

A NOTE ON FREUD & SELTZER'S BOOK *SERIAL KILLERS*

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Researching recently, once again, “serial killers murderous Freud” on Google, I happened on a book which I found of pertinent interest, *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture*, by Mark Seltzer (1999). Mark Seltzer is a professor of English at Cornell University. His book, in my view, has both the virtues and vices of an obviously “professorial” work. It has the virtue of being somewhat well-informed and the vice of using language that is often obtuse, involved, needlessly “jargonized” (apparently to appeal to other professors or graduate students). The reader, of course, can form their independent view of Seltzer’s book and if my remarks are just or not.

Cutting to the chase, I want to note that I found a number of things in Seltzer’s book that are useful to the subject of Freud and serial killers for my continuing exposition of the serial killer profile *vis a vis* Freud’s biography. Over the last three decades, I’ve read many books on serial killers and Seltzer’s is one of the better ones—especially in certain areas, areas which need to be isolated and expounded upon to highlight the importance of certain characteristics of the serial killers’ mentality. Here I wish to expound primarily upon the below paragraph in Seltzer’s book in order to highlight Freud’s absurd and deranged views, indicative, in fact, of his own serial killer mentality (as I detail in-depth elsewhere):

Freud observed, as we know, that every organism wants to die, but in its own way. This turn from natural life and natural death to *life and death as things that can be made* –is rechanneled in these cases, as if this movement beyond the pleasure principle means that every organism wants to take life, but in its own way. (Seltzer. pg.121)

For clarity’s sake I feel compelled to note at the outset that Freud did not “observe” that “every organism wants to die” or any of the rest of it. Clearly he could only have “fanaticized” what he says. Of course, “observe” can mean just “to say” but it also has the meaning of “to make a scientific observation” and since Freud is supposed to be a scientist it is better to write and speak unambiguously when dealing with a madman who, as the renowned psychiatrist, Dr. Thomas Szasz, says of him only posed as a scientist. When we say “Freud observed. . .” the reader pauses, and wonder’s what the paragraph really means. When we say “A madman fantasized. . .” few will have any problem immediately seeing at the outset the idea is crazy, namely that “every organism wants to die.”

Moreover, I hasten to add that I am not claiming that Seltzer believes in Freud’s view stated above. Indeed, throughout his book he sometimes insightfully, but far too often too timidly, appears to call into question the whole Freudian approach (or derivative Freudian approach) *vis a vis* an understanding of the mind of the serial killer. That said, here I would like to invite the reader to pause and read again the revealing words quoted above, words exemplifying the foundations of the Freudian world-view.

To his credit Seltzer succinctly summarized Freud's view in the above cited quote; yet I am mystified that he failed to more explicitly confront its meaning but quickly hurried by—as generally happens when educators confront Freud and don't have the courage to directly challenge Freud and to call a spade a spade—because Freud's reputation so far outweighs the commentator's own.

Let us deconstruct and consider the meaning of the above quoted paragraph of Freud's strange ideas:

1) "Every organism wants to die but in its own way": You want to die, your dog wants to die, your kitty, your children, your mother, your father, your pet turtle and lizard, the fly on the wall, the chirping bird in the tree—**every living thing wants to die**. In the first five words of the view of the great genius of the 20th Century, Sigmund Freud, we hear the utterances of a concept that it is so maniacal, so fanatical, so stupid as to stagger the imagination! It is an utterance of sheer madness which typical of the kind we are so used to when we examine the views of serial killers. Not only does "every" (the mark of a fanatic is the all-inclusiveness of their maniacal views) living thing want to die—it must be a craving more than a vague "wish" or it would not be called an "instinct"—but (Freud adds another of his great insight derived from his apparent "total knowledge of all living things,")—it wants to die **"in its own way."**

But, of course, it is the serial killer who, more than anyone else, is hell-bent on thwarting this alleged universal principle, i.e., of **not** letting things die "in **their** own way." The serial killer wants things to die in **his/her** way. Of course, the good professor in encapsulating Freud's view is making reference to one of Freud's bizarre concepts, his "Death Instinct" theory. So the reader can be clear about what we are talking about, I provide the definition of "Death Instinct":

death instinct: (*S.Freud*) a hypothesized [i.e., "imagined"] general instinct of denial, rejection and death; a collective name for all the primitive or instinctual tendencies that lead away from full expression and pleasure toward constriction, and (in full form) toward death. – *Syn.* THANATOS. *Ant.* **Eros. life instinct** (*A Comprehensive Dictionary of Psychological and Psychoanalytical Terms*)

