On Transience:
Freud, Rilke, And Creativity

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I was originally asked to reflect tonight on Civilization and Its Discontents, and in a roundabout way that is what I will do, though honestly I won’t get to the book itself until the end of my presentation. Most of you will know that Civilization and Its Discontents was one of Freud’s attempts to conceptualize history and culture according to psychoanalytic principle. Totem and Taboo, The Future of an Illusion, Moses and Monotheism, and Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego also belong to this group of writings, metametapsychology.

What is perhaps striking about Civilization and Its Discontents is its emphasis on the theory of the instincts, and the conflict between the wishes and needs of the individual with those, supposedly, of civilization. Its emphasis is, in short, on the conflict between self and other, and the ambivalent desire of the individual to be in and with the world.

Had Freud lived another twenty or fifty years, he might have written another volume in which he explained culture more explicitly in terms of object relations, in terms of differentiation from the object, internalization of the object and also of narcissism and the desire to be both alone and merged with another.

Instead, he begins Civilization and its Discontents precisely with a description of the “Oceanic Feeling” – of the desire for a merger with a maternal other, and promptly dismisses it in favor of a discussion of the instinct theory. The reasons for this – why, for Freud, the individual’s discontents with civilization lay in the direction of greater individuation and the liberation of the instincts, and not in the primitive direction of infantile merger with the other, are of fundamental importance for the direction of Freud’s thinking in later years, and for the history of psychoanalysis. These reasons are also rooted in the past of psychoanalysis, and of Freud himself. To illustrate, I will turn to one of Freud’s earlier texts, and to the circumstances surrounding its creation.

I hope to shed light on a little-known corner of Freud’s biography, his brief encounter with the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, and in particular the light

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shed on his ideas about creativity by his reflections on this relationship, and
indeed on the nature of his own creativity. I have written at much greater
length on this in my book, Freud's Requiem.

I am mainly concerned today in presenting the material to you with
certain ideas about literary method and practices, borrowed in significant
measure from psychoanalysis, as well as the literature I admire. In brief, I
am looking to create a connection between two kinds of creative generation,
which are also present in psychoanalysis. In analytic terms, the analogies to
the two processes are free association and interpretive construction - the
traditional modes, respectively, of patient and analyst.

I hope to use these two methods to point out a novel approach to the
phenomena of inner life. I hope my method is applicable in many other
areas, to biography as well as autobiography, really as a means to portray the
rhythms and roots of the internal world of another person.

Biography is the most natural place to start, for it is a literary genre preduced
on knowing what is unknowable: the inner life of such another person.
In this it is, like psychoanalysis, an impossible profession. There are many
ways to measure success in biography, but the most common is the degree
to which the biographer brings his subject to life, on the one hand, and the
resemblance of that life to the truth, on the other.

Psychobiography has been the principal legacy of psychoanalysis to
biography, and while it offers valuable frame for understanding some aspects
of a person's character, it generally pathologizes the subject, discovers in them
sources of conflict, usually rooted in development (Mozart's father, Freud's
parents) and the effect, while sometimes informative, is ultimately reductive,
and feeds the fear implicit in the reservations Rilke expressed about psycho-
analysis: that analysis looks for the roots of creativity and motivation in the
places where it best knows how to find anything.

The method I offer suggests an alternative that also offers a solution to
Rilke's anxious question. One looks for the patterns suggested by the material
itself. One looks for the repetitions, and views them closely. And in so doing,
the truth of analysis reveals itself in the method, not in the content.

Ultimately patients, and perhaps certain readers, learn to perform this
kind of work themselves. The capacity for free association and interpretation
are in themselves creative, and the capacity to synthesize experience and affect
are what analysts refer to when they ally their work to that of artists.

Taking Freud himself as the subject of this experiment in biography was
natural as breathing. The methods I borrowed are his own, and the material
Freud left behind about himself, the way in which his life enters his work,
the visible traces of his process of thought left behind in his correspondence, notes, and the reminiscences of his friends, uniquely lend themselves to this kind of effort.

