Memory, Narcissism, and Sublimation: Reading Lou Andreas-Salomé's Freud Journal

Ban Wang

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Memory, Narcissism, and Sublimation: 
Reading Lou Andreas-Salomé’s *Freud Journal*

In *The Freud Journal*, Lou Andreas-Salomé (1987) jotted down her thoughts while studying with Freud in Vienna from 1912 to 1913. A strand of her thought was strongly directed to the question of memory against the background of modernity. In this essay I trace her notions of memory, narcissistic love, and sublimation in the journal. Salomé’s reflections on these issues projected a vital, creative dimension repressed in the mainstream psychoanalytical thinking of Freud’s circle, with its focus on the heavy weight of civilization over the psyche and its resignation to the dominant relations of power. Finding this resignation still lingering in the Frankfurt School, in Lacanian psychoanalysis, and even in poststructuralism, Anthony Elliotte points to the “devaluation of the creative, imaginary features of psychic processes.” The task for a psychoanalysis usable for emancipatory practice, then, is to find out “how the potentially transformative elements of the imaginary and the self should be reconnected to the social field” (1992, 235). Cornelius Castoriadis puts the question more sharply: “Has psychoanalysis nothing to do with the Western emancipatory movement? Is work directed toward gaining knowledge of the Unconscious and transforming the human subject wholly unrelated to the question of freedom and the question of philosophy?” (1997, 125). Salomé, to be sure, was no rebel against the status quo. Yet a close look at her journal will reveal her radical reflections on the primal forms of desire, which, lodged in narcissism, in the longing for the past memory of joy, and in the unconscious, persist as a critique of the rational ego. With an eye on the libido’s constant surge forward through representation and affects—sublimation—she opened up the possibility of positing the creative, imaginary power of the human subject in changing the world. Central to this imagination is memory
Lou Andreas-Salomé’s *Freud Journal*

(more precisely, recollection), which provides a reconnection of the unconscious to the social field. For Salomé memory is a nodal point where narcissism and sublimation interlace, not to assume a pathological character, but to enable the reconfiguration of the oldest dreams into the newest cultural symbols and images.

The crisis of memory in modern times has been evoked in the recent discussions of traumatic memory in various catastrophes in the 20th century, “the age of extremes” (Hobsbawm, Caruth, Terdiman). Two exemplary thinkers of the modern experience, Benjamin and Gilles Deleuze, have delineated acutely the memory crisis in historical and phenomenological terms. Salomé offered deeper psychoanalytical insights, which may also align her with other thinkers like Norman Brown, Marcuse, and Kristeva. But, as I will show, Salomé preceded Benjamin and Deleuze in articulating the creative power of the self embedded in a resourceful past, and hence human hope, amid the intensified manipulation of psychic life by hegemonic power relations.

**The Crisis of Memory and the Persistence of the Past**

Lou Andreas-Salomé invites reference to Walter Benjamin, whose analysis of memory and modernity may serve as a context for interpreting her work. Benjamin’s epigrammatic style shares an affinity with the diary entries in *The Freud Journal*. Both Salomé and Benjamin seemed uninterested in elaborating an abstract body of ideas, unless the ideas are capable of a dialectic exchange, or standing in a productive tension, with experiential immediacy. Their approach to psychoanalysis is a telling example: both offered insights into psychoanalysis that scintillate in a twilight zone of intellect and imagination. Both operated at the liminal site where psychoanalysis interfaces with analysis of culture, and the unconscious is orchestrated by culture and culture infused with primal elements. Both “philosophized” in a way that is far from “metaphysical.” Their texts are marked with poetic musing rather than academic argumentation based on a schematic structure.

This stylistic similarity may offer clues to their method of analysis. Benjamin, as Hannah Arendt noted, is a thinker in a metaphorical mode. For him “a metaphor establishes a con-
nection which is sensually perceived in its immediacy and requires no interpretation" (1969, 13). Thus Benjamin “thought poetically” without being a poet. The same could be said of Salomé, who was a poetically inspired novelist and essayist. Salomé distinguished what she termed “synthetic thought” (1987, 166) from analytical clarity, with a preference for the unifying power of the former. The “synthetic,” an adjective that Benjamin also used to describe Proust’s work (1969,157), is here synonymous with “metaphoric.” To Salomé the synthetic is an interpretative method inherent in the psychoanalytical mode of epistemology. This method focuses on human experience as the key to understanding the world, and serves as “the sole objective bridge between individual analyzable facts and the meaning of the whole” (1987, 166). In the synthetic mode the innermost affective quality is “the most objective thing, indeed the only objective thing, constructing the objective world not indirectly but out of itself” (165).

