

Plato's cure for hysteria

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I was only a young boy and there lived in our street a belle, a brunette of unusual beauty, much older than me but not more than fifteen (but this was last century, at a time when, at least in Buenos Aires, a girl of fifteen was a woman). She was loved by all the boys of the neighbourhood and beyond – and she was passionately hated by all the other girls. When she went out in the direction of the bus stop, the whole of Flores Sur (South Flores) came to a halt and admired – or despised, depending on one's sexual affiliation – her graceful figure in movement.

One day, however, her demeanour changed dramatically. Her coming out of her home was preceded by a prolonged and deafening shriek, and she was not walking: she was running at full speed, and kept screaming frantically, her dress in a state of disarray. After her, also running in a frenzy, came her two sisters, her mother, her aunt (who was single and lived with them), her father and the dog, and then, of course, all of us, the boys who, as usual, were playing soccer in the street, but decided to suspend the game given the extraordinary developments that were taking place – in a neighbourhood where the only event out of the ordinary was the unfortunate breaking of window glasses by one of us kicking the football way off the goal.

The beautiful brunette ran and ran, some three hundred metres; then she stopped and fainted, a few dozen people surrounding her and trying to be of help. What struck me most was that her face looked peaceful and composed, almost beatific – in contrast with the anxiety and embarrassment clearly visible in the faces of her family. After a few minutes she came out of her trance-like state, asked what had happened and walked back home with her dear ones, escorted by the boys who, not finding the words to comment on what we had seen and heard, resumed the football game without delay.

Over the next few months the same scene re-occurred, almost identically in its ingredients, although we were not always playing soccer. A rumour started to circulate that the girl's head was not working properly and that perhaps she was holding too many secrets in it. Following one of those episodes, my father told me:

'She'll be cured of this thing when she gets married. Plato said it.'

'What do you mean?', I asked. Certainly the girl's escapades intrigued me.

'In due course you will understand', was my father's not so enlightening reply.

The girl eventually married a boy who happened to live very close to the spot where she used to faint, and as far as I know they have lived happily ever after.

In my final year at the Escuela Normal, a special secondary school where one trained to become a primary school teacher, I met a psychoanalyst for the first time. He was our teacher for Philosophy and for Educational Psychology, and as a psychoanalyst he was a follower of the culturalist school, the school founded by Erich Fromm and Clara Thompson. Once he referred to Plato's writings on sexuality, which have since been interpreted as an intuitive apprehension of the relations between sexuality and hysteria. I asked him for further elaborations on the matter – I had not forgotten the girl who lived two houses down.

'Look', he replied, 'read Plato; that will be good for you. But on this matter you better read Freud first. You may well start with the *Five Conferences* that Freud gave at Clark University' [SE 11:3].

So I did. Then I read the *Studies on Hysteria*. Then the rest of Freud's work. I started reading Freud 43 years ago and have never stopped. Since then the writings of Freud have had a formative influence upon me like no other piece of writing.

References

Freud, S. (1901). *Studies on hysteria* (SE:II). Ed. and Trans. James Strachy. London: Hogarth Press & the Institute of psycho-analysis.

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