

SEXUALITY, EXCESS AND REPRESENTATION

**by Rosine Jozef Perelberg,
London, Routledge, 2020, 204
pp., £29.99 (paperback), ISBN:
978-0-367-25355-4**

[Björn Sahlberg](#)

Pages 1280-1283 | Published online: 23 Dec 2020

- [Download citation](#)

•
[Previous article](#)[View issue table of contents](#)[Next article](#)

I would like to designate this ground-breaking work as “Contemporary Freudian”: it is fresh and contemporary, integrating a rich field of various psychoanalytic ideas on firm Freudian ground. Perelberg discusses many of Freud's most important writings on both the topographical and the structural models of the mind. In addition, Perelberg integrates, in a masterful way, important aspects from the three traditions in the British Society—Independent, Contemporary Freudian, and Kleinian—but especially Winnicott, who is an important source of inspiration. *Sexuality, Excess, and Representation*, like her previous book, *Psychic Bisexuality: A French–British Dialogue*, is also a truly “British–French dialogue,” where, among others, the voices of Lacan, André Green, Laplanche, the Botellas and Chabert can be heard. It is refreshing that Perelberg does not get bogged down in old controversies, either in Britain or in France. Instead, she takes her inspiration from all the best sources available and, in the process, creates her own unique perspective.

As Perelberg says,

Psychoanalysis has, since Freud, viewed sexuality in itself as traumatic to the individual. This traumatic dimension is linked to the force of the drives in that there is always something in excess that cannot be reduced to the level of representation. (10)

The traumatic dimension of sexuality also relates to the recognition of the difference between the sexes, the result of a long process of development and elaboration. In its homosexual and heterosexual dimensions, the Oedipal configuration confronts the child with the impossibility of belonging to both sexes, as well as the impossibility of possessing their parents. This establishes a link between sexuality, castration, renunciation, taboo and prohibition. (10)

According to Perelberg,

the revolutionary contribution made by Freud is the idea that one is not born already formed as a man or woman, but one is constituted as such in the process of development. (10)

A very powerful part of the book is the discussion of Susan Faludi's *In the Dark Room*, an account of Faludi's attempts to understand her father's journey as, in his mid-70s, he decides to take the ultimate step and undergo an operation to transition from male to female.

The first chapter of *Sexuality, Excess, and Representation* is devoted to a thorough review of Freud's views on bisexuality, as well as current literature on sexuality and gender studies. Perelberg develops further the investigation she had initiated in her previous book, *Psychic Bisexuality*. Freud used the concept of bisexuality very early on in his work, in *Studies on Hysteria*: he regarded it as an inherent characteristic of all human beings. Perelberg suggests that the interplay of identifications in relation to the primal scene is implicit or explicit in each of Freud's case studies—for example, the hysteric who cannot define herself as a man or a woman and displays what she is rejecting. Perelberg writes that her symptoms become

like a theatre of the sexual act in an attempt to both deny and represent the primal scene and deny the mourning of her incestuous sexual desires. (12)

A symptom expresses a current, unconscious, sexual phantasy.

The concept of psychosexuality is at the centre of this book, which establishes a link between sexuality and the unconscious, understood through the dialectics of excess and representation. Perelberg makes her point clear immediately, in the Introduction, that throughout his writings Freud attempted to explore the relationship between the drives and their representations, the somatic and the psychic, and so corporeal experiences are at the very origin of the constitution of the psyche.

Excess is closely connected with Freud's first theory of the drives, having somatic sources of excitation and thereby initiating a demand for psychic work. Perelberg writes:

If the drives are at the root of psychic activity, this [now quoting André Green] “implies that something is basically in excess, an overload charge on the mind, linked with the bodily exigencies of the drives whose derivatives have to be sent back to the unconscious because their free expression forbids psychic organization” (Green, 1998, p. 660). (1)

Excess is the experience of something that is overwhelming: too much for the psyche to integrate, a traumatic situation creating a state of helplessness and anxiety.

Following Freud, Perelberg postulates that there is a disjunction between drives and representations and that there is always something that escapes full representation.

Throughout her work, Perelberg is concerned with the question of representation and the possibility of creating in the cleavage of the mother's absence. Using André Green's beautiful concept of negativity, Perelberg writes:

... when holding her infant, the mother leaves the impression of her arms on the child, and this constitutes a framing structure that, in her absence, contains the loss of the perception of the maternal object and a negative hallucination of it. The framing structure is the outcome of the internalization of the maternal environment created by maternal care. It is the “primordial matrix of the cathexis to come” (Green, 1986b, p. 166). The capacity for the negative hallucination of the mother lies at the origins of representation. (89)

The task of representation is the central demand made upon the psyche to metabolize its experiences. We can only get to know what we, in some way, can represent. The most advanced form of representation is the secondary process and word-presentations. Freud's main discovery was of the more primitive and mostly unconscious primary processes, the less bound thing-presentations or fantasies, originally trying to hallucinate what has been lost. A more recent important development in psychoanalysis has been about even more primitive forms of representation, or quasi-representations. Perelberg quotes Bion's formulation of beta-elements. I would also consider here the work of Piera Aulagnier, who, in her theory of pictograms, involves affect and the body in the most primitive forms of representations.

