

On Transience

Sigmund Freud

Considered the father of modern psychology, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) wrote “On Transience” in 1915 when he was 60 years old and his two sons were fighting in World War I. Rejecting the notion that the transience—or the fleeting nature of the world—is cause for sadness or anger, Freud argues that the very transience of things makes them valuable. This is as true of a beautiful work of art as it is of a human life or our relationships with other people. It’s because these things won’t last forever that they should be considered all the more precious to us.

Some time ago, in the company of a silent friend and a young, already well-known poet, I took a walk through a flourishing summer landscape. The poet admired the beauty of nature around us, but without enjoying it. He was bothered by the thought that all this beauty was destined to die away, that it would have vanished in the winter, but so would every human beauty and all the beauty and nobility that men have created and could create. Everything he would otherwise have loved and admired seemed to him devalued by the transience for which it was fated.

We know that from such sinking into the decay of all that is beautiful and perfect, two different mental impulses can emanate. One leads to the painful world-weariness of the young poet, the other to rebellion against the fact being asserted. No, it is impossible that all these glories of nature and of art, of our sensory world and of the world outside should really melt into nothing. It would be too senseless, and too foolish to believe in it. They must be able to continue in some way, removed from all destructive influences.

But this thirst for immortality is too clearly a product of desires to lay claim to reality. What is painful may nonetheless be true. I could neither decide to deny the general impermanence nor insist upon an exception in preference for what is beautiful and perfect. But I denied the pessimistic poet’s view that the transience of beauty brings with it a loss of value.

On the contrary, an increase in value! The value of transience is a rarity in time. The restriction in the possibility of enjoyment increases

its preciousness. I found it incomprehensible that the thought of the transience of the beautiful should cloud our enjoyment of it. As for the beauty of nature, it will come back after every winter's destruction in the next year, and this return may be called eternal in proportion to our lifespan. The beauty of the human body and face we see disappearing forever in our own lives, but this short life adds a new one to their charms. If there is a flower that blooms for only a single night, its flowering does not seem to be no less splendid. Nor can I comprehend how the beauty and perfection of the work of art and the intellectual achievement should be devalued by its temporal limitation. There may come a time when the images and statues that we admire today have crumbled, or a race of humans comes after us that no longer understands the works of our poets and thinkers, or a geological epoch may arrive in which all the life on earth ceases. The value of all that is beautiful and perfect is determined only by its significance for our emotional lives; it does not need to survive and is therefore independent of the absolute duration of time.

I considered these considerations incontestable, but I noticed that I had made no impression on the poet and the friend. I deduced from this failure the presence of a strong emotion at work that clouded their judgment, and later thought that I had found the cause. It must have been the emotional rebellion against grief, which devalued their enjoyment of the beautiful. The idea that this beautiful thing was transient gave the two sensitive individuals a foretaste of the sadness of its loss, and, as the soul instinctively recoils from all that is painful, they feel their enjoyment of the beautiful impaired by the thought of its transience.

Mourning for the loss of something we have loved or admired seems so natural to the layman that he takes it for granted. For the psychologist, sadness is a great mystery, one of those phenomena that one does not explain oneself, but to which one goes back to other dark things. We imagine that we possess a certain amount of capacity for love, called libido, which in the beginning of development is directed towards one's own ego. Later, though still at an early age, it turns away from the ego and towards the objects that we, in a sense, take into our ego. If the objects are destroyed or lost, our capacity for libido becomes free again. It can substitute other objects or at times return to the ego. However, we do not understand why this detachment of the libido from its objects is such a painful process, and we can not derive it from any assumption at present. We only see that the libido clings to its objects and does not want to give up the lost one even when the replacement is ready. So that's the sadness.

The conversation with the poet took place in the summer before the

war. A year later, the war broke out and robbed the world of its beauties. Not only did it destroy the beauty of the landscapes it passed through, and the works of art it touched on its way, but it also broke our pride in the achievements of our culture, our respect for so many thinkers and artists, our hopes for a final overcoming of the differences among peoples and races. The war stained the sublime impartiality of our science, exposed our instincts in their nakedness, and unleashed the evil spirits within us, which we believed had been tamed by the centuries-long education of the noblest of us. It made our fatherland small again and the rest of the world remote to us. It robbed us of so much of what we loved, and showed us the frailty of many things we had thought unchangeable.

It is not surprising that our libido, which experienced the loss of so many of its objects, has clung with all the greater intensity to that has remained to us, that the love for the Fatherland, the tenderness for our neighbor, and the pride in what we have in common have been suddenly intensified. But have those other, now lost, goods, really been devalued because they have proved to be so lax and incapable of resistance? Many of us seem to think so, but wrongly, in my view. I believe that those who think so and seem ready to make a permanent renunciation, because the precious has not proved to be durable, are only in mourning over the loss. We know that sadness, as painful as it may be, ends spontaneously. When it has renounced all that has been lost, then it has consumed herself, and then our libido is freed again, insofar as we are still young and vital, to replace the lost objects with new one as precious or even more precious. It is to be hoped that the same will be true for the losses of this war. Once grief is overcome, it will be seen that our high esteem for cultural riches has not suffered under the experience of their frailty. We will rebuild everything that the war has destroyed, perhaps on more solid ground and more enduringly than before.

Vienna, November 1915.