



## “That’s My Boy”: Challenging the Myth of Literary Mentorship as *In loco patris*

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Mentorship’s popularity among writers is unsurprising: mentors offer crucial encouragement to those starting out in a daunting career, along with valuable advice about aspects of authorship and publishing that can seem mysterious to the uninitiated. During what Mark McGurl (2009) has called the “program era,” when creative writing has become not just a pursuit and profession but a field of postsecondary education, too, mentorship has also been increasingly an institutionalized practice, with teachers and supervisors mentoring their students. The prevalence of such mentorships is indicated by a recent survey of Creative Writing instructors undertaken by Carl Vandermeulen (2011) in which 82 percent of them claimed to have mentored someone (119). Many such mentorships extend informally for years beyond the students’ period of study. Indeed, insofar as mentors commonly help their mentees to make the transition from academia to a career in the publishing industry, and insofar as mentors often have expertise and connections in both worlds, one might go so far as to say that mentorship stands as the paradigmatic interpersonal Creative Writing relationship in the program era.

That status is reflected by the fact that writers are, with some frequency, telling stories about their mentoring relations, whether in fiction, memoirs, or shorter reminiscences. Together, these stories constitute a body of lore about mentorship that is liable to influence people’s notions of how literary culture operates, who has power and authority in it, how success is achieved, what forms mentorship should take, and what to expect of such relationships. The stories may affect how prospective mentors and mentees alike approach mentorship; they may even influence how institutionalized mentoring programs are envisioned and implemented. For these reasons, even if such stories constitute only discursive constructions of mentorship and not evidence of how mentorship is actually practiced, it is important to pay attention to what sorts of narratives predominate in this lore and what they imply about mentoring. We are particularly concerned by what may happen if a certain notion

of mentorship is rehearsed repeatedly, gaining the status of a myth. As McGurl notes, individuals in contemporary society “understand themselves to be living, not lives simply, but *life stories* of which they are the protagonists” (12). Aspiring writers are liable to imagine their own possible life stories partly based on their engagements with autobiographical narratives by established authors. Accordingly, the myths of mentorship that develop and circulate through such narratives merit scrutiny, and problematic myths need to be addressed by Creative Writing teachers, whether they are participating in mentorship, developing initiatives to facilitate it, or telling stories about it themselves.

The mythologization of mentoring relations has long been quite literal, in that mentorship takes its name from an Ithacan courtier in the *Odyssey* who counsels King Odysseus’ son, Telemachus, during the king’s absence. The story of Mentor’s relationship with Telemachus in Homer’s text has bequeathed to the contemporary conception of mentorship more than just a name, however; it also models a form of intergenerational, homosocial, hierarchical, and exclusive mentorship that fiction and nonfiction alike continue to depict<sup>1</sup>. While it is common to think of educators as serving in *loco parentis*: that is, in the place of students’ parents<sup>2</sup>—contemporary narratives often follow Homer by dramatizing mentorship as happening more specifically *in loco patris*: that is, in the place of the mentee’s father. Whether or not they explicitly reference the *Odyssey*, the texts depict one-on-one relationships between writers of different generations. What is more, often the writers are both male. In these narratives of dyadic relations, the mentor usually enjoys significant status in the field and introduces his mentee to the workings of literary power networks, integrating him into a hierarchy while receiving deference from him. This picture of literary mentorship is by no means the only one in circulation<sup>3</sup>, but it constitutes a myth in the sense that it enjoys a sufficiently strong currency for it to influence people’s ideas about mentoring, not to mention their practices of it, whether or not the people involved are men. We wish to consider the ways in which the myth also rehearses patriarchal norms with respect to literature and gender, while endorsing exclusionary notions of family and an overly individualist conception of learning, thus making the myth’s prevalence a cause for concern.

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the *Odyssey* as a continuing reference-point in scholarly discussions of mentorship, see Cochran-Smith and Paris (1995).

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of writing instructors serving in *loco parentis*, see Podis and Podis (2007).

<sup>3</sup> For instance, another myth—evident in texts such as Teresa Rebeck’s 2011 play, *Seminar*—foregrounds sexual relationships between male mentors and female mentees. For a consideration of this myth, see Blumencranz (2014).

Narrative forms such as life writing are liable to have an outsized role in promoting myths of mentorship, in part because stories render in concrete terms what is otherwise wide-ranging and amorphous. The diversity of forms that mentorship can take is implicit in Eugene M. Anderson and Anne Lucasse Shannon's (1988) frequently cited definition of it as

a nurturing process in which a more skilled or more experienced person, serving as a role model, teaches, sponsors, encourages, counsels, and befriends a less skilled or less experienced person for the purpose of promoting the latter's professional and/or personal development. Mentoring functions are carried out within the context of an ongoing, caring relationship between the mentor and protégé. (40)

In contrast with such a broad definition, mentorship comes into clearer focus whenever people describe mentors as serving *in loco patris*. Such descriptions smuggle in their own form of definitional ambiguity, insofar as fatherhood itself is polymorphous, with conceptions and practices of it varying enormously, but the notion of mentorship as *in loco patris* has an obvious appeal: it provides a template that allows mentors, mentees, and third parties alike to make sense of mentorship by drawing on their associations with father-child relations. So considered, mentorship also encourages mentees and their mentors to develop a sense of intimacy with each other that they might not otherwise share. In the case of literary relationships, moreover, mentorship imagined as *in loco patris* contributes to popular narratives of literary "genealogies" in which writers are granted a certain cachet in virtue of the literary figures by whom they were mentored and from whom they can thus claim a manner of aesthetic inheritance. This cachet is particularly valuable in the face of literary stature's many contingencies. Authors and books fall in and out of fashion, and success can be an elusive, partly aleatory thing, but writers who have been mentored by literary stars can lay claim to that connection for their entire career, thereby securing for themselves a place in literary culture that is not dependent solely on their own work's fortunes. In this paper, we will discuss these and other attractions that the myth of literary mentorship as *in loco patris* holds, making the case that the attractions are inextricable from fraught psychological and social dynamics, including the patriarchal, racialized, and heteronormative inflections of literary culture. The myth is especially detrimental to the people who are too seldom the protagonists in mentorship narratives promoting the myth: namely, those who are not white, straight, cis-gendered, physically normative men. Yet as stories of mentorship unquestioningly feature normative performances of gender and conservative rhetoric regarding things such as family and literary value, they are harmful to everyone, perpetuating oppressively restrictive conceptions of individual identity, interpersonal relationships, and viable paths to professional success.

