

Can Desire be the Opposite of Death?

the exploration of a living dilemma

by

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Part One

In one of the great films of the late 1970's there's a scene towards the end, which has always had a splendid poignancy for me. Isaac Davis, one of the main protagonists, finds himself alone in his apartment talking into the microphone of his cassette recorder. He is working on an idea for a short story, wherein the inhabitants of New York, constantly invent trivial and unnecessary neurotic problems and elevate them into major moral issues. This they do in order to avoid facing the more real, terrifying and unsolvable issues of existence. As he speaks, the monologue goes on something like this:

*"Why is life worth living? It's a very good question. Well, there are certain things, I guess, that make it worthwhile. Umm...like what? For me....umm...I'd say, Groucho Marx, Willie Mays, the second movement of the Jupiter Symphony and umm...Louis Armstrong's recording of Potato-Head Blues, Swedish movies...naturally.... "Sentimental Education" by Flaubert, ah... Marlon Brando, Frank Sinatra....those incredible apples and pears by Cezanne....the crabs at Sam Wo's.... Tracy's face..."*¹

For most of my life I have been concerned with one central issue. It's a question of how to live a meaningful life in the face of a personal inner attitude which has a constant gravitational tendency towards a sense of the meaningless. As far back as I can recall, my basic disposition could be exemplified by the simple question: "what's the point?"

Whether this is a pathological state; a deep-seated depression, the consequence of a broken heart or trans-generational unfinished business concerns me little these days. Of late, I have chosen to take the question on face value and try to answer it as best as I can. For myself, it seems that life is indeed pointless and without any real meaning that satisfies me. There is some redemptive comfort in finding that I am not alone in this conclusion and, in fact, am in most illustrious company.

"The only absolute knowledge attainable by man is that life is meaningless"²

However, what I have found is that, despite this, there are things connected to the experience of being alive which make life worth having. The "point" of life, so far as I am content to use such a phrase, seems to me to be to use it up. In this, life becomes ultimately concerned with death. Without death, life would become wholly unbearable in that any meaningfulness we are able to glean from our existence relies largely on the fact of the immanence of our death. Without death, life cannot be "used up". This presents an interesting possibility for an illusion of immortality in that if I don't use my life, I will live forever. This may sound ludicrous but I think that the maintenance of this fallacy is indeed not uncommon in individuals who appear to refuse to live their lives. I am reminded of a remarkable novel by Simone de Beauvoir, concerning the story of a man who ingests a potion enabling him to live forever, and of how his tenuous illusions of meaning erode as the centuries progress.³

One of the central experiences of being alive is the phenomenon of desire. So long as I am alive, I want, I long for, I lust, I covet, and I yearn for. I experience hunger. My contention is that this experience is essentially one of sensory pleasure. I see this as essentially an organic phenomenon,

bound up with my fundamental aliveness and as such provides, in itself, one of the most fundamentally meaningful phenomenon of being. To desire is a core, positive, ontological experience, irrespective of whether I achieve the object of my desire or not. As a subjective intrapersonal sensational experience it is one of the things that can make life worth living. It gives meaning to a meaningless life. Unfortunately, as I hope to demonstrate, the common habit of coupling the free movement of desire to the need to possess, the need to acquire my desires, is one of the most pernicious factors in the subjugation of our fundamental aliveness.

Tennessee Williams and “A Streetcar Named Desire”

Tennessee Williams (1911-1983) was a prolific playwright and, together with Arthur Miller, is widely regarded to have transformed the American stage. With this new theatre he brought burning passion, envy, rage, frustration and eroticism with, in his own words:

“my little company of the faded and frightened, the difficult, the odd and the lonely”.

He wrote about what he knew best, including many autobiographically inspired characters. He portrayed men and women with painfully frustrated sexuality, characters trying to find meaning in lives shattered by multiple problems and characters on the verge of – or just past – disintegration. Many of his biographers have attributed his personal inner conflicts to the fact that he was a known homo sexual during a very hostile period of American history. In 1947 he met and fell in love with Frank Merlo whilst living in New Orleans. Merlo, a second generation Sicilian American who had served in the U.S. Navy in World War II, was a steadying influence in Williams' chaotic life. But in 1961, Merlo died of lung cancer and the playwright went into a deep depression that lasted for ten years. In fact, Williams struggled with depression throughout most of his life and lived with the constant fear that he would go insane, as did his sister Rose. For much of this period, he struggled with addictions to prescription drugs and alcohol.

Tennessee Williams was born Thomas Lanier Williams, the second child of three, in Columbus, Mississippi on March 26, 1911. Tom, as he was known for most of his life, earned the nickname Tennessee from a college roommate who attributed the name, jokingly to Williams' heritage as a Tennessee pioneer. Tennessee Williams' home and early family life was full of tension and despair. His parents often engaged in violent arguments that frightened his older sister, Rose, so much that one evening she went running out of the house. His father, Cornelius, was a stern businessman who managed a shoe warehouse. Cornelius' bouts with drinking and gambling (habits that later ailed Tennessee) sent rumours about the family throughout the towns in which they lived (Williams moved 16 times in 15 years). His mother, who is often compared to the controlling Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie*, allowed Rose's doctor to perform a frontal lobotomy on Rose - an event that greatly disturbed Williams who cared for Rose throughout most of her adult life. However, Tennessee, Rose and his brother Walter remained close to their mother, Edwina, often encouraging her to leave their abusive father.

In 1931, Williams was admitted to the University of Missouri where he saw a production of Ibsen's *Ghosts* and decided to become a playwright. His journalism program was interrupted however, when his father forced him to withdraw from college to work at the International Shoe Company. There, he worked with a good friend named Stanley Kowalski who would resurface as a character in “A Streetcar Named Desire”. Williams re-enrolled in college at Washington University only to be dropped in 1937. Finally, in 1938, Williams graduated from the University of Iowa, already having produced several of his plays locally (first by a lively theatre group in St. Louis called “The Mummer”). After failing to find work in Chicago, he moved to New Orleans where he changed his name from Tom to Tennessee and launched his career as a writer.

Tennessee's primary sources of inspiration for his works were the writers he grew up with, his family and the South. The work that had the most influence on Williams were those of Federico Garcia Lorca, Arthur Rimbaud, Rainer Maria Rilke, Hart Crane and D.H. Lawrence. His play "I Rise in Flame, Cried the Phoenix" was written as a tribute to D.H. Lawrence, dramatising the events surrounding Lawrence's death. In 1945, Tennessee earned his first commercial success with *The Glass Menagerie*. The play tells the story of Tom, his disabled sister, Laura, and their controlling mother Amanda who tries to make a match between Laura and a gentleman caller. Many people believe that Tennessee used his own familial relationships as inspiration for the play.

Shortly after *Menagerie* closed, Williams was already at work on a new piece which contained the image of a young woman who had just been stood up by the man she was planning to marry. He saw her sitting alone in a chair by a window in the moonlight. By 1947, this piece was finished and performed on the stage as "A Streetcar Named Desire". Blanche Dubois and Stanley Kowalski became household names nearly overnight, and the script continued to make its way into theatres and cinemas world-wide.

On February 24, 1983, Tennessee Williams choked to death on a bottle cap at his New York City residence at the Hotel Elysee. It is thought he possibly mistook the bottle cap of his eye medication for a sleeping pill. He is buried in St. Louis, Missouri. In addition to twenty-five full-length plays, Williams produced dozens of short plays and screenplays, two novels, a novella, sixty short stories, over one hundred poems and an autobiography. He was noted for bringing to his audiences a slice of his own life and the feel of southern culture. Elia Kazan said of Tennessee.