One is attempted to construct a dialogue between these two psychoanalytically oriented writers about the eclipse of memory in modernity, its diagnosis, and its possible solutions. To understand Salomé better, we may first attend briefly to Benjamin’s notions of memory.

Reflecting on the atrophy of experience in his essay “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” Benjamin notes that the “inhospitable, blinding age of big-scale industrialism” and the rise of the urban crowd have impoverished man’s structure of experience” (1969, 157). Signs of this atrophy are, among others, the inability of the mass population to assimilate shocks of the urban environment and to appreciate lyrical poetry as an experience-enriching art. Since, for Benjamin, experience in the strict sense consists in the absorption of the individual past within “materials of the collective past” (159), the atrophy of experience implies a breach with past mental and cultural resources that enable the perceptual faculty to assimilate and hence make sense of the flux of information and impressions.

Psychoanalytically, the atrophy of experience can be seen as a crisis of memory. To explain the psychic roots, Benjamin evokes Freud’s notions of consciousness and memory traces in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In Freud’s view, consciousness
Lou Andreas-Salomé’s *Freud Journal* comes into being at the expense of memory traces: “becoming conscious and leaving behind a memory trace are processes incompatible with each other within one and the same system” (quoted in Benjamin 1969, 160). While Freud in his work focused on traumatic neurosis caused by major catastrophes, Benjamin introduces a broader traumatic context of modernity in his diagnosis of the divergence of the two systems—the rise of a vigilant consciousness and the unconscious reservoir of memory traces. Faced with the overpowering shocks of modern life, consciousness is compelled to function as a protective shield, preserving the psyche by assigning shock stimuli to a point in time (163), which results in the truncated, non-integrated experience of the subject (*Erlebnis*). Unregistered and screened out by consciousness, the shock’s imprints meanwhile go underground to the other system, to the unconscious stratum of the psyche, in the form of “permanent traces as the basis of memory” (161).

The distinction between consciousness and the unconscious deposits of imprints entails a number of distinctions or oppositions. It involves the temporal rupture in the subject separating its present moment from the past, the opposition between the integrated, aura-filled experience of totality (*Erfahrung*) and its “fallen,” fragmented state (*Erlebnis*), and between the voluntary memory and involuntary memory, between self and society. Though he extended Freud’s model of traumatic neurosis to the analysis of modern subjectivity, Benjamin did not hold the fragmented psyche as absolute: fragmented subjectivity is portrayed as a historically contingent mode of subjectivity rather than the way the psyche is supposed to be. This utopian vision for readjustment of the psyche is present throughout Benjamin’s writings. For our purpose here his discussion of Proust’s distinction between *mémoire involontaire* and *mémoire volontaire* should be sufficient to give us a glimpse and points to the similar gestures in Salomé’s journal.

The voluntary memory, in its prompt servitude to the present, denotes the intellect’s protective alertness. The involuntary memory, on the other hand, constitutes the unconscious reserve of the deposits of the individual’s childhood memory, which to Benjamin also includes collective memory.
In Proust’s view, the split between two forms of memory makes it almost impossible for the subject to form “an image of himself” and “take hold of his experience.” In other words, the subject’s identity, or its authentic experience is hardly attainable, except in the chancy, private epiphany like the legendary tasting of the madeleine whereby some sense of authenticity is momentarily glimpsed through evoking the past joy (1969, 158).

Benjamin, however, does not see this split as the fixed nature of the psyche. Rather, he points to the bewildering flow of media information, shocks of modern urban existence and humans’ inability to assimilate experience as the historical circumstances for the split. By pinpointing the historical development of bourgeois culture Benjamin laid his finger on the cultural and historical sources of the memory crisis. Making connections with the past could be achieved by transformative social practice, but Benjamin pins much of his hope on the function of art. Throughout his analysis of Proust’s À la Recherche de temps perdu, Baudelaire’s Fleurs du mal, and the Russian novelist Leskov, he valorizes the figure of the poet and the storyteller as the last salvager and transmitter of cultural memory. Only a poet, he avers, “can be the adequate subject” of the experience of historical long durée. Proust’s work is “an attempt to produce experience synthetically . . . under today’s conditions (1969, 157). Baudelaire is also a Bergsonian philosopher of memory in the guise of a poet. While he, like the urban crowd, was implicated in the estrangement of experience and loss of memory, Baudelaire also tried to turn what is momentarily lived through (Erlebnis) into a real, integrated experience (Erfahrung) buttressed by memory and tradition. Baudelaire’s shock-agitated poetic prose makes a virtue of the curse: while paying the price of the “disintegration of the aura in the experience of shock” (194), he also “holds in his hands the scattered fragments of genuine historical experience” (185). Implicit in his analysis of these writers is a vision of the unity of the individual and society, of voluntary and involuntary memory, of integrated experience:

