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The Complexity of Love by

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Strivings of the soul, that include innocence and betrayal are about the dynamics of relating with others. The film 'Effie Gray' opens with a twelve-year old girl telling of a fairy story of how a hard-working young man wrote the story for her, for his angel come down to earth. She narrates:

'Once, a beautiful girl lived in a very cold house in Scotland. The house was cold because someone's grandfather killed himself there. One day his grandson came and visited the house. He thought the beautiful girl was an angel come down to earth. The grandson worked very hard. He read and thought and drew and wrote. He wrote a fairy story just for her. She was twelve years old. Her mother and father were kind. But his were wicked. When she grew up he married her.'

The story, called 'The King of the Golden River' was about the battle between good and evil - a popular story for generations of children to come. It is a symbol that prefigures the other story of the real life relationship within marriage. Both stories depict polar opposites: aesthetic ideals and human reality, goodness and badness, coldness and warmth, life and death, kindness and cruelty played out in the nightmare of the six years of their marriage. The film, as a third story, draws us excruciatingly into the imagined interiors of lives within the relationship that developed between the angel, Effie Gray and the grandson, John Ruskin.

To set the scene: John Ruskin was born in 1819, Effie, ten years younger, in 1828. Effie, was nineteen, when they married, John was twenty-eight. The marriage was annulled six years later. Their personal drama was embedded in the middle of the Victorian century when: most marriages were arranged; when marriage was an indissoluble contract terminated only by death; when a woman's reputation, if lost, would signify social banishment; when children were meant not to show

spontaneity and feelings. Emotions were unconscious or banished from consciousness. Unconscious emotions form what Jung termed 'complexes': they are clusters of thoughts, perceptions and feelings that may make us act in certain ways. Such clusters are named, for instance: a mother complex, a father complex, a child complex. They are a reflection of emotional dynamics in actual relationships with a mother, a father, that are like structures in the unconscious. The emotions affect us in our bodies as well as our minds. 'The complex' writes Jung,

'has a sort of body, a certain amount of its own physiology. It can upset the stomach. It upsets the breathing, it disturbs the heart; in short, it behaves like a partial personality. For instance, when you want to say or do something and unfortunately a complex interferes with this intention, then you say or do something different from what you intended. You are simply interrupted, and your best intention gets upset by the complex, exactly as if you had been interfered with by a human being or by circumstances from outside.'

Complexes are not only personal - they are also cultural, comprising the ways of the thinking and feelings a culture expresses, that influence the minds of individuals. Such clusters hover in the Nursery and in a lifetime, like the generational ghosts of past relationships. Escher's lithograph print 'Relativity' depicts the theme through staircases and persons that defy gravity. It is as if there are staircases up and down between conscious and unconscious realms, with past persons we, and our ancestors have known in all kinds of unconscious configurations. The film's graphic lens makes us feel the impact of John's 'mother complex' on his marital relationship. His struggles to relate with Effie reflect the emotional dynamics of his relationship with his mother and her patterns of relating with his father. We are going to watch how this happens through very short clips of particular moments in the film.

The first is the arrival at John's house. We shall see John hesitate before he can call it 'home,' expressive of complicated feelings - wanting to feel it is home, while not able to feel it is. Conflicts can paralyse us. He faces the new marital task of becoming separate from his parents, to transfer his love for mother to his new wife, to make a separate psychological and physical home for the two of them. We, as audience, emotionally contract when, having arrived home in

his father's carriage John and Effie enter the house. His parents welcome them in their hall. But Mrs. Ruskin is clearly gripped by her own complex adverse feelings, as she takes John 'to put him in a bath, because, says his father, she has been 'aching to get her hands on him.' His father colludes with her, making Effie stay downstairs.

Thus we see a primary element of John's mother complex – that although an adult, he is a controlled little child. He doesn't say 'No, Effie and I will go and change and then come down to dinner.' There is no shift to make a couple with Effie instead of his mother. Mr. Ruskin, also controlled by his wife, fails to separate his wife and son, as if unable, like John, to say 'No' to her, which would model a different response that John might make. Gruesomely, John's mother conveys to her new daughter in law, that she, his mother, retains the rights she had when he was a child, to his naked body, to have a sensual experience in bathing him. Mother, father, childish-man are in a collusive conjoined state, Effie as yet outside of their claustrophobic triangle. The mother complex, a mix of the archetypal and the personal, paralyzes John's potential action; he passively fits in with the model he has in his mind of how his relationship with his mother works, and hers with his father. Perhaps he learnt in childhood not to disturb her (and their) emotional equilibrium.

