

## A Brief Apocalyptic History of Psychoanalysis: Erasing Trauma

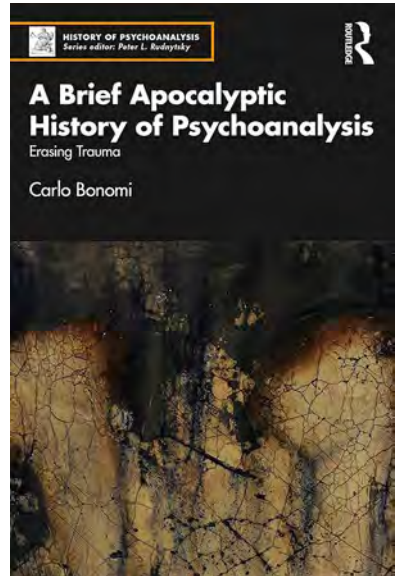
by Carlo Bonomi

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Reviewed by Endre Koritar

CARLO Bonomi's *A Brief Apocalyptic History of Psychoanalysis* is a fascinating read informing the reader about the relational dynamics among Sigmund Freud, Wilhelm Fliess, Sandor Ferenczi, and Carl Jung, as illuminated by a careful analysis of the dreams of two of Freud's patients: Emma Eckstein (the object of "Irma's injection"), and Sergei Pankejeff (the "Wolf Man"), as well Freud's self-analysis of his reported dreams. Bonomi, a psychohistorian, starts with the premise that there is something missing in our understanding of why Freud turned away from the idea that environmental trauma has an important impact on psychic development. In investigating that period in the early history of psychoanalysis, he arrives at the conclusion that Freud reacted defensively to his patients' trauma history as it reflected his own. Erasing trauma from his thinking and theoretical research was a compromise formation that protected him from the troubling affective reaction to castration anxiety that was more than a metaphor and represented his own actual personal history as well as that of his patients, especially Eckstein.

Bonomi's methodology is a sound psychohistorical research approach citing various sources. Firstly, he studies in detail several of Freud's (1900) dreams cited in *The Interpretation of Dreams* and places them temporally in the actual historical context when they were dreamt, providing the reader with the day residue sparking the dreaming. His sources for temporally locating



the dreams are the various correspondences now widely available for study, as well as known historical information from various biographies. The result is a *Nachträglichkeit* analysis of Freud's dreams filling in gaps in the dream interpretation that were either too personal or too traumatic for Freud to disclose and were consequently elided due to suppression or repression type ego defenses. Secondly, Bonomi has rigorously researched others' contributions to interpreting Freud's dreams (Anzieu, 1975/1986; Dupont, 1994; Erickson, 1954; Kris, 1954; Lacan, 1954–55/1988; Rudnytsky, 2002; Rycroft, 1984) and bases his hypothesis on a firm footing, citing work already done in the field. Thirdly, Bonomi has shed some light on a little-known period in Freud's life when he worked in pediatric and gynecological settings earlier in his career, observing various invasive techniques imposed on children and women "suffering" from what was then considered pathological: compulsive masturbation or onanism. In addition, he has worked closely with other well regarded psychohistorians (Phillip Réfabert and Peter Rudnytsky) in discussing his findings and their validity and reliability. The outcome of this rigorous research is the subject of this book. His insights into the dark, repressed regions of Freud's psyche are eye-opening and in some cases a challenge to one's credulity, yet his interpretations are backed by an impressive body of information from various reputable sources, imparting substance to his constructions.

Bonomi's main argument proposes that Freud was himself traumatized first by his circumcision when his foreskin was cut, a trauma reinforced later in his life when he worked in pediatric and gynecological settings witnessing treatments on women and girls "suffering" from onanism consisting of various methods of circumcision of the labia and clitoris. This was not an uncommon treatment advocated by gynecologists in the late nineteenth century. As a consequence of this trauma, Bonomi argues that Freud scotomized the reality of castration anxiety and instead proposed that children suffer from their imagining being castrated by an authoritarian father in order to maintain their subservience.

The dream that represented a "eureka" moment in developing a technique for deciphering the meaning of dreams was the dream of "Irma's injection." Irma is identified as Emma Eckstein, an analysand of Freud who had been subjected to clitoral circumcision as a child and, while under Freud's care, had undergone a botched nasal turbinate surgery by Wilhelm Fliess. Fliess had developed this technique as an alternate treatment of onanism based on his theory of a nasal libido reflex. Bonomi proposes that Freud gave only a superficial interpretation of the dream and that it remains unclear why, in the

