THE DEAD MOTHER

The Work of André Green

Edited by Gregorio Kohon
... a final eccentric solitariness.
(Annabel Patterson, Andrew Marvell)

What does the analyst want for the patient that the patient can, at least hope for, from the analyst? One of the striking things about André Green’s writing has been his willingness to formulate answers to this question. Green has never been shy about making claims for analysis, about what psychoanalysis really is – both what it entails and where it cannot suspend its judgement – and thus what its aims might be. The idea of psychoanalysis as having aims (the relative freedom to love and work, the achievement of the depressive position, the capacity to play, the flourishing of one’s true self) is one of the ways psychoanalysis makes sense of itself. An aim, after all, gives direction to our wishes, it gives hope a target. We think of the patient’s purposes, his sense of direction, changing during an analysis, but not of the whole notion of a sense of direction being put into question. In psychoanalysis (both as theory and practice), the teleology of a life is recomposed but never disappears as a guiding principle. It gives the idea of the unconscious its necessary minimum of intelligibility: we may not know what we want, but we know that we want. We are always going somewhere for something.

Despite, or perhaps because of the rigour of his theorising – his always acute and incisive Freudian inductions – Green’s stated aims of analysis have always been poignantly simple, with none of the covert moralism of the more esoteric versions of psychoanalysis.

Green writes:

...my hope at the end of the analysis will be, according to Freud’s guidelines, that my analysand will be able to enjoy life a little more than he used to do before coming into treatment or, as Winnicott says, that he will be more alive, even if his symptoms do not all disappear.

(Green, 1995b, p. 880)
And after going from Freud to Winnicott he can, as ever, make good his return to Freud: 'Is our psychoanalytic Puritanism,' he continues, 'responsible for the fact that we would consider sexuality as negligible in such enjoyment?' (Green, 1995b, p. 880).

Green says in an interview:

> What I think we are doing in analysis is to enable the people who come to us to increase their feeling of freedom. In what way? In order to liberate the forces which are present in themselves to enjoy life, not as scared people looking for all sorts of safety, nor as repenting sinners, but as human beings who are inhibited by something which makes them move on in quest of something they value. Analysis should improve their capacity to cathex something. We don’t have to say what, they will find out ... In other words analysis should improve what the patient already has, or give him the possibility of finding that life is worth living.

(Green, 1995, p. 25)

Enjoyment, aliveness, love of life, the feeling of freedom, cathexis as the quest for something of personal value, the possibility of what Green calls 'sexual ecstasy' (Green, 1995a); these, quite explicitly, are Green's values; the demands, one might say, he makes on analysis.

And yet, inextricable from these particular aims and inspirations, there is always another aim functioning ambiguously in Green's writing, as both a means and an end. 'Just as the instincts “seek representation”, psychoanalysis can have no other aim than the working out of the activity of representation in the widest possible sense' (Green, 1991). 'So what should the aim of psychoanalytic work be?'; Green asks elsewhere, 'To help the patient go as far as possible in the representation of his internal world and of his relationship to the external world as well, but mainly of the internal' (ibid.). In practical terms it is 'for the analyst to devote himself to the task of elaboration ... to give effect, albeit provisionally, to symbolisation which is always begun and never finished' (Green, 1985, p. 46). So for Green the 'only aim, in varying the elasticity of the analytic setting' (that is, in any way modifying the prescriptions of so-called classical analysis) is 'in searching for and preserving the minimum conditions for symbolisation' (ibid., p. 49). And because it is representation (the apparently fundamental capacity for symbolisation) that is, as it were, the aim and the object of analytic practice – then, what is the connection, if any, between what Green calls 'maximal symbolisation' and love of life? If, as Green suggests in a resonant sentence in his book on tragedy, 'The confusion between the unrepresented and the non-represented seems to be the source of errors of interpretation' (Green, 1979, p. 30), then how would clarifying this confusion, if such a thing were possible, enable us to enjoy life a little more? Does maximal symbolisation (the hitherto unrepresented that is available for representation) lead to love of life – guarantee it, as it were? It is an act of faith (an act of Eros perhaps?) to believe that what is there to be represented, what can be represented, is necessarily on the side of a person's life. Green's work, in other words, circles around a question that seems almost quaint now: what kind of good can it do us to make the unconscious conscious? In what sense is loving (and therefore fostering) a representation of loving life? The belief that symbolisation is good for us (as a general principle, not, say, true for some people but not for others) is one of the foundational assumptions of psychoanalytic practice.

