

SOME NOTES on **THE SWEET STAIN OF SUCCESS**

THE DANCE-WORK

This dance-work takes its inspiration from a very brief sketch of a case-history in Freud's 1907 short paper *Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices*.

A young Viennese woman, not long separated, describes to Freud certain actions she feels compelled to repeat: involving food, money, furniture & cleanliness. Freud traces these symptoms to her disastrous wedding-night in the past and to predatory males in the present.

Despite the brevity, I found the story, - especially the varieties of running between rooms done by the husband and the wife - and Freud's explanatory themes, intriguing. In the past, I have explored writing philosophical dialogue & plays of ideas. Now I wondered about wordless movement.

Freud's telling of the case-history and his comments are so brief that it is clearer to quote them in full, than to offer a summary.

FREUD'S CASE HISTORY

A woman who was living apart from her husband, whenever she ate anything, she felt she had to leave what was best of it behind: for example, she would only take the outside of a piece of roast meat. This renunciation appeared on the day after she refused marital relations with her husband.

She could only sit on one particular chair and could only get up from it with difficulty. "It is so hard to part from anything upon which one has once settled."

She would run out of her room into another room in the middle of which there was a table. She would straighten the table cloth on it in a particular manner and ring for the housemaid. The latter had to come up to the table. At one place on the table cloth there was a stain, and she always arranged the cloth in such a way that the housemaid was bound to see the stain. She would then dismiss her on some indifferent errand.

On her wedding night her husband had met with the not unusual mishap. He found himself impotent, and many times in the course of the night he came hurrying from his room into hers to try once more whether he could succeed. In the morning he said he would feel ashamed in front of the hotel housemaid who made the beds, and he took a bottle of red ink and poured its contents over the sheet: but he did it so clumsily that the red ink came in a place that was very unsuitable for his purpose.

She would write down the number of every banknote before parting with it. At a time when she was still intending to leave her husband if she could find another more trustworthy man, she allowed herself to receive advances from a man whom she met at a watering-place, but she was in doubt as to whether his intentions were serious. One day, being short of small change, she asked him to change a five-kronen piece for her. He did so, pocketed the large coin and declared with a gallant air that he would never part with it, since it had passed through her hands. At their later meetings she was frequently tempted to challenge him to show her the five-kronen piece, as though to convince herself that she could believe in his good intentions. But she refrained, for the good reason that it is impossible to distinguish between coins of the same value. Thus her doubt remained unresolved: and it left her with the compulsion to write down the number of each banknote, by which it can be distinguished from all others of the same value.

FREUD'S ANALYSIS

This renunciation [of the best bit of food] was explained by the date its origin: that is to say, after she had given up what was best.

In regard to certain details of her married life, the chair symbolized her husband, to whom she remained faithful.

With her obsessive action, showing the maid the table-cloth, she was representing her wedding night.

When the ceremonial is first being constructed, she must still be conscious that she must do this or that lest some ill should befall, and as a rule the nature of the ill to be expected is still known to her consciousness. But what is already hidden from her is the connection – which is always demonstrable – between the occasion on which this expectant anxiety arises and the danger which it conjures up. Thus a ceremonial starts as an action for defence or insurance, a protective measure.

The sense of guilt of obsessional neurotics finds its counterpart in the protestations of pious people that they know that at heart they are miserable sinners: and the pious observances (such as prayers, invocations etc) with which such people preface every daily act, and in especial every unusual undertaking, seem to have the value of defensive or protective measures.

MY DEVELOPMENT OF THE IDEA

On rereading the paper, I suddenly found myself thinking of the housemaid, and of the nuptial husband's anxiety and shame with regard to her. Given Freud's definition of health as the attainment of (sexually expressed) love and (creative) work, I wondered about the male fear of the sexual scorn of the female employee. As a virginal teenager I had read *Sex & Racism*, with its illuminating account of the *elective affinities* between slaves and slave-owners across the colour-line. Later I would meet Hegel's master-slave dialectic. With his account of unconscious transferences, Freud would further complicate these dynamics.

The paper is said to be the first in which Freud uses the phrase '*unconscious sense of guilt*'. It also presents his early thoughts on a theme to which he would return often: the *necessity* of civilized practices for the establishment of a society with minimal fear of mutual extinction: and the *danger* that the instinctual renunciation demanded does irreparable harm to the individual psyche and the body in which it lodges.