Where there is experience in the strict sense of the word, certain contents of the individual past combine with material of the collective past. The rituals with their
ceremonies, their festivals... kept producing the amalgamation of these two elements of memory over and over again. They triggered recollection at certain times and remained handles of memory for a lifetime. In this way, voluntary and involuntary recollection lose their mutual exclusiveness. (160)

Gilles Deleuze also sought to understand the function of memory in his brilliant slim volume *Proust et les signes*. Here he joins Benjamin in supplying a discursive frame for reading Salomé. Deleuze agrees that memory brings back the living sensations of a past incident or experience. But the mere duplication of past impressions, even if possible, is basically meaningless repetition. It ignores a fact evident in the involuntary memory: the image of the past always resurfaces in its splendor and brings us tremendous joy (69). Deleuze thus distinguishes two new functions of voluntary and involuntary memory. The voluntary memory, ruled by conscious perception and the intellect, merely reproduces the past event the "way it was." It proceeds from the present moment to a past that is thought passé. Its time scheme assumes a whole series of successive moments leading from the past to the present. Time is serial and lineal, chopped up into differentiated moments that succeed one another. It freezes the past as something that no longer exists, and sees the present as a radical departure. Something essential, the essence of time, escapes this mode of memory (71). If the evoked “past” is as powerful and joyful as if it were lived the first time (in fact it is invariably more so), then the past is never gone; the past must have existed all the time alongside the present in one’s subjectivity. Deleuze terms this persistence of the past in the present “l’être en soi du passé” (70), the existence of the past in the self. It follows from this that consciousness when memorizing does not just retrace its steps from a present to a past, or reclaim the past from the vantage point of the present. There is a hidden stratum of our being we mistakenly call “the past” and which is always present:

*Qu’on ne remonte pas d’un présent au passé, qu’on ne recompose pas le passé avec des présents, mais qu’on se...*
place, d’emblée, dans le passé lui même. Que ce passé ne représente pas quelque chose qui a été, mais simplement quelque chose qui est, et qui coexiste avec soi comme présent. Que le passé n’a pas à se conserver dans autre chose que soi, parce qu’il est en soi, survit et se conserve en soi—telles sont les thèses célèbres de Matière et Mémoire. (71)

The truth of memory, in this account, is not an empirical reality in a historicist mode, nor a product of free association of ideas and feelings, but a virtual and affective reality right in the present. In Proust’s formulation, Deleuze stresses, the essence or revelation of involuntary memory is “Réels sans être actual, idéaux sans être abstraits” (72).

**Creative Narcissism and Recollection**

Salomé was concerned with delineating the creative potential of involuntary memory, the relation of art to memory and to the unconscious, and above all, to an all-embracing narcissism. Like Deleuze and Benjamin, Salomé construed memory as a way to access and retrieve the primal sources of pleasure embedded in past experiences. Refusing to leave the past behind, she repeatedly stressed in her own way Deleuze’s idea of l’être en soi du passé, the existence of the past in the self. The substance of memory in her writing is not historical or biographical. Rather, it relates to a life-affirming notion of narcissism, which can be understood as an overflowing psychic energy, still undifferentiated into the dichotomy of ego and sexuality, self and the other. Memory’s function is to place the “self” in intimate touch with this repressed and forgotten narcissism, the primal source of human hope and desire.

In *The Freud Journal*, there is an entry entitled “Technique of Dream and Waking—Poetic Technique.” It is apparent that with this heading Salomé is looking for a certain form of writing that may be adequate to dream contents. She notes that the waking life, which has suffered a rupture with dream life, corresponds to the rupture between the present and the past. The waking state, ruled by the rational ego in the service of the reality principle, either devalues or misrepresents the
dream by cutting it up into fragments. As literary genres, journals and memoirs are unreliable as afterimages of dreams. This is because the rational ego, armed writing conventions and “spatio-temporal representation,” falsifies the dreamlike inner experience, so these memory representations often read “like narrated dreams” (1987, 49), turning the deeply felt, joyful or sorrowful psychic events into everyday banality or even something unintelligible. Yet the linguistic representation still betrays traces of the hidden dream. Salomé goes on to say that in this failed reconstruction the genuine intimations of dream contents come through in fits and starts, “broken at the surface but pressing vertically into the depths” (49).

