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## 7 Book Reviews

### 3 ***A brief apocalyptic history of psychoanalysis: erasing trauma,*** 4 **by Carlo Bonomi, Routledge, Abingdon and New York, 266 pp.**

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10 Readers of Bonomi's two volumes of *The Cut and the Building of Psychoanalysis*  
11 (2015, 2018) will be familiar with the main tenets of his thesis. He describes an  
12 intuition he experienced in 1992 when studying a dream of Ferenczi's.

13 The timing of the dream was significant; it is reported in the same letter in which  
14 the dreamer, Ferenczi, proposes the beginning of his analysis with Freud. The dream  
15 centers around "a small penis, cut off and horribly flayed" (p. 2). Bonomi's intuition,  
16 a question that he set about answering over the thirty years that followed, is that a  
17 real trauma was seeking expression in all the formations that flowed from it.

18 Ferenczi, he points out, came to believe that a second trauma often occurred  
19 following a first. The second trauma being the failure of a benevolent witness, a  
20 parent or analyst, to correctly bear witness to the trauma and its effects. Ferenczi  
21 called this a disavowal and through his own work he came to understand that, when  
22 a patient came to analysis for help or comfort, the key factor at the beginning of  
23 coming to terms with trauma was to be believed in the first instance. To be believed  
24 but, more importantly, that the analyst understands and can demonstrate their  
25 understanding of the nature and effects of that trauma. Even the relational aspects of  
26 the trauma let alone the actual traumatic event are key in this regard.

27 Bonomi goes on to outline the steps he took to research his intuition: to either  
28 prove or disprove it. His researches took him to Germany in the first instance to learn  
29 more about Freud's time there working, for ten years, as a pediatrician. This fact is  
30 little known within the biographical accounts of Freud's life or in the myths we have  
31 all read about the founding of our discipline. Why was this? Bonomi asks.

32 Ferenczi's dream pointed to the possibility that a real trauma lay hidden within  
33 the stories that came to be written about this period. Bonomi's attention turned  
34 quickly to the widespread practice in Germany at that time, no less than in Vienna,  
35 of the medical profession performing circumcision on girls as part of a misguided  
36 belief that these operations would bring about a cure for masturbation. Masturbation  
37 which, if left unchecked, it was believed at the time, would inevitably cause physical  
38 and nervous damage, as well as a kind of complete madness.

39 It is worth pointing out here that what Bonomi found, with the help of German  
40 academics is utterly shocking to the contemporary reader. What we are reading are  
41 accounts of the most horrific medical procedures which amount to nothing less than  
42 female genital mutilation. Freud was familiar with these practices and was shocked  
43 by them. But his shock could not be expressed overtly. It resulted in his own trauma,  
44 the trauma of his own circumcision becoming deeply repressed but worked out,

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45 denied and played out in his transference relationship with his patient Emma  
46 Eckstein who as a girl had undergone such a circumcision.

47 *Eckstein*, the corner stone, Bonomi argues, is the cornerstone from which the  
48 direction of Freud's metapsychology emerged, the stone that the builders rejected.  
49 Emma's trauma, in the way in which Ferenczi came to understand it was therefore  
50 overlooked, misunderstood and worse than that, her Doctor, Freud himself,  
51 collaborated with his friend and colleague Fliess in repeating it with an equally  
52 misguided operation on her nose. An operation which would have disastrous, almost  
53 fatal consequences. As it is well known Fliess forgot a gauze in the nasal cavity, and  
54 when it was later removed, Emma bled, nearly to death.

55 This event was then memorized in the main scene of the founding dream of  
56 psychoanalysis, the famous dream of Irma's injection, of July 1895, in which Freud is  
57 horrified when his female patient opens her mouth, and steps back. In the dream we  
58 can say that the mouth was condensed with the vulva. This is not the only place in  
59 Freud's dream where the shock of the botched operation on the nose is condensed  
60 with the shock of the circumcision endured by Emma when she was a little girl. In  
61 the second scene, Freud identifies with Irma, feeling as if the patient's body was his  
62 own, finally experiencing the adult Irma as a little girl in his pediatric ward.

63 According to Bonomi this scene informs Freud's formulation of the seduction  
64 theory, which took shape over the ensuing months. The idea that the specific cause  
65 of hysteria was an *early sexual shock* was not the result of a mere intellectual insight  
66 or speculation, but rather of the fact that the traumatized child in the patient came to  
67 resonate with the traumatized child in the doctor. This then awakened something  
68 that, within the analytic space, surfaces in scenes which, for both Eckstein and  
69 Freud, pointed to the possibility of seduction by the father.

70 For us female circumcision is an assault on the genitals, and as such it can create  
71 fantasies which are indistinguishable from those produced by a sexual abuse.  
72 However, in those years female circumcision was not categorized as a trauma. That  
73 a common practice by prominent pediatricians was a sexual abuse in disguise, and  
74 had similar psychic effects, was *simply unthinkable at the time*, as pointed out by  
75 Bonomi. The only way to make sense of these scenes for this analytic dyad was to  
76 represent them as involving an act of "seduction" by a "father."

77 Freud, famously or infamously, recanted this seduction theory a short time later.  
78 Ultimately, he dismissed his seduction theory as an "error," while searching for an  
79 alternative explanation for the same scenes, which then appeared to him as fantasies  
80 "intended to cover up the auto-erotic activity of the first years of childhood" (Freud,  
81 1914, p. 18). The theory of the Oedipus complex slowly provided Freud with a new  
82 foundation and cornerstone. This storied turn of events has repeatedly elicited  
83 various criticisms, especially because the traumatic roots of the neuroses were  
84 mainly lost in favor of the theory of pathogenic fantasies.