To illustrate these problems with the myth, we focus on recent books that reiterate it. The first, Tom Grimes's memoir, *Mentor* (2010), recounts his relationship with University of Iowa Writers' Workshop director Frank Conroy. Although Grimes's narrative does much work to idealize the *in loco patris* model of literary mentorship, *Mentor* also calls attention to the psychological complications that can arise when an emerging male writer treats his mentor as a father-substitute. Grimes's affection and respect for Conroy are unwavering, but equally evident is Grimes's dependence on Conroy's good opinion of him and his work. Identifying links between Grimes's picture of mentorship and the Telemachan model in the *Odyssey*, we argue that *Mentor's* overwhelmingly positive depiction of mentorship *in loco patris* is shaded by details that caution against an uncomplicated embrace of it. In particular, as Grimes recollects the challenges of his relationship with Conroy, he implicitly characterizes himself as having suffered from what we call a "Telemachus complex": a condition of deference and dependence that is far less antagonistic than the famed Oedipus complex but that is still challenging for both mentees and their mentors. Grimes's memoir also unselfconsciously foregrounds the Telemachan model's patriarchal inflections, demonstrating that the model can help to perpetuate gender inequality and masculinist values in literary culture. By identifying the ways in which Grimes's memoir undermines its own laudatory picture of mentorship *in loco patris*, we call attention both to the problems inherent in the myth and to published texts' role in perpetuating them.

These problems are further evident in the second book we examine: the collection *A Manner of Being: Writers on Their Mentors* (2015), edited by Annie Lontas and Jeff Parker. The volume includes reminiscences by over sixty contemporary authors, and the myth of mentorship as *in loco patris* appears in many of the texts, often with little authorial self-consciousness regarding the myth's sexist elements. That blitheness risks communicating to prospective mentors and mentees alike that authorial relations and identities need not be seriously examined with an eye to the ways in which they might contribute to inequity by privileging normative gender performances that marginalize those who aren't straight, cis-gendered men, and by celebrating quasi-familial connections that implicitly reinscribe racialized divisions. Meanwhile, as we observe with reference to Debra Weinstein's novel *Apprentice to the Flower Poet Z.* (2004), the norms of Telemachan mentorship have been sufficiently entrenched and influential as to inflect practices and narratives of mentorship between women, too. Weinstein's narrative is one in which transference and a mentor's unquestioned authority leave a mentee vulnerable and exploited. With an eye to the dangers of such situations, we argue for the importance of mentors and mentees developing a shared self-reflexivity about mentoring, both as they participate in mentorship and as they tell stories about it. In this regard, we consider the kinds of self-reflexivity we have practiced in our own collaboration as two authors of different ages and at different career stages. We argue for the value of mentors taking up an interrogative approach with their mentees, rather than simply offering them axioms and imperatives, and for greater attention to diversity not only regarding the authors whom mentors cite and

recommend but also regarding approaches to writing. Moreover, we call for renewed institutional attention to the various forms that mentoring can take, including alternatives to the dyadic, inter-generational model that the myth of mentorship as *in loco patris* emphasizes and naturalizes.

### THE TELEMACHUS COMPLEX AND LITERARY MANCESTRY IN MENTOR

In the *Odyssey*, the god Athena disguises herself as Mentor and provides guidance to Telemachus while Odysseus is away from Ithaca, having left to fight in the Trojan War. Athena aids Telemachus with the explicit goal of performing a service for Odysseus, thus underscoring her role as a father-substitute. The role is further underscored when Telemachus says to Mentor: "You've counseled me with so much kindness now, / like a father to a son" (87). Once Odysseus returns, Athena promptly relinquishes her position as Telemachus' mentor, and Odysseus takes up the role, advising and teaching his son while enlisting him in the effort to defeat the suitors who have gathered with hopes of marrying Penelope—Odysseus' wife and Telemachus' mother—and ruling Ithaca. Odysseus' assumption of the mentoring role directly after Athena surrenders it corroborates the patriarchal notion that mentorship is properly a fatherly position; it likewise implies that mentorship is properly dyadic. As Odysseus and Telemachus work together, with Telemachus remaining generally deferent toward his father, the *Odyssey* further presents a picture of mentorship as intensely hierarchical, elitist, and collaborative: the two male characters, bound to each other as family members, also share an interest in preserving Odysseus' status in Ithaca, given that Telemachus is in line to inherit the throne. Hence, the father-son relationship in the *Odyssey* is very different from the one in, say, *Oedipus Rex*. Indeed, if Sigmund Freud had looked to Homer rather than Sophocles for an ancient literary model of father-son relations, he might have been drawn not to those relations' elements of conflict but to their collaborative aspects and homosociality.

Tom Grimes never mentions the *Odyssey* in *Mentor*, but his characterization of Frank Conroy's mentorship of him is very much in the Homeric mold: Grimes construes Conroy as a substitute father who holds a position of authority in a male-dominated power network, as someone toward whom Grimes is deferent, and as someone whose values Grimes shares. Grimes describes his own biological father as an often-absent man who was also intellectually absent from his son's life, someone "who'd quit school after the eighth grade and mocked the novels" Grimes read (4). When Grimes was admitted to the University of Iowa's MFA program in Creative Writing, Conroy quickly became not only his mentor but also a surrogate father. Soon, Grimes claims, he "had difficulty imagining life without Frank's constant, fatherly approval" (134). Grimes's implication that his experience as Conroy's mentee compensated for his father's insufficiencies in parenting tacitly associates the father-son relationship with an ideal, necessary bond for a young man. Moreover, *Mentor* follows the

*Odyssey* in suggesting that if such a bond is not sufficiently realized between sons and their literal fathers, it might nevertheless be forged through mentoring relations. Indeed, Grimes suggests that in his case, he became something of a substitute son for Conroy, recalling that after he left Iowa, he was told that Conroy would exclaim “That’s my boy down there!” whenever he heard of Grimes’s latest accomplishments (206). In that respect, it is notable that Grimes pays little attention to the possibility that he was one of many mentees for Conroy; instead, he perpetuates the notion of mentorship as dyadic and exclusive. And rather than suggesting that mentees might exhibit a version of the Oedipus complex in their mentoring relations, coming into conflict with their mentors and seeking consciously or unconsciously to usurp them, *Mentor* suggests through Grimes’s example that mentees can manifest what one might call a Telemachus complex: a situation in which mentees take their mentors to be father-substitutes who are sufficiently authoritative for the mentees to evince an excessive deference while allowing themselves to become dependent, both personally and professionally, on their mentors’ support and goodwill. As a result, even while *Mentor* contributes to the myth of mentorship *in loco patris* by construing it as valuably intimate and professionally useful, Grimes’s narrative provides grounds for readers to be wary of the myth’s seductiveness.

