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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Freud, Ferenczi, and the “disbelief” on the Acropolis

CARLO BONOMI

### Abstract

Ferenczi's 1929 claim that “no analysis can be regarded . . . as complete unless we have succeed in penetrating the traumatic material” resonated deeply in Freud, influencing his last works. According to the author, it reactivated in Freud the same traumatic memories that were at the heart of his self-analysis, letting them resurface in the 1936 essay “A disturbance of memory on the Acropolis,” in the striking simile of the Loch Ness monster. The image of “the sea-serpent we've never believed in” is then analyzed and used as a sounding lead for Freud's self-analysis. The transformation of the love-object into an attractive monster, which is found as a recurrent pattern in Freud's life and work, hints at the centrality of the combined figure of woman and serpent in mythology, in psychoanalysis, and in Freud's self-analysis. Finally, the background of the “memory disturbance” on the Acropolis is traced back to the woman patient who had dreams of gigantic snakes. It is suggested that the patient might be Emma Eckstein and that a still unexplored thread exists, which runs through the foundation of psychoanalysis, connecting the surgical operation of Emma, the Irma dream, and the Acropolis incident.

**Key words:** *history of psychoanalysis, traumatic memories, bisexuality*

At the last IFPS conference in Athens, which was held in 1996, the keynote speech was made by Risto Fried, who spoke about Freud's “Acropolis incident.” Risto Fried devoted his life to reviewing Freud's meditation and its resonance in the psychoanalytic community. The major work of his life, *Freud on the Acropolis – a detective story*, was published in 2003, a few months before his death (cf. Bonomi, 2005). It is a magnificent work on a topic which is so crucial for the history of psychoanalysis that, coming back to Athens, I had to take a last imaginary walk up to the Parthenon in company with Risto Fried and, for reasons that will soon become clear, with Sándor Ferenczi. But let me first of all explain what the Acropolis incident is about.

One of the pillars of psychoanalysis is Freud's self-analysis, which, in September 1897, took the shape of the so-called “Rome neurosis.” In the midst of his self-analysis, Freud made several trips to Italy with the aim of reaching the eternal city, but he never succeeded, so the “Rome neurosis” became the comprehensive symbol for the most intimate goals he was forbidden to achieve and a focal point in his self-analysis. It was by analyzing his inhibitions, dreams, and “Freudian slips” concerning his “paralysis” in front of “Rome” that he made his great

intellectual conquest of the Unconscious. Finally, in 1901, his phobia was overcome. He entered Rome and, sensing the absurdity of his neurosis, wrote to his wife “at noon, opposite the Pantheon . . . So this is what I have been afraid for years!”

But Rome was not all: there was Athens as well. Freud visited Athens three years later, in 1904. Since Freud was deeply involved in classical culture, the walk uphill to the Parthenon promised to deliver the highest degree of pleasure. However, Freud's pleasure was spoiled by a strange feeling of incredulity. In fact, the experience turned out to be so uncanny that he never came back to Athens. Why?

The first element to be stressed is that the “incident” – as Freud called it – *troubled* him for the rest of his life (Freud, 1936, p. 248). The German expression Freud used was “*heimgesucht*,” which, according to Niederland (1969), indicated a much more painful affect such as “tormented or tortured,” while, according to Bettelheim (1982), it had a religious connotation – “*Heimsuchung*” is in fact the Viennese name of the holy Visitation of the Virgin Mary. Moving between the two readings, and taking into account the fact that references to the Acropolis incident appear in Freud's essay “The uncanny” (*Das Unheimliche*; Freud, 1919), Risto

Fried suggested that “troubled” should be replaced by *haunted*.

The second element is that the incident on the Acropolis left Freud with an impressive sequel of neurotic symptoms, among which were an obsessive-compulsive concern with death, and two or more instances of hysterical fainting (Schur, 1969, 1972); these became the living symbol of the contrast between his great intellectual achievement and the pitiful therapeutic failure of his self-analysis.

If I have invited Ferenczi to join us in our imaginary walk, it is because he was deeply concerned with both aspects. Ferenczi was not only fascinated by Freud’s intellectual achievements: he was also worried about the outcomes of Freud’s self-analysis. For instance, after having assisted in the first fainting of Freud in front of Jung, he was able to foresee the second one, that is, he introjected significant pieces of Freud’s unconscious mind. As I have tried to show in detail in a previous work (Bonomi, 1996), he took over Freud’s “heritage of emotion” and further elaborated it. It was going through this emotional process that Ferenczi came upon the issue of trauma. If we are prone to epitomize this process by saying that Ferenczi became the “analyst of his analyst,” the following questions arise spontaneously: How did Ferenczi’s rediscovery of trauma resonate in Freud? Is it possible to detect in Freud’s late meditation on the Acropolis incident an expression of such a resonance? If so, can we use this resonance as a sounding lead of Freud’s self-analysis?

