THE RELIGION OF PSYCHOANALYSIS, OR ODE TO A NIGHTINGALE

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Abstract: The central thesis of this article is that psychoanalysis is an organic offshoot of that evolutionary process called religion. As such it has more in common with the world’s religions than it would care to admit. Nor would the world’s religions feel particularly excited about admitting psychoanalysis in their midst, for its inclusion forces a rethinking of their place in human development. Using Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale,” the author looks at the pain of human existence and how it has resulted in the concepts of soul, God, and immortality. The nature of sentience—being aware of one’s awareness—is examined. The article asserts that psychoanalysis is the process by which the soul examines itself, thought examines thinking, and life examines its meaning. The author describes religion, soul theory, and psychoanalysis as having evolved naturally and necessarily from human existence and experience, and views them as necessary dimensions of existence.

Keywords: group unconscious, maternal reverie, mortality, psychoanalysis, religion, sentience, soul theory, spiritual streams

Freud would probably have been horrified by the title of this article, for we all know about his intense antagonism toward religion, which he regarded as little more than “the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity” (Freud [1927] 1961: 43). He considered the obsessive magical thoughts and the compulsive rituals that are such central parts of any religion as methods of dealing with anxiety: “[D]evout believers are safeguarded against the risk of certain neurotic illnesses; their acceptance of the universal neurosis spares them the task of constructing a personal one.” It is an interpretation that religious people would understandably not concur with, for they think of religion as being something unworldly, something that reaches beyond our human existence. I would not be surprised if religious people judged psychoanalysts, who are mostly atheists, quite severely.

Social Analysis, Volume 50, Issue 2, Summer 2006, 224–238 © Berghahn Journals
However, in the last 20 years or so, there has been a change within psychoanalysis toward religion. Certain psychoanalysts now feel that Freud was perhaps a bit hasty and harsh in his criticisms of religion. These psychoanalysts would probably remain sympathetic to Freud’s opinion of orthodox religion, but they would say that within all religions there are streams that can be called spiritual. It is mainly toward these spiritual streams, rather than orthodox religion as such, that there has been a shift in attitude. This shift is basically sympathetic toward the spirituality of religion. Some psychoanalysts, such as Neville Symington (1994: 171), now regard psychoanalysis, at its best, as being a spiritual act. Rachel Blass (2004: 614–634) has recently reviewed and summarized these developments within psychoanalysis. Her basic position is that psychoanalysis has softened Freud’s harsh criticism by accepting and rejecting various aspects of religion and by crediting the illusions of religion as being valuable and growth promoting, if they can be understood as transitional objects and phenomena as described by Winnicott (1951: 229–242). In seeking a rapprochement with traditional religion, Blass reasons that both religion and psychoanalysis are searching for truth and that both are based on unconscious memories of early infantile experiences.

I mention these developments in psychoanalysis to emphasize that this presentation is not an attempt to enter these debates, which are mainly about content that can be variously described in Symington’s terminology as the distinction between primitive and mature religions or the transformation of bad actions into good. This article, on the other hand, is about the process of religion, that is, the reason why religion exists in the first place. The point of view that will be put forward here is completely indifferent to what kind of religion we are talking about, for what I have to say applies equally to the most primitive and the most mature of religions. Likewise, this discussion is indifferent to the aims of religion, whether they are ecstatic, moral, or growth promoting. It is merely the existence of religion that is examined, and it is in this context that psychoanalysis too is examined. For just as we ask, why does religion exist in the first place? we equally ask, why psychoanalysis?

It is the contention of this article that the processes that result in religion are also the processes that result in psychoanalysis and also that these processes are necessary and inevitable. We could not be without them. So there is no attempt here to bring about a rapprochement of psychoanalysis with religion, but much more to illustrate that psychoanalysis is a form of religion. This is not because we regard Freud as a modern prophet and his writings as holy writ (though many people might think that is why psychoanalysis is a religion). It is because there is an organic, evolutionary process in mental development that results inevitably in mental creations that go by the name of religion or psychoanalysis. Implicit in this statement is a plea to open one’s mind to the phenomenon known as religion and to not be close-minded the moment that the word ‘religion’ is mentioned.