It is as difficult to define representation as it is to imagine an alternative to it. If, as Freud says in the phrase quoted by Green, that the instincts 'seek representation', it seems as if there is at least something (call it instinctual life, or even affect) to set against representation; something that is not yet in representational form. Words, like instincts, drives, urges, affects are, paradoxically, our representations for whatever both seeks and resists representation. There is a story here about how something that is not language is turned into language; how the infant, or the body, articulates itself, engages in what Green calls 'the work of inner transformation'. Dreams and affect, and states of emptiness or absence have been the essential perplexities of Green's work because they are the areas of experience (or anti-experience) in which the nature of representation itself is put at risk: its very possibility is put in question. Representation is the individual's acknowledged insufficiency; his attempt to make more life rather than more death-in-life out of the inevitable (if temporary) absence of what he depends on. It is as though absence can only be borne if it is recognised as such: symbolisation, or the abolition of need. Green remarks:

> The dream remains a paradigm because it is the model for the whole of our work ... the importance of the dream is closely linked to the importance of the concept of representation because, once again, what I think is most important is the dream representation, the thing which repeats itself in the absence of the object ... the mind has the capacity to bring something back again which has been related to an object, without the object being there.

(Green, 1979, p. 30)

It is worth noticing here that Green does not say the object has been brought back, but something which has been related to an object, feeling for the object, desire for the object has been restored, via representation, in its absence. As though representation prevents our becoming oblivious of our affective life. 'In the end', he writes, 'what I maintain is that affect is representation', meaning that it can take no other form, or that affect in some way constitutes representation. 'Signifier of the flesh is what I proposed in Le Discours vivant. Today I would rather say the representative of passion'
(Green, 1980, p. 250). Analysis becomes a way of keeping our passions in play, 'the extension of the field of passion' (ibid.). The capacity for representation is deemed necessary (though not instrumental) to this project.

Our passionate selves are our best selves; and a passionate life is only possible, by definition, if we can make our passions known to ourselves, by the absence of the object stimulating desire and its correlative representations, and to the object through the articulation of love as demand. There can be no passion – or rather, no recognisable passion – without representation. But this compelling psychoanalytic picture leaves us with a logical, and therefore an emotional conundrum: can there be passion without recognition? Is a private passion akin to the impossibility of a private language? Passion entails circulation and exchange; it is in Green's felicitous phrase, a field. But why, after Green's uniquely interesting Freudian detour – after his own elaborations of Winnicott and Bion and his agonistic relation to Lacan – does Green end up with the traditional value of passion? What does his work add, or indeed does the relatively new work of psychoanalysis add to the old idea of passion; what further justifications does it offer?

'The object is the revealing agent of the instincts' (Green, 1991). More impressed by the immeasurable solitude of the baby than by its moments of contact – committed, that is to say, to primary narcissism rather than the consoling sociability of the newly over-observed infant (Green, 1995b) – Green has steered subtly between the Scylla and Charybdis of contemporary psychoanalytic theory. If we are endlessly offered either sexuality as the denial of the other (with its apotheosis in perversion) or concern for the other as denial of sexuality (with its apotheosis in reparation), Green nevertheless has been able to go on asking the Freudian question: what, if anything, has our passion got to do with so-called other people?

Again ... we are confronted with our ideology of what psychoanalysis is for. What is its aim? Overcoming our primitive anxieties, to repair our objects damaged by our sinful evil? To ensure the need for security? To pursue the norms of adaptation? Or to be able to feel alive and to cathex the many possibilities offered by the diversity of life, in spite of its inevitable disappointments, sources of unhappiness and loads of pain?

