

‘It’s a pity I can’t kiss myself’

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When this talk was proposed, it seemed like a good idea and I was certain a favourite passage of Freud would easily spring to mind; any psychoanalyst must surely have a dozen such passages. But when the deadline came, I was still a blank. In extremity, I decided to simply choose the passage I could remember quoting most often. What embarrassment when I saw it was one that describes the birth of the oral drive! As always in psychoanalysis, spontaneous thoughts reveal something.

I had always thought that this passage was a great description of what Freud meant by drive, and the way he had observed something no-one else ever had: that the sexual drive of human beings is *not* biological, and yet it arises from the pleasure taken in biological functions, not alone, but privileged by their connection with what he called ‘the prehistoric, unforgettable other’ with whom those functions were first satisfied (‘Letter 52’, Freud, 1950a [1887-1902], 239).

“To begin with”, Freud says, “sexual activity attaches itself to functions serving the purpose of self-preservation” (Freud, 1905d, 182). He then comments that the blissful smile of a satiated infant at the breast is the prototype of later sexual satisfaction. Then the passage I obviously like so much: “The need for repeating the sexual satisfaction now becomes detached from the need for taking nourishment...” I like it because it so neatly shows what the drive *is*, and also the impasse at the heart of sexuality. It says there is a *drive* to repeat a satisfaction that is gone and could only be had in relation to an *active need*, and yet the drive continues in the *absence* of that need. It wants to *constantly* repeat the pleasure of satisfying need, and is therefore impossible: impossible because you can’t have need *constantly*—witness bulimia—and because even when you do have it, satisfying it never attains the mythical, unforgettable yet un-rememberable Other of the first, blissful time. That first satisfaction was therefore not only of meeting the need, but of encountering an Other inscribed in the body and memory—that is, in the drive—as *perfectly satisfying*. The drive thus aims at a complementary sexual relation.

The drive towards this Other who no longer exists is one side of the sexual drive, the side that heads into the field of thought and representation where its satisfactions are sublimations and are more properly called love. But that’s not *living* sexuality. The living, *real* part of the drive finds an object that gives immediate gratification, without any mediation by speech, so that the child, Freud says:

does not make use of an extraneous body for his sucking, but prefers a part of his own skin because it is more convenient, because it makes him independent of the external world... he provides himself, as it were, with a second erotogenic zone... “It’s a pity I can’t kiss myself”, he seems to be saying.

Given these two sides of the sexual drive, the subject attached to it is split or divided. To me, this demonstration is the genius and tragedy of what Freud brought to us, which Lacan later characterised by saying ‘there is no such thing as a sexual rapport’: that the originary satisfaction can never be found

anywhere but in one's own representations; that is, in fantasy. And what the drive *really* satisfies itself with is an object that betrays the ideals of love and causes us shame.

It follows from Freud's revelation that to seek sexuality with another person is brave, foolish, inevitably partially disappointing and the stuff of tragedy, comedy and heroism. If the drive's satisfaction is hallucinatory and autistic, it requires considerable psychical work to introduce another subject to that place. That work is done by fantasy, and by the neurotic and perverse and psychotic structures and symptoms we confront as analysts and as analysands. As works constructed to deal with a fundamental impossibility, they ought not to be scorned.

In my view, this impossibility is the heart of the rejection encountered by Freud and psychoanalysis, up to and including today. Freud said that his message was rejected because it spoke of infantile sexuality. True, but would it have been rejected if it had been a message of joy and harmony? I think not. Lacan's reading of Freud suggests that infantile amnesia and the social rejection of Freud's observations are due, not to the *existence* of sexuality in infancy, but to its *failure*; to what he called the fault in the Other: namely, that there is no *jouissance* there. Sexuality, even in its connection with childhood, is not absent from our culture; on the contrary, it is omnipresent, but in a fantasy form that rescues it from failure, usually under the rubric that 'love conquers all'.

Therefore I honour Freud for having the barefaced honesty, like a good hysteric, to point to what fails in the Other and then, beyond hysteria, to follow his observations scientifically to the point of showing that all hysterics were speaking the truth—that the emperor has no clothes, the sexual relation does fail—and that neurosis is an attempt to deal with this truth whilst still remaining human, in relation to the symbolic Other, beyond the autism of thumb-sucking.

References

Freud, S. (1905d). *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, SE VII.

Freud, S. (1950a [1887-1902]). *Extracts from the Fliess Papers*, SE I.