



Book Review

***Mutual Analysis: Ferenczi, Severn and the Origins of Trauma Theory*, by Peter L. Rudnytsky, Routledge, Abingdon and New York, 2022, 349 pp.**

Peter Rudnytsky is an experienced and well-known historian of psychoanalysis who has authored many brilliant collections of essays, among them *The Psychoanalytic Vocation: Rank, Winnicott, and the Legacy of Freud* (1991), *Reading Psychoanalysis: Freud, Rank, Ferenczi, Groddeck* (2002), *Rescuing Psychoanalysis from Freud and Other Essays in Re-Vision* (2011). This is however his first book conceived as an integral whole since his early *Freud and Oedipus* (1987), which was written more than three decades ago. Its subject, *mutual analysis*, deserves indeed an all-around examination, especially because it has been usually perceived either as a blatant manifestation of Ferenczi's alleged *mental deterioration* or as a utopian experiment doomed to unavoidable failure. Even Michael Balint had been rather dismissive about his *master's grand experiment*. Mutual analysis has indeed elicited so many doubts that when Judith Dupont, Balint's niece and literary heir, took the decision to make public Ferenczi's *Clinical Diary* (1932), she had to resist the discouraging advice given even by scholars who were sympathetic to Ferenczi. As we know, the result of her venture was nothing else than the Ferenczi Renaissance, a movement of ideas and people that has kept growing, while the Freudian metapsychological frame was sinking. Yet, in spite of the growing consensus in favor of Ferenczi's views, especially on trauma, his *mutual analysis* remained somehow stuck in the corner. Despite presenting many brilliant micro-analyses, it never overcame the status of a dubious ad hoc *experiment*, which was not to be taken as an inspiring model by practitioners. In his new book¹, Rudnytsky challenges this crystallized view, coming to the conclusion that Ferenczi's mutual analysis should be considered as "the paradigm for the contemporary shift to a two-person conceptualization of clinical work, just as Freud's self-analysis was paradigmatic for the one-person perspective of classical theory" (p. 8).

To change the biased view of Ferenczi's grand experiment is not an easy task, but the author methodically tracks all *factual errors* about its circumstances and real actors, undoing the belief that mutual analysis was a *direct exploitation* of subordinated patients. Once cleared from prejudices, the field is progressively filled with accurate scrutiny and till now ignored material, which opens up a new and consistent perspective. In retrospect, the conception of mutual analysis as a *boundary violation* appears as something which is not dissimilar from the old shared belief about Ferenczi's insanity, both stemming from the same pathologizing attitude by which a divergent thought is turned first into heresy and then into insanity.

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Most of the new information concerns Elizabeth Severn, the only actual partner in mutual analysis. In particular, the discovery that Severn's book *The Discovery of the Self*, which was published in 1933, shortly after Ferenczi's premature death, contains Ferenczi's clinical case in disguised form, offers *the other part of the story* of mutual analysis. This forgotten book, which Rudnytsky himself re-edited in 2017, proves to be an indispensable complement to Ferenczi's *Clinical Diary*, the book that a quarter of a century ago marked the beginning of the *Ferenczi Renaissance*. The importance of the discovery is such that the author rightly believes that it can prompt a *second wave* of Ferenczian studies. The main difference consists in the fact that while in the course of the first wave the shared disparaging attitude towards the person of Ferenczi was progressively dissipated, the demonization of Elisabeth Severn basically persisted.

Severn's life, as well as her career path before landing on Ferenczi's couch, is now reconstructed not only with hitherto unknown biographical material but also with a particular focus on her two previous books and their intellectual influences. This comprehensive vision of Severn substantiates the esteem that Ferenczi had for her and allows us to recognize how she expounded the fundamental principles of the new paradigm "with equal clarity and consistency" (p. 10). In short, Rudnytsky puts forward a new thesis, indeed anticipated by Rachman's (2018) previous study, namely that Severn must be considered as a true and full partner of Ferenczi in the paradigm shift of psychoanalysis.