(Green, 1995b)

Green's critique of psychoanalysis is only plausible because it implicitly acknowledges how representation can be the enemy of passion, and not merely when it is in the service of the death instinct. Kleinians promoting reparation, or ego-psychologists promoting adaptation both think of themselves as the guardians of Eros.

And yet, of course, to talk of the uses of representation – to talk pragmatically – in a psychoanalytic context, can only beg the question. In what sense, at least in psychoanalytic language, can we describe a person as choosing the use he will put his representations to? No one in the psychoanalytic community would claim to be speaking on behalf of the death instinct. And yet clearly one person's psychoanalytic aim (or ideal) can be another person's problem. It is curious how devoted one can be to the picture of a struggle (or indeed a war) between the life instinct and the death instinct – without there being any kind of consensus about how to recognise the workings of Eros. Reparation, adaptation, safety, aliveness, passion. Green, like anyone else, can assert his preference, but does it need backing from a god?

There is clearly a question here about how we go about legitimating our psychoanalytic aims, bound up as they are with fantasies about the kind of world we would prefer to live in. And this may not be a matter of providing foundations where none can be found, but rather of producing persuasive descriptions of why certain things, like aliveness or passion, might matter. How, if we take these things seriously, good things follow (if we start preferring aliveness, to adaptation, say, how will our lives be different?). If psychoanalysis saw itself as rhetoric rather than metaphysics (as persuading people to prefer certain ways of living to others, rather than revealing the truths about, and causes of themselves) we might have better descriptions not only of the aims of analysis, but of why we should value such aims. Slogans like 'Love and Work', for example, would be less likely to catch on so easily and we might be wondering then why so much of what Freud calls love sounds like work. So by way of conclusion I want to deduce, through a brief reading of Green's great paper, 'Passions and their vicissitudes', why it might be a good idea to value passion, and what Green adds to our common-sense view of passion that makes it even more attractive. It is one of the great virtues of Green's writing that it always performs what it claims to value: the work of transformation. One of the vicissitudes that the passions undergo in this paper is the imaginative work Green does on them.

For Green the question is not, is a passionate life a good life? but rather, given the passions, what life can we make that feels worth living? Passion, reduced to its scientific signifier, instinct, grounds the intelligibility, however vagrant, of both sanity and madness: 'instinctual life which is, after all, life itself' (Green, 1983, p. 244). As Green writes, passion is – whatever kind of mythological status we give it – the ultimate psychoanalytic referent. Without the life and death instincts, and their historical precursor, the passions, the human subject would seem disembodied. Now that the soul has fallen out of
Our vocabulary we are left with the passions as the heart of the mystery. It can only sound crass to talk of the pragmatics of passion (to ask why we might choose or value a passionate life over any other kind of life) because passion itself is the secular essentialism. The death of God can be proclaimed, but no one is going to celebrate the death of passion. As Green states quite explicitly:

We know enough now to understand that passion, be it mad or psychotic, calls the tune ... [but] ... let us say to begin with that we (psychoanalysts) have taken care to recognise it only where it already exists. We have not introduced it. It is where it has always been. And if it was necessary to recognise it, it is because we underestimated its importance.

(1983, p. 241)

The paradox that Green begins with is that passion has always been there, but that psychoanalysis began with Freud trying to push it out of the picture, undermining it, as Green says (at least in translation), as though passion needed to be sabotaged. And now it needs to be reinstated, where it has always been. The return of passion as the repressed of psychoanalysis is the gist of Green’s intent. This brings with it, of course, the assumption that something essential has been lost, and needs to be re-found.

For Green there is an ‘original madness’, not a psychotic core that defines the human subject and in his view Freud ‘minimised ... the intrinsically mad essence’ of the instincts. Original madness is no more and no less than the individual’s inborn instinctual life. So to understand neurotic conflict, for example, as merely a question of superego prohibitions of the normal functions of nourishment, sexuality and work is consolingly bland. ‘Should one not rather think that it is the risk of the appearance of this potential madness in the execution of these functions that makes it so dangerous to carry them out, and so implicitly disorganising for the ego’ (ibid., p. 224). In other words, there is an excess here, an intensity of something, that psychoanalytic theory itself conspires to conceal. Freud failed with Dora, Green suggests, because he focused too much on her dreams, in other words, on her unconscious representations – while minimising her affects; and because he was ‘obliged to keep the transference outside the analysis, because with it the primacy of affects over representations appeared’ (ibid., p. 225).

