

Retrieved from:

The European Journal of Psychoanalysis

Jun 18, 2024

<https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/freud-rilke-and-transience/>

Elvio Fachinelli

Freud, Rilke and Transience



“Cherry” by Stephen Mosblech

Summary:

In his 1915 essay ‘On Transience’, Freud begins by describing a conversation with a poet (Rilke) and a taciturn friend (Lou Andreas-Salomé). Around that time Freud and Rilke shared a concern with the problem of transience: Freud being preoccupied with the survival of psychoanalysis and Rilke with his aging and the decrease in creativity that ensued. In the midst of the First World War, Freud expressed – in this essay – a firm hope that mourning enables human beings to overcome even the gravest loss, contrary to the marked pessimism of the poet. Later, though, the Freud of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* will be much more pessimistic: by the time you begin to mourn – he seems to say – destruction will have already taken place, and your mourning will have come too late; and it will end with being only an attempt to get through a loss so enormous as to be irreparable. Such pessimism already seems to underpin and taint ‘On Transience’. The late Rilke would overcome this paralysing pessimism: perhaps it is not, as Freud thought, mourning – neither anticipated nor post rem – that we need. Instead, we need an acceptance, a capacity for immersing ourselves, in which we, the wounded, will become the mother of all wounded creatures.

A summer day in 1913. In a countryside in bloom, Sigmund Freud is walking with a “taciturn friend” and “young but already famous poet”. The latter, struck by the beauty surrounding him, is still profoundly saddened by the thought that all that beauty, like all of human beauty and creation after all, is destined to disappear.

Thus begins “On Transience” (Freud 1915), a brief essay written by Freud two years after the conversation took place. And the first thing we ask ourselves is who were the “young but already famous poet” and the “taciturn friend”. The latter is characterized solely by silence which persists throughout the conversation, while the first is described in very precise terms. One might say that Freud intended to entirely conceal the silent friend, and only half-conceal the poet. Almost as if he wanted to indicate him but at the same time not let him be identified with certainty. A trait common to Freud, one of discretion-indiscretion. The *Standard Edition* of Freud’s *Works* asserts that the two interlocutors are unknown.

Yet there was someone who, following various indications, hypothesized years ago that the young poet was Rainer Maria Rilke, and the silent friend Lou Andreas-Salomé.[1] Even one of Freud’s biographers and personal friend Max Schur gave credence to this hypothesis. Thus it is the case to examine the salient points.

In September 1913, during a psychoanalytic conference in Munich which saw his definitive break with Jung, Lou Salomé introduced Freud to the poet Rilke, who was 37 at the time. Lou, a rather noted writer herself, had been an intimate friend of Nietzsche, had an intense relationship with Rilke, and for some years had entered into Freud’s inner circle of friends and relatives.

According to Lou’s account, Freud and Rilke entered into a long conversation which carried on late into the night. The hypothesis which sees the figure of Rilke in the “young poet” supposes nonetheless that the encounter and the conversation took place on the margins of a conference, and not during a walk in the country some weeks earlier. In short, in his writing Freud conceded himself—as was often the case—a sort of poetic license. He wanted to render the topic of the conversation, transience, alive and immediate for the reader, inserting it for contrast into the brilliant abundance of summer. In doing so, I might add, he would succeed in moving the encounter far from the psychoanalytic scene, thus further disguising the two interlocutors. And by transforming the female friend into a male one, he would be able to avoid creating the impression for the reader of a recognizable couple, which in fact Rilke and Lou were.

Certainly, all of this does not in fact confirm the hypothesis. But the strongest point in its favor is that the problem of transience in that period deeply touched both Freud and Rilke.[2] For Freud, the already predictable rupture with Jung implied—beyond his fallen hopes and expectations in the Swiss *goi*, up to then considered his son and heir—also the sense of a threat to the survival of psychoanalysis itself. For his part Rilke, following the publication in 1910 of *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (a book perceived as an “indescribable caesura”, a “watershed”), had fallen into a state of “dullness, a sort of aging”, where weeks and months would go by with his barely being able to put five sentences of a simple letter together. Under these conditions, feeling himself “dried up”, the idea of analysis surfaced. But this seemed to him a “too radical aid”, that “everyone once, makes order”, and that finding himself “re-ordered he would perhaps be more desperate still”. On the other hand, he had persistent disturbances which were physically concentrated in his musculature and which he could no longer bear:

“Certain bad habits through which one previously passed as through bad air, are increasingly intensifying, and I can imagine that one day they will close in on me like walls”.

