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Donald L. Weismann

Violence and the Creative Act

SOMETHING like the resurgence of that Puritan moralism which assured the social acceptance in America of the presuppositions of Freud's psychoanalysis is today operating to convince men of a dark and sinful violence underlying their intentions and actions. In the case of Freud's psychoanalysis, it was essential that its repostulation of the doctrine of original sin be agreed to—either expressly or tacitly—in order that specific sins might be diagnosed and by acts of faith transmuted and expunged. The controlling wish back of this was, of course, to “come clean,” to be decent again.

It appears that the same wish lies back of today's will to believe not only that a fundamental violence exists in men, but that this violence is morally bad, entirely destructive, and that, were it to be expunged, then decency and love would reign—in fact, man would be redeemed. And since this wish continues to be more than incidentally related to certain presuppositions of psychoanalytic theory, it may be in place to note how that theory came about and whether its very invention may not have depended upon acts of both compulsion and violence. For if an alternate theory by which men are being convinced of the powerful energy—indeed violence—generated by their repressions is, in itself, an example of the positively productive—not totally destructive—character of this force, then some revaluation of the role of violence in the creative life of men would be called for.

What we are apt to overlook or fail to value in the matter of psychoanalysis is that it first appeared as the invention of a man, Sigmund Freud. His first works—on the *Psychical Mechanism of Hysterical Phenomena* (with Josef Breuer), *The Interpretation of Dreams*, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, and *Three Contributions to the Sexual Theory*—stand, even after more than a half century, as commanding creative works. They are as much the lively expressions of a particular person at a particular time and place as they are cool

scientific discoveries. Put in another way, the corpus of Freud's works, the hypotheses and convictions it expresses, amounts to a highly organized presentation of Freud's own personal case—a case ready for psychoanalytical or other interpretation by someone besides Freud. And this interpretation could be made at least as successfully as Freud's interpretation of the case of Leonardo da Vinci which he called a *Study in Psychosexuality*. In the absence of such an interpretation of the case of Sigmund Freud, however, we can only wonder about what it might hypothesize, should it be written, concerning an extraordinarily gifted Jew who passed most of his life at an ancient crossroads on the fringe of a decaying empire. We can only speculate about the relationships that might be shown to have existed between this exile's adult life on the battleground and outpost that was Vienna, and his postulation of an unconscious conversion of psychosexual trauma in earlier life. Of one thing we may be relatively sure, however, and that is that Freud's work was one of compulsion and even of violence.

Now, in referring to Freud's work, and perhaps most especially to his earlier writings, as being works of compulsion, all we mean is that the conditions of Freud's life in some way obligated him to create those works. And although he might have done other than what he actually did, it is still true that he did what he did as if he were urged irresistibly to do so. In fact, one senses that Freud created and perfected his psychoanalytical theory as if compelled by moral necessity. Having responded to the first intimations of what was to become his psychoanalytical system, he sought—as any artist seeks—for their logical consequences in a coherent whole. Every person who has ever engaged in creative activity of a high order, whether he be scientist, philosopher, or artist, is familiar with the quality of compulsion that pervades the process of creation. Once begun, the process moves forward by stages relating to each other because each provides the substance and the means for action toward the next stage. And throughout the whole process the performer is led, or compelled, by the ambivalent and strong allure of a potential coherency which keeps asking, as it were, to be achieved. This is all we mean when we say that Freud's creative works were works of compulsion. And it is meant to say no more about his innovative work than we might say about Einstein's or Picasso's—or even about our own.

But we also used the word violence in connection with the work of Freud. We said that his work was one of compulsion, and even of

violence. To point out what was meant by that we must remember that the word *violence* is not limited to the narrow meaning into which it is pressed most often today: "the exercise of physical force so as to inflict injury or do damage to persons or property."* It also means, as part of its first definition, the "wresting or perversion of meaning or application." It is this part of the definition in which we are most interested now. Its words are strong and highly charged. But if we understand the two strongest words, *wresting* and *perversion*, in terms of their prime definition, we have *wresting* meaning "the subjecting of (something) to a twisting movement; to turn or twist," and we have *perversion* meaning "the action of . . . turning aside from truth or right."