I will structure this article in the unfashionable Kantian model of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. It would appall many literary critics, and certainly all poets, for me to put the burden of this structure on Keats’s poem, “Ode to a Nightingale.”
Yet I have found it useful to do so, if only to emphasize that poetry is as much a repository of emotional truth as psychoanalysis and religion, and that all three serve very similar human purposes. It is for this reason that Keats’s poem shares the title of this presentation. There are many ways in which this marvelous ode can be read, but rather brutally I will reduce it to the thesis, the painfulness of the human condition; the antithesis, the escape from it; and finally the synthesis, the substance of this article. What follows first is the thesis.

The Pain of Human Existence

The human condition is extremely painful. In his invocation to the nightingale, Keats ([1861] 1906: 255–257) describes the tragedy of our human lives:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and specter-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs,
Where beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond tomorrow.

Few descriptions of the realities of human life are as accurate, beautiful, and economical as these few lines. It is not possible to live and be free of old age, sickness, and death. Further, what appears beautiful cannot remain so, and it is also not possible to think without being filled with “sorrow and leaden-eyed despairs.” Since this is the painful truth of our lives, there is much motivation to escape it, which forms the antithesis of existence.

The Birth of Soul, God, and Immortality

Now let us move to the antithesis, the escape from the pain of existence. Since time immemorial, humankind has sought comfort in the belief that pain and mortality can be circumvented by some kind of life after death or some kind of immortality. Keats expresses it in this way:

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
The same that oft-times hath
Charm’d magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

However, it is not entirely accurate to state that the concept of immortality came into existence purely as a means to escape the pain of mortality. It is more likely that once the idea of immortality was established, it was used to evade the misery of existence. Of course no one can establish with certainty the origins of such an ancient idea, but it is highly likely that the notion came into existence concomitant with sentience becoming established. I will use the term ‘sentience’ to mean not merely being aware, but being aware of that awareness. The moment that the mind becomes aware of itself, it has, so to speak, stepped outside of itself and is observing itself. From here it is but a small step to think of the observing function being independent. Since this function does not have physical characteristics, it implies the existence of something that is other than body, something other than mind, something that stands above both, observing both. This is a crucial point in human developmental history, for it is at this juncture that the painfulness of human existence also comes into being. To put it another way, were it not for sentience, the human condition would not be painful. It is not possible to become aware of our existence and not simultaneously become painfully aware of what lies ahead of all of us—namely, old age, sickness, and death. But it is just at this point when sentience comes into being that God, religion, psychology, and soul theory also come into being. I will take each in turn.

Sentience
The special feature of human sentience is that humans are aware of their sense perceptions and their consciousness—and they are aware of that awareness. I see consciousness as a logical evolution of the development of sense perception. Further, I see awareness of that consciousness as an evolution of this same process. It is in this way that stardust, and hence the universe, becomes able first to perceive, then to be conscious, and then to be aware of that consciousness. Nor is this awareness of consciousness confined only to the species experiencing it, for species that are conscious become aware of all else in the universe that exists, consciously or non-consciously. We are seeing an interesting elaboration of this in the conservation movement, where the awareness of one species not only takes into account the existence of other species, but also attempts to serve the interests of these other species by acting on their behalf. Another way of stating this is that humans are functioning as the surrogate mind of both sentient and insentient stardust.

We will have more to say about the centrality of the process of one part of the mind serving to foster the development of other parts of the mind in the development of thought, but for now I want to point out only the evolution of human sentience. In keeping with this developmental scheme, I think it is only the most developed of human minds that are capable of being aware of other minds and
serving as surrogate minds for all forms of stardust. It is interesting that psychoanalytic thinking, through a very different paradigm, that of emotional development, comes to exactly the same conclusion, namely, that care, concern, and compassion for other beings are features of only the healthiest and most developed of human minds. And religious thinking, through yet another paradigm, that of prophet, messiah, or Godly incarnation, preserves in the personalities of these exceptional individuals the same qualities of care, concern, and compassion.

The Development of God and Religion

This brief discussion of the evolution and development of human consciousness, including self-awareness, brings us to another interesting conclusion. If we imagine the human mind as functioning as the surrogate mind for the rest of creation, we are but a short step away from the concept of God, who by all accounts functions as the mind for the rest of creation. There is nothing that God is not aware of and nothing that God cannot do. This expresses both sentience and the infinite possibilities of the mind. It also suggests a caring and protective function, essentially a parental function, which, to wit, is the other leg that God stands on.

