

Creativity and Perversion: The Analysand's Battle with Truth.
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This paper concerns creativity and perversion in relation to psychoanalysis.

The thesis I want to put forward is that psychoanalysis in its *therapeutic function* is an activity that facilitates the transformation of perversion into creativity by means of the apprehension of emotional truth.

I am casting a wide net. The analysand of the title is potentially everyman or woman. The psychoanalysis in question is independent of any particular theory or technique and is characterised by an interest in truth. It might include psychoanalytic psychotherapy and other interpersonal or intrapsychic processes pursued with the purpose of attaining knowledge of emotional reality. It would exclude forms of therapy that pursue some other aim, and in particular those that rely on suggestion for their effect.

In 1995 Gitta Sereny's book: *Albert Speer: his battle with truth* was published. As you probably know Speer, beginning as Hitler's architect, became one of the most powerful men in the third Reich, controlling much of the bureaucratic organisation behind the war effort including the forced labour camps. At Nuremberg he was sentenced to twenty years incarceration. In summing up her exhaustive and harrowing account of Speer's life, Sereny writes:

He enthusiastically embraced Hitler's war when it began, was jubilant about his conquests, and when he – the artist – was appointed to high government office, he readily did all, and more, that was required. He manipulated, cajoled, intrigued against and threatened those who interfered with his power and his aims, demanded rather than merely participated in the brutal subjugation of foreign workers for slave labour and unconsciously or consciously blinded himself to licensed murder.

Speer himself killed no one and felt no enmity, hatred or even dislike for the millions, Christians and Jews, who were systematically slaughtered: he felt nothing.

There was a dimension missing in him, a capacity to feel which his childhood had blotted out, allowing him to experience not love but only romanticised substitutes for love.

Pity, compassion, sympathy and empathy were not part of his emotional vocabulary. He could feel deeply but only indirectly – through music, landscapes, art, eventually through visual hyperbole, often in settings of his own creation: his Cathedral of Light, the flags, the thousands of men at attention motionless as pillars, the blond children, row upon row of them with shining eyes and arms stiffly raised. This became beauty to him, and another substitute for love.

But then, at long last he acknowledged Hitler's madness; through the revelations of Nuremberg and the confrontation with the reactions of the civilized world came his realisation and horror at what had been done, his feelings of personal guilt, his wish, almost, for death and yet fear of execution, the shame of being spared, the prospect of twenty years' incarceration - out of all this, there came another Speer.

In this Speer, obsessed with a history he understood perhaps like no other man, I found a great deal to like. This was a very serious man who knew more about that bane of our century, Hitler, than anyone else. An erudite and solitary man who, recognising his deficiencies in human relations, had read five thousand books in prison to try to understand the universe and human beings, an effort he succeeded in with his mind but failed in with his heart.

Unforgiven by so many for having served Hitler, he elected to spend the rest of his life in confrontation with this past, unforgiving of himself for having so nearly loved a monster.

According to Sereny, Speer was the only one of the accused at Nuremberg who had a significant capacity to recognise the reality of what he had done and accept moral responsibility. Her book is an account of his journey from an omnipotent and perverse state of mind and towards recognition of emotional reality. I would call it a psychoanalytic journey, albeit incomplete. For Speer, the evidence at Nuremberg was as incontrovertible as an analyst's interpretation may sometimes need to be in order to illuminate that to which the analysand is blind, especially in the area of the analysand's destructiveness. Confronted over and over Speer was able to let go of a perverse conviction that he was in possession of 'the truth' as embodied in Hitler and found the courage to become open to a reality and truth greater than the 'Hitler' part of himself.

There is a subtle distinction in the phrase 'the truth' as against 'truth', as in Sereny's title that I have cribbed for my paper. 'Truth' keeps open the possibility of multiplicity and complexity; 'the truth' easily becomes something dogmatic and categorical. The psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion emphasised that the dogmatic conviction of possessing 'the truth' is a totalitarian frame of mind that stifles the creation of new thought, interfering with the capacity to learn from experience.