For instance, it is clear in *Mentor* that the dyadic quality of mentorship *in loco patris* contributed to Grimes developing in relation to Conroy what Freud calls transference: the rehearsal in present-day relationships of unconscious feelings and wishes developed through prior relationships—often parental ones.<sup>4</sup> In Grimes’s case, his relationship to his father—who, according to Grimes, had long ago decided that his son “was headed for disaster” (50)—evidently sparked a powerful desire for Conroy’s approval, causing Grimes to become panicked and paranoid after sending his mentor a completed novel manuscript and failing to hear back from him immediately. Grimes recalls thinking: “My novel wouldn’t exist until Frank acknowledged it, and it wouldn’t be good unless he said so” (183). At the same time, Grimes became anxious that Conroy would turn out to be “as quick-tempered as [Grimes’s] father” (19). It is possible that such anxiety would have emerged in relation to any of Grimes’s teachers at Iowa; as Judith Harris (2001) puts it, “Within the teacher-student dyad, there is always a degree of transference” (198). But in a mentoring relationship that popular narratives have encouraged people to view as quasi-parental, there is prone to be a higher degree of transference than otherwise. Consequently, there is cause for concern in Grimes’s representation of Conroy as a better father figure than Conroy’s biological father and as someone worthy of Grimes’s “adulation” (181). Whatever the truth of that characterization, Grimes’s encomium

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<sup>4</sup>J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis (1974) note that while transference is most paradigmatically observed in the relationship between psychoanalysts and their patients, it is also evident in other relations, including “those between teacher and pupil” (456). Freud discusses transference in his article “Observations on Transference-Love.” For a discussions of transference in Creative Writing supervision and instruction, see Hecq (2014), as well as Vandermeulen (2011), 160-63.

normalizes the model of mentorship as *in loco patris*, even while the book draws attention to the negative repercussions of allowing transference to remain a subtext of mentoring relations. At the same time, *Mentor*'s depiction of mentorship as *in loco patris* risks being overly reductive, encouraging mentors and mentees to prioritize the familial dynamic in their relationship while ignoring the relationship's other potentialities.

The myth of mentorship as *in loco patris* may further lead mentees and their mentors to view themselves and each other inaccurately, ascribing to the mentors a comprehensive authority they do not deserve, while viewing the mentees not just as novitiates regarding their careers but also as immature or undeveloped in other regards because they occupy the figurative position of a child. When mentorship is understood to be *in loco patris*, it can be difficult for the mentee ever to escape a subordinate role, because the mentor will always remain a figurative father, someone to whom deference is conventionally expected. In *Mentor*, Grimes's Telemachus complex leads him to position himself as deferent in just such a way. The possibility of conflict with Conroy does surface, as Grimes recalls reading a galley copy of his mentor's book *Body & Soul* and writing a letter to him expressing a belief that "the novel's latter half could be improved" (162). But when Grimes showed the letter to others, they advised him not to send it, saying it would only hurt Conroy's feelings. Although Grimes does not speculate extensively about what lay behind what he calls his "irrational" desire to send the letter (162), it is tempting to think that in the face of his deference to Conroy, he had a contrasting impulse to assert his own literary authority and to change the mentoring dynamic. A reader seeking to identify an Oedipus complex in Grimes would surely make much of his letter, but what is just as remarkable is the apparent failure of disputatious impulses to surface more frequently in him. Although Telemachan mentees' penchant for preserving harmonious, intimate relations with their mentors might seem ideal, it carries with it the risk of making the mentees' overly dependent on their mentors' approval and leading them to embrace a self-subordinating identity.

*Mentor* also suggests that the Telemachan model of mentorship can produce a compulsion in mentees to incorporate their mentor's voice, which carries with it the weight of patriarchal authority. Grimes recalls that Conroy's mentorship of him involved Conroy issuing imperatives with respect to what constitutes good writing, thus corroborating the stereotype of writing instruction as a process whereby established writers hand down dicta such as "Find your voice." When these dicta are embraced by new writers and then passed on to subsequent generations, the command to find one's voice gains an ironic dimension, as the very voice issuing the command is not solely the speaker's but an incorporation of predecessors'. In *Mentor*, Grimes's incorporation of Conroy's voice is evident as Grimes, years after his mentor's death, recalls the moment when he learned of his acceptance into Iowa's MFA program. Grimes imagines Conroy speaking from beyond the grave to direct Grimes in recounting the moment, telling him: "First off, don't be vague. Don't just have

the character wander around the apartment, dazed. Give the reader concrete details. You have five senses at your disposal. . . . Use them.” Grimes continues with the prosopopeia by having Conroy offer several other instructions, including “[N]ever use the word *suddenly*” and “Above all, avoid melodrama” (11-12). Whatever the usefulness of these instructions in terms of craft, their reiteration serves to normalize an association of the mentor with authority and with the imperative mode. Insofar as this authority is ceded specifically to the mentor’s voice, and insofar as it is a voice that Grimes feels able to reproduce on the page, it also becomes clear that Grimes identifies with and has effectively claimed the fatherly mentor’s authority as a kind of inheritance.