The fragment is not a matter of bad writing. The ego’s construction of the dream and its failure to absorb the dream’s traces indicate a split between conventional language and the dream’s messages. This split corresponds to “the cleavage between the ego and that which confronts the ego” (50). The dream’s message, which confronts the ego, is the primal longing for pleasure and joy of a narcissistic nature, which is constantly frustrated by the rational ego.

Salomé’s formulation of narcissism posed a challenge to the notion of the rational ego and a re-assertion of the creative potential of libido. It is perhaps her most significant contribution to the Freud circle. There is good evidence that her suggestion was responsible for Freud’s shift of theoretical emphasis from the ego instinct to the sex instinct (Martin 1991, 204). In Freud’s account, the ego instinct aims at self-preservation and survival, and operates under the aegis of the reality principle. The sex instinct denotes the auto-erotic love: love of one’s own body and objects like oneself. This distinction in Freud’s writings, however, remains ambiguous. Several commentators have pointed out (Brown 1959, 40-45, Marcuse 1962, 29-31), and Salomé long before them, that the sex instinct in fact underlies and informs the ego instinct, and may pick up any object-choice as its love object, and that through it the pleasure principle secretly uses the reality principle as a “detour” for its own fulfillment (Salomé 1987, 143). Brown and Marcuse put this ambiguity to radical use and spelled out the breakdown of the arbitrary distinction. Implicit in Freud’s
remarks on the sex instinct, wrote Brown, is the suggestion that “there is only one loving relationship to objects in the world, a relation of being-one-with-the world which, though closer to Freud’s narcissistic relation (identification), is also at the root of his other category of possessive love (object-choice)” (42). Marcuse considered this introduction of narcissism into Freudian psychoanalysis to be “a turning point” in the development of the instinct theory. The rational ego (ego instinct), he noted, is “shaken and replaced by the notion of an undifferentiated, unified libido prior to the division into ego and external objects” (152).

Yet for all this bending of Freud in the direction of the sex instinct, or the Id, the ego still dominates in the psyche’s topography. Summarizing the twenty-five years of his work in challenging that structure of domination, Castoriadis shows how one of Freud’s most comprehensive formulations should be challenged and altered. This is the famous “Wo Es war, soll Ich werden (Where That was, I should/ought to become”). “That” here stands for the Id, from its ashes the ego comes into being—which at least is how the formulation has been generally interpreted. Now, questions Castoriadis, if psychoanalysis is about the conquest of the ego where the Id used to be, it is an impossible and monstrous project, since “there can be no human being whose Unconscious is conquered by the Conscious, whose drives are fully permeated and controlled by rational considerations, who has stopped fantasizing and dreaming” (1997, 127). The unconscious has a stronger impetus in making us human. What prevents us from becoming social robots, the completely socialized egos, is that “uncontrolled and uncontrollable continuous surge of creative radical imagination in and through the flux of representations, affects, and desires.” So Freud’s statement should be changed into “Wo Ich bin, soll auch Es auftauchen” (“Where I [Ego] am [is], That [Id] should/ought also to emerge.” 127-128).

Salomé’s central concern is articulating how the unconscious drives emerge right in the ego’s proper domain. The shaking of Freud’s formulation à la Castoriadis is frequently evident in her journal. The unconscious drives are fleshed out as narcissism, which signifies an unconscious intransigent to
the domination of the ego: “In narcissism the Ucs still exists only en bloc, the primordial form not simply of a foundation but of the all-inclusive” (1987, 110). Narcissism as unconscious drive is not to be eliminated or transcended by the ego’s self-love. Rather, it is the “persistent accompaniment of all our deeper experience, always present” (110). The neurotic and the psychotic have inklings of this narcissistic ferment, but their vision is distorted. The emergence of the id depends on a healthy and “beautiful narcissism.” In it Narcissus does not look in love at his own image with sadness (as legend has it). This is so because this different Narcissus is not passively “mirrored but becomes—gives birth to himself” (111).

Castoriadis insists on translating Freud’s \textit{werden} in the above mentioned formula into “become,” for altering the ego’s dominance over the id is a process, one of “taking in the contents of the Unconscious” (128). Similarly, Salomé envisages the surging forth of narcissistic libido as a process of becoming, in the image of an active, enterprising Narcissus discovering and knowing himself (111).