This much is sure: Freud and Rilke met twice, as far as is known. Freud wished for a greater relationship to grow between them. Rilke did not. In 1912, when they first met, Freud was 56, and Rilke was 40. They met through Lou Andreas-Salome, well-known poet, novelist, analyst, widely reputed for her love affairs, a fascinating individual who in her youth had refused Nietzsche's proposal of marriage. A decade before, she had taken Rilke under her wing as lover, muse and teacher, and their relationship had evolved into a comfortable companionship. She was a part of Freud's analytic circle, a close friend of his and his daughter, and was on the way to herself becoming an analyst.

Freud, Rilke and she met in Munich, at the controversial congress of 1913 that marked the official break between Freud and Jung. They stayed up late the evening of the break, talking, and Lou believed they got along famously.

They did not meet again until December 1915, in wartime Vienna, where Rilke was stationed as an army bureaucrat. The poet, after several invitations, came to Freud's house, and was warmly received. But he refused any subsequent visits, and in the aftermath, Freud wrote to Sandor Ferenczi that “Rilke made it clear to us that ‘no lasting bond’ could be made with him.”

After those encounters, there are only fleeting allusions in their respective correspondences with Andreas-Salome. Rilke gave Lou a book about a psychotic artist named Adolf Wolfli, which he evidently intended for Freud, who thanked them for it. Rilke sent fond greetings occasionally. Lou apparently continued to discuss, Rilke with Freud, though exactly what they said is unknown. Rilke died in 1924 of leukemia after a painful illness. When Andreas-Salome died herself, in 1934, Freud wrote in her obituary of her importance to Rilke, who he said was “a little helpless in life.” Freud himself died of cancer in 1939.

We do not know what Freud thought of Rilke's work, though he must certainly have known it; daughter Anna and son Ernst were passionate about the poet's work, and Lou entrusted Anna with a copy of the *Duino Elegies* a year before they were published.

Rilke was on the other hand greatly impressed with Freud's work, and it influenced his poetry. The third elegy, which speaks of a "hidden guilty river god of the blood", is generally understood to be Rilke's lyrical version of the Oedipal struggle. Like so many artists of his time, Rilke saw in psychoanalysis what he wanted, and for him its appeal lay in its account of wild subterranean instincts, operating outside of reason in epic struggles with themselves, and
against the oppressive influences of consensual reality. Ultimately, he was uninterested in bringing these instincts under the sway of conscious reason.

Significantly though, Rilke seriously considered analysis for himself. His estranged wife Clara had been in analysis with Viktor Gebsattel. Rilke, who suffered from anxieties, depression, hypochondria, an inability to sustain relationships and, worst for him, crippling creative inhibition, wrote Gebsattel in 1912 seeking analysis, then withdrew his request the next day, after seeking advice on the matter from Lou. He worried that analysis would, in his words, “correct him like red ink in a schoolboy’s exercise book.” In order to “drive out the devils, it would drive out some of the angels too.” Rilke abandoned the idea altogether when in January of 1912 the wind upon the cliffs of the Castle Duino spoke to him, and he began the great work of his life, which would take ten years of intermittent and painful effort to complete.

In late 1915, around the time Rilke came to visit, Freud wrote a brief essay, On Transience, for a volume called Das Land Goethes, in support of German libraries and in honor of Goethe, which was unlike anything else in his large corpus except perhaps his discussion of the “oceanic feeling” in Civilization and Its Discontents. In it, Freud described a puzzling encounter with a young but already famous poet and a taciturn friend in a “blooming summer landscape” in 1913.

“As Freud and his companions lingered in the soft light of that afternoon, admiring the surrounding nature, their conversation took a melancholy turn. The young poet was troubled by ghosts. Everywhere he turned he saw beauty, but in this radiance the poet foresaw the coming of sorrow. All these things were transient, fated to extinction; mocked by its own frailty, beauty was eclipsed by its negation, and had no value and no meaning.

The older man was sympathetic to the poet’s melancholy (which their silent friend shared), but he could not accept his anguished conclusion. The poet was correct, of course, that all earthly things must pass away, including those in whose qualities we take special pleasure. But rather than subtracting from their beauty, Freud protested, this evanescence only added to its increase. Winter replaces summer, but spring comes again in winter’s wake. The scientist – taken aback, perhaps, by the poet’s remonstrance – suggested that it was beauty’s “scarcity value in time” that gave what is precious its worth. Since beauty was only known – could only ever be known – by the heart and eye and mind of its witness, so long as we live, beauty is with us, only passing into nothingness when we, too, cease to exist.
Freud’s protests found no favor with the poet, nor with their companion, the “taciturn friend”. His own conviction however remained unshakeable, that the fleeting quality of existence increased, not diminished, its value.

