



MOURNING AND LOSS AND THE LIFE CYCLE IN THE BOOK OF RUTH

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The psychoanalytic theory and practice looks at conscious and unconscious aspects of the mind as expressed through thoughts, feelings, phantasies, and behaviour. In psychoanalysis we try to explore the underlying meaning and gain a deeper understanding of the person's inner world; in the psychoanalytic treatment, we try to bring about psychic change by following the nature of interactions as they develop and try to understand their underlying meanings.

Over the last 150 years such ways of looking at human relationships have become part of many areas of thinking. It leads also to reading of contemporary and old texts in the light of developing ideas about the unconscious processes and about their underlying meanings. Of course in reading a text we do not have a live dialogue with the characters to confirm and develop together the process of understanding as we can in psychoanalytic treatment, but our theoretical and practical experience makes reading a text from a psychoanalytic perspective possible and enriching. It seems that the continuing fascination of certain texts stems from the capacity of the work of art to reflect the ever evolving conscious and unconscious meanings of the human experience, in a way that evokes a powerful response on a conscious and unconscious level in the mind of the reader.

In thinking about the Book of Ruth I have found it most interesting to read the text as representing Naomi's inner world. From that perspective, the different characters of the Book could be seen as representing different aspects of Naomi, i.e. her 'internal objects', as well as her experience of her relationships with the external figures. Looking at the text in this way makes it possible for me to understand better why my response to the text is so multi-layered and why there are so many possible meanings, some contradictory and some ambiguous. When we experience ourselves in relation to others—Naomi to her family, I in relation to Naomi and the story she tells—we experience hope, despair, ambivalence, love and hate towards the other and we have equally a multitude of phantasies and ideas as to how they experience us. It is mainly in moments of actual experience with the other that, however momentarily, we can verify and link these internal experiences of the other (the psychoanalytic 'internal objects') and the external ones. The immediate reading of the Book is that it is a story of a reaction to grief and to managing loss. Through that experience we can all relate to a mother's and a wife's loss of son and husband and to how others in society respond and help with the process of mourning and coming to terms with, a trauma—an event which defies natural expectations of life. Another reading of the story is that it is about the universal cycle of human life; about managing losses which everyone has to work through. From this perspective, human life is reflected in the cycle of nature's seasons—Naomi's story could be understood as ways in which every woman has to manage the loss of her youth, sexual attractiveness, fertility, old age and death. In the case of Naomi, she has to accept that a younger generation of women— Ruth and Orpa—can do what she can't any more. Ruth and Orpa could

also represent the younger aspects of Naomi herself, who, in order to become adult, had to come to terms with the loss of her childhood dependency on parents and move into relationships based on sexuality and on becoming a parent herself. As part of that process of life cycle, the young woman has to cope with guilt towards the parents whom she leaves behind and with her own rivalrous feelings towards them, as she comes to terms with her wishes to *be like* her parents and has also to come to terms with her infantile wishes to *be* her parents.

The first chapter of the Book represents mainly the personal process of managing death and loss from Naomi's point of view. The following chapters—back home—are developing into a wider circle where the developmental issues of women and men are tackled. The old widow and the young widow, both have to come to terms with being childless and with underlying feelings of rivalry, guilt, triumph, love, concern, reparative urges and attempts to integrate these different states of mind. The story reflects such struggles in all of us and the hard work involved in achieving emotional resolutions. We see Naomi, like all of us, moving forwards, regressing, succeeding to be ruled by her feelings of love and concern, getting overwhelmed by hate, bitterness and envy—only to try to repair the damage. In that sense the Book is a powerful, multi-faceted tale of the human journey, more striking for it being a story of a woman's journey, a woman who has to tolerate the younger generation who take over while she has to accept her coming old age and death. Naomi is learning to celebrate the ongoing cycle of life which will continue with these younger women and their children.

Perhaps a clue towards these different readings of the Book is illustrated through the most strange and seemingly paradoxical gap in the narrative: nowhere does Naomi directly refer to her sons and to what must be her most intense feelings about them. There is almost no direct reference to them or to feelings about their deaths anywhere in the Book. Are we to feel that Naomi isn't ever able to face, directly, the loss of her children? Or, is it so narrated because the story is mainly a vehicle to describe a woman's journey within herself? Is the main message of the Book not about reaction to external losses but about a person's struggles with their developmental stages?