### **Between belief and disbelief: The traumatic memory controversy**

Freud would refer to the Acropolis incident in his last self-analytic essay, which was named initially “Disbelief onto the Acropolis” and later “A disturbance of memory on the Acropolis.” Written in 1936 as an open letter to Romain Rolland, the essay is a meditation on belief and doubt, ambition and piety, triggered by the perturbation of a man whose childhood wish is finally fulfilled. In his youth, Freud had to suffer poverty and could only dream about distant places, which appeared simply unreachable to him; but now he was there, he had come a long way and was standing on the top of the world! Yet the pleasure was spoiled by a strange disbelief, the premise of which had already been set at the beginning of the trip, when the idea of going to Athens appeared “too good to be true,” as if he was not “worthy of such happiness,” that he did not “deserve it.” This idea was later retained by Freud’s incredulity, producing the feeling “*What I see here is not real,*” which,

according to Freud, could be ultimately traced to the forbidden desire to supersede the father.

However, most commentators have found this explication to be insufficient. Many commentators have moreover been struck by the simile used by Freud to further outline the interference: it was as if, while standing on the Acropolis, he was forced to believe in something whose reality had seemed doubtful, just as if walking beside Loch Ness the sudden sight of the famous monster would force in someone the admission “So it really does exist – the sea-serpent we’ve never believed in!”

The insertion of the Scottish sea-serpent into the midst of classical Greece is a narrative shock, by which a concrete feeling of disbelief is conveyed to readers’ minds. What kind of symbol was it? What did it stand for? As one can easily imagine, the “unbelievable sea-serpent” elicited the most stereotyped psychoanalytic interpretations.

But this was not the case with Risto Fried. What Fried saw in the shocking dragon was, first of all, a resurfacing of the provocative question related to *what is real*, which lies at the heart of psychoanalysis itself. At the time of his self-analysis, Freud was haunted by such a question: Was he sexually abused when he was a child? Was the perpetrator his father or his Catholic nursemaid? What is true? What is real? Can childhood memories be trusted? According to Risto Fried, “these questions... are at the heart of the Acropolis mystery” (Fried, 2003, p. 289). I totally agree with him, but I also think that if these provocative questions resurfaced, it was because Ferenczi put the issue of traumatic memories again at the top of the psychoanalytic agenda.

The attaining of traumatic memories was the initial goal of psychoanalysis, but it very soon proved to be a goal that was difficult to reach. Freud’s disbelief in the possibility of filling the voids of memory erupted in September 1897, at the same time as he visited the Etruscan tomb in Orvieto and the “Rome neurosis” took shape. A few days later, explaining in a very famous letter “where the reasons for disbelief came from”, he listed several reasons, coming to the conclusion that “the secret of childhood experiences is not disclosed even in the most confused delirium,” since even “in the most deep-reaching psychosis unconscious memory does not break through” (Freud to Fliess, 21 September 1897, Freud, 1985).

Although he would never completely abandon his original goal, Freud was no more sure whether the scenes he obtained were real memories or phantasies, and at a certain point he decided to equate them, assuming that “children in their phantasies are simply filling in the gaps in individual truth with prehistoric truth” (Freud, 1916–1917,

pp. 370–371). Later, in the 1920s, psychoanalysis turned into an ego-psychology, and the attaining of traumatic memories became a superseded goal.

Character analysis and superego modification were the new credo, when Ferenczi embraced “an earlier direction, undeservedly abandoned” (Ferenczi, 1930/1950, p. 108), claiming in the groundbreaking paper “The principle of relaxation and neocatharsis,” that “no analysis can be regarded... as complete unless we have succeed in penetrating the traumatic material” (p. 120). How did Freud react? As is well known, he thought that Ferenczi was repeating his own first great “aetiological error,” and he was upset in realizing that his beloved follower and companion had regressed to the theory that he had abandoned in September 1897.

Reviewing the reasons of the Freud/Ferenczi controversy, Peter Hoffer has recently pointed out that the brunt of Freud’s negative reaction “was not in response to its assertion of the reality of infantile trauma, or of the prevalence of sexual abuse of children by adults, but rather to the technical measures that Ferenczi employed in the pursuit of that reality” (Hoffer, 2010, p. 102).

In my opinion, the core of the question is, however, slightly different. It is true that Freud never denied the relevance of traumatic memories, but the point is that he did not believe that they could “break through” the unconscious (as he put in the “disbelief” letter of 21 August 1897). It was not a methodological question. According to Freud, traumatic unconscious memories are condemned to remain forever opaque, because what is allowed to resurface has to be regarded as a *composite structure*.

Significantly, the specimen of a composite structure in “The interpretation of dreams” is the “dragon” (Freud, 1900, p. 324). Three decades later, when Ferenczi presented his views about the traumatic fragmentation of mental life, Freud’s immediate reaction consisted of emphasizing the composite structure of memories. In the letter of 16 September 1930, welcoming Ferenczi’s new views, he added: “I only think that one can hardly speak of trauma in the extraordinary synthetic activity of the ego without treating the reactive scar-formation along with it. The latter, of course, also produces what we see.” In other words, what “we see” is a composite structure – as is the Loch Ness dragon.

