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ART AND PSYCHOANALYSIS REGISTER AT  
THE WHITE HOTEL

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My title refers to the fact that in D. M. Thomas's remarkable novel, both art, in the form of literary imagination, and psychoanalysis seek to comprehend the life of a woman named Lisa Erdman, and both register certain truths or part truths. The novel traces Lisa's life from the time she enters analysis with Freud in Vienna until her death at Babi Yar at the hands of the Nazis. In a final chapter entitled "the camp" that has troubled many readers we witness a kind of apotheosis in which Lisa and most of the characters we have met survive their own deaths. Most readers find The White Hotel to be a brilliant treatment of human aggression, which it certainly is; and an equally brilliant portrait of Freud, who is presented in his role as the man who first unlocked the secrets of hysteria. But the landscape of hysteria, which is the terrain of the novel, is also the landscape of imagination, and so there is a basic opposition between art and psychoanalysis from the outset.

Only, the novel is also much more than this. During the next thirty minutes or so I will suggest that the novel is as well a study of the capacity to love both oneself and others, as this is affected by the inevitable experience of suffering--one's own suffering, and the suffering of others. As such, The White Hotel asks some very profound questions about analysis, not only as it is represented by Freud in the early part of this century, but some penetrating questions of all analysts.

The White Hotel begins with a few letters, somewhat fictionalized, written by Freud and others in his circle. Ferenczi writes of an incident that took place just before he, Jung and Freud left for the new world in 1909. All had been drinking wine, and Jung found himself talking at tedious length about the discovery of some "peat bog corpses" that had been made recently. Freud fainted as the monologue went on, apparently because he perceived in it Jung's unconscious wish that he die. The many who died and are now only peat bog corpses and the unconscious hatred of an apparently decent man--the letter thus introduces the important theme of aggression and human destructiveness, and artfully anticipates the murderous scene at Babi Yar that is the climax of the novel.

But there is another letter in this group that introduces the novel, quieter and more domestic, yet even more important, I believe. In this letter, Freud writes of the death of his daughter Sophie with these words:

Since I am profoundly religious there is no one I can accuse, and I know there is nowhere to which my complaint could be addressed. . . . Quite deep down I can trace the feeling of a deep narcissistic hurt that is not to be healed. My wife and Annerl are terribly shaken in a more human way.

I find this a disturbing letter, and I think Thomas did, too. It is not that narcissistic aspects do not attach to the relationship of a parent to his child, it is rather that this seems to be the entire focus of Freud's feeling. In reality, Freud at this painful time wrote more feelingful letters, but I think it is no accident that Thomas selected this one for the novel. Freud loses a daughter and his reaction is a narcissistic injury that he does not expect will heal. But if this is the dominant feeling, Sophie as Sophie has only a diminished place in her father's heart, and his mourning for her can not be completed. Whether we understand this as a defense against vulnerability or the reality principle at work, can the fulness of Freud's love for his lost daughter be experienced, or is it constrained and diminished by his apparently narcissistic experience?

In the novel, these questions open out into the deepest significance. What is the effect on the self of the presence of loss in life? And how does one achieve self-acceptance and even self-forgiveness in the knowledge that suffering and loss are inevitable, and, moreover, going on around one all the time? It may seem that these questions are sociological rather than psychoanalytical, but

Lisa, who often seems to stand for all people, suffers terrible loss as a child when her mother is burned to death in a hotel fire during a tryst with Lisa's uncle. Freud will discover in this event a key to understanding Lisa's hysteria; but the novel does not end when he does so.

These questions about loss and the problematics of mourning, already implied in the letters that open the novel, hang in the air as Freud meets Lisa Erdman, a young woman who suffers from some powerful hysterical symptoms. Primary among these are pains in her ovary and left breast; but she also suffers from recurring, obsessional hallucinations: one in which she sees a hillside collapsing upon a group of mourners; and a second, of falling from a great height. Lisa experiences these whenever she had sexual intercourse.

Freud finds the initial phase of Lisa's analysis difficult, due to the strong resistance she shows to some of his interpretations. (For those of you who have not read the novel, this section reads so much like a genuine case history by Freud that I've often had the feeling that had it been found in manuscript it would be immediately accepted into the canon of Freud's work.) But a breakthrough develops after two particular events. The first is Lisa's presentation of her first dream, which ends with an interchange between Lisa and an elderly man:

I went into a white room. Eventually an elderly gentleman came in and said, 'The house is empty.' I took a telegram out of my coat

pocket and gave it to him. I was sorry for him because I knew what it contained. He said, in a dreadful voice, 'My daughter is dead.' He was so shocked and sorrowful I felt I didn't exist for him any more.

