

## The death drive: a disturbing concept

Silvia A. Loviscek de Rodríguez

I encountered Freud the summer I turned sixteen. I was preparing my entrance exam to University and one of the subjects was philosophy; so I made a place for myself at the Library of the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters. There I began to study, but lo and behold! Suddenly my gaze fell upon a little bookcase, separated from the rest, nestled in a space left under the staircase, that niche contained a collection of books written by Sigmund Freud. I read the indexes, then bits and pieces of different articles, then the sexual theory and then the psychopathology of everyday life. It caught my interest in a tight grip and it began to seriously interfere with my studies. I did not care. Freud spoke about sexuality and that was what interested me most. The little alcove under the stairs seemed to me a magic place; it held a knowledge that interested me more than the work of the philosophers.

The *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* enlightened me as to how people do and say things that are different from what they consciously mean. That got me thinking about my own family and then my only desire was to find an analyst. Suddenly all the other things in my life seemed of no importance. I started a peregrine's search for what analysis can do, who and what is a good analyst, what can you learn in the psychoanalytic institutions and how they are not more comforting than one's own family — but like the family it is better to have one than none.

The interesting thing was that the theories of sexuality, the Oedipus complex and the *Papers on Technique* were somehow easy to understand. Not that I understood everything but I was in love with it; I absorbed it excessively without criticism, except for one concept: the death drive and its consequences. It was after several years of studies that I registered that it existed as a major part and a necessity in Freud's work, and it took many more years to understand what it meant.

One day, studying with a friend at a café in Buenos Aires, he suddenly said, "the aim of life is death". "You must be having a very dark day today," I said. "Not at all, that's what Freud says". "Where?" "In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*". I made a note to read it again. But being a romantic and always in love, I only registered the opposition between Thanatos and Eros. I did not have to worry: I could imagine that I was entirely on the side of Eros and so did the people I loved; only my enemies were on the side of Thanatos.

It took me the shock of my first job in a hospital to realise that Eros was not such a good fellow after all. It was not at all straight forward, to encounter the first suicide, a beautiful young woman whose beauty we all loved and admired, then the first psychotic who found sexual desire unbearable to such an extent that he cut his own penis.

It was only then that I commenced a relationship with Freud that went beyond love; an intellectual discipline began to form — beyond the pleasure principle. That love and erotic life were not on the side of life was quite a blow. I could see in myself and in my friends how falling in love gives people the idea that allowing free range to love is tantamount to happiness. What I could then see were catastrophes suddenly

appearing like natural disasters, creating chaos, desolation and confusion. Nice, intelligent people would become idiots or the worst traitors, full of murderous wishes for their rivals; they would betray even their best friends. Some loves required the strongest resistance, because if they were fulfilled they would produce ravages to everyone involved. I wasn't innocent any more. In my hospital practice I saw people who would fall very ill, with pathologies that destroyed part of their bodies and yet they would rise above and show an extraordinary zest for life.

The exuberance of the drives fascinated me. Suddenly wealth and poverty acquired another dimension in the smaller world of each person. I could see that some people had too much Eros but also too much Thanatos. Others were poor in terms of their drives. Homeostasis was rare, only appeared at some times in life. And a tranquil enjoyment was not granted forever. But there was still more to face. Once I developed some experience in psychoanalytic treatment, mine and other people's, I realized that nobody wants to be cured. Life cannot be cured. My patients wanted to abandon the treatment or wanted to stay forever, one or the other was a part of not wanting to change. I myself did not want anything else but to repeat. Although I did not know that I was repeating. The immortal desire and the death drive were in the same spot!

I needed the encounter with Jacques Lacan to go a bit further. But it does not matter how far one goes: one always finds something that is in the same place, at exactly the same distance, that is, in one's guts, with all the sense and nonsense one could assign to it.