I think it would be fair to say that God is an expression of both supra-consciousness, that is, consciousness becoming aware of itself, and the projection of our long dependence on our parents. The two are probably interdependent, for it seems that a necessary feature of development is the dimension of time. It takes time for anything to develop, and the more complex the development, the longer it seems to take. Unicellular organisms divide and in that way instantly reproduce fully developed organisms that are developmentally identical to the original organism. More complex organisms require more time to reach the same developmental level as that of the original or parental organism. So it is not surprising that the human organism, the most complex organism on Earth, takes the longest period to develop. Within the human organism, the most complex and highly organized organ, that of the mind, requires the most time. We discover that humans spend about a quarter of their lives developing to reach the full mental potential of their parents. In this long period they are dependent on parental minds to a greater or lesser extent. It is to be expected that this long period of incubation should result in the formation of a structural element in the human mind reflecting the necessity of one part of the mind being dependent on another, child upon parents, or human beings upon God. In this way, God is a feature of both supra-consciousness, which takes a long time to fully develop, and the incubational parental function necessary for this development. This is not to say that there cannot be ecstatic experiences in which there is a sense of being one with God. The two structures are experienced as one indivisible whole.

The Birth of Psychology

It is well known that the predecessor of astronomy was astrology, which has a factual element. This factual element is based on the movements of the planets and distant stars, and there is no reason to suggest, given that everything in our
world is dependent on everything else, that all stardust should not be interdependent on other stardust. But mixed in with this factual element are the very human elements of desire, omnipotence, and magic. Chemistry likewise emerged from a mixture: the factual and fantastic elements of alchemy. In the same way, psychology is emerging from ancient soul theory, which also has factual elements woven in with the magical. Nor has psychology emerged completely from this process, for there remain elements in it that are either magical or that deny the existence of the mind altogether.

For those who are offended by the contention that our discipline is the latest offspring of soul theory, we have only to provide evidence of this parentage. The DNA link is unmistakable. The DNA of all thought is the language that carries and communicates it, with an infinite variety of phenotypic manifestations. The root for both ‘psychology’ and ‘psychoanalysis’ is the Greek term ‘psyche’, which the Concise Oxford Dictionary describes as “breath, life, soul or spirit.” Since we shy away from acknowledging our parentage and from accepting that our science is merely the latest version of soul theory, we are not able to truly benefit from examining our roots and the rich harvest of meaning its investigation might reveal. For instance, we are not then able, as Otto Rank (1930) has done brilliantly, to explore the whole purpose of soul belief, which is to assert human control, such as astrology and alchemy, over the forces of nature. The force of nature that we are particularly concerned with here is mortality. For if psyche is breath, life, soul, or spirit, the whole purpose of soul belief is to control and preserve it, so that it does not willy-nilly slip through our fingers. In other words, soul belief is concerned with ensuring some measure of immortality. I am not suggesting that this is deliberate, planned, or conscious. In fact, the roots of soul belief remain largely unconscious. Before proceeding any further, something needs to be said about mortality.

*Mortality and Soul Theory*

Mortality has always been problematic for humans, for unlike all other living creatures, only humans are able to imagine and anticipate their own deaths. Of course, other creatures also will do anything to survive, and it could be said that their struggle for survival is based on some kind of unconscious recognition of death. But this recognition is not, as far as I am aware, ever a conscious knowledge of death. Only humans can think of it, be aware of it, plan for it, and communicate about it. The fact that we are able in this way to be conscious of our death and the death of all those around us does not mean that we can easily accept it. This is because life is very dear to us, as it is to all creatures, and because of something much more basic. I think we do not sufficiently appreciate the fact of sentience in the manner I have described. We are constantly aware of the world we live in but are simultaneously also aware of our being aware. This awareness of our being aware is sometimes called ‘consciousness of our internal world’, because awareness of being aware is a whole inner world of enormous complexity that in many ways mirrors the external world. So deep is this sense of inner watchfulness that it is not possible to imagine it not being there. For
instance, when we think of our death, we are nevertheless present in thinking about it. It is almost as if even when we die, our state of consciousness will continue. We cannot imagine ever being without it—alive or dead.