Thus it was necessary to find “a solution”. And instead of consulting directly with Freud, whose ideas on some points made “his hair stand up on his head”, he called on a friend, Victor Email von Gebattel, who would later become a noted exponent of phenomenological psychiatry, and who guaranteed him that he would use Freudianism “with prudence and efficiency”.

But then suddenly, as if by miracle, there is an interruption in this creative sterility. In January 1912 Rilke “receives” the first of the *Duino Elegies*, of which he exultantly informs Lou. The second follows shortly behind. This is certainly not enough to resolve his state of general inhibition, which will last around ten years, but it is enough to put off the prospect of analysis. Now, it is notable that both elegies have as their central theme the desperate awareness of our transience and precarity, which counterposes the essential consistency of the Angels. “For us, to feel is to vanish; ah, we / we exhale, we dissolve; burning / we throw off a fainter odor”.^[3] Human life reveals its extreme and essential limits in some of the poet’s identifications: abandoned lovers such as Gaspara Stampa, whose “exhausted nature” he takes onto himself, and indistinct figures of “dead youths”: “QUOTE....”

It is a world that vanishes and whose anguish is manifested even at that moment where an Angel appears, because *jeder Engel ist schrecklich*, every Angel is dreadful. And in a note to Lou from 1913, thus some months prior to the meeting with Freud, troviamo qualcosa che sembra riprendere alla lettera, in modo più articolato, le parole dell’ignoto poeta citato da Freud: “QUOTE....” (p. 87)

Let’s return now to Freud’s short essay. Faced with the young poet’s despondency, Freud is pushed to rebut: the transience of men and Nature does not debase them, but rather increases their value, which becomes a scarcity value: the beauty of Nature, destroyed by winter, returns, and this periodic return, in relation to the length of our lives, can be considered an eternal return; as to the beauty of a work of art or to the perfection of an intellectual achievement, their value is determined only by their significance to our present lives, and thus has no need to survive them. “But I noticed that I had made no impression either upon the poet or upon my friend”. (Nor upon us, to tell the truth.) Freud then questions the reason for this indifference, and finds it in the fact that the poet *foresees* the end of what he is looking at and at the same time the mourning which will come upon him. It is the refusal of such mourning that prevents him from enjoying the beauty which lies before him.

At this point, Freud abandons the description of the discussion and comes back to the reality of 1915 Europe, where widespread destruction of unimaginable magnitude is taking place. Everything which had been considered solid, long-lasting and assured, revealed itself to be miserably transient. But Freud concludes that, even under these conditions, when we will have overcome our mourning for the loss of what we have loved, “We shall build up again all that war has destroyed, and perhaps on firmer ground and more lastingly than before”.

Even in this frightful world, Freud seems to say, I know I am right and the poet wrong. And, for all that I know, all the commentators—without discussion—have adopted Freud’s conclusion, which corresponds to a *firm hope* founded on the capacity to experience the mourning of (an even appalling) loss.

If, however, we take a closer look, things become more complicated. The solid and lasting world which Freud had hoped would emerge from catastrophe indeed does not. On the contrary. In Europe, Nazism and Fascism arose, and with them a war even more dreadful than the first one had been. And not just this. The same Freud, through his theoretical construction of the death drive, came to doubt any possibility of contrasting this generalized destructivity. And, albeit in very different ways, he arrived at a vision somewhat close to that of the young poet he had met years earlier. One might even think, without any force, that the young poet’s voice which he had so assuredly rejected, in fact corresponded to some secret voice within him. But a voice which would emerge only *later*.

Later. This temporal dislocation leads us to reflect on the poet’s position, who is not rebelling against a future mourning as Freud sustains, a bit too quickly, in his brief essay. Rather, destruction is *already present* in him at the moment he contemplates that blooming countryside; mourning is already within him, and it is an unresolvable mourning, since all living things move towards their end, to die before his eyes, and they are unique and *without possible substitute*, just like the man who beholds them (“Each thing / *once*, only *once*. *Once* and no more. And we also / *once*”). Common good sense would quickly tell him: you are starting your mourning *before* even the death of what you love. But the poet might respond, whether to men of good

sense, or to the Freud of *On Transience*: by the time you begin to mourn, destruction will have already taken place, and your mourning will have come *too late*; and it will end up being only an attempt to get through a loss so enormous as to be irreparable. My mourning is crazy—and prescient; while yours is wise—and both too late and useless. And at this point the later Freud, the so-called pessimist Freud of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, maybe would agree.