"Everything in his life is in his plays, and everything in his plays is in his life."

When I was fifteen, I remember going on a school trip to see Tennessee Williams's play, "A Streetcar Named Desire". Not being much of a scholar, and rather ignorant of literature at this time, I had little idea of what I was about to see. I was captivated by this work but also disturbed, excited and fearful. There is obviously a great deal of violence in the play in many guises, but something much more fundamental touched me that evening. The play remained with me in being at once enthralling, startling and intensely, dangerously, erotic.

I have seen the play, in theatre, a few times since and also watched the 1951 film version ⁴ many times. Recently, I was struck by something I hadn't fully noticed before. There's a scene towards the end of the play in which Harold Mitchell (Mitch) confronts Blanche Dubois with her apparent deceit. He is hurt and violently angry and as the scene unfolds, Blanche descends into the tormented truth of herself.

SCENE NINE (about half way through)

MITCH (*getting up*): It's dark in here.

BLANCHE: I like it dark. The dark is comforting to me.

MITCH: I don't think I ever seen you in the light. (*BLANCHE laughs breathlessly.*) That's a fact!

BLANCHE: Is it?

MITCH: I've never seen you in the afternoon.

BLANCHE: Whose fault is that?

MITCH: You never want to go out in the afternoon.

BLANCHE: Why, Mitch, you're at the plant in the afternoon!

MITCH: Not Sunday afternoon. I've asked you to go out with me sometimes on Sundays but you always

make an excuse. You never want to go out till after six and then it's always some place that's not lighted much.

BLANCHE: *There is some obscure meaning in this but I fail to catch it.*

MITCH: What it means is I've never had a real good look at you, Blanche.

BLANCHE: What are you leading up to?

MITCH: Let's turn the light on here.

BLANCHE (*fearfully*): Light? Which light? What for?

MITCH: This one with the paper thing on it. (*He tears the paper lantern off the light bulb. She utters a frightened gasp.*)

BLANCHE: What did you do that for?

MITCH: So that I can take a look at you good and plain!

BLANCHE: Of course you don't mean to be insulting!

MITCH: No, just realistic.

BLANCHE: I don't want realism.

MITCH: Naw, I guess not.

BLANCHE: I'll tell you what I want. Magic! (*Mitch laughs*) Yes. Yes. Magic! I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don't tell the truth. I tell what *ought* to be truth. And if that is sinful, then let me be damned for it! – *Don't turn the light on!*

(*Mitch crosses to the switch. He turns the light on and stares at her. She cries out and covers her face. He turns the light off again*)

MITCH (*slowly and bitterly*): I don't mind you being older than what I thought. But all the rest of it – God! That pitch about your ideals being so old fashioned and all the malarkey that you've dished out all summer. Oh, I knew you wasn't sixteen anymore. But I was a fool to believe you was straight.

BLANCHE: Who told you I wasn't straight. My loving brother-in-law. And you believed him.

MITCH: I called him a liar at first. And then I checked on the story. First I asked our supply man who travels through Laurel. And then I talked directly over long-distance to the merchant.

BLANCHE: Who is this merchant?

MITCH: Kiefaber.

BLANCHE: The merchant Kiefaber of Laurel! I know the man. He whistled at me. I put him in his place. So now for revenge he makes up stories about me.

MITCH: Three people, Kiefaber, Stanley and Shaw, swore to them!

BLANCHE: Rub-a-dub-dub, three men in a tub! And such a filthy tub!

MITCH: Didn't you stay at the hotel called the Flamingo?

BLANCHE: Flamingo? No! Tarantula was the name of it! I stayed at a hotel called the Tarantula Arms!

MITCH (*stupidly*): Tarantula?

BLANCHE: Yes, a big spider! That's where I brought my victims. (*She pours herself another drink*) Yes, I had many intimacies with strangers. After the death of Allan – intimacies with strangers was all I seemed able to fill my empty heart with....I think it was panic, just panic, that drove me from one to another, hunting for some protection – here and there, in the most – unlikely places – even, at last, in a seventeen year-old boy but – somebody wrote the superintendent about it – “This woman is morally unfit for her position!”

(*She throws back her head with convulsive, sobbing laughter. Then she repeats the statement, gasps, and*

drinks)

True? Yes, I suppose - unfit somehow – anyway....So I came here. There was nowhere else I could go. I was played out. You know what played out is? My youth was suddenly gone up the waterspout, and – I met you. You said you needed somebody, too. I thanked God for you, because you seemed to be gentle – a cleft in the rock of the world that I could hide in! The poor man's paradise – is a little peace....But I guess I was asking, hoping – too much! Kiefaber, Stanley and Shaw have tied an old tin can to the tail of the Kite.

(There is a pause. Mitch stares at her dumbly)

MITCH: *You lied to me, Blanche.*

BLANCHE: Don't say I lied to you.

MITCH: Lies, lies inside and out, all lies.

BLANCHE: Never inside, I didn't lie in my heart....

(A vendor comes around the corner. She is blind Mexican woman in a dark shawl, carrying bunches of those gawdy tin flowers that lower class Mexicans display at funerals and other festive occasions. She is calling barely audibly. Her figure is only faintly visible outside the building)

MEXICAN WOMAN: *Flores. Flores. Flores para los muertos. Flores. Flores.*

BLANCHE: *What! Somebody outside.... I – lived in a house where dying old women remembered their dead men...*

MEXICAN WOMAN: *Flores. Flores. Flores para los muertos...*

BLANCHE *(as if to herself)*: Crumble and fade and – regrets – recriminations...."if you'd done this, it wouldn't have cost me that!"

MEXICAN WOMAN: *Corones para los muertos. Corones....*

BLANCHE: Legacies! Huh....And other things such as blood stained pillow slips – "Her linen needs changing" – "Yes, Mother. But couldn't we get a coloured girl to do it?" No, we couldn't of course. Everything gone but the –

MEXICAN WOMAN: *Flores.*

BLANCHE: *Death – I used to sit there and she used to sit over there and death was as close as you are....We didn't dare even admit we had ever heard of it!*

MEXICAN WOMAN: *Flores para los muertos, flores – flores....*

BLANCHE: The opposite is desire. So do you wonder? How could you possibly wonder! Not far from Belle Reve, before we had lost Belle Reve, was a camp where they trained young soldiers. On Saturday nights they would go in town to get drunk –

MEXICAN WOMAN: *Corones....*

BLANCHE: - and on the way back they would stagger on to my lawn and call –

"Blanche! Blanche!" – The deaf old lady remaining suspected nothing. But sometimes I slipped outside to answer their calls....Later the paddy-wagon would gather them up like daisies....the long way home....

(The Mexican woman turns slowly and drifts back off with her soft mournful cries. Blanche goes to the dresser and leans forward on it. After a moment, Mitch rises and follows her purposefully. He places his hands on her waist and tries to turn her about.)

BLANCHE: What do you want?

MITCH *(fumbling to embrace her)*: What I been missing all summer.

BLANCHE: Then marry me, Mitch!

MITCH: I don't think I want to marry you anymore.

BLANCHE: No?

MITCH (*dropping his hands from her waist*): You're not clean enough to bring into the house with my mother.

