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THE ABYSS OF COUNTERTRANSFERENCE

Commentary on "Freud the Pediatrician"

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Editorial note (January, 2023)

This article has been published in Italian in a 2022 special monographic issue of the journal *The Wise Baby / Il poppante saggio* dedicated to the essay "Why have we ignored Freud the 'Paediatrician'? The relevance of Freud's paediatric training for the origins of psychoanalysis" (Bonomi, 1994a).

Both can be downloaded from my website:

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Abstract

In *Why have we ignored Freud the 'Paediatrician'?* (Bonomi, 1994a) the "crime" which resonates in Freud's self-analysis was sought in the rooms of Baginsky's polyclinic. But the thing was more subtle. A circumcised girl was there, but she had popped up like a ghost from the past of a woman in her thirties whom Freud regularly met in his office for analysis. The "scene of female circumcision," which Freud obtains in analysis, is thus identified as the place where the lives of the doctor and the patient intersect and intertwine. Together with the discovery that Freud had not circumcised any of his three sons, this scene illuminates the thesis advanced by Ferenczi in his *Clinical Diary* that Freud abandoned the theory of real trauma at the very moment when "the abyss of countertransference" had opened wide before him.

1. The gap

Re-reading "*Why Did We Ignore Freud the Pediatrician?*" nearly three decades later, the first thing that strikes one is the abundance of information relegated to footnotes, information that could have generated far more than an article on the history of psychoanalysis, but is kept out of the text to maintain the narrative tension that unfolds around a gap that is the real subject of the essay, as well as the driving force behind the research that will ensue.

This lacuna is not simply historiographical, although it concerns something very concrete: a few weeks before opening his practice as a neurologist, the young Freud experiences actual castration as a therapy for masturbation and hysteria in girls: cauterization of the entrance to the vagina, cutting of the labia minora, destruction of the clitoris, all means that were spreading rapidly in the medical world in those years. Freud, however, never mentions this, not even in his 1905 *Three Essays on Sexual Theory*, in which he nevertheless sets out to present cases of infantile masturbation as a natural phenomenon, demystifying the belief that they were “horrifying instance of precocious depravity” (p. 484). But it is clear that the so-called "discovery" of infantile sexuality, for which Freud would be celebrated for much of the twentieth century, has its starting point here (Bonomi, 1997). Not only that; from here also starts the famous "seduction theory" which, in the course of 1897, will be replaced by the drive paradigm and its correlates, the theory of sexual constitution, precisely, and the theory of pathogenic fantasies. Thus, in one fell swoop, one finds here the unique root of paradigms that will not only be mutually exclusive, but will never quite succeed in prevailing over each other, signaling that rift around which the history of psychoanalysis will unfold. Here the "hole" turns out to be a crack in the foundation of psychoanalysis.

In short, the young Freud's encounter with the horrors of real castration is, indeed a relevant experience because it can explain his subsequent moves in the construction of psychoanalysis, as well as their contradictions. And yet Freud avoids in every way to be found as someone who has had such an experience, indeed he carefully hides any trace that might make him recognized as the subject of such an experience. Here the hole is Freud cutting it out, forcing us, as I find myself doing in *Freud the Pediatrician*, to retrace the edges of a historiographical gap by picking up the cut-out flaps one by one, and then using them as stones on which to rest our feet. And the great surprise, from the point of view of the theory of knowledge, is that, at some point, psychoanalysis will suddenly flow out of this hole like a karst river in flood.

In particular, in composing *The Interpretation of Dreams*, which is the most important product of his self-analysis, Freud began to dream about and dramatize castration, to talk about it through legends and myths, to identify any "hole" as symbolizing both female genitalia and castration, and finally to build a most powerful theory around "symbolic castration," making it the prop of a phallogocentric system that would be untouchable. A kind of new religion, before which the followers will have to bow, as Abraham Kardiner well recounts in his memoirs, or they will be forced to leave, like Otto Rank, Freud's longtime right-hand man, or they will eventually enter into a conflict that will reverberate like a trauma on the history of psychoanalysis, as is the case with Sándor Ferenczi.