It is in this way that the idea of mortality does not come easily to us. Of course, we do not want to die, but we are also not truly able to imagine dying, for we are always there watching the death. It is never a mere extinction. It is, I believe, this central fact that has had a profound influence on the origins of soul theory. We can see from these considerations that when we die, some part of us continues to watch this dying, a part that could perhaps be called our soul. Thus, we can say that we die but the soul persists. Soul theory exists not only to deny the fact of death, though this is a very important element in all soul belief, but also because of the phenomenal impossibility of imagining such an event. On the other hand, for this very reason it is very easy to imagine the psyche or soul continuing after the extinction of the physical body.

What compounds the problem even further are credible reports of rebirth (Story 1975). These are not all hoaxes, and even one tenable account is sufficient to suggest that something persists after physical death. I am not acquainted with this phenomenon, but reading a number of instances draws one’s attention to two features that are fairly constant. The first is that the death of the person who is reborn is usually premature and often traumatic. Apart from reports of the rebirths of Tibetan lamas, I have not come across an account of an old person dying who is then reborn. The second fairly constant feature is that rebirth generally takes place in geographical proximity, usually within the same region or country. It is extremely rare for it to occur in some distant global region, though such instances have been reported. Since I am a psychoanalyst, I tend to reach for familiar psychoanalytical theories, such as projection identification. It might be that rebirth is a special form of this process, but if it is, the whole theory will need to be rewritten. Until that happens, I am content to let phenomena exist that I do not understand without either discrediting them or drawing them forcibly into areas of recognized experience. I mention rebirth here and the associated Tibetan bardo, or interval between death and rebirth, merely to highlight the fact that these phenomena contribute to our problem with accepting mortality as being a clearly defined, clean line that limits life. On the other hand, it is this very blurring, this leaking, along with the impossibility of being able to imagine our deaths, that leads to the creation of soul theory.

One particular form of soul theory is of special interest to me—the one that goes by the name of psychoanalysis. I will try to explain why I think psychoanalysis is just one of the latest versions of soul theory.

**Psychoanalysis as Soul Theory**

Probably the deepest link that psychoanalysis has with soul theory is through the concept of the unconscious, which is central to all psychoanalytic theories. There are of course many different schools of psychoanalysis and many psychoanalytic theories, but to the best of my knowledge, there is none that does
not have the unconscious forming an important part of that theory. Of course, what it is that is unconscious, how it affects our everyday lives, and how we might influence it will vary with the theory. But it would be hard to imagine something that goes by the name of psychoanalysis that did not have some formulation about the unconscious. What is so important about the unconscious? I will offer some suggestions.

First, when we talked about other creatures not being aware of their death, I mentioned that their behavior might suggest an unconscious awareness of death, that is, maybe things go on in the organism that the organism is not aware of. We also talked about unicellular organisms having, if you like, an unconscious awareness of propagation, otherwise, why propagate? This sense of things happening in the organism that the organism is not aware of, but which are nevertheless essential and central to that organism, goes back a long way. Freud always talked about his own version of the unconscious, and we in turn talk about Freud’s version, as if it is the only version of unconscious that exists. Perhaps we do not sufficiently understand how deep and how central this concept is to all forms of life, for it is an essential feature, albeit unconscious, of all life to desire to continue living and to propagate that state. So if psychoanalysis is about life and if an unconscious desire to live and propagate is central to life, then it is not mere coincidence that the unconscious is central to psychoanalysis.

Secondly, Freud’s understanding and description of the unconscious came from his interpretation of dreams. Since antiquity our ancestor’s soul theories were heavily reliant on dreams, for it was dreams more than anything else that demonstrated the incontrovertible existence of the soul. When one sleeps, one is dead to the external world, but the internal world (or soul) is very much alive in dreams. Dreams have long been seen as evidence of the soul’s independence from the body and hence of its immortality. To this day, people view their dreams as not being of this world but rather as having predictive value, as being a glimpse into the world of the future. Soothsayers and prophets have since time immemorial relied heavily on dreams, citing them as evidence of their ideas. Is there anything new in psychoanalysis that uses dreams in much the same way? Of course, we do not use dreams to predict the future, but we do claim, like our ancestors, to know the meaning of dreams. More importantly, we use dreams to substantiate our theories, especially the theory that is central to psychoanalysis—the unconscious. It could be said that for our ancestors, everything one needed to know about the soul was to be found in dreams. We psychoanalysts say that everything one needs to know about the unconscious can be found in dreams. We have merely replaced the term ‘soul’ with ‘unconscious’, and because we deny our connection with our ancestor’s soul theories, we do not see the similarities.

