

Eros and the poets

Susan Schwartz

For Freud, the man of science, love is a mystery that can be solved. He introduced a vocabulary for talking about love: transference, object, libido, cathexis, drive, wish, sexuality, Eros. Of course, each of these terms has a specificity and cannot be reduced to the signifier, “love”, but in that love embraces both motivating force and the object of that force it is implicated in them all. Listen to what Freud wrote to Jung in 1906:

Transference provides the impulse necessary for understanding and translating the language of the unconscious; where it is lacking, the patient does not make the effort or does not listen when we submit our translation to him. Essentially, we might say, the cure is effected by love. (S. Freud, 1856-1939., [1974]).

The analyst’s “translation” substitutes, for the cryptic language of the unconscious, the enigmatic interpretation. We could say that the interpretation, gravid with significance, has an essentially poetic form. Poetry works through metaphor and metaphor is the way love moves in language.

The notion of love as clinical instrument is different from the love that appears in Freud’s cultural writings. While love as function is demystified, when Freud speaks of love as Eros a certain mystery re-emerges. Eros and the death drive are the two primal instincts. Freud draws from the poets to speak of the strange co-existence of love and hate “in the more tempestuous stages of love” (S. Freud, 1953-1975.) and he acknowledges, not without some envy perhaps, E. T. A. Hoffman for that writer’s recognition of the crucial significance of the impressions made on the psyche in the first five years of life. Freud writes that Hoffman anticipated his own “uncomfortable discovery... with the boldness that is permitted to poets” (Freud, SE XXIII, p.126).

The desire motivating Freud’s scientific research is attuned to the voices of his beloved poets. How else are we to hear this statement in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, where Freud brings together what he has previously taken care to distinguish in his clinical writings: love and sex?

We are of the opinion, then, that language has carried out an entirely justifiable piece of unification in creating the word ‘love’ with its numerous uses, and that we cannot do better than take it as a basis of our scientific discussions and expositions as well... In its origin, function, and relation to sexual love, the ‘Eros’ of the philosopher Plato coincides exactly with the love-force, the libido of psycho-analysis... (S. Freud, 1921, p.91.)¹

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* which appeared a year earlier he had expressed the unificatory wish realised in this passage that “the libido of our sexual instincts would coincide with the Eros of the poets and philosophers that holds all things together” (Freud, 1961[1920], p.50). Freud measures the degree to which someone is really in love by “the size of the share taken by the aim-inhibited instincts of affection” (Freud 1921c: 112). Such love can be taken to an extreme: the more the inhibition of sexual impulses, the more the overvaluation of the object, the more “sublime and precious” (Freud, 1921c, p.113) it becomes. As a consequence, the ego is weakened to the point that it sacrifices itself. This is surely the greatest paradox of

love: it places love on the side of death rather than life. There it is certainly proximate to the Eros of the poets. Just think of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways" which ends with:

I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints,— I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life! — and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.

Edgar Allen Poe's statement is also relevant here: "There is no more poetic a subject than the death of a beautiful woman". I do not know whether Freud read Poe but he did comment in the Preface to Marie Bonaparte's psychoanalytic study of Poe that he was "a great writer of a pathological type" (Freud, SE XXII, p.254).

Would Freud have discovered psychoanalysis without the help of Goethe? Or Schiller, Heine, Byron, Sophocles, Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky? Or even John Galsworthy whose early twentieth-century story "The Apple Tree" provides a reference point for Freud in affirming the notion of the "simple natural love of two human beings" (Freud, SE XXI, p.105n.2) against the demands of civilisation which destroys it. (The story also happens to illustrate Poe's dictum.) It is an open question. Psychoanalysis is embedded in the fertile humanist loam of the literary field. Literature seeds Freud's scientific project; or to mix my metaphors, it is the intellectual medium through which Freud's thought passes.

Freud tells us that one of the two aims of psychoanalysis is to enable the analysand to love. Our culture reinforces the idea that love is the solution to the problem of individual unhappiness. Love *is* adept at presenting itself as the answer rather than as a question. Freud's psychic taxonomy of love enables us to look behind the veil of this most desirable of illusions. He refused to be dazzled by love's sleight of hand yet he never underestimated its power.

References

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¹ The affirmation that "the enlarged sexuality of psycho-analysis coincides with the Eros of the divine Plato" is made strongly in the 1920 preface to the *Three Essays* (1905d: 1920).