Aside from this inheritance’s psychological consequences for Grimes, the depiction of it in *Mentor* has ramifications with respect to literary mentorship more generally. Not least, it gives credence to various critics’ claims that mentorship can be conformist and conservative. For example, W. Gulam and M. Zulfiqar (1998) worry that mentoring generates “no more than the reproduction of a given paradigm” (42), while Nigel Krauth and Inez Baranay (2002) note a more specific concern that writing mentorships “have the potential to produce little writers in the mentor’s image” and that “apprenticeship perpetuates only the old—reproducing existing ideas about what is good writing, about aesthetics, about fashion.” In the *Odyssey*, mentorship serves clearly conservative ends, insofar as Telemachus is being groomed to take his father’s place as king and eventually collaborates with Odysseus in restoring him to the throne. In *Mentor*, Grimes does not succeed Conroy as program director at Iowa, but the two of them and others apparently consider it as a possibility (235), and Grimes does become an MFA director elsewhere. Moreover, he subscribes to aesthetic values that seem to be in line with Conroy’s.

With respect to this conservatism, it is not incidental that the mentees and mentors in the *Odyssey* and *Mentor* are male or, in the case of Athena, playing a man. In both texts, mentors’ authority emerges in no small part from their membership in a male-dominated power network with regard to which the mentee is an initiate. In the case of literary mentorship, an emphasis on elite, intergenerational male mentoring serves to normalize and consolidate men’s dominance of literary culture, not least by replicating the quasi-genealogical structures of white, straight, male-dominated canons while eliding female, queer, and minoritized authors, thus positing what one might call literary mancestry. In *Mentor*, Grimes briefly mentions his admiration for Flannery O’Connor, Toni Morrison, and Alice Munro, but the writers whom he identifies as influencing him are exclusively men. He describes longing to be Ernest Hemingway after reading *The Sun Also Rises*, studying Norman Mailer through the night when he was nineteen, then applying to Syracuse University “because Raymond Carver had taught there” (5). When Conroy mentions the agent Candida Donadio, Grimes dwells on the male authors she represents, from Philip Roth to Joseph Heller and William Gaddis (23). And when Grimes discusses the publication of his novel *City of God* in France by Gallimard,



he notes the writers on the publisher's backlist whom he respects: "Proust, Camus, Sartre, Hemingway, Faulkner, Kafka, Joyce, and Roth" (205-06). Moreover, when he refers to the "literary idols" whom he has invited to take up the Chair in Creative Writing at Texas State, he mentions only men: "Tim O'Brien, Barry Hannah, Denis Johnson, and Robert Stone" (207). Both O'Brien and Stone provided commendatory blurbs for *Mentor*. Meanwhile, Grimes reports that Conroy advocated for Grimes's work in personal conversations with publishers such as Roger Straus and Sam Lawrence. In other words, *Mentor* gives every indication that mentorship can provide mentees with access to a mutually supportive literary network constituted largely by men.

The marginalization of women in *Mentor* also involves Grimes minimizing the role of female figures in his life, an action that once more echoes the *Odyssey*. In Homer's narrative, it is striking that Athena mentors Telemachus only after adopting the guise of *Mentor*, as though acceding to patriarchal expectations that men make the best mentors. Moreover, Homer is not interested in pursuing the possibility that Penelope could also serve as a mentor to Telemachus; instead, her inability to do much more than delay the suitors seeking to supplant Odysseus stands in contrast with Athena's and Odysseus' puissance. In *Mentor*, Grimes seems similarly not to consider women as possible mentors. For instance, the novelist Marilynne Robinson taught one of Grimes's workshops at Iowa, but the only times she is directly quoted in *Mentor* are when he recalls her quibbling about verb tenses—"It's the subjunctive, right?" he remembers her saying—and when he compares her saying "Oh?" to "a pigeon cooing" (118, 124). It is hard to decide what is more dismissive: the association of a distinguished female writer with a bird or the alignment of her with a focus on grammar. Grimes's cursory representation of his relationship with Robinson encourages readers to infer that he missed out on an opportunity to enjoy a more meaningful mentoring relationship with her. Likewise, although his spouse, Jody, appears in *Mentor* as a reader of his work and a voice of reason who refutes his anxious, transferenceal perceptions of Conroy's actions—for instance, when Grimes worries about disappointing Conroy, Jody says, "He's your teacher, not your father" (44)—Grimes pays relatively little attention to her role in his career. And he is equally perfunctory in representing his mother. In one of the few moments in which she figures, he remembers watching her work as a lunchtime monitor at a school and characterizes her moments of ordering the children about as being "the only time she felt anyone in the world respected her." He goes on to note that at home, "none of us took her seriously" (49). In this regard, Grimes's mother serves as a foil for Conroy, her subaltern status helping to explain Grimes's eagerness to attach himself to a mentor who has power and stature.

Grimes's minimal attention to his ostensibly powerless mother and his admiration for his father-substitute mentor point to a further problem with the valorization of the mentor as working *in loco patris*: namely, it risks leaving intact questionable, if widely held, norms of parenthood. It is problematic to treat the absence of a literal father as necessarily a vacuum that must be filled in a young

person's life. It is just as problematic to tell stories associating fathers with authority and insisting that insofar as mentors have authority, too, they draw it at least partly from their status as father figures. This embrace of paternal authority is a key part of the Telemachus complex evident in *Mentor*, as it appears to stimulate Grimes's efforts to attach himself to Conroy and to a male literary genealogy. As Grimes makes those efforts, there is evidently little impetus on his part to question the patriarchal elements underpinning that genealogy. In the ancient Greek society of the *Odyssey*, patriarchy and male lines of succession were taken for granted. In *Mentor*, the line of succession from Conroy to Grimes is only figurative, but in certain ways it would seem that little has changed.

### MENTORS BEING MEN IN A MANNER OF BEING

It would be one thing if *Mentor* were exceptional in rehearsing the myth of mentorship as *in loco patris* and, along with it, conservative norms, but Grimes's book hardly stands alone. Further evidence of the myth's continuing popularity is provided by Annie Lontas and Jeff Parker's edited collection of essays on literary mentorship, *A Manner of Being*. Laudably, it features stories about all sorts of mentors and mentees, but the plurality of the mentorships described are of the Telemachan variety, involving a younger man being mentored by an older, elite male writer.<sup>5</sup> The book's title is taken from Douglas Unger's contribution to the volume, in which he asserts: "[M]ore than specific content, it's a *manner of being* in our mentors that I believe we keep tapping into as a vital source for our students" (17). Repeatedly in the collection, the manner of being that mentors exemplify involves them modeling not just authorial identities but also gendered and sexual identities. In the *Odyssey*, Athena's assumption of a male persona encourages readers to think of gender as involving performance and choice. In *A Manner of Being*, there is little attention to such aspects of gender. Instead, various contributors pay homage to mentors whom they take to have embodied a quite conventional masculinity, one that the mentees construe not as a performance but as a natural fit for the mentors—and, implicitly, a natural fit with literary authority. Insofar as the mentees in question are invariably men themselves, this naturalized association of masculinity with literary authority enables the mentees' self-insertions into male-dominated literary genealogies.