This notion of narcissism as “undifferentiated, unified libido” which fuels symbolic creation can be usefully considered together with an essay of hers published in 1921. Entitled “Narzißmus als Dopplerichtung” the essay addresses specifically the dual character of narcissism. Though designated “narcissism,” the term does not refer to self-love or the auto-erotic as the attributes of the ego. Nor does it designate pathological withdrawal from the external world to oneself. Rather, Salomé treats these commonly assumed “pathologies” as symptomatic of stunted but still restive sexuality. Narcissistic love is an overflow, a self-flowering, of libidinal energy, still unsexed and pregenital, but in the subject’s psychic development it gets jammed en route to its self-fulfillment. Often called infantile, it is modeled on the baby’s intimacy with the mother’s breast: it loves and merges into the breast of the mother, as the latter loves and satisfies it. Narcissism in its narrow form, Salomé points out, is either an infantile or “primitive” stage to be overcome, so that the mature ego may get established, or a “pathological” persistence of the primal self-love that disables the social function of the ego (1987,
Taking this notion to task, she charges that this view is premised on a false dichotomy between ego and sex, self and other, consciousness and the unconscious, one that creates blind spots in Freudian psychoanalysis. She revises the meaning of primary narcissism by calling it “creative.”

This rich notion of creative narcissism anticipated a whole string of thinkers who have championed the transformative notion of libido in the twentieth century—Norman Brown, Herbert Marcuse, Kristeva, Bataille, Deleuze and Guttari, and Castoriadis—to name just a few. Creative narcissism goes beyond self-love and breaks through the ego boundaries, dissolving the self in a selfless-love of objects in the world. It suggests, Salomé writes, an “all embracing state where self and external world flow together” (1987,166). It rejoices in a primal affective connectedness with the world, an erotic attitude toward objects as if they were beloved extensions of oneself, a giving of “ourselves to ecstatic involvement with someone or something” (144). It is thus synonymous with unconscious drives, which contain the memory traces of the deepest childhood pleasure and wishes.

Salomé’s re-writing of the Narcissus myth in light of her own “mirror stage” epitomizes the contrast between the traumatic image of a nascent ego and the all-encompassing unity of self and world in Narcissus’s pool image. At the age of seven (pretty late for the “mirror stage”) Salomé saw her reflection in the mirror and the experience was one of rupture, diminution, and loss. Instead of experiencing a Lacanian imaginary jubilation at a formed self over a formless, turbulent body (Lacan 1977, 2), she was devastated by “the fact of standing forth as a bounded individual that left me homeless and impoverished,” “a ghostlike copy” of her primal unity of childhood (1921, 365). This “shrunken vestige” of the oceanic feeling, to use Freud’s term, is to her a discredit to Narcissus, the godfather of the term. Bear in mind, she urges, that “the Narcissus of the legend gazed, not at a man-made mirror, but at the mirror of Nature.” It might not have been just a self-image that Narcissus was enamoured of, she questions, but “himself as if he were still All”—an erotic image of self-enjoyment in the union with nature (366-67).
The Narcissistic union of self with the world is the deepest dream of early childhood. In mainstream psychoanalysis it has become a distant memory, a developmental phase to be traversed and overcome, a pathology to be cured, a childishness to be censored, or a pensée sauvage in primitive folk art for our enchantment. Freudian psychoanalysis tended to lose sight of this memory, Salomé pointed out, even as it listened to its faint murmurs. While fully aware of the difficulty of recovering the “ancient” and childhood memory in the modern age, Salomé, like Benjamin, sought at first to theorize the artist as the agent of memory. She describes the artist as an agent of “recollection,” better equipped than others to regress to the infantile level, to the forgotten sources of bodily pleasure. She made a distinction between memory and recollection, one comparable to the voluntary and involuntary memory in Benjamin and Deleuze. Memory is actually forgetting, by consciousness, of memory traces immersed in material images and lodged in the unconscious, akin to the “thing-presentations” in Freud. Recollection, on the other hand, conserves affect-laden impressions of early childhood and is a source of pleasure (1921, 380-81). The crisis of memory, as a sign of modernity, could thus be understood as a historically and socially instituted opposition between memory and recollection, and its related, rigid dichotomies between consciousness and the unconscious, ego and id, present and past. In Salomé’s reckoning, deep-seated recollection from which the narcissistic pleasure of childhood derives, is the “persistent accompaniment of all our deeper experience” (1987, 10). This être en soi du passé, the presentness of memory traces, i.e. the recollected memory, constitutes the very being of our life, present and past. “We ‘have’ memory,” she claims, but we ‘are’ recollection” (1921, 80). The truth of our being is the unconscious recollection that pursues and shapes us daily: it claims: “we are, rather than we are” (Salomé’s italics in the original, 1987, 67).

