

Vida, J. (2017). Book Review. *The Cut and the building of Psychoanalysis, Volume 1: Sigmund Freud and Emma Eckstein*. By Carlo Bonomi, Routledge, Sussex & New York, 2015, 288 pp. *American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 77(1): 83-86.

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This is the first of 2 metaphorically archeological volumes by the Italian psychoanalyst, Carlo Bonomi, who for decades has been digging beneath the foundational hagiographies of psychoanalysis. The second, *Volume 2: Sigmund Freud and Sándor Ferenczi* is not yet available, though there is an English précis of *Volume 1* and a tantalizing table of contents of *Volume 2* on Dr. Bonomi's website. Although identified as Volume 65 of the Relational Perspectives Book Series, *Volume 1* is not easily obtainable. The language of the text has some awkward usages and is occasionally garbled, which, along with some careless copy-editing, makes the whopping price something of a sore point.

But ... so what? These comments morph into mere cavils when held up to the potent content of this whirlwind of scholarship, destined to forever alter your understanding of Sigmund Freud, the birth agonies of psychoanalysis, and the hitherto unacknowledged origins in trauma of the entire psychoanalytic enterprise.

I first met Carlo Bonomi in 1993, in Geneva where we had both been invited to speak by André Haynal and Ernst Falzeder at the conference *100 Years of Psychoanalysis: Contributions to the History of Psychoanalysis*. I was speaking of Sándor Ferenczi as an inventor whose intuitive insights transcended the practice of his contemporaries; Carlo Bonomi was presenting "Why have we ignored Freud 'the paediatrician'? The relevance of Freud's paediatric training for the origins of psychoanalysis." This is the paper (itself the product of substantial research) that would constitute the cornerstone of a monumental undertaking. Though this meeting was almost twenty-five years ago, I can recall as if yesterday the intensity and passion of Carlo Bonomi's absorption in his findings, even over lunch --- and the dizzying impact of what I knew these findings should mean to psychoanalytic theory and practice.

Indeed those very impressions --- intensity, passion, and dizzying amazement --- are captured in these pages. I read the first 100 pages at a fevered clip paralleling Carlo Bonomi's fevered prose, muttering and exclaiming with the turn of pages as though reading a pulp fiction thriller. Extraneous circumstances forced me to stop; when I resumed nearly a year later for the purposes of this review, I began all over again. The second time through those opening 100 pages was marginally calmer, but as I proceeded through the remainder, the impact of relentlessly accumulating historical residues woven into progressively more intricately rendered decodings of Freud's *Irma* dream resembled nothing so much as binge-watching a dystopian television series like *Mr. Robot*, as seemingly bizarre and disconnected details slowly revealed themselves to be part of a vast, emotionally complex, and comprehensible narrative.

The key revelation is that the “castration” at the core of foundational psychoanalytic theory and practice was neither metaphor nor fantasy, as has been widely believed and promoted. Carlo Bonomi’s research has not only confirmed the boy Freud’s traumatization as witness to his younger brother’s ritual circumcision (a key element in Freud’s later refusal to have his sons circumcised as required by Jewish tradition), but that genital mutilation was *a standard practice*, a frequently employed pediatric surgical intervention to treat masturbation in children, both boys and girls, between 1860 and 1880. In girls, this could and did include as “circumcision” clitoridectomy and partial to complete resection or cauterization of the labia. Historically, so-called erotomania, hysteria, and uncontrolled masturbation in women who had attained puberty were commonly treated with hysterectomy, with or without ovariectomy, in other words: partial or complete castration.

But it has not been known that Freud’s patient Emma Eckstein had been so affected, both in childhood and as an adult. Nor has it been acknowledged that his boyhood traumatic witnessing made the reality of Emma’s mutilation profoundly troubling for Freud, with the resultant denial, displacement, and dissociation with which contemporary clinicians who treat trauma are very familiar. More unsettling, however, is the realization that Freud’s denial, displacement, and dissociation have subsequently been reified in the theory and practice of psychoanalysis, and accommodated by a pliable historical record. These reifications had a significant part to play in the emergent conflict between Freud and Ferenczi, and in Ferenczi’s demonization and virtual excommunication from the annals of psychoanalysis. Because, as we now know, it was Ferenczi whose openness to the traumatic histories of his patients eventually led him in a direction opposed by Freud.

The following appears on Carlo Bonomi’s website <http://carlobonomi.it/volume-2.html> and are copyright 2016 Carlo Bonomi:

Our understanding of the origins of the psychoanalytic building would greatly benefit from the reconstruction of a trauma which Emma appears to have experienced again and again, either by cutting herself or as a result of the compliance of her doctors and surgeons. Yet, the reality of Emma’s genital mutilation has not been acknowledged or consensually validated by the members of the psychoanalytic community. On the contrary, it has been powerfully suppressed, denied and written out, as it were, from the history of the foundation of psychoanalysis by psychoanalytic scholars, including the present and past directors of the Freud Archives. Penned (*sic*) out from the first edition of Freud’s letters to Fliess (Bonaparte, Freud, Kris, 1950), the scene which described Emma’s circumcision and mutilation was first published by Max Schur (1966) in context of an important article on the starting point of Freud’s long journey into the Unknown, to wit, his ...dream of Irma’s injection. Schur (1966) explained Emma’s cut as the product of her “fantasy” (p. 114) thereby expunging from his and our mind what Freud himself had reported to Fliess in his communication. The entire emotional drama of the event was thus displaced in the direction of the nasal operation which Fliess performed on Emma’s nose in February of 1895.

The genital cut which Emma suffered as a child was completely overlooked, bypassed and neglected by the psychoanalytic community during the following three decades. As far as I know not a single psychoanalytic scholar or analyst pondered the repercussions of Emma’s trauma and the unconscious impact that it might have

exercised on her analyst. Historians of psychoanalysis and academics have not fared any better. When the complete edition of Freud's letter to Fliess was published in 1985, the passage describing the genital cut on Emma's labia was finally made available; even then it was successfully dissociated and remained unconnected from the origins of psychoanalysis...

Underneath Carlo Bonomi's trenchant words, the foundational myth of psychoanalysis is cracking. Psychoanalysis is not a pure system of unconscious fantasy. The denial, displacement, and dissociation embedded in its conception make the development of psychoanalysis a *demonstration* that trauma is real, that trauma's effects persist and defy simple resolution, that unrecognized and unacknowledged trauma makes us less compassionate, less comprehensible, and less human, to others and to ourselves.

Listed in the bibliography are some of Carlo Bonomi's seminal papers from decades of deeply immersive research, and from which this formidable text has grown. Others will undoubtedly feature in *Volume 2*, which promises a comprehensive, unsparing appraisal of the Freud – Ferenczi relationship and its fateful consequences for our field, which I expect to be no less unsettling, and necessary. This is important work.

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REFERENCES (in the Bonomi excerpt)

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