Immediately after the Acropolis meditation, Freud would speak of “dragons” in “Analysis terminable and interminable.” Cautioning against the illusion that it is possible to gain access to traumatic memories, Freud wrote:

At one time it seemed that hypnotic influence was a splendid way of achieving our end; the reasons why

we had to abandon this method are well known. Hitherto no substitute for hypnosis has been discovered, but we realize that it was with this aim that such a master of analysis as Ferenczi devoted his last years to therapeutic experiments which were, alas! in vain. (Freud, 1937a, pp. 384–385)

Freud is saying here that Ferenczi’s request to penetrate the traumatic material is an illusion. It was within this context that the image of “dragon” resurfaced. Discussing the persistence of libidinal fixations and superstitious beliefs, Freud wrote: “Sometimes we are inclined to doubt whether the dragons of primæval times are really extinct” (Freud, 1937a, p. 384). Mark the wording here: Freud does not say “extinct dinosaurs” or “non-existent dragons;” instead he speaks of *extinct Dragons*, mixing up the real world of dinosaurs, which is testified to by fossils, and the fantasy world of dragons. This is a dramatic way to claim the impossibility of undoing the composite structure of traumatic memories, to present the combination between reality and fantasy as something that cannot in principle be disentangled.

We can now draw a more complete profile of Freud’s reaction to Ferenczi’s claim that “no analysis can be regarded... as complete unless we have succeed in penetrating the traumatic material”. This emotional reaction persisted many years after the death of Ferenczi, with whom Freud pursued a posthumous dialogue through his last works (Press, 2006). Freud’s reaction was twofold: whereas his earlier convictions about the centrality of real trauma were strengthened (cf. “Moses and monotheism,” 1939), the goal of reaching the Promised Land of traumatic memories was revised in “Analysis terminable and interminable” (1937a), while the method of handling memories was reformulated in “Constructions in analysis” (1937b). Both essays were written short after the Acropolis essay.

The presence of the Acropolis meditation in the midst of this extended reaction suggests that Ferenczi’s emphasis in penetrating the traumatic material resonated deeply in Freud, awakening part of the material that remained enigmatic in his self-analysis. In the Acropolis meditation, this enigmatic material is allowed to resurface in the shape of a combined object, similar to the sphinx in the Oedipus myth. By inserting the enigmatic image of the Loch Ness monster, Freud was behaving as one of those cartographers who inserted images of dragons and sea-serpents to decorate the voids of terra incognita they drew, and can be commented on using the same words: “By employing the dragons and the sea serpents, the cartographer makes a formal declaration to himself and to his public that he intends to

leave the unknown regions unexplored. He will never fill the voids” (Binstock, 1973, p. 553).

The formalistic self-control of Freud as a writer was, however, not sufficient. The limit of what could be explored was again discussed shortly after in the paper “Analysis terminable and interminable,” in association with Ferenczi’s requirements and complaining, once again, that Ferenczi “was asking a very great deal” (Freud, 1937a, pp. 404–405). The *dragon*, the enigmatic combined object, was now associated with Fliess and his idea of “permanent bisexuality,” that is, with the very “background” of the Acropolis incident (cf. Schur, 1969). The impossibility of penetrating further with analysis was now expressed using the idea of a “bedrock” lying under the psychological strata. The German words used by Freud were “*gewachsene Feld*,” which signifies a “growing or living rock,” that is, the inverse of *fossil*, of “petrified life” (cf. Geller, 2007, p. 211). Freud’s “*gewachsene Feld*” was a *living fossil* – that is, a “dragon” that was not “really extinct.” Here, in my opinion, we can sense the highest point of the reverberation produced by the Acropolis incident – as if the Titanic sea-serpent were still trembling under the rock on which psychoanalysis was built.

The process of reworking was, however, not over: in 1938, eight years after the initial rejection, Freud wrote the unfinished note “Splitting of the ego in the process of defence,” which contains an implicit revision of his initial reaction. What Freud had not understood was the novelty of Ferenczi’s exploration of traumatic memories, the fact that he was able to access a fragmented landscape – the fragmented world of the “basic fault” as Balint (1968) would call it. Freud’s rejection was based on the scheme of Reality versus Fantasy (that is on a “Cartesian ontology of the mind”; cf. Atwood, Orange, & Stolorow, 2002), and was motivated by the assumption that traumatic memories were the outcome of the “synthetic activity of the ego” (cf. the letter of 16 September 1930).

However, eight years later, he rejoined the view, put forward by Ferenczi from the very beginning, that the ego’s capacity for synthesis was damaged by the trauma. Observing for the first time the splitting of the ego, Freud remarked that it appeared so strange “because we take for granted the synthetic nature of the processes of the ego” (Freud, 1938, p. 276). This admission, which sounds like a delayed acknowledgment of Ferenczi’s new metapsychology, could have been the first step of a vast revision.