BLANCHE: Go away, then. (*He stares at her*) Get out of here quick before I start screaming fire! (*Her throat is tightening with hysteria*) Get out of here quick before I start screaming fire!

(*He still remains staring. She suddenly rushes to the big window with its pale blue square of the soft summer light and cries wildly.*)

Fire! Fire! Fire!

(*With a startled gasp, Mitch turns and goes out of the outer door, clatters awkwardly down the steps and around the corner of the building. Blanche staggers back from the window and falls to her knees.*)⁵

END of SCENE NINE

Interestingly, in the 1951 film version of the play the dialogue is changed slightly and has the effect of drawing out the death/desire link even more strongly:

BLANCHE: Death....I used to sit here and she used to sit over there and death was as close as you are....Death....the opposite is desire.

Life, Death and Desire

I was hopeless at school when it came to all things scientific but I do remember that there was something called "the characteristics of living things". In this concept, life is defined in terms of what it does. I thought that this might be a good place to start considering the nature of my present subject matter: life, death and desire. So far as I can remember, life is defined as being characterised by the following functional attributes: growth, reproduction, irritability, feeding excretion and movement. There may be others but for the time being, they elude me. It seems to me that we could reasonably add to this list, Desire. All living things exhibit behaviour which I have chosen to call desire. In this, they move towards desirable objects and away from undesirable ones. Central to my idea of desire is that this function includes what I don't want as much as that which I do want. Further, it seems to me that desire is indeed essentially and organic phenomena and is implied in all of the other characteristics. It could be seen as the motive force behind the other characteristics.

I would say that to desire is one the central experiences of being alive. This being so on all levels of our being – emotional, intellectual, sensational and spiritual. Desire permeates the whole of my being, the whole of existent life, and therefore can be seen as one of the defining parameters in how we might define "aliveness". We could say the life desires – this is what it does.

The experience of desire is simply life doing what it does.

In psychodynamic theory there is a lot of talk of "goal directness", of drives, of Id impulses, ego impulse control. Likewise in Object Relations theory. Cognitive theorists talk of wants and needs. Biodynamic practitioners similarly of impulse, impulse blocking, armouring against the impulse. For me, there is an unspoken presumption that such phenomena are facts of life. It is natural, in the literal sense of the word, for life to want and not want and will respond organically, bio-chemically to this fact.

We could therefore translate this understanding into a measure of aliveness. For example, how easily, how freely and spontaneously, or otherwise, does the living organism that is Myself move towards desirable objects and away from undesirable ones? To go a step further, if I would define the meaningfulness of my life in terms of what I want and what I don't want (not what I have or could have) then contained within the experience of desire are ontological concerns. As I have already suggested, my assumption is that the desire to establish a satisfactory relationship with the "why" of life is essential to building an adequate sense of wellbeing. If the phenomena of desire contains within it a large part, if not all, the concerns regarding the "why" of life, then contained within the freedom and spontaneity of movement of my desire is also a measure of the degree to which I find my aliveness to be a satisfactory state. This is a long way around to saying that if the way in which I handle my desires is organically disturbed (for example, with relevance to this study, by neurotic structuring) I am likely to have a corresponding difficulty in experiencing my state of aliveness as satisfactory or pleasing.

What I have thought for sometime is that lack of "wellbeing" has got a lot to do with the functioning, or otherwise of my desire/aliveness. In other words, how do I respond to the organic fact of my aliveness? How do I respond to the fact that so long as I am alive I am continually, and ceaselessly, being moved by the force of desire? Of course, we will all respond in our own characteristic way, consequent upon our psychodynamic structure. For example, I know very well that most of the fear engendered in myself in watching "A Streetcar Named Desire" was my reaction to the characteristic way in which issues of desire are handled in this work. Blanche wants what she wants and can't have it so creates a precarious fantasy world in which she can, while Stanley wants what he wants and can't have it so simply pushes and pushes until he gets it. In both cases the revealed solutions lead eventually to psychic disintegration. As these solutions are so different to my own characteristic (neurotic) management strategy, my alarm in witnessing them as a school boy was perhaps what etched the play into my memory.

The Essential Dilemma

Whilst I was writing this part of the paper I kept hearing a song in my head. 1969, written by Mick Jagger and Keith Richard, "You can't always get what you want". How true, but therein lies our dilemma. I have said that a part of the nature of my aliveness is to want, to experience desire – that this is an inescapable, inseparable condition of my aliveness. Given the truth of the Jagger/Richard lyric, is it also true to say that my aliveness is conditional upon the fulfilling of my desires? In other words, do I always need to get what I want, or that which I don't want, in order to maintain my wellbeing? If we take a look at basic Biodynamic theory – the vasomotoric cycle – this might lead us to suppose that this is indeed the case. I am assuming for the purposes of this paper that no explanation of the basic cycle is required.

Looking at the diagram on the left, I have proposed that at Point A, that which I have called the experience of desire is continually triggered by the very fact of our being alive. Given our basic theory, this impulse will seek resolution approaching and passing through Point B in order for digestion and integration to occur, returning once again to Point A. What this seems to suggest is that my desire will require to be satisfied if adequate completion of the cycle is to come about. However, as we have all without a doubt experienced, satisfaction of our desire is by no means guaranteed nor, paradoxically, desirable in itself. We naturally experience frustrated desire as a consequence of being alive. Does this mean that we are all doomed to be "biodynamically" wounded?

If aliveness is indeed continual movement of desire then, the very nature of life, its finiteness, will cause continued interruption of the cycle and thereby distress. It seems unavoidable. By nature, my

desires are infinite but my opportunities for satisfying them are finite. In other words, I am limited, finite but my aliveness is unlimited, infinite. In order to approach some kind of redemption of this dilemma I would propose, in the first instance, that something more than the basic model above needs to happen.

Another cycle is initiated at the point of interruption, B. This cycle is not concerned with the original desire, which has become unattainable at this point. This second cycle is concerned with the expressing, digesting and integrating of the experience of the pain of not getting what I want. I would suggest that the satisfactory completion of this second cycle is very much dependent upon the presence of another. It is dependent upon the witnessing of my distress, primarily by another and the support I may get in being able to satisfy this need to grieve my loss. It seems to me that repeated inadequate resolution of this second cycle in formative years is chiefly implicated in the genesis of inappropriate characterological distress. This is how I might learn to suppress my desires or, like Blanche, to split them off into a protected fantasy or, like Stanley, to become a bulldozer. How I am supported and learn to manage my desires, especially in situations of not getting what I want, in the early part of my life be a crucial element in how much I will dare to keep my desires fully present in the future.

The critical point here is that if I suppress, or otherwise disable or distort, the free-flow of my desire I likewise effect directly my degree of aliveness.

Another concern here is this: what if what I want is so important that no amount of expressing and digesting the pain of not getting it will do. I don't want emotional support in not getting what I want; **I just want what I want.** I have desires that are, or seem to be, essential to the very maintenance of my physical life. Life and death concerns which simply cannot be frustrated. This can be true of real physical needs, for example for food and water, or in cases of overwhelming, seemingly unbearable, emotional wounding. I think part of the answer here is that, in such circumstances, we are truly wounded and our energy corrupted to a degree that no amount of emotional processing will redeem. I think that this is one of the ways in which we, as human beings rightly need each other in that the redemptive qualities of ordinary human companionship, contact and warmth are most apparent. For example, in the time I have spent in Eastern Europe I have heard stories which most clearly illustrate this for me. Stories wherein the wounding is by all standards permanent and tragically disabling - that the companionship of friends and families seems to be able to make the unbearable, bearable.