All artists in this particular sense are Marcel Proust, capable of resurrecting, or more exactly, re-awaking what has been relegated to the unconscious and yet remains latent in the deep layers of our subjectivity. She (in Salomé the artist is
closer to woman, more in touch with reproductive and creative sexuality) is more capable of tapping into the potential reservoir of recollected traces of narcissistic pleasure, of re-activating the all-embracing unity of childhood. Further, she posits narcissistic recollection as a basis for envisioning a social structure in tune with narcissistic pleasure, which is “poetically rather than practically oriented” (1921, 379). This comes close to a utopian vision of the primary unity of the self and the other, and is an important insight for a psycho-cultural understanding of modernity. In Salomé the work of memory is not private and individualistic. On the contrary, by breaking through the limiting ego and by relapsing to the infantile, shared depository of wishes and dreams common to average men and women, the artist seizes upon more play-space within the logical and practical reality. The artist thus becomes a Schillerian transformer, a role model in harmonizing the intellect and imagination and in creating a poetically oriented society.

**Affirmative Sublimation and its Symbolic Value**

Sublimation, of a kind that is healthy and creative rather than repressive and pathological, is the artist’s memory work writ large. It is narcissistic memory in operation, creating symbols and, by extension, a congenial cultural environment by evoking the forgotten resources within the unconscious.

In *The Freud Journal*, Salomé offers a critique of the repressive notion of sublimation. Her idea presaged the notion of non-repressive sublimation and the corresponding utopian vision of a life-affirming social condition. This vision was crystallized and given full-fledged theoretical shape in Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization* written some forty years later. With “feminist” insights Salomé pinpointed the errors of repressive sublimation. Repressive sublimation, she argues, is the result of the historical condition of the modern West, in which the primary elements need to be overcome to achieve the cultural dominance of the reality principle over the pleasure principle. Sublimation worthy of its name, she proposes, should be a narcissistic self-realization of human beings’ primary drives and natural potentials through cultural means. It means “the living application of the gifts of nature to their
own purposes” (1987, 146). A genuine sublimation should be nothing less than the euphoria of libidinal impulses intimately consonant with cultural pursuits and social institutions. A supreme pleasure of spirit and body derived from the unity of the self with others and of the self with everything outside, this euphoria has been scorned and deprived of its value in positivist scientific activities, in ego-centered psychoanalysis, and in the intellectual clime of world-weariness.

The concept of sublimation occupies a privileged position at the intersection between culture and psychoanalysis, between the public domain of social life and the private recesses of the psyche. A psychoanalytical understanding of culture must rely on some notion of sublimation. One can claim, following Hans W. Loewald, that sublimation is crucial to our status as human, if we can agree that a human being is largely a cultural product (4). In sublimation we undergo psychic development, transform and refine our primal instincts, advance from “primitive” to more advanced levels of mentation, and redirect our libido toward respectable intellectual, artistic and cultural pursuits.

But this “positive” and normalizing progress toward culturally circumscribed ideals of humanity also goes hand in hand with a grim picture of sublimation as a repressive mechanism. Although Freud is not univocal on sublimation, he generally leaned toward a negative, repressive view, which mars the culture with profound discontents. In Freud sublimation is both affirmed and in doubt. On the one hand it is “what makes it possible for higher psychical activities, scientific, artistic, ideological, to play such an important part in civilized life.” On the other hand it is an external “vicissitude which has been forced upon the instincts by entirely civilization” (Freud 1961, 44). As a renunciation of instinct and a psychic façade, sublimation blocks the way to earliest memories of childhood (Loewald 1988, 1). Civilization, with all its sublimatory technologies and activities, is seen as something alien and superimposed onto the instinctual stratum of the human subject. A process that rejects the lower, “primitive” components, it impedes and sidetracks the instincts’ natural needs for satisfaction in order to meet the imperious demands of social reality.
Through this opposition between culture and psyche, sublimation is most often associated with a negative series of psychic functions: repression, defense, myth, illusion, deflection, protection, fantasy, and even pathology. These terms are part of the ego’s defensive mechanism. The ego is the main agency that fulfills the task crucial to repressive sublimation. It employs the mental devices “that dam up, block or run against the instinctual stream” (Loewald 1988, 4). To meet the demands of reality and to achieve the purpose of self-preservation, the ego maintains a check and vigilantly guards against the eruption of the id. The sublimated ego is pictured as a “beneficial” executive officer that runs an insidious regime of domination in the name of sublimatory management of affects in order better to discipline the libidinal threat.

