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MARION FABER

Wolfgang Hildesheimer's *Mozart* as Meta-biography

Wolfgang Hildesheimer is a contemporary German playwright and novelist, known also for his short stories (*Lieblose Legenden*, 1952) and radio plays. A member of the Gruppe 47, he received the prestigious Büchner prize in 1966. Recently, his fifteen-year preoccupation with the figure of Mozart, which had begun with a short essay ("Betrachtungen über Mozart"), culminated in the publication of his extensive biography, *Mozart* (1977).

It is tempting to describe Hildesheimer's *Mozart* in musical terms: it is contrapuntal, with several themes. First and foremost, it is a biography of Mozart; but in addition to the narrowest sense of that term, it is an examination of the cultural phenomenon Mozart. It attempts to explore the relationship between the figure of Mozart and his music; further, it examines the phenomenology of music in general. Within the large biography are mini-biographies of people central to Mozart's life, each illuminating some aspect of the main figure. The book is a theoretical speculation on the nature of genius—and, in addition to everything else, it is a criticism of earlier biographies, a questioning of the method and perhaps the very act of writing biography. Its overt intention is to challenge and correct biographical clichés, thereby *widening* the gap between the historical Mozart and our preconceived image of him.

This particular theme is my interest here, the biographical-critical aspect of Hildesheimer's work. Because of the wealth of biographical data about Mozart, Hildesheimer feels it is not for him simply to repeat chronologically the well-known, bare facts of Mozart's life.

Somewhat like Thomas Mann's hero Adrian Leverkühn, a composer no longer able to contemplate another Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in his age, having instead to dispute its validity, so Hildesheimer finds himself unable to write a "straight" biography in his time. In an age predicated on psychoanalytical insights, on a phenomenological skepticism, Hildesheimer's work is as much an attempt to dispute, eradicate, expose, and challenge former biographies of Mozart as it is a biography per se. Incisive criticism of the method and practice of biography is a fundamental structural element of his book. (One could also profitably examine Hildesheimer's criticism of *musicological* method, but I will confine myself here to biographical criticism alone, however forced the distinction.) Hildesheimer is writing a self-conscious biography, and in its self-conscious preoccupation it approaches meta-biography, akin to what Lionel Abel has called meta-theatre.

The preface would seem to be the natural place for this kind of critical activity, and indeed Hildesheimer provides us at the start with some central tenets and examples. Above all, he wishes to overcome the unwitting subjectivity of previous biographers. The reader of biographies is interested in the "information, not in the informant" (10).¹ Self-knowledge, therefore, is considered an essential attribute of any responsible biographer, that is, an ability to recognize the role his own wishful thinking plays in his portrayal of a historical personality.

This wishful thinking can take many forms. One form, common in respect to Mozart, is the romanticization of the hero. Hildesheimer is attacking the notion that Mozart's greatness, his sublime musical achievement was recompense for his material suffering, that his suffering "paid off, so to speak" (11). But for whom? As opposed to those who see Mozart's painful life as glorious, Hildesheimer's conscious intent is to emphasize its degradation—the fact that "an inconceivably great mind" (377) went through much of his life and to his grave unrecognized and unsaluted by virtually everyone in his society, especially by those with power (Haydn being the notable exception).

Hildesheimer's second target is the nationalization of the hero (which is of course related to romanticization). Hildesheimer quotes Bernhard Paumgartner, who attempts to make Mozart into an Austrian folk hero, despite the indisputable fact that in Austria Mozart suffered a humiliating lack of recognition, and despite the fact that Mozart hated his native city Salzburg and the Viennese as well.

Hildesheimer does not, however, confine remarks of this nature to the preface alone. Rather, his *whole work* is informed with this kind of

critical comment; at times Hildesheimer's chief aim seems to be critical rather than synthetic. In this sense, his is a negative, "neinsagende" biography. Almost more important than establishing the facts and relating the events is the exposure of his predecessors in biography.

Both nineteenth and twentieth century biographers are constant references throughout the work. Hildesheimer mentions how Franz Niemtschek, Mozart's second biographer, used reports from dangerously biased sources, Mozart's wife Constanze, for example. Thus the information that Mozart preferred playing billiards most of all in the company of his wife, coming, as it does, from the wife herself, is open to question.

George Nicolaus Nissen, Constanze's second husband and Mozart's third biographer, is also taken to task, not only for accepting biased sources wholeheartedly and for erasing sections of Mozart's letters, but also for his overall and absolute lack of method. Nissen's methodology is compared to that of a "highschool essay" (275). (Hildesheimer also gives credit where it is due, however: he praises Joseph Lange, Mozart's brother-in-law, for his incisive insights into the workings of a genius's mind.)