Freud--or, Thomas's Freud--interprets the dream without noting the possible transference dimension. It is unlikely that the "real" Freud would have missed this, not after Dora. In the novel Freud instead comments on the relation of Lisa to her father, who greatly preferred Lisa's brother to her. However, the dream also suggests the theme of the novel that I find crucial, namely Lisa's fear that when Freud's daughter will die, Lisa will not matter to him anymore. Because among Lisa's other idiosyncrasies is this matter of "second sight," which she has at various times in her life. She "knows" as she tells Freud her dream that his daughter Sophie will die soon; and she fears that this will constrict Freud's ability to care for Lisa herself. Her fear is entirely consistent with the letter Freud will write describing his narcissistic response to Sophie's death, and in this sense Lisa has reason for concern.

And, bearing out Lisa's fear, Sophie dies. Freud's response, in the novel, is to meditate briefly on the presence of suffering in life:

Such an event is not to be lingered over; although, were one given to mysticism, one might well ask what secret trauma in the mind of

the Creator had been converted to the symptoms of pain everywhere around us. As I was not so given, there was nothing for it but 'fatum and ananke.'

This powerful affirmation of the reality principle, of the scientific rather than the primitive or neurotic or artistic view of life, is so close to a genuine strain in Freud's thought--it runs through Totem and Taboo, for just one instance--that it allows us to see an important aspect of what psychoanalysis means to Thomas. It is the very opposite of what Freud calls "mysticism," as though Freud had taken upon himself the task of rescuing blind humanity from its preoccupation with false hope and false consolation. It is almost as though Thomas had asked himself what the most powerful point of view against a certain form of the literary imagination might be, and found it in Freud.

Just what I mean by the literary imagination is represented by two remarkable documents written by Lisa at Bad Gastein during Freud's time away from work following Sophie's death. The novel, which is achronological much as an analysis is, actually begins with these two documents, inserted after the letters by Freud and his colleagues. The first is a highly sexual poem that describes Lisa's meeting on a train with Freud's son Martin and their affair at the White Hotel. The second is a prose summary of the poem, written by Lisa after she returns to Vienna. Both give the novel its title as well as giving Freud evidence for his diagnosis of hysteria. For the White Hotel is a

place where there is a fluid mixture of love and death, passion and destruction. As Lisa and Freud's son make love--almost constantly--many of the other guests at the hotel meet their deaths in fire or falls from great heights or avalanches. In this unrestrained sexuality and death there is plenty of evidence for some of Freud's ideas on the unconscious, of course. But there is something else that takes place at the White Hotel which troubles the guests even more than the unleashed destruction and the uncontrolled passion of the lovers. It is a series of apparently inexplicable events that Freud reads of in Lisa's writings but does not address after her analysis resumes. But the hotel guests meet to try to understand them. The situation the guests try to understand is that some or all of them have witnessed apparently impossible sights: a school of whales appearing in the landlocked hotel lake; a human embryo floating in the lake shallows; a womb gliding across the lake; and others. One of the guests puts forth an astonishing theory to explain at least one of these phenomena, the appearance of the school of whales: "I believe I may have an explanation for the whales," he begins. "Madame Cottin"--he bowed to the plump, blue-dressed lady, who inclined her smiling face in response--"is a corsetiere. And part of every corset is--to speak bluntly--dead whale. It seems to me not impossible that her presence among us . . . has 'called' the whales, so to speak. Attracted them, sung to them, lured them home, call it what you will."

At this suggestion of a startling and unexpected compensation for loss, others among the guests become able to suggest similar

explanations. A Lutheran pastor admits to seeing a breast flying through some yew trees; a woman among the guests explains that she had had a breast removed because of a growth. A cynical attorney claims to have seen an embryo floating in the lake shallows; his sister, with great embarrassment, confesses to having had an abortion. And so it continues. The sight of a womb brings out a statement of a recent hysterectomy. At the White Hotel much that is alive is lost, but many things return.