2. Woman = "castrated man"

Thirty years ago the "castration complex" was still very much present in current psychoanalytic jargon, and not only in Lacanian jargon. André Green, for example, had just published a book aimed at preserving the specificity and centrality of the system of thought based on "castration," despite the fact that he himself pointed out the many contradictions of this notion and its progressive transformation into a metaphor. In particular I was struck by Green's assertion that the specificity of the psychoanalytic notion of castration lay in the fact that reality was never in question!

I remember well the cognitive clash between this apodictic assertion and what I was discovering, and my wavering to the point of wondering if I was delusional. I was at a crossroads and this would have been the easiest solution because, if I was not insane, then the problem I was confronting was far more serious: how was it possible that the horrific atrocities I was discovering had gone unspoken? How was it possible that Freud's pre-analytic engagement with children had been erased or distorted, or that there was no mention of surgical treatments of masturbation in children not only in Freud's texts, but not even in the many works on the history of psychoanalysis? Yet these were partly known facts among historians of medicine. I must say that these studies served a function of "consensual validation" of my research. However, this presented an additional problem, since this kind of knowledge was systematically kept at a distance, dissociated, from the world of psychoanalysis. It was as if the world of history and the world of psychoanalysis were separated by an invisible wall.

Language was part of this invisible wall. For example, in the Italian translation of Freud's complete works, the German word "Kastration" is systematically translated as "evirazione" [emasculatation], a term that corresponds to the German "Entmannung," a word also used by Freud, but rarely and mostly in reference to myths or delusions. This choice of language obviously transports the reader into a world of masculine fantasies. However, if we step into the real world, we find that the word "Kastration" referred mainly, at least in medical journals, to the "castration of women." For example, in a book titled *On the Effects of Castration* [Über die Wirkungen der Castration], from 1903, Paul Möbius wrote, "If before men were castrated often, while women exceptionally, now the castration of women is so frequent that the cases of surgeons doing this operation number in the hundreds, while the castration of men is comparatively rare" (p. 22).

This historical reality disappears in a narrative in which the word "castration" is replaced with "emasculatation." What is even more surprising is that this erasure fits perfectly into the Freudian system of thought, in which woman is thought of and presented as a "castrated man." In this regard, few people know that the trigger for the final conflict between Freud and Ferenczi, which erupted in 1932 around the work *Confusion of Tongues between Adults and the Child*, was precisely Ferenczi's

disagreement with the view of woman as a "castrated man," to which he had also initially subscribed (Bonomi, 2016).

Similarly, one has no idea how much the way castration is thought of in psychoanalysis has concretely altered the perception of the traumatic dimension of actual castration in women. A good example is the review, which appeared in 1961 in *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, of a follow-up study of 244 cases of castration on men and women, in which the author wrote:

From a psychoanalytic point of view, we must assume that castration in men re-enforces the fear of further loss—the loss of the penis; whereas castration in women does not interfere with the visible body image *and thus has less or no traumatic effect*. (Gero, 1961, p. 589; emphasis added)

The psychoanalytic idea of the threat of castration, i.e., the imaginary fear that the penis will be cut off, is used here to erase the traumatic character that castration can have on a woman. In this case it is about removal of reproductive organs for eugenic reasons. But the same idea was used to erase throughout the twentieth century the traumatic character of Female Genital Mutilation based on the representation of women as "castrated men" supported by metapsychology and its multiple fallouts, primarily the belief that women, in order to become women, must give up their "imaginary phallus."

The disconnect between the historical reality of medical castration, as well as of Female Genital Mutilation, and the alternative reality created by Freudian metapsychology was the problem I faced after studying *Why did we ignore Freud the "paediatrician"?* It was a real puzzle.