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<sup>5</sup> The twenty-seven contributions by female authors are fairly balanced with respect to the gender of the mentors identified: nine contributors focus on male mentors, twelve on female mentors, and three on both male and female mentors (while two describe the experience of not having had mentors). In contrast, of the forty-one essays by men in *A Manner of Being*, thirty-one focus on a single male mentor, while another five focus on multiple male mentors. Only two male contributors focus on female mentors: one of the contributors identifies a high school teacher, "Mrs. Maureen Vanderbilt," as a mentor (along with a male college professor) (Meinke, 71), while the other contributor in question describes having been mentored by a female writer whom the contributor identifies only as "the Exquisite Lady" (D'Souza, 105).

The existence of such genealogies is implied in the very structure of *A Manner of Being*, which is divided into eight sections, three of which are titled "Lineage." Often in the "Lineage" sections, a writer's essay about a mentor is followed by an essay in which another writer recounts having been the mentee of the writer of the previous essay. For instance, a contribution by George Saunders about having been mentored by Unger and Tobias Wolff is followed by one by Adam Levin about Saunders's mentorship of him. As the title "Lineage" indicates, the book suggests that mentorship can be understood as having a familial structure. What *A Manner of Being* does not explicitly recognize is that most of the contributors to the "Lineage" sections are male, and all but one of the mentors discussed in the sections are men. Moreover, the notion of the mentor as a father-substitute recurs in several contributions. For instance, Scott Laughlin says of his mentor, Alberto de Lacerda: "[H]e had no children, and I, no father" (51). The notion is equally explicit in Padgett Powell's tribute to Donald Barthelme, in which Powell writes: "I discovered by accident that if you demanded good fathering of [Barthelme], . . . he would oblige you" (142). And several contributors identify their mentors as exemplary literal fathers. Discussing Saunders, Levin writes of realizing "how good he was at family" (29), while Parker testifies to Saunders's "doting on his daughters" (3), and Saunders himself recalls observing Wolff with his family and thinking: "He clearly adores them, takes visible pleasure in them, dotes on them" (21). For Saunders, the lesson is that writers do not have to be "dysfunctional and difficult, incapable of truly loving anything" (21). But the kind of love he describes witnessing also foregrounds the writer as a father heading up and caring for a traditional nuclear family. In that regard, it is notable that Saunders recalls returning to Wolff's house with him after an episode of drinking, then proceeding to eat with him "some chicken that [Wolff's] wife Catherine [had] prepared for something very important" the next day, an event "for which there [would] be no time to make something else" (19). This story of mentor-mentee bonding unfortunately normalizes two gendered stereotypes: women as domestic laborers and men behaving badly.

The unselfconscious depiction of literary mentorship as a homosocial affair involving male lines of inheritance and shared performances of masculinity is spectacularly instantiated in Levin's contribution to *A Manner of Being*, which is constituted by an anecdote about an encounter that he and a fellow male writer had early in the first semester of their MFA studies at Syracuse University. Levin recalls that the two of them were in a public bathroom together, "pissing into a urinal" and "talking about something I don't remember—probably a book or a girl with red hair," when they were joined by Saunders, a faculty member in the program. Levin goes on to remember wondering whether to say something to Saunders, given that, as Levin puts it, "[O]ur dicks were out." Finally, Saunders broke the silence by saying, "You know, I was just thinking, . . . If a bomb went off in this bathroom, killing us all, how fucken crazy would that be?" Levin and the other student voiced their agreement; Levin claims to have said, "That would be so fucken crazy!" He recalls that Saunders then continued: "I mean, the progress of American letters . . . could be set back as much as fifteen

seconds” (29-30). The scene establishes Saunders as the alpha male in an environment in which the relationship between voice, penis, and power is all but explicit. Catching the male students with their pants down, Saunders silences them with his mere presence, then further demonstrates his power by transforming a moment of awkwardness into an opportunity for him to welcome them into the literary fold, aligning his place in American letters with theirs. This show of humility and munificence, intentionally or not, secures Saunders’s authority in the situation; he has the confidence to speak and the power to assign them all a place in the literary hierarchy. He also takes on the responsibility of putting the students at ease in a moment of vulnerability—a moment that is, of course, a particularly male moment: with their genitalia exposed, they have the potential to be assigned a place in an anatomy-based hierarchy, too. The implicit conflation of the two hierarchies gives the scene much of its dramatic frisson, but it also follows a patriarchal logic that associates excellence in writing with the phallus. Moreover, it renders mentorship a relationship distinguished by tutelage and bonding in spaces where there are literally no women allowed; the reference to the “girl with red hair” serves as a further reminder that women are being marginalized, relegated to the status of topics for male conversation. Meanwhile, by attributing words to Saunders and by reproducing part of his speech with the idiosyncratic spelling of the word “fucken,” Levin shows off his ability to master his mentor’s voice and make it his own, just as he did in the bathroom incident by repeating the phrase “fucken crazy.” These are emblematic instances of homosocial incorporation and inheritance not unlike the moment in *Mentor* in which Grimes ventriloquizes Conroy.

A similarly emblematic narrative is offered in *A Manner of Being* by Davy Rothbart regarding Charles Baxter’s mentoring of him. First, Rothbart recalls Baxter helping him to tie his tie on the night that Rothbart won an award just before graduating from college. Then, Rothbart flashes forward fifteen years to an encounter between the two men in which Rothbart remembers seeking “the right words” to acknowledge his debt to Baxter. In the end, Rothbart recalls, he declared “You’re the fucking man,” and Baxter replied with exactly the same words. Rothbart concludes with the recollection: “[W]e slapped a high-five, and he disappeared into the night” (55). In this story, the penises in question are present only metaphorically via the tie, but they play a similar role as in Levin’s piece: namely, as the centre of attention in a moment of distinctively male bonding. Once again, a writer relates an anecdote about literary mentorship that ends up almost literally tying mentorship to an education in performances of masculinity. Baxter’s confirmation that Rothbart is “the fucking man” grants the mentee a status that counterbalances the volatile contingencies of literary fame with his more stable birthright as male and as his mentor’s figurative son.

