious politics will necessarily be a politics of love that displays a "leveling impulse" and that "sides with oppressed people," whatever additional motivating factors may to varying degrees also be at work.

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Psychological Functions of Artistic Creativity

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I fully agree with both Arthur Miller and James William Anderson that artistic creativity at its best is based on the artists' most insistent psychological processes—some of them largely conscious, some largely unconscious. However, I find it useful to go beyond that rather broad formulation, attempting to understand the artist's creativity better by looking more closely at the distinct psychological functions it plays for each individual creator. Drawing upon the commonalities across several theoretical traditions, I have most often discussed creative work as satisfying any or all of three categories: *expressive* functions, *defensive* functions, and *restitutive* functions (*Uncovering Lives*, 1994).

Creative artists tend to emphasize the *expressive functions* of their work most often in their youth. Creative work serves to differentiate the artist from other artists (or from non-artists); it helps the artist to arrive at a satisfying and stable identity. The traditional *Bildungsroman* is largely concerned with the principal character's search for an adult identity; in depicting that search, the

novelist seeks to express his or her own identity. Jack Kerouac, J.D. Salinger, and Thomas Wolfe are representative of writers whose best-known work is oriented toward self-expression, but Arthur Miller's emphasis on expressing authenticity in his work indicates the salience of this functional category for him as well. One of Jim Anderson's quotations from Miller is strikingly apt here: that in his plays, "the people have some preconception of having been displaced from what they should be or even of what they 'really' are, and the tension consists in their trying to arrive by one means or another at where they 'ought' to be."

Psychobiographers tend to emphasize the *defensive functions* of a creative artist's work—the ways in which the work helps the artist to cope temporarily with his or her psychological problems, consciously or more often unconsciously. Creative work may be used defensively in ways as diverse as the entire armamentarium of psychological defenses, from those first identified by Sigmund Freud through others added by Anna Freud to the most recent clinical lists. Jim Anderson uses Miller's play *The Crucible* and Miller's autobiography *Timebends* to identify an important defensive pattern both in Miller's creative work and in his political stance: an "identification with the downtrodden" that "enables him to expose the wickedness of the rulers; thus justifying his right to compete with and outdo them" and "offers him a way of denying that he is surpassing his elders; he is not portraying himself as being better than others but rather as being one of the common people." Thus Miller can seek fame and fortune (and court one of the most beautiful women in the world) while telling himself he is still just ordinary folk.

Using creative works to play defensive functions does not resolve the underlying psychological conflicts. The creative artist must keep returning to those conflicts and expend further creative energy in developing new or revised defensive structures. That pattern is evident in Arthur Miller's return in several of his works (not only *The Crucible* but his play *A View from the Bridge*, 1955, 1956, and his script for the film *The Mistfis*, 1961) to his struggle with the conflict between his moral principles and his sensual desire for Marilyn Monroe. When creative work plays a truly *restitutive function* in the creative artist's personality—that is, when