In particular, it seemed impossible to me that the foundational core, the bedrock, of Freud's mature theory of female sexuality had been a circumcision (excision), i.e., something that is now widely considered a trauma. According to Freud's theory of sexual constitution, girls are born with a sense of having a penis, and only when the expectation that the clitoris will grow like the male penis is disappointed are they driven to abandon masculine goals, discover the vagina and become female by accepting their own "castration." As Freud will say lapidarily in *Some psychic consequences of the anatomical difference between the sexes*, "the elimination of clitoridal sexuality is a necessary precondition for the development of femininity" (Freud, 1925, p. 255). The term used by Freud is *Wegschaffung*, which means "to take away," as occurs in a mackerel. But what was its meaning? Did it have a metaphorical or literal meaning? The boundaries are blurred. Freud describes it as a psychic process, but his model was decidedly "physical," as is well evident from what Marie Bonaparte reports in the essay "Notes on excision," composed shortly after Freud's death and published only later, in 1948, along with the article "Female mutilation among primitive peoples and their psychical parallels in civilization." In this second article Bonaparte wrote that clitoral excision,

seemed to Freud a way of seeking to further “feminize” the female by removing this cardinal vestige of her masculinity. Such operations, as he [Freud] once said to me, must be intended to complete the ‘biological castration’ of the female which Nature, in the eyes of these tribes, has not sufficiently effected” (1948a, p. 153).

Of course, one must ask here what happens to the circumcision of this or that girl by human hands in this or that historical time? Disappeared in a biological time, erased from a universal, absorbed into one immense "bio-trauma." This is the great black hole into which concrete cases of circumcision of girls (I use here a term that for Freud also included excision of the clitoris) that Freud encounters since his pediatric training in 1886 have disappeared.

3. "A scene of female circumcision"

But there is something even more crucial, which I had not yet focused on in this essay. It is the fact that the patient from whom Freud obtains "a scene of female circumcision" [*Eine Szene von Mädchenschneidung*] in January 1897, was indeed Emma Eckstein. From what Freud wrote to Fliess on January 24, 1897, this was not so transparent, but both Gerhard Fichtner and Albrecht Hirschmüller confirmed it to me later. The implications were enormous, because Emma Eckstein is Freud's main patient of the years when psychoanalysis was born. Not only that, but Freud's sudden turns of those years appear to be linked to this patient, who was the only woman Freud had in long-term psychotherapy. Was it ever possible that this patient, who influenced Freud decisively as much in the formulation of the so-called seduction theory as in his retraction, had been circumcised as a child? That her childhood trauma was just that?

At first I thought this was an absurd thought. If it had been so, it would have opened up quite a few paradoxes. The first was that what had prompted Freud to abandon the theory of real trauma had been real trauma itself!¹ The second paradox was that this real trauma, the circumcision to which Emma Eckstein had been subjected as a child, stood there at the bottom of the Freudian theory of female sexuality. Once stripped of the question of who does what to whom and why, once the historical context was erased and the personal drama silenced, this circumcision had been turned into the metapsychological tale about the unhappy creature (the woman) who, alas, lost her penis in the course of biological evolution!

I found it hard to believe that Freud could have gone so far, that is, that he had turned a particular event like his patient's circumcision into a universal drama. If that was so, I told myself, it was folly.

¹ As Schur (1966) reported at the time, the trigger of Freud's realization that what his patients had described to him as actual seduction episodes were fantasies, was Emma's scene of circumcision.

And had it not been for certain statements by Ferenczi, I would surely have abandoned this path. On the August 4, 1932 page of his *Clinical Diary*, a page written on the eve of his last meeting with Freud, Ferenczi had dismantled the master's biological theory of "castration in femininity," arguing that the fantasy of having a penis (i.e., the clinical phenomenon Freud had stumbled upon in the course of his analysis of Emma Eckstein and which would later become the central element of Freudian theory of female sexuality, and more) could also be produced by traumatic causes. On that very page Freud had noted, "The ease with which Freud sacrifices the interests of women in favor of those of male patients is striking."

And yet it was not easy to embrace the idea that Emma Eckstein had really undergone a circumcision, that is, that an actual event had been behind the scene. Among Freud scholars there was not one who had advanced this hypothesis. Masson, in his famous and much-discussed book *Assault on Truth*, regarded the Eckstein scene as a fantasy. And even such respected and esteemed scholars as Appignanesi and Forrester (1992), in their voluminous book on Freud's women, had characterized the scene as a mere fantasy.

In short, everything was urging to give up this path. Was the matter therefore closed? Not at all. Reporting the scene to Fliess, Freud had noted in parentheses that a labium minor was "even shorter today," as if to say that, despite the fictional character of the scene, the remnants of what had happened in the past were still clearly visible! Genital mutilation had taken place and the eyewitness was none other than Freud himself.