The myth of the mentor as serving *in loco patris* may offer further comfort to some mentees insofar as it grounds mentors’ authority in a familiar, if problematic, power structure. The kind of authority that literary mentors wield can be otherwise unclear and unstable. The mere fact of being

a "good" or "successful" writer—qualities that are themselves highly contestable—does not necessarily mean that the writer is a good teacher or role model, yet literary success is often the sole qualification an author needs to be sought out as a mentor, whether informally by an emerging writer seeking help or formally by an institution seeking to match the author with a mentee.<sup>6</sup> Mentees may thrill at being mentored by such an author but, at one level or another, feel ambivalent about taking direction from the person, especially if the mentor turns out to be less than expert in providing guidance, instruction, and support. In the face of such ambivalence, some mentees might be drawn to treat their mentors as figurative fathers because to do so evokes previous intergenerational relations in which the mentees' ceding of authority to an older person was habitual. Such a dynamic may lie behind the repeated assertions in *A Manner of Being*—as observed by Parker in his introduction to the volume—that mentees see mentors as people who "give permission": that is, they make it appear acceptable for their mentees to keep writing, to experiment, to develop their idiosyncrasies, etc. (4). "Permission" might seem like a strange word to describe such encouragement, but its use makes more sense if it depends on a conception of mentors as *in loco patris* and on mentees' voluntary self-subordination to them in order to enjoy a fantasy in which the mentors have a quasi-paternal authority. A fundamental problem with this fantasy, however, is that it takes for granted and exploits patriarchal norms that grant an inordinate authority to fathers.

Another problem with the repeated representation of mentorship as *in loco patris* is its perpetuation of the idea that mentors are customarily men whose mentees are their figurative sons. This idea encourages male would-be mentees to look for male mentors and vice versa, while it discourages female, intersex, and genderqueer writers from thinking about themselves as participants in mentorship in either regard. When they do serve as mentors or mentees, moreover, they are liable to find that the conservative notions of gender and family underpinning the myth of mentorship as *in loco patris* threaten to intervene. For instance, the myth may create an expectation that female mentors will serve *in loco matris*, playing a conventionally feminine role. In that regard, consider Lee Montgomery's contribution to *A Manner of Being*, in which she contrasts one of her male mentors with one of her female ones:

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<sup>6</sup>In this regard, one might keep in mind Steve Colwell's (1998) distinction between "instrumental" and "classical" mentoring, the former involving an institutional relationship for "formal employment or training purposes," the latter occurring "between individuals, who come together voluntarily . . . for the personal and professional growth of both" (314). Although instrumental mentorship is often time-limited and otherwise more constrained than classical mentorship, there is every chance of it rehearsing the myth of mentorship *in loco patris*, especially if the mentorship is intergenerational and dyadic. In fact, because instrumental mentorship often involves mentees being matched with mentors without either party choosing the other, it might be said to parallel biological paternal-filial relations more closely than classical mentorship does.

Whereas Jim Krusoe pushed out, encouraged wild leaps of imagination, Deborah Eisenberg, more of a realist and traditionalist, pushed in, leading me toward the power of crystalline language and the constructs of the traditional narrative. . . . Deborah's teaching strategy was subtle, full of whispers. . . . We were doing intricate work, not brain surgery, certainly, but almost, braiding stories with silk threads. When we sat to review a story, I'd follow her long, slender, white finger as it traipsed across the page. (44-45)

However accurate Montgomery's description of the two mentors may be, she aligns the two writers with clichés of gendered writing in which men are imaginative risk-takers while women excel as traditionalists and miniaturists.

Insofar as the evocations of fatherhood in narratives of male mentoring relations typically involve a heteronormative conception of it, the representations are further problematic for queer writers. In the sixty-eight essays in *A Manner of Being*, just one mentor's queer sexuality is mentioned, and in that case only in passing.<sup>7</sup> And insofar as the myth of mentorship as *in loco patris* posits a familial connection between mentors and their mentees, it risks reinscribing racialized boundaries, too. Thus, the myth is particularly exclusionary with respect to writers of minoritized groups who are underrepresented in literary culture and less likely than others to find prospective mentors or mentees sharing their racial identification. In this regard, there is a telling moment near the end of *Mentor*, as Grimes describes arranging a first meeting with ZZ Packer, then a young writer living in Iowa, to discuss publishing her work in an anthology he was editing. When he asked her how he would recognize her in the coffee shop where they planned to meet, she replied: "I'll be the black one." Grimes recalls laughing and chiding her, "Come on ZZ. It's not that bad." Then he adds retrospectively: "But it was" (217). By foregrounding his insensitivity to matters of racialization, Grimes implicitly comments on a further dimension of his quasi-filial bond with Conroy: it involved not just a shared gender identity but also a shared racial identity. The anecdote suggests further that a culture in which mentoring relations are assumed to be like biological father-son relations is likely to produce mentors who lack the mindset and skill-set to respond sufficiently to mentees who differ from them with regard to things such as gender, class, and race.

The myth of mentorship as *in loco patris* also encourages writers to overemphasize the mentoring dyad's importance while ignoring or diminishing the significance of other relationships. In that regard, a notable counter-example is the contribution to *A Manner of Being* by Arthur Flowers, who suggests that he views his own mentoring as most importantly contributing not so much to the success of individual writers as to a collective project of African American "liberation" and of "trying to keep the culture, the tribal soul, healthy" (242). In making this suggestion, Flowers helps us to recognize

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<sup>7</sup> See Parini, 230.

mentorship as not simply a process of training in craft and professional skills but as a relationship that is ineluctably political. Even the choice to practice and privilege dyadic mentorship is politically charged: not least, it corroborates an individualist worldview, insofar as it can be taken to imply that a writer might succeed based on the help of a single figure and no one else. Bruce Robbins (2007) has argued that mentorship narratives are "stories of reliance on others" (xvi). Stories of mentorship *in loco patris* tend to be, more particularly and tellingly, stories of reliance on particular others, facilitating upward mobility for certain sorts of people and revealing the ways in which white, male writers' privilege includes the support of power networks dominated by other white men. At the same time, the trope of mentorship pairings as paternal-filial treats them as the result of biology rather than of ideology, eliding the problematic structures that facilitate such pairings. The metaphor of fatherhood leaves aside the choices that are made, the people who are consciously or unconsciously passed over, and the others whom social inequality excludes from consideration at the outset.