### Analysis: Freud and the dragon

The Loch Ness monster, the unbelievable sea-serpent, and the never-extinct dragon form a group

of interconnected metaphors that can be further explored. In Freud’s work, we find the image of the dragon in his 1913 paper on “The disposition to obsessional neurosis” (Freud, 1913a), in a context that is closely related to our discussion: the theory that the choice of the neurosis is independent of the traumatic experience, being in the nature of disposition. The latter is explained as a “point of fixation” to which the function may regress if the subject falls ill through some external disturbance.

Referring to the “well-known fact” that women become “quarrelsome, vexatious and overbearing, petty and stingy” when they lose their genital function, Freud makes his point referring to the image of the “dragon”:

Writers of comedy and satirists have in all ages directed their invectives against the “old dragon” into which the charming girl, the loving wife and the tender mother have been transformed. We can see that this alteration of character corresponds to a regression of sexual life to the pregenital sadistic and anal-erotic stage, in which we have discovered the disposition to obsessional neurosis. It seems, then, to be not only the precursor of the genital phase but often enough its successor as well, its termination after the genitals have fulfilled their function. (Freud, 1913a, p. 324; emphasis added)

Freud’s explanation for this typical alteration of character is based on his theory of sexuality: before sexual instincts have assumed their final shape, the sexuality of female children is “dominated and directed by a masculine organ (the clitoris) and often behaves like the sexuality of boys” (Freud, 1913a, p. 325). In order to become charming, loving and tender, female children have to get rid of their masculine sexuality and raise the vagina into the dominant erotogenic zone. Thus, when a regression to the pregenital stage occurs, the repressed masculine sexuality, together with the sadistic and anal-erotic traits, is also reactivated. In short, “old dragons” are unloving women whose sexuality is fixated on their own imaginary masculine organ<sup>1</sup> – a sort of gigantic snake or dragon, as satirists have unconsciously understood.<sup>2</sup>

Let us now complement Freud’s line of thought assuming that the transformation of the tender love object into a vexatious and stingy dragon might also be the outcome of a misogynistic attack. If the

<sup>1</sup> Although the notion of the “phallic” stage only appeared on the scene many years later, in Freud’s paper on “The infantile genital organization of the libido” (1923), the imago of the phallic woman is clearly implicated in the figure of “old dragon.”

<sup>2</sup> In the same paper, Freud asserts “that everyone possesses in his own unconscious an instrument with which he can interpret the utterances of the unconscious in other people” (Freud, 1913a, p. 320).

satirist is embittered because his expectation of love has been baffled, and if his invectives have themselves a “pregenital” (sadistic and anal-erotic) quality, would we not be ready to consider the “old dragon” as the imaginary remnant of a tender love object that has been attacked by impotent rage? And, in this case, would we not harbor some doubt about the “reality” of the “dragon”?

The significance of such a doubt becomes apparent as soon as we relate it to the object of Freud’s first infatuation – Gisella Fluss – or better, to *Ichtyosaura* (fish-lizard), as the 16-year-old Sigmund Freud used to call her (Freud, 1990), “denying his fear and debasing the love-object into an ugly reptile” (Fried, 2003, pp. 414–419). Risto Fried, from whom I have borrowed this remark, came to the conclusion that the transformation of the love object into an attractive monster was part of a recurrent pattern in Freud’s life and work. For instance, he called his future wife Martha “Melusine,” that is, giving her the name of the medieval water nymph similar to a siren or mermaid – woman from the navel up, and a serpent or fish from the navel down.<sup>3</sup> According to a legend popular in fourteenth-century France, the Melusine saga relates how Count Raymund finds a beautiful maiden in the woods and falls in love with her. Melusine consents to marry him on condition that he never tries to see her naked; but he breaks his promise and sees her in the form of a part-woman part-serpent. At this point, she forgives him; only when, during a disagreement with her, he calls her a “serpent” in front of his court, does she assume the form of a dragon and fly off, never to return.

In German heraldic usage, Melusine is not a serpent-tailed woman but a mermaid with two tails, which she holds provocatively outspread as if to reveal all. The first German version of the tale was written in 1474 by Thüring von Ringoltingen, in the increasingly misogynistic spirit of the Church and of society at the time: Minne (the medieval personification of love) is merged with Melusine, nudity is condemned, courtship is abolished, the husband’s suspicions about his wife’s trustworthiness and reliability are fully justified, and Aphrodite is transformed into a disgusting monster. In 1801, Goethe wrote a new version of the tale in which the heroine was neither a serpent nor a mermaid, but an insect-size dwarf, living in a small box and able to assume human size for limited periods. Although the story

was changed, the themes of the shocking spying and the broken marriage were retained. In his letter to Martha, Freud, who also knew the traditional version well, referred to this later version of the tale.

