Psychoanalysis

How does the thing work? Two people meet privately and regularly; they don't touch—a tacit proscription on sexual activity. The patient freely speaks her desire to the analyst who listens with benign receptivity, not to judge, but to understand, and to offer back that understanding—a reciprocal offering called “interpretation.” With these three principles (no touching, the analyst's non-judgmental receptivity, the patient's pledge to candor), Freud gives us psychoanalytic treatment.

The driving force within those principles is the transference: the analyst as a magnet for a tangle of feelings “transferred” from childhood. Along with the quasi-parental position of guardianship and responsibility, the doctor becomes the object of archaic love, dread, and rage.

Of course, this turned out to be a combustible arrangement. In his great essay “Observations on Transference-Love” (1915), Freud speaks of “highly explosive forces” unleashed by the transference, whereby the patient quite naturally —“as any other mortal woman might” —falls in love with the analyst. Combustion is Freud's simile: there is “a complete change of scene; it is as though some piece of make-believe had been stopped by the sudden irruption of reality—as when, for instance, a cry of fire is raised during a theatrical performance.”

But the fire alarm is in the script, the analyst serving as a deliberately incendiary human lure in a process focusing and magnifying the patient's love cravings. In “Observations on Transference-Love,” Freud struggles to measure the audacity of the analyst's activity: a structured invitation to fall in love, a form of seduction, courting the
transgressive. Psychoanalysis creates a “no, you may not” coupled with a “yes, you must”—don't move, don't look, don't touch, but speak the words that express the desire.

Like a stage play, the artifice of the psychoanalytic process, as Freud describes it, invokes—maybe even insists on, as it ritualizes—the transgressive. “Observations on Transference-Love” refers explicitly to magic rituals. Responding to the patient's transference by urging that it be renounced or suppressed, Freud writes, “would be just as though, after summoning up a spirit from the underworld by cunning spells, one were to send him down again without having asked him a single question.”

The “cunning spells” or magic potions have had unintended consequences from the beginning. As in Freud's own time, the “boundary violation” (the discipline's contemporary euphemism) remains embarrassingly common. Usually the clinician is a man, often professionally distinguished with years of experience, and the patient a younger woman. My home city of Boston has, in the last decade, lost three senior analysts to disgrace. One was the chair of a national ethics committee; a second was the editor of a prestigious psychoanalytic journal.

Freud treats the analyst who succumbs to this pattern with a dry, corrective irony: “[the analyst] must recognize that the patient's falling in love is induced by the analytic situation and is not to be attributed to the charms of his own person; so that he has no grounds whatever for being proud of such a 'conquest,' as it would be called outside analysis.”

Can erotic feelings be so delusory, ductile, nearly arbitrary, induced by a construct? The Shakespeare scholar Stephen Greenblatt describes the fairies’ “love juice” in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:
Desires in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are intense, irrational and alarmingly mobile. This mobility, the speed with which desire can be detached from one object and attached to a different object, does not diminish the exigency of the passion, for the lovers are convinced at every moment that their choices are irrefutably rational and irresistibly compelling... The emblem, as well as agent, of a dangerously mobile desire is the fairies’ love juice. No human being in the play experiences a purely abstract, objectless desire; when you desire, you desire *someone*. But the love juice is the distilled essence of erotic mobility itself, and it is appropriately in the power of the fairies.

The two people in the consulting room merely talk, but in a way that invites the mobility of desire with an intensity like that of the stage-woods of Midsummer Night. The psychoanalytic process devises that love juice, channels it, and distributes it for its special use. But in the analytic situation, the potion—Greenblatt’s “distilled essence of erotic mobility”—is not in the power of a magical creature in a theatrical drama. It is in the power of the human analyst on the tilted analytic stage.

The analyst, drunk on the love juice, may feel justified, thrilled by “the charms of his own person” and their effect; he believes he is himself a bit magical—charismatic. Freud's tone about this recalls Shakespeare's play. The cool, smiling irony of “not to be attributed to the charms of his own person” *mocks* the notion of charisma. Self-deluding, the idea of a personal charisma beyond the structural is also, as a matter of theory, redundant. As a moral or ethical matter, it is radically defective: a charismatic analyst, within the clinical setting, is a massively destructive contradiction in terms. It punishes trust. The patient’s love is a construct provoked by the analytic situation; the analyst, having set the process in motion, is responsible for limiting and protecting it.

Bottom, Shakespeare’s loquacious clown, becomes an ass-headed man who is adored by the enchanted fairy queen Titania. For her, Bottom becomes charismatic; Bottom, with his ass's ears, believes he *is* charismatic. In Freud's terms, Bottom believes
in “the charms of his own person.”

But while Freud says, wisely enough, that it's not the charms of the analyst's own person that enrapture the patient, perhaps in another sense that's exactly what it is. In a well-conducted analysis, guided by the analyst's abstinence and neutrality, the transference is a kind of enchantment, transitory and functional. As Max Hernandez writes: “once an analysis is over—one hesitates to say finished—the memory that the analyst or the analysand has of it, and especially the written account of it, is but a pale reflection of what happened during the analysis to either of them or between them. All one knows is that it occurred once upon a time.”

—Ellen Pinsky