But now, perhaps, we know where we are--we know the landscape that is the White Hotel. It is the landscape of the romantic form of the literary imagination, which so often revolves around the wish that nothing that is human dies forever, the wish for the immortality of the soul. Each discovery made by the assembled guests of the hotel constitutes what the nineteenth-century poet Wordsworth would have called an intimation of immortality--nothing of us fades entirely. In such a landscape love and passion can indeed be free to fully realize themselves, for the fear of loss and the experience of suffering need not be diminishing to the self. "The spirit of the white hotel was against selfishness," Lisa writes.

But also, this is what Thomas's Freud considers to be the landscape of hysteria. Consequently, he reads her poem and her prose as though reading an extended symbolic statement conjured by the unconscious of an hysteric. "By the time I had put down the notebook," Freud says, "I was convinced that it might teach us everything, if we were only in a position to make everything out." In fact, one might

say this of the entire novel: it might teach us as psychoanalysts, as the heirs of Freud, much, if only we were in a position to make it out. Freud believes that he can identify the white hotel: it is the body of the mother, the place that makes all love a homesickness.

All who have hitherto, in a learning capacity, had the opportunity to read Frau Anna's journal have had that feeling: the 'white hotel' is known to them, it is the body of their mother. It is a place without sin, without our load of remorse . . . in the 'white hotel' there is no division between Anna and the world outside. . . . This is the 'good' side of the 'white hotel,' its abundant hospitality. But the shadow of destructiveness cannot be ignored. . . . The all-giving mother was planning her visit to the doomed hotel.

Based upon this view of Lisa's powerful love of her mother, Freud analyzes her recurring hallucinations and hysterical symptoms as indications of her suppressed homosexuality, in turn arising from a very great narcissistic need. This explanation neatly explains both Lisa's unhappy choices of male lovers and her recurring visions. Her first lover, a student referred to only as "A," turns out to be a fellow who accepts the need for political violence. Her husband, as we learn in stages in the novel, is bitterly anti-semitic and sadistically enjoys sending young deserters off to be shot in World War I. And wasn't the husband of Lisa's beloved Madame R killed by a political

bombing? Lisa's underlying homosexuality, Freud explains, accounted for the choice of sadistic men and the love of Madame R--but "the incompatible idea had to be suppressed, at whatever price; and the price was an hysteria . . . the pains in breast and ovary because of her unconscious hatred of her distorted femininity; anorexia nervosa: total self-hatred," and so on.

Moreover, Freud is able to relate the pattern of repetition in Lisa's life to the ideas he is formulating at the time in connection with his essay, Beyond the Pleasure Principle. "Strange," Freud muses, "was her psyche's compulsion to relive the night of the storm when she learned of her mother's death in a hotel fire. I have said that at certain moments Frau Anna's expression reminded me of the faces of the victims of war neuroses. It is still not clear to us why those poor victims of the battlefield force themselves again and again to relive in dreams the original traumatic events." But "there is also the pattern of self-injuring behaviour that can be traced through the lives of certain people." From this association, Freud surmises that he has found additional evidence for his theory of the death instinct: "Was there not a 'demon' of repetition in our lives, and must it not stem from our human instincts being profoundly conservative? Might it not therefore be that all living things are in mourning for the inorganic state, the original condition from which they have by accident emerged? Why else, I thought, should there be death?"

Freud is too acutely sensitive to fail to notice Lisa's resemblance to the victims of war neuroses, but in the world of the

novel he is too scientific to fully realize the significance of this. As in his interpretation of her dream, he understands much of the historical aspect of the association, but misses the prospective aspect: Lisa will become herself a victim of the war--the coming war. She is not only repeating a traumatic past, she is suffering because of a dim sense of a traumatic future in which death is not longed for, as in a death instinct, but is violent and inevitable. Life, the novel seems to suggest, has not only an important historical dimension--which it does--but also a present and a future: and all are intimately tied to human suffering. In her dream, Lisa feared not only that Freud's daughter would die; she feared that her loss would make Freud incapable of loving Lisa herself, that loss diminishes the capacity to love. And of course she had good reason to fear this, for had her own father not turned from her after the death in the hotel fire of her mother? And now, in the present, has not Freud given evidence of his own narcissistic preoccupations? What will happen to the "child"--Lisa--in each case? Isn't it true that the child is always sacrificed to the narcissistic needs of the parent? For Lisa knows also that Freud's grandson will not long survive the death of his mother.