The Task of Management of Desire

Tennessee Williams again:

"Whether or not we admit it to ourselves, we are all haunted by a truly awful sense of impermanence".

Perhaps we might all not articulate this dilemma in the same way but it does seem that there is some kind of "awfulness" inherent in our existence and, for me, this does stem largely from the aforementioned essential dilemma. It's like standing in a sweet shop with only 50p to spend. Are we truly haunted by our limitedness in the face of infinite desire?

Let us return to the task that we are all engaged in, in one form or another – that of some kind of therapeutic endeavour. It might be helpful here to ask, what is the purpose of this endeavour? It seems that clients often seek psychotherapy to change something, either about themselves or about the world they live in. We want problems solved, we want feelings to go away, and we want memories to be less troublesome, we want "them" to be different somehow and we want to live a better, happier, life. We

want, we want, we want. Our desires take us into psychotherapy. So, is then aim of the psychotherapeutic endeavour to help us fulfil our desires? Perhaps, and perhaps we may well find that this is indeed the case. However, it is equally true to say that this may not be the case – both seem to me to be equally likely given the parameters of psychotherapy.

The solving of problems and the fulfilling of desires, in the way in which we usually formulate them, is not the province of psychotherapy. Such things, indeed, belong to the world of “problems” and as such are not the business of psychotherapy. I would suggest that the principle area of concern in the psychotherapeutic endeavour is that of focussing on the world of dilemma. Problems usually require solutions whereas dilemmas do not. A dilemma can only be examined and considered in the light of experience and lived with in a more or less satisfactory manner. In the present context, I feel that the primary task of the psychotherapeutic charge lies in a quest to manage, in as satisfactory way as possible, the dilemmas posed by living a limited existence in the presence of a self aware and self-reflecting consciousness.

We might reflect this back to Tennessee Williams’ “awfulness” and answer that some redemption may stem from the attempt to better manage the facts of my infinite energetic aliveness in being bound (painfully, perhaps) by my finite organic aliveness and the finite nature of my conscious awareness. It becomes a question of co-existence – can I hold the twin facts of my existence within my being, each one being compromised as little as possible by the other. I might explore the possibility of a consensus, a happier compromise, between the two even though each will inevitably be compromised to some extent by the fact of the other. I am aware that we seem to have a tendency to prefer one pole to the other, perhaps suggesting the real difficulty of holding the both in mutual, but consensual, compromise. If I reflect on my own life, there have certainly been times when I have preferred attachments to the infinite in being very “spiritually” oriented in every possible way. Alternately, I have also veered towards the finite in being materially oriented, atheistic and agnostic. Both of these polarised positions can reasonably be seen to act as an avoidance of the possibilities for consensus. Interestingly, it seems to me that as a race we are not that interested in consensus solutions – I think that there are many reasons for this centring around issues of forgiveness and separation but, unfortunately, these go beyond the scope of this current paper.

In essence, the task becomes to be able to maintain the fullness on my aliveness/desire in the face of the likelihood of the pain of not getting what I want. Perhaps, with more relevance to the psychotherapeutic task, the job is how to re-awaken my ability to dare to be fully alive/desirous in the face of limited possibilities.

Returning once again to “Streetcar” for a moment, it could be said that the “awfulness”, the violence, the brutality and the eventual disintegration stems in large part from the fact that the characters do not handle this dilemma too well. On the whole, they are incapable of compromise. Paradoxically, this is of course what makes the play so compelling. They do not reduce their desires, and as a result they remain splendidly alive. There are other solutions, which on the whole do involve reducing our aliveness. If I compromise my desires, I compromise my aliveness. Around and around, we return to the dilemma - how can I stay fully alive in the face of not being able to have what I want.

Given that I am proposing Desire to be a core condition of aliveness then, why is desire so often associated with a source of pain and distress in the human condition. Perhaps we, none of us, handle the aforementioned dilemma very well. As a preface to an exploration of other possibilities I would firstly like to reflect on our characteristic responses to this dilemma and try to tease out some of the defensive processes connected to our response.

Choderlos de Laclos and “Les Liaisons Dangereuses”

“Les Liaison Dangereuses” was first published in Paris in 1782 where it was regarded as an outrage. So much so that the first edition sold out within a few days and subsequent printings were rapidly exhausted. It is largely concerned with desire and power and written in the form of exchanges of letters over a period of time. Thus, in one letter, the Vicomte de Valmont writes to his confidante, the Marquise de Merteuil:

“Here I am then: for the past four days the victim of an overpowering passion. You know how strong my desires are, how they thrive on obstacles; what you do not know is the extent to which solitude can increase their force. I have only one idea: I think of it all day and dream of it at night. It has become necessary for me to have this woman, so as to save myself from the ridicule of being in love with her: for to what lengths will a man not be driven by thwarted desire?”⁶

There are four interesting things in Valmont’s declaration relevant to our inquiry. Firstly, the necessity for a do something to escape from the experience of thwarted desire – this is an experience to be avoided. Secondly, in this instance, the experience is to be avoided because it is associated with humiliation. Thirdly, that there is something ridiculous about being in love and lastly, that the solution lies in “having”, in a kind of possession. We know from the character of Valmont as revealed in the rest of the novel that “having,” means having power over the other person.

Thwarted Desire

To begin with, we might explore why the experience of thwarted desire is apparently so painful and so much to be avoided, “by any lengths”. To do this I think we need to examine why I might want that which I want. It is important here to look at the desire more closely and, in particular, to look for “attachments” to the desire. As I’ve already said, I think life moves constantly in desire. I feel desire out of wellbeing as much, if not more, as out of distress or need. However, my natural movement of desire towards a particular object may become attuned to a place of lack in me, to an experience of need, which has nothing to do with the current object. In other words, needs which may be more concerned with unsatisfactory developmental experiences can become entangled with the current desires. In this instance, the natural movement of desire is likely to associate with this historical unfinished business and become “loaded” with a need beyond that of the immediate natural organic movement. This could, for example, be associated with a memory of a time when my desires were indeed concerned with life and death issues – it is true that for the infant, not getting what it wants could mean death. The desire here feels like a “must have or die” experience.

Another example: I want a big, flashy sports car. To illustrate my point simply; I see two basic scenarios. Firstly, I might feel like an insignificant, small and impotent man and want the car out of this. The needs associated with my inadequate self-concept become entangled with my desire the car and therefore my desire for the car is likely to be infused with anxiety and perhaps desperation. My desire becomes a “must have” experience in that it is associated, perhaps unknowingly, with historical needs allied to issues of humiliation. Distress becomes attached to the experience of desire. The desire for the car is unlikely to be a wholly pleasurable one as, of course, I cannot be sure of having the car.

Valmont feels his desire for Madame de Tourvel as just such a “must have” experience and as a consequence will go to any length to avoid the thwarting of his desire. In fact, it does seem that Valmont is afraid of his desire here, which is indeed adequately borne out later in the story. Because of his reliance on the “having” of the object of his desire he seems afraid to actually desire it in the first

instance. His desire is by no means pleasurable in itself but rather a potential source of ridicule and humiliation. He clearly feels this very strongly and he is taking a huge risk in even admitting of his desire to his closest, secret, confidante. Such a revelation gives her power over him as is seen later in the novel as the downfall of the Marquise results from the publication of her secret correspondence.