The above definition is defective, as it is obvious (see below) that in the Freudian view "satisfaction" of the "death instinct" (especially the satisfaction of the desire to murder) leads "toward," rather than "away from full expression and pleasure." For the serial killer (and in the Freudian view we are all murderers) has greatest pleasure in satisfying his/her "death instinct." It is commonplace for expositors of Freud to hide from his real views and to distort his "teaching" as they feel the need, or error simply out of ignorance of the "doctrine." For proof that Freud's so-called "death instinct" is driven by pleasure in both its "inward" (to kill oneself) and "outward" (to kill others) aspects see Chapters 6 and 7 in *Civilization and its Discontents*.

2) "This turn from natural life and natural death to life and death as things that can be made": What does this mean? What is a "turn" from "natural life" and "natural death"—obviously, it is something other than the realities of "life" and "death"—as all the world knows, except Freud, and that class of serial killers who refuse to accept natural life and

natural death, and who turn, instead, to “life and death as **things** that can be “made” and “unmade” to their satisfaction. The same thought expressed otherwise is, that what is being noted is the “turn” to “unnatural life” and “unnatural death.” To a serial killer, people are “things,” the animals and people that they torture and kill are mere things, “trash” is the term that most of them use, including Freud (“most people are trash,” etc.). Again, the reader will see on my “Other Amazing Quotes” Freud specifically casts himself in the role of “God” with his statement that he makes or gives life and he takes it away and for this his name should be praised forever. Read the quotations on the website, I do not exaggerate. This is exactly what he says and it is the unnatural “philosophy” specifically of the serial killer type. The idea that people and their “lives” are “things” that can be disposed of, “if one wishes,” is a theme habitually sounded in Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams* and in his personal correspondence, as I abundantly document in my book).

3) Natural life and natural death: “is rechanneled in these cases, as if this movement beyond the pleasure principle means that every organism wants to take life, but in its own way.” And here we come to the nub of the matter, “wants to take life,” that is “to kill” or “murder.” And perhaps here it should be emphasized again that Freud is not talking about the desire to kill to obtain food to stay alive, which all the world well knows. Freud is talking about an instinct for pleasure in killing “things” for the sheer pleasure of it. Natural life and natural death is converted to unnatural life and unnatural death and is “rechanneled in these cases”—in what cases? What is the good professor talking about with the words, “in these cases”? If he means, as he seems to, that the “cases” are the concepts exemplified by Freud, he is equating Freud’s concepts with those of the serial killer mindset, whether he realizes it or not. But, Seltzer does not come right out and say it. Why? Seltzer refers to “this movement;” again, what “movement”? He means, unless I am mistaken, the movement *against* one of Freud’s other main concepts, the so-called “pleasure principle.” Clearly Professor Seltzer is catching Freud in one of his numerous self-contradictions and is actually indicating that Freud’s thinking is self-contradictory because “every living organism wants to die, but in its own way” cannot be maintained simultaneously with the “pleasure principle” which would seem to state the opposite. Here I would simply quote again *The Dictionary*:

pleasure principle: (*psychoan.*) the demand that an *instinctual need* be immediately gratified, either directly (e.g. by food to satisfy hunger) or by **fantasy** or **wish fulfillment**. (English, *ibid*)

The desire of every living organism to die, but in its own way, then, is, we are told, converted “beyond” the “pleasure principle,” according to professor Seltzer, to a desire to take *its own* life, “but in its own way.” In short, every living thing actually wants to commit suicide! That hardly seems to be in accord with the Pleasure Principle or any basic life principle. That Freud believes that “every living organism” wants death, to kill itself, to commit, in other words, suicide or murder, is certainly itself an *insane* idea. Why should we hesitate to say so? We can readily see that, the two ideas taken together (the so-called Death Instinct and the Pleasure Principle), contradictory though they may be, advance the proposition that Freud championed over and over and over again—that the desire to *murder* others, as well as oneself, is an *instinct* of the human mind (to say nothing of all other beings in the universe). Ultimately, Freud’s murder mania, in fact, was generalized by him into an underlying universal principle of insanity! (This issue is dealt with in depth in *Passion for Murder*, and copious quotations from Freud’s theories and private letters are divulged in evidence of the fact).