Like the public of their time, we are drawn into judging, taking sides in their personal drama, since we are rooted within our own personal and cultural unconscious dynamics. It is a struggle not to telescope their dynamics into ours, as if our current perspectives are more real, true, or fundamental than theirs.

The clip continues, and draws us into becoming as enmeshed as Effie and John in the family's relational dynamics, full of the ghosts of ancestors. What generational factors caused their incapacity to separate from John and let him become an independent and sexual man? John's parents were cousins. They had each suffered traumatic events, related to social status and psychological loss. John's mother, as a young girl, lost her publican father, crushed and killed, riding into Croydon. Furthermore, a traumatic shared factor was hidden in the shadows of John and Effie's ancestral pasts. Biographical

research tells us the following story: John's paternal grandfather, suffered melancholia, hot-temperedness and black rages. He became unable to work causing his son (John's) father to leave school to work hard to settle his father's debts, delaying for seven years his marriage to John's mother. John's grandfather finally cut his own throat, soon after his wife's death. John's mother, alone with him, held the wound together to staunch the blood as he died. This is the suicide referred to in the first clip. The family drama plot thickens. Ghosts of Effie's past and John's past merged when Effie Gray's father bought that house from John's father. Effie was born in the room in which the suicide took place. John and Effie were married in the same room. His parents could not bear to attend the wedding. Such events are like ghosts that haunt future generations, the figures we saw in Escher's staircase. They cast their shadow forward into the dinner scene that follows after the bathing scene.

The dinner scene opens: Mrs. Ruskin is saying Grace at the beginning of the meal. She includes thanking God for delivering 'her heart's treasure' back home. The words 'heart's treasure' suggest something/someone very difficult to give up. They speak of the wedding, Effie saying how they missed them at the wedding, John saying it was a shame they could not be there. 'Never mind, never mind, it's all over now' says Mrs. Ruskin. They move on to comment on Effie's thinness that Effie explains is because she had been ill due to the pressures on her family of her father's financial worries. Mr. Ruskin tells her that strain is gone, they will never want for money again. Mrs. Ruskin tells her son, in a disapproving tone, that he has grown stouter, which Mr. Ruskin says is due to the Scotch air. Mrs. Ruskin retorts 'Nonsense, you cannot be well in Scotland, you will cough all through the winter.' John speaks with firmness and authority in his voice, that he is much improved, stronger, and has resumed painting. Effie says words that seem to feel poisonous to Mrs. Ruskin - about how John has been drawing her so much it must have cost him lots in paper and pens. John looks to Effie, saying 'Who wouldn't, with such a subject'. His mother gives Effie a present, saying she might as well give it now, as Effie would have it when she dies. The mention of her death causes John to look at his mother with much concern and reach out to take her hand, then he reaches and takes Effie's and handholds the two hands simultaneously. At this very moment he has a sudden coughing fit that panics Mrs. Ruskin to jump up to attend to him. Mr.

Ruskin, in archetypal words tells Effie to let his mother do this, 'you know what mothers are like.'

What a prescient moment this is, foretelling the rest of their marital drama. A cough, the Victorian shadow of tuberculosis, suggests suffocation, an inability to swallow painful emotions. The atmosphere becomes airless, thick with ghosts, thick with complex emotional dynamics. The parents cannot adjust to form new couple and triangular forms of relating. John cannot hold Effie's hand without holding his mother's. Father cannot intervene. Perhaps this is the 'wickedness' that the little girl for whom the King of the Golden River was written, attributed to the boy's parents - that they could not free their son, to become himself.

Thus, after the dinner, John could not respond to Effie, when in the bedroom. Effie comes into the bedroom in her nightgown; John is there, in his. They look at one another in silence. Effie slowly slips the straps down and drops her nightgown down to the floor. Her new husband's face expresses total dissociation, as he disconnects his mind from perceiving what is too much for his selfhood to bear. He leaves the room.