Later, Freud wondered at the source of his companions’ attitude that afternoon. Looking back on their conversation, he recognized in the poet and their friend what he called “a revolt in their minds against mourning.” They recognized in the transience of these beautiful things the essential mortality of life, and of their own lives; this knowledge so disturbed them that they could no longer appreciate beauty except as something already lost. In the process, life itself lost for them its luster and meaning.

_On Transience_ moves from its poetic beginning to a discussion of mourning, his first mention of his new theory, later announced in _Mourning and Melancholia_. Freud concludes _On Transience_ with an affirmation: that with the end of mourning, the ego is free to redirect its energies towards new objects. He implies that the outbreak of war evoked among Europeans mourning for their civilization, and suggests that with the end of the war, their mourning would end and “we shall build up again all that war has destroyed, and perhaps on firmer ground than before.”

We cannot know for certain whether Rilke is the poet of Freud’s essay. The suggestion was first made publicly by Herbert Lehmann, in a 1966 article on the subject, but the case is circumstantial. We do know that Freud vacationed in the Dolomites the summer described in the essay, and met Rilke in September, immediately following this holiday, in Munich.

This is all there is, and whatever else there might be in the way of documents or recollection is irrevocably lost.

What remains is _On Transience_, a powerful work of imagination, remarkable for the ways it weaves together fantasy and fiction, reality and theory. At once open-hearted and enigmatic, it is wide open to interpretation, especially when looked at from the widest possible angle, or from different angles. It is, as analysts say, overdetermined, and nearly inexhaustible as a way into Freud, a name that signifies so much: a man, a theory, a style, perhaps – much as he would hate it – a _weltanschauung_.

I cannot cover all the meandering territory of the book in the short time I have with you, but I would like to follow some of the threads that connect this essay to the rest of his inner world, like the mycelia that connect one mushroom to the next, as Freud described the network of unconscious thoughts in the psyche.

Let us begin by saying a few words about the essay, _On Transience_, which was written in wartime as a sort of elegy to the _Pax Europa_ during
which analysis flourished. It takes mourning, and the refusal to mourn, as its principal theme. It does this by setting up an argument between Freud and a poet, young but already famous (in somewhat forced contrast to Freud himself). And that is certainly its dominant theme. But its subdominant theme is creativity, and its relationship to loss. Whether or not his interlocutor was Rilke, or even a poet, it is significant that Freud refers to him as a poet and, for that matter, young and famous. In this generic designation, the poet can be many things. He might be Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, whom Freud revered, and of whom in accepting the Goethe Prize in 1930 he wondered “what he would have made of psychoanalysis.” Taken with his “taciturn friend”, he might be speaking generically, of the poet and his muse. Or he might even be referring to Freud himself. This is, after all, at this stage a fiction, and a conversation with himself. Or more accurately, it might be the poet whom Freud renounced in himself as a young man, in a last poem following the heartbreaking end to his adolescent crush on the young Gisela Fluss. Or again, taking Freud at his word, with an actual poet, Rilke. (Others suggest it might even have been Stefan Zweig, or someone else altogether.)

Why not all of them? This is the approach I take, and there is evidence for each possibility. The Goethe connection is suggested by the context, by its publication in Das Land Goethes, intended to raise money for German libraries and so preserve German culture at a time when it seemed gravely threatened.

The title and theme of Freud’s essay take direct inspiration from Goethe. Vergänglichkeit, or On Transience, is an allusion to the famous verse concluding Goethe’s Faust:

> Alles Vergänglich/Ist nur ein Gleichnis;/Das Unzulängliche/ wird’s Ereignis/Das Unbeschreibliche,/Hier ist’s getan;/Das Ewig-Weibliche/Zieht uns hinun. (All transience is only a likeness/symbol/the inadequate/becomes event/The undescribable/is here realized/the Eternal Womanly/draws us onward.)

Puzzled over since Goethe first put these lines down, they have been interpreted to mean many different things. Some scholars hold them to be an expression of the redemptive power of creativity – Faust, they say, is delivered from his devil’s pact and carried aloft by angels. Others view these lines as Goethe’s retraction of his long held antipathy toward religion – as a sort of deathbed conversion.

