

## Freud: A way with words...

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I don't know if it's the same for you, but for me there was never a time before Freud – Freud was 'already-there'. I mean there was never a moment when someone introduced me to this particular thinker and his works, saying "Have you heard of Freud?" I always already knew of Freud somehow. For me He existed.

This is not to say that I knew about his work – far from it! For years I stared emptily at the rainbow-coloured spines that made up the Freud Penguin Collection on other people's bookshelves, never opening a single page! I think I thought to myself – "There's some knowledge in there that I would like to know about and I will certainly come to know about it at some time, but not now!"

Freud was always a benevolent figure for me, and certainly worthy of respect, but I knew that some people scoffed at him. Later I learned that there were knowledgeable people who objected to Freud's thinking on the grounds that it was not only scientifically wrong, but socially conservative, sexist, reactionary, essentialist, normative, and so on. (I don't need to tell you that in order to arrive at these opinions one usually has to have avoided reading Freud!) Sometimes people seemed to have an image of Freud the man as severe and twisted: this was not my Freud.

Freud for me has always been the epitome of wisdom and therefore kindness in a world that can be harsh and violent. It might have been an image that I needed to sustain, just as people like to believe in God. However I know now, and am better equipped to know, that Freud as a human being would probably not have been a disappointment to me. I say that now because we have some knowledge of the man and his ways in his writing – Freud's being is evident throughout his work.

Today I merely want to share with you two little sections of Freud's writing that I came across at different points in my relation to Freud. The first one I read before I had begun to study psychoanalysis — it is Freud's letter written in 1935 (Freud, 1961) to a mother who had written to him in distress at her son's homosexuality. Freud replies to her: <sup>1</sup>

"Homosexuality is assuredly no advantage, but it is nothing to be ashamed of, no vice, no degradation; it cannot be classified as an illness: we consider it to be a variation of the sexual function... Many highly respectable individuals of ancient and modern times have been homosexuals, several of the greatest men among them... It is a great injustice to persecute homosexuality as a crime – and a cruelty too..."

By asking me if I can help you, you mean, I suppose, if I can abolish homosexuality and make normal heterosexuality take its place.... What analysis can do for your son runs in a different line. If he is unhappy, neurotic, torn by conflicts, inhibited in his social life, analysis may bring him harmony, peace of mind, full efficiency, whether he remains homosexual or gets changed..."

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<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, 9<sup>th</sup> April 1935, *Letters of Sigmund Freud 1873 – 1938* (ed.) Ernest Freud, Hogarth Press, London 1961, p.419 – 20.

Nothing needs to be said after this – I can think of no better evidence to counter those who accuse Freud of prejudice of any sort. What struck me at the time was not only this evidence, this remarkably modern attitude, but also the incredible kindness of the man, and the peace he could transmit to others.

The other piece of writing I came across a few years ago, browsing in someone else's bookshelf, is another letter, this time written to Mathilde, Freud's eldest daughter when she was a young woman in her twenties:

'I have guessed for a long time... [he begins] ...that in spite of all your common sense you fret because you think you are not good looking enough and therefore might not attract a man. I have watched this with a smile, first of all because you seem quite attractive enough to me, and secondly because I know that in reality it is no longer physical beauty which decides the fate of a girl, but the impression of her whole personality. Your mirror will inform you that there is nothing common or repellent in your features, and your memory will confirm the fact that you have managed to inspire respect and sympathy in others.'

I only have this section – presumably it goes on. Once again I was struck by the enormous kindness of Freud, and by a kindness that did not mean avoiding difficult areas, or not saying certain things - kind because it puts into speech things that go on seething underneath until they have been said to an Other. It is a kindness that uses speech in the most significant, signifying way; a way with words that is notable in its profundity and effects.

On this auspicious day let's make a toast to Freud and his words – and may we all find a way.

### **References**

Freud, S. (1961). *Letters of Sigmund Freud 1873 - 1938*. London: Hogarth Press.