Speaking of the greatest pleasure that the human being is capable, Jed Rubenfeld, author of *The Interpretation of Murder* (2006),* a recent highly praised novel, which deals with a fictional historical situation where Freud and Jung are working on a murder case in America, stated that in his book he put these words into the mouth of Freud:

Satisfying a savage instinct is incomparably more pleasurable than satisfying a civilized one.

To which one almost involuntarily asks “how would he, Freud, know that?” There is no record Freud ever took a poll of “savages” on their most acute pleasures. He could only have derived knowledge of these matters *from his own personal experience*. Jed Rubenfeld wrote in justification of the above quoted words from Freud:

Readers may wonder whether Freud and Jung would really have expressed the views I attribute to them in *The Interpretation of Murder*. The answer, in almost every case, is that they did express them. Much of Freud's and Jung's dialogue is drawn directly from their letters, their writings, or other published sources. For example, in my book Freud says, "Satisfying a savage instinct is incomparably more pleasurable than satisfying a civilized one." Interested readers can find the corresponding statement in Freud's 1930 *Civilization and Its Discontents*, in volume 21, page 79, of the Standard Edition of Freud's collected works.

I do not have at hand, the Standard Edition, 1930 edition, but in my paperback, College Edition, of *Civilization and its Discontents*, though I was not able to find Rubenfeld's exact quote, I was able to find a passage that could well serve for Freud's “corresponding statement” (Rubenfeld's, by the way, is given at the website for his book as being a direct quotation from Freud—i.e., that is from the 1930 edition). I assume the following must be the passage cited by Rubenfeld, and what he cites has been “retranslated” in the 1961 “newly retranslated” text of *Civilization and its Discontents*. Freudians, such as Strachey, Freud's official translator frequently pass off as Freud's whatever they will to serve their purpose.

The feeling of happiness derived from the satisfaction of a wild instinctual impulse, untamed by the ego is incomparably more intense than that derived from sating an instinct that has been tamed. . . . But their intensity [i.e., the pleasures derived from more civilized instincts] is mild as compared with that derived from the sating of crude and primary instinctual impulses; it does not convulse our physical being. (pg. 26-27)

A corollary quotation makes the same point with even more information specific to Freud-as-a-serial-killer and is especially important and “on point” as Freud frequently confessed to himself having a sadistic nature:

It is in sadism, where the death instinct twists the erotic aim in its own sense and yet at the same time fully satisfies the erotic urge, that we succeed in obtaining the clearest insight into its nature and its relation

to Eros. But even where it emerges without any sexual purpose, in the blindest fury of destructiveness, we cannot fail to recognize that the satisfaction of the instinct is accompanied by an extraordinarily high degree of narcissistic enjoyment, owing to its presenting the ego with a fulfillment of the latter's old [read in context "savage"] wishes for omnipotence. The instinct of destruction, moderated and tamed, and, as it were, inhibited in its aim, must, when it is directed towards objects, provide the ego with the satisfaction of its vital needs and with control over nature. (pg. 68)

I leave this matter, which is correctly condensed and/or cited by our novelist, with a simple question: How does Freud know this? How does he know that a "Death Instinct" rage of the "blindest fury of destructiveness" creates "an extraordinarily high degree of narcissistic enjoyment" owing to its savage fulfillment of a desire for "omnipotence"—which is certainly not found in any "civilized" instinct? The answer, I think is obvious, and is borne out in Freud's writings on the subject of his own murderous inclinations. Freud knows this because he himself indulged in such "savage instincts" and **he personally found the satisfaction of his most savage "instincts" for murder and sexual perversions incomparably more pleasurable than any civilized act.** How else could he "know" which experiences were most incomparably satisfying? He did not take a poll of savages; at least he never published or mentions any. The act of murder and the commission of various horrendous perversions is *the* quintessential pleasure that they, serial killers, can possibly experience. It was no different for Freud.