However, to return to the big, flashy car. I can imagine another possibility, which is of wanting the car out of a sense of established wellbeing in myself. I desire the car out of a sense of fullness and completeness, out of a desire to expand and manifest my fullness in the world. It is likely here that the organic movement of desire will have a negligible association with historical needs. It will consequently be less associated with anxiety or desperation. The possibility here is that the feeling of desire, of itself, becomes pleasurable **whether I get what I want or not**. My experience of desire is separated from the need to fulfil it. Of course, it will be great to actually get the car and I will grieve if I don't get it but **I do not need to have it in order to experience my essential wellbeing**. Indeed, following from my earlier notions, the more alive I am, the more desire I am likely to feel. I do not think that wellbeing implies an absence of desire – in fact, quite the opposite.

Adult and Child Love

Another aspect of Valmont's declaration concerns love. We might pose a similar question – is my desire to love and to be loved a current adult desire or is it, like the desire for the big car, associated with earlier unfinished business. Such unfinished business is unlikely to be the real concern of the current desire. For example, do I want a loving relationship out of a sense of lack in myself? Basically, I feel myself to be an unlovable person and my desire for such a relationship stems from an associated redemptive motive. Do I want love so that I can feel loveable? In such a case the desire becomes, once again, a "must have" experience. If I cannot establish a visible loving relationship in the world I risk facing feelings of inadequacy, unloveableness, shame and humiliation. Of course, in such an instance the establishing of a "loving" relationship will only provide an illusion to partly and temporarily stave off such problematic feelings. The experience of my desire for a relationship here becomes one of anxiety and the resulting relationship will likely be infused with the same with, all too familiar, catastrophic results.

To take this a little further; we might be concerned here also with the differing natures of child and adult love. When the child says, "I love you" they mean also, "I need you, I am dependent upon you, I love the fact that I am dependent upon you and the fact that you are willing to meet this dependency". In other words the dynamic here implies a power relationship. This seems to me to be wholly good and appropriate. In contrast, when the adult says, "I love you" they do not (hopefully!) mean such things. They mean "I don't need you as a child needs you, we can be interdependent, I want you, I desire you. I can survive happily without you but would choose not to have to." The adult loving relationship is based solely on desire current and not on needs associated with historical unfinished business.

It has been suggested that this view of adult love is simply a sophisticated defence against need for others. This may be somewhat true in that my interest in the intricacies of the current study has indeed emanated from my personal explorations of such a personal defensive need. There does seem to be wisdom in any so-called "neurotic" structuring which is always worth consideration. However, I am not implying an indifference to loss nor am I advocating well-being as isolation. What I am trying to show is the possibility of a loving adult relationship as based chiefly on desire rather than need. I would not for a moment underestimate the power of attachment that can result, nor the painful experience of the loss of such. The main point is that there is a possibility that I am not dependent upon such a relationship to maintain my essential wellbeing but that I may, nevertheless, desire to love and be loved

with a Herculean passion. Again, what I am suggesting are possibilities for separations in the desire to have and the need to have.

To return to Valmont. We could say that he is clearly speaking of the former (child) love with its associations and power dynamic. He is obviously afraid of this in that he misunderstands of the nature of adult love. For him, to be in love is to be dependent, powerless and consequently at risk of exploitation. We could surmise that he might carry child-like longings for just such a kind of dependent love hidden within his conceptions of love as an adult. He may perceive such needs as shameful and so hides them even from himself but pays the price by remaining mortally afraid of real adult love.

Indeed, we know later in the novel that when he does indeed fall in love with “this woman”, Madame de Tourvel, it leads to his death in a duel. Further, there is some suggestion that he willingly loses his life, as he perceives the experience of being in love as synonymous with actual physical death.

Ridicule, Shame and Humiliation

The third aspect of Valmont's declaration concerns ridicule. At the time of the publication of “Les Liaisons Dangereuses”, Paris 1782, to be ridiculed in society was akin to death. Humiliation was used as a weapon as deadly as a sword blow. Valmont seems to associate desire with possibilities of ridicule. It's not too difficult to make speculative formulations about his childhood experiences here to understand why this might be so. Desire and experiences of humiliation seem inexorably linked and, I think, are not an uncommon entanglement in our collective psyche.

Humiliation is an interpersonal experience whereas shame is more intrapersonal. By this, I mean that shame is an internal experience – something I feel for myself. On considering the function of shame we could see it as an element of conscience. It serves to temper the force of my desire. We might see it in this light as a self-regulating mechanism in the realm of community. My internal experience of shame, in its rightful, useful, function helps me to contain my unlimited desires. It can be seen as a “higher” purpose than simply the personal. In this way we can see that shame is an extremely useful regulatory mechanism in respect of the infinite/finite dilemma previously described. It will give me an internal device, which can effectively assist me in moderating my infinite desire/aliveness.

To be shameless is not helpful, it is not socially useful, and yet we so often cite shame as a block to our living an authentic (and thereby, meaningful) life. I have said that shame has a functional place in our psyche' and yet, paradoxically, it seems also to be a force directed against my aliveness and wellbeing. This is because of the simple fact that shame is routinely used employed as a social control mechanism in most levels of human organisation. The dominant group will attach shame to any behaviours which appear to be antipathetic to the maintenance of the norms and thereby the structuring of power in the existing hierarchy. Therefore, if shame, via his political process, is employed to suppress certain life-enhancing processes it becomes a force against life itself. It does seem that all social groups have their “shameful” practices – even so-called deviant groups. In all cases we can see that shame is attached to behaviours which are seen to be detrimental to the perceived status of the group.

Tragically, all too often these attachments are to primary, individuating impulses, or desires. Shame is a very potent suppressive force when applied to an emergent, living child and it is often that which I hold most precious – that which is most alive in me – to which my shame has been attached. For example, shame is routinely attached to primary narcissism in children, which effectively disables them in the task of developing any real sense of self-worth at this crucial and very early stage of life.

Another apparent contradiction here in that what this can mean is therapeutically, shame is very much to be welcomed in the process. How strong is the impulse to retreat as shame emerges, but how critical

it may be to move forward to embrace it. The emergence of shame can mean that we are approaching something very precious and authentic in ourselves. The door to selfhood is so often marked with shame. The task is not to rid myself of shame but simply to rescue it from the hijackers and replace it in its rightful location as an aide to the containment of my infinite aliveness and boundless desire.

The Nature of Power

“Les Liaisons Dangereuses” deliciously, and rather shamelessly, concerns itself with deceit, seduction and sexuality. In some respects, Graham Greene’s semi-autobiographical novel, “The End of the Affair” has many similar themes. In this, Maurice Bendix (the character thought to be Greene himself) draws connections of power and sexual desire.

“For one thing, she was beautiful, and beautiful women, especially if they are intelligent also, stir some deep feelings of inferiority in me. I don’t know whether psychologists have yet named the Cophetua complex, but I have always found it hard to feel sexual desire without some sense of superiority, mental or physical” ⁷

Here, we might surmise is a case of unhelpful attachments from history, unfinished business, being bound up with current adult desire. Again, as with Valmont, we see the solution in creating a particular kind of power relationship. Power here means having power over the other.

To return to the source of my wellbeing in this respect; is my wellbeing founded upon my ability to get, to have, that which I desire? My position will be *“I am a good person because I can get what I want, I can make happen what I want to happen in the world and I am able to show this to myself and others.”* Here, my wellbeing is dependent upon my ability to manipulate the environment, to have power over the world. Consequently, my experience of desire will involve possibilities of loss of power and anxiety at my potential loss of wellbeing. Possibilities of humiliation again.