Naturally, this determined a shift in the center of gravity of my research. The center of gravity was no longer Freud the "pediatrician," the young Freud who is exposed to the horrendous things that pediatricians were doing to the genitals of little girls, and who reacts with indignation to the point of becoming an opponent of the sexual theory of hysteria, but precisely the "analyst" Freud who, ten years later, encounters the same horrendous thing, but in a different context and in a new form. Freud is no longer faced with a little girl, but with a woman in her thirties in analysis, and he presses her, urges her, as was then the custom, to recall her own childhood trauma. And that is how he finally obtains [bekommen] her circumcision scene. But it is not what he expected. It is a far-fetched scene in which reality and fantasy are mixed, and it disorients him.

The most far-fetched feature of the scene, the one that has led scholars to dismiss its "reality," is the "sucking of blood" after the cutting of the labium minor. Now, this fantasy is not entirely disconnected from the "circumcision" theme, nor is it so absurd. Rather, it recalls a precise element of the orthodox ritual of Jewish circumcision in which the mohel (the circumciser), stops the blood with the pressure of his mouth. Had Emma wrapped her personal trauma in a typical and recognizable

element of Jewish ritual, a ritual from which females are excluded? This is a question I asked myself in another article that came out almost simultaneously with the one on Freud the pediatrician (Bonomi, 1994b). By fabricating her scene with this "male" fantasy, had Emma replaced an infamous "cure or punishment"² for masturbation, of which she could only be ashamed, with the noble symbol of the Covenant with God of the chosen people? We can go even further. With his scene, in which any distinction between male and female, as well as between sacred and profane, is abolished, had she constructed a hall of mirrors to strike her analyst at his very weak point?

4. But had Freud circumcised his sons?

Here we come to the second thing I did not yet know, but which emerged at the very symposium *100 Years of Psychoanalysis* held in Geneva in 1993. When I expounded on my research on Freud the "pediatrician," the question naturally arose: but had Freud had his children circumcised?

The first public statement that he had *not had* them circumcised was in a book by Sander Gilman that had just been published (Gilman, 1993, p. 86), but which I had not yet had the opportunity to read. Apparently, the only one among the participants in the symposium who knew anything about it was Peter Swales, who related that Gilman's source was an "ad oculum" demonstration that could only be whispered. It seemed that no one had then consulted the register of the Israelitische Cultusgemeinde in Vienna! Of course this was a naive thought, but it is a fact that in the literature no one had ever fully reported the register data, so I asked Johannes Reichmayr if he could consult them for me once back in Austria. He confirmed to me that in the birth records the space indicating circumcision had been left blank, at the same time turning over to me a note from the community secretariat denying its probative value because, in the Vienna of those years, Freud might as well have opted for a private ceremony, as I recount in another essay (Bonomi, 1994b, p. 73). Evidently, it was not easy for the Jewish community in Vienna to accept Freud's dissent to circumcision as an identity ceremony. I should add that psychoanalysts are not willing to accept this dissent either, since to this day the fact that Freud did not have his sons circumcised is missing from the official biographical data of the father of psychoanalysis.

In 1994 an article by Emanuel Rice, entitled "The Jewish heritage of Sigmund Freud," was published. The author related that he had learned at a Swales lecture that none of Freud's three sons had been circumcised. Surprised to hear "this astonishing information," Rice had immediately set out

² In a late work, Freud defined the circumcision of boys practiced in America as a "cure or punishment" (Freud, 1933, p. 87)

to verify it. In an interview with Elliott Philipp (Martha Freud's first cousin) in July 1992, he asked him if this was true, and Philipp replied that it was.

For many years the issue was discussed only in small circles (I still remember a heated debate, which arose almost by accident, at a conference at the Freud Museum in London in 1995 or so), then the issue resurfaced in a book by Franz Maciejewski (2002, p. 37, pp. 327-328, n. 13). Also in 2002, the archives of the Jewish community in Vienna were consulted by Adrian de Klerk, who, discovered that Herbert Graf (Freud's Little Hans) had not been circumcised either (Klerk, 2004, p. 465). It had been in the essay on Little Hans that Freud had advanced the thesis that the castration complex was the most powerful unconscious root of both anti-Semitism and man's natural contempt for woman, based on the equation Jewish circumcised=castrated=woman (Freud, 1909, p. 36, note).