At the same time fundamental to Bion's thinking is the idea that truth exists, that it can be apprehended by the human mind, and is ignored by the mind only at its peril. Bion thought that truth, or 'ultimate reality' which he designated 'O', could be apprehended only indirectly and never known with certainty. Nevertheless psycho-analytic work concerns itself with the attempt to get to know aspects of 'O'.

- A quote from W.B. Yeats comes to mind: 'Man can embody truth but he cannot know it.'

Like Bion, Yeats seems to suggest there is truth around, truth which may be apprehended in the inescapable reality of the human body, but perhaps if we try to pin it down as knowledge, as 'the truth' then an essence, perhaps the vitality that belongs to the body, is easily lost.

The body as a given precedes interpersonal and social constructions of reality and does seem to act as a final reference point for truth. So often when a person has lost touch, at least in the conscious mind, with an aspect of emotional reality it is some form of somatic bodily manifestation or illness that remains like a kind of final protest causing 'troublesome symptoms'.

It is also true that our psychological concepts of both perversion and creativity are dependent upon, and related to, our concepts of bodily and sexual perversion and creativity.

Perversion -

This term entered psychoanalysis to designate the so-called sexual perversions. Laplanche and Pontalis, in their *The Language of Psychoanalysis* state that in psycho-analysis the 'word "perversion" is used exclusively in relation to sexuality.' They offer an essentially behavioural definition of sexual perversion following Freud's original formulations.

We should note however that while Freud attempted to delineate and define the sexual perversions along these lines, he was never satisfied with the conflation of psychological health with normative standards of behaviour. He also suggested that the disposition to perversion formed a part of what passes for the normal constitution.

We can note two developments in current psychoanalytic use. First, attempts at definition of sexual perversion have shifted from behavioural criteria, towards attempts to delineate the perverse emotional activity associated with a sexual act. Second, the term perversion is no longer used exclusively in relation to sexual perversion. In this regard psychoanalytic use is moving towards common usage. The OED defines perversion as a turning aside from truth or right, as a process of corrupting something.

For example John Steiner in his 1982 paper *Perverse Relationships Between Parts of the Self: a clinical illustration*, commenting on his use of the term, writes: 'In this context I am using the word *perverse* to refer primarily to a twisting or perversion of truth and the relationship between this and the actual sexual perversion is not always apparent.'

The work of one contemporary theorist in this area deserves particular mention. The French psychoanalyst, Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, has formulated a theory of perverse emotional activity which remains linked to psychosomatic development, and Freud's understanding of the fixation and regression to pregenital intrapsychic organisations.

Central to her theory is the idea that the perverse tendency seeks to reconstitute an undifferentiated and chaotic state where anything is possible, out of a differentiated reality. This disregard and erosion of difference is also characteristic of the anal-sadistic organisation in the mind. So, she regards perversion as fundamentally the same thing as regression to an anal-sadistic frame of mind.

'The pervert's hatred is aimed at reality in general. This is essentially composed of differences, differences between man and woman, child and adult, between the appearance of need and its satisfaction.'

She argues the perverse tendency is to reduce everything to the same value as faeces, to remain preoccupied with one's own products, and to attempt to deny the value of a separate and differentiated reality. The background to this, she suggests, is always sadomasochistic.

She cites a catalogue of literary works to illustrate her theme, in particular the writings of the Marquis de Sade: 'the Sadean universe is one of confusion, chaos, mixture.... Inverted and abolished values.'

Coming from a French background she may not have been familiar with Alexander Pope's *The Dunciad*, which she does not mention. It is a lengthy mock-heroic poem in four books – Pope sets out to satirise the frame of mind that Sade sets out to promulgate.

At the beginning of the poem we are introduced the goddess Dullness – 'Daughter of Chaos and eternal Night' who 'In eldest time' 'ruled, in native Anarchy, the mind.' And 'Still her old empire to restore she tries'.

Throughout the poem Dullness promulgates all manner of mindless activity, speech, and ideas. The perverse nature of all this is self-evident, and the repeated scatological images emphasise the link with the unconscious anal preoccupation.