“It has become necessary for me to have this woman...”

“I have always found it hard to feel sexual desire without some sense of superiority...”

Desire becomes a frightening prospect and a million miles away from the possible source of aliveness and real pleasure that it otherwise might be. My sense of wellbeing can become so bound up with the need to fulfil my desires that I might suppress my desires, in one way or another, rather than risk a possible loss of my illusory selfhood. In this instance, the loss of the illusion of selfhood is consequent upon being seen to not fulfil my revealed desires. This will lead to any one of a number of familiar anti-life strategies: pretending that I don’t want it; bullying, violence or others modes of “power over” or, ensuring that I only want that which I am sure to get. The point here is that the full experience of desire, to really allow my aliveness becomes dependent upon something which is impossible – **that I can be absolutely sure I will have what I desire.** Impossible. My capacity to fully allow my aliveness, my experience of unlimited desire becomes one of anxiety, of conditionality upon impossible demands, of unsureness and insecurity, of prevarication and vacillation. In short, in living this scenario, I do not dare to be as fully alive as I am. I am vulnerable, as I have made my full aliveness conditional upon things, which are actually beyond my power.

It seems then, that if I am to dare to be fully alive I will need somehow to detach my experience of desire from my dependency on the fulfilment of it. To paraphrase Valmont “It is not necessary for me

to have this woman, but I want her''. Only in this way will I dare to be fully alive, to fully experience my desire as a truly pleasurable phenomena.

In Part two of this paper I want to explore some possibilities of how we might begin to approach this (desirable) state of being wherein, my experience of desire can be separate from my need to have the object of my desires.

Part Two

In the second section of this paper I want to focus on idea centred around the possibilities for achieving a separation between the experience of desire on the one hand and, on the other hand, the need to satisfy that desire. How is this done, and what are the elements necessary to accomplish this? I would like to focus on the organic matters of concern in this respect and, to this end, will begin by introducing a simple model of organic aliveness: the Amoeba.

The Amoeba is a single celled animal belonging to that class of living things known as Protozoa. The Protozoan cell carries out all of the life processes – all of the “characteristics of living things” - as described in Part One of this paper. While composed very simply of a single nucleated, or sometimes multinucleated, cell they are capable of independently sustaining and propagating life. The well-known type of the species, Amoeba Proteus, is found on decaying bottom vegetation of freshwater streams and ponds. In addition, there are also numerous parasitic amoebas and six species are found in the human alimentary tract of which one species, Entamoeba histolytica, causes amoebic dysentery.

Amoebae are used extensively in cell research for determining the relative functions and interactions of the nucleus (containing the DNA) and the rest of the cell, the cytoplasm. Each Amoeba contains a small mass of jelly like cytoplasm, which is differentiated into a thin outer plasma membrane, a layer of stiff, clear ectoplasm just within the plasma membrane, and a central granular endoplasm. The endoplasm contains food vacuoles, a granular nucleus, and a clear contractile vacuole. The Amoeba has no mouth or anus. Food is taken in and material excreted at any point on the cell surface. During feeding, extensions of cytoplasm flow around food particles, surrounding them and forming a vacuole into which enzymes are secreted to digest the particles. Oxygen diffuses into the cell from the surrounding water, and metabolic wastes diffuse from the Amoeba into the surrounding water. The Amoeba reproduces asexually through a process of binary fission. This has led to the attractive fancy that each species carries form of immortality.

During adverse environmental periods many amoebas survive by encystment: the Amoeba becomes circular, loses most of its water, and secretes a cyst membrane that serves as a protective covering. When the environment is again suitable, the envelope ruptures and the Amoeba emerges.

Here then, we have a very simple, yet highly successful, organism and I want to draw out three features for further comment: the cytoskeleton, the plasma membrane and the pseudopodia.

The Cytoskeleton

The cytoskeleton is the name given to a fibrous network formed by different types of long protein filaments present throughout the cytoplasm of the Amoeba. As the term cytoskeleton implies, these filaments create a scaffold or framework that organises other cell constituents and maintains the shape of the cell. In addition, some filaments cause coherent movements, both of the cell itself and of its internal organelles.

Three major types of cytoskeletal filaments are commonly recognised: actin filaments, microtubules, and intermediate filaments. Actin filaments and microtubules are dynamic structures that continuously assemble and disassemble in most cells. Intermediate filaments are more stable and seem to be involved mainly in reinforcing cell structures. A wide variety of accessory proteins work in concert with each type of filament, linking filaments to one another and to the plasma membrane and helping to form the networks that endow the cytoskeleton with its unique functions. Many of these accessory proteins have not yet been characterised, which limits current understanding of the cytoskeleton.

The Plasma Membrane

A thin membrane some .005 micrometer across surrounds the Amoeba, as with every living cell, delimiting the cell from the environment around it. This can be defined in similar terms as to the Gestalt principle of the Contact boundary. It is here that the cell both makes contact with its surrounding environment and is simultaneously separate from it. Thus, the functions of the membrane are physical isolation, maintenance of integrity and to form the point of contact with the environment. It also serves in regulating the exchange of substances with the external environment, acting as a selective doorway into and out of the cell. Its third main function is that of sensitivity to the external environment in that the membrane contains identifier and receptor proteins, which will respond to chemical signals from the external environment. Thus it is, at once, the "skin", the sensory system and the gatekeeper of the cell. The membrane is composed of protein, carbohydrate and lipid compounds and is extremely flexible. Enclosed by this plasma membrane are the cells constituents, often large, water-soluble, highly charged molecules such as proteins, nucleic acids, carbohydrates, and substances involved in cellular metabolism. Any rupturing of the membrane would result in the death of the cell.

Pseudopodia

Amoebae are characterised by their ability to form temporary cytoplasmic extensions called pseudopodia, or false feet, by means of which they move about. This type of movement, called amoeboid movement, is considered to be the most primitive form of animal locomotion. Pseudopodia are formed by some cells of higher animals (e.g., white blood corpuscles) as well as by Amoebae. During amoeboid feeding, pseudopodia both flow around and engulf prey or trap it in a fine, sticky mesh. Some amoebas appear sac-like throughout locomotion and hence, no pseudopodia are obvious. In other species of the type, numerous long, stiff protoplasmic extensions (axopodia) shorten and lengthen - the forward axopodia lengthen and become attached, while the posterior axopodia detach and retract - and the Amoeba rolls slowly along. Alternately, the foraminiferans move by extending slender pseudopodia (filapodia), which may be several millimetres long in some species. The extending filopodia branch and fuse with each other so that there is a complex, continuously changing network of pseudopodia pulling the organism along.

Various theories have been proposed to explain how pseudopodia effect movement. A widely accepted model suggests that the ectoplasm at the front of the Pseudopod contracts, isometric tension is maintained on the endoplasm, while isotonic contraction in the rear ectoplasm increases pressure on the tail endoplasm to push it forward. In addition, the contractile protein actin and the force-generating enzyme myosin - which can release the energy carried by ATP (adenosine triphosphate) and is found in the muscle contraction system of higher animals - has been isolated from the cytoplasm of amoebas. During movement, the endoplasm moves toward the cell surface at the pseudopodial tip and then gels, while actin filaments polymerise to form a longitudinal network of endoplasm that interacts with myosin and actin-binding proteins - some of which are attached to the plasma membrane - to create a contractile cytoskeleton. This contraction increases internal hydrostatic pressure, resulting in a flow of cytoplasm toward area where the endoplasm can extend.