Acknowledging a less defensive function of sublimation, Freud also described sublimation as a congenial process of channeling and reorganizing libido. In this version the aim of the instincts is changed but there is no longer forced blocking of libido. This creates a leeway for libidinal discharge. At the heart of this account is the major shift in psychoanalysis that commentators like Brown, Marcuse, and Loewald have mentioned: the absorption of the ego instinct into a broader theory of libido, the reduction of ego libido into a subset of an all-encompassing libido. Freud used the metaphor of an amoeba sending out pseudopodia to suggest the way the libido uses the ego to attain its own purposes. Underlying the ego-instinct, Freud wrote, could be “an original libidinal cathexis of the ego, from which some is later given off to objects, but which fundamentally persists and is related to the object-cathexes much as the body of an amoeba is related to the pseudopodia which it puts out” (1957, 75). Salomé evokes this metaphor several times in her writings to underscore how libido or psychic energy underlies and shapes the ego. Ego activities for her are emanations from sexuality, rather than a check on it on behalf of a paranoiac cultural structure.

One of Salomé’s contributions to the theory of sublimation is her move from a purely theoretical elaboration of sublimation to an acute awareness of the historical conditions that grant priority to the repressive form of sublimation.
Repressive sublimation relies in part on a rigid opposition between culture and nature. Salomé suggests that this opposition is false, for it views the “primitive” or primary elements—the “natural” in the human psyche—as obstacles that sublimation strives to overcome and transcend. In her journal entry “Sublimation,” this distinction is seen as “historically, i.e., artificially, intensified so that sublimation and repression are pushed into an ominous kinship” (1987, 146). Salomé is here alluding to the historical and cultural changes in the modern West that brought about and perpetuated the separation between id and ego, self and society, libido and culture, primitive and modern. In this light, the organization of the instincts is not merely a psychoanalytical but a socio-historical problem.

A case in point is monogamy and the patriarchal family, along with its related sexual ideology. Sublimation is conventionally regarded as a transformation of sexual drives into nonsexual sentiment and relations in the family. The sex instinct in this “family romance” is inhibited in its aim and becomes sublimated into love and affection. The question, however, is whether this institution has really turned away from sex to something cultural, nobler, and “higher.” Salomé wryly points out that the sublimation of sex to love in the family is in fact “not a departure from the sexual goal, but on the contrary the attainment to the goal” (1987, 146). This recalls Marx’s equally trenchant remark that the bourgeois businessman entered into a respectable marriage to sanction the raping of his wife. In other words, the patriarchal family does not accomplish a transformation of sex, defined as genital intercourse, into a wider field of libidinal fulfillment, but rather finds a “decent,” roundabout way to attain an impoverished, one-dimensional pleasure, as compensation for the lack of libidinal fulfillment in the realm of work and public life. This is an instance of “repressive de-sublimation,” a de-sexualization of life. It is, as Marcuse put it, “the historical result of a long and cruel process of domestication, in which the instinct’s legitimate manifestation is made supreme and its component parts are arrested in their development” (1962, 183).

Salomé clearly perceives the “arrested” component parts of the instinct in the patriarchal family. She makes a point of
distinguishing between two different forms of sexuality. One is genital sex; the other is broadly defined sexuality, in the sense of defuse Eros. Since for her the erotic as libidinal pleasure stems from “the realm of the erogenous zones” (1987, 146), sublimation within the frame of the patriarchal family is only an instance of the reduction of libido into socially and economically useful production—what Marcuse termed the one-dimensional, or de-eroticization, of life. Salomé calls it lack of euphoria, “a deficient experience of vitality,” or “Weltschmerz” (117)—a shriveling of sexuality, a denial of life. Sexuality is cut off from erogenous zones and confined to the genital. Channeled to economic reproduction it becomes narrowly instrumental and procreative.

In contrast, affirmative sublimation sees the whole cultural field as a potential playing field for release and affirmation of sexuality. This socially expanded sexuality is linked to Salomé’s notion of narcissism discussed above. In this link, affirmative sublimation can be seen as a process in which narcissistic love is given a chance to unfurl and realize itself by constantly recycling and recreating symbolic forms consonant with desire in human culture.² Salome’s preference of Tausk’s term “elaboration” instead of “sublimation” stresses the self-realizing, circular sense of an expansive space, rather than the vertically peaking transcendence from low to high implicit in the ego-centric notion of sublimation (146). Affirmative sublimation is a self-duplication, and is the “living application of the gifts of nature to their own purposes” (146). Its archetypal figure, once again, is a Narcissus who constantly re-creates a reality of his own, “fully evolved, standing before his own images” (147).

