
REVIEWS

Elisabeth Young-Bruehl. *Subject to Biography: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Writing Women's Lives*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998. 282p.

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Elisabeth Young-Bruehl's third collection of theoretical essays offers consistently fresh perspectives on a surprisingly wide range of topics, from biography writing to anorexia nervosa. The first of the book's two major parts, "The Practice of Psychobiography," is comprised of essays exploring the process, practice, and theory of biography writing, essays informed by Young-Bruehl's experiences writing her acclaimed biographies of Anna Freud and Hannah Arendt. In the second part, "Feminism and Psychoanalysis," Young-Bruehl explores the vexed relationship between the two schools of thought as she treats key issues of their mutual concern. What unifies these two otherwise quite dissimilar sets of writings are the revealing intersections among psychoanalysis, feminism, and biography that inform and define Young-Bruehl's project throughout the volume.

Not only biographers, but also those who read biographies, and wish to do so from a theoretically informed perspective, will find the essays in Part 1 illuminating. Young-Bruehl is sensitive to the postmodernist perception that biography is a hopelessly untheorized and essentialist activity. And, although die-hard postmodernists will probably not find enough in Young-Bruehl's work to acquit biography and its practitioners of such charges, her first two chapters do go a long way toward offering a theoretical framework for biographical scholarship that both relieves it from the necessity of claiming scientific objectivity and informs it with original psychoanalytical insights. In "The Biographer's Empathy with Her Subject," Young-Bruehl considers the role of the biographer's subjectivity and her relationship to her subject, celebrating the cultivation of a kind of empathy she describes as "putting another *in yourself*, becoming another person's habitat" (22), a kind of cohabitation that, if undertaken with care, can lead to important self-discovery for the biographer herself (who is, as such, *subject to biography*). In "Psychoanalytic Reflections on Creativity," the only chapter that deals with literary authors (including Yeats, Wilde, Hopkins, and Stein), Young-Bruehl presents her theory of "the character-ideal" that creative people form for themselves in late

adolescence as a kind of guiding image or figure that organizes the sense of self and the particular direction that the creative process will take.

While this — a continuation of the main thrust of one of Young-Bruehl's earlier collections of theoretical essays, *Creative Characters* (Harvard, 1991) — is an original and intriguing idea, I am made uneasy by the very structuralist impulse that guides it, resulting in three rigidly fixed types into which all people's characters and their character-ideals can be placed: narcissistic, obsessional, and hysterical. Indeed, Young-Bruehl's propensity for classification in general, though it does in places help make her material manageable for readers, is also the single most disturbing aspect of the book. Especially evident throughout the essays collected in Part 1 is the uncanny tendency for things to fall into exactly three groups or types: from the three character types already mentioned to three modes of biographical empathy, to "three methodological roads [that] have appeared and been considered" in the "joint development of psychoanalysis and biography" (87), to three reasons "why psychoanalysis is unique among the sciences" (102), to three interrelated themes in the work of Hannah Arendt that have attracted the attention of three generations of feminists, respectively — to name a few. One is left with the impression that these categories are arbitrary or imposed, and in either case cannot be taken seriously.

This tripartate thinking seems to ease up a bit in the essays that comprise Part 2. This is also, coincidentally, where the strongest pieces in the book are found. Especially provocative are Young-Bruehl's rereadings of Freud and the conclusions she comes to on a variety of topics. In "Rereading Freud on Female Development," a fascinating exercise in historical-biographical reconstruction (163), she does something Freud himself did not but might have: she uses his later work on female pre-Oedipal mother attachment to revise his early theories of female psychology for which he has been so severely criticized by both psychoanalysts and feminists and with which the later work is inconsistent. This analysis leads to some fascinating conclusions, including the idea that "rather than being relatively without a superego [as Freud's earlier theories had suggested], the girl in her sustained Oedipus Complex, having abandoned her mother for her father, should have a superego made up largely of her maternal identification" (169). The implications for feminist reappraisals of Freud suggested in Young-Bruehl's approach are significant.

One of the more valuable dimensions of this collection stems from Young-Bruehl's interest and skill as a historian. The two essays that follow "Rereading Freud," for instance, offer comprehensive historical overviews of their specific topics as well as insightful analyses. "On Psychoanalysis and Feminism" (co-

authored with Laura Wexler), distinct phases of the relationship between psychoanalysis and feminism are described, culminating with a persuasive call for a more “psychoanalytically informed feminist discussion of female sexuality” (189). And in what is bound to be the most controversial essay in the collection, “What Happened to *Anorexie Hysterique?*” (co-authored with Sarah Cummins Townsend), the authors offer a cultural history of anorexia and argue that it should be seen “as a form of hysteria, as chiefly a means of avoiding sexuality or transferring sexual fantasies into other modes” (210). Although the rejection of the commonly accepted view among in feminist theory that anorexia nervosa is a sort of protest against our culture’s cult of thinness and objectification of women’s bodies is bound to make many feminist readers uneasy, the close reading of Freud’s work on defense on which their conclusion rests makes the argument rather convincing. Not only is this piece valuable for its fresh view of the current anorexia epidemic, but it also — as do other essays in the latter half of the book — demonstrates the ongoing relevance of Freud’s work to feminism. Overall, Young-Bruehl’s compelling and original views, consistently grounded in superb scholarship, recommend this volume to readers across disciplines. ✱