And here, of course, new scenarios open up. I give just one example. In Chapter 8 of the essay on Freud the pediatrician, "Moses and the Operation," I point out how the Freudian analysis of the falsifications of the biblical text focuses on the Zipporah legend -- the episode in which God is angry with Moses precisely because he had neglected the circumcision of his son, and then Zipporah, Moses' Midianite wife, promptly performs the operation herself, thus saving Moses from God's wrath. If we know that Freud *had not had his sons circumcised*, his identification with Moses (which runs through various dreams of the years of self-analysis), becomes pregnant and consistent. Indeed, we find ourselves suddenly admitted into the cradle of Freud's anxieties and confronted with the origin of the inner torment that will be carved into the psychoanalytic theory of the killing of the father, the pillar that supports the theory of the Oedipal complex.

In short, Freud's father Jacob, who, though open to modernization, was nonetheless a pious observer, must not have welcomed Sigmund's decision not to let his children enter the Covenant with God. Here, too, we find a particular historical event that, after being erased, returns in the form of the universal: rebellion against the father and his killing, to be exact, with the torment that follows, until its reversal into "posterior obedience." Freud's strongest act of rebellion to his father, to all fathers, the one that had hurt Jacob more than any other, had been precisely that of not circumcising his sons, thus interrupting the transmission of an identity that had been maintained over the millennia. But this unforgivable act had left a rift in Freud's self and that alternation between rebellion and submission that he would describe in *Totem and Taboo* in exemplary fashion. Not only that, but Freud's grandiosity also has its payoff here. He can thus mirror himself in the Moses the Lawgiver, the Moses who in the Freudian narrative creates the community of the Jews by introducing the seal of circumcision. As for Freud, we can better understand why he felt he was the new Moses creating the psychoanalytic community by replacing the seal of circumcision with symbolic castration. Hence that

religious character of psychoanalysis that manifests itself in its irrational dogmas and will be extrinsic in the history of its repeated splits and wars of faith.

5. The "crime"

A question I have been asking myself recently is this: did Emma Eckstein know about the painful conflict between Freud and his father, between Freud and his father's religion? In short, did she know that her therapist had not circumcised his own children? Given that his brother Friedrich was a close friend of Freud, this is a more than plausible question. In that case, his circumcision scene not only mixed reality and fantasy, but also marked the exact point at which the lives of the patient and the analyst had become intertwined, at which the pains and salvific fantasies of the one were knotted with those of the other.

This knot had been formed two years earlier, in February 1895, when Freud had consented to his patient being operated on in the nose by Fliess. The episode, which came to light with the uncensored publication of Freud's letters to Fliess, is so well known that I will not dwell on it. I only recall that, on that occasion, Emma almost bled to death before Freud's eyes.

Paradoxically, the birth of psychoanalysis owes much to this incident that shocked Freud to the core. The phenomenon of "transference" was discovered by Freud in the very stormy days when Emma Eckstein was hovering between life and death. To find some relief, Freud had hastily written the final chapter of *Studies on Hysteria*, in which the first idea of transference as a "false connection" was formulated. It was an idea that would prove to be ingenious but, as has been pointed out by many commentators, it had a strong defensive character in that it absolved Freud of any responsibility. Robert Langs (1984), for example, translates it this way, "I - the analyst - am not responsible for the patient's disturbance, his disturbed view of me or reaction to me or to my therapeutic measures" (p. 598), pointing out that it is precisely this need to exonerate himself that emerges powerfully in Freud's dream of Irma's injection a few months later.

This dream, dated July 24, 1895, is rightly regarded as the moment when psychoanalysis was born. Freud himself will say that the "secret of the dream" was revealed to him through this very dream. His imaginative center is Irma's mouth, which in the dream merges and blurs with the vulva. Freud inspects her only to retract immediately afterward in horror. In a masterful reading by Erikson (1954), the act of looking down into the horrifying depths of Irma's throat is identified as the moment of an "initiation, conversion and inspiration" that transforms Freud into a hero who in turn will be looked upon by men "with pity and terror, with ambivalent admiration and ill-concealed abhorrence" (p. 47). This reversal, in which Freud loses the privileged status of "doctor" to find himself in the

position of his patient, in which Freud becomes *her*, is the great mystery of the dream from which psychoanalysis was born.