Thirdly, there is something about the unconscious that suggests that it belongs to another realm, providing a link to immortality. No psychoanalyst talks about the unconscious being immortal, but there is something called the group unconscious that seems to have a life of its own, independent of the individuals constituting it. But perhaps more central to our everyday work,
there is an unconscious dialogue that takes place between the psychoanalytic dyad that seems to have a life of its own. Only periodically and occasionally do we become aware of the rhythms and features of this other dialogue, this other life, which exists parallel to the current one. This parallel existence has much in common with soul theory, for instance, when we say things such as: “The formal procedure of psychoanalysis is time limited and finite, but the process of psychoanalysis persists throughout one’s life.” We might even go so far as to say that this process, which was a parallel process during psychoanalysis, might govern the conduct of one’s life till the very end.

**Synthesis**

To recapitulate the structure of this presentation, we first talked about the pain of mortality, then about the origins of sentience, God, soul theory, and mortality. Now we will attempt to bring them together in a synthesis. I will preface this synthesis with another verse from Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale.” For me it is the most moving verse of this poem, and it carries within it the essence of this presentation.

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
    I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call’d him soft names in many a musèd rhyme,
    To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
    To cease upon the midnight with no pain.
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain –
To thy high requiem become a sod.

On the first reading of this verse, one is inclined to think that what is being sought is just death, or an escape from pain through death. Thus, the intent of this verse—escape from pain—seems to be similar to the previous one. But I think there is a crucial difference, for in this verse, it is not just death that is being sought—it is death “while thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad in such an ecstasy!” It is the “while” that makes an enormous difference, for though death is taking place, it is in the presence of the singing of the nightingale. The singing of the nightingale at this point is surely also Keats singing and singing in such an ecstasy! The song that is being sung carries the essence of the bird and the essence of the poet so beautifully melded together. It might be at this point that there is a transformation of death into painfully beautiful singing. The song is a feature of the singer’s pain yet is separate from the singer, and that is why the song is able to carry pain and the terror of death.

So it can be said that in this verse, the pain of existence (the thesis) is overcome neither by death nor by immortality (the antithesis), but by something else that brings about a transformation of the pain within the mind of the person
experiencing it. It is important to emphasize that the pain is still there; it has not ceased nor has it been denied. The singing of the nightingale that has entered the mind brings about the crucial transformation, the synthesis of pain and the capacity to bear it. The pain of existence is cradled in what we have referred to as the soul of existence. The pain of existence without a soul is meaningless. Soul theory devoid of the pain of existence, like many contemporary psychological theories, is equally meaningless. When they come together, there is a sense of coherence, meaning, and comfort. We need to explore this process by which it becomes possible both to experience pain and also to bear it.

Beginnings

I believe it is an illusion to think that the mind can develop on its own, for I believe that the human mind is essentially an inter-relational structure. In maintaining that the mind is a relational structure, I am merely summarizing and paraphrasing an enormous body of psychoanalytic literature, which can be condensed into a couple of sentences. The first is by Winnicott (1960: 39), who states that there is no such thing as an infant independent of the maternal care provided by its mother. The second is by Bion ([1962] 1977: 36), who asserts that the mind needs maternal reverie in order to survive and develop, without which the mind deteriorates and dies. Both are essentially saying the same thing in slightly different ways.

Having traversed the origins of sentience, God, and soul theory, we are now in a position to draw them together into a causally interdependent relationship. We saw that sentience, in the sense of awareness of consciousness, is a logical and necessary evolution of consciousness, and that God and soul theory are logical and necessary products of this same process. We could say from this perspective that a complex chicken has evolved from the origins of life—the egg, if you like. But we are now asking, perhaps very controversially, how could there be an egg without a chicken? What we are positing is a development of our earlier idea that all organisms have an unconscious desire to live and propagate, though there is nothing in their consciousness that would suggest such awareness. We are saying in the same way that it might be this very unconscious process that produces consciousness in the first place. The rather crude model we have is that of the chicken laying the egg, or maternal care or reverie being necessary for the development of mind. This of course is no doubt true, for there can be no egg without a chicken, infant without maternal care, or mind without reverie. But we are now saying that an egg necessarily posits a chicken, an infant a mother, and a mind reverie. They do not exist independent of each other, so it is nonsense to ask which came first, chicken or egg. It is likewise naive to interpret Winnicott or Bion crudely as saying that it is maternal care that produces the infant or that reverie produces mind. It would be truer to the spirit of Winnicott’s writings to say that when he beheld the infant, he simultaneously beheld maternal care and that he could not separate one from the other. Likewise it would be truer to say that when Bion beheld a functioning mind, he became aware of an interdependence of
mind and reverie or ‘container-contained’. He came to this opinion from his observation that when there appeared to be a container without the contained or something contained without the container, what he saw was a severely dysfunctional mind or a mind functioning in the dimension of psychosis.