At the heart of the puzzle is Goethe’s strange sounding neologism, das Ewig-Weibliche, the Eternal Womanly (or Feminine). This Eternal Feminine is an ambiguous metaphor for the creative process, suggesting that
creative inspiration comes from a mysterious source, whether divine or merely irrational, which guides the passive artist along toward his art.

The abstraction must have frustrated Freud, and it is possible to see in the essay On Transience an attempt to unravel the mystery of the Eternal Feminine, with its intimations of eternity and immortality. Goethe's notion of transience is markedly different from Freud's. For Goethe, mortal existence is an illusion, a symbol or echo of a higher essence, and the Eternal Feminine, a muse-like entity, the transcendental impulse, akin to the oceanic feeling.

For Freud, on the other hand, it is transcendence (or any worldview that relies on an unknowable) that is an illusion, and a yearning for the beyond, whether expressed as a religious or artistic impulse, a vestige of primordial human nature. Instead, in On Transience he suggests that creative work is accomplished by accurate comprehension of the object world, including the inevitability of death, by an adaptive ego that has successfully distanced itself from its overwhelming internal objects, toward which the instincts are directed, especially the lost ones. Art approaches science.

This theme – of the necessity of seeing life without illusion – pervades Freud's work, and is present from the very beginning. Indeed, in the young poet addressed in the essay, Freud might easily be talking to his adolescent self, the young poet Sigismund Freud (for this was the name he was given, before he renamed himself more heroically). At the age of 16, Freud had a shattering emotional experience in failed love for a younger teenager named Gisela Fluss. They had met a couple of years earlier, when Freud returned to his birthplace in Freiburg for the summer. For years his letters to his friends are filled with his playful adolescent puppy love for this girl, an affair that proceeded mostly in his head. He called her (in a manner suggesting his adolescent conflicts with sexuality) "Ichthyosaura", a prehistoric fish. Upon learning of her betrothal, Freud wrote a vengeful wedding poem, a Hochzeitscarmen, in which, in the Sturm and Drang tradition of Goethe's The Sorrows of Young Werther and similar Romantic works, he contemplates a dramatic suicide, while he showers curses upon the traitorous object of his affection.

Freud recalled these events years later, in his famous 1898 essay Screen Memories. In that essay, Freud portrays an exchange between an analyst and his supposed patient, in which the patient recalls a vivid memory of early childhood. It is a beautiful mountain day, and he recalled a little girl with a yellow dress, whom he and his fellow ruffians rob of her dandelions. She is then given warm bread by the nurse, inspiring renewed jealousy in the boy until he, too, receives some of the warm bread (the boy and the patient no doubt being Freud himself.)
As in On Transience, the setting is something akin to a blooming summer landscape, filling the senses. Freud's patient then recalls a later memory of a painful love affair with a girl, whose brilliantly colored dress he remembers, along with memories of being lost in love, taking “many hours in solitary walks through the lovely woods that I had found once more and spent my time building castles in the air.”

For Freud, in this case the early memory concealed the later experience of his desire for Gisela, which was displaced owing to its painful, unacceptable nature, including a fantasy of deflowering his young love. The pain was denied, while the intensity remained in the sensual imagery. As an adult, the patient says he could barely recognize his former lover in the street, so complete was the eclipse of his affection.

Young Freud concludes the poem by declaring the he will abandon his affection all together, and with it break his magic wand, abandoning all fantasy and poetry:

I now bury the magic wand that aided her education, and may a new age begin without force working in secret, that has no need of poetry and fantasy. Let no one seek a Principle (an object) save in the present...

Freud renounces his love for Gisela, and also the irrational indulgence in fantasies and poetry that fostered it. Soon after this experience, he declares his intent to become a scientist, and forcefully embraces the superiority of reason.

And so, long before psychoanalysis codified his beliefs, young Freud dealt with the pain of loss by a denunciation of irrationality, embodied in fantasy and poetry and enshrined in the ethos of Romantic poets.

This became Freud's attitude towards poets in general, whom he characterized in Creative Writers and Daydreaming as irresponsible toward the truth, free to build indiscriminately from fantasy in the pursuit of emotional effect. Poets lived in the realm of fantasy, he said, and fantasy was illusory. But it was not his unremitting attitude. To Arthur Schnitzler in 1922, for example he wrote, “So I have formed the impression that you know through intuition—or rather from detailed self-observation—everything that I have discovered by laborious work on other people.” Despite his mistrust of such writers and their approach to knowledge, Freud conceded that they were on to something.