dream, Freud the observer looking down Irma's throat, had become shaken and horrified by what he saw. One of the meanings of Irma's throat examination is that it represents Emma's truncated vulva and that what Freud felt to be traumatic were emotional, implicit memories of his own circumcision experienced by the infant as a castration. Freud was so strongly opposed to the "barbaric act" that he refused to have his sons circumcised. But the solution to the dream meaning lay in another dream-thought from that dream. Irma was supposed to have taken a solution as a treatment for her condition: trimethylamine. While in discussion with other colleagues about the meaning of the word, one of them, Adrian DeKlerk, had suggested that in Hebrew the word is phonetically close to *Brit Milah*, meaning the covenant of the cut, or circumcision. Suddenly, all made sense to Bonomi. Freud's repression of the actual trauma of circumcision was a defensive positioning against his own castration anxiety in his Oedipal struggle with his father. Freud, like Oedipus, had made himself blind to the origins of his feeling of horror: in Freud's case, actual environmental trauma and not phylogenetically determined castration anxiety. A critique of Freud's theorizing about unconscious fantasy may be based on the idea that Freud had only his self-analysis to work with, and absent a tempering outside observer, his oneiric insights could not be challenged and remain the outcome of Freud's solipsistic thinking. Furthermore, his thinking was inculcated with the ethos of the times. In late nineteenth-century Austria-Hungary, as in many other European countries, the zeitgeist endorsed patriarchy, misogyny, antisemitism, and phallocentrism. In that culture, women were considered weak and passive second-class citizens, in need of the direction and guidance of a patriarch. Freud developed his theory of universal penis envy in girls and women on the premise that the phallus is superior to female genitalia and that women would naturally envy men who were in possession of a phallus. According to Bonomi, Freud's thinking was certainly influenced by the zeitgeist. Women remained the "dark continent" for him. But Ferenczi provided the missing feminine perspective in Freud's work and emphasized the importance of the infant's earliest environmental influences on the developing psyche.

Bonomi introduces Ferenczi's voice early in the book, thus providing a dialectic balancing of what went missing in Freud's repression of trauma in his reflections on psychoanalytic theory and technique. Whereas Freud elaborated on the concept of projection when discussing transference, Ferenczi, as early as 1909, referred to introjection of environmental relations with one's

significant others. Freud emphasized remembering in analysis as essential in resolving unconscious conflict, but Ferenczi considered that repeating past trauma in analysis with a benevolent other, rather than remembering trauma, was important in working through the repressed trauma and, in the process, healing the wounds sustained by the developing ego.

Freud believed that countertransference (CT) should be neutralized in a personal analysis, while Ferenczi believed that CT analysis was important in developing an empathic attitude in the analysis and overcoming negative therapeutic reactions. Freud's dual instinct theory posited the existence of life and death instincts where the life instinct seeks stimulus while the death instinct works to have an energized system in flux, discharge its energies, and return to a zero-stimulus situation. Ferenczi, however, developed an object relations theory of the death drive. The degree of life drive is dependent on how well-loved an infant is early in its existence. If an infant is unwelcome and not well loved, the life drive is diminished and death drive increases. A traumatized, emotionally deprived infant, "dies easily and willingly" (Ferenczi, 1929/1955, p. 105).

Bonomi challenges Freud's basic tenet that it is not actual trauma that is experienced as traumatic, but genetically transmitted phylogenetic primal memories that are experienced as castration anxiety, and that it is unconscious fantasy which is traumatic, not the actual trauma. Following this line of thinking, Freud developed a quasi-scientific, positivist, one-person approach to investigating thinking processes, applying his conceptually-derived metapsychology a priori to empirically-derived free association on the couch. But the process also renders the analyst into an objective, unresponsive other who may well be perceived as the spectre of the original traumatizing object, thus propagating the pathological process in the analysis.

By introducing Ferenczi's ideas of empathic attunement, intersubjectivity, work in a two-person paradigm, and learning from the patient while working in the field, Bonomi injects what has been missing in Freud's one person, classical, positivist metapsychology. But Bonomi does not "throw the baby out with the bath water." He maintains that Freud and Ferenczi represent polar binaries in a holistic vision of psychoanalysis. Both Freud's metapsychology and Ferenczi's intersubjectivity are essential aspects of the psychoanalytic paradigm. The brief history of psychoanalysis has been fraught with ideological disputes among various schools of thought, resulting in ostracism, negation, and redaction of those who represented a challenge to the ideology. A manifestation of this type of splitting into adherents and non-adherents was

Ferenczi's ostracism from mainstream psychoanalytic discourse, eliding his message that provided the missing feminine perspective into the discourse. Bonomi ends the book by evoking the myth of the Androgyne in Plato's *Symposium*. Originally, humans were in possession of both female and male aspects of their physical existence. But Zeus split them into discrete male and female aspects. The two now-separate parts of a whole being were then left feeling something was missing in their existence. Each sought to complete itself by searching for the missing part that Plato (ca. 385–370 BCE/1994) portrays in Aristophanes' speech: "It was their very essence that had been split in two, so each half missed its other half and tried to be with it" (p. 27, 191b). In rehabilitating Ferenczi and restoring his voice in the psychoanalytic discourse, Bonomi has attempted to restore the splits that have rent a whole psychoanalytic body into dogmatic camps, each asserting the truth of their perspective. By shedding light on what went missing in Freud's elaboration of his metapsychology, Bonomi attempts to restore the significant impact of the early environment on the developing psyche. In doing so, he emphasizes the importance of environmental trauma in self-development. A more balanced view would have both the phylogenetic endogenous and the environmental exogenous influences equally contribute to self-development.

An optimistic perspective in contemplating the future of psychoanalytic discourse is that Freud and Ferenczi represent two parts of a whole that is currently seeking to unite into its original situation.

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