Vincent and Mary Novello, an English couple whose pilgrimage to Mozart's survivors in Vienna and Salzburg provides many vignettes in Hildesheimer's work, are berated for their lack of daring, their overbearing propriety. Vincent "refused to listen to reports which denigrated the ideal image of the admired man" (102). Their goal was "beautiful biography" (255). Hildesheimer wishes that they had asked Constanze "a short, surprised question" (169) at the right moment, and probed a bit deeper, rather than allowing prudery to halt the search for information.²

Not only does Hildesheimer expose Mozart's contemporaries and near-contemporaries, these nineteenth-century biographers just mentioned, he is every bit as severe on authors of his own time. He sees them primarily as descendents of the nineteenth-century, their critical biographical methods stemming directly from a romantic habit of mind. For a non-German audience, then, the point of his criticism is perhaps less urgent.

Hildesheimer's criticism of contemporary biography is directed primarily at Alfred Einstein's standard work on Mozart. For example, Einstein is rebuked for his inclination to see some traits of Mozart, the Man, as "regrettable" (83). Mozart's clearly sexual love for his cousin Bäsle makes Einstein uncomfortable: he turns the affair into "teasing"

(118). Hildesheimer also singles out certain of Einstein's enthusiastic expressions, (one composition makes him want "to fall on his knees" [145]). In this, Hildesheimer is unfair. For Einstein seems also to have been a main source for Hildesheimer; the reasoned, balanced, and un-sentimental majority of Einstein's work is never given the credit due it. Here, the *biographical critic* Hildesheimer is distorting his subject matter, in a manner more deliberate than any he attacks in the biographies of others.

The other standard Mozart biographer is Hermann Abert, whose work dates from 1973. Hildesheimer criticizes his false dramatizations of the facts. He calls the year 1781, when Mozart's mother dies, a "fateful year" (81). Hildesheimer claims that Mozart did not experience such "blows of fate," (Einstein's phrase, 81) that it is misleading, and in this particular case, sentimental to categorize the sequence of events in his life in this way. There must be more acerbity (and respect) in the biographer's voice.

Stefan Zweig, whose collection of Mozart's letters to his cousin Bäsle Hildesheimer quotes, was also a biographer in his own right. According to Hildesheimer, his ideal is "biography with gaps" (118), that is, he would omit certain distasteful facts (Mozart's scatological humor) as unsuitable for the general public. Hildesheimer finds this kind of editing deplorable, if amusing in its naiveté.

In addition to these instances of misrepresentation or omission of the less noble side of the hero's character, Hildesheimer also attacks the rationale, the didactic nature of biography. He notes that the subliminal intention of biography has been to "admonish" (116). The biographical subject has to be a model for others to emulate. Thus the political partisan tries to make Mozart into a radical politician. The Catholic biographer tries to make Mozart into a good Catholic. Or, in a related kind of persuasion, biographers who feel inadequate and helpless in the face of death, need, according to Hildesheimer, to portray Mozart as a man "half in love with easeful death" (203). The biographer who cannot make his peace with death tries to pull himself up by his model's bootstraps. In all these cases the great genius has to be a great human being as well.

The ultimate object of Hildesheimer's criticism is the mythification of the biographical subject. He admits that the urge to turn a man into a myth may be irresistible: referring to Giesecke, the unacknowledged co-author of *The Magic Flute* libretto, he notes that biographers tend to ignore him and concentrate on Schikaneder as sole author, out of the need to mythologize one single figure, a need, he writes, that "is as

old as monotheism" (333). But Hildesheimer is resolved to combat this need by revealing it in others. The myths abound. He notes Beethoven's alleged meeting with Mozart as a case in point (201). The countless anecdotes surrounding the circumstances in which Mozart composed (the overture to *Don Giovanni*, *La Clemenza di Tito*, etc.) are further examples of mythologizing activity, instead of responsible documentation. Mozart's wife and his sister-in-law (who speaks of his "piercing glance" [275] because a great man must have a piercing glance) are the first to contribute to the Mozart myth. The inevitable process begins at once.

In summary, then, Hildesheimer's biography is a critique of the subjectivity and mythologizing prevalent in the work of his predecessors. Of course, his own work is also an attempt to overcome that which he criticizes. What methods does he employ to *counteract* the tendencies he deplors? How successful is his attempt to overcome them?

Hildesheimer's methods are many. He has examined Mozart's handwriting in manuscript to try to discover signs of emotion in the very ductus of Mozart's strokes, to use graphology as an insight into character. He describes portraits of Mozart, trying to find a common essence behind the external features, and exposing here, too, romantic euphemisms. In both attempts, he must ultimately acknowledge failure.

