

Artist at Play: Wiseman's Theory of Creativity

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There is a commonly held notion that an artist is a solitary figure, attic-bound, impoverished, gallantly if somewhat narcissistically dedicated to the creation of immortal works. In the popular stereotype, the artist is concerned with beauty and truth but not with love, community, sharing or social responsibility. The Joycean image of the lonely, exiled creator has a deep hold on our imagination. So, too, does the quip of some late-Victorian cynic, that the artist should be prepared to murder his mother rather than neglect his potential for creativity.

No such *fin de siècle* shadows are found in Adele Wiseman's theory of creativity in *Old Woman at Play* (1978). Ostensibly, the book is the story of her mother's dolls. I say ostensibly because *Old Woman at Play* is an extraordinary mixture of bits and pieces which manage to cohere brilliantly. There are three main threads. The first is the story of Chaika Waisman's life, from its start in the Ukraine, through New World trials and tribulations in Winnipeg, to the present, where Chaika is

in her eighties, dying of cancer and the creator of more than one thousand rag dolls. The second is the author's own life story: a rebellious childhood, various world travels, and a lifelong quest to understand her roots and the meaning of creativity. Interwoven with the biography and autobiography is an existentialist exploration of the artistic process in relation to Canadian society and contemporary educational practice.

This exploration, conversational and anecdotal, becomes a detective story, an attempt to "crack her mother's code" and uncover the mysteries of creativity in this 'innocently' productive woman. Mrs. Waisman provides few or no didactic, analytical answers. Our answers come obliquely, in and through example, anecdote and illustration. The dolls themselves, in numerous coloured and black-and-white photographs, supplement Wiseman's comments on them and provide a kind of rogues gallery or zany Greek chorus. Some of them hang on Wiseman's bookshelves and seem (as she comments) to have stepped out of the books behind them.

The book's format is no accident but is, like style in a novel, the inevitable expression of the accompanying vision. Wiseman and her mother see art as basic human activity. Far from being the narcissistic product of an isolated individual, it is a means of communication, mediation, sharing: a sharing which expresses, and generates, love.

As well as that of artist as solitary egoist, Wiseman's analysis disturbs other popular notions. For some generations, the West has distinguished Fine Art from "crafts," and "creative" literature (read poetry, fiction and drama) from lower orders of words. The Artist, creator of Art, is deemed to be as distinct from the ordinary man or woman as Michael Angelo is from some amateur potter. Is it disturbing to be led to suspect that Chaika Waisman's rag dolls may be as creative as her daughter's magnificent novel, *Crackpot?* Or is it reassuring? Perhaps both. And perhaps, as we are faced with what is rather pretentiously called "Women's Non-traditional Literature,"¹ Wiseman's theory of creativity has significant implications for women, as well as for the world at large.

Chaika Waisman's career as doll-maker began in earnest in 1950, with the last major outbreak of polio in Canada. Earlier, she had helped to support her family by sewing. By 1950, with her adult children leaving or about to leave the parental nest, and financial burdens lessening, Mrs. Waisman was able to indulge once again the pleasure in colour, texture and form which she had felt in childhood, apprenticed to a talented *modistka* in the Ukraine. Equally strong, or stronger, was the desire to give pleasure to the children encountered in her volunteer work in a Winnipeg hospital.

"Why do you make dolls, mama?"

"To please the children."

Children, for Chaika, expand to include her adult daughters, their friends and, ultimately, the human race.

One suspects the truth of Wiseman's conviction, that human creativity is understood little and valued less in our society, The Canada Council notwithstanding. Wiseman set herself, not to evaluate, but to discover, reveal and share: "to trace and celebrate the most generous impulse, and the most mysterious process known to man, the impulse to create. . . ."² For her subject, she chose the most unimposing creator imaginable, an immigrant woman not five feet high, sewer of dolls and "junk creations." Chaika's materials are rags, buttons, fishbones, old bottles—an extraordinary collection of rejectables. Her *métier*, seamstress, is not a threatening one. Her daughter thereby hopes to avoid the poses, stances and masks which capitalized Art evokes in our society. (p.4)

One of her first and most welcome conclusions is that creativity is a natural human attribute. We are all creative to some degree. And this basic impulse is "a generous, social gesture." (p.9) Both the original act of making, and its correlative, the response to it, are creative. The ability or gift of the receiver is called "the other vital end of the creative act." (p.12) Once again, the key factor becomes a loving sharing rather than private glorification of the self.

