Philosophy and Psychoanalysis

Midterm Paper: Acts of Love

Jonathan Lear calls interpretation “an act of love.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Freud would add: one that refuses to understand too quickly. Such a combination comes close to what is called, in the register of theology or of social movements, *bearing witness*. The latter is usually offered as an appropriate response in the face of suffering; psychoanalytic practice constitutes itself as addressed by sufferers. Your final term paper will be the right place for philosophical appropriation and digestion, but what I would like you to do in this paper is to bear witness to something that is not obvious but is important, to carry out an act of love that refuses to understand too quickly.

Please take as your text one of the stories we have read thus far – either a case history written by Freud (or Breuer), including Dora, or one of the accounts of Medea. You should select a small portion of that text, a few details or a few lines that one of the characters says, and elaborate. Explore what it shows about the person’s character, what light it throws on other elements of the story, some possible meanings it might bear. (With regard to this last, recall that for Freud symptoms are always overdetermined.) The goal is not to produce a “Freudian” interpretation, as if we already had a handle on what that would be; you might just as well produce a “Platonic” or “Aristotelian” interpretation. The point is to say something illuminating about some important facet of a character.

This is in a way a creative exercise, but you are bound to the text that has been offered, since you are trying to articulate what sense *it* may bear, not some other thing you are imagining. You are trying to get a feel for a literary or interpretive kind of truth, an art of selection and evaluation. Thus, in grading your interpretations, I will consider possible objections based on counter-evidence in the story you’ve chosen. (For our purposes, Euripides’ *Medea* and Wolf’s are not beholden to one another, except insofar as Wolf is explicitly reworking details of the earlier account.)

The interpretation you produce should be 3-4 pages long, at 1.5 or double spacing, as you prefer, and submitted as a Word or PDF document on Brightspace. I will mark it and return it on the same platform.

1. Jonathan Lear, *Love and Its Place in Nature: A Philosophical Interpretation of Freudian Psychoanalysis* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)