Representations, Green remarks, sustained a ‘mediating distance’ for Freud, ensuring he was ‘well guarded against dangerous false connections’. There is something immediate, too present, too urgent, too invasive, called affect for which representation provides a boundary: both a barrier and a channel. But in the first act of the drama that is Green’s paper there is, as it were, a natural antagonism between passion or affect and representation. And the ‘dramatic’ emblem of this antagonism is the sheer physicality of the hysterical fit, ‘the element of passionate frenzy, linked to an instinctual upsurge’ (Green, 1983, p. 221). There is an intensity of affect that representation cannot bind; the ordinary madness of love articulates, above all, the insufficiency of language. Passion without representation in autistic states or Green’s blank psychosis is death-in-life, suicide by insulation; but the representation of passion ruptures language, reveals a daunting lack in representation itself. ‘Fantasy binds libido to representations’, Green writes; and yet,

To concern oneself in preference to these representations is to analyse, but perhaps it is only to half-analyse, if the suffering caused by this impossible love is not taken into account. It is to fix one’s attention to the sexual theories of children while failing to recognise that the solution they present is only partial compared with the quantity of libido which they do not manage to bind by this means, and which remains a burden for the child.

( Ibid., p. 226)

Despite the technologies of technique (the elaborate sophistications of theory, the racket of profundity of competing analytic schools) psychoanalysis becomes simply and starkly: the emotional impact two people have on each other, whether they like it or not. ‘It is a question’, Green writes, spelling out the necessary impossibility of the venture, ‘of binding an unquenchable libidinal tension through meaning’ (ibid., p. 227).

Green’s paper hurls towards passion as catastrophe (‘is passion the best or the worst of things? One is bound to admit that it is more often the worst than the best’ (ibid., p. 236)) and towards the therapeutic pessimism that always follows in the wake of relinquishing all the versions of instrumental reason. Burdened by the burden of the child Green refers to, what is to be done? Is meaning, as it were, up to the task we have set it, or more often than not a betrayal masquerading as an affirmation, of the passionate life inside us? Having got himself into a familiar corner (and passion, after all is what always corners us), Green makes some useful distinctions in his defence of the very thing that leaves us defenceless. ‘It seems to me essential,’ he writes, ‘to re-establish madness in the place where it has been recognised for all time: at the heart of human desire’ (ibid., p. 239). And re-establishing it can only mean, given its rather obvious resilience, re-describing it in more promising form. If, as Green writes, ‘Freud’s logic is a logic of hope because it counts on wish fulfilment’ (Green, 1980, p. 241), then passion is primordial hope.

Having shown the daunting incompatibility of representation and passion (and, of course, their necessary complicity – there can be no communicable, no hopeful passion without representation) Green describes how the mother is the one who gives the infant’s passione a chance, as it were. His lucid distinction between madness and psychosis, and his account of the origin of
psychosis ('Psychosis emerges when the subject is forced to mobilise his destructive instincts as a means to putting an end to a fusional relationship with a primordial object' (Green, 1983, p. 243)) are committed to the necessary value of binding the unbinding. 'Without representation instinct has become blind' (ibid., p. 240), he writes; but with representation what does it become? Tolerable is Green's word. Without representation the ego is overwhelmed, 'subject to the anxiety of separation and intrusion' (ibid., p. 246). And yet there is an equivocation here, an ambivalence about representation that echoes throughout Green's work: the very thing that makes the individual's passion viable – representation – also gives it the lie. That representation is never good enough, and by the same token it is the only thing that is good enough.