Pseudopodal movement is perpetual, so long as the animal is alive. Amoebae do not stand still at any time. I would draw the connection here to my contention that the "movement" of desire in living things is likewise unceasing throughout life. This movement is synonymous with the existence of life. Indeed, it is not too difficult, using simple self-awareness exercises, to feel such movements within ourselves even though we may be, on a grosser physical level, otherwise motionless.

Pseudopodia and Desire

The following text and accompanying diagrams are shown to give a summary of the process whereby the Amoeba can snare and ingest a small Paramecium. The Amoeba has been reduced to a simplified form showing membrane and nucleus whilst the Paramecium is the small organism, top right.

As stated, Amoeboid movement is affected by regulated changes in the internal pressure of the cell. It involves a contraction and a directed movement of fluids under pressure within a flexible, delimited space. Not unlike the experience of desire. On an organic level, the experience of desire is indeed one and the same with an increase in internal pressure, or charge, in the body. It is this pressure which “moves” me towards the object of desire. Increases in internal pressure result in a degree of discomfort in the system, which can be relieved by physical movement, for example, by reaching out. Let’s take a look at what the Amoeba does with its desire.

The processes involved in amoeboid movement i.e. the development of pseudopodia, are the same as those employed in a directed and purposeful way to enable the Amoeba to hunt and feed. Chemical receptors in the membrane of the Amoeba detect the presence of nearby prey, another single-celled organism for example, the Paramecium. Through processes of mediation between the cell membrane and the cytoplasm, a cascading response is initiated resulting in the aforementioned internal contractions and increased internal pressure. The pseudopodia are formed via the flexibility of the membrane but this time it will be directed towards the prey, towards the object of desire. This process will continue as the Amoeba further reaches out towards the prey. It may develop a second pseudopodium to better ensure the snare. If you notice the development in the diagrams you will notice that at no point in the procedure does the Amoeba open its membrane. The membrane stays intact throughout the whole process of taking what was external (the Paramecium) and making it internal. As the Amoeba fully encloses the prey, the pseudopodia join together around it forming a chamber within which the Paramecium is enclosed. There follows a change in the functioning of the membrane, which now is effectively an internal membrane. The function of this new internal membrane becomes that of digestion and it will secrete digestive enzymes to complete the assimilation of the prey. Again, note that at no time in this process does the external membrane lose its integrity. To go back to the ideas contained in section one of this paper—at no time does the Amoeba lose its sense of well being. At any point in the process, the Paramecium may “escape” and the Amoeba would remain intact. At this stage we could say the Amoeba wants to engulf and digest the paramecium but it does not have to for its present well being. This is where we might say that there are more Paramecium in the sea! At all times in this operation the organic process of desire, of reaching out, is not dependent upon the need to have the object of desire. I want to write more about this later but perhaps enough to say at this point that, in the more common experience of desire we, unlike the wise Amoeba, do indeed allow our boundaries to lose their integrity during the reaching out. Again, this is how the “wanting” becomes a “must have” experience. The experience of desire becomes one of anxiety rather than pleasurable expansion.

As I have already written, it then is all too common to come to believe that we can re-establish our integrity by having the object, by possessing it. This is not to suggest that the organism does not need anything and can continuously experience frustration of the impulse. This would be clearly nonsense and result in death through starvation. It is simply that, given an adequate level of wellbeing, it becomes possible to separate the experience of desire from the need to possess through the mechanisms of maintaining integrity to the structure throughout.

What I am suggesting here is that one of the crucial elements in achieving the separation of the experience of desire and the need to possess the object of desire is that of containment of the self throughout the process. By this I mean, the maintenance of the integrity of the self, and well being of the self, whilst I desire something other than the self. Imagine for a moment a neurotic, armoured, Amoeba. Such armouring could reasonably be expected to manifest in distortions and disruptions in the flexibility of the membrane. To refer to Character Structure theory for a moment: the hysterical Amoeba would rupture its membrane at the first increase in charge, at the first experience of longing or want. This would mean that very quickly this Amoeba would experience the “must have” type of desire in a desperate and vain attempt to repair the breached boundary. “*I will die without it!*” On the other hand, the masochistic Amoeba would be so trapped within its immobile and rigid membrane that any experience of desire and the resulting increased internal charge would cause massive internal damage consequent upon such a chronic hypertonic state. “*I will hide my desire even from myself!*”

To begin to relate these concepts to the human organism: the key element is that of identifying and separating historical frustrated desire from current lived experience. The task implicated here can obviously be well placed in the psychoanalytic arena but also, can reasonably be a proper subject of organic/energetic intervention. Therapeutic work directly with the organic structures of the body may usefully proceed in this respect and the following section takes a closer look.

The Human Organism

To summarise, what I am demonstrating is that in the attempt to separate the experience of desire from the need to possess, the critical issue is concerned with maintaining the containment of the self throughout the dynamic process. In other words, to be able to support the wellbeing of the self whilst wishing to possess something more. I want it but I don't need it. In relating this function to the Human organism we need therefore to locate where we might place the attachment between the conditionality of desire and the fulfilment of that desire. I would suggest that this place is the abdomino-pelvic cavity.

The diagram on the left shows the abdomino-pelvic cavity in sagittal section outlining how the cavity and the organs contained therein are lined and supported throughout by loose connective tissue. The peritoneal cavity is shown in the lighter shading and is lined by a serous membrane consisting of a superficial mesothelium covering a layer of loose connective tissue. The serous membrane can be divided into the visceral peritoneum that covers organs within the cavity, and the parietal peritoneum that lines the inner surfaces of the body wall.

The serous membrane lining the peritoneal cavity produces peritoneal fluid at the rate of about 7 litres per day. This is secreted and reabsorbed continually and in Reichian terms is clearly implicated in the processing of emotional material. Furthermore, portions of the digestive tract are suspended in the peritoneal cavity by sheets of serous membrane that connect the parietal peritoneum with the visceral peritoneum. These are known as mesenteries and are composed of double layers of peritoneal membrane. The function of the mesenteries is to stabilise the positions of the attached organs and to prevent the intestines becoming entangled during the digestive processes. From a Biodynamic standpoint they also serve to support and prevent entanglements in the processes of psychoperistalsis.

To speculate about the psychophysiological function of the peritoneal membrane, I would suggest that it has the following functions related to this enquiry:

Firstly, that it serves the function of assimilating undigested emotional material in the same way as does the more familiar psycho-peristaltic processes. This it does through the medium of a circulation of body fluids into and out of the peritoneal cavity. Reich associated movements of body fluids with that of energetic and emotional movements as long ago as 1942⁸ and this has subsequently been developed with specific regard to the abdominopelvic cavity through the work of the Biodynamic theorists.⁹ To be more specific, the physiology of the peritoneal membrane further suggests a slightly different function to that of the better-documented peristaltic phenomena. The circulation of fluids through the peritoneal membrane could act as a processing stage prior to that of the eliminating function of the gut-level psycho-peristalsis. My image is one of a "chewing over" of the psycho-physiological material as it is secreted and reabsorbed circulating around the peritoneal membrane and the peritoneal cavity. This would provide a more economic system of dealing with stress remnants in that the circulatory process could provide a filtering function to allow for a more selective elimination. It might be said that herein is an apparatus to allow lessons to be learned from our experience prior to a final letting go and separation. What I am suggesting is a two stage integration and digestion function in the body related

respectively to the functioning of the Peritoneal membrane and only then, secondly, to the psycho-peristaltic mechanism.