According to the author, Severn represents a bridge between Janet's model of psychic dissociation and the theory of the fragmentation of psychic life, which in the late Ferenczi supports the return to actual trauma. Rudnytsky shows how the concept of dissociation is present in Severn's 1913 book *Psycho-therapy* (p. 34), and even more so in *The Psychology of Behavior* of 1917 (p. 38), in which such statements are found as "the greatest danger to the personality is that of *dissociation*," and "*Disintegration* is the logical outcome of *dissociation*" (p. 66). Both of these books, however, leave much to be desired in many respects and are not comparable to her third book, which was made possible by her eight years of analysis with Ferenczi, from 1925 to 1933. As she would say in the 1952 interview by Kurt Eissler (p. 37), *The Discovery of the Self* was "the fruit" of her long and intense analysis with Ferenczi, and an explanation to the lay public of "the real meaning and value of psychoanalysis" (p. 70).

Severn's book shows a deep understanding of psychoanalysis, its developments, its merits and flaws. Among the latter, there was the assumption "that a man might become cured of his neurosis merely by becoming aware of it" (p. 73). Obviously Severn recognized the importance of "making *conscious* that which was previously unconscious," which entails "excavating lost or dissociated parts of the memory or personality" (p. 73). However, as pointed out by Rudnytsky (p. 73), she didn't envision it as a purely intellectual process, but rather as a process involving all the emotional resources of the analyst. Hence her criticism of the rigid scientific approach, which ignores that "the patient is a human palpating being, needing endless understanding and *Einfühlung*" (p. 77), or "empathy," a concept that will remain banned from psychoanalysis for another half century. Significantly, Severn

referred to the German term that already had a rich history, at least in phenomenology, but was discarded by Freud precisely because it was not “scientific,” as later explicitly claimed by Reik (1935).

Returning to Rudnytsky’s careful reading, I find especially relevant the following passage about “remembering.” I quote it extensively:

Her [Severn’s] point is that this process, rather than being purely cerebral or cognitive, is above all emotional and visceral, because it is the hitherto unprocessed “feeling-tone that has to be recovered and experienced again” in order to build “a bridge” in the analysis from the present to the past, so that “the broken pieces of the psyche” can “return to their original places and the patient is helped to endure the catastrophe again, this time without bursting, losing consciousness, or going insane, which is what shock consists of”. (p. 85)

Rudnytsky’s text is replete with jewels like this, which show how Severn was well aware of the *fundamental difference* between Ferenczi and Freud. Also telling is the reconstruction of how, in her second meeting Freud in 1929 (she met him also in 1925 and in 1938, in London), Severn did not hesitate to voice her objections to classical psychoanalysis and her criticism of the incomplete and “purely intellectual” (p. 127) analyses of the analysts themselves—Ferenczi included, of course. Precisely the inadequacy of Ferenczi’s analysis by Freud, and in particular, the unresolved problem of the *hatred of intelligent women*, made mutual analysis necessary to liberate the analysis that had already been underway for 6 years from this obstacle. Rudnytsky dedicates an entire chapter to the “Ferenczi case” (pp. 88–100), which enriches what the author has already published on this topic (Rudnytsky, 2015, 2017).

This very dense but always clear book is articulated in three parts. The first, entitled “Conceptions,” concludes with the reconstruction of the relationship between Severn and her daughter, Margaret, an internationally acclaimed dancer, whose clinical case is also to be found, in disguised form, in *The Discovery of the Self*. Together with other historical material, this allows Rudnytsky to broaden the focus on the intergenerational transmission of the trauma of childhood sexual abuse. The second part, entitled “Contexts,” addresses various controversial issues that have over time been used to de-legitimize Ferenczi. We find here the reconstruction of the lives of the patients named by Ferenczi in the *Clinical Diary*, the relationship between Thompson and Severn; the end of the mutual analysis with Severn; Ferenczi’s anemia and the myth of his mental illness; the myth of the *kissing technique*; the relationship with Groddeck and the common interests in *bioanalysis* and finally the epithet *evil genius* that Freud applied to Severn. The reader will then find a distillation of Ferenczi’s and Severn’s mutual analysis at the end of the book, in the “Finale,” where the two analyses are traced in a parallel process. The intervening third part, “Consequences,” covers a variety of themes, which clarify and sharpen the contrast between Freud and Ferenczi, as both men and thinkers.