Although Irma was not Emma Eckstein but another patient of Freud's (Anna Hammerschlag), nevertheless, most commentators have recognized in this specific scene precisely the shock Freud felt when Emma had almost died. The association between mouth and vulva confirms this. The theory that justified nose surgery was the same one that justified genital surgery, that of "reflex neurosis." The only difference was that Fliess had identified the "genital points" on the nose, thus devising an alternative therapy strongly supported by Freud, who, as we know, abhorred the "sexual etiology" of the time (read: he felt horror at genital surgery, the main etiological treatment). Thanks to his friend's new theory, it was no longer necessary to operate on the genitals: a harmless operation on the nose was enough!

But the operation had not been harmless. Not only because Emma nearly bled to death, but also because it was a dislocated "circumcision" on the nose, as I also say in the essay on Freud the pediatrician. What was not yet clear to me was that, subjectively, for both Freud and his patient, this "displaced circumcision" had been a *repetition* of Emma's childhood trauma, her circumcision. It had been then that the fates of the patient and the doctor had become knotted. How this could have happened, we do not know. We do not have enough information. But we do know that in analysis the patient's childhood trauma can begin to reverberate so strongly in the unconscious of the analytic dyad until it bursts into the present in the form of repetition.

Here the words Sándor Ferenczi writes in the *Clinical Diary* come to mind: "... the time will come when he [the analyst] will have to repeat with his own hands the act of murder previously perpetrated against the patient. In contrast to the original murder, however, he is not allowed to deny his guilt ..." (March 8, 1932).

In the essay on Freud the pediatrician, I was looking for the "crime" that resonates in Freud's self-analysis in the wards of Baginsky's polyclinic. That was what the pediatric scenario of Irma's dream was suggesting me to, and I still believe that those and similar wards were relevant, but the thing was more subtle. A circumcised girl was there, but she had popped up like a ghost from the past of a woman in her thirties whom Freud regularly met in his office for analysis.

6. From mutilated sex to the cult of the phallus

A biographer of Freud, Ronald William Clark, wrote that by avoiding mention of the incident that occurred to Emma Eckstein in his interpretation of Irma's dream, the father of psychoanalysis "created a gap of Grand Canyon proportions" (Clark, 1980, p. 152).

Finding the torn threads with which to mend this hole was anything but simple. Thus, for many years I devoted myself to putting together other pieces of the puzzle, especially related to Ferenczi, who had filled that hole in an extraordinary way, transforming the, one-person Freudian psychoanalysis, emotionally detached and based on the analyst's authority, into a two-person adventure in which the analyst's sensitivity and his technique, i.e., his countertransference, cannot call itself out of the field in which the repetition of the patient's childhood trauma takes shape.

But the dream of Irma's injection -- that is, the moment when Freud loses his privileged status of doctor to become himself the patient -- remained an insuperable stumbling block. So I decided to at least publish my research on Freud's medical work with children in a book, written only in Italian, entitled *On the Threshold of Psychoanalysis. Freud and the Madness of the Child* (Bonomi, 2007). The publication was strongly supported by John Jervis, but the reception of Italian psychoanalysts was one of substantial disinterest.

Elisabeth Roudinesco, who had written the preface to that book, and who was convinced that the circumcision of girls was Freud's real "dark continent," invited me in 2006 (the 150th year of Freud's birth was then being celebrated) to present my ideas to the *Société internationale d'histoire de la psychiatrie et de la psychanalyse*. I decided then that the time had come to cross that threshold that I dared not cross with a work entitled "Du sexe mutilé au culte du phallus" [From mutilated sex to the cult of the phallus].