The second psycho-physiological purpose of the peritoneal membrane is related to its holding function. As is clearly seen in the diagram, the membrane both surrounds and supports the organs of the abdomino-pelvic cavity as a continuous intertwining sheet of tissue. It is there to prevent entanglements. In this it supports the fluidic functions of the cavity as previously described and hyper- or hypotonus in these tissues will clearly cause a dysfunction in the psycho-physiological processes. I would suggest that, in this, the membrane acts in a similar way to the membrane of the Amoeba in supporting the maintenance of integrity during movement.

Desire is movement and the holding functions of the abdomino-pelvic cavity are crucial for the maintenance of wellbeing throughout this dynamic process. Disturbances to the holding functions in the abdomino-pelvic cavity will have a massive effect on my ability to maintain my sense of wellbeing whilst I experience desire. I need to be able to hold onto myself whilst my desire moves outward. Like the Amoeba, this will require flexibility of the boundaries (in this instance the Peritoneal membrane) in response to the increased internal pressure consequent upon the experience of desire. If I am able to negotiate this task successfully then I am likely to be well on the way to being able to desire in pleasure without the attached experience of needing in anxiety.

Therapeutic work with the Peritoneal Membrane

What I hope is clear is that I am advocating the establishment of an independent sense of wellbeing upon which I will be able to ride the full flowering of my desire without the “need to possess” and all the consequent anxieties and perhaps the killing of my desire/aliveness. The Psychotherapeutic processes as a whole should focus on this task and will do so on many levels and using many vehicles toward this goal. Not least of which being the management of dilemma as a primary concern. As the focus of this paper has been the organic and psycho-physiological aspects of this task, I would conclude by focussing on possibilities for a therapeutic vehicle addressing the function of the peritoneal membrane.

The implications of the foregoing do suggest a requirement for addressing the peritoneal membrane in the psychotherapeutic process. The aim of which will be to try and establish, or to re-establish, a flexible yet secure membrane to enable the individual in better separating the desire to have from the need to have. The membrane will be required to allow to flowing outward of my energy towards the object of desire whilst maintaining the integrity of the abdominal self.

Biodynamic massage focussed on the membrane could be of great benefit in attempting to establish such a functioning. Deep tissue work around the abdomen is helpful especially if combined with image work around issues of desire. However, this will be of limited usefulness if not combined with more active and dynamic structured exercises. In the first instance, the client needs to experience the difference between “desire” and “need” in the terms I have described, on a sensational, bodily level. Secondly, there will be a need to experiment with exercises centred on “reaching out” with additional support provided by the therapist to provided that lacking in the clients Peritoneal functioning. The following two-stage pair exercise can be very beneficial.

With the client standing and facing the room, have them imagine an object of desire and try to “see” this object in the room in front of them. Allow time to really savour the presence of the object and for the client to sense their internal experience. It may be helpful to spend a little time describing the sensations arising to fully this ground this awareness. Then, ask the client to reach out towards the object with their energy, allowing the body to move if so impelled. It is better to keep the feet reasonably still (do not allow pouncing across the room!)

although the rest of the body can be encouraged to move. The client should note their experience, especially the possibility of splits in the sense of self or projections of the same. It is interesting to note how often the individual projects their own “desirability” onto the object at this point and thereby lose this sense in themselves. Some time could now usefully be spent reflecting on this experience.

The second stage is a repetition of the first except that the therapist will provide some external support as follows: the therapist will stand behind the client and give support to their back by using the front of the therapists body against the client. In addition, the therapist will hold the client around the abdomen and press their hands (the therapist’s hands) against the clients belly. As the process is repeated with this additional support, the client should note their experience.

In my own experience, both personally and with clients, this is a profoundly helpful exercise and can be used both to increase awareness (which, in itself, is of course transformative) but also, through repetition and careful adjustments, to enable the client to internalise the experience of the external support. A simplified version which can be practiced “single handed” can be achieved by applying a gentle, holding pressure to the abdomen whilst manipulating images of objects of desire.

Finale

The phenomenon of human desire is a somatic, sensational experience and is synonymous with the presence of life. Fundamentally, it is manifest life. As an organic emanation it is the conscious counterpart to naturally occurring shifts in internal charge which the living organism continually experiences. These internal shifts result in variances in internal fluid pressures which in turn lead to gross physical and psychic movement. We have come to call this experience Desire and it can be one of the most substantially satisfying ontological human experiences. In itself, Desire can give meaning to an otherwise meaningless life. For myself, the circumstances of Desire form a central part of any personal experience that I would call fulfilling and thereby, meaningful. To allow the fuller expression of my Desire is to allow the fuller manifestation of any meaning my life might embody.

Strange then, that experience of Desire is so commonly associated with pain and distress in human consciousness. This seems consequent upon the common connecting of what are in fact two very separate phenomena: that of the desire to have (or not to have) and the need to fulfil that desire. There exists a common confusion, on the one hand, between painful historical experiences of frustrated desire at a time of life when ego strength was inadequate to contain and assimilate such an experience and, on the other hand, current lived experience. In addition, there also exists the very real fact of life that, on the one hand, Desire is infinite and unceasing and, on the other hand, the opportunities for fulfilling such desires are finite and limited.

Given the foregoing, it seems a reasonable compromise to reduce the force of my Desire in order to temper the distress contained in the dilemma. However, such a manoeuvre will likewise reduce the force of my aliveness to an equal degree. Redemption is found in the realisation that Desire is not dependent upon fulfillment for it to be ontologically satisfying. We need not agree with Blake’s devil :

“Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires”¹⁰

Impeding the force of Desire is anti-life but equally, we cannot always have that which we desire. Nor can we act on every Desire as Blake’s proverb advocates. The better solution lies in being able to fully allow the force of my Desire without the need to have it. “*I want you but I don’t need you*” seems to me to be a much more fulfilling, exciting, sustainable and erotic basis for a human relationship rather than that based on “*I can’t live without you*”. The key to such an ability lies in the separation of the

desire to have from the *need to have*, the pathway to this being a capacity to contain the integrity of the self throughout the dynamic process of the flowering of desire.

This can be a lifetimes task in that it demands establishing a truly independent sense of well-being. This sense can act as the ground upon which we can stand the essential dilemma of our aliveness, and thereby not drown amidst it.

Endnotes:

¹ Allen, W. & Brickman, M. (1979) *Manhattan*, United Artists Inc.

² Tolstoy, L.N. (1884) *A Confession*.

³ De Beauvoir, S. (1992) *All Men are Mortal*, WW Norton & Co. (re-issue)

⁴ Kazan, E., director, (1951) *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Warner Bros.

⁵ Williams, T. (1947) *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Penguin Books.

⁶ De Laclos, C. (1961 trans.) *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, Penguin Books.

⁷ Greene, G. (1951) *The End of the Affair*, Penguin Books.

⁸ Reich, W. (1942) *The Function of the Orgasm*, Orgone Inst. Press.

⁹ Boyesen, M. (1974) *Psycho-Peristalsis, the Abdominal Discharge of Nervous Tension*, Energy and Character Vol 5, No. 1.

¹⁰ Blake, W. (1790) *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (Proverbs of Hell)*, Oxford Poetry Library, (1994) OUP.

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