### SELF-REFLEXIVITY AND ALTERNATIVE MENTORSHIP MODELS

While we have suggested that intergenerational, dyadic, collaborative mentorship—what we have been calling the Telemachan model—is likely to involve an overly comprehensive authority being granted to mentors, as well as hazardous manifestations of deference and transference on the part of the mentees, we are concerned by what happens when this model becomes the dominant one both in practice and with respect to stories of mentorship. One consequence is that alternative kinds of mentorship are insufficiently recognized and pursued. Another is that the Telemachan model is liable to be taken for granted, practiced and narrated with inadequate attention to its risks and problems, as is the case with the stories in *Mentor* and *A Manner of Being* that pay little heed to the patriarchal elements of literary culture.

The myth of mentorship as *in loco patris* is also problematic in terms of how it ends up inflecting stories about literary mentorship beyond those focused on men. For instance, the myth's influence is evident in the depiction of the central mentorship in Debra Weinstein's novel *Apprentice to the Flower Poet Z.*, which involves Annabelle, a precocious undergraduate writer at a New York university in the 1980s, and a distinguished poet, the titular "Z.," who holds an endowed professorship at the college. Although *Apprentice to the Flower Poet Z.* would seem to depart from the *in loco patris* model by presenting a mentoring relationship between women, Annabelle and Z.'s relationship exhibits a distinctively Telemachan dynamic in many respects: it is intergenerational; it is almost dyadically intimate and collaborative, as Z. demands much of Annabelle's time, energy, and devotion; and it is distinctly hierarchical, as Z. regularly issues imperatives and judgments while expecting Annabelle's deference. Moreover, the mentorship is transferenceal, as Annabelle has intense feelings for Z. that are evidently due, at least in part, to Annabelle's estranged relationship with her parents.

Weinstein suggests that such a mentorship can lead to exploitation. While working as Z.'s personal assistant, Annabelle is encouraged by Z. to think of herself as Z.'s "apprentice," but she also ends up performing enormous amounts of menial, secretarial, intellectual, creative, and emotional labor for her. Eventually, Z. goes so far as to use Annabelle's poetic lines in her own published work without attribution. Meanwhile, Z. seldom considers Annabel's needs, and she offers Annabelle little beyond financial compensation and dubious perks such as the honor of being seen around the college as "the celebrity assistant" (34). Thus, Weinstein's picture of Telemachan mentorship is one in which mentors, rather than helping their mentees to scale the ladders of literary hierarchy, use them primarily to maintain their own place in that hierarchy. What is more, Annabelle becomes dependent on and vulnerable to Z., not least because Z.'s demands on Annabelle make it difficult for her to cultivate other mentoring relationships—relationships Z. deters her from, evidently wishing to ensure that she remains the primary influence on the younger writer.

At the same time, Z.'s authority over Annabelle is not clearly earned. Indeed, much of the advice Z. offers is problematic, as when she counsels Annabelle against publishing any time soon but then uses Annabelle's lines in her own writing. Z. also admits to little familiarity with Emily Dickinson's work, even though she enlists Annabelle in editing a book about her, and she lacks a basic knowledge of flowers in several respects, despite the fact that she has gained her reputation as poet due to her writing on the subject. Z. also espouses a conservative poetics that she expects Annabelle to embrace, thus demonstrating the tendency of mentorship *in loco patris* to reproduce aesthetic paradigms rather than fostering innovation. As such details sit pointedly alongside Annabelle's deference to Z., it becomes clear that cultural expectations around mentorship are doing Annabelle a disservice by playing a part in the perpetuation of that deference. The novel does present other possible mentors for her, including a former teacher, Arthur, whom she thinks of as her "poetry father" (15), but these figures also tend to rehearse the *in loco patris* tradition of offering aphorisms and imperatives, as Arthur does when he tells her regarding her talent: "Use it well. Listen closely, take good notes, and make friends" (15).

Z. is a larger-than-life character, and *Apprentice to the Flower Poet Z.*, as a fictional narrative with elements of satire, is not a text that readers will necessarily take to be a verisimilar representation of real-life mentorship. Nevertheless, the capsule biography at the end of the book identifies Weinstein as a poet who was a student at New York University, thus tempting readers to think of the novel as a roman à clef with elements of truth—perhaps even as a text that, protected by the veil of its status as fiction, is freer than nonfiction to tell the truth of how mentorship really is. Consequently, even as the novel does valuable work in alerting readers to the dangers of Telemachan literary mentorship, it risks perpetuating the dominance of that form of mentorship in the cultural imagination.

Given that the myth of literary mentorship as *in loco patris* has had such currency, there are good reasons for mentoring relations to include self-reflexivity on the part of mentors and mentees alike.



Those reasons are compelling, not least, regarding norms of gender. Susan Hubbard (2005) has identified it as important for Creative Writing instructors to address gender stereotypes in their classes so that developing writers can “create characters and plots that acknowledge, confront, and/or correct, rather than unconsciously reinforce, such stereotypes” (137). It is equally important to recognize and address how mentoring relationships between writers might avoid the harm that can come from normative gender performances. Mentors should recognize that insofar as they are role models, one of the things they are modeling is a gender identity. Mentees will benefit from their mentors’ recognition that their specific gender identities are not the only alternatives—especially if the mentors have embraced identities that are stereotypically associated with literary celebrity: for instance, the identity of the hard-living, hyper-masculine man in the style of Hemingway. Likewise, it is important for writers not to leave unchallenged the social forces that have naturalized a relationship between masculinity, literary value, and literary authority. For instance, Mary Ann Cain (2009) asserts that Creative Writing teachers too often point to men’s writing when suggesting what literature their students should read (237). *Mentor* and *A Manner of Being* provide evidence that such biases also exist in mentorship and play a part in the perpetuation of male-dominated literary genealogies. Consequently, mentors need to be self-reflexive about the possible biases informing their choices of work to cite and to recommend.