**Disjunction of Container-Contained or Lies and Truth**

Those familiar with the work of Bion might accept what I have just stated, but there is a piece of his work that does not sit comfortably with this interpretation. It concerns his theory about lies and the thinker. I will quote a few sentences that summarize his view and then try to understand these statements from an interdependent perspective. The quotation comes from his book *Attention and Interpretation* (Bion [1970] 1977: 100–103):

Provisionally, we may consider that the difference between a true thought and a lie consists in the fact that a thinker is logically necessary for the lie but not for the true thought. Nobody need think the true thought: it awaits the advent of the thinker who achieves significance through the true thought. The lie and its thinker are inseparable. The thinker is of no consequence to the truth, but the truth is logically necessary to the thinker. His significance depends on whether or not he will entertain the true thought, but the thought remains unaltered.

In contrast, the lie gains existence by virtue of the epistemologically prior existence of the liar. The only thoughts to which a thinker is absolutely essential are lies. Descartes’s tacit assumption that thoughts presuppose a thinker is valid only for the lie.

These words are a powerful and persuasive description of what Bion means by lies. Part of the power of this argument comes from his contrast of the lie with what he calls the truth. This contrast can be misleading. Bion maintains that the pre-existence, pre-eminence, and necessity of the liar are the foundation of a lie. The lie is a lie because it is a feature of the personality of the liar, and yet the liar makes out that it is not so. That is the basic lie. The truth, on the other hand, is not a feature of the personality of the person espousing it and as such is indeed independent of human agency. Bion thus overstates his case by asserting that true thought awaits the arrival of the thinker. This may of course be true, but there is no way that we can possibly know this. It is the same as saying that before the advent of an organism, there exists a desire to live. While this may be so, we can never know about this until the arrival of the organism. In the same way, we can never know about the truth until the arrival of the thinker.

What distinguishes truth from lies is the fact that truth cannot be owned by anyone; for instance, the wish to live and propagate cannot be owned by anyone, nor are they the features of some particular person. The truth is something that is necessary and inclusive, not voluntary and exclusive. Or we can say that truth and thinker are different aspects of the same reality, but lies and the liar are not. The liar can choose a particular lie to propagate, and the lie dies with him or her. However, there is no choice when it comes to the truth, for truth
will always endure ("Satyam eva jayate"—Upanishads) and is imperishable. Truth never changes, though over time we come to appreciate more and more of it, and this greater awareness is commensurate with the growth and development of the person who discovers and uses it. Lies do not endure for long. They keep changing rather than enduring, and they are eventually detrimental to the person who harbors them.

Singer and the Song

Returning to Keats and the nightingale’s song, I think we are now in a better position to understand the relationship of the singer to the song. Keats is in pain, enormous pain. But in his pain he recognizes the pain of all humanity, so already in this recognition he has moved beyond his personal pain. He understands that his pain is an integral part of the pain of existence, of being alive. It is not possible for his pain to exist independently of the pain of humanity. Likewise, there can be no such thing as the pain of humanity without the pain that we all have some experience of. They are both different aspects and dimensions of the same thing, particular and universal, container and contained. But this is not the only dimension of Keats’s existence. A central feature of his experience is his poetry, which wells up in him like the song of the nightingale. This poetry is probably the most important aspect of his existence, for it gives meaning to the rest of his existence. His pain does not disappear, but having various significations assigned to it makes it bearable. This difference is an important one, for it is the difference between what Bion calls the experience of the pain that one rids oneself of and the pain that is suffered. I believe it is possible to suffer pain only if the pain can be put into some kind of context that gives it coherence and meaning that thereby contains it. Thus, the song of the nightingale, and Keats’s own song, gives meaning to the pain that Keats suffers and hence makes it endurable. This song is a particular instance of song that is universal, the song of the nightingale, your song, my song. These lines of Keats have meaning for us, for even though we did not write them, they resonate within us. They are part of our song, or we are part of that greater song. And we have seen that the song carries within it pain, for it is pain that produces the song, and it is song that carries the pain, universally and individually, container and contained.

