



# The Muse

Psychoanalytic explorations  
of creative inspiration



Edited by Adele Tutter

ROUTLEDGE  


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# The Muse

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Psychoanalysts have long been fascinated with creative artists, but have paid far less attention to the men and women who motivate, stimulate, and captivate them. *The Muse* counters this trend with nine original contributions from distinguished psychoanalysts, art historians, and literary scholars—one for each of the nine muses of classical mythology—that explore the muses of disparate artists, from Nicholas Poussin to Alison Bechdel.

*The Muse* breaks new ground, pushing the traditional conceptualization of the muse by considering the roles of spouse, friend, rival, patron, and therapist—even a late psychoanalytic theorist—in facilitating creativity. Moreover, they do so not only by providing inspiration, but also by offering the artist needed material and emotional support, tolerating competitive aggression, promoting reflection and insight, and eliciting awe, anxiety, and gratitude.

Integrating art history and literary criticism with a wide spectrum of contemporary psychoanalytic perspectives, *The Muse* is essential reading for psychoanalysts and psychotherapists interested in the relationships that enhance and support creative work. Fully interdisciplinary, it is also accessible to readers in the fields of art, art history, literature, memoir, and film. *The Muse* sheds new light on that most mysterious dyad, the artist and muse—and thus on the creative process itself.

**Adele Tutter, M.D., Ph.D.**, is Assistant Clinical Professor of Psychiatry, Columbia University, and Faculty at the Columbia University Center for Psychoanalytic Training and Research and the New York Psychoanalytic Institute. She is the author of *Dream House: An Intimate Portrait of the Philip Johnson Glass House*, and coeditor, with Léon Wurmser, of the Routledge title *Grief and its Transcendence: Memory, Identity, Creativity* (2015). She practices psychoanalysis in Manhattan.

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Edited by  
Adele Tutter

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To my husband, John Hudak, and our children, Kaspar and Ursula Hudak—my sustenance and inspiration.

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*“Fool,” said my Muse to me, “look in thy heart, and write.”*

*—Sir Philip Sidney*

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## Author's Preface

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I came to the topic of the muse in reverse. Artists and writers have served as my psychoanalytic “muse,” their insights into human nature predating the more recent contributions of psychoanalysts. My study of Nicholas Poussin took an unexpected turn when I encountered *his* muse, encrypted on a fragment of his Louvre *Self-Portrait*—a seemingly peripheral element of the composition, and yet its conceptual fulcrum. Thus it was Poussin who led me to ask exactly how, and why, can a person that seems so separate from the artist’s practice be in fact so central to that practice? It has been a joy to share this question with colleagues, and a privilege to collect their answers in this volume.

As an editor, this project engaged me more deeply than anticipated. Some of the contributors to this volume reported that, in what seemed like a parallel process, I functioned as something of a “muse” as I edited their essays. If true, then I have gained even more, for the elegant and creative approaches my colleagues have brought to bear on the topic have challenged me to think about my own work in new and different ways. For their inspiration, and for their warm collegiality, I am deeply thankful.

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# Introduction

## Mnemosyne, Mother of the Muse

Adele Tutter

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*I call upon queen Mnemosyne, Zeus' consort,  
Who gave birth to the holy, sacred and clear-voiced Muses . . .  
O blessed goddess, for the initiates, stir the memory of sacred rite,  
And ward off oblivion from them.*

—ORPHIC HYMN 77<sup>1</sup>

In 1511, Raphael was commissioned to decorate several rooms in the Vatican Palace. One of the frescoes he painted in the *Stanze di Raffaello* is *Parnassus* (Figure 0.1), in which a panoply of poets and scholars gathers



Figure 0.1 Raphael Raffaello Santi, *Parnassus*, 1511, *Stanza della segnatura*, Vatican Palace

Image: Wikimedia Commons

to pay tribute to Apollo, god of the arts. Seated in the center, Apollo plays his lute, accompanied by the nine Muses—his students, and the privileged mythical source of creative inspiration: Calliope, muse of epic poetry; Clio, history; Erato, lyric poetry; Euterpe, music; Melpomene, tragedy; Polyhymnia, sacred poetry and oratory; Thalia, comedy; Terpsichore, dance; and Urania, astronomy. The recipients of their gifts also appear in *Parnassus*; ahead of his time, Raphael pointedly identifies the poet Sappho by name, distinguishing her from the female muses lest the viewer “condemn women to being always the Muse and never the Maker” (Figure 0.2a; Parker, 1998, p. 767).

