

Stefano Ferrari

Writing and Creativity. Sexuality and the pleasure of writing: pre-genitality, adolescence, senility

Abstract

Writing as reparation is a common defence strategy and emotion processing that belongs primarily to the private experience of the subject, when he lives delicate and crucial moments of his life: in this case we can speak of a “Ego’s private writing”, which is typical of the diary and other modest autobiographical expressions. But the drive to repair is a constant mode, which can be found also in great literary models (Rousseau, Svevo, Proust, Kafka ...). The pleasure that the act of writing seems to bear in itself is an important and recurring element, that characterizes both these levels of writing, also in situations of pain and anguish. In my speech I will speak of this pleasure and its links with the dimension of sexuality – a “polymorphous perverse” sexuality, that not by chance characterizes essential but different seasons of our lives, such as adolescence and senility.

Keywords

Writing; Sexuality; Reparation; Senility; Psychoanalysis

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Writing and Creativity. Sexuality and the pleasure of writing: pre-genitalità, adolescenza, senilità*

In my studies of writing and reparation,¹ dealing in particular with the pleasure of writing – a pleasure which has a fundamental value in the economy of the psychic elaboration of affects – I dwelt on the role of sexuality not so much on a symbolic level (writing as a substitute for the sexual act, as in the sole explicit reference by Freud which can be found in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*²) but on a functional level in relation to the pre-genitalità stage. It must be premised that I consider in particular the context of a “private writing of the ego” (that of the diary, for

example, or certainly autobiographical writing), which does not only regard, therefore, “laureate writers”. In this writing, in fact, the psychic mechanisms appear more transparent and therefore easier to observe and analyze, although the same dynamics are found also in more complex and elaborate texts on a literary level.

Let us analyze more closely the pleasure correlated to functional aspects of writing, intended in its zero-degree, firstly and irrespective of its communicative purposes, which naturally are always more or less present. There is,

first and foremost, a pleasure of a motoric type, which is in one with the graphic act, with proprioception of the hand that writes and leaves on the surface a trace of our psychicism, a mobile testimony of our existence, which unfurls and distends through those signs which belong so intimately to us. The functional nature of this pleasure (which we find moreover in the materiality of every creative act – in drawing, painting, sculpture, dance...) is complicated, or rather, extends in the moment in which writing (or whatever expressive form is utilized) becomes too a modality to reduce or nullify a specific psychic tension, responding that is to an inner need for expression, liberation (writing as outlet or abreaction) – something that is homologous with the crying of a child or the scream of a man overcome with pain. This aspect is further connoted by the choice of particular ways for activating expressive processes (greater or lesser pressure on the paper, size of character, slowness or speed of execution...)

through which the intensity and quality of the emotion can be expressed even materially. The affect connected to a psychic tension from which we feel the need to free ourselves is generally of a painful nature (and in this sense one speaks expressly of reparation – and the pleasure of writing constitutes a means also of absorbing and alleviating the harshness of the elaborative processes), but this affect may also be related to the magnitude of the desire: this is the case with amorous writing that, both in verse and prose, constitutes one of the most universal testimonies of the need to write. It is clear that in this case the association with sexuality is even more explicit, in that it passes directly through the need to alleviate a tension of the libidinal type. With this we can highlight a further characteristic of this pleasure. If it is true, according to Freud, that every strong psychic tension is perceived as a source of displeasure, which entails the need for its neutralization, it is true, moreover, that in the case of sexual

tension, this is per se perceived as pleasurable: “In every case in which tension is produced by sexual process it is accompanied by pleasure...” – writes Freud in *Three Essays on Sexuality*.³ The writing of desire, therefore, which in some way “damms up” and prolongs the flow of this tension, can count on a double register of the pleasure: that of the discharge, in the measure in which a certain portion of the libido is freed through the objectifying on paper of words, phrases, moods, and the functional relating to the protraction and variation of this tension. However, upon closer inspection, this double register of writing is present even in the processes more directly related to reparation, in that cathartic and abreactive outcomes of the affects intertwine with more functional ones connected to the graphic act mentioned earlier. But even these functional pleasures, dealt with by Freud principally in his writing on jokes, which in general belong to man’s capacity to find pleasure in his own mental activity and are

intrinsically associated with the perception of a certain degree of psychic tension, are in turn connected (or connectable) to the sphere of sexuality, albeit a diffused and mobile sexuality, typical of the pre-genital sphere. The direct connection with this dimension is, furthermore, suggested by Freud himself when, precisely in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) and in *The Relation of the Poet to Daydreaming* (1908), traces the aesthetic pleasure to mechanisms of the preliminary pleasure that at times is accompanied, but at times is replaced by the final one, tied to the satisfaction impulse. In the dynamics of jokes and artistic creation not always is the preliminary pleasure, which characterizes the form, is absorbed and annulled by the final pleasure.