In literature Emma Eckstein was treated as a "phallic" woman. Even Jones had described her as being of the "masculine" type for whom Freud felt a special attraction. Moreover, in the very letter to Fliess in which Freud reports the scene of female circumcision, we find the first reference to what was to be the Phallus in his mature system of thought, the dazzling idea that the broomstick of the flying witches was the "great Lord. Penis." In short, Emma Eckstein had been circumcised as a child, she bore visible signs of her mutilation on her body, but what Freud grasps and believes about this constellation is not the wound, nor the traumatic pain, but the fantasy that magically erases the trauma, the all-powerful fantasy of having a penis, or rather, a phallus. It had become clear to me that the epicenter of Freud's phallogocentric doctrine was precisely this anti-traumatic fantasy.

Emma's psychic reaction to the cut, her hallucination, had not only survived the carnal body, as in the phantom limb phenomenon, but had become the relic secretly preserved and venerated in

the crypt of psychoanalytic theory. In short, in the position of analyst, Freud had not merely placed himself outside and above the field, and not to be found as the subject of all his experiences with circumcised girls and women. He had done much more. Feeling emasculated, he had reacted to this countertransferential feeling by taking possession of his patient's imaginary phallus, the magical talisman that erases trauma, and on this he had built his new thought system. This imaginary phallus, arresting Freud's fall into a bottomless abyss, was a *fetish* and "a monument to the horror of castration," just as Freud would describe many years later (Freud, 1927, p. 493).

7. The abyss

I was sufficiently satisfied with how I had argued my thesis to submit it to the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, which had already agreed to publish a decidedly heterodox paper of mine. But this time publication became an interminable odyssey. The reaction of most *peer reviewers* was *one* of bewilderment. However, the journal *editor* was supportive. Or rather, since I was talking about things completely unknown, he suggested that I split the article in two: at the moment I should confine myself to the medical context only, leaving out the possible impact Emma Eckstein's castration might have had on Freud. He convinced me that this was already a rich contribution and so, with his generous assistance, I reworked the material I had previously published in various forms. Although my article contained only half the message, the final product was well packaged and the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* was indeed the best place to ventilate my ideas. But time passed and the article did not come out.

It had happened that a board member was against its publication even in this tame form and, due to the current editorial rules, had exercised his veto right. In short, publication had been blocked. The conflict within the journal's board lasted more than a year (Antonino Ferro, who was then on the board, phoned me to ask me to "be patient" a little longer) and only when the rules were changed did the article get a green light. It appeared in the June 2009 issue with the title "The relevance of castration and circumcision to the origins of psychoanalysis. The medical context," [The relevance of castration and circumcision to the origins of psychoanalysis. 1. The medical context]. A few weeks later, I received an unexpected gift. Fascinated by my paper, Adrian de Klerk, a Dutch psychoanalyst, had sent me a long email offering me the last missing key.

The central part of his email (sent on July 24, i.e., the anniversary day of Irma's dream) was this: "When I began to read Freud 'sub specie circumcisionis', I was startled to find that the keyword in the Irma-dream 'trimethylamin' can be read as an anagram, a nearly literal transcription, of 'brith

milah' (Hebrew for circumcision). Try it and you will find that nearly all of the letters and sounds of brith milah are present in 'trimethylamin', except for the initial 'b' in the phrase. It may be just a sheer coincidence, a speculation on my part; but perhaps maybe not. Anzieu once said that a nearly perfect likeness is a complete one for the unconscious."

I must say that at first I was not convinced, and so I well understand the skepticism about this reading, which had immediately seemed too "Freudian." But about two months later strange thoughts began to swirl in my head. Something had unlocked and new connections began to take shape.

This is not the place to go over the complicated plot of the dream, but I must at least mention that, in Freud's interpretation, the disgusting smell of amyl was the element repressed by the dream work, which had replaced the word "amyl" with a string of words culminating in the word "Trimethylamin," which finally appears in bold letters before the dreamer's eyes. For Lacan (1954/55) it had been an "apocalyptic revelation" (p. 157), an enigmatic oracle similar to a religious formula. Lacan associates it with the Islamic formula "There is no God but God" (p. 158); he had come close, for *brith milah* is (literally) the covenant of the cut that seals the Covenant with God.