Another question arises in reading On Transience. Why was it written in the form of a conversation, or, put better, a disagreement? Here again, an answer is suggested in Freud's own experience. Certainly, it is not hard to
see, in the fictional conversation, echoes of many relationships in Freud's life, from the past (Wilhelm Fliess) to the essay's present (Carl Jung) and future (Ferenczi, Rank, Rolland).

Freud said it was his need to have a beloved friend and hated enemy — usually in the same person. He was further attracted to men whose views were incompatible with his — usually, because of their allegiance precisely to fantasy: Wilhelm Fliess, the silent partner of his early pioneering work and a quack of the first order, who devised a scheme of bisexual periodicity as the governing principle of life. Carl Jung, with whom Freud broke at the time the summer walk would have taken place who sought meaning in a collective unconscious that could only be transmitted supernaturally, and who lived among ghosts. Rank in the birth trauma. Ferenczi in mutual analysis.

Freud was powerfully drawn to such figures, and equally fated to break with them, or else to keep them and their ideas at some distance, even as he tried to win them over with his own. Among this category we may include novelists Arthur Schnitzler, whom Freud called his *doppelgänger*, and Romain Rolland.

What was common to these men was their belief in or reliance on something beyond comprehension, intuition, spirit, genius. This attitude was all too familiar to Freud. Richard Sterba recalls in his memoir a weekly meeting of the Vienna Society in 1928, in which Freud discussed the idea of *weltanschauungen* — worldviews, philosophies of life — all of which he regarded as in the service of repression. And the greatest threat to the scientific *weltanschauung* was not animism, religion, or materialism, but that of unreason, mysticism, which he felt was on the rise. “A great many cultured people who liberated themselves from religion adhere to this mystic *Weltanschauung*. Its essence is the high esteem of the irrational. The mystic *Weltanschauung* is the *Weltanschauung* of the future. Scholars, artists, and scientists embrace it and feel they have the right to look down on the other *Weltanschauungen*.”

Rilke was an obvious adherent of this dangerous *weltanschauung*. For Rilke, analysis seemed a kind of lobotomy of intuition. Rilke shows in many ways his essential difference from Freud. For Rilke, school was one long humiliation and it turned him away forever from conventional study, even the study of literature — he hated Goethe, the father of German poetry, for most of his life. Convention itself was Rilke's adversary, and Freud was conventional. Rilke and his art were anything but correctable.

His final gesture to Freud was to present him, as noted earlier, with the book about Adolf Wolfli, the psychotic artist. The gesture was evidently a way of showing Freud his conviction that the direction in which true art lay was in madness, unreason, and not in what analysis had to offer.
Freud evidently understood the conflict between them in similar terms. Following Rilke's Christmas visit to the Freud household in 1915, Freud had remarked laconically in a letter to Lou that his son Ernst had encountered "his hero Rilke" during a recent visit to Vienna. "But not at our house. Rilke was not to be persuaded to visit us a second time, though his first visit before his call-up had been so very cordial." Several months later, on hearing of Rilke's discharge from military service and subsequent, un heralded departure from Vienna, Freud wrote Lou again that Rilke had "made it quite clear to us that 'no lasting bond can be forged' with him."

Freud borrowed the phrase "no lasting bond" (kein ew'ger Bund zu Flechten) from Friedrich Schiller's poem Das Lied von der Glocke (The Bell's Song). Schiller was Freud's kind of poet, whom he called (in contrast to Wolfli, or even Goethe) "a particularly fine example of a normal man."

Schiller's long poem is an elliptical, panoramic glance cast over a town's fortunes as a community builds, burns, harvests, revolts, dies and is born anew. Through it all looms the figure of a bell, Concordia (Harmony), which the townspeople have forged together to speak to heaven for them through its song. The casting of the bell signifies the sweeping enterprise of life; and in the bell's fading peals, the hearer is reminded of life's essential, paradoxical significance: "that all things earthly die away."