Closer to classic theory is Wiseman's suggestion that the artist brings something new into being, thus enlarging our understanding of the world (and, simultaneously, his or her own understanding). Selecting, rejecting, shaping, ordering, the artist wrestles with the fragmentation of the universe and produces a new unity which is meant to be *shared*. (p.107) The artist thus becomes "a faithful link in an honorable chain of being." (p.108) The need to share this vision, this recreation of the world, is as strong as the initial need to shape it. By experiencing the work, the viewer is able to share in the artist's growth.

Both Wiseman's theory and her accomplished fiction may be compared with "play theology," popularized in the last few decades by theologians such as Robert Neale, Hugo Bayner, Harvey Cox, and Johan Huizinga.³ Like

Wiseman, theologians of play emphasize hope and celebration. Pain and tragedy are not ignored but are part of a world-view that stresses immanence, the harmony of body and soul, and a strong God-awareness. Like Wiseman's view of creativity, these attitudes constitute a state of mind or, as Harvey Cox puts it in *Feast of Fools*, a total way of life.

Play, like creation, is done for its own sake. The freedom of the player/creator is the first requisite. Chaika Waisman scoffs at the suggestion that she sell her dolls: "Sell my dolls? All my life I worked alongside my husband, to earn a piece of bread, to help bring up my children, to educate them. Now I don't need to sell my hands." (p.8) But freedom, Wiseman reminds us, is born of service to an ideal. She makes the point by telling an anecdote of a Chinese calligrapher, "enslaved" to his stroke for a lifetime, who finally discovered that his stroke had become his wing. This is juxtaposed with the story of her parents' drudgery, their sacrifice to a better life for their children. Backbreaking labour: yet Chaika still "loves" dressmaking. A further analogue is child-rearing, another "enslavement" accepted freely and transformed by love.

Although the dolls look cheerful, and are created to make children happy, Waisman's creations include thalidomide babies with grossly shortened arms, just as her personal memories include the horror of a two-headed child born to a neighbour in the Ukraine. Pogroms, and the Holocaust, constitute a minor but significant note in *Old Woman at Play*, just as they do in *Crackpot*. As in play theology, both women acknowledge, even accentuate pain and tragedy, while incorporating these elements into a world which is seen and celebrated affirmatively. Wiseman remembers her parents' struggle to make "a compensatory garden of possibility for us." (p.118) Similarly, Chaika's thalidomide dolls give expression to existing pain ("the world should see that sometimes there is tragic in families that it's hard to bear"); by shaping, and sharing, the pain is *made bearable*. (Pp. 124-5)

The bits and pieces which go into Chaika's creations will remind anyone who has read *Crackpot* of that novel's epigraph: "He stored the Divine Light in a Vessel, but the Vessel, unable to contain the Holy Radiance, burst and its shards, permeated with sparks of the Divine, scattered throughout the universe." This Kabbalistic creation legend may be explored in the two major works of Hebrew scholar Gershom Scholem, and in a brief article by Kenneth Sherman on *Crackpot*.⁵ For our purposes, it is sufficient to point out that Wiseman's novel gives dramatic form to this Lurianic myth of humanity's breaking, exile and recreation, while *Old Woman at Play* offers a curious correspondence with the myth and the vision behind it. Like the mythic Creator, the human artist takes flawed bits and pieces, rejected by the world at large; and out of her own fulness, this fragmentation is brought into a new unity. The dark past lives on in the present, but the broken has been made whole, in a magic circle which unites mankind. Such is the reconciling, joining work effected by artist, artifact and audience in Wiseman's theory.

