

DR. JUNG AT THE SITE OF BLOOD: A NOTE ON BLOWN FIGURES

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In an essay on Audrey Thomas' novel *Blown Figures*, George Bowering speculates about the identity of Miss Miller, a figure he acknowledges as crucial to an understanding of the motifs and themes of the novel. Bowering suggests that she may be "the sacrificial penitent's altar ego," "Isobel's attendant at the loony bin," or a possible allusion to Henry James's *Daisy Miller*.¹ Whatever else Miss Miller might be in the novel, it would be well to take into account first the fact that she is based on a young American woman from New York known by the pseudonym of Frank Miller, some of whose fantasies and visions were published in 1906 under the title "Quelques Faits d'imagination créatrice subconsciente."² These fantasies formed the basis of Jung's seminal work *Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido*,³ from which Ms. Thomas has created Miss Miller. Thomas herself gives us a clue to the importance of Jung in the writing of *Blown Figures* in an interview published in the spring of 1975: "I hadn't read Jung before I wrote *Blown Figures*, and then all of a sudden last summer I pick up all this stuff! He talked at one point of how Africa smelled like blood."⁴ To know that Miss Miller derives from Jung is essential to understanding her role in the novel and to understanding the role that fantasy and ritual play in Isobel's story and in the writing of fiction for Thomas. It would not be overstating the case to say that the influence of Jung's ideas on *Blown Figures* is as significant as that influence is on Robertson Davies' *The Manticore*, in which Jungian concepts similarly provide structure and assist meaning.

Only a few facts can be assembled to flesh out Miss Miller: she was born in about 1878-79; she was apparently a writer (she mentions "publications" in the work Jung knew); in 1898 she travelled extensively in Europe; and she later underwent analysis by Théodore Flournoy, who published her fantasies in 1906.⁵ Some years after the publication of his exhaustive analysis of her fantasies, Jung learned that she was under treatment for a "schizophrenic disturbance."⁶ Clearly, Miss Miller — a traveller, a woman obsessed with fantasy — resembles Isobel. But the relationship between Jung and Miss Miller is similarly important. In both editions of his work, he

¹"The Site of Blood," *Canadian Literature*, No. 65 (Summer 1975), p. 90.

²A translation of the French version under the title "Some Instances of Subconscious Creative Imagination" is appended to Jung's *Symbols of Transformation: An Analysis of the Prelude to a Case of Schizophrenia*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, 2nd. ed. with corrections (1967; rpt. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1974), pp. 447-62.

³Written in 1911-12 and originally published in English translation in 1916 as *Psychology of the Unconscious*. The work was rewritten and revised, and in 1952 published as *Symbole der Wandlung*. This version appears as Volume 5 of Jung's Collected Works under the title *Symbols of Transformation*.

⁴"Interview/Audrey Thomas," *Capilano Review*, No. 7 (Spring 1975), p. 89.

⁵*Symbols of Transformation*, pp. 450, 449.

⁶*Symbols of Transformation*, p. xxviii.

is at pains to assert that he had no personal knowledge of the author of "Quelques Faits d'imagination créatrice subconsciente": she "is just as shadowy to me as are her phantasies; and, like Odysseus, I have tried to let this phantom drink only enough blood to enable it to speak, and in so doing betray some of the secrets of the inner life."⁷ In *Blown Figures*, Miss Miller is silent, while Isobel plays the part of Odysseus exploring "the mind's antipodes," giving voice to her fears and obsessions.⁸ For Jung, Miss Miller serves as a "phantom" in the way that she also serves Isobel and Isobel's creator: the actual Miss Miller, first for Jung and then for Audrey Thomas, is transformed into a fictional creation. In a sense, the "real" has become "fantastic."

Central to Miss Miller's function in the novel is her role as fantasist and dreamer, a role that Isobel appropriates for herself; and, in an ironic way, Miss Miller, dreamer, becomes part of Isobel's fantasies and dream life: "You're only a sort of thing in my dream, Miss Miller; you're only a sort of something in my dream" (p. 297). Progressively, she and Isobel become identified as one, a reason for much of Isobel's antagonism towards her: "I see you are a barren woman, Miss Miller. Take these leaves and perhaps you will conceive" (p. 538). It is not insignificant that one of Miss Frank Miller's fantasy poems, "The Hymn of Creation," deals with her ability as a woman to create life, and with the realization of this capability in the form of a young sailor.

The significance of Miss Miller to Isobel lies not only in Miss Miller's role as dreamer and fantasist, but also in the content of Miss Miller's visions, particularly as they concern the archetypes of the mother and the self-sacrificing hero. Isobel's vision of herself as "terrible" or "destroying" mother — the polar opposite to the life-giving and nourishing mother — leads her to symbolic self-destruction: to madness. The images of cannibalism, eating, and death all relate to this conception of herself. Her relationship to the Dutch Boy, a type of child, is further related to her maternal role, and seems to hint at an incest motif in her relationship to her own dead child: "Sexual intercourse with a ghost results in death" (p. 318). The final chapter of the novel corresponds in some respects to Miss Miller's vision of the sacrifice of the hero, "Chiwantopel": A Hypnagogic Drama." Preparations for this moment have been numerous: the scorpion (an animal that can fatally wound itself) (p. 49), the slaying of the spring god (p. 45), a reference to the ritual of the Black Mass — "The woman who serves as the altar . . . is nude" (p. 429) — and a dream of premonition involving sacrifice and the search for a child (p. 169). Catholic priests and the ritual formula for confession are a further prelude to the primitive ritual Isobel undergoes for the cleansing of her guilt. Her journey to "explore the mind's antipodes," however, leads not to health, but to a confirmation of her madness:

"Basa-Basa," they said to one another.

"Basa-Basa." They giggled and ran away (p. 525).

Having failed to exorcise her demons, her direct contact with the primitive, rather than bringing her to a new wholeness, results only in complete fragmentation. Hence the novel ends in pleas for pity (DAMIRIFA) and with the final lines:

⁷*Psychology of the Unconscious*, trans. Beatrice M. Hinkle (1916; rpt. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1946), p. 490.

⁸*Blown Figures* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1974), p. 189. Subsequent references are to this edition.

NO MORE TWIST
MISS MILLER
NO MORE TWIST.

Isobel's situation is that of Miss Miller after her European sojourn — schizophrenia. She has completely lost contact with reality and entered the world of madness where things both are and are not what they seem to be. In addition to conjuring up the dead child, the allusions to Lewis Carroll's Alice stories function as signposts to Isobel/Alice's own state of bewilderment and confusion, lost among Red Queens and White Queens. The prognosis for Isobel at the end of the novel is the fate that awaited Miss Frank Miller — "a total surrender, not to the positive possibilities of life, but to the nocturnal world of the unconscious,"⁹ that is, psychic death. Like Miss Miller, she has, by a final and pitiless irony, made herself not only victim of the real world, but also prey to the demons of her own inner one.

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⁹*Symbols of Transformation*, p. 436.

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