What I have said about Keats and the nightingale is true also of the thinker and the true thought, of experience and its formulation. But this needs some elaboration. It is not easy to understand that the process of thinking is inherently painful. We think a thought and it does not hurt, so we conclude that thinking must also be painless. But any kind of sustained or productive thinking is painful, as is evidenced by the many ways we avoid thinking in this manner. We have numerous means of numbing our minds so that they do not think, from using drugs such as alcohol to watching television constantly and indiscriminately. We shy away from thinking because it requires effort and because it is painful. We have seen that in order to develop, thinking requires maternal care or reverie. As the capacity to think develops, it facilitates greater capacity to think, or, to state
it another way, maternal reverie gradually becomes part of one’s own reverie, thus facilitating the development of thought. This development of thought by giving context to one’s existence makes the pain of existence that much more bearable or sufferable. If the capacity for thinking is not developed, less thinking can be borne, less pain can be endured. Instead of being suffered, pain gets either numbed or ejected, often forcefully in external intemperance or physical violence. Or alternatively, pain fragments the mind.

Concluding Thoughts

There are many kinds of thinking, but we are here concerned only with those kinds of thinking that give meaning to our existence and, in doing so, make the pain of it a little more endurable. Soul theory is the most basic and most persistent way of giving meaning to our existence and thus making it bearable. I understand religion as a process that collects concordant clusters of soul theory, preserving them in scriptures and various rituals and practices. This is how I have come to understand psychoanalysis— as being merely the latest repository of clusters of soul theory preserved in rituals and practices. But there is nothing disparaging about such a description, for in our discussion about maternal care and reverie, we have come to recognize that such organization is necessary to provide containers of human experience.

It is in this way that I regard soul theory, religion, and psychoanalysis as evolving naturally and necessarily from human existence and experience, acting as containers of that existence and experience. But we have also seen that consciousness of human existence cannot exist without some way of being able to think about it, and while this thinking about it stands outside the experience, it is yet an inherent part of that experience. In other words, maternal reverie that is necessary for thought to develop is an inherent part of thinking. It is not that soul theory or religion evolves from man as some scientists say. Or that man emerges from religious beliefs as religious people would have us believe. It is truer to say that that they are both organically and mutually necessary dimensions of all human existence; you cannot have one without the other. Every thought is reciprocally related to the thinker that thinks it, as indeed is every chicken to every egg.

There is only one way in which I think psychoanalysis differs from other soul theories. While all soul theories take as a given the existence of the soul, psychoanalysis examines the creation, structure, and function of that soul. Psychoanalysis exists as a product of experience, yet it is always examining how it is such a product. It is consciousness examining consciousness and hence necessarily what is unconscious. The process extends to experience, for psychoanalysis examines all experience, including the experience of psychoanalysis, and it is the experiences of psychoanalysis that provide the structures that allow the examination of these experiences. Psychoanalysis is the process of the soul examining itself, of thought examining thinking, and of life examining its meaning.
Yet even as I put matters this way, I cannot help but feel that the essence of what I am trying to say might well be lost in all the words and ideas that I am using to convey that essence. I do not have the economy of the poet. If I did I would probably say something like:

Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain.
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!

I would like to convey the feeling of how the pain of existence is transformed so richly by wordless birdsong, for it is birdsong that gives meaning to existence. And when birdsong gives meaning to existence, then one becomes part of that experience seamlessly. All that can be heard is Keats and the nightingale pouring forth their songs in such an ecstasy of joy, a joy that carries within it the rich scarlet thread of pain that is such an inherent part of being human. We cannot be human without that pain, and we cannot carry that pain without our songs. But please do not ask whether what you hear is Keats or the nightingale singing, or whether it is the ecstasy of the singer or the song. Please only listen and in listening quietly fade away. So that eventually there is only the singing and nothing outside it.

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References