Perelberg raises important questions about the comparison between what is not represented, as in Bion's concept of beta-elements, and Freud's idea about the drives. Is there a correspondence between Bion's beta-elements and Freud's concept of the drives? From early on in Freud's work there is the idea that excess is connected with unpleasure and discharge with pleasure. I ask myself whether binding and more developed forms of representation lead to pleasure, as there is less excess and excitation. Also, there is the question of whether identification can be seen both as excess and as representation—as, for instance, in hysteria, where an identification is leading to the symptom, but at the same time the central identifications in the Oedipus situation are used to bind the polymorphous drives and bisexuality into a binary opposition of differentiating between love objects and objects of identification.

The issue of primitive forms of representation is further developed by Perelberg in a very striking chapter on love and melancholia in the analysis of women by women. She writes that a melancholic core is connected to an internal maternal imago. “The attachment to this primary love object may be preserved in a melancholic, invisible way and may reach representation only in the *après-coup* of the analytic process” (108). Often attacks on the body take place in such an analysis, which Perelberg sees as attacks on the primary object and, at the same time, as preservation of the object. Such analyses bring to the fore intense somatic experiences that can be perceived as unconscious phantasies about the maternal body.

Perelberg quotes Kristeva, who has suggested that in some women patients there is present a psychosomatic fatigue that expresses an inability to choose the sex of their object of desire, because they have failed to work through their bisexuality. An inherent psychic bisexuality is constituted in women in that the love for the mother is never given up. Melancholia, in contrast to mourning, is characterized by the experience of the individual not consciously knowing what has been lost. Regarding technique, if the analyst focuses on interpreting aggression and sadism, she may miss the underlying longings that these symptoms conceal. As Green says:

... “to interpret hatred in structures which take on depressive characteristics amounts to never approaching the primary core of this constellation” (1986b, p. 146). (110)

For Perelberg, a central aspect is that symptoms may have a paradoxical function, thereby expressing the conflict between longing for the mother and fear of fusion with her. She concludes this chapter by saying that the loss of the maternal object can never be completely mourned, and that the melancholic can take refuge in anxiety that floods into the room or leads to somatic breakdown. Many women's struggle to turn away and separate from their mothers involves a bodily symptom.

Perelberg discusses another—in my view, very important—question: namely, that of differentiating neurotic states from more structurally severe cases. She formulates the question: what happens when mother fails and appears frightening or absent? Following André Green, Perelberg argues that the result is not an economy of unconscious desire, but a logic of despair. The latter is less organized than the primary process and has to contend with unprocessed elements coming from the id. According to Perelberg, the aim of analytic work with this group of patients is to transform hallucinations into words that create a narrative about the patient's history, transforming delirium into play and death into absence. For such patients there is a failure of hallucinatory wish-fulfilment, the outcome of a traumatic encounter with the primary object. As if it is not possible to invest in the mnemic trace, the patient withdraws into a personal, bodily and sensorial domain, and the excess does not reach representation. These conclusions have important implications for psychoanalytic technique. When you cannot interpret that which is not there (in the mind of the patient), the task then becomes, not that of “finding” an unconscious phantasy already there, but, rather, that of inaugurating the symbolic domain and a world of (re)presentations.

In the final chapter Perelberg revisits Freud's text on the uncanny. She suggests that Freud's “The Uncanny” raises questions about the primal scene, the maternal and the paternal, and the sexual of the feminine and the masculine. There is, Perelberg suggests, in relation to Hoffman's “The Sandman,” a marked contrast between Nathaniel's view of the “day” father, described as “mild and honest,” and his image of the “night,” sexual father, whose features are distorted into a repulsive and diabolical mask by some horrible, convulsive pain. In establishing a link between the uncanny and the incestuous phantasies about the mother and the father, desires are revealed that are frightening, forbidden and disgusting. Perelberg raises the following questions: is it that the act of sex is, by definition, uncanny because of the experience that “one has, therefore, been there before”? Is incest at the core of the riddle of anxiety? The chapter examines these questions in relation to Gabriel García Márquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and a detailed clinical example.

It has been a great joy for me to review this very important book, which, among many other things, opens up a crucial question of the nature of the drives and psychosexuality. Can the drives be viewed both as excess and as representation? Regarding psychosexuality: is every primitive psychic phenomenon actually about sexuality, even if it leans from the beginning on the self-preservation instinct or on the infant's needs?

Throughout the book, in the several clinical accounts, Perelberg brings alive her delicate and profound attunement to her patients. In the words of Catherine Chabert,

who writes one of the endorsements to the book: “... this is a psychoanalyst who is alive and vibrant—alive in the construction of her concepts and her method, anchored in the original foundations, and yet open to further contributions.”

I highly recommend this book, which advances, I believe, our clinical and theoretical psychoanalytic understanding of sexuality.