It must also be the only Freudian (and perhaps only First Generation psychoanalysts) case-history which features both a man and a woman running. My intuition was that this would make a great ballet. As I say above, the other motivation was to try to show a story without dialogue. At the time, 2007, I had also been thinking of Wittgenstein's point that often it is better/clearer to show than to say. Music was to him the highest medium for showing-without-saying. The most common criticism of films of novels is that they fail to find a visual correlate for the interior life of the characters that the writer has so subtly expressed in words on paper. One could argue that dance-theatre, unlike drama & opera, can show without saying – and even without music!

I should say that I wasn't trying to present erotica. In addition to orificial stimulation, sex is also the site of the human capacity for shared play and the capacity for control & even humiliation – economic political and emotional. All State Hierarchies and all Religious Authorities minutely police the joy its people seek through their bodies, by using the ineluctable guilt that is a human social inheritance: as a way of preserving their own power.

I am mindful that without words, shown objects & actions, repetitions and parallels, can quickly seem ponderous symbols and inept allegories. But when well done, what might happen is that the obvious actions, the elusive symbols and the hinted allegories, induce in the audience Kantian aesthetic ideas – a sense of a richer understanding of human social processes that isn't yet quite precise words and ideas.

My subtitle deliberately transposes the terms of the book Eliot cited as the greatest influence on *The Wasteland* – Watson's *From Ritual to Romance*. Some scholars believe that the sexual cripple Eliot was further devastated by his similarly inept first wedding-night & his wife's Viv's 'excessive' production of menstrual blood: about a dozen years after Freud's 'Stain Woman's' traumas.

Because of the received material of obsession & ritual, I intended to produce as many parallels and repetitions, between characters, objects and actions, as would enrich the story. The symbols and allegories arose in the process of writing, not as a pre-writing essay to be 'dramatised'.

I hope that even in this first raw draft, giving directions in words, some effects and thoughts come across. The effects of repetition and parallel can be intensified by leitmotifs in

- a) costume
- b) music,
- c) choreography.

THE STRUCTURE

A: CHARACTERS

Freud's original case-history has besides him, four unnamed persons: the woman (patient-protagonist), her husband, her housemaid, the hotel housemaid and the new suitor. I coalesced the two maids, introduced a female friend and added a religious minister to honour the connection Freud (Ufes) makes.

B: TIME

The case-history is set around 1903-7. My work plays with time, in narrative order, and follows the way any psycho-analyst learns and constructs facts.

ACT 1 : The symptoms - referring to the patient's recent past & still occurring in the present.

ACT 2 : The actions of the analytic work: nearer to & in the present.

ACT 3 : The causes of the symptoms – from the deep past.

ACT 4 : The symptoms weakened/removed : the immediate present.

The other sense of time-play is given by the repetition intrinsic to obsessional behaviour and religious ritual

C: SCENOGRAPHY : SETS & COSTUME

The furniture & costumes are to be minimal and notional but suggestive.

D : PERFORMANCE STYLE

There are three different styles for the three Acts.

Act 1 – In Ritual Mode

Act 2 – In Expressionist Mode

Act 3 – In Romantic-Realist Mode

What would be explored in discussion & rehearsal is how music supports the ideas expressed in movement. Great attention would be paid to pitfalls.

MUSICAL DANGERS : MANIPULATION & ANACHRONISM

I distrust music which is too directive and manipulative of emotion: it is most useless (in some films) when it tries simplistically to heighten the emotion that is already obvious from the character's movements (or in dialogue from the words): and ends up as being intrusively clamorous.

A possibility worth considering, and only testable in rehearsal, is whether later 20C music – avant-garde classical or rock - could be used. As the historical period is signalled and fixed by costume: there might be space for other music - though more like La La La Human Steps & Laurie Anderson than Baz's *Moulin Rouge*.

MOVEMENT & ABSTRACTION : another danger

It was tremendously helpful to hear Marie-Gabrielle Rotie, the dancer & choreographer, express her scepticism of a foreclosed matching of movement or gesture and abstract idea viz a received & fixed physical-vocabulary. She prefers that in discussion/rehearsal the dancer experiments and aims to be surprised at a new matching of move and meaning. There might be an analogy with the writer who mints a new word which is slightly more than a synonym for a single received word: but connects/fuses more than one word. She saw Act 1 as having great scope for playing with such shifts in meaning and movement.

NARRATIVE DANGER : OVER-NEATNESS

Freud is often criticised for the narrative neatness of his case histories. And writers, playwrights, and film directors who use Freud are further hammered for clumsy summaries at the denouement. More self-consciously, Orson Welles famously referred to the *dollar-book Freud* aspect of *Citizen Kane*.