Mentoring relations are also likely to benefit from self-reflexivity about elements of the mentorship that could contribute to undue hierarchization. For example, mentors might resist the urge to adopt the imperative mode, more often taking up an interrogative approach that seeks to draw out mentees’ experience, expertise, and critical thinking. Furthermore, mentors might demystify their own stature in their mentee’s eyes: for instance, they might describe their past and current struggles with writing, as well as the contingencies of their various accolades. And they might identify the idiosyncratic elements of their work habits, aesthetic preferences, and career paths as such rather than allowing their mentees to assume that these are things to be replicated as closely as possible. Self-reflexivity alone is no guarantee that mentoring relations will be entirely free from oppressive elements, but it is an important step in denaturalizing the norms associated with the myth of mentorship *in loco patris*.

In our own case, the two of us have been drawn to challenging norms of mentoring in part because our collaborative relationship could easily have gained a Telemachan dynamic. Robert, a novelist and professor, is more than a decade older than Neil, who was a student in Robert’s graduate Creative Writing workshop in 2015. For the past two years, moreover, we have been working together on a research project involving Creative Writing pedagogy in which Robert has been the primary investigator and Neil has been one of Robert’s research assistants. Recognizing that our collaboration could come to involve a Telemachan form of mentorship, Robert has made a point of not aiming to preserve any façade of unimpeachable authority with respect to writing, instead sending Neil drafts of sections of this article that were a long way from being polished. He has also repeatedly encouraged Neil to challenge and disagree with the ideas in the

drafts. For Neil's part, collaborating with Robert in a relationship that resembles a Telemachan mentorship in certain respects has caused him to approach the work together with a heightened sensitivity to its hierarchical elements and to claim his share of authority in the collaboration: for instance, by independently drafting paragraphs about *Mentor* and *A Manner of Being*, thus dispersing any pressure he might have felt to align his opinions with Robert's preliminary ideas about the texts. Furthermore, through dialogue about mentorship, gender, and literary culture in the course of writing this paper, we have engaged in the sort of self-reflexive discussion that we believe every mentoring pair should undertake. Even as we drafted this section of the article, we had a conversation about the ways in which we identify with respect to gender, taking care to ensure that neither of us was making an assumption about how the other wished to be represented. In the stories we tell people of our relationship, these will be among the elements on which we focus, rather than ostensibly leaving out gender and treating it as a given.

Meanwhile, there is a need for more stories about other kinds of literary mentorship—and, indeed, for an increased institutional facilitation of mentorships other than the dyadic, intergenerational, all-male kind. For instance, one effect of the cultural emphasis on mentorship *in loco patris* has been that mentorship programs tend to be geared toward young writers. As researchers involved in a 2002 study of Australian programs observe, usually “mid-career writers don't qualify for support because they are not young and because they are not producing their first major work” (Krauth and Baranay). Although it may seem intuitively the case that younger writers are in greater need of mentorship than midcareer writers, that intuition is partly shaped by the dominance of the intergenerational mentorship myth. In fact, many midcareer writers would benefit greatly from mentors, especially given that there are innumerable programs, prizes, etc. for younger writers but few for those who, later in their literary lives, are still struggling to make a name for themselves.

The Telemachan model's cultural dominance has also led to a common belief that mentorship is, by definition, dyadic. However, there are other mentorship structures that in some situations may be more effective than one-on-one relations. As Kate Philip and Leo B. Hendry (1996) point out, such alternatives include “peer group mentoring” and “individual-team mentoring where a group looks to an individual or small number of individuals for support, advice and challenge” (192-93). These mentorships need not substitute entirely for dyadic mentorship, but they promise a more egalitarian, less atomistic form of relationality, and they promise to broaden writers' understanding of what nurturing literary relationships can entail. Peer group mentoring may also be more likely than mentorship *in loco patris* to develop writers' sense of autonomy. As Craig Batty and Jennifer Sinclair (2014) observe of peer-to-peer learning, such “horizontal” relationships have a greater potential than more traditionally hierarchical ones to help writers in “assuming and acquiring their own authority and confidence as writers and researchers” (342).

Attention to such possibilities, along with greater self-reflexivity in mentoring relations, will help to lessen the influence of the myth of mentorship as *in loco patris* while challenging the cultural and social status quo, especially with regard to exclusionary gender norms. Such challenging remains imperative in a literary culture where female writers remain less likely than male ones to gain the interest of literary agents<sup>8</sup>, where books about women are less likely to win prizes than books about men<sup>9</sup>, and where aspiring writers who are asked to identify their literary influences end up naming male authors much more often than female ones<sup>10</sup>. Mentorship needs to become something that, in practice as well as in theory, is as much for female writers, racially minoritized writers, and queer writers as for straight, white men. The dominance of the Telemachan model of mentorship has meant that it has been too easy for the exclamation "That's my boy down there!" to be uttered without due attention to the dynamics underlying it. With respect to the writing of literature, authors frequently insist on the need to be aware of conventions and to avoid the unthinking rehearsal of them; it is important for them to bring this same spirit to their practices and stories of mentorship.

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<sup>8</sup> See Catherine Nichols's 2015 article "Homme de Plume," in which she recounts that when she sent a letter and excerpt from her writing to fifty agents under her own name, she received two manuscript requests, and that when she sent the same materials under a male pseudonym, she received seventeen requests.<sup>2</sup>For a discussion of writing instructors serving *in loco parentis*, see Podis and Podis (2007).

<sup>9</sup> A 2015 study found that twelve of the past fifteen Booker Prize-winning novels and all of the past fifteen Pulitzer-winners had featured male protagonists. See Flood (2015).

<sup>10</sup> In a 2015 article, "Throwing the Book at Sexism in Publishing," Sarah Davis-Goff of Tramp Press—which asks authors submitting work to list their literary influences—reported that of 148 influences so named in the press's 100 most recent submissions, only thirty-three were women.

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