A Brief Apocalyptic History of Psychoanalysis

Erasing Trauma

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INTRODUCTION

In his memorable book on the psychoanalytic meaning of history, Norman O. Brown said that “The aim of psychoanalysis—still unfulfilled, and still only half-conscious—is to return our souls to our bodies” (Brown, 1959, p. 158). This simple sentence neatly captures what this book means to me.

The story told in this book is based on an event that has remained hidden until now. Taking it into account leads to a completely different narration of the foundation of psychoanalysis than Freud's and, above all, a different paradigm from the one inherited from self-analysis.

This event is nothing less than a circumcision, "*Beschneidung*", endured in her childhood by a patient who, during the dawning of psychoanalysis, inspired Freud’s ideas, inhabited his dreams, elicited his sudden turns and, eventually inspired the self-analysis from which Freud’s masterwork, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, unfolds.

For cultural reasons, Freud could not recognize the traumatic nature of this circumcision. But it reignited his own experiences of circumcision, those he had seen performed on children as part of the medical crusade against masturbation and, above all, pointed to the one he had refused to practice on his own children. In fact, it was at the center of all his contradictions and aroused deep anguish because of the echoes of a violently anti-Semitic environment on the one hand, and the conflict with his father, with his fathers, precisely about circumcision on the other hand. Ultimately, this unbearable situation resulted in Freud’s dreaming up a “scientific religion” and new system of thinking, that of psychoanalysis, in which "symbolic castration" will take the place of actual, lived circumcision.

The thesis of this book is that this unacknowledged trauma was inscribed in this system of thinking as an amputated legacy from which the dreams and fantasies of Freud's closest disciples would germinate and bloom. In particular, Sándor Ferenczi, Freud's pupil and confidant, would help to restore this amputated legacy, thus laying the groundwork for a new foundation.

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Many conferences and publications have marked the steps of my itinerary as researcher. I will try to summarize these steps in the most synthetic way.

The starting point of my investigation was a strange dream that Sándor Ferenczi had the day before he asked the master to begin an analysis with him. This dream, in which a small penis, cut off and horribly flayed appears, elicited in me the idea of some real catastrophe. Could young Freud have come across a case of real castration

in the early years of his medical practice? To test my hypothesis, I visited Professor Gerhard Fichtner, Director of the Institute of the History of Medicine at the University of Tübingen, in Germany, who, to my amazement, handed me various books and medical articles, all in German and all on the *castration* of women and the *circumcision* of girls during the second half of the 19th century. At that point a totally new medical scenario and hypothesis took shape, one that had been surprisingly overlooked by prior historians of psychoanalysis.

In July of 1993, I presented some of my thoughts at the Ferenczi International Conference in Budapest, which piqued the interest of Professor André Haynal, the father of the Ferenczi Renaissance. He then invited me to present at the upcoming *Symposium "100 Year of Psychoanalysis"*, scheduled for September 1993 in Geneva. During the summer I continued my research in Berlin, where Freud had undergone his pediatric training, which led me to write the article: "Why did we ignore Freud the 'pediatrician'? The relevance of Freud's pediatric training for the origins of psychoanalysis."

The discovery of the extensive use of real castration against women and girls in the medical practices prevailing in the years when psychoanalysis was built around the nuclear idea of symbolic castration, opened a series of questions. Why is this world of atrocities represented neither in Freud's writings, nor in those of his followers, nor finally by the historians of psychoanalysis? How was this world of unspeakable atrocities translated into "symbolic castration" by Freud? What was lost in translation?

Freud did not merely erase this world of real atrocities but, at the same time, elevated castration to the a priori form of the representability of trauma and turned the threat of castration into "the severest trauma" [das stärkste Trauma] in a child's life (Freud, 1938b, p. 190). In other words, he constructed a system of thought in which castration in the psychoanalytic sense, that is, the imaginary ablation of the penis, is the symbol of every possible trauma. This system relies on metapsychology. One of its pillars is the idea that the father of the primeval human family castrated his male children to enslave them to himself, and that this phylogenetically transmitted memory, reinforces in the boy the fear of castration regardless of the actual threats. The other is that the woman is a "castrated man" who lost his (her) penis in the course of biological evolution. In this narrative the concrete historical circumstances in which this or that woman or girl is castrated, excised or circumcised by this or that doctor are lost and replaced with an impersonal tragedy projected into a biological past. In turn, this universal "bio-trauma" or "bio-drama" is instrumental in defining the alternative reality created by Freud's theory. The castration of the female proves in fact to the little boy that the threat he had never believed (the cutting off of the penis)

is real, “henceforth he will tremble for his masculinity, but at the same time he will despise the unhappy creatures on whom the cruel punishment has, as he supposes, already fallen” (Freud, 1910a, p. 95). The circle is then closed in a self-supporting system in which the traumatic character of the excision of the clitoris is nullified, this "vestige of masculinity" that for Freud prevented the woman from becoming woman. In this alternative world, what is lost in translation is precisely female circumcision.