This can at times count on autonomous statute, which finds its equivalent precisely in infantile sexuality, when the pleasure is necessarily a diffused pleasure devoid of acme, connected to the “perverse polymorph” character of

a libido not yet organized and not finalized to genitality. This pleasure is distinguished by the presence of a tension, of an expectation and, like the *promise*, of further pleasure. This dimension of sexuality, which is fortunately preserved also in adulthood, characterizes from within, according to Freud, also the way in which man in general experiences creativity. Indeed, when referring to “intellectual work”, he says: “Finally it is an unmistakable fact that concentration of the attention upon an intellectual task and intellectual strain in general produce a concomitant sexual excitation in many young people as well as adult”.⁴

Let us now consider the relationships between writing and sexuality also in more complex and elaborate contexts. According to widely varying testimonies, alongside the intrinsic erotic nature of those pleasures relating to graphic and functional aspects, in writing there is also something more voluptuous, in which the erotic implica-

tions become explicit – and we are not only dealing with variations on the theme, so to speak, such as the calligraphic aspect or the rituals accompanying it (choice of pen, paper, modes and locations assigned to its activity). It must also be taken into account that, though drawing from pre-genital sexual reserves, a person utilizing writing on these occasions of psychic elaboration is always someone who has already crossed this threshold, who therefore revives the potentiality of pre-genitality through nostalgia and/or feelings of guilt, bad faith, at times, of who has lost, however, their “innocence”. In tune with the title of the conference, at this point we shall also explore certain associations which, to a certain extent can be linked with the issue regarding the age of the person writing. In previous works I dwelt in particular upon the adolescent dimension of certain writings, for example, that of the diary, which I had also considered as a typical transitional object, and which can be taken or left according to

need. However, in this case, writing, alongside the nostalgia of greater expanded erotic dimension, confusive and reassuring, which recalls the omnipotence of primary narcissism, expresses too the urgency of impelling sexual impulses, whose aim is immediate satisfaction: a writing, therefore, which recovers the autoerotic aspect from the pre-genital dimension. Indeed diary writing, alongside recurring elements in the work of mourning (repetitiveness, prolixity, emphasizing of emotions, etc.) manifests sometimes that aggressive violence which is expressed in the discharge of a sort of unhappy orgasm which, together with the need for secrecy and solitude, is connoted also its more expressly masturbatory cipher. However, as I explained in previous studies, the drive to one's reparation of the "private writing of the ego" terminates and transforms into a need for stylistic and formal elaboration which aspires to assume a "literary statute", however naïve and approximate this drive may then reveal itself in

reality. The fact of the matter is that, above all in adolescence, this aspiration for literature may find two outlets: either that, in line with the perspective of *The Relation of the Poet to Daydreaming* by Freud, which aims to materialize in writing one's own daydreams, where it seeks then to transform, dilute and arrange the creative urgency in the tale, in the novel, sometimes in the essay and, nevertheless, into something "long" and protracted, that passes in any case through the filter of style; or the more "romantic" outlet in which the creative urgency wants to preserve, exalt, and at the same time purify, at all times through the form, violent orgasms, so to say, of its emotions, transforming them into lyrical fragments: – the adolescent that writes poetry... However, regardless of every specific reference to age, as for example Franz Kafka teaches us, writing both in certain of its rituals (the solitude, secret, silence, night...), and for its capacity to dig deep into the profound and awaken ancient ghosts, can be

not only something very voluptuous, but may also be connected to a sense of guilt and assume a strength which is even diabolic. As Kafka writes to Felice : “the nights cannot be long enough for this work which after all is extremely voluptuous”⁵ – and in another letter confesses, “because the devil always nestles in the desire to write”⁶ and this remains, as he would tell his friend Brod, “a sweet, marvelous, reward, [...] for a service of the devil.”⁷ On the other hand, writing may also have an explicit function of erotic seduction, transforming itself virtually in an unlikely modality of “soliciting” – more than a preliminary means, in this case, to reach the erotic intent. Again, the young Kafka comes to mind, when he says that he would like to “tie up girls with writing”.⁸ But if this affirmation constitutes a happy, distracted testimony of the turmoils of his adolescence (which probably assimilate him to the emotional events of many other of his “eternal” coetaneous), the plot of his later letters to Felice and

Milena is, instead, the confirmation of a more tormented and tormenting writing aspiration, which effectively substitutes sexuality. However, not in the sense of a sublimation: in those letters nothing whatsoever is sublimated, and the warmth, sweetness, reserve), together with the aggressive nature and sexual self-consciousness, remain intact in his words, phrases and flow of his writing. We are witnessing here, perhaps, an unresolved damming up and a sort of involution of Kafka’s libido, whose writing is at the same time both the occasion and testimony.