During the Renaissance the theme of the nine muses enjoyed so much popularity that guides were published to allow the learned viewer to recognize each one by their traditional attributes: Clio by her book, Polyhymnia by her white dress and scepter, Terpsichore by her harp, and so on. Personifying the Renaissance principle of which Raphael was the undisputed master—the mirroring beautification of reality by visual art—the serene Polyhymnia gazes at Melpomene’s tragic mask, countering its distorted face and lined brow (Figure 0.2b). As for Melpomene, she holds her mask at her sex, which could be interpreted in all sorts of ways. Among them might be the reminder that like the mortal scholars and poets they inspire, the divine Muses were also borne of a mother. And it is surely fitting that, in classical myth, that mother is *Mnemosyne*—the goddess of memory.

Mnemosyne is not portrayed in Raphael’s *Parnassus*, but the stream that flows below Apollo’s feet references the waters that bear her name, and confer the ability to remember to all who drink from it (Figure 0.2c). In the underworld, their counterpart is the river Lethe, from which the departed drink to forget their past lives. The myth of Mnemosyne and her daughters allegorizes the mental process prerequisite for the creation of our valued cultural products, all of which, it might be said, constitute a form of *remembering*—and sometimes, at the same time, a form of forgetting.

Mnemosyne was one of the four Titans, a product of the union of heaven and earth, and revered by the ancient Greeks as the guardian of the oral tradition. The myth of Mnemosyne and the nine children she conceived in nine nights of love with Jupiter is a Hellenic expansion of a much older matriarchal myth, which featured no gods, but three goddesses—in one telling, Melete (“meditation” or “practice”), Mneme (“memory”), and Aoede



*Figure 0.2* Details, *Parnassus*: a, upper left: Sappho; b, upper right: Polyhymnia and Melpomene's mask; c, lower left: the river Mnemosyne; and d, lower right: Homer

Image: Wikimedia Commons

(“song”)—who may have themselves tripled from an original “primal mother-goddess” (see Modell, 1993, p. 134). Underlining the relationship between the mind, thought, and the conscious awareness of time, the Greek “mneme” is derived from the proto-Indo-European root, *men* (“mind”). And song, of course, is a mnemonic device that facilitated the committing of epic poetry to memory in the great oral tradition, which predated written language by thousands of years.

In *Parnassus*, a prominent place is granted to the blind poet Homer, who famously begins his two heroic epics with the command: *Sing to me, O muse* (Figure 0.2d). Along with Virgil, Dante, Milton, and Shakespeare, in the manner of the great poets he thus summons divine inspiration, while at the same time invokes the oral tradition. His command—and the iconic notion of the artist and his muse—is a poetic elaboration of Laplanche’s (1997) assertion that all “[c]ultural activity is an opening out on to the other, an address to the other” (p. 664). Indeed, Notopoulos (1938) notes that, for Plato, the singular importance of memory for creativity is rooted in the dialectical qualities of spoken dialogue in the oral tradition. “It is the creative use of memory, which is movement of thought, rather than a fixed formalized retention of it in the written word, that Plato advocates,” he writes; “the written word, however, like the image may be a steppingstone to the original, but the memory of the philosopher must in its creative apprehension be similar to dialectic” (p. 482). In other words, creativity is borne not in a vacuum, but from a dialogic operation on memory, a sensate, reciprocal, interpersonal interaction—in other words, in the crucible of object relations, in dialectical relationship to “the original.” Creativity, it seems, is cut from the same cloth as identity.

Of no little irony, the personification of memory and mother of the Muses was all but forgotten by Renaissance painters, who vastly preferred to portray her talented and comely offspring. Not so their Baroque successor, Marco Liberio (Figure 0.3). In his portrayal of Mnemosyne, he imagines Jupiter as an eagle, one of his characteristic metamorphic forms. Wings spread, he approaches Mnemosyne, her legs splayed in reference to Titian’s *Venus and Adonis*. But while in that canvas Venus entreats her lover Adonis not to leave her, Mnemosyne welcomes her lover’s advances—a more forward expression of desire, which despite her show of modesty is as great as Venus’. Head demurely turned, she smiles as she opens her thighs to Jupiter, whose talons grip her leg in an avian takeoff on the “slung-leg” motif, visual shorthand for sexual intercourse (Steinberg,



*Figure 0.3* Marco Liberio, *Jupiter and Mnemosyne*, c.1660–1680, Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest

Image: Wikimedia Commons

1968). Infused with her lover's bestial potency, the striations of Mnemosyne's robe flow seamlessly into staves, illusionistically turning into the sheet music she literally "births" as she straddles the celestial globe (Figure 0.3, detail). This marvelous evocation of the music of the spheres at the same time symbolizes the conception and birth of the nine Muses—which, in Liberi's eyes, embody the transformation of Eros into art.