Chapter One describes a personal tragedy of three women: we first hear that Naomi and her husband had to leave their country because of hunger and seek their fortune in Moab. Immediately as we encounter this first loss, it is followed by a personal tragedy—Naomi loses her husband and is left with two sons she has to care for. Ten years later the sons die and in addition to that loss, she is left without grandchildren, i.e. with the loss descendents. There follows a first description of a reaction to such a chain of losses: Naomi decides to leave her current home and return to Judah. And immediately following that, she tries to dissuade her daughters-in-law from joining her and from expressing thus their love and devotion to her. Naomi expresses a powerful range of emotions whilst doing so, her feelings both intense and full of contradictions. On one hand she says: 'the Lord deal kindly with you: as ye have dealt with the dead, and with me' (1:8). But is she merely being kind in sending them away? Was the Lord merely 'kind to her' and her family? It is as if Naomi is both, kind and angry, caring and appreciative of the young women and yet sarcastically rejecting of them. She says: 'the Lord grant you that ye may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband' (1:9), but then with sarcastic anger she insists: 'turn again my daughters: while will ye go with me? are there yet any more sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands?' (1:11). She is not only cruelly attacking here the young women, she is also relating to herself in an equally ambivalent and hostile manner: on one hand she elevates herself to being all important in her daughters-in-law's eyes, as if saying that they don't merely love her in an ordinary way and grieve for their husbands, but that they want to join her because she has the om-

nipotent power to provide them with husbands and children again. For that moment she experiences herself, either in her own eyes, or in the eyes of the young women, as someone who could still have children and because of that be loveable; on the other hand she seems to be experiencing herself as someone who is totally useless and unlovable because she is too old to have more children. Ambivalence of love and hate towards oneself and others, and distorted perception of reality is often part of a reaction to a traumatic loss. At this stage Naomi is not able to be in touch with her own sadness and extreme pain and with the pain of her daughters-in-law.

We cannot grieve properly unless we are able to be in touch with such pain. This can happen when we are able to bear both the feelings of love and of anger towards those who have died and towards those who have survived them. Often the initial reaction is an inability to feel such feelings as it may be too unbearable. Instead we tend to deny the pain and defend against it through either feelings of outrage, hate and guilt towards ourselves and others or by idealisation. Often hate and anger stem from feelings of ambivalence, anger, disappointment in relation to the other and ourselves which rise in us at times of acute pain of loss. The ordinary mix of negative and positive feelings with which we can come to terms on a daily basis, in times of bereavement become intense and may overcome, temporarily, the feelings of love in relation to those who have died and those who survived them, including ourselves. These feelings often subside with time. However, if the relationships with the others and our internal relations within ourselves have not been resolved fully prior to the traumatic event, the grieving person may become stuck in this stage of extreme emotions and become unable to move on through the natural process of mourning and may develop emotional difficulties, particularly depression.

We see this happening with Naomi as she turns against herself and her daughters-in-law and at the end of the chapter towards God himself when she says: 'Call me not Naomi, call me Mara: for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, and the Lord hath brought me home again empty: why then call ye me Naomi, seeing the Lord hath testified against me and the Almighty has afflicted me?' (1:20-21). At the time that Naomi reaches the height of her anger, she gets in touch with another feeling in her grieving process, beyond the anger—she is feeling bitter. Bitterness seems to include, in addition to anger, an element of self-reflection, of some more tender non-aggressive resignation, something closer to sadness. So it is when Naomi can turn against the ultimate power with anger, that she is able to turn away from anger towards more loving feelings and she allows Ruth to come with. She is thus acknowledging that neither she nor Ruth are yet able to separate from their past relationships and from each other and are still clinging to each other for support in order to survive (Ruth 'claves' to Naomi); both not ready yet to separate. At the same time Orpa, who is persuaded by Naomi to return to her parents, seems to represent a capacity to say goodbye that Ruth is perhaps not ready for yet. It seems that Orpa could represent also Naomi's capacity to be the independent woman who can make a new life after the loss of a husband, while Ruth could represent that part of Naomi that remains attached to past relationships and still needs to cling to them before she can develop new relationships.