The passage from which Freud borrowed appears midway through the poem, as a father surveys his family and estate with pride. "Boasting, he gazes round./Firm as the very ground/Spite of misfortune's cross/Stands the wealth of my house." But the man knows he deceives himself with these transient satisfactions: "But with the powers of destiny/No lasting bond may woven be./And misfortune strideth swift."

The allusion to Schiller is significant. In the poem, the phrase means simply that there is no immortality, no cheating death. But in Freud's analogy, Rilke is the power of destiny, the representative of the irrational effort to deny death and mourning through fantasy and poetry who must soldier on, like Schiller, disillusioned by reason. It suggests what Freud thought about Rilke the poet: that he was (or deluded himself that he was) joined with the great forces of life, with immortality, had privileged access to the oceanic feeling.

It is worth noting that, following Schiller's early death, Goethe wrote an epitaph to Das Lied von der Glocke as an epitaph to his beloved friend. Goethe's poem laments Schiller's departure, but it also envisions the poet's spirit advancing into eternity, while in the life that remains "behind him, a shadowy illusion, lay what holds us all in bondage -- the things that are common." This triumphal image of the poet shedding his mortal frame to assume his immortal place in history amounts nearly to a refutation of
Schiller's poem, which it celebrates. Goethe instead looks to eternity for consolation, through the immortality of the poet's writing. For Goethe, it is not life itself, or its limited duration, that gives life purpose; rather, one obtains immortality through one's efforts, bypassing mortality altogether, which in any case is a "shadowy illusion" -- or, as he will say at the end of Faust, Part Two, "only a likeness."

In his self-analysis, Freud recalled Goethe's "shadowy illusion", which he took to be a depreciation of mortal existence, and found in it an expression of his own wish to die on his own terms, and to leave his children with an image of himself strong and unsullied by the infirmity of age. But viewed alongside the poem that inspired it, what Goethe meant to be a tribute to his friend seems to verge on betrayal by misinterpreting Schiller's theme (creativity as a way to come to terms with human mortality) so as to turn it into its opposite (creativity as a way around mortality) and so render it toothless. It was a peculiar act of friendship, and one that resounded in the exchange between Freud and Rilke nearly a century after it was written.

In quoting Schiller, Freud seems cagily (and perhaps a little competitively) to use his literary knowledge to put his finger on the matter: no bond could be made with the "forces of destiny" -- that is, with Rilke, whose poetic force Freud both admired and perhaps feared.

Knowing of his admiration for Goethe and Schiller, one can speculate that in quoting Das Lied von der Glocke, Freud perhaps mourned the demise of yet another friendship with a representative of irrational poetic intuition. Freud embraced the rational acceptance of mortality and mourning as the foundations for art expressed in Schiller's poem, but apparently rejected Goethe's epilogue, as well as the young poet's dismissal of the value of mortal life in On Transience and Rilke's fear of the corrections of psychoanalysis. For Freud, as for Schiller, poetry and life were bound together inescapably in time's shadow. It is eternity, and the eternal nature of Art that are illusory.

The work most closely resembling On Transience in Freud's corpus is the discussion of the oceanic feeling, which came in an exchange he had with his friend, the novelist and Nobel Laureate Romain Rolland, and reported in Civilization and Its Discontents in 1930. Rolland had described an unusual emotion that he guessed to be the basis for religious feeling. According to Rolland, this oceanic feeling filled his host with an overpowering sense of wonder, causing him to feel flooded with life, a sense of wonder that overran reason and evoked a sense of unity with the world. As Freud later described it:

[The Oceanic Feeling] consists in a peculiar feeling, which he [Rolland] himself is never without, which he finds confirmed by
many others, and which he may suppose is present in millions of people. It is a feeling which he would like to call a sensation of “eternity”, a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded – as it were, “oceanic”. This feeling, [Rolland] adds, is a purely subjective fact, not an article of faith; it brings with it no assurance of personal immortality, but it is the source of the religious energy which is seized upon by the various Churches and religious systems, directed by them into particular channels, and doubtless also exhausted by them. One may, he thinks, rightly call oneself religious on the ground of this oceanic feeling alone, even if one rejects every belief and every illusion.