Affirmative sublimation brings us back to the portrait of the artist as the agent of memory. Inspired by narcissistic love, by a longing for erotic interconnectedness with things and other people, a longing for the mother’s body, the artist is capable of evoking the earliest memory traces, the earliest happiness, and the ancient memory of utopian dream. The artist’s imaginative capability is not only aesthetically creative in private, but more importantly, socially and politically transformative. By rejecting repressive sublimation, the artist teaches
us to imagine more play-space within practical reality. In this light psychoanalysis moves from the clinical to the social, inner to outer. The sublimatory process is “rather a practical/poetical activity where both participants are agents and where the patient is the main agent of the development of his own self-activity” (Castoriadis 1997, 129). Sublimation is both poetic and creative, for the aim is “the appearance of another being” and it is a praxis “whose object is human autonomy” (Castoriadis 1997, 129). Less constrained by the alienating symbolic order and the repressive social system—the mechanisms that are said to bring about fragmented subjectivity as well as the crisis of memory in modernity, we are able to see ourselves as creators of symbols, not prisoners indentured to an external symbolic order. Affirmative sublimation, rooted in narcissism, allows us to glimpse the powerfully generative, symbol-creating, imaginative capability of the human subject.

In contemporary critical discourse, Lacan-inspired psychoanalysis and post-structuralism, the symbolic is often portrayed as a straitjacket both conditioning and alienating the subject. Frequently we deal with symbols only to delude, deceive, and alienate ourselves. The symbolic order is seen as a distorting mirror, causing mis-recognition; it is a fragmenting socio-psychic construct and sometimes even thought control. It appears to be the given of the real, deconstructable in text or in the classroom but unshakable in reality. Radical attempts to envisage social and psychic change often run up against its reified wall. Thus most cultural critiques, for all their revolutionary intents, sound hopelessly negative: demystifying, dismantling, deconstructing, demythologizing, etc. In this apparently territorialized world filled with rigidly administered egos, unconscious drives have nowhere to go except spilling and overflowing the firmly set boundaries. Salomé reminds us, however, that these symbolic boundaries were initially created by humans—out of the depths of memory and the yearning for happiness, and that we are mistaken to think that they are by nature external and alienating. Symbols arise out of our unconscious—“symbolized out of the unconscious” (1987, 106). Every object-symbol we create in the cultural environment is a stand-in for the underlying, all-embracing unity. In
other words, social reality can be and has to be the objective correlative of the deepest human wishes and memory, rather than an outside shadow cast on us. This is often forgotten by psychoanalysis and cultural criticism, which often do little more than diagnose the ills. Fueled by narcissistic love, healthy sublimation is as much dream play as memory work, constantly turning fantasy into reality, constantly re-drawing the symbolic boundaries and dreaming out of the reified reality. Sublimation—the memory-based symbolic activity—is simultaneously a regression and creation—without pathology. Instead of being sunk in the fin-de-siècle world-weariness and disheartened about individual and collective imaginative creativity, we can pull ourselves up by listening carefully to Lou Andreas-Salomé, whose revitalizing voice comes as a reminder that human beings can still re-create and transform the ways we live, experience, and think.

Department of
Comparative Studies
SUNY, Stony Brook

Notes

1. Martin argues that narcissism in Salomé constitutes a feminine ego, which also blurs the line between consciousness and the unconscious, ego and sexuality, masculine and feminine (191-229).

2. Marcuse’s notion of self-sublimation of sexuality seems to have come straight out of Salomé’s writing, though there is no evidence that he had read any of her works. Marcuse wrote that in self-sublimation, sexuality can “create highly civilized human relations without being subjected to repressive organization which the established civilization has imposed upon the instinct” (186-187). This also means a “good” regression from reproductive sexuality to a fulfilling sexuality in the sense of obtaining pleasure from erogenous zones of the body, which in Marcuse was extended to the re-fashioning of the social environment. The similar notion is suggested by Salomé’s account of woman as a conduit to affirmative sublimation, for woman’s cultural achievement lies in the fact that she is “a regressive without neurosis” (Salomé 1987, 118).

References


Lou Andreas-Salomé’s *Freud Journal*


