

Journal Title: *Free Associations: Psychoanalysis and Culture, Media, Groups Politics*
Number 61, May 2011
ISSN: 2047-0622
URL: <http://www.freeassociations.org.uk>



BOOK REVIEW:

***FREUD'S REQUIEM:
MOURNING, MEMORY AND THE INVISIBLE HISTORY OF A SUMMER WALK***

Matthew von Unwerth, Continuum, 244pp, £16.99
ISBN 0-8264-8032-2, Published March 2006

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This review marks a series of returns that are themselves marked by mourning and memory, the concepts that feature at the centre of Freud's brief essay 'On Transience', the starting point for Matthew von Unwerth's literary perambulation of Freud's life and work. These returns are both intellectual and biographical. They signal the re-emergence of a transformed *Free Associations* that nonetheless retains the memory of its predecessor (through a process of transformative and creative mourning that will feature in this introductory edition and in the launch issue that will follow it), but they are also symptomatic of a rather more personal revisiting of 'On Transience', the essay from which and around which my own doctoral thesis germinated and was formed. Freud's essay also marks, for me, the site of a specific memory (and mourning) of a love now lost, just as for Unwerth it came to enable, through the writing of *Freud's Requiem*, a 'making sense of' and a reclamation of 'lost aspects of our lives'.¹

'On Transience' was written as a contribution to a special collection on Goethe, *Das Land Goethes/Goethe's Land*, during the First World War and in it Freud combines the psychoanalytic theme of mourning with an exploration of transience. He describes an episode in which a poet and a somewhat reserved friend, thought to be Rainer Maria Rilke and Lou Andreas-Salomé respectively, are unable to enjoy a scene of beauty because 'it was fated to extinction' (Freud 1916, p. 288). However, for Freud it was precisely 'beauty's "scarcity value in time" that gave what is precious its worth' (Unwerth 2006, p. 2). Thus as Unwerth notes 'the poet was correct, of course, that all earthly things must pass away [...] but rather than subtract from their beauty, Freud protested, this evanescence only added to beauty's increase' (2006, p. 2). In his analysis of his friends' reactions Freud surmises, '[t]he idea that

all this beauty was transient was giving these two sensitive minds a foretaste of mourning over its decease' (1916, p. 288).

My own interest in 'On Transience' was triggered by an attempt to explore the fleeting moment that characterises love at first sight or that arrests one's attention when watching a powerful film, which I relate to the temporality of deferred action or *afterwardness* that permeates Freud's work (see Sutton 1999). As such it is the 'foretaste of mourning' surmised by Freud that is significant here because it suggests a projection into the future that is then read back, by deferred action or *an effect of afterwardsness*, into the present situation, thus altering it. For transience to be experienced in the present it requires the projection, the figuration of loss in the future, which turned back on the present moment gives this sense of loss, transience, in the present. Transience is the experience of loss before it has actually taken place – the perception of potential loss in the future through the recollection, a coming into consciousness of prior, unconscious loss in the past. Roland Barthes assesses the transience of love in similar terms, suggesting that the 'act of mourning is not to suffer from the loss of the loved object; it is to discern one day, on the skin of the relationship, a certain tiny stain, appearing there as the symptom of a certain death (1990, p. 108)'.² Unwerth connects Freud's analysis of Rilke and Andreas-Salome's reactions to transience to Freud's own analyses of mourning, memory and love that feature in essays such as 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920) and 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917) but Unwerth is also at pains to point out how it is through Freud's relationships, through his biography, that these same concerns manifest themselves, informing, and emerging from, his intellectual theorising and his clinical practice.

In many ways what makes 'On Transience' so fascinating are the provocative speculations in relation to many of the central concerns of Freud's writing that it seems to engender, for as Unwerth suggests the paper 'is a portrait in miniature of the world of its writer, rich and teeming with the same themes that shaped his life and his work (2006, p. 6). He argues that 'Freud's essay suggests a story of his inspirations and frustrations, his dreams and crises of spirit, a story of his loves and hopes, and above all of his expectations of loss' (2006, p. 6). In its attempt to hold onto this apparently slight but actually vital piece of psychoanalytic writing, Unwerth's book mirrors the very structure of its argument; it extends this one short essay out into not just the entire wealth of Freud's oeuvre but also offers speculative insight into some of the key associations and relationships that shaped him and

the new science of psychoanalysis. It also, as Frances Wilson points out, highlights Freud's anxieties about the potentially transient nature of this new science.³

Residing at the heart of this text is a debate about creativity, the apparent conflict between the artistic and the scientific, the rational and the irrational, articulated in the biography of Rainer Maria Rilke, his relationship - and Freud's - with Lou Andreas-Salomé and in his resistance to psychoanalysis. Rilke's creativity is explored in some detail – the coming and going of his 'muse' interspersed with periods of depression that he considered 'treating' via psychoanalysis but repeatedly declined because of the perceived risk to his imagination that such a 'cure' might carry. As Unwerth recounts 'in the terror brought on by depression, and desperate to restore his failed inspiration, Rilke turned hopefully to psychoanalysis' but ultimately he balked at treatment 'afraid analysis would clean him up, correct the flaws of his personality in "red ink like a child's exercise in school"' (Unwerth 2006, p. 19). Unwerth goes on to suggest that this self-same opposition between the artistic and the scientific characterised Freud's own struggle to develop, sustain and legitimise psychoanalysis, a conflict that continues to this day.

Unwerth's book is ultimately as much biography as it is theoretical exegesis and it is here that its long anticipation led to some disappointment on my part, for I had expected a more thorough-going analysis of 'On Transience', an essay that I have long admired and which has exerted as a powerful an influence on my intellectual development as it has on Unwerth's. However, Unwerth's text provides a fascinating insight into two individuals who connected with Freud in a strange psychoanalytic circuit that by turns reveals a great deal about Freud himself. *Freud's Requiem* is well crafted and well written and, despite the rider above, engages with psychoanalytic concepts in a comprehensible and digestible fashion. Highly speculative the book is a fascinating addition to a growing body of biographical writing that seeks to address the work of a writer and thinker through the prism of one tiny but vital moment...

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Notes

¹ Matthew von Unwerth, Freud's Requiem: The Story Behind the Book, <http://www.freuds-requiem.com/backstory.html>, accessed 6th February 2011.

² Barthes suggests that it is the loss of the image of being in love that is as significant as the loss of the loved object itself (1990: 107-108).

³ Frances Wilson, 'Walking with Freud', The Guardian, 29th April 2006, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/apr/29/highereducation.biography>, accessed 6th February 2011.

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