A precedent should be recalled here. In his 1891 study on *Aphasia*, at the point where Freud discusses the words that the aphasic keeps repeating in a vacuum after a shock, we find a curious autobiographical insert. Freud says that he was twice suddenly in mortal danger and that on both occasions he had thought "Jetzt ist es aus mit dir" [This is your end]. "In these dangerous situations," Freud writes, "I heard these words as if someone were shouting them into my ears and, at the same time, *I saw them as if they were printed on a piece of paper floating in the air*" (emphasis added). The passage is quoted by Isakower (1939, p. 347) in the first of a series of articles in which he develops the thesis that the linguistic-auditory sphere forms the core Super-Ego. For Isakower it was "to emphasize the superegoic character of these words, which sound like the declaration of a judgment by a powerful authority, while at the same time the verdict can be read" (ibid.).

Even in Irma's injection dream Freud sees a printed word floating in the air, the word trimethylamin. Had she relived a deadly danger? Were the letters in the air the verdict of a powerful authority?³ Had Freud felt abandoned by the protective superego and consigned to his fate, as he

³ Many years later Freud would argue that whatever the situation of mortal danger, it is experienced as castration anxiety, as the ego reacts by feeling abandoned by the protective superego, or destiny (Freud, 1926, pp. 129-30). This thesis, although it will be profoundly changed by Ferenczi's theory of trauma, I believe helps us understand something of Irma's dream, or at least how Freud understood it.

would say many years later, explaining that whatever mortal danger one is exposed to, intrapsychically, the ego experiences it as castration anxiety (Freud, 1926)?

Even behind this universal theory (the theory that makes castration anxiety the universal language of trauma) we find particular facts of Freud's life. When, in 1889, his first son was born to him, Freud had broken a tradition that had been handed down from father to son for generations and generations: he had not had him circumcised, nor had he given him a Jewish name, only a Christian name. Freud had named him Jean-Martin in honor of Charcot, his admired master. The same thing had been repeated in 1891, at the birth of her second son, named Oliver in honor of the pugnacious General Cromwell. So, in that same year, his father Jacob, a pious and observant man, decided to give his son, for his 35th birthday, the old family bible they had read together years before, bound in a new skin. And, to remind him of who he was and his God-commanded duties, he added a dedication written in Hebrew (Freud's Hebrew name was Schlomo, after his grandfather, who had been a rabbi). It goes without saying that among these duties was that of making the children enter the covenant (*brit*), inscribing with the cut (*milah*) on the organ of generation the covenant with God. But Freud had not listened to him. In fact, he had done more. When his third son arrived, he named him Ernst, after Brücke, the revered director of the physiology laboratory he had attended as a student -- as if to say that in his life religion had long since been supplanted by science. It had been his response to Jacob, or rather to the call to religious duties conveyed by the gift of the old bound Bible.

All this is recorded in a series of dreams that Freud reports in the *Interpretation of Dreams*, culminating in the final dream of the Self-Dissection of the Pelvis, which opens with a strange anatomical task that the revered physiology professor entrusts him with: to make a dissection of his own pelvis. Of course, there is nothing "religious" about this order; it is a "scientific" task. But hadn't science taken the place of religion? And had not Brücke taken the place of Jacob?

Thus the meaning of this strange "circumcision" turning into a horrible "castration" carved into the body of the father of psychoanalysis was becoming more precise. What was at stake was the task that Freud had not fulfilled and that Jacob had reminded him of. This task is inscribed in the name Brücke, which, taken literally, means "bridge." In the Jewish religion, circumcision is in fact the "bridge" between fathers and sons, the way in which a specific identity is transmitted from one generation to the next. But Freud had broken that bridge, and was now plunging into an bottomless abyss.

The "abyss of countertransference" had opened wide before him. The expression is not mine, but Ferenczi's, who mentions it on the May 1, 1932 page of the *Clinical Diary*, where he tries to explain something that had always been a puzzle for him: when and why had Freud abandoned the

theory of real trauma? The answer he gives himself in the *Clinical Diary* is this: at the moment when the abyss of countertransference had opened wide before him.

By now the basic ingredients to explain the birth of psychoanalysis were all there. But these ingredients, which had gradually become clearer since my study on Freud the "Paediatrician," now required a radically different narrative of the beginnings than we are used to.

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