Let me briefly outline here the significance of the serpent-tailed woman in mythology, in psychoanalysis, and in Freud’s self-analysis. In the same year as Freud commented on the typical transformation of the love object into an “old dragon,” Otto Rank drew attention to the Melusine saga in his excellent essay on “Nakedness in saga and poem” (1913), in which the motive for the transformation of the lower half of the body into a serpent is related to the twofold feeling of fear and desire in regard to the sexual embrace, being evocative on the one hand of the disgust and repulsion felt towards the female genitals at a certain times (as during menstruation), and, on the other hand, of the hallucination of the woman’s penis.

Recent archeological studies have cast out Melusine as the medieval transformation of the Greek Aphrodite (Campagnolo, 2007). The phallic origins of the Greek goddess of love are clearly imprinted in her origins. According to myth, she was generated out of the genitals of Ouranos (Uranus), which were severed and cast into the sea by Kronos. As told by Hesiodus and represented by Botticelli in one of the masterpieces of Renaissance painting, the goddess of love was generated by “a white foam from the immortal flesh.” In his 1945 article “Aphrodite, or the woman with a penis,” Geza Róheim further traced the Greek Aphrodite back to the serpent of the earthly paradise:

In tracing the Oriental prototypes or parallels of Aphrodite we soon find that we are on the trail of the serpent. “Eve or Havva means the serpent and Phoenician inscriptions invoke a goddess Eve who seems to have been a goddess of the underworld.” Eve is probably identical with Ishtar, “the great mother serpent”. (Róheim, 1945, p. 353)

A similar, although less explicit, connection was made by Freud in his 1913 essay on “The theme of the three caskets” (Freud, 1913b), which had a strong autobiographical meaning, harking back to well-known elements of his self-analysis (the “kasten” scene and the dream of the “Three Fates;” cf. Anzieu, 1986, pp. 239, 362–364). The core question of the essay was: How is it that fear can be replaced by desire, love by hate, life by death, and choice by compulsion (Freud, 1913b, p. 299)? This question, which will be answered in a new way by Ferenczi’s notion of “identification with the aggression” (Ferenczi, 1933/1955), is the same as was

<sup>3</sup> Freud’s letter to Martha, 19 June 1882 (Freud, 1960). See Fried, 2003, pp. 419–422, and the excellent exploration of the Melusine phantasy in Freud that is contained in Rosenberg (1978). For comments on both *Ichtyosaura* and Melusine, see Eissler (1978). Abraham (1982), Harrison (1988), and Doria-Medina (1991).

implicated in the transformation of the tender love object into a vexatious and stingy dragon.

Finally, it should be noted that the tripartite organization of the tree caskets theme was casting its shadow on three figures liable of becoming “dragons” in the 1913 essay on the disposition to obsessional neurosis: the charming girl, the loving wife and the tender mother. We have already found the autobiographical meaning of the first two – Ichtysosaura and Melusine. What about the third one, the *tender mother*?

An unloving “old dragon” as mother-substitute lay at the heart of Freud’s self-analysis. Initially, when he formulated his so-called seduction theory, Freud had had the feeling that he had been abused as a child by his father, but over the course of 1897, he came to the conclusion that the “prime originator” of his neurosis was not the father but his Catholic nursemaid, an “ugly, elderly, but clever woman, who told [him] a great deal about God Almighty and hell” (letter from Freud to Fliess, 3 October 1897). This conclusion was not based on direct recollections, but on reconstructions, especially of dreams.

The first dream that was interpreted in this sense was the following: incompletely dressed, Freud was going upstairs three steps at a time, but when he noticed that an old maidservant was ascending behind him, he felt ashamed, lame, and glued to the spot, with an accompanying feeling of erotic arousal (Freud, 1900, p. 238). In *The interpretation of dreams*, Freud associated this “exhibitionistic” dream to his nursemaid in ways that emphasized the contradiction between the attachment and mistreatment:

And thus the maid-servant...acquired the right to be treated in my dream as a reincarnation of the prehistoric old nurse. It is reasonable to suppose that the child loved the old woman who taught him these lessons, in spite of her rough treatment of him. (p. 248)

Freud had this dream in May, 1897 (cf. the letter to Fliess of 31 May 1897). Only a few months later, in the midst of his systematic autoanalysis, he would refer the same complex of attraction and inhibition to his “neurotic longing for Rome”.

Grigg (1973) recognized that the dream of going upstairs was the first manifestation of the paralysis that Freud experienced with regard to Rome. Risto Fried further suggested that the dream was an anticipation of the Acropolis incident. Striving, elation, exhibitionism, paralysis, and “pregenital” invectives are the key features. The stairs belonged to the house of an old lady to whom Freud regularly gave injections; since there were no spittoons, he used to throw the product of his expectoration on the staircase, provoking the reproaches of an old con-

cierge. Moreover, the day before the dream, the maid had been angry with him for neglecting to wipe his shoes and tracking mud onto the carpet. The spitting (urination) and the mud (defecation) bring degradation and hostility in Freud’s representation of the sexual act (his going upstairs with the objective of giving “the old lady an injection”). The degradation is also reflected in the representation of the love object as nasty and old: the women are stern, unattractive and disapproving – just like the nursemaid of Freud’s childhood in Freiburg, who made him feel inadequate and ashamed. In this crucial moment of his self-analysis, the old lady, the angry maid, and the strict concierge were discovered as new editions of the stern, unattractive, and disapproving love object of Freud’s infancy.

