

In Praise of Robert H. Abzug's Biography of Rollo May Daniel Benveniste

Robert Abzug's *Psyche and Soul in America: The Spiritual Odyssey of Rollo May* (Oxford University Press, 2021) is a magnificent adventure. Abzug is an outstanding scholar, and the subject of his biography is perhaps the most important American-born depth psychologist in history. As I write these words, I recall explicitly Dr. May saying it was Harry Stack Sullivan who was the most original American-born psychoanalyst. But with all due respect to Dr. May, I disagree. It was Rollo May himself.

When someone in my world dies, it seems I always learn something new about that person from others in their world. Everything Abzug reveals fits with the man I knew, but all the new details and intellectual depth in this book brought me much closer and deeper into the life and work of Rollo May, who was one of the four men whom I call my mentors. I had two semesters of case seminars in existential psychotherapy with Rollo at his home in Tiburon, California, in 1987 and 1988, as well as some additional contacts outside of seminars. Although our contact was relatively brief, the connection made a great impact on me.

Abzug leads us through May's intellectual development from his Midwestern family through his relationships with the YMCA, the ministry, art, theology, Alfred Adler, Paul Tillich, Erich Fromm, Freda Fromm-Reichman, Clara Thompson, the William Alanson White Institute, and on to becoming one of the founding figures in both existential and humanistic psychology. Abzug tells us that "Rollo's dreams of destiny found a voice" in Sam Foss's poem "The House by the Side of the Road," part of which reads:

There are pioneer souls that blaze their paths
Where highways never ran;—
But let me live by the side of the road
And be a friend to man.

The poem is so extraordinarily Rollo. As a psychologist—a non-MD—he was not permitted training in the American Psychoanalytic Association institutes. So he went to the side of the road, into the margin, and there he built a castle of his own. In addition to his foundational role in defining existential and humanistic psychologies, he played a significant role in the licensure of psychologists and as a psychological commentator on life and culture in twentieth-century North America. And as for being “a friend to man,” I think this speaks to Rollo’s humanism and reminds me of his studies with Alfred Adler, whom he recalled saying the goal of therapy was “to become a fellow man.”

May came to psychology from theology, art, and philosophy and from these perspectives developed a refreshing approach to the subject, which he presented to the intelligentsia and popular culture in his compelling prose. His writing moved the American soul and brought psychological sophistication into public discourse through his inspiring books, magazine articles, and radio and television appearances. This naturally led to a more psychologically sophisticated North American culture interested in self-knowledge and the personal pursuit of psychotherapy.

Freud did not write much about inspiration, but, of course, he was extraordinarily inspired. Rollo May did not write much about the unconscious, but, as we learn from *Abzug*, he was deeply concerned with it. He actively plumbed the depths of his dreams and interpersonal conflicts through his various analyses, self-analysis, and journal writing,

in which he discovered and rediscovered the roots of his personal problems in early childhood traumas. Within these traumas he found the basis for his sorrows, his conflicts with women, his competitions with men, and his loneliness. Through Abzug's telling of this odyssey, we learn of some of the darkest moments of May's life and climb with him to the heights of his professional successes, international recognition, and even the development of a warm and sustaining love later in life.

When a biographer chooses a subject to write about, a transference naturally develops that the biographer elaborates, in one way or another, through the writing. But when the subject of the biography is alive and collaborates with the biographer, offering interviews and documentary material, another transference component becomes involved. Abzug writes, "Rollo and I developed a respectful relationship, one that at times sparked a warm encounter in which each of us learned something about ourselves and the other." Thus we can see that Rollo did not compete with Abzug but rather gave the story of his life to him in an act of love and generativity. In kind, Abzug rose to the occasion and produced a fine biography worthy of the life and work that it describes.

I highly recommend Abzug's biography of Rollo May not only for existential, humanistic, and Jungian psychologists, who will naturally be interested, but for my colleagues within the broader Freudian psychoanalytic tradition, who will find May's distinctly North American approach to psychoanalysis quite compelling.