It is significant that Wiseman sees her mother's basic vision in relation to her childhood experiences in the Ukraine. Her three adjoining towns (now one) with their rich emotional life and grotesque tragedies, the dividing river and its tiny pleasure island, are transmogrified into Chaika Waisman's inner knowledge of a cosmic unity that embraces fragmentation and conflict. Wiseman envisages this two-in-one river "as a human body spreadeagled, with a teeming town, its head, at one fork, and a pleasure island, its crotch, at the other; its nature human, binary, unified and bifurcated, held together, pulling apart, coming from all directions and flowing in all directions, concentrating life around itself." (p.129) Like Margaret Laurence, Wiseman emphasizes the importance of cultural heritage and of ancestors in human experience and art; and, like Laurence, she makes a river a major symbol of human continuity, cultural and genetic inheritance, and existential unity. As Wiseman told Adele Freedman, the North Winnipeg of her own youth was "the very incubator of conflicting absolutes."⁶

Out of Wiseman's deep commitment to family and race, she strives to find order and meaning. Reading *Old Woman at Play*, and seeing Wiseman's roots, we are given insights into the vision behind *Crackpot*.

The geography of Chaika's childhood, and her daughter's conviction that we return compulsively to the emotional shape of our early world, serve as springboard for an attack on current idols and educational practice. Wiseman calls "the idea of 'reason,' of a logically sequential, consciously controlled linear existence in time," *an illusion* (p.128) She criticizes the school system for cultivating herd standards, for conspiring to rob children of their true experience, for preferring neat margins to creativity. Reviewing Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*, Marian Engel mounts a similar attack on neatness, conformity, and what she suspects is actually *fear* of the disturbing element in creativity. Wiseman also blames our educational system for stifling the creative potential in many children.

There is one element in our educational system and general culture which Wiseman does not tackle directly, either in relation to her own experience on her mother's: male chauvinism. In one parental anecdote, her father's memories exclude the part played by his wife, much to the latter's irritation: "Unfortunately, among the inessentials expunged almost entirely from my father's story of his life, is the part my mother played. . . . *Fifty-seven years and as far as he remembers I need never once have knotted my thread.* If my father's song of his life is recognizably the ancient, proud, blinkered chauvinism of the male, my mother's cry of protest at being edited out rings a truly modern note of female exasperation." (p.108)

Wiseman, however, uses the anecdote simply to make a point about female rebellion and high-spirited independence. Curiously, the book that celebrates her mother's art uses, with rare exceptions, the male pronoun to represent the artist. In Wiseman's fiction, *The Sacrifice* (1956) reflects not merely a patriarchal society (which would be realistic for the Winnipeg Jewish

community, especially in Wiseman's youth) but a male-oriented vision. The male protagonist's experience typifies universal human concerns, while the female characters are reduced to stereotypes of the good wife and immoral whore.

Crackpot, published eighteen years later, has a matriarchal vision. But even here, Wiseman uses the ancient stereotypes of man as spiritual and rational (Hoda's father Danile) and woman as earth-mother, part-time wife to the whole crazy world. From *Old Woman at Play*, one suspects that it was Wiseman's mother, not her father, who provided the germ for the novel's wise fool of a father: "You got to trust, Peisy," Chaika advises her husband when he reminds her of how a former employer had cheated them. (p.117)

The unforgettable heroine of *Crackpot* supports herself and her blind father by being "an actress on the mattress." Hoda considers herself a sexual worker motivated by the "highest socialist ideals of generosity and sharing." Wiseman's tongue may be in her cheek, here, but the suggestion that Hoda is an artist in human relationships, and that sexual love is an art as well as a generous sharing, are born out by the novel as a whole. This reinforces the theory of creativity in *Old Woman at Play*. Much of what Wiseman sees the artist as bringing about, such as mediation and reconciliation, seem particularly *female* accomplishments in relation to family life; yet the same words, transposed to theological realms, have been made to carry exclusively male connotations.