We have here some of the elements bridging the gap between the “tender mother” and the “old dragon.” The ascension can be seen as an aspiration for the celestial tender mother. However, the desire to merge with her (the desire to fly) is precociously sexualized (exhibitionism) and culminates in a shameful paralysis vis-à-vis the old dragon.

By analyzing another dream, Freud traced back his sexual mortification to the nursemaid’s complaint that he was “clumsy and unable to do anything” (letter to Fliess of 4 October 1897). Risto Fried took very seriously this reconstruction. According to him, Freud had suffered the most diffused kind of sexual abuse: as a child, he was taught to masturbate an adult and then ridiculed by him or her (Fried, 2003, p. 328). In my opinion, this could explain the absolute centrality that the issue of *revenge* would have in his self-analysis.

Within the cathartic model elaborated together with Breuer, the recovery of memories was functional in releasing the unaccomplished reaction and in discharging the “strangled” affect. The underlying idea was that an experience was traumatic only if the reaction – such as tears, rage, and revenge – had been suppressed and the injury had been suffered in silence. Causing an unaccomplished reaction to be completed was the manner in which the therapy operated (Breuer and Freud, 1893; Freud, 1893). When Freud lost hope of the possibility of disclosing “the secret of childhood experiences” (letter to Fliess of 21 September 1897), he did not give up the abreactive project, since affects could be triggered also by “new editions” of the original objects. Freud was able to liberate his emotions, leaving aside uncertainties and doubts concerning the real identity of the abuser.

If we focus back to Freud’s dream of going upstairs, we realize that it also expressed the infantile fantasy of seeking revenge through spitting and soiling. It was a revenge fantasy of this kind that

became the main pattern of Freud’s autotherapeutic project, which now was taken over by the fantasy of reviving his juvenile identification with Hannibal, the Semitic hero who swore to take revenge on “Rome”:

To my youthful mind Hannibal and Rome symbolized the conflict between the tenacity of Jewry and the organization of the Catholic church. . . . Thus the wish to go to Rome had become in my dream-life a cloak and symbol for a number of other passionate wishes. (Freud, 1900, pp. 196–197)

Freud’s wish to overcome his inhibition, to undo the mortification, and to take full revenge on the Catholic nursemaid makes the “Rome” agenda more intelligible. The uncertainty about his childhood sexual abuse could be bypassed by the fact that the abreaction could be carried out indirectly, by means of substitutes. Finally, thanks to the shift from originals to copies, abreaction was transformed into an exploration of unconscious symbolic processes, that is, into a cognitive conquest. Ultimately, the idea of making a great scientific discovery became the substitute for disclosing his own traumatic memories, while the cherished revenge took more and more the shape of an Oedipal project. I use the word “project” here, because, as has been stressed by many commentators, first of all by Anzieu (1986, p. 155), the deciphering of the secret language of dreams was his way to regain possession of the lost mother’s body.

Let us see why should be. The spitting and soiling in Freud’s dream of going upstairs compelled him to recategorize the doubts about his own cleanliness that had broken through into another dream, indeed the most important one, the dream of Irma’s injection, in which the suspicion was raised that “the syringe had not been clean” (Freud, 1900, p. 107). Commenting on the “paradigmatic dream” of psychoanalysis, Freud associated the “dirty syringe” to the injections he gave to an old lady, pointing out that he took “constant pains to be sure that the syringe was clean,” emphasizing his scrupulousness, and reassuring himself that he was “conscientious” (p. 118).

The Irma dream occurred in July 1895; nearly two years later, the identical issue of “cleanliness” reappeared in the dream of going upstairs spitting and soiling. In addition, the analogy was even more striking, since Freud’s motivation for going upstairs was to “give the old lady an injection.” In spite of the different manifest contents, the two dreams had a deep thematic continuity: the “exhibitionist” dream of spitting and soiling while going up to give the old lady an injection, incompletely dressed and with erotic feelings, was a blow-up of the “dirty syringe”

and a slow-motion repetition of the paradigmatic injection – a repetition that was calling for attention.

Freud had been visiting the old lady twice a day for many years for the purpose of giving her a morphine injection and putting eye lotion into her eye when, under the influence of dreams, he confused the two routine duties, committing a nearly fatal error. According to his own report, it was by means of this bungled action that, in October 1897, he came to grasp “the universal human application of the Oedipus myth as correlate with the Fate which revealed in the oracles” (Freud, 1901, p. 178). Freud interpreted his action as a “violence” (assault) committed on the old woman (“*sich an der Alten vergreifen*”), and as a symbolic incest carried out with the tender and beautiful mother.