The problem that now arose was: when and how did the divorce between history and psychoanalysis occur? I soon became convinced that the broken thread must be found in Freud's dream from which *The Interpretation of Dreams* originated, the famous dream of Irma's injection.

This initiatory dream, dated July 1895, was the subject of a great deal and variety of studies, before and after the publication of the complete edition of Freud's letters to Fliess, in 1985. In addition to providing a vivid picture of Freud's life and work during the years of the gestation and birth of psychoanalysis, these letters shed light on the great influence of one of Freud's patients, Emma Eckstein, both on the genesis of the so-called "theory of seduction" in 1895 and on its abandonment in 1897. The Eckstein case, all traces of which had hitherto been censored, was intensely debated because prior to analysis, Freud had tried to cure her neurosis (hysteria) by letting his dear friend Dr. Fliess perform surgery on her nose only to witness her nearly bleeding to death afterwards. According to many commentators, Freud's shock is evoked in the main scene of Irma's dream, where the dreamer recoils from the horrible vision that is presented to him when the patient opens her mouth. Privately, Freud had indicated that this was the precise moment in which the "secret of the dream" was unveiled. Understandably, Freud experienced a shock. However, we must admit that his dismay does not explain the fundamental reversal that followed, until we learn another detail. During her first analysis (years later she would have a second analysis) Emma Eckstein evoked “a scene about the circumcision of a girl” [*Eine Szene von Mädschenbeschneidung*]. In the new perspective opened by the study on Freud’s pediatric training, it became easy for me to wonder if Emma Eckstein had not been a victim, as a child, of the medical folly that raged in Vienna not less than in Berlin. Had she actually undergone a circumcision as a “cure or punishment” for masturbation? [1]

The scene is reported in a letter to Fliess (January 24, 1897) which also contains Freud’s remark on the still visible stigma in the body of his female patient: one *labium minor* was "even shorter today". The German word “*Beschneidung*,” circumcision, when referring to girls, consisted in the “excision of the clitoris and labia minora”, as

[1] Here, I am using the expression that Freud will use, several decades later, when referring to the circumcision endured by one of his American patients as a boy.

Freud pointed out in the essay *The Taboo of Virginity* (Freud, 1918, p. 197), the only one in which he refers to this practice. In the medical literature of the nineteenth century the cutting of the labia is never presented as an operation independent from the cutting of the clitoris, and in younger girls both results were often obtained with a cauterization of the entrance to the vagina. Likely, the genital operation endured by Emma Eckstein was of this kind.

If so, the senseless operation on the nose was just one piece of a larger picture, and the horror that Freud felt in his dreams when confronted with Irma's mouth/vulva would begin to make sense. Had the operation on the nose, with its actual dramatic outcome, been a repetition of the circumcision undergone by the patient in her childhood?

Unlike all other psychotherapies, analysis requires a lasting closeness between doctor and patient, nearly an intimacy, and its most peculiar characteristic is the communication between the unconscious, and the mutual echoing of the deepest traumas, as well as, *last but not least,* in the psychoanalyst's capacity to take this echo into account, to explore it and to make it the object of his reflection. Embracing this perspective, I wondered about the way in which Freud dealt with circumcision and what was his attitude towards not only the circumcision of girls but also the ritual prescribed by the Jewish tradition. To my surprise, I again found that ritual circumcision was the center of his opposition to his father to the point that he had not practiced it on his children. New perspectives then opened up.

Piecing this complex puzzle together was an extremely slow process. In 2006, at the invitation of Elisabeth Roudinesco I presented in Paris a paper on my ongoing research entitled *"Du sexe mutilé au culte du phallus"* [From the mutilated genital to the cult of the phallus]. My thesis was based on two interconnected points: the first was that after enduring castration in her childhood, Emma Eckstein developed various hysterical symptoms including the hallucination of having a penis. The second was that Freud had incorporated her hallucination into the pillar of his phallocentric doctrine.