Both in letters to Rolland and in Civilization and Its Discontents, Freud claimed that he could find no trace of such a feeling in himself, and declined to analyze too deeply what was beyond his experience. He speculated, however, that the origins of the feeling lay in the infant’s original secure union with his mother, and that the experience in later life of Rolland’s oceanic feeling was really the expression of a longing to be restored to that early unity. The urge for union with the world, the sense of eternity expressed a longing not, Freud believed, for a union with God, but with the mother from whom one is separated at birth; a yearning, not for an ecstatic present, but for a blissful, unremembered past, in which ego and object are indistinguishable.

Freud describes the oceanic feeling as a longing to return to maternal union, the ultimate fantasy, and utterly destructive. It is the denial of the ego’s autonomy from its object, and utter reliance on itself.

In contrast, Freud’s own idea about sublimation was rooted in his evolving idea of the ego. (Incidentally, the genesis of the idea of sublimation is pertinent here. Originally a concept in chemistry, used to describe the process by which elements change from solid to gas, it came into use in aesthetics thanks to Goethe, for whom sublimation was linked to the spiritual rapture embodied in the Eternal Feminine. I don’t know whether Freud knew this, but it may be that he sought to offer his own view of sublimation as a corrective to the Romantic vision of creativity advanced by his hero.)

He told colleagues that he came upon the idea of sublimation while reading Heinrich Heine, the bilious German Jewish poet and satirist and, like Goethe, a favorite of Freud’s. He had read Heine’s account of a delinquent boy in the Harz Mountains who went around cutting off the tail of every dog he could get his hands on. Later, when he grew to be a man the boy became a very great surgeon. All the while, Freud remarked, the man was doing the same thing; he had merely put his brutality to good use – thereby harnessing his instinctual impulses to constructive purpose.
In sublimation, the ego adapted the instinctual impulses to reality, allowing them discharge without the destructive consequences their pure expression would bring. By contrast, in oceanic states, the ego ceded control to the instincts in regression to the primitive egoless realm of infancy.

These two ideas about creativity are plainly at odds, if not in outright opposition. And the difference between them is roughly akin to that between melancholia (in the case of the oceanic feeling) – losing oneself in one’s objects – and mourning (successfully detaching oneself from them in order to free and redirect one’s instincts).

Freud clearly affirmed the superiority of his version of sublimation but, though he believed he understood the oceanic feeling fully, it troubled him, not least because it was so alien to him.

At the beginning of a paper he wrote about his favorite sculpture, The Michelangelo Moses, published anonymously in the Fall of 1913, probably written during the vacation during which Freud’s walk with the poet occurred, and a favorite among his own writings, he wrote:

I have often observed that the subject-matter of works of art has a stronger attraction for me than their formal and technical qualities...Nevertheless, works of art do exercise a powerful effect on me, especially those of literature and sculpture, less often of painting. This has occasioned me, when I have been contemplating such things, to spend a long time before them trying to apprehend them in my own way, i.e. to explain to myself what their effect is due to. Wherever I cannot do this, as for instance with music, I am almost incapable of obtaining any pleasure. Some rationalistic, or perhaps analytic, turn of mind in me rebels against being moved by a thing without knowing why I am thus affected and what it is that affects me.

Years later, in the exchange with Rolland, excusing his doubts about the oceanic feeling, he concluded by saying he could find no trace of it in himself, and was as “closed to mysticism as to music.” Lumping art and spirituality together, Freud underscored their common roots in a realm beyond reason – an irrational underworld more closely akin to the primitive urges of our ancestors – more closely akin, perhaps, to madness. It is a creative source, though a troubling one.

Why does Freud equate mysticism with music? Why is the oceanic feeling closed off to Freud, as, apparently, is aesthetic enjoyment itself?

Repeatedly one has the spectacle of Freud in disagreement, unable to persuade; shut out from the realm of artists, from the irrational
weltanschauung. With Romain Rolland, with Rilke, with the young poet and taciturn friend of *On Transience*, in his address on receipt of the Goethe Prize, in a birthday greeting to his fellow Viennese, Arthur Schintzler, – again and again, he pleads his case to the poets, struggles to convince them of his position and demonstrate their true mutual affinity. Again and again, he is, to his lasting disappointment, rebuffed.

And so, in *On Transience*, Freud’s own little fiction, we see him having it out with those who he feels have turned from him, – Rilke, Fliess, Jung, even Goethe, – always trying to make sense of what has happened, by recourse to his own (despite what he might say) most intuitive intellect.