We end this chapter with a number of paradoxes and conflicting feelings. Why does Naomi allow Ruth to come with her? Is it for Ruth's sake or her own? Is it out of selfless love? Or is it out of selfish needs stemming from the bitter feelings? Why is she returning at all? She seems to be going to an uncertain situation, two poor and lonely widows. Does she go there to seek pity or rebuild her life, to help Ruth find a new life or to show God up in the eyes of his own people? We leave Chapter One with Naomi not able to mourn yet with sadness and despair. Can she eventually manage to move fully beyond, towards grief and compassion and concern?

The following chapters represent ways of dealing with the loss of a woman's youth and fertility, with the ripened fruits falling to earth. In Chapter Two as the bitter mother is entering Judah somewhat self-pitying—the barley harvest is beginning. What is the older mature woman going to

reap? Would she find a capacity to encourage the younger generation, i.e. Ruth, with generous support and love while she herself comes to terms with the end of her life cycle? It seems that in Chapter Two these issues take precedence over the storyline in Chapter One, which is about the death of the two sons. Here we have the young woman and the old woman, two faces of female life in relation to sexuality, fertility and death. As Naomi enters Judah, she seems alone and poor and for the first time she is allowing Ruth to take a leading role. By Ruth having more of a voice and initiative to go and find food and husband, we see a change: the older woman is stepping into the background and allows the younger generation to begin to develop in their own right. But, as before, this is not without emotional contradictions. Did Ruth learn about Boaz from Naomi? Is Naomi pleased that Ruth will seek his love? Is she disappointed that this older kinsman of hers could be attracted to a fertile young woman and not to her? Is that why, she doesn't directly suggest, to begin with, that Ruth seeks him out? Is that why she seemed to pretend that she doesn't know about them nor does she know about Ruth's intentions? Throughout Chapter Two we see Naomi moving from feigning ignorance about Boaz, to shrewd, almost crude manipulation. And so Ruth says to Naomi: 'let me now go to the fields, and glean ears of corn up to Him in whose sight I shall find grace. And she said unto her, Go, my daughter' (2:2). And then towards the end of the chapter: 'and her mother in law said unto her, where hast thou gleaned today? And wroughtest thou? Blessed be he that did take knowledge of thee. And she shewed her mother in law with whom she had wrought, and said, The man's name with whom I wrought today is Boaz' (2:19).

Does Naomi have to deal with feelings of envy and resentment, while she also wishes to help Ruth? Is she struggling with her own needs and hopes that Boaz will eventually help her as well by marrying Ruth? And what will Naomi find helpful through this match? When Naomi encourages Ruth to seduce Boaz, is she dealing with the conflict between a wish to carry on the name of her sons and husband and help Ruth, and between her need to come to terms with the painful possibility that it is her sons and not Ruth (and Orpa?) who were infertile? If Ruth succeeds to conceive, it is not her son's children but Ruth's son that will come to be. Is that why she is not explaining more fully to Ruth that she has some property and land to be redeemed and not one but two kinsmen who could redeem the name of her family? It is as if she leaves in the hands of fate the results, too ambivalent about what will be for her the 'happy ending'. If Boaz does fall in love with Ruth, if Ruth will seduce him and have a son, would that help Naomi to tolerate these conflicting wishes and needs?

In Chapters Two and Three we are witnessing the difficult process of Naomi struggling with acceptance of the loss of her own youth while she attempts to help Ruth to take care of her own needs for sexual and procreative fulfilment. This ambivalence of the older generation is reflected also through a male perspective as expressed in Boaz's ambivalence and guilt in relation to Ruth and Naomi. He, the older man, feels attracted, but guiltily, to the younger woman: guilty towards Ruth, but also towards Naomi, perhaps for not choosing the one who seems to be his peer. He says, 'have I not charged the young men that they shall not touch thee? And when thou art athirst, go unto the vessels, and drink of that which the young men have drawn' (2:9). And a bit later: '... a woman lay at his feet, Who art though? And she answered, I am Ruth thine handmaid' (3:8-9). Is it out of guilt that he feigns ignorance of Ruth as she comes to him in the night and is that why he praises her mother-in-law at the same time? Equally, he is aware of the young men and women working, thirsty, in the field, alongside Ruth: he is aware that they and Ruth belong to a different generation from his. Like Naomi, he seems to act out of self-centred needs, as well as act out of care for his kinsman's family and out of love for Ruth. The love towards Ruth coming from Naomi and Boaz is expressed in these chapters as strongly as the other feelings: perhaps Naomi chose Boaz over the other kinsman in order to give Ruth someone whom she already knew and considered more suited to her as a love match? Boaz also seems quite clearly motivated by affection for Ruth and not only by familial duty. And yet as Chapter Three comes to an end and Chap-