As fanciful as this idea may seem, I merely applied to Emma Eckstein what Hermann Nunberg (1947) had elaborated for men: "that the trauma of circumcision released forces aimed at overcoming its effects" and that "all of the phantasies, thoughts and habits, served a single purpose: preservation of the phallus" (p. 154).

Ferenczi himself, in the *Clinical Diary*, criticized Freud's idea that the feeling of having a penis is innate in females, suggesting that it could also be a "hysterical symptom that set in for traumatic causes" (August 4, 1932). Since Freud evoked a vision of "the great Lord Penis" of the witches in the very same letter in which he reported Emma Eckstein's "scene about the circumcision of a girl," it seemed inevitable to conclude

that although Freud had not intellectually recognized his patient's castration as a trauma, he had nonetheless felt it on his flesh, as attested by his identification with his castrated patient, a reaction culminating in his taking possession of her magical penis, the Phallus that conceals the trauma and exorcises impotence.

Repeatedly criticized, Freud's phallocentric system no longer plays a substantial role in contemporary psychoanalysis. However, it marks a fundamental moment its the birth and history. Beyond easy sociological analyses, what can it tell us today that we don't yet know? Can we consider it a symptom, a "monument to memory" from which to draw undreamed-of knowledge, just as Freud suggests at the beginning of *The aetiology of hysteria*? Comparing the hysterical symptom to the ruins of an archaeological site, he writes:

> the numerous inscriptions, which, by good luck, may be bilingual, reveal an alphabet and a language, and, when they have been deciphered and translated, yield undreamed-of information about the events of the remote past, to commemorate which the monuments were built. *Saxa loquuntur*! [‘Stones talk!’] (Freud, 1896c, p. 192)

In 2009 I published in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* an article entitled "The relevance of castration and circumcision to the origins of psychoanalysis. 1. The medical context”. A few weeks later I received a long email from a Dutch psychoanalyst, Adrian de Klerk, who confided in me his belief that the key word in Irma's injection dream, *trimethylamin*, was a transcription of the phonemes that make up the word *(b)rith milah*, circumcision in Hebrew, literally "Covenant of the Cut." It was the missing key. It allowed the second part of the article to come into focus, which appeared in 2013 in *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, under the title "Withstanding trauma: The significance of Emma Eckstein's circumcision for Freud's Irma dream."

As the various pieces of the puzzle were slowly coming together, I began to reorganize material I had accumulated over time into a large study entitled *The Cut and the Building of Psychoanalysis*. Volume I was published in 2015 and Volume II in 2018. Freud often compared psychoanalysis to a building under perpetual construction whose foundation rested on a solid cornerstone, namely the Oedipus complex. In my deconstructive reading, however, Emma Eckstein's circumcision was the “stone that the builders rejected.” (Psalm 118: 22). As an interesting aside, “*Eckstein*” was in fact the word chosen by Martin Luther, in his German translation of the Bible, to refer to the fundamental concept of cornerstone [*akrogoniaios lithos*] in the *Septuagint*. What had been petrified, could be restored to speach.

This last book is the culmination of research that began almost thirty years ago with the question "Why did we ignore Freud 'pediatrician'?" From this research a story of

the origin of psychoanalysis takes shape that differs from consolidated narratives, on many points, and three in particular.

I will dwell on the first one at length here; it concerns the meaning of Freud's famous “self-analysis.” The other two are closely related and can be dealt with more quickly. Although it may seem strange today, self-analysis remained for a long time the method recommended by Freud for those who were engaging in psychoanalysis. Not until his break with Jung did analysis by another analyst began to hold sway over self-analysis. This was not so with Freud but it was with the circle of his closest followers. Freud accepted this idea, which was to become an institutionalized rule from 1920 onwards, but it is not easy to establish with what conviction. After all, it was through his own self-analysis that he had given life to the fundamental work of psychoanalysis: how could he question its validity?

Later, when the official history of psychoanalysis was established, all of Freud's great discoveries, whether it be child sexuality, the Oedipus complex or the role of the unconscious in the formation of neurotic symptoms and in dreams, were presented as the fruit of his self-analysis, the unique and unrepeatable character of which was not missed.

The foundations of this “heroic” narrative were laid by Ernst Kris at the time of the first publication of Freud's letters to Fliess, in 1950. For Kris, Freud had succeeded in overcoming the erroneous "seduction theory" through the maturity and independence of thought gained through self-analysis. Specifically, it was Freud's personal conflicts with his father that led him to the faulty assumption that neuroses were caused by “seduction on the part of adults,” typically the father, but then self-analysis imposed itself on the struggling man, serving “the function of liberation from suffering as well as from fatal error” (Kris, 1954, p. 181). Kris explained that by interpreting his own dreams, Freud had gone far beyond the traditional exercise of “self-observation” because, thanks to the psychoanalytic method, his ego functions emerged “from involvement in intense conflict to full and supreme autonomy” (p. 181). This gave godlike powers to autonomy—in ego functions and in life—as a goal of mental health, an idea which coincidentally reinforced the glorified solo, non-relational process of self-analysis.