Apparently, the Death Instinct and the Pleasure Principle, coalesce, in Freud's deranged mind in that the Death Instinct is inwardly and outwardly directed. That is to say, every living thing wants to die, in its own way, and kill, in its own way. The Death Instinct, we will recall is a "collective name for all the primitive or instinctual tendencies . . . leading toward death." Certainly, the "murdering mind" indulges in its "hypothesized" Death Instinct through the act of murder, as well as suicide. And in this we see in all the features of Freud's own "instinctual" penchants for pleasure and murder and his belief that murder is the greatest of all pleasures.

The act of murder and the commission of various horrendous perversions is *the* quintessential pleasure that they, the serial killers, can possibly experience. It was no different for Freud.

As you know in Italy I am seeking a punch made of Lethe, here and there I get a draft. One savors the strange kind of beauty and the enormous creative urge; at the same time my inclination toward the grotesque, perverse-psychological gets its due. I have much to tell you about (which from now on will be a catchword [code] between us. (Freud/Fliess Correspondence, September 6, 1897—Freud was 41 years old]

Lethe, of course, was the River of the Dead, which corpses drank from upon their arrival in Hell for "forgetfulness" or "concealment." Like all serial killers, Freud savored a "strange kind of beauty" when he killed, it gave him that savage pleasure of an "enormous creative urge," a feeling of omnipotence, which also satisfies his inclination toward the grotesque, the perverse—something than can't be talked about to others who are not so inclined.

In conclusion, I want to re-emphasize, that I think professor Seltzer has made a significant contribution to the study of serial killers and I intend to give greater attention to a number of insightful things he says, albeit that a number of them need to be untangled to grasp their clear meaning. It is a shame, however, that he obviously had very little knowledge of Freud's biography, personal writings, or detailed knowledge of his most famous works, such as *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* and *Interpretation of Dreams*. Be it noted that Seltzer identifies, with his quote cited below, that there is a "paradox" in Freud's thinking by pointing out that his idea of the "genesis" of a universal "murderous" mind conflicts with basic legal principles and concepts of individual responsibility. That is to say, Freud's views are in conflict with the fact that there is no distinction between the so-called "psychic killer" (one who kills in fantasy) and the "psycho killer" (one who *actually* murders)—this is because Freud was a serial killer, and as all (or most all) serial killers he himself could not control or distinguish the thought from the deed.

On these grounds there is a basic "paradox inherent in psychoanalysis operating in the region of the law," in that psychoanalysis can give us "no absolute or consistent theory of violence which could adequately describe it as much in its genesis as in its effect." (75) Moreover, if, as Freud posited, "the unconscious foundations are similar in everyone," and if the "genesis" of violence is "the psyche murderous in itself," then it would seem that the only difference between the psychic killer and psycho killer devolves on this: the psycho killer, on this account, is one who does what others merely think, collapsing the distance between representations and things, private desires and public acts." *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture*, by Mark Seltzer, p. 143

That professor Seltzer is correct that Freud did not distinguish between actually murdering people and just having the thought pass through the mind is proved by Freud's many comments on the subject. Below is one from Freud's *and its Discontents* (Chapter 7, pg.79):

Whether one has killed one's father [as Freud probably did, more on this to come] or has abstained from doing so is not really the decisive thing. One is bound to feel guilt in either case, for the sense of guilt is an expression of the conflict due to ambivalence, of the eternal struggle between Eros and the instinct of destruction or death

The "guilt" Freud speaks of, it should be noted, is not a "moral" guilt. It's just an "ambivalence" between Sex and the Death Instinct. Freud had little or no guilt, properly speaking, as serial killers generally do not. Yes, the situation was "an eternal struggle" *for Freud personally*, between Life and his "savage" instinct for destruction and death!

* Rubinfeld, in the choice of his title for his best-selling book, *Interpretation of Murder*, is obviously playing off the English title of Freud's, *Interpretation of Dreams*. He probably had no idea of the aptness of his title nor had read my book, *Passion for Murder*—one of whose central claims is that Freud used his dream-book to confess to his many murders and murder mania.

Sources

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