In spite of, or maybe because of, the clarification, one is puzzled by the abrupt change of landscape provoked by Freud’s Oedipal interpretation: Weren’t we struggling with the “old dragon”? Wasn’t the love object nasty and old? Weren’t the women stern, unattractive, and disapproving? Wasn’t Freud excited by the sexual phantasy of giving the old dragon a “lesson”? And since he was too scared and enraged to be able to accomplish the revengeful project, didn’t he spit, soil, and bring mud in?

Suddenly, all this is gone. The paralyzing monster has disappeared, the hostile feelings have been erased, the dirt has been wiped off, and what is now standing in front of our eyes is the charming, loving, and tender mother – a beautiful and perfect body that has nothing to do with serpents, mermaids, or dragons. Isn’t this strange? Freud too was baffled. This is how he explained the incongruity:

The strange fact that the [Oedipus] legend finds nothing objectionable in Queen Jocasta’s age seemed to me to fit in well with the conclusion that in being in love with one’s own mother one is never concerned with her as she is in the present but with her youthful mnemonic image carried over from one’s childhood. (Freud, 1901, p. 178)

The incongruity felt by Freud had many implications: How could his love object be protected by the hostility lurking behind it?<sup>4</sup> How could the “youthful mnemonic image” of the Oedipal mother be preserved from the mud? Keeping it in a distant and unreachable place – such as classical Greece – was a good solution, for wasn’t classical Greece the cradle of

<sup>4</sup> As outlined in Freud’s 1913 paper, the main concern of obsessional neurotics is “to protect their object-love from the hostility lurking behind it” (Freud, 1913a, p. 325). The pattern of hostility that underlies the revelation of the universality of the Oedipus myth went mainly unnoticed but not completely so: Rudnytsky (1987, p. 64), for instance, cast in it a “pattern of unconscious hostility towards women.”



beauty? Didn't Goethe choose classical Greece for his search of perfect beauty?

The idea of a beautiful and perfect body was part of the vision of classical Greece that Freud learned at school, under the influence of Winckelmann and the neoclassical culture. This was the place where his love object could be buried in order to make it immune from the passing of time – wouldn't he spend the rest of his life searching for it again and again, by collecting thousands of antique statues? – as well as to protect it from his own revengeful rage.

There is a passage in *The interpretation of dreams* that reveals Freud's difficulty in keeping love separated from rage. This occurs when, commenting on his "longing for the eternal city," he is reminded of the following scholastic discussion about the reasons for going to Rome: "Which of the two, it may be debated, walked up and down his study with greater impatience after he had formed his plan of going to Rome – Winckelmann... Or Hannibal...?" (Freud, 1900, p. 196). That is, is there admiration for the ideal beauty or hate for the powerful tyrant, idealization or revenge? Since the intermingling of the two motivations seems to be the reason for the paralysis in Freud's dream of going upstairs, we might speculate that the ideal beauty had to be moved into a safe place – such as the unreachable classical Greece.

Indeed, as was pointed out by William McGrawth, in the course of 1897 the collapse of the seduction theory reverberated in Freud's esthetic ruminations and dreams: at the beginning of the year, Freud's esthetic was still dominated by the tense medieval Gothic style of Nuremberg, becoming later associated, in May 1897, to the classical ideal of beauty, which was embodied in Faust's "quest for Helen of Troy, the archetypal representative of Greek beauty symbolizing the balance, restraint, and proportion that Goethe and the other great German classicist saw as the essence of Greek art." (McGrawth, 1986, p. 202). To succeed in his spiritual quest:

Faust had to abandon the emotionally tense Gothic north, where spirit and senses struggled for dominance, and journey south to the classical lands, where sin and the devil were out of place and feeling coexisted in balanced harmony with spirit... Like Faust, Freud had to abandon the Gothic north for the classical south in order to achieve psychic wholeness, and like Faust in pursuit of Helen, Freud too went in search of "absolute beauty". (p. 203)

It was the idea of "absolute beauty" that was shattered by the Acropolis incident. Let us recall that, in his meditation, Freud would describe the emotions roused by the Acropolis as "*Entzückung*

*und Erhebung*", which has been translated by Strachey as "delight and admiration." According to Risto Fried, "Ehreibung definitively implies being uplifted or elated, and 'admiration' fails to render this powerful, subjective quasi-religious quality" (Fried, 2003, pp. 265–266).