ter Four begins, it seems that the link between Boaz and Naomi, and their feelings of self interest continue to be quite powerful. 'And when she came to her mother in law, she said, Who art thou, my daughter? And she told her all that the man had done to her' (3:16). It seems that feigning ignorance, i.e. Naomi asking Ruth 'Who are you?' and 'Where were you?' are a way of Naomi describing her own ambivalent and guilty state of mind. 'And she said, These six measures of barley gave he me; for he said to me, Go not empty unto thy mother in law' (3:17). We are reminded here of the end of Chapter One when Naomi said, 'I went out full and the Lord hath brought me home again empty'. In Naomi's inner world, is Boaz using Ruth to fill Naomi with a child and riches or is he using Naomi to get Ruth, the young wife? Is Naomi trying to fulfil Ruth's destiny as a woman and wife or is she using her to compensate for her own losses?

In Chapter Four the different strands of conflict and reconciliation are culminating with the high point being the birth of Ruth's son. 'And the women said unto Naomi, blessed be the Lord, which has not left thee this day without a kinsman, that his name may be famous in Israel. And he shall be unto thee the restorer of thy life and the nourisher of thine old age, for thy daughter in law which loveth thee, which is better to thee than seven sons, have borne him. And Naomi took the child and laid it in her bosom and became nurse unto it' (4:14-16). We can see here an expression of a loving restorative process where Naomi, the older bereft mother, is able to connect both through religious ritual and through the generosity of her daughter-in-law, to a cycle of life that will continue beyond her death; a resolution which Naomi is nursing with care. And yet immediately we see the other side of the old woman's conflict, she rationalises her feelings by using a social consensus of other women, and is looking upon the newborn child as her own and not Ruth's. It is as if a part of Naomi is not restoring Ruth, but is using her to maintain the delusion that she herself is still young and fertile and has a live son and ancestor to a future king: 'And the women and neighbours gave it a name, saying, there is a son born to Naomi; and they called his name Obed, he is the father of Jessie, the father of David' (4:17). And there follows a long list of future generations, all the way to King David, seeming to express Naomi's desperate need to justify and to strengthen that side of her conflict.

The feelings of any older generation, especially of women towards children and grandchildren, is as full of conflicting struggles as is a process of any bereavement. We all are in an ongoing struggle to overcome envy, resentment and guilt, and reconcile these with feelings of concern and love. We can see how Naomi is trying to manage an emotional reality in which she is able to enable Ruth to achieve what she herself has lost, with sympathetic concern. And yet at the same time Naomi is using Ruth to deny the reality of the end of her own life cycle, up to a point where she denies Ruth's separate existence and merges with her by 'becoming' the mother of Ruth's child.

The book ends with Naomi seeing herself again as the mother of a live child and not as the woman who lost sons, grandchildren, youth and fertility. It is we, the readers who have to remember at this point in time, at the end of the book, at the end of the harvest, that Naomi's state of mind will shift again to times when she will be able to be in touch with more realistic, more concerned and generous feelings. Like the cycle of nature, so the cycle of our life is a constant process of managing losses, for better and worse, of overcoming one's hateful feelings and failing to do so. When we can keep together in mind the different feelings, conflicts, and fluctuations of our internal relationships, we are then able to keep developing and acknowledging our emotional limitations. The relationship between the reader and the biblical story is a representation of that ongoing relationship within ourselves. And so it is, that we the readers on behalf of Naomi and ourselves are to keep in mind as we reach the end of the story, Naomi's different feelings

throughout. Maybe when certain works of art, like the Bible, have the capacity to create such response in the audience, that they become emotionally meaningful to every generation of readers. Perhaps it is because these works of art can recreate in us the experience of an ongoing internal struggle, that they help us to get in touch with an awareness that nobody including ourselves is only loving or only hateful and that the human psyche is forever shifting like nature itself.