However, I have absolutely no desire to delve into areas that can also only allude to implications of a clinical-biographical type. The fact remains that, besides the events in his life, Franz Kafka provides us with innumerable, vivid evidence as to the diverse relations between writing and the universe of sexuality. Now, without wishing to reduce in overly facile schematizations, something extremely labile and complex, nevertheless always varies

from one case to the next, we must say too that for writing it is possible to a certain extent to identify certain tendential typifications connected to age – age intended naturally in a mental and psychological sense and not strictly expressed in years. As it proved relatively easy to associate certain characteristics to writing and its pleasures with adolescent constellation, I believe the same can be done for a period no less problematic, that of *senility* where, although with a different sign, some of the same dynamics related with pre-genital sexuality can be identified. On the other hand, also on the physiology plane (and no particular andrological competences are necessary) it is not difficult to verify that with the advancing years, with reducing urgency and impatience in sexual impulses compared youth, there is the tendency to rediscover and recuperate, and maybe even enrich and vary, precisely those pleasures of looking, touching and playing and, broadly speaking, in taking one's time over partial aims – even consid-

ering that, at least for men, the need for the ultimate pleasure of the orgasm becomes less impelling. As far as writing is concerned specifically, and its relationship with senility, I will limit myself to two examples, that of Rousseau and that of Svevo, or rather, Zeno, the protagonist of his novel.

Rousseau wrote *The Confessions* – practically his autobiography – between 1764 and 1768, when still not sixty. We know that, in the field of various degrees and diverse registers of private writing of the ego, autobiography is the result of a *solemn* and particularly demanding gesture, which presupposes a retrospective look at the significance of the entire life of a man (or of a major part of it) and therefore implicates per se a certain “maturity” both psychological and in terms of age. An autobiography is psychologically all the more significant the longer and more radical the time span that the writing intends to redeem and re-signify. Yet thinking of the modality of its

drafting, we can immediately seize an element that leads us to certain considerations that we proposed earlier as regards the pleasure of writing. Autobiographical writing is in fact a writing up of the memory which entrusts the task of rewriting a life in memory and its caprices. In this case the material pleasure of writing is exalted by intertwining with and blurring the innate pleasure of the activity itself of remembering. Here is another of those functional pleasures, of which Freud writes expressly in *Jokes*, which we know are massages and fueled by a certain degree of eroticization: “in view of the close connection between recognizing and remembering it is no trash to suppose that there may also be a pleasure in remembering – that the act of remembering is in itself accompanied by a feeling of pleasure of similar origin”.⁹ Rousseau’s testimonies on the pleasure of remembering and on the erotic implications of this form of writing of the memory, that loves to dwell on details, that needs digressions in order

to prolong the effects, are already numerous in *The Confessions*. But the text he would write approximately ten years later, between 1776 and 1778, the year of his death, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, is in our opinion, even more significant. Right from the title an element is brought to light which compares a typical characteristic of adolescence (the need to daydream) with that typical of senility, the need to remember. We are dealing with an effective prior confirmation in that it would be spotlighted by Freud in *Screen Memories* (1899), in which he discusses widely the character of our memory, which ensures that remembering can be considered a sort of “retrospective fantasizing”¹⁰: the elderly, instead of fantasizing, remember, but in this way and no differently from adolescents, fulfill their desires by correcting and reinventing a past in accordance with their needs. In any case, the old Rousseau is, however, a “happy” writing, in which even nostalgia becomes creative, or rather, recreative.