But there is a more profound basis for Lisa's fear of the loss of love. After her analysis ends, with a diminution but not a cure of her symptoms, Lisa discovers that one of her greatest fears, so hard to tell Freud, remains with her: her fear of childbirth and babies. Freud understood this in connection with her homosexuality; but Lisa is not homosexual to any great degree; it's just that babies fill her with

fear. When she learns that her new friend, the opera singer Vera, is pregnant, she dreams of "standing over a deep trench filled with many coffins." Vera will become yet another parent in the novel who dies and leaves a motherless child behind. Only this time, Lisa will take her place.

But before we as readers can see and understand that Lisa's dreams and her visions and her fear of and for babies are leading us to the horrors of the slaughter at Babi Yar, we will follow her from Vienna to Russia during the 1930s. The themes of political violence and anti-semitism grow more powerfully intertwined as we do so, but nothing is quite so telling as the story of the mass murderer, Kurten, who had terrorized Dusseldorf as he killed mostly women and little girls. While he was being sought, and this gives us some indication of the emergence of Nazism, "nearly a million men had been reported to the police as the Monster, and questioned, all over Germany." Of course Kurten had had a dreadful childhood; but how does one respond to such violence? Lisa thinks that it is only by God's grace or mere chance that she was Elisabeth Erdman of Vienna and not "born as Peter Kurten. . . . But then again, the very thought that someone had had to be . . . Peter Kurten made it impossible to feel any happiness in being Lisa Erdman." And even after the murderer is executed, Lisa reflects that "somewhere--at that very moment--someone was inflicting the worst possible horror on another human being."

Lisa cannot ignore the existence of human suffering, nor can D. M. Thomas. This novel takes its place among other epic explorations of

the nature of good and evil in man's life, and is, I believe, one of the great novels of our century, partly for this reason. It is a moral and religious novel in the broadest meanings of those terms; but most crucially, I think, it is a novel about the relationship between suffering and love. For Lisa does not know a way of being happy to be herself even in the face of suffering. How far we are now from the unconstrained love found at the White Hotel, where Lisa and Freud's son could happily continue loving each other even as others died. But at this point in the novel, when she visits the famous shroud at Turin, which might be the shroud of Jesus, Lisa loses the ability to believe in anyone transcending death and human suffering and she therefore denies any divinity. "Perhaps the closer you came to God," she reasoned, "the harder it was to believe in Him. That was why Judas had betrayed Him. . . . It must have been difficult for Judas, being so close, to see Him as the Son of God." But it is not only Judas's betrayal of Jesus that is salient here: it is also Lisa's betrayal of her own happiness. At the sight of the shroud replica, complete with nail marks, scourge marks, and the very features of Christ in his own suffering, Lisa is moved, but later tells a priest in confession that "having seen a replica of the photograph of the Holy Shroud, she no longer believed in Christ's resurrection." The priest replies that she should not base her belief upon a shroud that may or may not be genuine. But Lisa replies: "But that is just it, Father, I am quite sure the shroud is genuine." The priest's voice was puzzled. "Then why do you say you have lost your faith?" "Because the man I've been

looking at is dead."

This section of the novel fully sets out Lisa's spiritual dilemma, and it is a general one. Christ, even Christ, suffered, and now is dead. If death is an end, and life inevitably touched by great suffering, how can love survive? Lisa writes to Freud that "I have always found it difficult to enjoy myself properly, knowing there were people suffering just the other side of the hill." And she adds, with significance for his analysis of her, that she believes that this awareness, and not her fear of sex, had something to do with her hallucinations of falling from a great height and mourners being buried by a landslide. Nor, she writes, does she believe that her mother's "sin" had anything to do with her pains. "What torments me is whether life is good or evil. . . . It may sound crazy, but I think the idea of the incest troubles me far more profoundly as a symbol than as a real event. Good and evil coupling, to make the world."

This inescapable sense of the basic duality of the world, which supersedes Freud's analytical categories in Lisa's mind, constitutes her actual obsession. Like a genuine hysteric, she cannot avoid her powerful feelings. And she feels, a little like Christ or even perhaps all of us, the suffering of life. Freud, now suffering with cancer and somewhat bowed by life, writes back to her that, as she had feared, his grandson Heinz had died at the age of four. "With him, my affectional life came to an end." It is Lisa's greatest fear, of course, that death and suffering destroy the affections. Freud goes on to quote Heraclitus: "the soul of man is a far country, which cannot be

approached or explored."