The gigantic snake we didn't believe as being in the background of the Acropolis incident was clarified by Max Schur (1969, 1972): the trip to Athens was preceded by a "violent blast" from Fliess accusing Freud of plagiarism in relation to the issue of "persistent bisexuality."<sup>5</sup> He was referring here to the letter of 26 July 1904, the last one that Fliess wrote to Freud. In this letter, which cannot be regarded as a simple blast, Fliess recalls Freud's *emotional* reaction in March 1897, the fact that Freud had been impressed, better still, *struck*, by his bisexual interpretation of the "dreams of the gigantic snakes." I quote from the letter:

We talked about it for the first time in Nuremberg... [when] you told me the case history of the woman who had dreams of gigantic snakes. At the time you were *struck* [*sehr betroffen*] by the idea that undercurrents in a woman might stem from the masculine part of her psyche. For this reason I was all the more puzzled by your resistance in Breslau to the assumption of bisexuality in the psyche. (English translation modified and emphasis added)

Fliess went on to remind his former friend that he had forgotten their discussion for some time, as he had most candidly admitted. In his reply, on 27 July, Freud once again admitted that he had been taken aback by his having forgotten so much. A few days later, he started the trip to Athens, which, since its very beginnings, had been accompanied by symptoms of anxiety and obsessive ruminations. Once in Athens, Freud would find himself surrounded by all kinds of references to the "gigantic snake."

Strangely enough, no one among the many commentators of the Acropolis essay seems to be aware of the relevance of the "sea-serpent" in classical Greece, in spite of their stereotyped interpretations of the Loch Ness monster. Only Risto Fried devotes an entire chapter to the breathtaking power of the cult of the snake in ancient Athens. Here is how he describes his own reaction to the numerous effigies of snakes in the Acropolis Museum: "There were snakes of natural and gigantic

<sup>5</sup> The issue of persistent bisexuality was first discussed in Nuremberg, in March 1897, and later stood between the two friends, causing the first open disagreement in January 1898. One year later, the contention about the intellectual property of "bisexuality" resurfaced as an issue of Oedipal rivalry between siblings (as is alluded to in the associations to the "non vixit" dream), ending, in 1904, in a dispute.

proportions, realistic and fantastic, terrestrial and oceanic, with one or several heads or with human upper and snakelike lower bodies” (Fried, 2003, p. 610; see also pp. 409–411). Moreover, it should be well known that the serpent was the symbol of the goddess Athena, the patron of the town, and that the Acropolis was built on a rock that was believed to be the cave of a sacred gigantic snake, the sanctuary of which was the Parthenon.

In other words, classical Greece was infiltrated by archaic elements. The transformation of dreadful into beautiful, which lay at the heart of classical art, was far from being completed. And yet the Greek spirit that was taught in schools bore no trace of the shocking persistence of the archaic spirit of Greek civilization. As pointed out by Risto Fried:

The Greek spirit, [Freud] had been told, valued reason, moderation, harmonious balance, democracy, the beauty of the body, and the human individual as centre of the universe and measure of the cosmos. The “miracle of Greek mythology” was “a humanized world, men freed from the paralyzing fear of an omnipotent Unknown . . .” The “terrifying irrational” had no place in classical mythology. The Greeks . . . had “transformed a world full of fear in to a world full of beauty”. (Fried, 2004, p. 524)

I agree with Risto Fried that the experience of being exposed to the effigies of archaic Greece is in itself shocking, and that the breathtaking power of the cult of the snake in ancient Athens represented the “concrete factual basis for [Freud’s] playful and richly symbolic comparison of the Acropolis with the Loch Ness monster” (Fried, 2004, p. 610). Yet the point is that the exposure to the effigies of the cult of the snake was preceded by Fliess’s letter, and this was what made a private persecution out of a public shock. Through the mirror of Fliess’s astonishment, *each serpent* was reminding him of his own shock and of the object that triggered it: the gigantic snake of his woman patient. It is as if that precise shock, which was still reverberating in the rhetorical figure of the “sea-serpent we didn’t believe in,” later became encoded in the image of the Loch Ness monster – the “Nordic” and “Gothic” element that spoiled Freud’s capacity to take pleasure from “absolute beauty”.

Why? Who was the woman patient dreaming again and again of the gigantic snakes? In his paper on “Freud, Fliess and fratricide,” Peter Swales wonders in a footnote “whether the dreamer might have been Emma Eckstein, whom Fliess had operated upon two years before” (Swales, 1982, p. 7). I have harboured the same suspicion, since the surgical operation of Emma Eckstein was behind the Irma dream, which was the pillar of Freud’s discovery of

the “secret of dreams.” If such a hypothesis is correct, the Acropolis incident would cross the many layers of the psychoanalytic building, down even to its “bedrock.”

There is not the space here to dig more deeply into this paralyzing spot, but let me end with the following comment on the meaning of the German word translated as “bedrock,” which appears in the conclusions of a book aimed at “mitigating circumcision” in the body of psychoanalysis:

*Gewachsene Feld* literally (and figuratively) signifies growing or living rock. Its description as the unplumbable point of an analysis, where analyst and analysand can penetrate no further, harkens back to the Irma dream’s navel, and the specific figuration evokes its inverse, petrified life, the fossil that emerges in Freud’s discussion of . . . circumcision . . . (Geller, 2007, p. 212)

The author of these lines is alluding to Freud’s own ritual circumcision, yet, as I have suggested elsewhere (cf. Bonomi, 1994, 2009), another background should be taken into account.

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