The increasing divergence in their conceptualization of trauma is reconstructed with rare precision, including the debated question whether, after Ferenczi’s

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premature death, Freud came closer to his viewpoint? Rudnytsky's answer is no. Even though some of Ferenczi's key words on the fragmentation of mental life were incorporated in Freud's language of trauma, nevertheless they remained "inert and decontextualized" (p. 251). Also in his last works, Freud "remains removed from the immediacy of traumatic experience, and as a result eviscerates the concept of trauma of any substantive meaning" (p. 250). As a matter of fact, Freud never got rid of either the fallacy of equating inborn instinctual demands and accidental excitations or his mistaken belief in the phylogenetic foundation of the neuroses, or, behind both of these, his extraordinary "obsession" with castration, which turned his thinking into a closed system that had to be either accepted or rejected *in toto* (p. 256).

Besides detailed exegeses, the reader will find many elements to reflect on. Especially impressive is the demonstration of Freud's relentless de-legitimization of Ferenczi's commitment to psychoanalysis as a "process of healing" in response to Ferenczi's attempts at illustrating his new views. The usual way to handle the question by appealing to Freud's "pessimism" emerges as, at best, inadequate. Rather, Rudnytsky outlines, bringing to bear one piece of evidence after another, Freud's implacable refusal to hear anything Ferenczi is saying, remarking that in such circumstances "no genuine dialogue is possible" (p. 222), and finding this "one-sided attitude" recurring throughout their entire correspondence (p. 226), here and there blended with Freud's inexhaustible belief that his interlocutor was hiding murderous desires against him (p. 230). Thus, at the end, Ferenczi's "increasing alienation" from him, is projectively assimilated by the founder of psychoanalysis to betrayal and "personal hostility" (p. 234). According to Rudnytsky, the final conflict between the two men was not the result of a "sudden dramatic shift," either on issues of technique or on the conception of trauma, but rather the outcome of Freud's chronic incapacity to recognize "his interlocutor as a genuine 'other'" (p. 237). The core problem, in Rudnytsky's view, is Freud's "narcissistic nature" (p. 269).

In contrast with Freud, Ferenczi is portrayed as capable of humility and self-criticism and credited with a persisting "effort to engage Freud in authentic dialogue" (p. 237), a difference which is well mirrored in the opposition between the *one-person* model that informed Freud's conception of the analytic situation and Ferenczi's commitment in the *two-person* theory. Quoting Ferenczi's remark that he "developed to an exceptional degree a capacity for *humility*" in "*opposition to Freud*," finally gaining insight into his own "weaknesses" as well as into his "fraudulent superiority," Rudnytsky glosses "in opposition to Freud" to mean not only "against Freud" but also "from my struggle with Freud" (p. 270). As a result of his experience with Freud, Ferenczi became acutely aware that "the pseudo-objectivity of the detached, 'insensitive' analyst was ... bound to be traumatic for the emotionally vulnerable, fragile patient" (p. 237). Here we find a motivation for *mutuality* that precedes Ferenczi's experiment with Severn.

Indeed, from the very beginning *mutuality* was the kind of relationship that Ferenczi wanted to have with Freud, only to stumble on Freud's adamant defensiveness against his own vulnerability. The same defensiveness underlies the paradox that never ceased to puzzle Ferenczi, namely the fact that the man who

invented psychoanalysis did not allow himself to be analyzed by another person. As put by Rudnytsky “because of his need to control everyone else Freud was unwilling to entrust himself to the care of another human being to whom he would have to expose his vulnerabilities, and thus was never able to experience the transformative and healing power of psychoanalysis” (p. 283). This difference informs not only their attitudes toward the traumatized patient, that is, their techniques, but also their clinical theories.