Kris formulated this thesis in the years dominated by “Ego-psychology,” when the autonomy of the ego had become the flagship of psychoanalysis and it was believed that the ideal analytic situation consisted of “one-person,” namely the patient, while the analyst was just an external observer who remained outside the field of study like an objective scientist. At that time, the "two-person relationship” was not valued as it is now; analysis was not viewed as the unfolding of a “process;” and “countertransference” was considered to be obstacle. In short, the idea of

psychoanalysis was filtered by what, later, has been called “the myth of the isolated mind” (Stolorow & Atwood, 1994), an “asocial paradigm” (Hoffman, 1998) in which there is no substantial difference between analysis and self-analysis. Thus, the birth of psychoanalysis became known as a solipsistic enterprise, and this attitude was adopted by Ernest Jones in his three-volumes biography on Freud (1953, 1955, 1957), despite Jones’ snide remarks and grotesque details about his persistent neurosis.

Years later, origin story that psychoanalysis was the quest of a solitary hero became the target of endless criticism, sometimes well-motivated, sometimes less so. Nevertheless, and this is the point I want to emphasize, even this very shaky narrative was never unseated from its central place. Perhaps this is because of the widespread need for a hero/godhead to worship, admire, and follow, or even an unconscious need to protect the master. Yet, I believe that a lack of alternatives played a major role in keeping this narrative alive. No other narrative of Freud's self-analysis, crediting its founding role in the birth of psychoanalysis, yet rejecting the solipsistic paradigm, has ever taken hold. Freud's self-analysis has been the subject of accurate and far-reaching studies such as those by Schur (1972), Grinstein (1980) and Anzieu (1975, 1986), and of an infinite number of micro-analyses of this or that dream, but from this tremendous body of research, a new paradigm has never been proposed. Consequently, in the latest great works on the birth of psychoanalysis (such as Makari, 2008; Roudinesco, 2014), self-analysis no longer plays any relevant role. But in this way we lose the most peculiar feature of psychoanalysis, the fact that it was born from a dream.

Over the years it has become increasingly clear that we are faced with a narrative hole. Filling this gap is the aim of this book, in which I adopt a perspective sketched by Sándor Ferenczi in his *Clinical Diary* (1932). He portrays Freud as recoiling when “the problem of countertransference opened [up] before him like an abyss.” I will contextualize and develop Ferenczi’s lapidary intuition through the first analysis of Emma Eckstein, and look at Freud’s long self-analysis as an *après coup* of his countertransference towards her. Put simply: what is outlined here is a story of the origin of psychoanalysis resolutely thought from a bi-personal and not a solipsist point of view, in short, within the framework traced by the new paradigm.

We will be looking at the thorny question of Freud’s great turning point as well—his abandonment of the seduction theory in favor of Oedipal fantasies—from an unprecedented perspective. This turning point, which has long been the backbone of psychoanalysis's self-narration, is now being shaken up due to a greater understanding of and sensitivity to traumatic factors in the wake of cultural shifts during the 1980s and a growing emphasis on the relational nature of human mind. However, on the historical level, the topic essentially remained prisoner of a

polarization between facts and fantasies. If Freud's turn is brought back to the "scene about the circumcision of a girl," where facts and fantasies are inextricably mixed up, what "collapsed" was not the solid ground of reality, as Freud would later say. Rather, this reality remained unthought-of, while, at the same time, triggering in Freud powerful fantasies that fed his work in the years to come, as is attested by the speculations on "castration" that, in Freud's mature work, are found crystallized in the great apocalyptic scenarios of the beginnings of the human family. These scenarios, which no longer serve any function in contemporary psychoanalysis, have been the repository of the unthought-of real.