85 Bonomi offers a new comprehensive deconstruction of these developments,  
86 which is again based on Emma Eckstein's circumcision trauma. The main trigger for  
87 Freud's abandonment of the seduction theory was in fact the scene of female  
88 circumcision that surfaced only at the very end of Emma Eckstein's first analysis with

89 Freud, in January 1897. It was at that point that Freud began to realize that, *in the*  
90 *case of Emma*, the “seduction by the father” was, in all probability, a fantasy.

91 However, instead of acknowledging the traumatic significance of her circumci-  
92 sion; instead of further exploring the emotions, memories and fantasies that the latter  
93 aroused in him, Freud’s attention was captured by the bold phallic fantasies of his  
94 female patient, as can be inferred by Freud’s idea that the broomstick of the flying  
95 witches was “*the great Lord Penis*,” a reverie which appears in the same letter to  
96 Fliess where Emma’s circumcision scene was reported (Freud’s letter to Fliess of  
97 January 24, 1897). In these formulations does Freud ‘cling to’ the fantasy of these  
98 phallic ideas in response to his unconscious experience of the meaning of his own  
99 circumcision?

100 As a matter of fact, Freud never recognized female circumcision as a trauma. On  
101 the contrary the excision of the clitoris, phallically conceived, became the template  
102 for Freud’s view of a sound sexual development in girls. At the same time, in Freud’s  
103 system of thought, the Phallus became a fetish, representing both a protection from  
104 and a monument to the horror of castration.

105 Emma Eckstein’s real experience of having endured female castration/mutilation  
106 of the external genital organs, and Freud’s own circumcision, his Jewish her-  
107 itage, and his relationship with his own father, in Bonomi’s reconstruction, became  
108 the signifier of re-traumatization, which was then encoded in disguise in the  
109 founding myths of his new discipline, psychoanalysis.

110 In addition to shedding new light on Freud’s abandonment of his seduction theory  
111 Bonomi decodes the Dream of Irma’s injection in the light of the information that his  
112 research had uncovered. The great controversies and mysteries of the founding of  
113 psychoanalysis and the development of this phallogentric metapsychology are  
114 interrogated by Bonomi with meticulous research and bold insights.

115 What sets this book apart, in this reader’s opinion, is how utterly convincing his  
116 conclusions are. With thirty years of research, Bonomi has divined from the myths of  
117 the founding of psychoanalysis, truths that should inform a different view of how the  
118 psyche and more importantly perhaps, the practice of psychoanalytic psychotherapy  
119 could or should be considered. In this regard this book is an important contribution  
120 to the ongoing development of our field.

121 Problems, however, exist. Bonomi describes the difficulties he has had, especially  
122 in the early days of his research of having his ideas accepted for publication. In the  
123 same way as Freud could not quite believe or admit or express out loud the trauma of  
124 his real discoveries and needed to cover them up, contemporary psychoanalysis  
125 struggles to accept Bonomi’s research and conclusions. Here, in this reader’s  
126 opinion, the discipline of psychoanalysis is repeating Freud’s blind spot and perhaps  
127 perpetuating the trauma that he endured himself, but also perhaps visited on his  
128 patients with a failure to admit or to understand the real nature of their traumas.  
129 Bonomi teases out how Ferenczi came to understand the gaps in Freud’s theory and  
130 tried to amend and reverse them. He couldn’t, at the beginning at least, express these  
131 reservations directly to the master. He dreamed, and worked in secret towards the  
132 end, with the analysis of some notable patients, Elizabeth Severn in particular, and

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133 with his paper "The Confusion of Tongues between Adults and the Child, the  
134 language of tenderness and passion" (1933).

135 Ferenczi presented this paper and his findings in person to Freud in Vienna. Freud  
136 was horrified; the result was a cataclysmic break in their relationship and further  
137 resulted in a decades long period when Ferenczi's ideas were completely ignored  
138 and forgotten.

139 Bonomi traces how, with the publication of their correspondence and his clinical  
140 diary, Ferenczi's paradigm came to be revealed and understood. The author, with  
141 methodical re-reading of their correspondence and fresh interpretations of both their  
142 dreams and activities, reveals the full importance of what happened between them  
143 and its implications for the ways in which we all came to understand the history and  
144 central theories of psychoanalysis.

145 This is a significant book, the culmination of half a lifetime's research.  
146 Meticulously and methodically researched, Bonomi presents his ideas in a way  
147 that are utterly convincing and point to a new way to view the Oedipal paradigm  
148 and the ways that psychoanalysis has been taught. There is a personal tragedy too at  
149 the center of this, the rupture in the relationship between Freud and Ferenczi which  
150 was perpetuated after the latter's premature death by followers of Freud for more  
151 than half a century. Freud's blind spot, his trauma, his failure to admit what he  
152 experienced in his body and in the depths of his psyche, repeated over and over for  
153 more than fifty years.

154 Contemporary readers will, I believe, be outraged to think of the trauma of a girl,  
155 enduring a genital mutilation by a male medical profession. Her own Doctor, her  
156 therapist, equally traumatized and personally affected by her accounts of her  
157 treatment, identified strongly with her in the depths of his own psyche. The  
158 circumcised Jewish Doctor and the girl conflated together, and Bonomi describes the  
159 new Great Lord Penis becoming deeply encoded on the nascent discipline of  
160 psychoanalysis.

161 This noteworthy and thought-provoking work will be of interest to every student  
162 of psychoanalysis and anyone with an interest in the history of psychoanalysis and  
163 medicine. It ought, in the view of this reader, to contribute to changes in the ways  
164 that we view the theory of the psyche and, perhaps more importantly, the way we  
165 practice. It also affords the reader the opportunity to look at the foundations of  
166 psychoanalysis differently than before, but also in deep agreement with Sándor  
167 Ferenczi's views of trauma and the therapeutic relationship.

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