He refers at great length to Mozart's letters, taking them not at face value, but handling them with the critical tools of a man of letters familiar with eighteenth-century epistolary formulae. As he himself notes, his other tool is psychoanalytical insight. Thus he contends that Mozart did not experience his mother's death as *object loss* (it was not a devastating event in his emotional life). He carefully analyzes the relationship between Mozart and his father. And from letters written to Constanze during Mozart's stay in Leipzig, he reconstructs the "erotic compatibility" (264) that made their marriage a relatively happy one.

He uses Mozart's music as a key to the man, as well. But one of his achievements is that he avoids the trap of trying to explain or understand Mozart's music *through* the biographical context in which it was written. He does not look for causal connections between Mozart's emotional life and his compositions. Thus he is quick to note that the aria from *The Magic Flute* that moved Mozart towards the end of his life might as easily have been a merry one ("Der Vogelfänger bin ich ja") as a tragic one ("Ach, ich fühl' es"). Furthermore, Hilde-

sheimer's biography never loses sight of the fact that it is his *music*, not his life, that makes Mozart great. That his life need not, indeed cannot, be that example of perfection that is his music. In what is perhaps the most original and convincing aspect of his work, Hildesheimer emphasizes the unsocial side of the genius, the eccentric Mozart, whose pranks often have an air of desperation. Might his phenomenal mental preoccupations have made him an exasperating dinner guest?

Another of Hildesheimer's methods is to test the statements of contemporaries for veracity. He tries to siphon off the fantasies of witnesses from that which "can hardly be invented" (371). Inevitably, however, and despite his critical tools, his must also be an act of subjective judgment, in that his own personality must also be at work when assessing credibility and determining what is essential. In the end, Hildesheimer, too, cannot (and should not, some would add) avoid the subjective element in his own work.

Hildesheimer admits that he too knows "wishful thinking" (205, 358). Characteristically, he also exposes this side of his mind in its biographical work. But at times he is not so clear about this subjective element. For despite his caution, he is actually relying on his own superior powers of imagination to identify with Mozart and his situation. He asks that we trust him in a tremendous act of "Einfühlung" (identification) on his part, too, as much as with any other biographer.

For example, he follows his criticism of those biographers who see Mozart's welcoming attitude to death as a model by writing that Mozart "belonged to those who accepted death as their inevitable destiny without wasting any words about it" (206). Mozart didn't worry about death, Hildesheimer contends. Is this not every bit as great a projection? Does not the reader tend to think that the author, too, is a man who does not worry about death? Is he not projecting *his* values onto Mozart?

He contends that it was not his mother's death, but his own freedom, Mozart's newly-acquired independence that made the year in Paris important for him. Here, too, Hildesheimer's subjective value system is at work, for he can never know Mozart's real reaction to his mother's death. His views on Mozart's Catholicism are another case in point: how can we be *sure*, as Hildesheimer seems to be, that Mozart thought of a church only as a "place where an organ stood" (374)? His scepticism about Mozart's love for his mother and sister is also based purely on intuition. Even though Hildesheimer is probably right in seeing Mozart's epistolary protestations of love as mere for-

mulae, he cannot really conclude anything definitive about Mozart's true sentiments, for, as he himself often points out, Mozart's letters do not express them.

Thus Hildesheimer is putting together the pieces of this puzzle according to his own insight and imagination. His is a powerful, acute imagination, and the image of Mozart that we derive from his book may well be closer than others to an accurate one (accuracy being Hildesheimer's professional goal). But it, like all the rest, is shaped by subjectivity, no rhapsodic, naive subjectivity, it is true, but analytical subjectivity.

In its integrity, however, it is convincing. One might liken the technique behind its integrity to the *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect). The machinery, the flies and wings of Hildesheimer's biographical stage are brightly lit. His criticism of biographical method is part and parcel of this technique. His is a *self-consciously* subjective biographical meditation on Mozart, a meta-biography, and can claim for that reason an advantage on its biographical predecessors. Indeed, the subjectivity and mythification that he criticizes in the work of others may result from a want of this kind of alienation in their technique. In Hildesheimer's work, reason is to brush away the cobwebs of easy emotion. Yet, as in Brecht's Epic Theatre, the alienation techniques of Hildesheimer's biography also elicit an emotional response, one more rigorous, tempered by critical judgment.

NOTES

1. This and the following notes are taken from my translation of Hildesheimer's *Mozart*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980. As the book is still in press, however, page numbers in parentheses will refer to the original German edition, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977.
2. Here, and elsewhere, Hildesheimer uses his predecessors as occasions for displaying his own pointed wit: "(Vincent) was not equal to the task, but neither were the first three Mozart biographers, who were nevertheless undaunted by their inadequacy. Novello, on the other hand, never did write his book—for this we are grateful" (102). One wonders if humor is at times his sole aim in making such remarks.