Both Freud and Ferenczi were severely traumatized in their early childhood, and in remarkably similar ways—here Rudnytsky capitalizes on his previous studies, offering an accurate account of the traumas endured by little Sigismund—but, unlike Ferenczi, who allowed himself to be analyzed by Elisabeth Severn, reaching the moment when the integrity of his psyche was broken into pieces, Freud transformed his sexual molestation into an Oedipal romance and “was never able to admit that he had been severely traumatized as a child” (p. 271). Thus, while Ferenczi was able to uncover the roots of his “hatred of females” (pp. 271–272), Freud buried instead his feelings of impotence originated by a “sexually demanding” female caregiver, into a “castration theory of femininity” which, as noted by Ferenczi in his *Clinical Diary*, perpetuated his misogyny while arrogating to himself “the role of the castrating god” (p. 279). In conclusion, Freud’s 1897 paradigm shift from trauma to predisposition served as “a protective device against insight into his own weaknesses” (p. 305). Freud abandoned his trauma theory “above all because he could not come to terms with the extent to which he himself had been traumatized” (p. 271). Here, perhaps, Rudnytsky does not elaborate enough on Ferenczi’s keen hypothesis, which is nevertheless mentioned (p. 268), that Freud’s retreat from trauma originated from his failure to manage his countertransference in some unknown but well-defined situation. In other words, he felt lost when the surfacing of the infantile trauma of a certain female patient (in my opinion, Emma Eckstein) was experienced by him as a repetition of his own infantile trauma or, better, released fragments of it. The result was an emotional setback and a crystallization of a split between intellect and emotions that Ferenczi considered the hallmark of trauma. As put by Ferenczi, Freud remained “attached to analysis intellectually, but not emotionally” (p. 298). Similarly, countertransference would remain a thorn in Freud’s side, just like Ferenczi himself who, in my view, operated within Freud’s psyche as a constant reminder of his failure. Freud’s “posthumous dialogue” (p. 247) with Ferenczi (Rudnytsky correctly denies that it was a “dialogue” at all) was a pervasive rumination, an intrapsychic dialogue, or monologue, with this splinter planted in his body.

In his last phase, Ferenczi elaborated a comprehensive and alternative vision of psychoanalysis, the cornerstone of which is that “analysis entails a search for the ‘traumatic material’ that lies at the root of the patient’s suffering” (p. 291). Far from being, as it was perceived to be by Freud, a “regression” to his “first great etiological error” (p. 296), this process entails a new conception of the therapeutic action that Ferenczi learned in the course of his mutual analysis with Severn. The essential difference concerns the role assigned to emotions in both members of the psychoanalytic dyad. Recollection and interpretation alone are “never enough”

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(pp. 294, 309), since the patient must *feel* that the analyst shares his or her pain. The key is the dramatic technique consisting in experiencing the past as a “present reality,” an innovation castigated by Freud as “not permissible” (p. 293). Rudnytsky explains this very clearly by comparing it to the idea put forward by Winnicott in his paper “Fear of Breakdown”: because of the disruption of his or her psyche the patient cannot “remember” a catastrophe that has not yet been “experienced” (p. 297). The only way to remember “this thing of the past” which “has not yet happened,” since the patient “was not there,” is to experience it “for the first time in the present, that is to say, in the transference ...” (p. 294). Not only does this description by Winnicott fit in with Ferenczi’s and Severn’s conception of the fragmentation of the mental life, but it comes to therapeutic fruition with the articulated idea that the shattered pieces of reality are preserved in nightmares and hallucinations, and can be interpsychically relived in analysis, “absorbed” in state of deep regression, and transformed in recollection (pp. 296–304).

This is not, however, a linear process. Countertransference is always behind the corner. If one invites the reenactment of the patient’s trauma, the analyst cannot avoid experiencing its scenic complexity, including by being cast in the role of the perpetrator or, in Ferenczi’s wording, of the “murderer” (p. 307). This is the most difficult test. I would like to stress how crucial this point is by recalling that precisely this test is inscribed in the act of birth of psychoanalysis, namely Freud’s dream of Irma’s injection, in which the doctor claims his “innocence,” his desire to be “not guilty” of the patient’s (Irma) pains. In his *Clinical Diary* Ferenczi turned this script upside-down, claiming that, once cast in the role of the perpetrator, the analyst “is not allowed to deny his guilt” (p. 307). According to Rudnytsky, the analyst’s capacity to admit his failures and mistakes “breaks the vicious circle” (p. 307), and transform “a traumatic repetition into a new beginning” (p. 308).

Ultimately, Ferenczi created for psychoanalysis the chance for a new beginning. “Ferenczi succeeded in rethinking both the history of psychoanalysis and its most fundamental concepts” (p. 309). I couldn’t agree more with this conclusion of a book for scholars that also belongs in the library of every practitioner.

NOTE

¹This book review was presented at the virtual Book Presentation Series of the International Sándor Ferenczi Network on October 1st 2022, discussed by Peter Rudnytsky, Adrienne Harris and Agnieszka Sobolewska. The meeting was moderated by Carlo Bonomi.

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