And so we reach that difficult and topical knot which lies at the bottom of *On Transience*. Faced with degradation—and does not the word degrade already imply a sort of stability and acceptance of *degradation*?—faced with the advancing destruction of our “nature” which is then the totality of our world, the easiest and up to now most frequent compensatory attitude is to think that every object and situation can in the end be substituted. In overcoming the mourning for the losses we experience every day, we boldly set forth towards a new world populated by ever new substitutes. This attitude has clearly become insufficient, if not actually culpable, and corresponds to the character of Freud featured in *On Transience*, and certainly not to that secret voice which will emerge later.

So should we agree with the young poet? Is it necessary to arrive at a forestalling/announcing in advance/anticipating and mournful awareness of the world? Should Cassandra’s voice be our own, to prophecy the fall of the city and the extermination of our descendants? One cannot suppress the sensation/feeling? that any response given to *these* questions, besides being impending, risks being inert, non-influential and completely generic.

But let’s turn to Rilke. Not the young melancholic poet of 1913, but rather the Rilke of ten years later, who has traversed the period of the *Dürre*, of creative sterility, of the *Leidland*, the country of pain, without being defeated, and who has reached with the last *Elegies* a position where everything native—and as such radically ephemeral—to this world seems to need us men, “the most ephemeral” of all beings, and “seemingly solicits us”; all things which “live on dying” believe us capable of saving them.

This is the radical overturning of that ancient and well-noted position wherein nature, the divine mother, was called upon to save us. Now it is *we* who are called upon to save her. In Rainer Maria Rilke, this overturning, reached by passing through the most painful identification with the ephemeral, shows up as the particular task of art and poetry (*to say* Earth, to make her become *invisible*), which is at the same time an ethical-religious attitude. But both presuppose something wider and indistinct: the full acceptance of a figure which comprehends in itself and saves the creatures before it becomes *too late*; “a heart”, to use the poet’s word, from which gush “innumerable existences”. Perhaps herein lies one of the keys even for us, today. Perhaps it is not, as Freud thought, the mourning—neither anticipated nor *post rem*—which we need. But we need this acceptance, this capacity for immersing ourselves, in which we, the wounded, will become the mother of all wounded creatures. It is a difficult step; even impossible: *too late*. Yet this is increasingly “solicited” from us from all parts. And in this task a frail happiness might be found; not an *ascent* [rise?], an apex or culmination as one usually thinks, but rather, as the *Tenth Elegy* tells us, a “fall,” similar to the “rain which falls on the dark earth in early spring”.

Bibliography:

Freud, S. (1915) “On Transience”, *SE*, 14, pp. 305-308; *GW*, 10, pp. 358-361.

Lehmann, H. (1966) “A conversation between Freud and Rilke”, *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, XXXV, pp. 423-27.

Rilke, R. M. (1922) *Duino Elegies*, trans. by M. Crucefix (London: Enitharmon Press, 2008).

Rilke, R. M. & Salomé, L. Andreas (2006) *The Correspondence*, translated and annotated by Edward Snow and Michael Winkler (New York: WW Norton & Co.)

Notes:

[1] The hypothesis that the “silent friend” is Lou Salomé was made by Herbert Lehmann (1966, pp. 423-27).

[2] For biographical references on Rilke: Rilke and Andreas Salomé (2006).

[3] The *Duino Elegies* cited here are from XXXXXX

Bio:

Elvio Fachinelli (Luserna, Trento, 1928 – Milan 1989) was an M.D. and psychoanalyst in Milan where, in the 1970's, he established the journal 'L'erba voglio'. He published his witty 'psycho-political' articles there and in the popular weekly 'L'Espresso', establishing a strong connection between psychoanalysis and the emancipatory and radical movements at that time. Although he remained a member of the official Italian Psychoanalytic Society (SPI), member of IPA, in 1969 he led a public protest against the Italian psychoanalytic establishment, which he criticized for its conservative sclerosis. He authored the books: *L'erba voglio*, with Luisa Muraro and Giuseppe Sartori (Turin: Einaudi, 1971); *Il bambino dalle uova d'oro* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1974); *La freccia ferma* (Milan: L'Erba Voglio, 1979); *Claustrofilia* (Milan: Adelphi, 1983); *La mente estatica* (Milan: Adelphi, 1989); *Freud* (Milan: Adelphi 2012). 'On Time on Psychoanalysis', EJP, 12–13, 'The Psychoanalyst's Money', EJP, 18, 'On the Beach', EJP, 24.

Publication Date:

January 18, 2014