Given how much attention has been paid to the genesis of creativity, surprisingly little has been trained on the object relationships credited with inspiring creative works of art. In 2006, an issue of *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, "Psychoanalysis and the Muse," took on the role of the arts and other vocations as "muse" to the clinical psychoanalyst. In his contribution, David Shaddock framed the traditional understanding of the muse within a self psychological formulation:

She is always female: a nurturing and wise mother, but also an eroticized, if unattainable, lover, who offers the creative act as a sublimated resolution of oedipal desires. The muse is also maternal in the sense of the analogy between creativity and procreativity . . . For [certain] artists the creative process involves the subjugation and chaste service to the idealized oedipal mother . . . Only she can perform the life-and-art-giving selfobject functions.

(Shaddock, 2006, p. 427)

In *The Private Self*, Arnold Modell (1993) expands on the selfobject prototype of the muse, offering that while the muse may "contribute to the coherence of the self," that self may also be consumed or "surrendered to an idealized muse" (p. 138). Drawing on D. W. Winnicott's seminal work on the use of the object, Modell opens the door to darker aspects of the muse relationship—for example, the muse's survival of aggression, thereby demonstrating otherness, and eliciting attendant envy and hatred, as Herbert Rosenfeld (1971) explains. Especially if the muse is destructive or consuming, the muse may be rejected "to reestablish externality and individuality" (p. 139), a notion familiarized by Picasso and his serial repudiation of his muses (see Barolsky, 2010). From a different perspective, Rozsika Parker (1998) emphasizes the muse's functioning to neutralize the real and perceived destruction intrinsic to creativity: "the fear, guilt and anxiety associated with aggressive creativity [is] mediated by the muse, which is compared to the internal good object" (p. 767).

Today, “sing to me” is more often heard not in poetic recitation, but in a child’s request of a parent. Didier Anzieu (1979) posits that the original form of *l’enveloppe sonore*, the “audio-phonic skin” (p. 23), is mother’s containing voice, which receives and contains a child’s violent projections. In contrast to the classical role of messenger of divine inspiration, some of the muses described in this volume offer the maternal nurturance emblemized by mother’s voice. But, as the reader will find, others depart from this idyllic recapitulation of mother and child, as well as from the more traditional positions of artist and lover. Indeed, like any other, this special sort of object-relation is not limited to erotic or filial paradigms; rather, each artist–muse relationship reflects the unique dynamics, limitations, and needs of the individual dyad. By examining a variety of specimen examples through the lens of psychoanalytic theory, we gain a better grasp of the breadth and depth of the heterogeneity of this important partnering.

To this end, this volume offers a fortuitous number of essays—nine original contributions—authored by psychoanalysts, art historians, and literary scholars, which between them concern painting, cinema, poetry, fiction, and graphic narrative. These essays utilize a rich variety of theoretical perspectives: applications of the British independent, object relations, intersubjective, and relational schools are all in evidence. Their historical order parallels the ever-expanding conceptual breadth of the muse, from the traditional female muse to the male artist to the relationships that inspire creative women; from the familiar lover to the diverse positions of friend, rival, patron, therapist, predecessor—even a posthumous psychoanalytic theorist. The nine specimen examples of the muse explored in this volume also display a wide range of functions, hardly limited to “inspiration”; rather, the muse facilitates artistic production via the provision of material support and emotional nurturance, the disinhibition of competitive aggression, the promotion of reflective interaction and insight, and the elicitation of awe, anxiety, and gratitude. Collectively, they illuminate the protean nature of the mysterious relationship between artist and muse.

At the core of the more traditional conception of the muse lies the immortalizing power of the “eternal feminine.” In Chapter 1, this writer explores Nicolas Poussin’s underappreciated relationship with the woman who nursed him to back to health from syphilis, Anna Marie Dughet, who became his wife. He repaid her life-giving gift by enshrining her on canvas in a multiplicity of parts, from Madonna to Magdalene, servant to queen.

And in his Louvre *Self-Portrait*, Poussin visualizes the internalization, within his own multiplicity of parts, of the woman through whom he divined the world.