After the initial introduction of her mother as innocently productive, unthreatening, the question of innocence is not addressed immediately by Wiseman. Does Chaika Waisman know how much she knows, her daughter ponders. Does Danile's "generous innocence" protect that artist in straw from the knowledge that Hoda is a whore? Or that the world is full of pain and darkness? Danile, as the reader of *Crackpot* sees from the beginning and as Hoda learns, knows the dark side of

the world's face only too well, but his blind eyes continue to reflect its wonder and beauty.

Like Danile, Chaika Waisman is fully cognisant of pain and evil but continues to see the world's fullness as cause for celebration. At the centre of creativity, in Wiseman's portrait, is the artist's attitude of faith, hope and love. She describes her mother's insatiable appetite for life, contrasting it with the attitude of people traumatized by pain: "But nothing closed my mother off from her own experience, or diminished either her sense of her own essential dignity or her perception of alternate possibilities. It was the fulness of this still-living experience which she offered her children in all its dimensions, open for our exploration, like an extension of our own living space." (pp. 53-54) Portrait of the artist as a child. As a young woman. As "an ageless peer," retaining something of all the ages through which he or she has passed, and thereby enlarging the living space of all who partake of their vision. (pp.12-13)

This kind of innocence, however, can be dangerous. Often it constitutes a disturbance, a contradiction of vested interests or cultural taboos. The dolls, for example, created in pairs as a blow against loneliness, frequently suggest miscegenation. Mrs. Waisman comments simply that their colours go well together, but her daughter notes that here again the artist works toward "the dreaded, fascinating frontiers of the possible." (p.48)

To conclude, the vision of the world which underlies *Crackpot* is the one held by Chaika Waisman and put forward by her daughter as belonging to the archetypal artist. It is affirmative and celebratory. It is social, generous, and loving. It stems from wonder, and *acceptance* of what belongs, in Chaika Waisman's phrase, to "nature." Wonder is seen as the antithesis of greed, just as fear (not hate) is the opposite of love. The artist creates out of a profound need to share her vision, and both artist and audience are enriched by this sharing. There are no rules in this world of limitless possibility.

No standards: "Standards mark the limits of yesterday's conquests." (p.113)

The created work is a *living*, vital entity, *wrestled* out of fragmentation and flux.⁷ Out of a "mulch" of incoherent fragments come hints, revelations, vital energy in search of form. One of the many definitions of creativity which Wiseman tosses off along the way to manure her theory of creativity (itself a work of art) is: "Creativity is an expression of vitality which strives for the enhancement of vitality." (p.119)

The idea of artistic form fostered by New Critical theory tends to be static, Apollonian. Wiseman's form is Dionysian, vital, resonant with possibilities and in constant flux, fed by the past and flowing into past and future: "mama and her work have confirmed in me the knowledge that art, uncapitalized and unshunned, is our human birthright, the extraordinary right and privilege to share, both as givers and receivers, in the work of continuous creation." (p.146) Beauty, and the conscience of the race, can be forged in community. Exile was never necessary: welcome theory, indeed.

NOTES

1. The term was used by an NEH Humanities Institute Seminar devoted to women's letters, diaries, oral testimonies, etc. See *MLA Newsletter*, 11, 3 (Fall, 1979), p. 14.
2. Adele Wiseman, *Old Woman at Play* (Toronto: Clark, Irwin, 1978), p.3. Further page references in the text are from this publication.
3. I am indebted for this comparison to an unpublished essay, "Playing and Praying," by Sharon Mooney, Concordia University, 1979.
4. See Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), p.8ff.

5. See Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), and *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969); and Kenneth Sherman, "Crackpot: A Lurianic Myth," *Waves*, 3, 1 (Autumn, 1974), pp.5-10. See also Patricia Morley, "Out of Pain, Joy: Wiseman's Fiction," *Canadian Studies/Etudes Canadiennes*, 4(1978).
6. Adele Freedman, "The Stubborn Ethnicity of Adele W.," *Saturday Night*, 91(May, 1976), p. 24.

7. *Wrestled* will remind the reader of Margaret Laurence's recurring metaphor of Jacob wrestling a blessing from the angel of the Lord. Laurence and Wiseman, close friends, share many attitudes and ideas on life and art.

Author's note; August 1980: Mrs. Waisman died recently.