The morning after the bedroom scene, the dynamics intensify. Effie goes to be with her husband in his study. John, unable to accept her there, sends her to his mother pruning her roses in the rose garden, to help her, rather than him. In the garden, her help is rejected since 'no-one touches' Mrs. Ruskin's roses - 'as John knows', says Mrs. Ruskin. Then why did he send her there? 'Then' says Effie, almost with a nuance of defiance, 'I shall go and help John.' 'Help him' says Mrs. Ruskin 'you cannot help him.' 'I can take notes, I can sharpen his pencils', replies Effie. 'My dear' secateurs in hand 'you have married no ordinary man, and the best way, indeed the only way in which you can help him, is by leaving him alone.' Leaving him alone, says Effie, what, we are only just married.' her mother-in-law replies: 'John being able to work, undisturbed and unfettered, affords him the best chance of establishing his name - and you of course want the best position society that you can reach.' as she turns back to her roses. We too are drawn inexorably into the rose garden, its thorns symbolic of Mrs. Ruskin's complex prickly feelings. John makes a fatal error in the development of his marital relationship, to pair Effie with his mother rather than with him. It is as if traumatic experience has affected his

reflective capacity to put himself in either female's shoes, and imagine their feelings. Effie's help is rejected. She is trapped. 'Then what am I to do?' she asks.

The claustrophobic atmosphere provides no space for Effie to inhabit. We move to the Eastlakes' arrival. Effie is in bed; the servant (Mr. Ruskin's old childhood nurse) gives Effie Mrs. Ruskin's laudanum, morphine; Effie says her mother-in-law is poisoning her. Mr. and Mrs. Eastlake, downstairs, notice with concern Effie's absence. Mrs. Ruskin hastens upstairs to Effie in bed, and expresses her hatred of her daughter-in-law as she accuses her of not being ill, just 'peevish', that she must get up and come down. The scene that follows on, depicts John's father's fury as he speaks with his son about his mother 'being in floods', until John says archetypal child-parent words: 'I am sorry I am such a disappointment to you both', His emotional paralysis prohibits him from expressing anger at his parents' intrusiveness, at their commandeering of his capacities and growing public recognition for their own status desires.

To understand how John's mother complex reflects their relational dynamics, we leave the film for a few moments and move forwards in time to three decades later, two and a half decades after the annulment of his marriage, to a morning in 1885, the anniversary of John's deceased father's birthday. Imagine John, aged sixty-six, sitting in the Nursery Room of his childhood home that close relatives kept for him to return to, its cuckoo clock still sounding, as he began to write details of his childhood. John Ruskin was trying to make sense of his mental sufferings after recently resigning his Oxford Fine Arts Professorship, unable to restrict his lectures to the prescribed curriculum, too overwhelmed by turbulent mental states. His parents were dead, his father struck by lightning. He cast his memory back beyond the six decades of his two hundred and fifty writings on literature, the theatre, society, music, mythology, science, history, beyond his ideals for ecology, for social reform, for free schools and libraries, beyond his drawings and paintings, beyond his first publication when he was only ten years old. Now, in his Nursery, he was writing his *Praeterita* meaning 'past things', portraying the formation of complexes in his 'poor little life':

'A dutiful offering at the grave of parents who trained my childhood to all the good it could attain, and whose memory makes declining life cheerful in the hope of being soon again with them.'

His dead parents are as if his companions, alive in his mind, but couched in deathly images of their grave, his death to come, a hereafter with his parents, unseparated, united in death. They climb up the stairs of his unconscious, as if present in their influence on his thoughts and feelings, the stuff of complexes. He goes on to portray an image of a child trained by his parents - for goodness and fame, not for the complexity of life that includes hate, anger, jealousy, not for ordinary emotional, relational and sexual life. He writes:

'My mother forced me, by steady daily toil, to learn chapters of the Bible by heart, to read it every syllable through, aloud, hard names and all, from Genesis to the Apocalypse, about once a year.' Devoting me to God, meant, as far as my mother knew herself what she meant, that she would try to send me to college and make a clergyman of me: and I was accordingly bred for the Church.'

She was, he told, imitating Hannah (in the Bible) who, after childlessness, devoted Samuel to God. John further narrates:

'I found the bottom of the pew so extremely dull a place to keep quiet in (my best storybooks being also taken away from me in the morning) that the horror of Sunday used even to cast its prescient gloom as far back in the week as Friday - and the glory of Monday with church seven days removed again, was no equivalent for it.'

Indeed he wrote of the 'dread of -ill-keeping the Sunday:

'As being 'mere fear after all, no real feeling - a childish terror - induced by whipping and sermonising.'