Here we encounter my third departure from the canons: my emphasis on the unconscious transmission of this erased traumatic reality. My thesis is that the gap left by Freud will be filled by the fantasies and dreams of his followers. When Freud was contemplating the primordial scenarios of the great catastrophe, his closest student was Sándor Ferenczi. He will ultimately develop an understanding of psychoanalysis significantly different from that of his master, emphasizing trauma and dislodging the analyst from his passive and an affective position, to see him act and react. Such a vision, which turned the games upside down, cost him dearly and, in fact, his final contributions were banned for over half a century by most psychoanalytic institutes. However, in the last few decades his theories have been rediscovered and have gained both credibility and acclaim from progressive analysts who now acknowledge Ferenczi's work as the foundation of most contemporary trends in psychoanalysis.

As it is based on Ferenczi's latest contributions, this new narrative will risk resurfacing the same polarizations that have always plagued psychoanalysis. Here again we come across a missing piece, that of the deep continuity between Freud and Ferenczi. Such a continuity can be restored by choosing to focus on the early Ferenczi, a Ferenczi who was deeply identified with Freud, adopted his language and dreamed his dreams to the point of entering Freud's nightmares. My thesis here is that the dream is not only the place from which psychoanalysis sprang, but also the exquisite place of its unconscious transmission. From this perspective it will be possible to show how the new paradigm proposed by the later Ferenczi sprouts exactly from what was transmitted by Freud, albeit in a dissociated form.

Bollas once wrote that Ferenczi "worked through for Freud, what Freud could not consider in his own mind" (Bollas, 2011, p. xvi). My thesis is similar but more specific, because it puts the emphasis on something that, having overwhelmed Freud, was not inscribed in his psyche, but has been felt and known by his body in the sense suggested by Ferenczi in the *Clinical Diary,* where he writes "In moments when the

psychic system fails, the organism begins to think."[2] Thus, the story I tell in this book is the acephalous story of an amputated legacy that passes from generation to generation like a ghost that keeps returning until its story is told and listened to.

This book is divided into four parts. The first presents the image of the female as a "castrated male," a cornerstone of Freudian metapsychology, as the ground for both the encounter and the final disagreement between Freud and Ferenczi, illustrating it through the "paleontological fantasy" that Ferenczi created while in analysis with Freud. This analysis, we must say, did not help Ferenczi to recognize the traumatic origin of his "hatred of women", which will later be the focus of his mutual analysis with Elisabeth Severn. It was through this experience, from which the *Clinical Diary* takes shape, that Ferenczi succeeded in getting rid of the idea that the woman is a castrated man. An historical re-examination of the practice of female castration in nineteenth-century gynecological psychiatry and pediatrics, and the questions this raises, completes this introductory section.

The second part is the heart of the book. The reader is guided into the Freudian universe by a novel and surprising entry: the Hebrew word for circumcision (brit milah). It allows us to decipher the dream from which psychoanalysis sprung, to explore Freud's reaction to the scenes produced in analysis by Emma Eckstein, and to reconstruct the self-analytic "journey" that unfolds along *The Interpretation of Dreams*. The journey ends with the dream of the self-dissection of the pelvis, in which the father of psychoanalysis is split in two and observes the hole in his own genital area as an external spectator. It is the dream that will be repeatedly dreamt by Ferenczi and from which derived his theory of trauma as a split of the Self in a "brutally destroyed" part and a self-observing part that "knows everything" but "feels nothing". Psychoanalysis had been the product of this pure Intelligence. Ferenczi's contribution to the history of psychoanalysis was to take care of this laceration between a brilliant part and a dead part, as we will see in the third part, dedicated to transmission. In particular we will see in what ways Ferenczi absorbs an unconscious knowledge of what torments Freud, until he elaborates the reparative fantasy that underlies his genital theory known as *Thalassa*.

After the troubled publication of this work, Ferenczi will slowly begin to detach himself from Freud, until formulating a new metapsychology based on the fragmentation of psychic life. Some years after Ferenczi's premature death, Freud began to revise his ideas and to assimilate, as far as he could, the idea of traumatic fragmentation. This allows us to revisit, in part four, his final piece of self-analysis and

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[2] Ferenczi, 1932, p. 52 (January 10). The original text says: *"In momenten, in dennen das psyschische versagt, beginnt der Organismus zu denken."* The verb *Versagen* has many meanings here ranging from collapse to rejection and denial.

to see how Freud recognized in Ferenczi's “scientific fantasy” an attempt to fill a gap inscribed in his dreams. Finally, we will turn to Freud's most famous clinical case, the Wolf Man, on which all of Freud's interest in "castration" had been poured, just after the catastrophic end of Emma Eckstein's second analysis. We will then see how this paradigmatic patient brings to the surface all the unresolved knots at the time of the foundation, to the point of filling a void for Freud, in ways that bring us back to the "primal scene" from which psychoanalysis was born.