In his case, not only is reparation possible, but to a certain degree it already features in his writings as he states that

I write my *Reveries* for myself only. If in my later days, closer to death, I shall retain – as I hope – the same disposition as of now, their reading shall remind me of the sweetness I experience in writing them; and the reviving of my past times shall double, so to speak, my existence.¹¹

Far more of a problematic and conflicting nature is Svevo's relationship with writing. A conflicting nature that finds a possible solution, or at least a relatively positive cipher, only through the character and universe of Zeno Cosini, whereas other elderly characters we encounter in some of his stories are testimony to the futility, dangers and unreliability of writing. The protagonist of *The Nice Old Man and the Pretty Girl* comes immediately to mind

and only at a later age would he discover the power and fascination of writing. He deludes himself, or pretends to delude himself, into being able to redeem through writing and his naïve theories, the sins of the world (which are above all his) but, instead, after much writing and great difficulty finally realizes the “Nullity” and the futility of his search: “they found him stone dead with his pen in his mouth on which his last breath of life had passed”.¹²

In the case of *A Perfect Hoax*, the writing, even more pathetic in that it represents an unresolved vice of his youth, reveals itself to be for his protagonist an illness just as dangerous and here we read: “poor Mario learnt through experience that once past sixty one should no longer occupy himself with literature because it could become a very harmful practice for the health”.¹³ An affirmation that we can compare, or rather counterpose, in that it is affirmed in one of the “Continuations” of *Zeno's Conscience* on the part of the old man Zeno, who entrusts his

cure in his writing: “for this reason writing shall, for me, be a means of hygiene that I shall await every evening shortly before taking my physic”.¹⁴

In this case writing functions and acts in a reparative sense in that it is an authentically autobiographical project. We read, for example, in *Confessions of an Old Man*:

Of these days I discovered something of importance in my life, or rather, the only important thing that ever happened to me: the description made by me of one of its parts [...] It was the most important because I determined it. And now what am I? Not he who lived but he who described.¹⁵

E nel *Vecchione*:

Another time I wrote with the very intention of being sincere in that even then it was about a hygiene practice because that exercise was to prepare me for psychoanalysis

therapy. The therapy did not work, but the records remain. How precious they are! It seems as though I never lived anything other than that part of my life that I described. Yesterday I reflected on them [...] And they are there, always at my disposal, away from the disorder. Time has crystalized and can be found if one can open them at the required page. Like a train timetable.¹⁶

In conclusion, with the desire to give a sort of circularity to our line of thought, we can say that in certain respects writing, both of the young and old, appears to draw widely from the reserves of pre-genitality, and therefore from a dimension intrinsically open, mobile, free, which counterposes every pre-constituted rigidity.

But in other respects, autobiographical writing, above all for the risks of self-referencing (one thinks particularly of the diary, its repetitions, to a certain pleasure in the exhibition of pain...) appears, moreover, to presuppose, and to

a certain extent this itself produces, a sort of “adhesiveness of the libido”¹⁷ or, to use another of Freud’s expressions, a certain “susceptibility to *fixation*”¹⁸, which translates in an incapacity to abandon a acquired libidinal position. It is the less creative aspect and more sterile autoerotic aspect of writing, that which reiterates and repeats the symptom instead of elaborating it, which cultivates and fixes, not without a certain pleasure, one’s own neurosis. This is something that we find also in the young, particularly if they are neurotic, but which certainly constitutes, also according to Freud, a cipher of *old age*.

In fact he writes on the Wolf Man in “From the History of an Infantile Neurosis”:

Great mobility or sluggishness of libidinal cathexes (as well as of other kinds of energetic cathexes) are special characteristics which attach to many normal people and by no means to all neurotics, and which have hitherto not

been brought into relation with other qualities. They are as it were, like prime numbers, not further divisible. We only know one thing about them, and that is that mobility of the mental cathexes is a quality which shows striking diminution with the advance of age. [...] There are some people, however, who retain this mental plasticity far beyond the usual age-limit, and others who lose it very prematurely. If the latter are neurotics, we make the unwelcome discovery that it is impossible to undo developments in them which, in apparently similar circumstances, have been easily dealt with by other people. So that in consideration the conversion on psychic energy no less than of physical, we must make use of the concept of an entropy, which opposes the undoing of what has already occurred.¹⁹

In conclusion, writing too has to do with the questions relating to this *entropy* highlighted by Freud.

Only creative writing, which is capable of valuating the

inner plasticity of the libido typical of the pre-genital sexuality, besides the age of the writer, but even in accordance with its differences, may amount to being not only consolatory and reparative but, in the best of cases, as expression of that “grace of exuberant energies”²⁰ of which Kafka once wrote in relation to the gift of writing.