Imagine if we can the child's dark shadow of dread, terror, and hatred; imagine its impact in his developing mind, as he found self-protective

survival ways of defending himself to manage painful feelings. He recounts he was not permitted toys, was given a bunch of keys to play with that jingled and glittered, well-cut wooden bricks, and later a cart and a ball - hard, lonely toys. He continues:

‘With these modest, but, I still think, entirely sufficient possessions, and being always summarily whipped if I cried, did not do as I was bid, or tumbled on the stairs, I soon attained serene and secure methods of life and motion; and could pass my days contentedly in tracing the squares and comparing the colours of my carpet; examine the knots in the wood of the floor, or counting the bricks in the opposite houses, and rapturous intervals of excitement watching the filling of a water cart through its leathern pipe. But the carpet, and what patterns could be found in bedcovers, dresses, or wallpapers to be examined, were my chief resources’ achieving accuracy in observation and of attention to details.’

He uses the word again, on a childhood holiday in the Bath Hotel, Matlock:

‘the glittering white broken spar, speckled with Galena, by which the walls of the hotel were made bright, and in the shops of the pretty village, and in many a happy walk along its cliffs, I pursued my mineralogical studies of fluor, calcite and the press of lead with indescribable rapture.’

The attachment dynamics in his relationship with his Victorian mother are the stuff of relational trauma that is felt deeply not only in the mind but also in the body. Emotional and bodily damage may have stayed locked away, the pressure of dissociated affect now seeking expression when writing in the Nursery. His defense solutions were to regulate his affects, manage his feelings by focusing on carpet patterns, bricks of houses, knots in wood, stones in walls; to acutely observe the natural world instead of persons; to identify and fuse with Nature; and to develop his intellect. In later life he would write of his rapture for a stone, ‘for a stone, when it is examined, will be found a mountain in miniature.’

Returning to the film, we travel to Venice and see how John cannot express relational tenderness when he turns to a stone carving beside them. John strokes the stone dove and speaks of its softness. Effie is next to him, but it is the stone sculpture, not the woman beside him, that ignites his tenderness that he cannot transpose from stone-ness to human-ness. We see reflections of his mother unable to see the child John as a living small feeling-full human being who had his own thoughts, perceptions, feelings, wishes and spontaneous impulses. Thus John developed his precocious intellect. His father wrote in a letter to his ten year old son:

‘You are blessed with a fine capacity even genius & you owe it as a Duty to the author of your Being and the giver of your Talents to cultivate your powers and use them in his Service and for the good of your fellow creatures. You may be doomed to enlighten a people by your Wisdom and to adorn an age by your learning. I am forced to smile when I figure to myself the very little Gentleman to whom I am addressing such language.’

His young son wrote:

‘I do believe that the last year of my life was the happiest: and shall I tell you why? Because I had more to do than I could do without cramming and cramming, and wishing days were longer and sheets were broader, I do think, indeed I am sure, that in common things it is having too much to do which constitutes happiness, and too little, unhappiness.’

The words were a presage of his life to come, as no ordinary man. In later life he was to write:

‘I am almost sick and giddy with the quantity of things in my head - trains of thought beginning and branching to infinity, crossing each other and all tempting and wanting to work out.’

We leave the Nursery, with a greater sense of the relational trauma he suffered, and the dissociative defences needed for his survival. For us there was a gain. His inner

world brought forth the riches of his creative works that continue today to influence contemporary cultural life. In his personal life, he could not bridge the chasm between good and evil, angels and fallen angels, ideal love versus human love, ideal society versus human society, progress symbolised by the industrial revolution versus the wish to conserve. He could not cross the bridge to separate from his parents and have his own life. He struggled to have strategies to help manage emotion in relationships. He soared to the heights of creativity, expressed in the rich writings, paintings and drawings he has bequeathed us, in the social reform he inspired. He plummeted to the depths into the lonely personal hell of his mental pain, which he sought to understand, and help us understand, when he sat, in his mid sixties, writing of his life as a child, depicting the complexes formed in childhood, that gripped his mind and his actions, at the desk in his old Nursery, the cuckoo clock still sounding.

I end with the final moments of the film, when the lawyer delivers a legal document, addressed to John Ruskin, on the steps of John's family home. His parents stand on either side. The lawyer seeks to give the document to John; his father tries to take it on his son's behalf - the lawyer however insists on John taking it. They hear it is from his wife, Effie, annulling their marriage. John, in archetypal words, intimates that his parents are privy to all his affairs. The lawyer speaks to all three that the annulment is on grounds of 'impotency'. Thus the final moments of this wonderful film depict the archetypal parent-child triangle, that could not enable his marriage, whose central space contains the complex reflections of the traumatic relational dynamics the film so richly embodies.

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