At the end of the poem the reign of Dullness is inexorably restored.

Art after *Art* goes out, and all is Night.
See skulking *Truth* to her old cavern fled,

Lo! Thy dread Empire, CHAOS! is restored;
Light dies before thy uncreating word:
Thy hand, great Anarch! lets the curtain fall;
And universal Darkness buries all.

It is an apocalyptic anticreation vision where the goddess Dullness utters the final and ‘uncreating word’. As Pope emphasises throughout *The Dunciad*, words can be employed to creative or perverse ends.

In the Sydney Morning Herald of February this year Helena Echlin, a fellowship student at Yale wrote a column on her experiences undertaking a PhD in English Literature at Yale.

She writes:

I am sitting in a windowless conference room. The walls are lined with sets of leather-bound books with gold-lettered spines. “The ode must traverse the problem of solipsism,” a young man is saying. He pauses for a long time. “In order to approach participating in.” He pauses again, his body knotted like a balloon creature made by a children’s entertainer. Finally, in one rush: “The unity which is no longer accessible.” My fellow students utter a long soft gasp, as if at a particularly beautiful firework.

I write the sentence down in my notebook, like everyone else in the seminar. *The ode must traverse the problem of solipsism before it can approach participating in the unity which is no longer accessible.* When I have pieced it together, I realise that he is talking nonsense. I am struck by the thought that literary criticism, at least as it is practised here, is a hoax.

Think about that sentence until your brain hurts (it shouldn’t take long). How can one “traverse” a problem, or “participate” in a unity? But at Yale, obfuscation is *de rigueur*. No-one has mentioned enjoying a book. In the lift on the way down from the English department I ask one professor what is on her bedside table, The answer: a bestseller in physics. “No novels?” Her reply: “I don’t read literature for pleasure any more.”

To turn now to how we might conceptualise creativity:

To create is to make something new, and in psychoanalytic discourse the sexual intercourse of the couple, leading to a new conception, and ultimately a new birth, has been regarded as the prototypically creative act. But having children need not of course correspond with an inner attitude of creativity. Rather it is the welcoming of and concern for the potential new and separate life, whether represented in the baby, a new idea, or even the recognition of the separate existence of the other, which seems to be deeply representative of creativity in the psyche.

A second major theme in psychoanalytic discourse is the conceptualisation of creativity within the framework of Kleinian theory, in terms of repair and reparation. Hanna Segal argues that the infant in achieving a so-called depressive integration within must work through the anxiety that it is its own hatred and sadistic impulses that can destroy the good relationship with the feeding mother/breast. The infant's normal 'wish to restore and recreate is the basis of later sublimation and creativity.'

'It is when the world within us is destroyed, when it is dead and loveless, when our loved ones are in fragments, and we ourselves in helpless despair – it is then that we must re-create our world anew, reassemble the pieces, infuse life into dead fragment, re-create life.'

This view does, I think, provide a compelling framework for gaining understanding of much creativity, and particularly artistic creativity. Les Murray, when asked what creativity is, is purported to have said: 'It is the wound you receive in childhood that never heals. I believe that.' I think a 'compulsion to create' in an attempt to heal an intrapsychic wound that perhaps never heals can be identified in the lives and work of many writers.

Winnicott has written: 'A successful artist may be universally acclaimed and yet have failed to find the self that he or she is looking for. The self is not really to be found in what's made out of products of body or mind, ... If the artist (in whatever medium) is searching for the self, then it can be said that in all probability there is already some failure for that artist in the field of general creative living. The finished creation never heals the underlying lack of sense of self.'

In Winnicott's view the primary creative task is to create the self and the interpersonal world, and he conceives of a 'primary creativity' present in the infant at birth, which precedes any need for reparation. In his paper *Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena* he returns emphasis to the baby's early creative capacity, seeming to suggest that the baby has the capacity to create a loving relationship with the mother, and a sense of self, but that it needs a mother to present herself in a loving way for this capacity to be realised. Winnicott's idea of the true self and the spontaneous gesture seem closely linked with this idea of a primary creative capacity.

