Chapter 3

Father, Don’t You See That I Am Dreaming?: The Female Gothic and the Creative Process

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In the course of reading and teaching literature for many years, I have been impressed with the ways that literary works attempt to disguise the fact that they are often coded personal sagas, angst-filled daydreams committed to paper and shared with the reading public. Obviously, literary works are also ideological statements, historical documents, and aesthetic productions, but they still remain in essence the work of individual human beings, all of whom have a personal history, a childhood, parents, and loved ones who have supported or betrayed them, or, most likely, some combination of the two. And yet critics are hesitant to discuss, let alone analyze, the personal content in literary works, while authors are often all too quick to conceal, obfuscate, and deny any autobiographical materials in their works. Some artists have, however, over the years spoken sensitively about these matters, and I cite a very few here to frame this chapter. The first is Richard Wright, the African American novelist, who, in an unpublished essay entitled “On Literature,” observed: “All writing is a secret form of autobiography” (6). The second example is an observation by the early twentieth-century artist Georges Braque, who noted: “Art is a wound turned to light” (3). And the third
statement is from D. H. Lawrence, who noted that “one sheds one’s sicknesses in books—repeats and presents again one’s emotions, to be master of them” (90). Mastering trauma through artistic production, transforming the wounds of life by converting them into recognizable phantasies—these gestures would appear to form the core of writing as well as reading visual and verbal creativity.

One of the first questions that this volume attempts to address is, How does one approach creativity as a manifestation of an artist’s individual’s psyche? As the Introduction notes, Freud considered creativity to be an adult extension of imaginative play, but he also talks at length about how phantasy is deeply interwoven with trauma. A sort of equation begins to emerge here: if creativity is psychic play, perhaps that psychic play is most like what we recognize as phantasy, and if phantasy is a response to trauma, then literature is written by individuals who have turned their traumas into the phantasies that we recognize as “art.” Jonathan Culler makes a similar point when he discusses the nature of Freudian narratives: “One may maintain the primacy of the event; it took place at the appropriate moment and determined subsequent events and their significance. Or one can maintain that the structures of signification, the discursive requirements, work to produce a fictional event. At this point Freud admits the contradiction between these two perspectives, but refuses to choose between them” (Culler, 180). What that last quotation attempts to get at is the chicken and egg question of what comes first: trauma or fantasy. For Freud, either neurosis sprang from unconscious phantasies produced by conflicting internal and infantile sexual instincts or neurosis was the product of traumas, that is, outside intrusions on the psyche in the form of child abuse or seduction. (cf. “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”), Freud never decided conclusively between these two theories, and I would admit that I have been dwelling and oscillating on the issue as it manifests itself in female gothic fiction. This chapter will examine two important female gothic novels and ask if they reveal to us how we can understand creativity as a manifestation of trauma or phantasy or, finally, some combination of both.

I would like to begin by presenting an abbreviated summary of the much more complex thesis of Elizabeth Bronfen’s *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*, a work that speaks to the concerns of the female gothic in a number of interesting ways. Bronfen’s major claim is that psychoanalysis has consistently attempted to foreground the role and importance of the father in the construction of the ego because of an unacknowledged need to root out, displace, and marginalize the mother. But the displacement of the mother from