Now, the fundamental works of Sigmund Freud were, in their time, hardly restatements of traditionally accepted meanings or applications of those meanings. The import of those works served to subject traditional knowledge and accepted truths to a wrenching action. And that knowledge and those truths were perverted in the sense that the attention of men was turned aside from them. Certainly by his writings and demonstrations, Freud wrested and perverted traditional meanings back of such a concept as *conversion*, and back of such myths as those of Oedipus and Electra. What else can we believe happened to the traditional concept and meaning of *conversion* in his works? In what other way is his concept of an unconscious "conversion" of psychosexual trauma in earlier life related to and continuous with the concept of "conversion" as traditionally applied in the understanding of the experiences of St. Paul, St. Augustine, Savonarola, John Knox, John Wesley or Jonathan Edwards?

Wresting action and perversions of meaning, then, characterize the works of Sigmund Freud—and by this fact they can be properly thought of as works of violence. But far from wishing to emphasize them as destructive, we wish to emphasize their creative quality. In a word, we wish to bring attention to the fact that violence, in the terms in which we have been speaking, is a concomitant of the creative act. In this context violence is not necessarily bad in a moral sense, nor is it necessarily destructive. And to take the next step: decency and love would not necessarily reign, nor would man be redeemed if violence were expunged from his vocabulary of action. More to the point, innovation of a seminal variety would be next to impossible if violent

* All quoted definitions are from *The Oxford University Dictionary*, Third Revised Edition, 1955.

attitudes toward earlier stages of knowledge and truth were not part of the creative life of men.

So when it is understood that the very doctrine which has encouraged feelings of guilt in men for their acts of violence born of childhood repressions—that this doctrine itself came about through attitudes of violence born of dissatisfactions with earlier existing truths—then we are apt to be less nervous about the dark functions of violence and more concerned with the potential of violence for creative activity.

The present-day concern with the phenomenon of “violence in art” is the preoccupation mainly of journalists and reviewers of exhibitions, books, movies, and television programs. Usually these people single out for comment—often for outrage—only the *representations* of acts of violence in the works under consideration. They dwell on the numbers and kinds of shootings, strangulations, flagellations, rapes, and tortures. They remark the violence done to “civilized sensibility” by painted metaphors of pornography and scatology, but without feeling called upon to say what they mean by either civilization or sensibility. They reconstruct and review in words the physical conditions under which these representations of acts of violence take place. They occupy themselves with, and offer opinions about, the destruction of life and property as represented or alluded to in the works they review. Seldom, however, do they comment in any depth upon violence as creative or destructive of meaning.

This may be because today there is in general a great hesitancy to deal with matters of meaning or purpose. In these times it appears easier, less personally painful, to describe specific acts and conditions than it is to attempt to discover their relationships in any pattern of purpose or in any context of meaning. And those writers on art who do feel a responsibility in this and who do try to say how it is for them, those writers often end up offering their readers a combination of gingerly held attitudes and self-conscious evasion. But no matter how this comes about, those critics and reviewers exhibit little or no concern for meaning. As a result, their observations of and opinions about violence in art have little or no relevance to anything creative or destructive in the expressions of the art they review.

To come to grips with the nature of meaning, and to measure and evaluate degrees of creative or destructive violence in terms of meaning, that is the task that awaits doing in our time. To avoid considerations of meaning—whether through ignorance or through fear—on the one

hand, and, on the other, to take a stand for or against specific evidences of violence, is to act without intelligence and without responsibility.

There is an old catch-all cliché which is often quoted or paraphrased by politicians running for public office: "I am against sin." Today there is another such cliché that has to do with being "against violence." The strong attraction of both of these clichés lies in the inappropriateness of their opposites: "I am for sin," "I am for violence." But when we are aware of the varieties, qualities and functions of violence, so that we can recognize their role in such creations as Freud's psychoanalysis and Copernicus' *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*, then we should also recognize them in the wrenchings and perversions of old truths by artists from Akhenaten's studio in ancient Akhetaten to Andy Warhol's "factory" in present-day New York. Then, too, we can recognize and value the crucial difference between sporadic and destructive outbursts and the coordinated creative efforts which have contributed to turning civilization away from exhausted modes of order, truth and right, and on toward the new.

There is sufficient evidence of dark and destructive violence operative in this world of men, but it has been with us no longer than its creative counterpart. There may be as much reason for hope as for despair.