Just as we see that there is something in the newborn infant, whether we call it libido or 'object seeking', that carries the seeds of love and concern but precedes their appearance, so it does seem we must postulate a creative potential within the infant at birth which carries the seeds of the individual's fully developed creativity.

As a manifestation of life creativity remains as mysterious in origin as life itself. Fortunately perhaps, it will resist any attempted reduction to a psychoanalytic theory.

The relationship between creativity and perversion:

If the baby is not born perverse, which would seem to me an unlikely proposition, then what is it that can become perverted? I think perversion may be conceived of as a transformation of creativity; that some inherent force towards the affirmation of life and reality, has been transformed through the vicissitudes of experience, into a turning away from life and reality. By this formulation there is no perversity without creativity, and every perverse solution is also a creative accommodation to some aspect of reality. It also suggests the possibility, confirmed in clinical work, that a perverse solution to the problem of reality may contain the seeds of an uncorrupted state within itself; perhaps even serving to protect those seeds.

Psychoanalytic activity can exert a salutary effect because the transformation creativity \square perversion can, sometimes at least be reversed.

I want to finish with two examples to try to capture something of this process of transformation perversion \square creativity. One clinical and the other an example of the representation of this process in literature.

The clinical example has been deleted as I do not have the patient's permission to include it.

Like psychoanalysts, novelists often concern themselves with this question of the pathway to self-knowledge. Their characters are faced with choices; whether to confront their own emotional reality and learn from experience, or to turn away from self-knowledge.

At the beginning of Herman Hesse's poetical novel *Steppenwolf*, Harry Haller, the steppenwolf, exists in a perverse solution to life. His perversion lies not in the fact that he is half wolf and half man; that he experiences hatred and destructive impulses - in this he is no more than 'everyman'. Rather his perversion lies in the fact that these two parts of himself are locked in constant conflict, and in his overestimation of himself, the fact that he takes himself, his

problems, and his cherished aesthetic ideals, so very seriously; in doing so he loses any real perspective upon the harm he inflicts upon himself and others. The bourgeois society that he reacts against seems to mirror a conforming and deadening inner aspect of himself locked in constant and exhausting conflict with his wolf self; he lives on the edge of suicide.

The stalemate is broken when Haller is invited to dinner with an eminent professor and old acquaintance. His wolf-self takes over and Haller insults the professor and his wife, and their bourgeois predilections. Fleeing from the dinner engagement to a bar he meets Hermine, an alter-ego figure under whose guidance he begins to relinquish his old self and embarks on a journey of self-discovery. A journey which leads him finally into the MAGIC THEATRE – about which he has already received mysterious notices. It is – FOR MADMEN ONLY – Entrance NOT FOR EVERYBODY.

The price of admittance he is warned will be his mind. In a room of the theatre labelled ‘Jolly Hunting – Great Automobile Hunt’ he participates in a ruthless automatic killing spree; in the room labelled ‘Marvellous Taming of the Steppenwolf’ he witnesses various sadomasochistic enactments; and in the room labelled ‘How One Kills for Love’ he kills Hermine. Mozart makes a guest appearance and passes judgement: ‘You have made a frightful history of disease out of your life, and a misfortune of your gifts.’ In the final room ‘Harry’s Execution’ he receives his sentence – to be laughed out of court and condemned to live.

Without doing too much violence to the imaginative life of Hesse’s novel we can see that the many rooms of the Magic Theatre are the compartments within Harry’s mind, and however difficult and painful might be the process of entering into and knowing what is taking place in these dark rooms, it is this process which confers the freedom to live.

In exploring the mind in fantasy, through the psychoanalytic journey, and particularly in coming to know and understand the perverting and destructive forces within us, we are given the opportunity to choose not to act them out in reality. In the courtroom of the Magic Theatre the only sentence is to be laughed out of court and condemned to live, it is thankfully, a far more forgiving one than Nuremberg.

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