Another wife whose role as muse was historically denied is Cézanne's wife, Hortense Fiquet Cézanne. Susan Sidlauskas corrects this extraordinary elision in Chapter 2, in which she demonstrates that Fiquet Cézanne was in fact one of Cézanne's primary and enduring preoccupations. Sidlauskas argues that Madame Cézanne's function as a muse consisted of simply existing as an other with whom her notoriously difficult husband could engage in a particularly prolonged and intense manner as he painted her, allowed him to explore in great depth the intersubjective, mirroring realm she terms the "interworld."

In Chapter 3, Bradley Collins takes the role of the muse beyond the feminine, and into the realm of memory. Meticulously dissecting the complex relationship between Vincent van Gogh and his great male muse, his friend and rival Paul Gauguin, Collins introduces into the mix Van Gogh's less celebrated muses, the common men and women of Arles that the two artists painted side by side. Van Gogh's quotidien "Arlesian muses" are intensely cathected vessels of memories of childhood; loving and contentious attitudes toward Gauguin; feelings of abandonment and rivalry; and; regressive wishes for dependent fusion.

Nor is the maternal muse a necessarily ideal or benign one. In Chapter 4, Claire Nouvet examines the fraught relationship between Salvador Dalí and his lifelong companion and sworn inspiration, Gala, to whom he explicitly credited his work—so much so, he signed his paintings with both their names: "Gala-Dalí." Nouvet posits that while Dalí outwardly represents Gala as the embodiment of the maternal care upon which his art relies, his muse reactivates an unconscious and annihilating maternal desire, the "Dalí" persona its product.

In contrast, in Chapter 5, J. David Miller casts the art collectors Herb and Dorothy Vogel as muses to the artists they nurtured. An improbable but entirely plausible modern-day incarnation of Jupiter and Mnemosyne, they provided nurturance and support to major artists, as yet unknown when they became their patrons. In creating a world-class collection, they also recreated themselves, from a couple of modest means to major patrons of the National Gallery of Art.

Nancy Olson further expands the conceptual reach of the muse in Chapter 6, in which she construes the unforgettable namesake of Daphne

du Maurier's novel and Alfred Hitchcock's film, *Rebecca*, as post-humous muse to the narrator who succeeded Rebecca as the second Mrs. de Winter. Her innovative use of readers' reviews posted on the Internet allows Olson to also identify Rebecca as an enduring and pluripotent cultural muse. Extending Parker's formulation that the muse mediates the aggression prerequisite for creativity, Olson suggests that the muse may also function to promote it, subduing the "inhibiting angel."

Joseph Lichtenberg mines the rich interface of muse and memoir in Saul Bellow's semi-autobiographical novel *Ravelstein* in Chapter 7. Bellow's wife provides the literally life-saving emotional and physical support that the narrator/author needs as he struggles to overcome his inhibitions and write the memoir of his late friend Ravelstein, modeled on Bellow's real-life friend Allan Bloom. Lichtenberg elaborates Miller's suggestion that the psychoanalyst can in some respects likewise act as muse to the analysand: in contradistinction to historical mandates of neutrality, the analyst can function as mentor, savior, and inspiration for personal growth.

This notion is quite literally realized in the final two chapters. In Chapter 8, Dawn Skorczewski discusses Anne Sexton's relationship with her psychiatrist, Martin Orne, who encouraged his patient to write poetry and became the focus and fulcrum of much of it. Skorczewski shows how, by nurturing her good internal objects, and by allowing her a space in which she could excel without fear of envy, criticism, or retaliation, Sexton's "unlikely muse" allowed her to become not only a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, but also, in her own words, "a whole human being."

Strongly resonant with the story of Sexton and Orne, in Chapter 9 Vera Camden turns to the work of Alison Bechdel, for whom the psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott served as a "mystic muse" during the writing of the graphic memoir *Are You My Mother?* Camden formulates this book as an allegorical journey in which the author searches for her "True Self." Bringing the volume to a fitting conclusion, she closes the circle around the self-reflective exploration of memoir, the creative, reparative work of analysis, and the numinous work of memory,

The mythical figure of Mnemosyne and her daughters may have faded from contemporary consciousness, but memory and its vicissitudes have not: on the contrary, it is the beating heart of the psychoanalytic project, and at the very core of critical inquiry today. Nourished by our vital connections, memory is the link between our culture and its canonical

texts, and between this world and the next. In the great oral tradition of the ancient poets, enduring works of art form a river of memory from which we drink—to remember, to reflect, and to spur the endeavors that enrich our fleeting lives. In the best of circumstances, this collection of essays will itself function as a muse, a catalyst to inspire others to continue to interrogate the underpinnings of creativity: Mnemosyne’s daughters, who keep memory alive.

## Notes

- 1 *The Orphic Hymns*, p. 60.

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