Bruno Bettelheim has written a book to remind us that Freud was concerned with the soul. Finally, it is man's soul that both Thomas's Freud and the novel itself try to understand. As Lisa is killed and brutalized at Babi Yar, after volunteering to stay with the motherless Kolya, we too relive a terrible suffering. That first night, as the bodies are settling, D. M. Thomas is moved to write in his own person for the first time in the novel: "The soul of man is a far country, which cannot be approached or explored. [Again, of course, the quote from Heraclitus.] Most of the dead were poor and illiterate. But every single one of them had dreamed dreams, seen visions and had amazing experiences, even the babes in arms. . . . If a Sigmund Freud had been listening and taking notes from the time of Adam, he would still not fully have explored even a single group, even a single person." This is not an anti-analytic statement; it is only that Thomas believes that all of the suffering, even at Babi Yar, no matter how terrible, "had nothing to do with the guest, the soul, the lovesick bride, the daughter of Jerusalem." What Lisa could not know, as she viewed the Turin shroud, as she feared for the children whose mothers had died, as she herself died so horrifically, was that the guest, the soul, continued its journey to the camp.

The last chapter has bothered many readers precisely because it suggests that the soul survives, that, for example, Lisa will see her mother and father and even Freud again. And yet this is the major statement of the novel, for Thomas, if I may put it this way, takes

what Freud discovered about the unconscious more seriously than Freud did. Freud observed that the unconscious knows no negation, no sense of diminution or time, but he explained this quality as merely neurotic omnipotence and grandiosity, akin to the beliefs of primitive peoples. Thomas takes these as a kind of prescient wisdom. The unconscious knows no death because the soul knows none. Whereas Freud relegated the unconscious to the id, the other, Thomas, more like Winnicott or Kohut, sees it as an aspect of the true self, the guest, the portion of ourselves that survives.

This may strike the scientist in us as irrational, but of course that too is one of Thomas's points. Because we must be rational we allow love to die. If we could believe in something that transcended rationality, we might be freer to love, Thomas implies. I said that The White Hotel was a deeply religious novel.

And yet, I think this novel speaks to a part of us as few other voices speak, including our own voices as analysts. For intentional or not, there is a nascent theory of repression in the novel. We suppress and repress because of injuries to the self that arise from the experience of suffering and from our knowledge of the suffering of others. And repression blocks us from ourselves, our true selves. This contraction of the self, which is the reflex response to the implied question, "If there is death in the world and even I am to die, how can I love?" is, in the novel, at the heart of the Freudian world view. Here is the real Freud, in Totem and Taboo: "The scientific view of the universe no longer affords any room for human

omnipotence; men have acknowledged their smallness and submitted resignedly to death and to the other necessities of nature." Anything else, Freud suggests, results in pathological mourning.

But this contraction of the self is also the "selfishness" that the white hotel refutes: the spirit of the white hotel was against selfishness. Thomas identifies death and our prescient awareness of it as the genuine trauma of childhood; Lisa is less bothered by her mother's infidelity than her death. And Lisa's pain in breast and ovary anticipate the brutality of the Nazis who destroy her. Only, she doesn't know that the soul will survive into the camp in the last chapter of the novel: her symptoms were misleading, it was the survival implied at the White Hotel that was correct. Thomas seems to want to reduce the self-deforming fear of death in human experience: the literary imagination knows more than traditional psychoanalysis. From this perspective, Thomas is the heir to such other writers as Norman O. Brown and Ernest Becker, who saw death and not the parental environment as the origin of illness. Yet even they did not champion the soul as Thomas does, who makes belief the measure of wisdom and confounds his critics, by implication, by revealing their inability to believe.

And yet there is another side to Freud that continues the dialouge with Thomas. In "On Transience," Freud tells of a young poet who could not feel joy in a beautiful landscape because he knew it would fade in the autumn. "The proneness to decay," Freud writes, "can . . . give rise to [a] rebellion against the fact asserted. No! it is

impossible that all this loveliness of Nature and Art . . . will really fade into nothing." But Freud denies that the "transience of what is beautiful involves any loss in its worth." His poet friend could not love the landscape because he was in a revolt against mourning. Is Thomas, too, denying the transience of life in an attempt to obviate mourning? In the case of The White Hotel, art and psychoanalysis cannot be reconciled; yet, curiously, they both enrich existence.