But again, one must not diminish the brilliance of the connections Freud makes. There is a shocking truth in his observations in this paper about the unconscious connection between sex and dirt/sin in the sexually predatory 'uncle'.

Freud's talking cure works with words. But can dance show the possibilities and truths of connections (between symptoms and traumas) without seeming to make lab-mice of men & women.

Choreographers have not explored & used Freud's ideas as frequently as other artists. This project provides such an opportunity.

3 : READING THE SCRIPT

My characters will say nothing at all. I will give directions for their movements. From these you will get, I hope, a sense of drama and thought. In an ideal world, the story would be danced: and with the dancers' interpretation/showing of the actions providing more complex meanings & delight.

I have provided only brief descriptions of the stage-set. For the directions I have deliberately chosen a spare style. I will use the present tense. The themes may be inchoate or complex but the descriptions of the movements will be as clear as possible. I will repeat names and pronouns and actions as often as is necessary to avoid ambiguity. Such repetition, occasionally nearing incantation, is intended to chime with the reference in the title to ritual.

As well as numbering Act & Scene divisions, I have numbered the stage direction/movements. The Reader can of course ignore the latter notation, the river of numbers pouring down the left-hand column. At best, it will allow critics to note precisely where weaknesses and failures happen.

CONCERNING MY DANCE-SCRIPT

1 : WHO MIGHT READ IT ?

I agree absolutely with your remark:

"I think one of the criteria should be a subjective assessment of whether the person in question has an interest in exploring/revisiting Freud, be it friendly or in a critically refreshing way."

I have met many people who are well-read in the humanities, yet ignore Freud or presume to condescend & mock him on the basis of very little reading or reflection. So I am happy that my script is read by anyone who acknowledges that it would help their understanding of it if they (at some point) also honourably engage with Freud : even if it is only with the brief paper from which I take the case history : *Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices* (1907) Penguin Freud 13 : 31-41 (10 pages!)

I should add that I am not a Freud scholar of the calibre of Ivan Ward: and so I would not expect any collaborator to feel the pressure to be so.

The people you mention as possible readers seem fine.

2 : HOW MIGHT THE WORK BE ENTERED ?

Unlike a play with words, where one might have a seated read-through by a group of actors to get a feel for what works or doesn't, this movement-piece requires at least a walk-through by those interested in it. Where to begin? Either of these two points:

A) Act 3 : Scene : The Wedding Reception .

This is comparatively simple. Everyone has been at a wedding near the end of the night: . and knows some waltz tunes. In a few moves & gestures, the great anticipation and great anxiety in everyone's mind about what happens next on wedding nights is to be shown.

B) Act 1 : Scenes 1-21

This contains three scenes repeated seven times. The walkthrough could be done either :

- i) As Act 1 is given: with the alternating scenes OR
- ii) Experimenting with one scene in its seven variations eg Scenes 1, 4,7,10, 13,16, & 19: to experience what immediate repetition does to the performer's sense of the development of the character. At the heart of Freud's paper are ideas about the meaning of the human need for repetition, both in religion and obsession. My script explores if subtle shifts in the need & meaning can be shown through movement.

These walk-throughs would require a stage/studio space but little furniture: plain table, chair etc. (B) doesn't need any external sound. (A) would be helped by a waltz CD or a performer who had a violin.

THE 'UNKNOWING' PERFORMER

Though the director of the piece ought to know the Freudian context, I accept that it is possible for a performance student, with no knowledge of Freud, to be given the script pages for (A) or (B) and using their knowledge of movement and motivation etc to discover/reveal something in a walk-through.

3 : MUSIC & CHOREOGRAPHY

These are entirely to be discussed with others. I have a couple of ideas.

I had very interesting discussions with both Anna Furse and her friend & collaborator Marie-Gabrielle Roti: a dancer-choreographer-company director in her own right. (website : www.rotieproductions.com). She is the dancer with interest in butoh. She cautioned against the presentation of bland repetition.

4 : FILM

In 2007, about the time I wrote the script, I also made a short film 30 mins, on Freud's paper : using film-clips & photos, from the web & videos, and my home computer. It has some words, but not many : for I was again trying to think without words about the ideas of obsession and repetition. This can also be treated as background to my script.

I'd be happy to send you a copy of the DVD disc.

5 : COPYRIGHT

I am mindful that a script goes through many changes from the first working-draft to what gets performed. I would publicly record due credit to everyone involved in any production that gets shown in the public domain. I hope we'd all proceed with the intellectual grace you have already shown me.