Green leaves us with a contradiction that we should prefer to see as a paradox. On the one hand, he writes, 'I do not believe that affect escapes from symbolisation, or from metaphor' (ibid., p. 251); in other words, there is a sense in which affect can only reside in, be recognised through, its representations. On the other hand, implying as he has done throughout, that we may be bewitched (defensively over-impressed) by representations, he suggests in another personal confession: 'It seems to me that the attention given to representation comes from the concern for scientific demonstrability' (ibid., p. 250). And what then, we might wonder, is that a concern for? Cultural prestige, legitimation, reassuring forms of consensus? When Green, who has written with such illumination and consistency about negation writes, by way of internal debate, 'I am not saying that the work (in psychoanalysis) on representation is of little value …' (ibid., p. 249), he gives us pause for thought. What else could we write about, or with, but representation? What would psychoanalytic practice be like, what would we do differently if (to reverse Green's earlier formula) we gave primacy to affect over representation? What Green's extraordinary Freudian meditation on passion leaves us with then is not the virtually nonsensical question: is keeping faith with representation keeping faith with passion? but the more pragmatic question, apparently incompatible with what we might think of as a psychoanalytic ethos, what kind of representations sustain our love of life, or foster that form of hopeful passion that Winnicott called aliveness, and that Green himself promotes? If we take seriously Green's preference for the Freudian language of pleasure and displeasure, as opposed to the Kleinian language of good and bad, we would talk about a person's capacity or appetite for pleasurable forms of representation.

We need to distinguish, to tell the difference between what Green calls in this paper 'Freud's double equation, Eros = binding; destructive instincts = unbinding' (ibid., p. 248). This, of course, is the distinction that grounds all of Green's formulations and makes Bion's work integral to his own perspective. So it is instructive when, under the guise of being rather fussily punctilious, Green appears to under-emphasise a crucial point. He writes:

For binding and unbinding are always at work in madness as in psychosis. It is the resultant that counts, making transformations of the products of creation, or debris, products of disintegration. One must also insist, if one wishes to dot one's i's, on the positive role of unbinding, which produces discontinuity without which the mechanisms of recombination could not take place ....

(ibid., p. 249)

If there is a 'positive role' of unbinding, what are the criteria by which we recognise it? If unbinding makes possible a more fruitful binding, then Eros and the destructive instincts are collaborators and not exclusively antagonists. The individual's destructiveness may be integral, indeed essential to his passionate life, even if the consequent work of transformation seems to work against him. The logic of a life may be in excess of the distinctions we can make about it. Or, to put it another way, how does one know when someone is being self-destructive? To think of oneself as one's own best enemy implies an omniscient knowledge of what is good for one. Passion, as Green eloquently reiterates throughout this paper, leads people to apparently ruin their lives – 'acts which can compromise an entire life' (ibid., 1983, p. 222) – and yet from which of the many points of view in oneself is it ruin? 'Beyond the wish to recover', Freud says, 'the analysand clings to his illness'; Green writes, 'and I say that he prefers the object of his passion' (ibid., p. 251). A good life may entail the destruction of all that one apparently values; this is what Green intimates, this is the loophole he adds to our story of the passions. Passion always makes action morally equivocal. The passionate life is a good life because its goodness is always in question. Passion, Green stresses, is the object of analysis and sets the limit to analysability. It both tests and constitutes our capacity for representation; because it is a threat to this capacity, it is the source of its renovation. The life-line that is a death-line.

If 'The dead mother', whatever else it is, is Green's history of the psychoanalytic movement – a history of analysts brought up by, trained by, analysts mourning the death of the analytic parents – then 'Passion and its vicissitudes' is Green's Genealogy of Morals. Green's psychoanalytic aims, after all, cannot help but echo Nietzsche's paradoxical moral aim of 'more life'. And the dead mother, in Green's description, turns the infant's passions to persecutions. It is the fate of the analyst's passions – in the practice of analysis, bound and unbound by the analytic setting – that provides the sub-plot, the uncomic relief, of these remarkable twinned papers. How does the analyst keep his love for analysis, his aliveness to the work? The passion for analysis, one might say, is the struggle against the dead mother. But if the passion for analysis is merely the analysis of passion, then what is the analyst consigning himself to?
References