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NOTE

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¹ S. Ferrari, *Scrittura e riparazione. Saggio su letteratura e psicoanalisi*, Laterza, Bari-Roma 1994, (VIII ed. 2012); *La scrittura infinita. Saggi su letteratura, psicoanalisi e riparazione*, Nicomp, Firenze 2007.

² “As soon as writing, which entails making a liquid flow out of a tube on to a piece of white paper, assumes the significance of copulation, or as soon as walking becomes a symbolic substitute for treading upon the body of mother earth, both writing and walking are stopped because they represent the performance of a forbidden sexual act” (S. Freud, *Inhibitions, symptoms and anxiety* (1926), in Id., *An autobiographical study. The question of lay analysis and other works*, translated from James Strachey, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 20, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1959, p. 90).

³ S. Freud, SE, 7, p. 209.

⁴ S. Freud, SE, 7, p. 204.

⁵ “Die Nächte können gar nicht lang genug sein für dieses übrigen äußerst wollüstige Geschäft” (F. Kafka, *Briefe an Felice und andere Korrespondenz aus der Verlobungszeit*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, herausgegeben von Erich Heller und Jurgen Born, S. Fischer, Frankfurt a. M. 1967, s. 117).

⁶ “Der Teufel, der immer in der Schreiblust steckt” (*Ibid.*, s. 184).

⁷ “Das Schreiben ist ein süßer wunderbarer Lohn [...] es der Lohn für Teufelsdienst ist” (F. Kafka, *Briefe 1902-1924*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, herausgegeben von Max Brod, S. Fischer, Frankfurt a. M. 1966, s. 384).

⁸ Wenn es wahr wäre, daß man Mädchen mit der Schrift binden kann (*Ibid.* s. 97).

⁹ S. Freud, SE, 8, p. 122.

¹⁰ S. Freud, SE, 16, p. 336.

¹¹ “... Je n'écris mes rêveries que pour moi. Si dans mes plus vieux jours, aux approches du départ, je reste, comme je l'espère, dans la même disposition où je suis, leur lecture me rappellera la douceur que je goûte à les écrire et, faisant renaître ainsi pour moi le temps passé, doublera pour ainsi dire mon existence” (J.-J. Rousseau, *Les*

rêveries du promeneur solitaire, in Id., *Les confessions*, édité par L. Martin-Chauffier, NRF, Paris 1947, p. 657).

¹² “Lo trovarono stecchito con la penna in bocca sulla quale era passato l'ultimo anelito suo” (I. Svevo, *La novella del buon vecchio e la bella fanciulla*, Dall'Oglio, Milano 1980, p. 70).

¹³ “Il povero Mario stava facendo l'esperienza che dopo i sessant'anni non bisogna occuparsi più di letteratura, perché poteva divenire una pratica molto dannosa alla salute” (Ivi, pp. 146-7).

¹⁴ “Perciò lo scrivere sarà per me una misura di igiene cui attenderò ogni sera poco prima di prendere il purgante” (I. Svevo, *Il vecchione*, in Id. *Zeno*, a cura di M. Lavagetto, Einaudi, Torino 1987, p. 576).

¹⁵ “Di questi giorni scopersi nella mia vita qualcosa d'importante, anzi la sola cosa importante che mi sia avvenuta: la descrizione da me fatta di una sua parte. [...] Si fece la più importante perché la fissai. E ora che cosa sono io? Non colui che visse ma colui che descrissi” (I. Svevo, *Le confessioni del vegliardo*, in Id. *Zeno*, cit., p. 471).

¹⁶ “Un'altra volta io scrissi con lo stesso proposito di essere sincero che anche allora si trattava di una pratica di igiene perché quell'esercizio doveva prepararmi per una cura psicanalitica. La cura non riuscì, ma le carte restarono. Come sono preziose! Mi pare di non avere vissuto altro che quella parte di vita che descrissi. Ieri le rilessi.

[...] Ed esse sono là, sempre a mia disposizione, sottratte ad ogni disordine. Il tempo vi è cristallizzato e lo si ritrova se si sa aprire la pagina che occorre. Come in un orario ferroviario.” (Ivi, p. 577).

¹⁷ S. Freud, SE, 16, p. 455, where speaks literally of “the tenacity or adhesiveness of the libido, which dislikes leaving objects that it has once cathected”.

¹⁸ Freud, SE, 7, p. 242.

¹⁹ S, Freud, SE, 17, p. 116.

²⁰ “Gnadenweiser Überschuß der Kräfte (F. Kafka, *Tagebücher*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, herausgegeben von Max Brod, S. Fischer, Frankfurt a. M. 1951. s. 531).